



# Wedded to the Sinful Duke

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**Category:** Romance, Adult, Historical

**Description:** "I will satisfy your deepest desires, dear wife. Under one condition: you mustn't fall in love with me."

Duke Jonathan must never become like his father. So, a life of debauchery is the only path for him.

Stuck in a convent for half her life, Ciara must watch her every step now as she re-enters society.

Yet she makes the biggest mistake of all during a ball: she gets caught in the arms of the most rakish lord! Now, she must marry him. And although she can never have her husband's heart, she yearns to be taught all of his sinful ways...

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## CHAPTER 1

“Y-Your Grace? ...” the valet spoke louder each time, but it still didn’t work. “Your Grace, I apologize, but you really ought to wake up...”

“What? ... Where...” Jonathan Whitlock, the Duke of Silverbrook, opened just one eye, and even that was more effort than he could muster. A tidal wave of pain washed over him, his head violently rebelling against the idea of moving.

“Lady Kirdale is waiting for you downstairs in the parlor, Your Grace,” the valet added even more apologetically.

“Parlor?” Jonathan echoed as if he had no idea what a parlor was. Perhaps something to eat or drink?

Drink. That was when his memory flooded him with images of the previous night. The other eye finally opened, viscous and reluctant to accept the visions of the morning. At first glance, he realized where he was. He was in his townhouse in London.

Oh, good, he thought to himself. At least, I managed to get home.

He moved slowly with much effort, and when he looked down at himself, he reached yet another realization. He had slept in the same clothes he was wearing the previous night. He looked down more closely. His shirt was unbuttoned. His trousers as well. To say that he was a mess would have been a gross understatement. And that headache rose with each passing moment, claiming more of his focus.

“You said Lady Kirdale?” Jonathan echoed when the idea finally settled, an idea he didn’t like. “She is here?”

“Yes, Your Grace,” his valet nodded patiently, for this was not the first time he had to explain something twice, or even thrice, before Jonathan realized what was happening. Fortunately, the man was handsomely paid for his efforts, and in Jonathan’s opinion, that made it more than fair.

Jonathan nodded, placing his feet onto the floor with a heavy frown. He felt as if he had magically been transformed into a rag doll, and his limbs were sewn onto him, dangling without any control on his part. They were there, but he could not do anything conscious with them. He doubted he could hold a teacup at that moment.

“I shall be downstairs momentarily,” Jonathan managed to muster, wondering why his cousin Rebecca had come so early and unannounced. Did something happen?

“Yes, Your Grace,” the valet nodded again then disappeared behind closed doors, giving Jonathan a moment to gather the strength to get up.

He ran a hand through his thick black hair, disheveled and tangled from sleep. The movement sent a wave of pain through his head, causing him to wince and mutter a curse under his breath. Slowly, he rose to his full height, despite the obvious discomfort.

Staggering to the washbasin, he splashed cold water on his face, the shock helping to clear some of the fog from his mind. His clothes from the previous night were crumpled and smelled faintly of tobacco and brandy. The dark blue waistcoat and black trousers, while stylish, were a stark contrast to his disheveled state. He tugged at the edges of his shirt and waistcoat, trying to make himself look somewhat presentable, but that was impossible. He reached into his pocket, feeling something sticking out.

A moment later, his hand extracted a white garter and stocking. He lifted an eyebrow, faintly remembering the face of the lady it belonged to. He grinned to himself, stuffing it back into his pocket. Deciding that he needed to look at least somewhat presentable, he got dressed although without his valet, and with the aftereffects of the previous night still emanating off of him, he didn't manage to do a very good job of it. With a final glance in the mirror, he attempted to smooth his hair and straighten his posture. It did little to achieve any improvement in his outward appearance, so he gave up.

A minute later, he found himself in the parlor with his cousin standing by the window with a cup of tea in her hand. The look of utter shock upon seeing him was impossible to miss.

“Jonathan... what happened to you? Did you just wake up?” she asked aghast. Her blue eyes, sharp and observant, traversed the distance between his head and his toes, taking in his crumpled attire and disheveled hair.

“Yes,” he replied with a nonchalant shrug. “What’s wrong with that?”

Rebecca arched an eyebrow. “It’s well past lunchtime, Cousin. Even for you, that is rather late.”

She stood, shaking her head at him, her hand pressed to her hip in the manner of a disapproving governess. She was tall and slender, even after two children, her figure accentuated by the elegantly simple gowns she favored, often in shades of deep green or royal blue that complemented her fair complexion.

He offered a casual smile to his cousin, unbothered by her scrutiny. “I had a late night, and I just lost track of time. You know how it is.”

“I do not know how it is,” she reminded him. “You know that well enough.”

“Ah, yes, you must have forgotten what it is like to actually have fun,” he teased, much to her amused chagrin.

“I do believe you have a tendency to have fun for the both of us, so I don’t have to,” she reciprocated in the same playful manner that always characterized their conversations.

“Do you see, Becky my dear, how much I love you? I am even willing to sacrifice myself like that for you,” he said with a chuckle, and she could not help but join in.

Rebecca set her teacup down and crossed her arms, her expression one of amused exasperation. “You know, Jonathan, one of these days, you will have to relinquish your bachelor ways.”

“One of which days?” he asked, mockingly gasping. “These?”

“I am serious,” she said with a hint of a smile lingering in the corner of her lips. That was a conversation they had had many times before, but it never ended the way she wanted it to. He was simply too good at avoiding his obligations.

“So am I,” he replied, grinning.

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“It’s high time you considered settling down, Jonathan.” She started listing the things he already knew, “Starting a family, continuing the bloodline...”

Jonathan chuckled, moving over to the small table and proceeding to pour himself a cup of tea. “You sound like an old matron, Rebecca.”

“You talk as if there is plenty of time for that,” she frowned.

“There is,” he shrugged without a single care in the world.

“Time waits for no one, Jonathan,” she replied, her voice softening with love. “You like to think that isn’t so, but you do bear some responsibility to your family, you know.”

He sipped his warm tea, feeling a bit more awake by that point. However, he was in no condition for such grave conversations. “There is no need to rush things, Rebecca. I am still young.”

“That depends on what you consider young,” she replied, teasing him. “Seven and twenty sounds about the right age for marriage, if you ask me.”

“Too soon I say,” he shook his head. “Besides, the last thing the world needs is another Whitlock.”

“I beg—” she started, but he raised his finger at her, interrupting her.

“Before you get offended about your own children, they do not count. You have

diluted them with Kirdale's blood. And you were never really like our fathers in any case."

Rebecca sighed, obviously feeling exasperated about having the same conversation over and over again without a different outcome.

"So, is that why you have come so early in the... noon?" he asked playfully. "I could have been resting, you know."

"You could be resting in the carriage while you accompany me," she suggested, placing her cup down onto the silver tray, signaling that she was done with it.

He raised a displeased eyebrow. "Accompany you? Where?"

"I have been invited to the Earl of Langley's garden party," she explained importantly, "and I would like you to accompany me."

"Me?" he frowned again. "Why can't your husband go? Isn't that his duty and not mine?"

"He cannot," she clarified. "He has gone off on a business trip to Wales."

"Why didn't you accompany him then?" he asked.

"Me, go to Wales?" she asked incredulously as if that were the most preposterous thing she had ever heard. "What on earth for?"

They exchanged a meaningful glance, and then they both burst into a chuckle. She was one of the few rare people in his life who had the ability to make him laugh like that.

“No, Rebecca,” he shook his head once the onslaught of laughter had subsided. “I am in no mood to withstand lordlings and their incessant jabber about themselves. I have no patience for it; my mind and body have not taken their rest.”

That was only partly true. Indeed, he was in no mood for that, but also, he knew that while there, Rebecca would not resist trying to get him to speak to some ladies of her choosing in an effort to make a match. She had been caught doing that numerous times, and still, she persisted, despite his urging against it.

“But it’s not a ball,” she reminded him. “You will not have to dance with anyone or exert yourself in any way. Just?—”

“Talk,” he ended her sentence. “Yes, that is the worst part about it, talking. No, thank you.”

“If you appear looking likethat,I doubt anyone will want to talk to you anyway, so you will be safe,” she teased.

He almost burst into a chuckle again, but instead, he only smiled. “It is rude to come into someone’s home, wake him up, and then point out he is not dressed for company.”

“If you were in your night robe, I would understand, but considering how disheveled you look now, I’m assuming you barely got changed from last night’s... ahem, adventures,” she continued with an amused smirk.

“Is this your way of trying to convince me to come with you?” he asked mischievously. “Because I have to tell you it is not working.”

She laughed melodiously at his words. “No,” she shook her head. “I actually didn’t want to resort to this, but you made me.”



His eyes widened. “No... please, no. Not now.”

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“Yes,” she said, her eyes narrowing at him, like a hunter eyeing his prey. “I am calling that favor. Now.”

“Not now,” he whined again, rolling his eyes.

“Yes, now,” she repeated amusedly. “You said I could use it whenever I wanted. I want it now.”

“Oh, for fu?—”

“No cursing,” she interrupted him, walking over to him and pretending to clean his shoulders. “You owe me, remember? I saved you from the unbearable affections of Lady Helena Whitley and her mother when they cornered you during that ball at Lord Cunningham’s.” She chuckled to herself. “I still remember the look on your face. Weren’t they showering you with questions which dangerously neared the subject of courtship and marriage?”

He frowned. “You know well that Lady Helena’s mother was an old friend of my late mother’s. I could not just excuse myself without a proper reason, and one always lacks the ability to lie when the circumstances require it the most.”

“And then, I saved you... for a price. Now, do slip into something more... appropriate, my dear. I shall wait for you in the carriage.”

She leaned to kiss him on the cheek and then waltzed out of the parlor victoriously.

Jonathan raked his fingers through his hair. He sighed heavily, shaking his head at

himself. He headed upstairs, wondering what the day would bring. Whatever it was, he was absolutely certain he wouldn't like it.

## CHAPTER 2

"I think everyone is looking at me," Ciara whispered to her friend, Adeline Middleton, who stood next to her in the middle of the garden party.

Although the sprawling gardens, meticulously manicured with vibrant blooms, offered a respite from the hustle and bustle of busy London streets, Ciara could not rest easy. She could feel the weight of countless eyes upon her. She took a deep breath in an effort to steady her nerves.

"How could they not?" Adeline replied reassuringly as she always did. "You look lovelier than a rose in full bloom."

Ciara chuckled. Her gown truly was the color of a red rose, a daring choice she would not have chosen if Adeline had not persuaded her into it, and now, she felt awkward and out of place. "Did you read that in a book?"

"Actually, yes," Adeline replied, and both girls laughed melodiously.

Adeline's presence had always been a balm to Ciara's frayed nerves, a constant source of comfort and stability. Social events such as this one always felt overwhelming, especially the constant whispers and furtive glances which unsettled her more than she was willing to admit. She felt as if everyone could see right through her into her very soul and pick apart everything she had been so desperately trying to keep together ever since she had been rescued from the nunnery by Penelope, Adeline's sister, and her husband, James.

"I feel like everyone seems eager to catch a glimpse of the infamous Miss Everton,"

Ciara said mockingly. “I feel as if I am under severe scrutiny.”

Adeline nodded sympathetically. “I can imagine. But remember, most of these people are just curious. Their lives are infinitely dull, and when someone has had... as many adventures as you have, it is natural for them to want to know all about it.”

“Adventures?” Ciara laughed, appreciating the word her friend used. “That is the last thing I would call my life, but I suppose that is one way to look at it.”

“It is all about perspective, my dear Ciara,” Adeline chirped, looking about. “And curiosity is an omnipresent human condition.”

Ciara glanced around, noticing the subtle stares and whispers among the guests. She could feel their scrutiny like a physical presence, making her skin prickle with discomfort. “Curiosity or gossip, it’s all the same to me. I just want to get through this without making a spectacle of myself.

Adeline reached out and squeezed her hand. “You are doing wonderfully, Ciara. And if anyone dares to say otherwise, they will have to answer to me.”

Ciara could not help but laugh softly at that. “Thank you, Addie. I don’t know what I would do without you.”

“Thankfully, you will never have to find out,” Adeline said with a wink. “Now, how about we go find something to drink? A glass of lemonade should help take the edge off. Or maybe something a bit stronger?”

“No, lemonade will be fine,” Ciara shook her head, wondering how that might look, served on top of the tales that had already been spinning about her in the ton.

As they walked towards the refreshment table, Ciara felt a bit of her tension ease.

With Adeline by her side, she could face the whispers and the stares. For the first time that afternoon, she allowed herself to enjoy the beauty of the garden, the warmth of the sun on her skin, and the simple pleasure of a friend's company. However, that moment of serenity didn't last long.

Ciara immediately noticed her coming. Miss Sarah Danforth, the daughter of the Viscount of Hartford, was in the company of two of her friends, whom Ciara did not know by name. Sarah was known for her unforgiving tongue and penchant for gossip, and Ciara could immediately notice the flicker of malice in the young woman's eyes as she approached them, leading her two friends with her.

"Oh, Miss Everton!" Sarah began, her voice laden with false sweetness, the likes of which Ciara could immediately recognize. "Fancy meeting you here!"

"Miss Danforth," Ciara nodded curtly at her then nodded one more time in the direction of her friends, who seemed equally amused by what was happening as Sarah herself was.

"Hello, Miss Danforth," Adeline shot her own cold greeting, but Sarah gave her a dismissive smile, focusing once again on Ciara.

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“I didn’t know whether to believe the rumors or not when I heard you were back home,” Sarah launched her barrage of prying questions. “There is just so much we don’t know!”

“Isn’t that an omnipresent human condition?” Ciara threw an amused glance in Adeline’s direction, but it flew over Sarah’s head.

“Is it really true that you lived in a nunnery? My goodness! I can only imagine what that must have felt like. Did you ever consider taking vows? It must have been so different over there. Do you find all this,” she gestured at the bustling garden, “overwhelming? I mean, even a... rebel such as yourself might not find it so easy to readjust to life in the ton, especially after everything you have done. People do make terrible mistakes, but I suppose some are not that easily forgotten, are they?”

“I—”

“No,” Adeline interfered immediately, taking a step in front of Ciara. “What she does find overwhelming are foolish questions asked by people who have no business asking them.”

Ciara almost gasped loudly at her best friend’s comment, which even took her off guard. Sarah and her friends looked shocked, their eyes wide with disbelief. But Adeline stood there, unapologetically staring back at Sarah, who quickly regained composure.

“Oh, come now, Miss Middleton,” Sarah said with mock innocence, as her friends giggled behind her. “We are just curious. It is not every day we stumble upon

someone with such an... interesting background. A nunnery, of all places! I must say, it does make one wonder what sort of life led to such an exile. Whispers say it takes quite the scandal to be sent away like that. Secrets always have a way of coming out, don't they? Especially the sordid ones. Perhaps, Miss Everton, you could enlighten us all with the tawdry details? After all, if one lived through something, one should be bold enough to tell about it."

Ciara knew what that meant. They probably knew what landed her in the nunnery in the first place. She had a feeling that all of London knew it. Her life was an open book for everyone to see, for everyone to make fun of. It was an unbearable feeling.

She tugged at Adeline's sleeve, wanting to escape the conversation. "Please, Adeline, let's just go."

Adeline hesitated, glaring at Sarah. "You should be ashamed of yourself, Miss Danforth."

Sarah's eyes widened in mock innocence. "I didn't mean to offend her. I was merely asking questions, trying to be friendly. After all, not everyone finds themselves hidden away after such... indiscretions. One must wonder, with such a tainted past, what future can one possibly hope for? A gentleman of good standing would think twice, wouldn't he?"

"If that is you being friendly, I dread to think how you behave otherwise," Adeline said with chosen words, but Ciara could hear the rage boiling just underneath the surface.

Ciara could not take it any longer. "Excuse us," she addressed Sarah and her friends as she tugged Adeline away.

The laughter of the ladies they left behind rang in her ears for a long time afterward.

Adeline herself looked frustrated, but she allowed Ciara to lead her away, casting one last scathing look over her shoulder.

Once they were out of earshot, Adeline turned to Ciara, her expression softening. “That was really mean of her, Ciara. I am sorry. I should have thrown a glass of red wine on her gown.”

Ciara’s eyes widened in amusement as she imagined the commotion, but even that was not enough to make her feel better. “It’s not your fault, Adeline. You cannot repair what was once broken or pretend that it never broke in the first place...” She sighed heavily. She felt as if she were a burden to her friend, who instead of having fun had to be her line of defense. A part of her wished she had not come at all. “I... I just need a moment to myself. Do you mind?”

Adeline’s prior frustration now completely melted into concern for her friend. “Of course, Ciara. You take a few moments to yourself; I will be by the refreshments table.”

“All right,” Ciara nodded. “Thank you.”

“Of course,” Adeline smiled, taking her friend by the hand. “I am here for you for whatever you need.”

Ciara gave her a grateful nod and hurried off, weaving through the crowd until she found a secluded spot in the garden. She leaned against a tree, taking deep breaths to calm herself. The interaction with Sarah had rattled her more than she wanted to admit. She closed her eyes, trying to push away the feeling of being scrutinized and judged.

“Trying to hide from everyone, I see?” she suddenly heard a familiar voice.



She opened her eyes, and the sight of her uncle, Brendan Snowley, the Earl of Hopwich, greeted her.

“Is it that obvious?” she asked with a shy smile, feeling a tidal wave of relief upon seeing him.

“I saw what happened,” he admitted, standing by her side.

“It’s just... people being their worst selves,” she said with a dismissive half-shrug.

“Why does it bother you then?” he asked.

“I wish everyone would just leave me alone,” she confessed her deepest desire, one she knew would never come true.

He laughed as if she had said the funniest thing in the world. “Yes, we all wish that sometimes.”

She sighed. “I thought I was ready for this,” she mused. “But... it’s harder than I expected.”

He turned to her, placing a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “You are doing wonderfully, Ciara. Don’t allow a few thoughtless people to make you doubt yourself.”

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She looked up at him, gratitude shining in her eyes. “Thank you, Uncle Brendan. I needed to hear that.”

“Shall we go back?” he suggested.

“If you don’t mind, I would like to stay here for a few moments longer,” she said apologetically. “I will return to the party soon.”

He nodded again, his expression gentle. “Of course, take all the time you need.”

As he walked away, Ciara took a deep breath, feeling a bit more grounded. She was grateful for her uncle’s understanding and patience. Although he was also no stranger to letting her know when he didn’t agree with her actions, he was still on her side, no matter what. Knowing she had his support gave her the strength she needed to face the gathering once more.

But not just yet.

“Ah, there you are,” Jonathan approached his cousin, who was gracefully mingling with the other guests at the garden party. His tall, well-built frame stood out among the crowd, and despite his unkempt appearance from that morning, he still managed to exude a certain rugged charm. “You owe me for this favor, you know.”

She turned to him, laughing. “Need I remind you that I used my own favor to drag you here?”

“Yes, and now you owe me a favor back,” he said much to the amusement of them

both. “Everyone around here is sodreadfully dull, Becky. And what’s worse, there is hardly any real alcohol to make it bearable.”

“Thank goodness for that,” she rolled her eyes playfully. “Who knows what alcohol would make you do?”

He smirked, his dark blue eyes twinkling with mischief. “And here I am, so very well-behaved.”

She could not suppress a smile. “Just try not to cause any scandals this time, for my sake?”

Jonathan sighed dramatically but acquiesced, “I will do my best, but don’t expect any miracles.”

Rebecca laughed softly, shaking her head. “I wouldn’t dream of it. Just try not to corrupt anyone too much.”

Jonathan gave a mock salute, his grin widening. “I will be on my best behavior, then. No promises, though.”

Just as he was about to suggest they take a walk away from the crowd, a young lady approached them.

“Lady Kirdale!” the lady gushed upon reaching them. “How lovely to see you!”

“Miss Danforth,” Rebecca smiled back. She turned to her cousin. “You do remember my cousin, Jonathan Whitlock, the Duke of Silverbrook?”

“Of course, how do you do, Your Grace?” Sarah smiled, curtsying. There was nothing outstanding about the girl or her persona. She blended so easily into the sea

of other equally charming and lovely young ladies who had nothing spectacular about them.

Jonathan smiled back, suppressing a yawn. “Lovely to see you again, Miss Danforth.”

“Such a lovely gathering, isn’t it?” she asked cheerfully, her eyes sparkling with obvious interest.

Rebecca nodded politely. “Indeed, Miss Danforth. How are you enjoying the party?”

“Oh, it’s splendid,” Sarah replied, her gaze shifting immediately to Jonathan. “Your Grace, I heard you recently returned from a trip to Italy. How was it?”

Jonathan stifled a sigh, forcing a polite smile. “It was just business-related. Nothing too exciting, I am afraid.”

But her curiosity was far from satiated. “Business trips can be quite interesting, though. Did you meet any fascinating people? Learn any new customs? Surely there must be so many intriguing stories to share.”

Jonathan usually had very little patience for questions and people who did not hold his interest, especially after the sort of night he had had. However, he maintained his composure. “Nothing intriguing, Miss Danforth. Just... business.”

Rebecca could obviously sense Jonathan’s lack of interest and tried to steer the conversation in a different direction. “Miss Danforth, have you had a chance to explore the gardens yet?”

“Oh, yes!” Miss Danforth said enthusiastically but quickly returned to Jonathan. “Your Grace, you must tell me more about your trip to Italy. I have always been fascinated by that place. Did you encounter any unexpected adventures?”

“I am afraid not. It was just... routine,” he said with a shrug, looking about and trying to come up with an excuse to leave.

Miss Danforth seemed undeterred. “Well, perhaps you can share your thoughts on the latest book you’ve read? I, personally, have read a ton and simply cannot find anything new to titillate me.”

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Jonathan's interest was barely masked by his polite façade, despite the word she had used. "I'm afraid I have very little time to read. If you need a recommendation, Miss Danforth, I am not the source you need."

"Have you seen Lady Miranda?" Rebecca asked, seizing the chance to try and change the topic once again.

At that point, Jonathan was not listening any longer. He had spotted a familiar face in the crowd, Lady Elizabeth Finnegan, a striking beauty with whom he had shared more than just flirtation in the past. She locked eyes with him, giving him a subtle yet unmistakable signal to follow her.

His blood boiled at the thought of making this garden party a little more interesting. He didn't need to be asked twice. He watched her disappear through a small, garden path, her fiery red dress trailing behind her, like a passionate invitation. A mischievous smile crept across his lips as he turned to his cousin, already crafting an excuse in his mind.

"My Ladies, I have just remembered that I need to discuss something with Lord Fitzwilliam. Urgent business, you know."

His cousin raised an eyebrow, clearly skeptical at this sudden realization. "Really? Right now?"

He nodded, trying to appear honest. "Yes, right now. I will be back shortly. I promise."

Before she could protest, he slipped away, weaving through the guests with practiced ease. He knew that she was probably watching him go, shaking her head in exasperation. But he didn't care about that right now. He navigated the throng of guests with a sense of anticipation as he followed Lady Elizabeth's trail, expecting something illicit.

Now where could she have gone?

### CHAPTER 3

The sight of the small pond soothed Ciara. She could not hear the chatter of the guests any longer. The quiet, serene setting was a welcome escape from the judgmental whispers and curious stares. Bending over the pond, she cupped her hands and splashed the cool water onto her neck, letting the chill calm her racing heart.

As she stood up, she inhaled, gazing at the surface of the pond, mirroring the sun high up above. She began to sing softly, her voice barely louder than the gentle rustling of the leaves.

Close your eyes, my darling dear,

Let the stars above be near,

Dream of fields of emerald green,

Where troubles fade and hearts are seen.

It was an old Irish lullaby, one her grandmother used to sing to her every night before Ciara would drift off to sleep. After a moment, she leaned against a sturdy tree, closing her eyes. The cool breeze against her back was grounding, reminding her of the strength she had within. She focused on her breathing, in and out, letting the

song's gentle rhythm guide her thoughts away from the party.

"I didn't know you had such a beautiful voice."

Before she could even open her eyes to see who the deep baritone belonged to, she felt two strong hands lock around her waist, pulling her into a kiss.

It was a kiss of claiming someone, of awakening deep, slumbering desire that thundered through her body with the strength of an avalanche. His lips crashed against hers as if they had kissed a million times before. Without thinking, her body melted into his own, without a single thought regarding the danger they were in.

His hands were on her waist, keeping her close to him as her hands flew around his neck. She had no idea what was happening. All she knew was that she didn't want to be anywhere else. He angled his head and completely took control of her body, of her mind. When he gently sucked at her lower lip, her mind was obliterated. Her insides were on fire as she moaned softly against his lips, not even realizing that she was doing it.

For a moment, she let herself get lost in the kiss, in the way his mouth moved against hers, the way his body pressed close to hers. It was intoxicating, exhilarating, and terrifying all at once. Her hands found their way to his chest, feeling the solid muscle beneath his clothes, anchoring herself as the intensity of the kiss grew.

Then, as quickly as it had happened, he pulled back, leaving her breathing heavily and with her heart still racing, trying to make sense of what had just happened. However, his hand still lingered on the small of her back.

Her eyes now wide open; she could immediately see that he was a stranger. A devilishly handsome stranger but a stranger, nonetheless. Her lips still tingled from the passionate kiss he had just given her, and she knew that her cheeks were flaring



from his proximity. Dark curls fell over his forehead, and he stared at her with his chiseled chin and jaw, giving him the appearance of a Greek god.

“Well, you are not Elizabeth,” he grinned in obvious pleasure, “but I can’t say I am complaining.”

Fully regaining her composure, she pushed him away, creating what appeared to be only a semblance of safe distance between them. She could only hope that he couldn’t hear the thundering of her heart and what their kiss had done to her.

The man stood tall and well-built, exuding a commanding presence. His black hair, neatly styled, contrasted strikingly with his dark blue eyes that gleamed with intensity and intelligence. High cheekbones and a strong jawline gave his face a chiseled, aristocratic look while his impeccable attire and confident bearing completed the picture of a refined and powerful gentleman.

“What on earth were you thinking?” she managed to gasp, refusing to acknowledge how handsome he was, still inflamed from the kiss, a passion that only seemed to make her fury even more potent.

“Come on, darling. Do not act as though you were raised in a nunnery,” the man purred, his eyes dark and mysterious.

“How did you know?” she gasped, feeling as if someone had punched her in the stomach.

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“Know what?” he asked in confusion, and Ciara realized he was not speaking literally.

“Um, never mind,” she mumbled with a hasty shake of her head, stepping further away.

He reached for her and gently grazed her shoulder with the tips of his fingers, gesturing at her gown. “This is all a misunderstanding, you see. A very silly one.”

“A misunderstanding?” she gasped. “A misunderstanding is bumping into someone or stepping on someone’s foot. Not kissing someone, you vulgar man!”

“Do you always do this?” he asked, tilting his head as if to take a closer look at her which only infuriated her even more.

“Do what?” she snarled.

“Prevent people from explaining themselves,” he clarified. There was something about the way he seemed so unapologetic as if he had done absolutely nothing wrong. That only seemed to infuriate her even more, her cheeks revealing her state of mind.

“There is nothing you can say to explain yourself.” She shook her head incredulously.

“May I try?” he asked with a sly grin. He didn’t wait for her to finish. Instead, he merely continued, boldly confident of his charm. “I was following a lady with a gown the same color as yours. I assumed it was her standing by the tree, waiting for me as we had agreed.”

Her nostrils flared up at the thought of him having mistaken her for a lady who would so easily call upon a man to follow her away from the party.

“That only shows how much attention you were paying to the lady in question,” she told him furiously.

She had no idea where all that boldness was coming from. She wondered where it was when she had been talking to Sarah and her friends. But she was not enraged then. Now, she was.

For a moment, she thought he would be offended by her words, but he was only further amused. “I do apologize for having mistaken you for her, but if you don’t mind me saying, it would seem that you enjoyed that kiss as much as I did.”

Her cheeks flared up even more at those words. “How dare you insinuate such a thing?” she demanded, taking a shocked step back.

She thought he was rude before, but now, she thought he was a downright scoundrel. His apology was not even a proper apology, and he dared to point out... the truth. That very thought exploded inside her mind, reminding her that it would be best to simply leave both this place and this man and go home. Yet, she felt frozen in place.

“Careful,” he grinned, watching her move back. “You might fall into the pond, and then I will have to rescue you. Imagine having to explain that to everyone.”

She glanced back, realizing that he was right. She was dangerously close to the edge, so she stepped in the opposite direction, nearing him once again. She immediately knew that this proximity was a dangerous thing. His cologne overpowered her completely. Her mind was a haze from his smile and the kiss that they’d just shared.

“But perhaps you would like me to touch you again,” he teased. “Your body reacted to

me so easily, giving itself away; it was as if you were expecting me to come, beckoning me with your song.”

“My body reacted in surprise,” she replied furiously. “It did nothing. You did everything.”

“That isn’t how I remember it.”

“You... are not a respectable gentleman,” she said through clenched teeth, feeling a desire to slap him, but she resisted the temptation to do so for the simple fact that he was right.

Her own comment made him laugh, and much to her chagrin, she realized that he was even more handsome when graced with that unrestrained laughter. Now, she wanted to slap him even more.

“Respectable men do not kiss like that,” he teased, nearing her even more. His hand lingered close to her shoulder, the proximity making her tremble, but he made sure not to touch her. “And neither do respectable ladies.”

Respectable ladies. That was what Mother Superior used to tell them. That was what was expected of them. Every deviation from being good was a deviation from God. And right now, she felt that deviation more than ever before. Her body was insanely drawn to him. She could not deny that, at least not to herself. She felt sinful and dirty, and she knew that she could not remain there with him any longer.

“You are a rake,” she said the only word she could think of. “And I shall not be in the company of one.”

She turned on her heel to leave immediately, but before she could do so, she felt his hand gently gripping her elbow, preventing her from leaving.

“At least, tell me your name, siren.”

His own voice was the beckoning of a siren. She immediately remembered Odysseus and his sailors, who only survived because they could not hear the siren song. She had to resist the pull, the temptation, no matter how hard it was. At the same time, she could not force herself to leave without giving him a name.

But not hers.

“Sarah,” she said suddenly, blurting out the name. “Sarah Danforth.”

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He chuckled at her words. She wondered why. She was already walking when she heard him call out after her.

“Very well, siren,” he said, and she knew then that it would be a name she would never forget. “Let our little game begin.”

### CHAPTER 4

Oh, that vile, despicable, utterly intolerable man!

Ciara could not stop going over what happened a million times until she finally merged with the crowd at the garden party in search of her uncle. She could not stay there any longer.

Spotting her uncle at the far end, she approached him, trying to keep her composure. “Uncle Brendan?” she said softly, catching his attention. “Do you mind if I return home?”

He frowned, his brow furrowing with concern. “But... we have only just arrived. Are you feeling unwell? Has something happened?”

“No, no,” she was quick to reassure him. As she spoke, she tried to convey sincerity in her eyes. “I am just... too overwhelmed by the crowd and the music. I think it would be best if I went home and rested.”

He neared her, placing his hand on her cheek, as if to check if she had a fever. She was certain that she did, and all she could hope for was that he wouldn't notice. “Are

you sure that nothing happened?”

“Yes, Uncle, I am sure,” she said, hoping that she didn’t blush too noticeably. This was the first time she had ever lied to him, the only person in her family who was now on her side, and she felt horrible about it, but she knew that she could not tell him what had happened.

He sighed, clearly reluctant to let her leave. She knew that he wanted to help her come out of her shell, to engage more with the world around her, and that included mingling at balls and garden parties and not going home an hour after they had arrived.

“Ciara, my dear, you need to give these events a chance,” he urged tenderly. “Now that you have returned, it is important to socialize, to meet... new people.”

They had never spoken clearly on the topic of her future husband, but she knew that he was thinking about that as well. She, on the other hand, did not care one bit whether she would get married or not. She felt that she had so much pain to deal with first that she could not give herself to anyone in such a manner. At least, not yet. Maybe never.

“I understand, Uncle,” she replied, her voice pleading. “But this is just the second party we have attended since I returned from the nunnery.”

When she spoke that word, it felt almost blasphemous. A part of her expected to hear thunder rumbling in the distance upon that word, but of course, nature was oblivious to her pain and discomfort. It was solely her own to deal with.

“There will be plenty more chances to do that,” she tried to convince him. “Right now, I would just like some peace and quiet. Please?”

After a moment's hesitation, he conceded with a nod. "Very well. But promise me that next time, you will not do this."

"I promise," she said, relieved. She leaned closer and gave him a tender peck on the cheek. "May I take the carriage? Will you be able to get back home on your own?"

"Yes, my dear," he assured her. "I will just have one of my friends take me home, don't worry."

She smiled, giving him another kiss. Then, she quickly made her way back home, her mind still racing with thoughts of the kiss and the mysterious man. As the carriage took her home, her body ached with a longing she didn't quite understand. The unexpected nature as well as the intensity of the kiss had awakened something within her, something primal and almost desperate.

Once inside her room, she closed the door and leaned against it, taking a deep breath. Her fingers touched her lips, still tingling from the memory of his kiss. She tried to push the thoughts away, to focus on something else, but her body seemed to have a mind of its own. It craved the sensation again, the closeness, the electricity that had sparked between them.

What is this feeling?

She shook her head, trying to clear her thoughts. She could not allow herself to be swept away by a moment of passion. She needed to be rational, to think clearly. But even as she told herself this, she could not shake the feeling of longing that had settled deep in her core.

Jonathan thought he would find the siren easily. After all, the red hue in her brown hair made her distinctively different from all the other ladies in attendance. He wondered to himself if he truly had not seen the difference between her and



Elizabeth. It seemed like just a serendipitous mishap that he could not help but grin the entire time he had paced through the crowd, nodding at acquaintances but secretly, searching for her.

That was when someone gently tapped him on the elbow. He turned around locking gazes with Elizabeth.

“I was waiting for you,” she whispered boldly, her fathomless blue eyes threatening to drag him down into themselves. But strangely enough, his desire for her was nonexistent. All he wanted now was to find the siren.

“I am sorry,” he said without meaning it. “I got caught up on the way to you,” he admitted, but that was as much as he was willing to divulge.

“Perhaps, you would like to follow me again?” she purred seductively into his ear, spilling all sorts of wild desires right into his mind. He gazed at her, wondering how many men would consider themselves wildly fortunate to be in his place right now, to be asked that very same question by this goddess.

However, his reaction was lacking miserably. He had no desire to follow her anywhere. He wanted to remain there until he found the siren. And then, he wanted to take her far away from that maddening crowd and take her into his arms again. He wanted to taste her, to trail his tongue on her neck, all the way to the outer ridge of her ear, and make her tremble with desire. He wanted to hear the soft little moans as she gripped him, pulling him closer.

He could not believe that a single kiss had the power to inflame him so, to make him yearn for more, even going to such lengths as to refusing the advances of someone like Elizabeth. He was utterly mad for doing that, yet he could not help it. He was mesmerized by the mystery woman, and he knew he had to find her.

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“I would love to.” He decided to be nice as he promised his cousin he would be. “But I have to find my cousin and speak to her.”

That was the kindest excuse he could come up with, and despite being a rake with a reputation of one, he was in no habit of insulting women or making them feel bad. On the contrary, their pleasure was as important to him as his own. The only difference was that he never made any promises to them. They always knew what they were getting themselves into with him and that helped him in considering himself an honorable man... despite his obvious reputation.

“Oh,” Elizabeth immediately realized what that meant. There was a lightning bolt of hurt in those beautiful eyes, but she smiled it away. “Of course.” Without another word, she withdrew from him, keeping her dignity intact.

What the devil are you doing? He gasped silently to himself. A part of him wanted to run after her, to tell her that he wanted to go with her wherever she would take him. But he could not move. He just watched her leave until she was out of sight, and once again, she was out of his mind as well.

He turned around in an effort to find the fiery-haired siren, but she was nowhere to be seen. Instead, he found Rebecca eyeing him furiously from across the garden. He inhaled deeply, walking over to her, ready to be scolded.

“Urgent business discussion with Lord Fitzwilliam?” she echoed his own excuse, much to his amusement. “Who on earth is Lord Fitzwilliam?”

“Oh, you know,” he shrugged, gesturing with his hands. “Lord Fitzwilliam. The man

I spoke to.”

“You disappeared from the garden and ended up God knows where as you always do,” she frowned.

He almost told her that was exactly what happened, but he knew better than to divulge that. “I needed some respite from the crowd. These gatherings tend to be too much for me.”

That much was true. Only that respite was supposed to be Elizabeth but ended up being someone else, someone who now occupied his every waking thought.

“But you have barely spoken to anyone,” she pointed out. “There is a very nice young lady I wanted to introduce you to.”

“Speaking of young ladies,” he interrupted her, “have you seen a girl with reddish-brown hair tied up in a low bun, wearing a bright red gown?” As he spoke, he looked around, hoping that he would somehow manifest her there, but it was to no avail.

“No,” Rebecca shook her head. “I haven’t seen anyone like that. Is it someone we know?”

He smirked, feeling strangely titillated by the thought. “In due course.”

## CHAPTER 5

Ciara was still lost in thought, sitting in the drawing room of Uncle Brendan’s London townhouse, when the sudden arrival of a carriage drew her attention from the memory of the garden party which still burned fresh in her mind.

“My dear Ciara,” Adeline claimed as soon as she walked in through the door, her

eyes filled with concern. “Are you quite well? You left the garden party so abruptly without even saying goodbye, so I had to come and see for myself what on earth was going on. That isn’t like you at all.”

Ciara rose to greet her friend, offering a small but genuine smile. “Adeline, it is good to see you. Please, sit with me. I have much to tell you.”

As they settled into the plush chairs of the drawing room, Adeline leaned forward, her curiosity palpable.

“Would you like some tea?” Ciara offered. “I have just purchased some lovely brews from?—”

“Tea can wait,” Adeline interrupted her with a shake of her head. “First, I need you to tell me everything. You seemed so distressed.”

Taking a deep breath, Ciara began to recount the events of the afternoon in question although it still seemed impossible, even to her. “It was the most peculiar thing,” she commenced her story as if it was a fairy tale and not something that actually happened to her. “I needed some respite from the gathering, and I snuck away from the crowd to go to that little pond. As I was standing there, this stranger appeared before me, pulling me into an embrace and kissing me!”

“He... kissed you?” Adeline gasped. “A stranger?”

“An utter and complete stranger, Adeline,” Ciara confirmed gravely.

“And... what did you do?” Adeline asked, beginning to become slightly amused by the story, now that she had assured herself that nothing bad had happened to her friend.

“Well...” Ciara suddenly flushed in response to her friend’s question. “What do you mean what did I do?”

Adeline chuckled. “I mean exactly that, you silly girl. What did you do? Did you push him away? Did you scream? Did you slap him?”

“I... did none of those things,” Ciara had to admit with a pang of remorse. How come she didn’t think of any of those things? There was only one thing on her mind as he pressed his lips to hers. “I... I think I kissed him back.”

Adeline’s eyes widened in shock, in disbelief, in utter incredulity, and then she burst into a melodious laughter which didn’t seem to have an end. Ciara watched her friend chuckle and giggle until Adeline finally sighed, wiping the corner of her eye.

“Goodness me,” Adeline exclaimed. “I must say, I never expected that of you. To kiss a complete stranger. I must say!”

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“I didn’t kiss him,” Ciara frowned in her defense. “He kissed me first.”

“Well, you didn’t need to kiss him back, and yet, you did,” Adeline grinned. “But I digress. What happened then?”

Ciara looked down at her feet, still feeling the burn in her cheeks, but if there was anyone in the entire world to whom she could tell the entire story without any fear of being judged, that person was Adeline. They had been friends for about a year now, and despite that time being relatively short, they knew everything there was to know about each other. Their meeting was the union of two same souls, recognizing each other, and they had spent much time together since then.

“It turned out that he thought I was someone else,” Ciara divulged with a pang of displeasure. “He apologized but not as a normal person would apologize.”

“But as a mad person would?” Adeline asked, chuckling. It was obvious that she was enjoying herself immensely.

Ciara frowned, pretending to be offended. “If you keep up with those comments, I shan’t tell you another thing more.”

“Oh, no! No, please,” Adeline was still chuckling. “I was unable to resist. The story is just too much, especially for you. I would have expected it to happen to anyone else but you. That is why I am so utterly amused by the whole thing.”

“Well, that makes you and him,” Ciara pouted, remembering the man’s reaction. “I was not amused. Not the least bit.”

“Oh, but I beg to differ,” Adeline teased, taking her friend’s hand into her own. “Now, what happened after his mad person apology?”

Ciara lifted an eyebrow at her friend then she continued. The truth was, she would have continued no matter what Adeline said. She wanted her friend to know everything.

“Yes, he apologized, but he made it appear as if I were as much to blame as he was,” she scoffed. “Imagine that. As if I had been just lingering there, waiting for him to come and kiss me out of the blue. Preposterous!”

“Most certainly,” Adeline mused. “And scandalous as well.”

“He even had the audacity to flirt with me afterward!” Ciara was blushing again, and she could not help it. “Quite shamelessly at that.”

“And you have no idea who this man might be?” Adeline wondered, her head tilting slightly.

Ciara shook her head. “No, I don’t. But he seemed so confident, so utterly certain of himself. It was unnerving.”

“All jesting aside now,” Adeline spoke tenderly albeit gravely, “did anyone see you two? You know what would happen if they did.”

“I know,” Ciara agreed, her own tone changing with the tone of the conversation. “I don’t think anyone saw us... fortunately.”

“Good,” Adeline said with a sigh of relief. “Because that could have been quite an expensive kiss in terms of repercussions. A man who behaves in such a careless manner is certainly bad news. I believe you should pretend you do not know him if

you see him again.”

Ciara nodded though a part of her rebelled against the notion. “You are right, of course. It was an improper encounter, and I shall do my best to avoid him if I see him again.” Her voice somehow trailed off, and she looked away as if there was yet another, unspoken truth left inside of her.

Adeline, who knew her friend all too well, studied Ciara’s face, her eyes narrowing slightly. “But... you wish to see him again, don’t you?”

Ciara’s blush deepened, and she met Adeline’s gaze with a mix of defiance and vulnerability. “I cannot explain it, Adeline. There was something about him, something that stirred my curiosity. I know it is foolish, but I cannot help but wonder if our paths will cross again.”

“Was the kissthatgood?” Adeline teased.

Ciara chuckled. “Well, yes, it was quite good.”

“I hope that man never hears that,” Adeline’s words sounded like a premonition. “He already sounds so full of himself, and I have not even seen him or exchanged a single word with him.”

Ciara had to admit that everything her friend said was true. The man was full of himself. The man was bad news. And yet, she wanted to see him again, despite all common sense.

Adeline sighed, reaching out to squeeze Ciara’s hand. “Just promise me you will be careful. The world is full of charming rogues, and I would hate to see you hurt by one.”



“I promise,” Ciara replied softly though in her heart, she knew that the thrill of the encounter had left an indelible mark. She could only hope that fate would guide her wisely, whether or not it brought the mysterious stranger back into her life. “I really don’t need any further complications in my life. I promised Uncle I would steer clear of trouble, and that is what I intend to do.”

“Unless trouble finds you,” Adeline pointed out. “Which seems to be exactly what happened here.”

“Goodness,” Ciara sighed, shaking her head. “I just want to live my life, free from any judgment, a life on my own terms where I am in no one’s way. Is that too much to ask?”

“No,” Adeline assured her. “That is what everyone wishes for. But unfortunately, it is much more difficult to obtain for some than for others.”

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“I think I just need to forget that this kiss ever happened,” Ciara said simply, but that was not as easy to do as she had originally thought. “And steer clear off Miss Danforth. If I never saw her again in my life, it would be too soon.”

Adeline laughed. “I know that feeling. But if you attend balls, you will probably stumble onto her again.”

“Balls,” Ciara pouted. “I wish I could avoid them altogether to tell you honestly, but Uncle is insisting I attend.”

“You have been away for so long, your life now is completely different, and it is a big change. Such big changes should happen gradually, one day at a time,” Adeline reminded her. “You know that he means well.”

“I know,” Ciara sighed. “And I am very grateful for his presence in my life. Life at St. Catherine’s was... well, you know. It was not easy. And my parents... Gah! What I mean to say is that, apart from you, Uncle Brendan is the only person I can rely on. It is so frightening sometimes to know one is so... alone.”

“You are not alone,” Adeline smiled, taking her hand into her own. “You just said it. You have us, and trust me when I say that when you need us, we will be worth a million people!”

Ciara chuckled at her friend’s words. “Yes, you are right. I do not need anyone but you two.”

She wrapped her arms around Adeline and embraced her. When she pulled away, she

tried to change the topic of the conversation. “What about you, my dear Adeline? Has anyone caught your attention?”

“Oh, no, no,” Adeline shook her head. “I wish to be swept off my feet if I am to fall in love, and it seems that such a thing is rare to come by these days.”

“Don’t tell me you want a stranger to kiss you by the pond?” Ciara teased, and the two girls laughed sweetly, enjoying the relief of the moment.

“No, I shall leave that to you,” Adeline replied as they continued to tease each other, remembering why they were best friends.

## CHAPTER 6

The gaming hall buzzed with lively chatter and the clinking of glasses as Jonathan stepped inside, his eyes searching the room until they landed on his friend Hector Allen, the Duke of Islington, who was already seated at a corner table, nursing a pint of ale. Jonathan made his way through the crowd, greeting Hector with a hearty slap on the back.

“Ah, Jonathan!” Hector exclaimed, raising a hand in a mock toast. “I was beginning to think you had found more interesting company than mine.”

Hector cut an imposing figure, standing tall and lean, with a presence that demanded attention. A faint scar ran along his right cheek, a subtle but unmistakable mark that hinted at a past filled with dangerous encounters. It added to the sense of danger that clung to him, a silent testament to the battles he had faced and survived. His hands bore the calluses of a man who was no stranger to physical confrontation.

Jonathan grinned. “Not yet, Hector. Let me get you another round, and we can see what this fine establishment has to offer.”

As he raised his hand to the bartender, signaling to him to bring them two pints of ale, Hector's gaze followed Jonathan's to a small gathering of women—or more specifically, courtesans—at a nearby table, their laughter ringing out as they tried to seduce the gamblers away from their card game.

“Ah, I see you have already found tonight's entertainment,” Hector said with a knowing smirk.

Jonathan nodded, but his enthusiasm felt hollow. He could not shake the memory of the mysterious woman from the garden party: the softness of her lips, the way her hair felt as it slipped through his fingers, the intoxicating sound of her little moans. It was maddening how she occupied his thoughts so completely, even now, amidst the bustle of the tavern and the promise of easy conquests. All he could think about was the way she tasted, and he wanted more. So much more.

“Let's see if we can charm our way into their good graces,” Jonathan suggested, standing up with a roguish smile that didn't quite reach his eyes.

“Good evening, ladies,” Jonathan greeted as they approached them. “It seems that you are enjoying yourselves.”

One of the women stared at him straight in the eyes. He loved when women had the audacity to do something like that. Yet, this particular evening, not even the passionate boldness of such a gaze was enough to distract him from the mysterious woman whom he had kissed.

“We are,” she said with a slight accent, proving that she was not fully English. The thought titillated him beyond belief. At least, it would normally but not this time. Everything was somehow different this time, and he couldn't quite figure out why.

“But you are missing something,” Jonathan pointed out equally boldly, pulling a chair

and taking a seat at their table without even being invited to do so. He tried to remain focused on what would usually be his goal.

“Oh?” the woman asked, raising an eyebrow. Her eyes were deep, dark with mischief and a promise of even darker delights. Usually, she would be just his type. “And what is that?”

“Handsome men,” Jonathan smirked.

The two women burst into an amused chuckle which Hector seized as a chance to take his seat between them. The woman Jonathan had been speaking to did not laugh. She was not even smiling. She was staring at him mysteriously as if she were still deciding whether to kiss him or slap him. Usually, he would not mind either.

But once again, he realized that he was not focused on the situation. He was not in the present moment, and he hated that. He didn't like to dwell on the past. He didn't like to dwell on the future because that was yet to come, and it was not determined. He liked the present moment the best. It provided instant gratification, and he loved it. However, this time, his thoughts lingered in the past.

“What if we do not find you handsome?” suddenly the woman asked, bringing him back to the present moment.

“Excuse me?” Jonathan asked, not because he was questioning her own question but because he had not heard it.

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She frowned, obviously caught off guard by his own question. Then, Hector hastily intervened. “Do not hold it against my friend, madam. He is not himself this evening.”

Jonathan glanced at Hector, who gave him a puzzling look. Jonathan knew that Hector must have noticed his absentmindedness, so Jonathan endeavored to focus on the company. “Yes, my friend is right. I am a bit distracted this evening. That is all.”

The woman liked the response. She leaned closer to him. “Does that mean that there is someone else on your mind?”

He forced a smile. “No. I am merely captivated by your beauty, my dear,” he replied smoothly though the words felt completely empty, devoid of any meaning. He was usually much more charming than that. He tried to focus harder.

“I must say, your friend was right,” she said seductively. “We did need handsome men at our table, especially one as handsome as yourself.”

He smiled at the compliment. Usually, he would see that as a promising sign that he would not be going home alone. And she was a ravishing beauty. He had to admit that. However, her lips didn’t beckon to him. His manhood didn’t roar with desire, lusting after her. It lusted after the siren of the pond, the memory still as fresh in his mind, creating ripples of yearning in his loins.

Hector, ever the observant friend, caught Jonathan’s faraway look and intervened with a boisterous story, drawing the ladies’ attention away.

“Allow me, ladies, to tell you a story of the time when my friend here and I found ourselves in a duel at dawn over a matter of mistaken identity!” he began, his voice rich with exaggerated drama. The ladies leaned in, captivated by the sudden shift in conversation.

Jonathan was grateful, taking a sip of his drink and trying to shake off the persistent thoughts of the mysterious woman. He watched Hector weave the tale with effortless charm, his friend’s aloof demeanor momentarily replaced by an engaging storyteller’s warmth. The ladies laughed and gasped at all the right moments, completely absorbed by Hector’s narrative.

Hector glanced at Jonathan, noting his friend’s continued distraction. With a subtle nod, he wrapped up his story, leaving the ladies giggling and curious for more. “But enough about our past escapades,” Hector said smoothly, raising his glass in a toast. “To new adventures and the company of lovely ladies.”

The group echoed his toast, and the conversation flowed once more. Jonathan forced himself to engage, smiling and exchanging pleasantries, yet his mind kept wandering away from the gathering, back to the siren by the pond.

At one point in the evening, Jonathan realized that he had had enough. That had never happened. He downed his drink, slamming the glass against the dirty, wet table before them. He leaned over to Hector, his voice low and purposeful. “I think I shall call it a night.”

Hector’s eyebrow rose in silent shock. His friend had never said that before. He was always the one who wanted to stay in the tavern until the break of dawn, unless there was a lady accompanying him home, which Hector probably suspected was the case now.

“Ladies,” Hector announced, “my friend here says we’ve had enough to drink.”

“Are you going home?” one of the two ladies surrounding him asked.

“Yes,” Hector grinned. “Are you?”

“Yes,” the same lady replied, batting her eyelashes. “We could accompany you if you’d like.”

“I would like that very much,” Hector nodded, turning to Jonathan. “I just have to see about my friend.”

“I can see about him,” the olive-skinned beauty replied. “He seems like he could use some company.”

Jonathan hesitated, the offer tempting but somehow... hollow. He could not believe the words that were coming out of his mouth. “No, thank you. I am quite tired. I think I will just head on home.”

Hector’s eyes widened slightly, unable to hide his surprise. Jonathan, the ever-charming rake, turning down such an offer was unheard of. “Are you certain, Jonathan?” he asked, his tone laced with disbelief.

“Yes, quite, old boy,” Jonathan nodded. “But you go ahead and enjoy yourself. Good night, ladies.” He turned to leave without waiting for a response.

With a smooth, practiced smile, Hector turned to the two ladies. “Ladies, it has been a delightful evening, but I must also take my leave. I trust you will find your way home safely?”

The ladies, momentarily disappointed, nodded gracefully. “Of course,” one of them said.



Hector offered a polite bow then quickly caught up to Jonathan, who was already stepping out of the tavern and into the cool night air. “Jonathan, wait,” he called out, his voice cutting through the din of the street.

Jonathan turned, surprised to see Hector following him. “Hector, what are you doing? I thought you were staying with the ladies.”

Hector shook his head, his expression serious. “No, my friend. I can see you are not yourself tonight. Let’s head home together.”

Jonathan gave a grateful nod, appreciating Hector’s perceptiveness and loyalty. The two friends walked in silence to the carriage waiting nearby, its lanterns casting a warm glow in the night.

As they settled into the plush seats of the carriage, the driver set off, the clip-clop of the horses’ hooves a steady rhythm against the cobblestones. Hector studied Jonathan for a moment before speaking. “Now, are you going to tell me what the devil is going on with you?”

“Just tired, I suppose,” Jonathan sighed, attempting a dismissive wave of his hand, but it didn’t work. They had been friends for far too long for Hector to believe such a flimsy excuse.

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Hector raised an eyebrow, unconvinced. “Tired? You have turned down a lady’s company, you are distracted, and you have been uncharacteristically quiet. That’s more than just fatigue. I don’t think I have ever seen you like this.”

Jonathan leaned back, looking out of the window, his mind racing. Suddenly, he remembered something that might help. “There was a song,” he said slowly, almost to himself. “A song I heard recently. I can’t get it out of my head.”

“A song?” Hector frowned. “A song has you so besides yourself?”

“Maybe,” Jonathan shrugged. “If I could figure out where I know it from, I might stop thinking about it.” He hated lying to his friend, but he could not tell him that there was a woman he could not get out of his mind. That would be breaking his own rules.

Hector sighed. “Fine. Do you remember the melody?”

Jonathan nodded with a smile. “I feel like that is all I remember now.”

“Tell me,” Hector urged, “so we can get this all behind us and you get back to your usual self. This is beyond concerning, Jonathan.”

“I know,” Jonathan chuckled. “Now, I remember some of the words but not everything. I think it went something like this: Dream of fields of emerald green, where troubles fade, and hearts are seen. And the melody was like this...” He continued to hum what he remembered, hoping it might trigger Hector’s encyclopedic knowledge.

Hector listened carefully, his brows furrowing in concentration. After a moment, he nodded. “I cannot say with complete certainty, but I think it is an Irish lullaby.”

Jonathan’s heart skipped a beat. “Irish? Are you sure?”

Hector frowned. “I just said I cannot be sure. Are you listening?”

“Oh, yes,” Jonathan chuckled.

“Where did you hear it?” Hector inquired.

Jonathan hesitated, knowing that he could not reveal the true nature of his encounter with the mysterious siren. “Oh, it’s just something I overheard at the garden party. It stuck with me for some reason.”

After all, it was not a complete lie. In a way, it was the truth.

Hector regarded him with a skeptical eye but didn’t press further. “If it’s Irish, it narrows things down slightly. There aren’t many in our circles who would know such a song. You might have to start asking around discreetly.”

Jonathan nodded, a plan beginning to form in his mind. “Thank you, Hector. You have given me a starting point.”

Hector smiled faintly. “I still don’t understand why it is so important.”

“It’s not,” Jonathan urged. “It just... puzzles me.”

That was also true. More true than Jonathan himself was willing to admit.

## CHAPTER 7

An entire week had passed, and Ciara still could not get the mysterious stranger out of her mind, although she tried her best. That morning, she was in the drawing room, pretending to read. The truth was, she was genuinely trying to focus, but it was all a futile endeavor.

Suddenly, Uncle Brendan bustled into the drawing room, waving an invitation in the air with a broad smile. “Ciara, my dear,” he exclaimed, his voice filled with enthusiasm, “I just remembered that we’ve been invited to Lady Harrington’s ball! It is sure to be a splendid affair.”

He handed her the invitation which she accepted with little interest. The ornate invitation arrived weeks prior on fine parchment, adorned with delicate script and gilded edges, promising an evening of elegance and opulence. Yet, it didn’t beckon to her at all. As she inspected the invitation, a troubled expression appeared on her face. She twirled a lock of hair around her finger, hesitating before responding. “Uncle Brendan... would it be all right if I do not attend this one?”

He paused, his jovial demeanor softening as he noticed Ciara’s unease. He moved to sit beside her, placing a comforting hand on her shoulder. “Why ever not, my dear?”

Ciara glanced down at her hands, unsure of how to express her thoughts. “I... I am just not accustomed to these social events. They make me nervous. I just don’t fit in.”

Uncle Brendan shook his head. “The point is not to fit in, my dear. Not at all.”

“No?” she asked, amused. “Then, what is the point?”

He thought about it for a moment then he smiled. “The point is to find someone who equally doesn’t fit in.”

She had to laugh at his awkwardly worded statement although it was rather

endearing. She wondered if the mysterious stranger was such a man. She hastily banished the thought. He fit in all too well with his devilish good looks and ease of charm. He was the perfect epitome of the ton, and she... well, she was not. That was all there was to it.

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“You will do just fine, my dear,” he assured her. “Who knows? You might even enjoy yourself.”

Ciara sighed softly, torn between her uncle’s encouragement and her own reservations. Ever since she had returned, it was difficult to find her place. She felt as if she didn’t belong anywhere. Not here in the ton. Not back in the nunnery. Sometimes, she wondered if she even had a place of her own. As for her uncle, she knew that he meant well and only wanted her to experience the world beyond their quiet home.

She sighed heavily, deciding that she would listen to him. Maybe he will be there as well, a treacherous little voice reminded her. She pretended not to hear it although she knew perfectly well who he was.

“I suppose you are right, Uncle,” she finally conceded, offering him a faint smile. “Very well. We shall go.”

Uncle Brendan beamed with delight, patting her hand affectionately. “That’s the spirit, my dear! You will see it will be a night to remember.”

Ciara didn’t believe that. She already had an evening to remember, and she doubted that it could be better than that. The rest of their conversation, as well as their day, passed by uneventfully, and the evening of the ball arrived sooner than Ciara would have wanted it to.

She was in the carriage with her uncle, who had already complimented her gown that evening. She wanted to be beautiful... just in case. Her gown for Lady Harrington’s

ball was a breathtaking ensemble that captured the essence of elegance and sophistication. The gown, a vision in green, cascaded in soft folds of emerald silk, shimmering under the ballroom's candlelit chandeliers. The fabric hugged her slender form before flaring out delicately at the hips, creating a silhouette that was both graceful and alluring.

"It will be fine," Uncle Brendan squeezed her hand in a conspiratorial manner, assuring her that he would always be by her side, no matter what. "Trust me."

"I do," she smiled back, feeling slightly more at ease after his words.

As Ciara and her uncle arrived at Lady Harrington's ball, they were greeted by a scene of enchanting splendor. Servants in impeccable livery stood at attention, ready to assist the arriving guests. They ushered them inside where the grandeur of the ballroom unfolded before them. The air was filled with the sweet fragrance of fresh flowers and the soft notes of classical music drifting from a talented orchestra positioned at one end of the room.

At one end of the ballroom, Lady Harrington herself greeted guests with warmth and grace, her presence commanding attention as she exchanged pleasantries and ensured everyone felt welcome. She noticed Ciara and her uncle, excused herself, and headed straight for them.

"Ah, the Earl of Hopwich," Lady Harrington said in a warm greeting. "And Miss Everton, my dear. It is so lovely to see you both here."

"The pleasure is all ours, Lady Harrington," Uncle Brendan smiled, bowing down before their host and kissing her hand reverently.

"Yes, thank you," Ciara said sweetly. "Your home is... magical."

Lady Harrington was touched by that compliment. “Why, thank you, my dear. So sweet of you to say so. I hope you both will have a splendid evening.”

“I am certain we shall,” Ciara’s uncle assured her, and then, Lady Harrington excused herself once again.

“The work of a host is never done, I am afraid,” she chuckled gently, as she turned away from them and greeted another family who had just arrived.

“I see a dear friend of mine over there, Ciara,” Uncle Brendan gestured at the other end of the ballroom. “Would you care to join me?”

“I also see Adeline, Uncle,” Ciara was relieved. “And she is with Penelope. May I go and say hello?”

“Of course, my dear,” Uncle Brendan said as he gently caressed her cheek. “Balls are always much more fun with friends around. If you do need me, I shall be just over there.” He pointed at a table where several older men had already gathered, commencing a heated discussion that everyone seemed to enjoy.

“All right, Uncle,” she smiled, kissing him on the cheek, then rushing over to Adeline to embrace her.

“Penelope!” Ciara exclaimed as she greeted her other friend as well, proceeding to curtsy before James Chapman, the Duke of Huntington, and also Penelope’s husband, the two people who were responsible for saving her from that dreadful nunnery. Just being there and being free, she had them to thank for that.

“Ciara!” Penelope gushed, embracing her back. “How have you been?”

“Well, good,” Ciara said with a smile, hoping that she didn’t betray herself in any



manner. She didn't want her friends to worry about her. "But do tell me about yourself. You look absolutely stunning."

"Married life suits her, wouldn't you say so?" James teased his wife, and Penelope chuckled, turning to kiss him on the cheek.

"He is the worst, but I love him," Penelope gushed. "You also look breathtaking, Ciara."

"Thank you," Ciara blushed at their compliments, feeling comfortable surrounded by her closest friends. "I must admit, I was feeling a bit overwhelmed earlier, but seeing you here has lifted my spirits."

"You know that we are here for you, dear," Adeline squeezed her friend's hand affectionately.

"I know." Ciara smiled. She wanted to confess to them that she had little desire to attend at all, but now, she felt she had made the right choice. However, just as she was basking in the warmth of her friends' company, a shadow was cast over their joyous reunion.

"Oh, I didn't think nuns were allowed to attend balls." Miss Sarah Danforth appeared, making a directly mean comment. "And in such a choice of attire. My, my, my. How utterly inappropriate."

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The two same ladies accompanied her this time as well, and they immediately chuckled at her mean words. Ciara felt a knot tighten in her stomach, the familiar sting of Sarah's unkind words threatening to dampen the newfound courage she had gathered from her friends. Adeline, Penelope, and James exchanged uneasy glances, sensing Ciara's discomfort at Sarah's blatant rudeness.

Ciara could see that Adeline was ready to defend her friend, as she did before, but Ciara knew that she could not allow others to fight her own battles. She gently grabbed Adeline by the elbow, preventing her from speaking.

"I will have you know that I was never a nun but was an oblate," Ciara explained. "Not that I expect someone of such limited knowledge to know the difference."

Ciara could not believe that she had actually said that. But one look in Adeline's direction assured her she was on the right path, so she continued with equal boldness, "Your opinions are your own, Miss Danforth, but they hold no weight here. Kindness costs nothing, and I will not tolerate your rudeness any longer. You may turn around and leave us now."

Sarah's face flushed with indignation, but she seemed momentarily at a loss for words. With a haughty sniff, she turned on her heel and walked away, followed by her friends, leaving Ciara and her friends in relieved silence.

"Well done, Ciara," Adeline could not even wait for them to leave to express her delight. "Standing up for yourself always takes courage, and you handled that marvelously!"

“I must say, you really did,” James nodded.

“I am so proud of you, Ciara,” Penelope gushed, wrapping her arms around her friend.

“I know you were afraid of how you would fit back in,” Adeline pointed out. “And you can see now that each day will get better, especially when you don’t let people like her harm you in any manner.”

Ciara felt a rush of gratitude for her friends’ unwavering support. She smiled gratefully at Penelope and Adeline, feeling a newfound sense of strength and resilience. “Thank you, both of you,” she said sincerely. “I could not have done it without you.”

As the first strains of the orchestra’s melody filled the air, signaling the beginning of the grand dance, the ballroom seemed to come alive with anticipation and elegance.

James, ever the gentleman, extended his arm to Penelope with a charming smile. “Shall we, my dear?” he asked, his eyes twinkling with warmth.

Penelope accepted his offer with a graceful nod, her smile bright and infectious. She glanced back at Ciara and Adeline with an encouraging wink before following James onto the dance floor where they seamlessly joined the other couples gliding in time to the music.

Meanwhile, Adeline, with an air of quiet curiosity, surveyed the room for potential suitors. Her gaze swept over the gathered guests, assessing each gentleman with a discerning eye. She toyed with a strand of her hair, a subtle gesture of nervous anticipation mingled with hope. Ciara almost chuckled at the words her friend had told her that she didn’t really care about suitors. It was obvious that curiosity won over.

Ciara, on the other hand, felt a wave of anxiety wash over her as she watched Adeline's search unfold. The idea of being the center of attention, even just for a dance, made her stomach churn with nervousness. She cast a longing glance toward a quiet corner of the ballroom where the shadows offered a temporary refuge from the glittering crowd.

Adeline moved away, called by another friend of hers, when suddenly, Ciara heard a familiar voice from somewhere behind her.

"There you are, siren."

## CHAPTER 8

"It's you again," the siren scowled at Jonathan in a way that made him want her even more.

After all, he had come to this blasted event just so he could find her. And there she was as if waiting for him. She looked ravishing, truly like a siren. That pet name suited her in so many ways. And there were also so many ways in which he could suit her as well. He wondered how her naked body would feel pressed to his as her breasts heaved throughout her moans. He wondered about the color of her nipples. Would they be like delicate rose petals in the summer? How he longed to taste them, to flick his tongue over them while his eyes watched her in the throes of desire.

But he shouldn't be thinking about that right now. There were too many people around. His smile might betray him or perhaps even his words. He usually didn't mind his manners when he truly wanted something, and he truly wanted her. More than anything else in fact.

"It has come to my attention that we were not properly introduced last time we met," he grinned mischievously.

“Has it occurred to you that I did not wish to be acquainted with the likes of you?” she asked him, catching him off guard with her fire. Heat unfurled between his thighs, awakening profound desire.

“Actually, it has,” he acknowledged, realizing that one would easily attract more bees with honey than with vinegar. “And that is because I have not properly apologized for my behavior, a mistake which I intend to rectify immediately.” He paused, clearing his throat a little. “It was a mistake, madam. I should not have acted as I did. It was wrong of me in so many ways. But sometimes, I let the worst get the best of me.” He grinned at his last comment then he offered a proper introduction. “Jonathan Whitlock, the Duke of Silverbrook, at your service, madam.” He bowed down deeply before her in a most respectful way.

He looked down at her shoes, at the hem of her gown trailing on the floor. He lifted his gaze slowly, as if he were caressing her. Her legs, thighs, waist, her breasts rising and falling, and the delicate line of her exposed collar bones, finally reaching her lips and eyes. He refused to look away even for a second before he heard her siren’s voice and found out whom it belonged to.

“Ciara Everton,” she finally revealed her identity. “Daughter of the Viscount of Hartfield.”

“Ah,” he said with a smile, straightening his posture. “Miss Everton, would you do me the honor of dancing with me?”

“No, thank you,” she said without even thinking. It almost hurt his ego. Usually, women were that fast in giving him the opposite answer, but hers was a resounding no.

He knew that convincing her would yield no results. However, he could immediately tell that she wanted to run away and hide in the corner. Placing her in a situation

where he would be the lesser of the two evils was the only way to get her to accept his offer.

He leaned closer to her, discreetly pointing at a group of older-looking gentlemen, who were all glancing in the direction of the dancing couples. “I noticed Lord Quentington looking at you a moment before I approached you. I suppose he is trying to do so now as well, albeit discreetly, as we are talking. He has probably set his mind upon asking you to dance. And then, there will be others.” He paused, allowing his words to sink in. Then, he continued, “I bet they are all thrilling conversationalists, and they will not make you uncomfortable at all.”

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“You are not much of a conversationalist yourself, Your Grace,” she said boldly, accentuating his title. He had to admit that it titillated him to hear her be so respectful of him. He wondered what else he could make her say in that melodious voice of hers.

“Oh, but I have not revealed all my secrets yet,” he said mischievously. “We have barely spoken.” He threw a cautious glance around then added the second part, “We were busy doing something else.”

The pink blush on her cheeks turned to a fervent red. A strong desire seized him, to gently brush his fingers against them, but he resisted doing so, knowing how risky it would be. Besides, he wanted to convince her to dance with him, not to dissuade her.

“You look even lovelier when you are blushing,” he smiled genuinely that time, offering her his hand. “I promise I am a much better conversationalist than Lord Quentington. Will you dance with me?”

She hesitated for a moment longer then she rested her hand on his. He could not resist the temptation to kiss her hand, bringing it to his lips for a chaste kiss.

The memory of their unexpected kiss in the garden flooded his mind, igniting a fire within him that he struggled to contain. He had thought of little else since that moment, his thoughts consumed by the image of her, the feel of her lips against his, and the sweetness of her voice.

Without a word, Jonathan guided Ciara toward the dance floor, his hand warm and reassuring in hers. The music enveloped them as they joined the swirling dance of the

other couples, their movements synchronized with the graceful rhythm of the waltz.

“What’s the matter, siren?” Jonathan asked. Only then did she realize that she had not spoken a word since they had started dancing. “Has that mesmerizing voice of yours abandoned you?” he asked again, his voice carrying a hint of amusement.

Ciara’s pulse quickened at his words, a mixture of surprise and attraction fluttering in her chest. She glanced up at him, her eyes meeting his with a flicker of uncertainty. She knew she should maintain her guard, to heed the warnings whispered in the corners of London’s social circles. But Jonathan’s proximity, the warmth of his hand on her waist, and the undeniable chemistry between them blurred her resolve.

“No,” Ciara replied softly, her voice steady despite the fluttering of her heart. “No, it hasn’t.”

Jonathan’s lips curved into a smile, his gaze intense yet tender as he continued to guide her through the dance. “Good,” he murmured, his voice barely audible above the music, “because I find myself quite taken by your voice, Miss Everton.” He paused for a moment, twirling her away from him, letting go of her, and her body mourned the loss of the sensation of his hands on her waist. Then, when she was back in his arms again, the thrill was back, even stronger than before. She was finding it difficult to control herself although she was trying her best.

“And with your name,” he added playfully. “I find it quite beautiful.”

“Thank you,” she said politely although she tried not to sound amused or entertained. She didn’t want him to think that she was like the other ladies of the ton, easily charmed into obedience.

“That song you were singing...” he asked. Was that actual interest she heard in his voice? Or was that a practiced skill? She realized that she could not tell the difference



with such a man.

“Yes?” she replied, her hand becoming clammy in his. She could not believe that he had such an effect on her, making her body tremble with just one gaze.

“What was it?” he asked.

“Why?” she asked in return, lifting an eyebrow.

He smiled in a way that disarmed her completely. “I liked it. I could not get it out of my mind.”

Once again, she wondered if he was telling the truth or if he only thought that was what she wanted to hear. Men like him knew how to tell ladies exactly what they wanted to hear. Yes, she decided to indulge him, at least for the duration of this one conversation.

“It is an Irish lullaby that my grandmother used to sing to me,” she said softly, wondering if she was doing the right thing by revealing something so intimate, so vulnerable about herself to a man such as him.

“Oh, so it is an Irish name, Ciara?” he inquired as his fingers gently caressed hers during the dance. She wondered if that was an accident.

No. With him, nothing was an accident.

“Yes,” she nodded.

“It is lovely,” he said. “And so is your voice. I would love to hear you sing again.”

She pouted before speaking. “That probably will not happen again, Your Grace.” It

helped her to keep repeating his title. It served the purpose of creating distance between them, metaphorical, if not physical.

“Why?” he inquired, sounding genuinely intrigued by her response.

“Because that might lead to a lady being alone with you,” she reminded him.

He chuckled. “Well, what is so wrong with that?”

“No lady should be alone with you, Your Grace,” she told him.

“Ah,” he spoke, pressing his lips together, only to click the tip of his tongue against his upper teeth. “So, I take it you have heard of my reputation.”

“Yes, it precedes you, I am afraid,” she affirmed.

Although their conversation was playful, their dancing was even more so. He would pull her closer to himself when the music required it of him, and he kept their hands intertwined a moment longer than necessary when the music demanded of him to let her go. It all drove her slowly, silently mad. She could not tell why on earth this man had such an effect on her that she could not think of anything or anyone else.

“That is the reason why a lady must stay away from you,” she clarified.

“And yet, here you are, dancing with me,” he pointed out just as they faced each other, so close that their chests were almost touching. His eyes were mesmerizing, staring right at her, threatening to see right through her and steal all of her secrets for his own.

“Because I am the lesser of two evils?” he asked when he saw that she didn’t know what to say to that.

“Exactly,” she replied, unable to resist chuckling. He charmed her so easily. She wanted to scold herself for having so much fun with him, but it was impossible not to.

“You have a grace about you, Ciara,” he murmured, his voice low and intimate as if they had just kissed again and there was no one else around. The thought made her blush even more than before, and she tried to banish it from the confines of her mind.

“A grace that sets you apart from the rest,” he added.

“I’m certain that is what you say to all ladies.”

“No,” he responded quickly. “I only say things I mean. Just like your eyes.”

“My eyes?” she echoed.

“Yes,” he nodded. “They say things your lips do not mean to divulge. Your eyes hold secrets I am dying to uncover.”

Ciara’s breath caught in her throat at his boldness, her heart racing as she struggled to maintain her composure. She knew she should resist his charms, to remind herself of the tales she had heard about him. But there was something about the way he looked at her, the way he made her feel desired and alive, that made it difficult to resist.

As the final notes of the waltz drifted into silence, Jonathan brought their dance to a graceful halt. He held Ciara’s hand in his, his touch lingering for a moment longer than necessary. He led her away from the dancing area where the guests were happily chattering, but Ciara could not hear anything other than the sound of his voice.

“Thank you for the dance, Miss Everton,” he said softly, his gaze intense yet filled with a hint of uncertainty. “I hope to dance with you again this evening,” he added, kissing her hand once more then turning around and disappearing in the crowd, leaving her yearning for more, against all reason.

## CHAPTER 9

“You seem particularly pleased with yourself,” Hector grinned upon having Jonathan join him by the refreshments table. The two gentlemen huddled in one of the safest corners of the ballroom in hopes of having a private moment to themselves.

“I can only assume it has something to do with the lady you were just dancing with,” Hector added playfully, taking a drink from his glass.

“You assume well, old boy,” Jonathan grinned. “And you can assume that I need a drink of my own.” He went and grabbed himself a drink, walking back confidently to join his friend, as he swirled the amber liquid in the glass he was holding.

“Are you going to tell me the name of the mysterious young lady?” Hector teased. “So, I know whom to thank for perking you right back up.”

Jonathan laughed. “Her name is Ciara Everton.”

Hector’s smile died down as his forehead knotted. “Wait... Everton you say?”

“Yes,” Jonathan nodded.

Hector thought about it for a second more. “The daughter of the Viscount of Hartfield?”

“Yes.” Now, it was Jonathan’s turn to lift an inquisitive eyebrow. “How did you know?”

“Ciara... that name stuck with me,” Hector admitted, pointing somewhere indefinitely with his index finger as if that helped him remember better. “Was not she the one who was sent away to a convent?”

Jonathan’s eyes widened in surprise. “A convent? As in... a nunnery?” he echoed, his mind racing to reconcile this revelation with the captivating woman he had just danced with. Was she... a nun? It could not be.

Hector nodded, his expression contemplative. “Yes, it is all coming back to me now. She has a most unusual name, and it is also unusual to see her here, given her history.”

Jonathan's thoughts whirled as he tried to piece together the puzzle of Ciara's past. Before he could voice his confusion, Hector's eyes lit up with sudden realization. "Wait a moment. Is this the girl connected to that Irish song you were asking me about last time?"

Jonathan could not remember the last time he felt this awkward, the memory of his quest for the mysterious melody finally resurfacing. "Perhaps," he admitted, seeing there was no other way out. A hint of sheepishness in his tone betrayed him.

Hector's grin turned to teasing. "Well, well, Jonathan. It seems our rakish hero has found himself quite a challenge. The nunnery girl with an enchanting voice."

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Jonathan rolled his eyes at his friend's playful jibe, but before he could respond, a group of ladies approached them, their laughter and chatter diverting the men's attention. Hector immediately turned his attention to the newcomers, engaging them in lively conversation.

Jonathan, however, found his thoughts drifting back to Miss Ciara Everton.

On the other side of the ballroom, Ciara navigated her way through the elegantly dressed guests until she found Adeline, who was standing near a table adorned with crystal vases overflowing with fresh flowers. Adeline's expression brightened upon seeing her friend, but it quickly shifted to one of concern as she took Ciara's hand.

"Ciara, there you are," she said, her voice filled with relief and worry. "Is that the man you told me about?"

"Yes, that is him," Ciara confirmed, knowing what was about to come.

"Ciara, you... you have to be careful with him," Adeline warned her tenderly. "His reputation is... how do I put it, less than stellar."

Ciara offered a reassuring smile though she felt a twinge of guilt. "I know, Adeline. I only accepted his dance request to be polite. I assure you, it was nothing more than that."

"All right, if you say so, then I believe you," Adeline noted. "I am glad to hear that. Just remember, not all attention is good attention, especially from men like him."

Ciara smiled, appreciating her friend's concern. "I will, Adeline. Thank you for looking out for me."

The two friends chatted for a bit longer, their conversation drifting from the events of the evening to lighter topics. They spoke of the upcoming season, the latest fashion trends, and the delightful music filling the ballroom. Ciara felt a sense of comfort in Adeline's presence, the familiar rhythm of their friendship providing a much-needed anchor in the midst of the evening's complexities.

Their conversation was interrupted when a distinguished-looking lord approached, bowing slightly as he addressed Adeline. "Miss Middleton, may I have the pleasure of this dance?"

Adeline glanced at Ciara, who gave her an encouraging nod. "Of course," she replied with a graceful smile, taking the lord's offered hand.

As Adeline was led away, Ciara found herself alone once more, her thoughts inevitably drifting back to Jonathan and their enigmatic dance. Despite her friend's warnings, she could not help but feel a pull towards him, an inexplicable curiosity that refused to be quelled.

Ciara wandered to the edge of the ballroom, finding a quiet spot where she could observe the festivities without being immediately noticed. She watched as couples twirled and swayed to the music, their movements graceful and elegant. Among them, she caught glimpses of Jonathan, charming and handsome, his presence commanding attention wherever he went.

As Ciara made her way through the crowded ballroom, her eyes fixed on her uncle, a sense of relief began to wash over her. Uncle Brendan's familiar and comforting presence felt like a lifeline in the midst of the opulent chaos. But just as she was about to reach him, her path was suddenly blocked.



“Ciara,” came the stern voice of her mother, Lady Hartfield, piercing through the noise of the ballroom. “We almost didn’t recognize you.”

Ciara’s heart sank as she came face-to-face with her parents, Lord and Lady Hartfield. This was the first time she had seen them since they had sent her away to St. Catherine’s, and their expressions were a mixture of disdain and anger.

“Mother, Father,” Ciara managed to say, her voice trembling.

Her father, Lord Hartfield, crossed his arms and glared at her. “What do you think you are doing here, parading yourself around at social events? Have you no shame?”

She needed her uncle now more than ever, but he was nowhere to be found. In fact, none of her friends knew she needed them desperately. She was all on her own, faced with the most frightening duo of her life.

Lady Hartfield’s eyes narrowed. “You are humiliating us, Ciara. The scandal you bring upon our name is insufferable. How dare you show your face in society after everything?”

Their harsh words cut through Ciara like a knife, each accusation reminding her of the isolation and cruelty she had endured at St. Catherine’s. The memories of the nuns’ abuse, and their cold, unyielding discipline flooded back, overwhelming her senses.

“Mother, Father, please...” she began, her voice barely a whisper, but they continued their tirade, their voices rising in anger and disappointment.

“I truly thought that you would change, that you would see the error of your ways,” her father said furiously. “You were only thirteen when all of this started, and even after all these years, you are still the same.”

She wanted to tell him that he couldn't have known that when he didn't see her, when neither of them had seen her. But she didn't have the strength to speak up.

"You broke that boy's nose!" her mother exclaimed, remembering the incident that started it all when Ciara's temper got the best of her during a heated argument with a local nobleman's son who insulted her late grandmother.

It was something Ciara would not allow. In a fit of rage, she punched him hard and then challenged him to a duel. Fortunately, the duel never took place, but it was a major scandal that started what her father referred to as her downward spiral.

"He deserved even more for what he said." Ciara found a bit of courage, but it was not nearly enough.

"So did you," her father said with malice in his eyes. She never thought that a parent could despise their child so much. It was unthinkable.

As her parents' harsh words echoed around her, Ciara felt her chest tighten. Panic welled up inside her, a visceral reaction that left her feeling trapped and desperate. She could not breathe, could not think, and the urge to escape grew overwhelming.

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In that moment, she felt the familiar grip of fear take hold. Unable to face the confrontation any longer, she turned and fled, her heart pounding in her chest as she pushed her way through the crowd. She barely noticed the bewildered stares and murmurs of the guests as she ran, her only thought being to escape the oppressive weight of her parents' judgment.

Ciara finally reached a secluded balcony, her breaths coming in ragged gasps. The cool night air enveloped her, and the quiet solitude of the balcony provided a stark contrast to the overwhelming noise and chaos of the ballroom. She leaned against the railing, her hands gripping the cold metal as she tried to steady herself.

The stars twinkled above her, a reminder of the vastness of the world beyond her troubles. The garden below was bathed in the soft glow of moonlight, the gentle rustling of leaves and the distant chirping of crickets offering a soothing melody to her frazzled nerves. Ciara closed her eyes, focusing on the sounds of the night and the rhythm of her own breathing.

In and out. In and out.

Just as she opened her eyes, turning toward the doorway, she realized the Duke of Silverbrook was there.

“Need a solitary moment, siren?” he asked seductively.

## CHAPTER 10

“Yes, but you obviously don't know what solitary means; otherwise, you wouldn't be

here,” Ciara snapped, unable to control herself as the rage and anguish from the encounter with her parents still boiled inside of her.

She was still reeling from the painful interaction with her parents, and the sight of Jonathan only added to her agitation. She could not keep the frustration from bubbling over. The Duke of Silverbrook was the last person she wanted to see at this point. All she wanted was to be left alone, but there was not a single place in that entire mansion where she would be granted that.

The sheer rage at her helplessness poured out of her every gaze, her every word. “Why are you so insistent on following me?” she snapped, her voice sharp. “Haven’t you had your fun already?”

The Duke smirked, undeterred by her anger. He stepped closer, his dark eyes twinkling with amusement. “I actually keep telling myself that, but every time I see you, I realize that no, the fun is not over. In fact, it has just begun.”

“I am not here for your amusement,” she snarled at him, determined to treat him just like she had treated Sarah. She would show him that she would not accept being treated with disrespect.

“But I am here for yours, siren,” he teased. “If you want me to be.”

“The sort of fun you have to offer is not something I am interested in, Your Grace,” she assured him. “And I just told you, I want to be left alone,” she reminded him, strangely feeling slightly less angry.

“But a ball is exactly the opposite of that,” he said with surprise. “You come to a ball to socialize, not the other way around.”

“Well, mistakes happen,” she said, staring him straight in the eyes, not allowing

herself to look away even for a second. “Like the one by the pond.”

“Ah, but you see, that was a fortuitous misunderstanding,” he said, grinning in a way that drove her mad. She had no idea why she was reacting to him in such a manner, wanting to feel his lips on hers again. It was utterly maddening.

“A mistake,” she urged, ignoring the blush that spilled all over her cheeks.

He chuckled at her insistence. “I knew immediately that you had some fire in you. Tell me, sweet siren, do you bite as well?”

Ciara could not believe him. Her frustration was reaching its peak, but she knew that she could not show him that. That would only cause him more pleasure. She needed to show him that she was as calm and composed as he was. She needed to be on his level in order to play his game. And the worst part was that she needed to remain there with him. Back inside, she could risk running into her parents again, and that was the last thing she wanted to happen. She wanted to avoid another confrontation, to escape the judgment and harsh words that had wounded her so deeply.

“I might,” she said instead of telling him how rude and annoying he was. “If you keep following me, that is.”

His laughter was rich and genuine, sending a shiver down her spine. “You are clever enough to deduce that I would not object to that, Miss Everton.”

He continued his playful banter, sensing her reluctance to go back inside, “What is it about me that vexes you so, Miss Everton? Is it my charm, my wit, or perhaps my devastatingly good looks?”

“Your arrogance, mostly,” she retorted, her eyes flashing with irritation.

He chuckled, moving even closer until he was mere inches away. “Ah, but you see, it’s only arrogance if it’s unfounded. I prefer to think of it as confidence.”

Ciara turned to face him, her chin held high. She tried not to pay attention to how devilishly handsome he was, how utterly titillating his smile was. “And what makes you so confident that I would tolerate your company?”

The Duke’s gaze softened slightly, his playful smirk turning into a more genuine smile. “Because, despite your protests, I think you enjoy our exchanges as much as I do. There’s a spark between us, one that neither of us can deny.”

She opened her mouth to argue, but the words caught in her throat. There was an undeniable chemistry between them, a magnetic pull that drew her to him even as she fought against it. His confidence, his teasing, and his charm all combined to create an allure that was hard to resist.

“That is most certainly not the case,” she finally flared at his words. And even if it was the case, she would certainly not admit it to him of all people.

“You may deny it all you want, siren,” he teased. “But your actions speak louder than your words.”

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“No, it is you reading into things that are not there,” she retorted.

“Well, now I am here,” he said walking closer to her. “And from what I see, you need someone to keep you company, someone who can distract you from the unpleasantness of this evening.”

Unpleasantness?

She wondered if he noticed what happened between her and her parents. She sighed. Of course, he noticed. Everyone in attendance noticed because they all knew what had happened. And the saddest part of all was that no one was on her side, no one but Uncle Brendan and her friends.

“I do not need to be distracted from anything, especially not by you,” She shook her head. “I meant what I told you before. A lady alone in your presence is?—”

She started, but she was not allowed to finish. Voices were coming from the corridor. Her heart skipped a beat, and she gasped, fearing so many things. She locked eyes with Jonathan, who reacted immediately. He grabbed her arm and pressed her against the side of the balcony’s entrance, pulling them both out of view. He placed a finger on his lips, his eyes locking onto hers with an intensity that made her breath catch. They were inches apart, and the tension between them was electrifying.

She wanted him to kiss her. In truth, she wanted to kiss him.

It was beyond mad, beyond utterly ludicrous what she was feeling at that moment, and yet, she could not help it. She had completely forgotten all about the danger she

was in and instead focused solely on the touch of his finger pressed upon her lips.

The voices grew louder as they approached then slowly faded as they passed by the corridor. Ciara's heart pounded, not just from the fear of being discovered but from the closeness of the Duke's body against hers. She could feel the heat radiating from him, the scent of his cologne enveloping her senses.

Once the voices had completely faded, she pushed him away, her emotions a whirlwind of confusion and frustration. She hurried inside, eager to put distance between them, but the Duke was relentless. He followed her, his steps quick and purposeful. Before she could get far, he reached out and took her hand, pulling her close once more.

"Ciara," he said softly, his voice a mix of urgency and something deeper that she could not quite place. "Why are you running from me?"

Neither of them realized that Miss Sarah Danforth and her group of friends were standing at the edge of the corridor, their eyes wide with shock and amusement at the scene unfolding before them.

The whispered gossip had already begun; the scandalous implications of Ciara and the Duke being caught alone together spreading like wildfire.

Ciara's eyes widened as she noticed the group, her heart sinking at the sight of their judgmental stares and knowing smirks. Panic surged through her, and she pushed Jonathan away with all her strength, breaking free from his grasp.

"Miss Everton, wait—" the Duke called after her, but it was too late.

She had already bolted past Sarah and her friends, her face flushed with a mix of anger and embarrassment, knowing that she had just been completely ruined.



The carriage ride home was tense and silent at first, the weight of the evening's events hanging heavily in the air. Ciara sat with her hands clenched in her lap, her mind racing with a mix of anger, shame, and frustration. Uncle Brendan, sitting across from her, finally broke the silence, his voice stern and edged with disappointment.

“I asked you to come out of your shell, Ciara, not to be compromised by a rake!” he snapped, his eyes flashing with anger, something she had never seen before. “Do you have any idea what you have done?”

Ciara flinched at his tone, her cheeks burning with shame. He had never spoken to her like that, although her parents adamantly believed that he, as well as them, had a reason to.

“Uncle Brendan, it was not like that. The Duke was just?—”

“Just what?” Uncle Brendan interrupted, his voice rising even more. “Flirting with you? Putting you in a position where your reputation is now in tatters? I warned you about the dangers of such men, Ciara. Neither I nor your duchess friend can get you out of this situation.”

Tears stung Ciara's eyes, but she refused to let them fall. “I... I don't know what came over me, Uncle. But I know that I didn't ask for this. I didn't ask for him to follow me or for Miss Danforth and her friends to find us.”

Her uncle was still staring at her intently, trying to understand how on earth she had allowed something like this to happen. She herself couldn't tell him because she didn't know. She wasn't herself, and that was the most frightening thing of all.

“Intentions aside, the damage is done,” Uncle Brendan said, his voice softening slightly but still stern as he came to terms with the situation. “You have to be more careful, especially with men like that. His reputation precedes him, and now, by

association, your reputation is at risk too.”

She knew that was putting it mildly. Her reputation was not only at risk, but it was lingering on the edge of the precipice which could mean her certain doom. She had made a dreadful mistake. Now, she was certain of it, but it was too late for any regrets.

Ciara looked out the window, the passing landscape a blur as she tried to process her uncle’s words. She knew he was right, but the unfairness of the situation gnawed at her. She had only wanted to escape the suffocating atmosphere of the ballroom, and instead, she had walked into an even worse predicament.

“I am sorry,” she whispered, her voice barely audible.

Uncle Brendan sighed, his expression softening further. “I know you are, Ciara. But being sorry isn’t enough. You have to be smarter, more aware of how society views these things. One misstep can ruin everything. And you did exactly that. The ton... they will say terrible things now. I am certain that they already are.”

“It would not be the first time that they say terrible things about me,” she reminded him. “You know what I did.”

“I know that. I also know why you did it. I know you planted a well-deserved facer on that young man because he insulted my mother, your grandmamma. You had a reason for that. And I never wanted you to end up in a nunnery because of it. But now... what is the reason behind this? Have I given you any cause to act in this manner?”

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“Of course you haven’t, Uncle! I could have never dreamed of the kindness you have shown me,” she replied.

She dared not tell him about her encounter with the Duke by the pond. That would prove to him that she plunged willingly into this disgrace. That she might have somehow predicted or even planned it with the Duke himself. That was of course preposterous, but she knew that the ton only cared about what something looked like, not what it actually was. That was the sad truth of their existence and also why she never felt as if she could live her own life in such a false manner.

“Then what was it?” he asked.

“I was upset after I saw my parents,” she confessed with a voice that was on the verge of breaking. “The Duke saw what had happened, and he followed me to see if I was all right.”

Her uncle frowned. She knew how preposterous that excuse sounded. A man with such a reputation following a young woman into a solitary corner to ask if she were all right? That was no more possible than pigs taking flight.

“I know how that sounds,” she said, realizing that she was only enforcing a lie.

She knew well why he had followed her. She knew it because she wanted the same. She wanted the repetition of that scene by the pond, regardless of all common sense.

“You should have come to me, Ciara, and not allowed yourself to be prey to a man like him,” he chastised, frustration furrowing his brow.

“I know, Uncle. You are right. I should have acted more rationally.” Her voice was laced with guilt, and she couldn’t help but swallow hard as she spoke.

Her uncle sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose in a defeated manner. “I suppose there is no point in discussing something that has already happened. What we need to focus on now is you steering clear of that man. There is to be no more contact between you two unless it is in the middle of the crowd with everyone serving as chaperones. Is that understood?”

“Yes, Uncle,” she nodded.

She knew that he only meant well. His orders were for her own good, unlike the orders she used to receive from her parents.

She looked away at the window, the weight of his words settling heavily on her shoulders. She had to find a way to navigate this scandal, to protect herself and her future which at the moment didn’t seem bright.

But for now, all she could do was endure the journey home and hope that tomorrow would bring some clarity.

## CHAPTER 11

Sleep did not grace Ciara with its blissful presence that night. The same unease and feeling of guilt kept gnawing at her throughout the dark hours of the morning, and it did not leave her side even with the sun rising. Instead, she felt even guiltier, knowing that she was partly to blame for what had happened with the Duke of Silverbrook. She was supposed to push him away and quickly go back to the ballroom, refusing to be in his company unchaperoned. Yet, she couldn’t refuse him. And that lack of character had cost her dearly now.

A knock on the door interrupted her need to hide away from the rest of the world for the day, even from her own uncle.

“Yes?” she called out, her voice a whisper.

The door opened, revealing the butler. “Miss Everton, your uncle requests your presence in his study.”

Ciara swallowed heavily. “Now?”

The butler nodded apologetically. “Yes. He said at your earliest convenience.”

That, of course, meant right now.

“All right,” she confirmed with a tinge of concern in her voice. “Please let him know that I shall be there momentarily.”

“Yes, Miss Everton.” The butler bowed respectfully then closed the door behind him.

Ciara’s heart was beating wildly. She had hoped that his tirade of questions would end the previous night during their carriage ride home. She had hoped that she would be able to hide in her chamber for the rest of the day, for the rest of the week, even the month, and not see anyone. She knew that was impossible, of course, but one could always hope.

Inhaling deeply, she took one glance at the looking glass, not even certain why she had done that. It was a nervous habit her parents had instilled in her. Always look your best, my dear, her mother would say. Even now, she could not get those words out of her head. Did she need to look her best for a chastising?

Mustering all the courage she had left, she opened the door and hastily walked down

the corridor, climbing the grand stairwell that led to her uncle's study. She lingered in front of the door, her fingers curled into a fist, then she quickly knocked, fearing that her courage might leave her.

"Come in," she heard from inside.

As soon as she opened the door, she felt as if someone had punched her in the gut, forcing her to expel all the air out of her lungs. With her hand still clutching at the doorknob, she realized, much to her horror, that her uncle was not alone.

"Miss Everton," the Duke of Silverbrook smiled upon seeing her, getting up from the armchair which he was sitting in a moment ago.

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Her uncle did not get up. He simply stared at her then at the man who had been there for quite a while, judging from the comfortable expression he was wearing.

“You?” she gasped, barely managing to breathe in. She felt as if a claw had grabbed her by the throat, squeezing menacingly with each new word she wanted to expel into the world. “What... what on earth are you doing here?”

He bowed before her respectfully, taking her hand into his own, without her even offering it, and bestowing a chaste kiss upon it. Then he took a reverent step back, creating some distance between them, something she was not certain he even knew how to do, and yet, he was now being courteous beyond her wildest imaginations.

“I am doing the only natural thing, my sweet siren,” he said in a voice dripping with gentility and affection. “I am asking for your hand in marriage, of course.”

Her breath caught in her throat. Her eyes widened in astonishment, her hand rising to her chest. She didn’t know what to say to that. The blush on her cheeks was evident. She was certain of it. Yet, what she didn’t know was what caused it: anger or some secret attraction.

“Ciara, my dear, please...” Her uncle gestured at the other chair, situated by the Duke’s side. “Take a seat.”

Reluctantly, she did as he bid her. A moment later, the Duke took a seat as well. It all reminded her of some business transaction that needed to take place, and she was at the center of it. She had never imagined her marriage proposal to look like that and even less, for the man in question to be a well-known rake. It all sounded like a bad

dream, and she desperately wanted to wake up.

“You know, Your Grace, that although Ciara is living under my roof, I am not her guardian,” Uncle Brendan explained. “Her hand is not mine to give.”

Ciara tried her best to read his facial expressions. He obviously didn’t approve of that man sitting there in front of him, asking for her hand. However, with everything that had happened, he knew, just like she did, that it was the only thing that could save her already crumbling reputation.

But what sort of a reputation would she have married to a rake? She felt helpless and desperate but most of all, enraged.

“I know that,” the Duke nodded, taking his eyes off of Ciara only for short glimpses at her uncle, but his eyes always traveled back to her. “I have taken the liberty of visiting the Viscount of Hartfield. He and his lovely wife are more than happy to allow their daughter to marry me and become a duchess, so there is absolutely no objection on their part.”

“What if there were an objection from me?” Ciara blurted out, but she immediately regretted it. Her past self had taken over for a moment, but clarity hit her immediately. She was being childish, not taking into account the bigger picture and the fact that this was the best solution to the predicament she had found herself in.

However, instead of the Duke, she heard her uncle respond curtly, behavior that he was not akin to often, “May I remind you, Ciara, that after what happened, this is the only way to stop the gossip that has been circling the ton and hold your head up high in public.”

She knew what he was referring to. And worst of all, she knew that he was right. She didn’t have any counterarguments, other than the mere fact that she didn’t want to



marry a rake, especially not one as arrogant and conceited as the Duke of Silverbrook.

She glanced at the Duke just once. That was all she needed to see the look of victory in his eyes as he tried to suppress a grin. For some reason, he was content with the situation, and she could not, for the life of her, understand why. However, she knew that she had no other way out. Going back to the nunnery was something she would never allow again. That place was the closest thing to hell she had experienced, and even marriage to this arrogant man was better than that.

“I apologize, Uncle. You are right,” she addressed her uncle softly and turned to the Duke. “Very well then,” she said through pursed lips, still finding it difficult to control her displeasure with the situation.

She forced herself to curtsy in the most polite manner possible although she could see gloating in the man’s eyes as she did so.

“If you will excuse me,” she said, her voice on the verge of breaking as she walked straight out of her uncle’s study with her heart beating in her throat, making it increasingly more difficult to breathe.

She rushed out into the garden, hoping for some fresh air, but the world seemed to conspire against her, forcing her into a mold that demanded of her to be something else, something she was not.

“Ah, Becky!” Jonathan was caught slightly off guard upon seeing Rebecca in the main hallway of his townhouse upon his return. “What brings you here?”

She had obviously arrived only moments prior, her hand clutching several rolled pieces of paper which clearly, she intended to show him.

“This,” she said annoyed, offering him the papers.

He frowned, accepting them. One glance assured him what they were. Just a scandal sheet, one that had featured him often in the past several years. Not that he blamed them. People loved reading about other people’s misery and stupidity. That made them forget about their own. They also loved reading about other people’s shame. That was their favorite.

“And?” he shrugged, handing it back to her. He allowed his valet, who appeared out of nowhere, to take his coat, turning to him. “The Countess and I shall be having tea in the drawing room, Parkinson. Please have some tea sent there.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” Parkinson bowed, disappearing with his master’s coat and leaving Jonathan alone with his cousin.

“And?” Rebecca gasped, echoing his own question.

He ignored it, heading towards the drawing room. He didn’t need to turn around to know that she was following him. He could hear her soft footsteps echoing on the floor.

As soon as they entered the drawing room, she hastily closed the door behind her. She locked eyes with him, looking both shocked and furious. It was a look he had seen many times. In fact, he had seen it so often that it had lost all of its power.

“What do you mean and?” she demanded to know. “Have you lost all humanity in your pursuit of Dionysian pleasures?”

“Dionysian?” he echoed, laughing. “I love it when you are so poetic, Becky.”

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“Do not mock me,” she flared up at him, her eyes wide and furious. “You know very well what I mean.”

“Of course, I do,” he nodded, taking a seat, and gesturing for her to do the same. “And I also know that you worry too much. But I suppose, mothers always do.”

She frowned again. “Have you no mercy ruining a girl who is already under the scrutiny of the ton?”

He inhaled exasperatedly. “Both you and that thrill seeking scandal sheet know nothing. I have, in fact, proposed to the girl.”

She didn’t seem to have heard him, and she merely continued with her tirade as she had always done because his answer had always been the same. Only, not this time.

“Well, of course, you have because you are so selfish and egotistical that you think of no one else but you, and I honestly do not know when you will?—”

That was when her tirade ended. Her eyes widened, only then realizing what he had said. He could see that frown transform into a straight line on her face then her lips parted in a gasp. Finally, she grasped the full magnitude of his words.

“You... proposed to her?” she asked, her eyes wide with incredulity.

“Yes,” he said simply, eyeing her reaction. He was quite amused although he knew that it must have been quite a shock to her. She probably never thought that she would be hearing something like that from him.

“To a girl who was in a convent?” she asked, obviously for clarification purposes.

“Yes,” he nodded again. “Although for your information, she wasn’t a nun. She was just an oblate which is?—”

“I know what an oblate is,” she interrupted him, still with that incredulous look in her eyes. He doubted that she had heard anything even remotely shocking in her entire life.

“You know, Becky, despite what everyone thinks, I am not a monster,” he said simply, realizing that although his cousin loved him, she shared the opinion the ton had of him.

After all, he was a rake. And that reputation came with quite a few unflattering epithets, but monster was not one of them.

“I never said you were,” she was quick to correct him. “I am merely led by your behavior so far, but now... what happened with this girl... I am shocked.”

“I know,” he confirmed with a nod. “I can assure you that this came as a shock to me as well.”

She hesitated for a moment then asked what was on her mind. “Why is this girl special? Are you... in love with her?”

Now, it was his turn for his eyes to widen in disbelief. He couldn’t resist bursting into roaring laughter. The question was utterly ridiculous to even consider, and yet, she thought it possible. How utterly amusing!

Only once the onslaught of his laughter subsided was he able to provide her with an answer.

“In love? Don’t be ridiculous, Becky.” He tried to explain it in the simplest manner possible. “She was unlucky to get caught with me, and I was careless. And this is the consequence of being careless. It is as simple as that.”

He omitted mentioning the kiss and the fact that he was madly attracted to her and that he yearned to make her his. He had to admit that he wasn’t planning on making her officially his, in the marital sense of the word, but if bedding her had to entail marrying her, he was slowly coming to terms with it. After all, it would not be the first marriage of convenience in the world, nor would it certainly be the last.

“This is unlike you,” she admitted, the shock subsiding but still present.

He chuckled. “You don’t have a very good opinion of me, I see.”

“No, it’s not that,” she shook her head, almost smiling at his comment. “I’m just... stunned that you would even consider marrying. You... of all people.”

He shrugged. “Do not think I have changed my rakish ways, dear Becky. I am merely... adapting myself to the new situation. That is all.”

“You are adapting very well, I must say,” she confessed. “I never thought I would see the day.”

He laughed melodiously, utterly amused by her shock and her genuine reaction to his words. “Yes, I also thought there was a better chance of a hailstorm in July than of me getting married, but here we are.”

She pondered about it for a few more minutes then she smiled. She had suddenly come to terms with it; she had accepted the situation and realized that she loved it. “I think that is splendid news. It was high time you took your life and yourself more seriously.”

“No, no, wait a minute.” He shook his head, lifting his hands to the level of his chest in a mock surrender gesture. “I just told you, this doesn’t mean I’ve changed. I am merely being a goodman, not wanting to have someone else suffer for my own lack of judgment of a situation and how risky it was.”

“Yes, yes,” she smiled back at him. “You may claim that, but this is the first step of you maturing, and I am so glad to bear witness to it.”

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Without any warning, she jumped onto him, wrapping her arms around him and enveloping him into a loving embrace. “Congratulations, Jonathan! There is so much we need to discuss regarding your wedding!”

Jonathan’s arms floated around his cousin’s body then he wrapped them around her, returning the hug. He didn’t say anything.

After all, what was there to be said other than I do?

## CHAPTER 12

Ciara said I do without really meaning it. How could she promise to love and cherish someone she didn’t know, someone who willingly and purposely placed her in this situation? She could never mean it under such circumstances. But as always, one had to pretend.

“So lovely... congratulations... all the best to the newlywed couple... the new duchess... long and prosperous... many children...” The good wishes kept pouring during and after the wedding breakfast held at Silverbrook Hall, Jonathan’s main residence in the country which was also to be her new home. How strange that felt.

However, what was even stranger was the moment when her parents walked up to her and her husband, wanting to offer their own wishes for the newlyweds.

“Your Grace,” the Viscount bowed respectfully, and as he bowed, Ciara caught a glimpse of his bald head which he was trying his best to hide by combing his remaining hair to the side, creating a ridiculous look.

She remembered how fearful and tall he used to seem, mountainous even, but now, they were almost the same height.

“Viscount Hartfield,” Jonathan nodded respectfully, “how nice of you to attend.”

“Yes, we had some business matters to attend to, but nothing was more important than this event,” the Viscount said, his voice dripping like venomous honey, threatening to drown anyone it touched. Ciara felt nauseated. The amount of lies in that statement was astonishing.

“Your Grace,” Ciara’s mother interjected, “congratulations. You honor us by choosing our daughter as your bride. We know that there are so many other ladies of the ton far more suitable for a man of your grandeur, and yet, in your endless kindness, you have chosen the black sheep of our family.” Her mother turned to her with a look of scorn. “You have no idea how hard we’ve tried with her to make sure she grew up into a fine young woman. We have done everything in our power, everything! And yet, I feel that we have failed... that we have failed you as her future husband,” she said, suddenly bursting into sobs which she tried to hide in her husband’s embrace.

“You must forgive my wife, Your Grace,” the Viscount said, gently embracing his trembling wife. “This is all very emotional for us. You have made us so happy.”

Ciara’s mother then pulled away from her husband’s arms, her thin lips pursed, her eyes wide with gravity. “But despite everything, I believe that Ciara will be a good wife to you, Your Grace. I know that she hasn’t forgotten everything we have taught her.”

Ciara looked at Jonathan, incredulous at her parents’ behavior. He seemed confused by the charade he was witnessing, and she could only hope that he could see through it. However, if he was like everyone else, then it was easy to fall into their trap.



Her parents had always played their roles perfectly. She was the child that was to be ashamed of, and they were the good parents who were to be blamed for nothing, other than doing everything in their power to bring her back onto the right path. She wanted to scream about the injustice that had been done to her, but she knew it would serve absolutely no purpose.

“Thank you, Viscount,” Jonathan nodded, perplexed that they were addressing only him and not their daughter.

That was when Ciara’s mother pulled away from her husband, wiping the corner of her eyes with a handkerchief that seemed to have magically appeared in her hand. She always had a flair for the theatrics which only heightened the effect of their drama.

“As for you, young lady, consider yourself extremely fortunate that His Grace forgave you for your past,” her mother said in a scornful tone. “Not many men would.”

My past?Ciara almost gasped.What about his? He is the rake here!But she wisely decided to keep those thoughts to herself.

“You need to make sure that you are a good wife and a good duchess,” her mother urged with an outstretched index finger, just like she had when Ciara was a little girl and she had done yet another transgression. “You know what the punishment for mistakes is, Ciara. Hopefully, you have learned at leastthatmuch.”

“Come now, Bridget,” the voice of Uncle Brendan sounded off somewhere behind them, and Ciara immediately felt relieved. “This is a wedding, a joyful occasion. Or have you forgotten what those are like in your quest for perfection?”

Ciara could see the look of utter shock on her mother’s face. Uncle Brendan was her

mother's brother, and he never missed seizing a chance to show her that he was on his niece's side, not on hers.

"I have always been on a quest for perfection, and it is exactly because I have been so bold to demand it of myself and of others that I have been able to obtain so much," she replied, trying to obtain an air of aloofness, but it was obvious that her brother's words struck a chord with her. "Then again, not all of us are able to obtain it."

"Perfection is dull anyway." Uncle Brendan turned to Ciara and her husband. "My mother always taught us to be ourselves, not to be perfect. You know that as well as I do, Bridget."

He glanced at his sister, and Ciara knew that he was expecting a response from her.

"I don't see what Mother has to do with this," Ciara's mother said, thinly veiling her outrage.

"Our mother was there for Ciara when you were not in your everlasting pursuit of... perfection, was it?" Uncle Brendan said somehow victoriously. "She taught Ciara to be herself, even when that seemed to be the wrong thing to do. But being true to yourself... only the bold ones can do that, not that I expect you to know much about boldness, Bridget, my dear. You were always too busy assimilating yourself into your surroundings, preferring the safe option."

"Mother taught her silly things like believing in fairy tales," Ciara's mother scoffed. "No one has any use of fairy tales."

Ciara begged to differ. She had many stories from the nunnery when her grandmother's tales and legends were her only means of remaining sane, but now was not the moment to go back to that dark place. She promised herself she would never return, and she meant it. Returning, even if only in her thoughts, was difficult enough

as it was.

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“Fairy tales are a wonderful thing,” Ciara dared to speak. “She lulled me to sleep with them, and I will never forget her kind and compassionate spirit.”

“I wish she taught you other things as well,” her mother scoffed.

Ciara bit her tongue before stating that it was a mother’s job to teach her child everything it needed to know to be a good human being.

“Like perfection?” Uncle Brendan interjected, steering the conversation back. “We were not made to be perfect. I, you, Ciara my dear, and even you, Your Grace. As such, we are prone to mistakes, but sometimes, those mistakes end up being serendipitous chances in which fate works. Don’t you agree?”

Ciara wasn’t certain who he was referring to, but Jonathan was the first one to respond. “I couldn’t agree more, Lord Hopwich. I have never been a man of perfection myself.”

Ciara almost chuckled at the words. If she didn’t know any better, she could have sworn that he said those words to contradict her mother, who was taken aback by the comment.

“Well, yes, of course,” her mother added, clearing her throat. “I did not mean perfection in every aspect of one’s life. Just... generally, you know?”

“Yes, I’m sure His Grace knows, Bridget,” Uncle Brendan nodded, taking Ciara’s hand into his own and squeezing it tightly, a sign of his support. He always knew what to do and say to make her feel better. “Now, I am certain that they have better

things to do after a wedding breakfast than entertain us old folks. We should leave them so their new life can finally commence.”

“Yes, of course,” Ciara’s mother nodded, locking arms with her husband. Ciara could see that they didn’t like how that conversation turned out. They didn’t like it one bit, and it made Ciara feel glad that not everyone fell for their theatrics.

“Thank you again for coming,” Ciara managed to muster. “I look forward to seeing you soon, Uncle.”

“Of course, my dear.” Uncle Brendan embraced her tightly. “Just because you are married now doesn’t mean that you will get rid of me that easily.”

“The thought never crossed my mind, Uncle,” she smiled, feeling relieved.

Her father offered Jonathan his hand, and Jonathan shook it. When her father leaned closer to her, she flinched, unconsciously taking a step back.

“Your presence was... appreciated,” she said, unable to choose another word.

Her mother smiled, but there was malice behind that smile which made it even worse as it came from a mother. At least, from someone who was supposed to be one even if she never possessed the qualities of one.

“Goodbye, Ciara, my child,” her mother said, using that painful reminder of them being connected forever. “Do behave yourself.”

“I always do, Mother,” she said through clenched teeth, swallowing heavily. She could not wait for them to leave.

That was when Jonathan gently nudged her elbow, turning to her. “Ciara, my dear,

there is someone else who wishes to say goodbye,” he said, pointing at Adeline.

“Goodbye,” Ciara said, turning away from her parents and allowing Jonathan to lead her to her friend, feeling as if a huge burden had just been lifted off her back.

“I never thought I would see the day, old boy,” Hector spoke in a whisper as the two men huddled away from the rest of the remaining party. Jonathan gave Ciara a moment alone with her best friend, deciding to seize one for himself as well.

“I know,” he whispered back as their gazes followed the small group of people that were left, readying to leave as well. “Pigs must have taken flight somewhere in the world.”

Hector chuckled at his phrase. Jonathan had to chuckle himself because he still couldn’t believe what was happening.

“It is like a dream,” Jonathan said cautiously.

“You mean, a nightmare?” Hector corrected him.

“Mhm,” Jonathan said although it wasn’t entirely true. “I am hoping that a part of it might actually be a dream... in bed.”

Hector glanced at his friend. “Oh,” he chuckled again. “I see you haven’t changed.”

“One signature cannot do that,” Jonathan clarified. “This is just... an adjustment.”

“A minor inconvenience?” Hector teased as the two men spoke quietly, not wishing anyone to overhear them.

“Not even an inconvenience,” Jonathan admitted.

“Marrying an oblate? How can it be anything other than that?” Hector sounded incredulous.

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“There is something about her, Hector,” Jonathan whispered, turning closer to his friend. “I told you about kissing her. And that kiss... it enflamed me more than that Spanish opera singer.”

Hector’s eyes widened in shock. “You can’t mean Arabella Ortiz?”

“The same one,” Jonathan nodded.

He had bedded that woman years ago, and yet, the passion and skill of that woman was something Jonathan had been retelling to his friend on many an occasion.

“You cannot mean that.” Hector still couldn’t believe it.

“You know me, Hector,” Jonathan grinned. “I don’t say things I don’t mean.”

Hector whistled as they both turned in the direction where Ciara was standing with her friend. “Perhaps her friend kisses in the same manner?” Hector asked with a curious smirk.

Jonathan chuckled. “You may try, old boy.”

Hector raised an inquisitive eyebrow, not taking his eyes off Adeline. “To tell you honestly, I might take you up on that.”

Jonathan nodded amusedly. “Are you interested in a marriage of convenience yourself?”



“God no!” Hector frowned, his eyes widening as if he had just witnessed the worst horrors of hell. “I was just thinking of stealing a few kisses, maybe feeling the inside of her?—”

“Shhh!” Jonathan elbowed his friend hastily the moment he noticed the girls turning to them, and Ciara waving at him with a smile.

Hector raised an eyebrow at his friend, only to burst into a chuckle. “You have already been hen-pecked I see, and you’ve been married what... a mere hour?”

“Hen-pecked, my arse,” Jonathan teased him back. “If you want any chance of kissing her friend, you’d better be on your best behavior, my devilish friend.”

As soon as he said those words, the two girls embraced, bidding each other farewell, and Ciara started to walk in their direction.

“You know me,” Hector grinned, speaking in a very low tone of voice. “I can be very good when I need to be.”

“Yes, that is what I am afraid of.” Jonathan resisted a chuckle since Ciara was already within earshot.

“Ah, the new duchess,” Hector bowed respectfully. “You are lovely, my dear, and the whole wedding was so... wonderful.”

“Thank you, Your Grace.” Ciara smiled with a courteous curtsy.

Jonathan gave his friend a quick glance. He knew Hector well enough to know that his friend had never described a wedding as a wonderful event, but Ciara had actually taken his words to be true.

“Yes, Hector was just leaving,” Jonathan urged. “Weren’t you, old boy?”

Hector lifted an eyebrow. “I was?” He paused for a moment then he nodded. “Why yes, I was. All the guests are leaving, aren’t they?” He bowed once again before Ciara, taking her hand and kissing it in a chaste manner. “Thank you for having me, Your Grace.”

Jonathan winced at the title. He only noticed now that Hector was the first person to call her that.

It made him realize that it wasn’t a dream. He was truly married to this siren. And now, a titillating question remained which was whether she would allow him into the depths of her bedchamber where he would explore her body in more ways than he could imagine. He had to admit that he had never been so desirous of a woman before. Perhaps it was simply a matter of being forced to wait, of being denied the pleasure that he would usually obtain after a bit of effort.

But she was different, his siren. Different in so many ways, and he couldn’t wait to start exploring the depths of his desire for her.

## CHAPTER 13

The sunlight filtered softly through the lace curtains of Ciara’s chamber, casting delicate patterns on the wooden floor. She stood by the window, gazing out at the sprawling estate that was now her home, a mix of excitement and trepidation coursing through her. The wedding had been a whirlwind, and now, she found herself in this new, unfamiliar place as the Duchess of Silverbrook.

A gentle knock on the door drew her attention. She turned to see a young woman, neatly dressed in the uniform of a lady’s maid, standing in the doorway. She curtsied respectfully.

“Good day, Your Grace,” the girl spoke courteously and with a smile that could light up the darkest of chambers. “I am Frances, your lady’s maid. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.” The girl curtsied deeply and respectfully, lowering her gaze.

Ciara smiled, feeling a sense of relief at the girl’s kind demeanor.

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She walked up to her and took her by the hand. “Frances,” she replied, “it is so lovely to meet you. Please, come. I need help getting out of this tangle of lace and buttons.”

Frances chuckled sweetly with a nod. “Yes, let’s find something more comfortable for you to wear, Your Grace. You must be tired from the day’s events.”

Ciara nodded gratefully. “Yes, that would be lovely. Thank you, Frances.”

Frances moved with practiced efficiency, her hands deft and gentle as she began to undo the intricate buttons and laces of Ciara’s wedding gown. As the heavy fabric fell away, Ciara felt a sense of relief, the weight of the dress a symbol of the day’s pressures. She was immediately offered a robe which she wrapped around herself, allowing the cool silk to envelop her.

Meanwhile, Frances moved to the wardrobe and selected a soft, flowing gown in a pale lavender hue which suited Ciara’s complexion perfectly. “This should make you much more comfortable, Your Grace.”

Ciara smiled as she slipped into the new gown, feeling the soft fabric against her skin. “It is perfect, Frances. Thank you.”

Frances adjusted Ciara’s gown, ensuring it fit just right, then began to brush out Ciara’s hair with gentle strokes. “You have such beautiful auburn hair, Your Grace,” she remarked, her voice filled with genuine admiration.

“Thank you, Frances,” Ciara replied with a smile of her own. “It is kind of you to say so.”

“Do you find everything to your liking?” Frances asked as she started to form Ciara’s hair into a simple chignon that she would wear for the rest of the day.

There was still the matter of her being introduced to all the servants and the housekeeper giving her a grand tour of the vast estate.

“Yes, everything is quite lovely,” Ciara said then couldn’t resist adding, “Although it is all a bit overwhelming.”

Frances glanced at Ciara’s reflection in the looking glass. “I understand, Your Grace. It can be quite a change. But you will find your place here soon enough.”

“I am wondering about that,” Ciara sighed heavily. “About that and the sort of man I married.”

She knew that she shouldn’t have opened up about anything, not that early, but she was weighed down by an enormous amount of sorrow and guilt for the situation she found herself in. Frances’ sympathetic demeanor made her hopeful that perhaps, she had found a kind soul to confide in.

“Well, His Grace... I have to admit we were all a bit shocked to find out that he was getting married,” Frances stated a little clumsily, as if a part of her didn’t want to be so open but another part thought she owed her mistress complete sincerity.

“Why?” Ciara asked. “Isn’t every young man supposed to get married at some point?”

“Yes, yes, of course,” Frances confirmed, “but judging from His Grace’s past behavior...”

Ciara frowned. “Has he done something inappropriate?”

“Oh, no, no,” Frances hastily shook her head. “Despite his reputation, he is a fair and just man.”

Ciara couldn't believe that. “Are you certain we are talking about the same man?” she asked, intrigued by the girl's insinuation. “The Duke of Silverbrook? My husband?” She still couldn't believe those words, almost as if she were talking about someone else, someone who wanted to get married and got their wish which certainly wasn't her.

“Indeed, Your Grace.” Frances finished setting Ciara's hair. “Just the other day, he assisted Mrs. Cook with her young son who had taken ill unexpectedly. His Grace personally arranged for the physician to visit and ensured the boy received the best care. Mrs. Cook has been instructed not to mention it to a living soul, but of course, we all know it. It's just that word of it does not leave the confines of this estate.”

“So, you are saying that there is a kind heart beneath his roguish exterior?” Ciara felt a warmth spread through her chest at this revelation although the talon of doubt still had her by the throat. Her husband's reputation was undeniable. Everyone knew of it.

“Yes, but His Grace is adamant we keep that a secret,” Frances explained.

“A secret?” Ciara was surprised. She couldn't understand why someone would do a good deed and then want to keep it a secret. It didn't make sense. “But why?”

Frances shrugged without any clarification. “We do not question his instructions.”

“I see,” Ciara nodded, even more confused, wondering what sort of a man she had married.

She was once again reminded of the old adage that one was never to judge a book by its cover. Perhaps there was more to her husband than met the eye. Still, that didn't

mean that all of his transgressions were to be forgiven and forgotten.

“His Grace cares deeply for those in his household,” Frances added, and Ciara could hear the tone of loyalty and sincerity in the girl’s voice. “I am certain that you will come to see it yourself in due time.”

Ciara smiled, feeling a strange and unexpected sense of comfort and against all common sense, hope. “Thank you, Frances, for revealing that.”

“As I said, you will see it for yourself soon,” she repeated. “As for myself, I am honored to serve you and His Grace equally.”

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“That is most kind of you to say.” Ciara couldn’t help but feel gratitude for this unexpected new friend as well as the unexpected information she had just received.

She glanced at her own reflection in the looking glass, satisfied with what she was seeing. “How about we go and find Mrs. Dawson? She told me to come and find her once I freshened up, so she can give me the grand tour of the manor house.”

“I will gladly accompany you, Your Grace, if you wish me to.” Frances beamed at the suggestion.

“Yes, Frances, I would really like that.” Ciara smiled, getting up, eager to find out more about this place and all the people in it.

Nighttime had always been difficult for Ciara, forcing her to reminisce, to reevaluate, to keep rethinking her choices, and that night was no different. She found herself pacing her room, her mind racing with nervous anticipation. The flickering candlelight cast soft shadows on the walls, adding to the intimate atmosphere. She had changed into a silk nightgown and a robe with delicate lace trimmings, feeling both elegant and vulnerable.

A sudden knock on the door adjoining her room to Jonathan’s made her jump. Her heart pounded in her chest as she walked to the door, her hands trembling slightly. She took a deep breath and opened it.

Standing there was Jonathan, his presence dominating the doorway. He was clad only in his white shirt, unbuttoned to reveal his strong neck and a hint of his muscled chest, and his breeches. His dark hair was slightly tousled, and his eyes gleamed with



mischievous and something deeper as he looked at her from head to toe.

“I have brought offerings to you, my siren,” he said, his voice a low, enticing rumble. He held two glasses and a bottle of wine in his arms, his grin nothing short of wolfish.

Ciara’s breath hitched at the sight of him, her nerves heightened by his presence. “Offerings?” she stammered, her voice barely above a whisper.

Jonathan stepped into the room, his movements graceful and confident. “Indeed,” he said, closing the door behind him with a soft click. “A fine wine to celebrate our union. I thought it might help ease the nerves of my lovely wife.”

She swallowed heavily, realizing that nothing would be able to calm down her racing mind and her nerves. Nothing but his arms around her and his lips on hers. She tried to banish the thought from her mind as it only confused her even more, making her tremble with desire. She wanted to be cold and aloof, but she was exactly the opposite, and she knew that he could easily tell the effect he had on her.

He took a seat on the sofa across from the bed and filled their glasses without taking his eyes off of her for even a single moment. She wondered how he didn’t spill a single drop. Then, she remembered that he must have done this a million times before. After all, he was an infamous rake. It was just one of his skills. She was certain that he wanted to show her more, but she would then show him the door.

Still trembling like a leaf in the wind, she sat all the way on the other end of the sofa, as if fearing his proximity. The truth was, she dared not sit closer to him for fear of his cologne completely washing over her and making her forget that she wanted to refuse him, not allow him to do whatever he wanted with her.

Seeing that, he laughed. “Unlike you, my dear, I don’t bite.” He paused for a moment

then added mischievously, “Well, unless you ask for it.” He winked at her which made her blush even more fervently.

Unable to say anything, she remained quiet with a storm brewing inside of her. He handed her a glass at that moment. Her fingers curled around the crystal throat, but there was no grip. She had absolutely no control of her body or her mind. Her fingers were trembling so much that she almost dropped the glass onto the beige-colored carpet.

“Easy there,” he said softly. “Just take a sip. It will help you relax.”

Usually, she would not even consider drinking alcohol, but right now, she was too anxious to contradict him. She wanted to relax. She didn’t want to be that tense. Her fingers still trembling, she took a long, thirsty sip. He did the same, not breaking eye contact. Then, he placed his glass on the table in front of him.

“All right,” she heard him say as she tried to anticipate what he would do next. “You are trembling like a leaf, so I’ll end your torture now. I will not bed you tonight. Although, most women tremble at the thought of bedding me, mind you.”

His words were followed by a self-satisfied grin. She wanted to wipe that smirk off his face by telling him that she would rather die than go to bed with him, but she wasn’t allowed to say that before he continued.

“I can see you are nervous and very eager with the wine. Ideally, when I do bed you, I want you to be very alert.”

“Do you, now?” she asked. She could have done much better than that, but it was all she could come up with at the moment.

“Yes,” he agreed still with that smirk. As he said it, he slid over closer to her.

Instantly, she flinched, affected by his proximity, and the wine spilled onto her hand.

Without any warning, he gently wrapped his fingers around her wrist, bringing her hand to his lips. Then, his tongue was gliding down her fingers, lapping up the droplets of wine. Her skin exploded into a million little goosebumps which traveled down her spine, merging into an eruption of lava somewhere between her thighs, a place that had been slumbering before she had met him.

Those were mere seconds, yet she felt as if they were hours of delicious torment, and she didn't want it to end. But it did. It ended with him pulling away. His gaze made her shiver, especially after what he had just done.

"I know you are just an innocent maiden," he whispered. "Although I can sense something in you, Ciara, something perhaps you yourself are not aware of yet. But I am a patient man. I am willing to wait. This is, after all, a marriage of convenience, and I don't want you to feel any pressure to be intimate with me."

She raised an eyebrow. "But... don't you want an heir?"

Up until that point, she thought that perhaps that was the reason behind their hasty marriage. She couldn't imagine that he would care so much about her reputation. They barely knew each other.

He shook his head at her question. "We can live here together for two months until the ton's attention is required elsewhere. I predict that will be the time frame for them to finally leave us alone. Then, we can start living separately," he divulged.

She felt a pang of something strange, something she didn't like. Wasn't this supposed to be her new home? He planned on throwing her out after two months? Her heart clenched at the idea.

“Separately?” she echoed, not wanting to reveal that his words hurt her.

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“Why of course,” he said with a smile that plunged the knife of shock deeper into her heart, twisting it to the side. “This is not a love match, Ciara. Love is for fools who actually believe it exists.”

She watched him with a look of stunned astonishment. “What made you into such a cynic?”

“I’m not a cynic, my dear,” he corrected her in a matter-of-factly manner. “I am merely a realist. I see the world as it is.” She had something to say to that, but before she could utter a single word, he continued, “This, of course, means that you will have the liberty and the means to do whatever pleases you as a duchess. You will need to remain discreet with your affairs, as will I, but apart from that, we can live a very happy married life, separately from each other.”

The liberty and the means to do whatever pleases you as a duchess. Those words made her smile. She never had either, not in her entire life.

Now, it seemed that this marriage was opening exciting new doors for her.

## CHAPTER 14

Jonathan wanted to make that perfectly clear. Their lives would be separate, joined only by a piece of paper that deemed them husband and wife. But that would only happen once he had his fill of her, of course. And have his fill of her he would.

“I am used to living a separate life,” Ciara said somehow wistfully. “So, that won’t be anything new for me.”

“Yes, your life in the nunnery. “What was it like?” he asked curiously.

He had never known an oblate, let alone in the way that he wanted to know her. He had a million questions he wanted to ask her, but one look in her direction assured him that now was not the moment for any of them.

“I would rather not talk about it if you don’t mind,” she said defensively, looking away from him. There was deep sadness in her voice, sadness he wanted to kiss away and make her forget about anything other than himself.

“I don’t,” he assured her. He knew that feeling well when someone was urging him to talk and all he wanted was to be quiet. “We don’t have to talk about it. In fact, we don’t have to talk about anything, my dear.”

“Is that why you came here?” she asked, tilting her head a little, as if to take a closer look at him, wanting to drink in the sight of him. “To be silent with me?”

“No, siren,” he grinned. “I wanted to see you in silk and lace.”

Her cheeks blushed fervently at his words, a sight that made his manhood awaken with roaring desire. She was there by his side. All he had to do was reach for her, and she would give herself to him. He was absolutely aware of that fact. But he liked playing games. He liked them a little too much, and playing games with this woman was proving to be one of the most wonderful things he had ever experienced. He didn’t want it all to end. Not yet, at least.

“You are a sinful man,” she said once she had regained her composure.

“I’ve been called worse things,” he agreed through the onslaught of laughter. “But I have never been called that by an oblate.”

Their eyes locked, and he could see all the fire burning underneath. She was a vixen, whether she wanted to admit it or not. She was awakening an insane desire in him. It was impossible that she didn't know that. All she had to do was look at him with those doe eyes, and he was mad with lust, teetering on the edge of the abyss that would drag them both down.

Even if that happened, he didn't care. He had two months to see whether he could corrupt her with his sinful ways.

"I may be a maiden, but I am not naïve," she reminded him, pulling him back to the present moment.

"Oh, I didn't doubt that for a moment," he smirked. "That is why, when you come begging me to take you, I will... and I will satisfy your deepest desires, even the ones you didn't know you had."

Her eyes widened in shock at his words, titillating him even more. He downed his drink hastily, slamming the glass onto the table before him.

He locked eyes with her one more time then he left her, hopefully in the same state of mind as he himself was.

Over the next week, Ciara found herself gradually adjusting to her new life as the Duchess of Silverbrook. The grandeur of the estate, with its sprawling gardens and lavish rooms, was both awe-inspiring and a bit overwhelming. Having only recently returned to society after years of seclusion, she was still getting used to the expectations and responsibilities that came with her new title.

Her days were filled with a flurry of activities: meeting with the household staff to understand their duties, overseeing the preparation of meals, and attending to the social obligations that came with her position.

Despite her initial nervousness, she found herself growing more confident and capable with each passing day although she felt that it was still too early to expect to be accepted into the household by the servants, especially the housekeeper, Mrs. Dawson.

One morning, as she was reviewing the household accounts in the garden and enjoying the morning sun, Frances appeared with a tray of tea. “You are becoming quite the adept mistress, Your Grace,” she said with a smile, setting the tray down on a small table amid the lush greenery.

“Thank you, Frances,” she returned the smile. “It is all very new to me, but I am trying my best.”

Frances poured the tea and handed Ciara a cup. “Everyone can see that you are, Your Grace.”

“I do have a feeling that Mrs. Dawson doesn’t like me all that much,” Ciara admitted.



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Frances chuckled. “Pardon me for saying so, but I don’t think she likes herself, that woman.”

Ciara couldn’t help but chuckle as well. “She just seems so serious and strict all the time.”

“She is,” Frances noted. “It is simply how she is. And just like with His Grace, there is more to her than meets the eye. She is very hardworking and loyal to the family. She has been with them ever since His Grace was born.”

“I see,” Ciara nodded. “That is why it is so important to me that she accepts me.”

That was when Ciara remembered Jonathan’s words. Two months. Separate lives. The thought rang inside her mind like a million church bells, reminding her that she might not be living there at all, after the expiration of those two months. Jonathan would be able to send her away to any part of his estate, and she would not have any say in it. The thought saddened her.

“Is everything all right, Your Grace?” Frances asked softly. Her voice brought Ciara back to the present moment.

“Yes, of course,” she smiled with reassurance. “I was just thinking of all the things I still need to do today.”

Frances nodded approvingly. “You do all your work diligently. You ensure that everyone feels valued and respected. Though, I must say, Your Grace, you should not forget to take some time for yourself. You deserve a moment of peace as well.”

Ciara sighed softly, sipping her tea. “You are right, Frances. This past week has been a whirlwind. I have been so focused on my duties that I have hardly had a moment to relax.” She thought about it for a moment then she smiled. “You know what? I shall do exactly that now. Frances, would you be so kind as to bring me a few scones with strawberry jam? I wish to enjoy them with my tea.”

“Of course, Your Grace.” Frances smiled in agreement.

As she turned around, her foot caught on a nearby, protruding root, and she stumbled. She leaned to the side, pushing the table, sending the teapot, cup, and plate tumbling to the ground with a clatter.

“Oh, no!” Frances exclaimed, dropping to her knees in dismay. “I am so sorry, Your Grace. I didn’t mean to?—”

Before Frances could finish her sentence, Ciara was already beside her, kneeling on the grass and reaching out to help. “It is quite all right, Frances. Accidents happen,” she said reassuringly, picking up the teapot and setting it upright.

Frances looked up, her cheeks flushed with embarrassment. “But Your Grace, you shouldn’t trouble yourself with this. It is my mistake to rectify.”

“Nonsense,” Ciara replied with a dismissive wave of the hand. “It isn’t so hard to pick up a few dishes and put them back on the table. Besides, a little spill cannot do anything to ruin my peaceful morning.” She picked up the tray and the teacup with the plate. “Now, why don’t you go fetch us some more tea and don’t forget about those scones, Frances. I would like you to join me for a moment here, so we can enjoy this moment together.”

Frances nodded gratefully, her eyes shining with appreciation. “Thank you, Your Grace. You are very kind.”

“Kindness is the least I can offer, Frances,” she assured the girl. “You have been such a great help to me, and I value your company.”

Frances lingered for a moment, completely taken aback by the words, when she fumbled with the tray, nodding and turning around to fulfill her task. Ciara smiled as she watched Frances disappear back into the house, then she closed her eyes.

Frances had become an unexpected ally in this house, and Ciara hoped that there would be more. However, she knew that she had to prove herself to them first. Especially to Mrs. Dawson.

## CHAPTER 15

The following day, Ciara was walking through the corridor when she suddenly heard a commotion in the main hall. There were two voices discussing something obviously urgent. One voice belonged to the housekeeper, while the other was one of the servants.

Curious and concerned by the raised voices, she hurried toward the main hall, finding both women in a state of distress.

“What do you mean it is not working?” Mrs. Dawson demanded, her stern voice even sterner than her usual demeanor.

“It has gone completely cold,” the servant girl explained apologetically, looking down at her feet as if it were her own fault.

“Well, get Mr. Thornby to fix it.” Mrs. Dawson immediately came up with a solution as Ciara lingered on the last stair, not wishing to intrude on their conversation but still curious to find out what was all the commotion about.

“Mr. Thornby is not here,” the servant girl clarified with equal concern. “He has taken the day off.”

Mrs. Dawson frowned. “Always in the worst possible moment, isn’t it?” she sighed heavily. “And what about Mr. Huxley or Mr. Gibbons?”

“They already left,” the servant girl’s whiny voice replied.

Ciara knew that some of the workers at the manor house did not live there. They spent several hours working then they returned home. So, it was quite possible that the men who were required to solve the issue at hand were not present.

“What is the matter, Mrs. Dawson?” Ciara finally dared to intrude. The moment the two women heard her voice, they turned to her with Mrs. Dawson’s steel blue eyes shooting right through her.

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“Ah, Your Grace,” she said respectfully but coldly, “it is nothing. We shall sort it out shortly.”

Ciara insisted. “What is there to sort out? Perhaps I can help.”

Mrs. Dawson raised an eyebrow. “With all due respect, I doubt that, Your Grace. It appears that the large stone oven, essential for the evening’s dinner which was specially requested by His Grace, has stopped working.”

“It has gone completely cold, Your Grace,” the servant girl added for more clarification. “We cannot seem to get it working again. Without it, the roast and the pastries for this evening’s dinner will be ruined.”

“There is no one who can take a look?” Ciara asked.

“I just inquired about the men knowledgeable in that,” Mrs. Dawson explained.

Ciara hesitated for a moment then she made her suggestion. “Perhaps I might take a look?”

“You?” Mrs. Dawson gasped.

“Yes, if you don’t mind, I would like to take a look.” Ciara smiled in a reassuring manner, fully aware of the fact of how ridiculous that sounded. A woman being able to check an oven. But the truth was, she spent many evenings working in the nunnery kitchen where they had a large, stone oven, and she had learned a thing or two about why it might stop working.

The servant girl glanced at Mrs. Dawson for confirmation, but the housekeeper was still taken aback by the suggestion. A moment later, she acquiesced. "I... suppose you could take a look," she said as if she had only recently learned English and needed to think of the words she was going to use.

The three women walked into the kitchen in silence then Mrs. Dawson announced to everyone what was to take place.

"Her Grace is about... to take a look at the oven." She said it as if she were describing the most incomprehensible notion in the world. Again, Ciara did not hold it against her. She had lived her entire life being told she couldn't do something, being told she was not enough. This was not a matter of proving herself. It was simply a matter of being helpful which was all she ever wanted to be.

Ciara turned to everyone with a smile. "Let's see if we can figure this out together," she said, rolling up her sleeves.

The staff watched in surprise as Ciara knelt by the oven, inspecting it closely. She noticed that the flue was blocked, preventing the fire from drawing properly. Then, she grabbed a pair of heavy gloves and a long metal poker.

"Mrs. Dawson, if we can clear this blockage, we should be able to get the fire going again," Ciara explained. "Can you hand me that broom handle?"

With the staff gathered around, Ciara carefully worked the broom handle into the flue, dislodging the blockage bit by bit. Soot and ash fell, and the kitchen maids quickly swept it away. After several tense minutes, the blockage was finally cleared, and Ciara coaxed the fire back to life.

"There we go," she said with a smile, stepping back as the fire roared to life once more. "The oven should be working now. Let's get those dishes back in and finish

preparing for the dinner.”

The kitchen unexpectedly erupted in relieved cheers and applause. The servants beamed with gratitude, their eyes shining with admiration.

“That was... exceptional, Your Grace,” Mrs. Dawson said as she stood before Ciara.

“Thank you, Mrs. Dawson.” Ciara felt herself blush a little at the praise. “When one finds oneself in... unusual situations, one picks up a few unusual skills.”

Her comment made the other servants chuckle, and even Mrs. Dawson smiled a little, only to turn serious once again, clapping everyone to get them to focus once again. “Now that we have the oven working again, let us make sure that the dinner isn’t late.”

Ciara watched as the staff all dispersed back to their positions, working with renewed energy and confidence. She hoped that she was a bit of an inspiration for them and that her unusual skill didn’t make her appear odd, but on the contrary, that it assured them she was just like them, used to the work that was required of her.

Mrs. Dawson led Ciara out of the kitchen, addressing her respectfully. “You may focus on your tasks now, Your Grace. You have been truly helpful today.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Dawson, those words really mean a lot,” Ciara said, genuinely feeling a sense of belonging. She remembered the applause she was greeted by once she had solved the problem, and even now, the housekeeper was hopefully, slowly warming to her.

Two months, she remembered. Don’t get attached to these people.

Only, that was easier said than done.

Jonathan was in his study the following day with a single thought in his mind. His wife knew how to repair an oven. Jonathan had to admit that was one of the most peculiar things he had ever heard. A lady with such a skill. When Mrs. Dawson brought him dinner in his study that evening, she mentioned what had happened, and the story amused him beyond belief.

He tried to bury himself in his work, but a knock on the door interrupted him. “Yes?” he called out, and the butler entered, announcing that his cousin Rebecca was there for him. “Fine, send her in,” Jonathan gestured at him.

Several moments later, Rebecca waltzed into the study, closing the door behind her. “Jonathan,” she greeted.

“Rebecca,” he replied, teasing her. “I am already married. You can’t force me to attend any more balls where I have to speak to ladies and listen to them talk about the wonders of embroidery.”



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I have a wife who can mend an oven, he thought to himself with a smirk. He wondered what other hidden skills she had, this wife of his. The thought titillated him beyond belief.

“I actually came here to ask you about married life,” Rebecca divulged, taking a seat opposite him at his oak writing table. “And speaking of married life, where is your wife?”

He lifted his gaze from the papers that surrounded him, shrugging. “I wouldn’t know. Why?”

“Why?” she frowned. “How can you not know where your wife is?”

He lifted an eyebrow. “Because we are not joined with an umbilical cord? She is... around here somewhere, minding her duchess business. I don’t have to chaperone her for that.”

“But you are her husband,” she reminded him of something he knew very well.

“Husband but not her keeper,” he was adamant. “She is still her own person, and she can do whatever she pleases as can I. Nothing has changed.”

“It has,” she corrected him.

“Well, perhaps only minor technicalities have changed, but the essence has not,” he urged. “I simply have another person living here in the manor with me, and we are adjusting our lives to each other... for the time being.”

“Jonathan, you can’t possibly mean that—” she started, but a knock on the door interrupted her.

“Yes?” he called out eagerly, grateful for the intrusion. The door opened momentarily, and the butler appeared.

“I apologize, Your Grace, but there is a letter here for you,” he announced. “It arrived with the late morning mail just now.” The man walked over to Jonathan’s writing table and placed a letter on it. He bowed respectfully then closed the door behind him.

“A business letter?” Rebecca asked.

“Probably,” Jonathan shrugged.

He took the letter in his hands. The letter, penned on creamy, thick paper, bore the elegant watermark of a reputable stationer. Carefully folded into thirds and sealed with a dollop of deep red wax, the seal was imprinted with an intricate family crest. Upon opening, it revealed neatly spaced lines of black ink, each stroke executed with the precision of a practiced hand. He sighed upon reading it.

“What is it?” Rebecca inquired.

“Just some silly thing I would rather not attend,” he tried to evade her questioning although he knew that it would not work.

“What sort of a silly thing?” she demanded to know.

“Lord and Lady Weatherly are hosting their annual dinner party,” he explained, referring to a relatively young married couple whose estate was nearby.

“How lovely!” Rebecca clapped her hands joyously, almost like a child. “Why, that would be a splendid opportunity for you to show off your wife.” Jonathan rolled his eyes at the suggestion. Before he could say anything to that, she continued, “It is important to present yourselves as a happily married couple, Jonathan, seeing that you married because of the scandal... which you were responsible for, mind you.”

Jonathan swallowed heavily. His cousin was right. All of this was his fault. He couldn't bring himself to think with the right head, and now, he was paying for the consequences.

He tried to remind himself that at least some good would come of it. He would bed his wife. He would taste her again and have her in his arms. And then, as usual, he would lose interest in her. That was what always happened. He couldn't find a reason why it would be any different now.

“Fine,” he pouted.

“Oh, do not be like that.” She grinned, amused by his behavior. “I shall see you both there.”

“How lovely,” he grimaced, much to her amusement.

“Now,” she said clapping her hands again, but only once this time, “how about a game of Pall Mall?”

“Now?” he frowned.

“Yes, now,” she confirmed. “I don't see you busy with anything else.”

“Actually, I am busy,” he urged. “Very much so.”

“I beg you to reconsider,” she said, pacing about the room and walking over to the window where she stopped to take a look. “You know, I’ve always liked that pond of yours.”

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His eyes widened. “Rebecca...” he started, but his voice betrayed him.

“Yes?” she asked, pretending to be all innocent.

“You... wouldn’t,” he said, shaking his head.

“I wouldn’t usually, no,” she agreed, turning to face him. “But if you force me, then I have no other option.”

He sighed heavily, raking his fingers through his hair. “You promised you wouldn’t use that anymore.”

She shook her head. “I don’t remember ever saying anything like that. You must have imagined it, along with that fear of frogs you can’t seem to outgrow.”

“It is because I fell into that damned pond as a child,” he growled at her, although there was no anger in his words, only annoyance. “I could feel them crawling and swimming all around me as I found my way back to the bank. Disgusting creatures.”

Rebecca laughed. “I would never bring one here to your home. Never,” she said, teasing him. “But there is a pond very close by. Perhaps one of them might find its way here, just hopping merrily until?—”

“Fine!” he exclaimed, lifting his hands at her in a mock gesture of surrender. “Fine! We’ll play the stupid game. Are you happy?”

“Yes,” she nodded, glancing out at the garden. “Very much so.”

## CHAPTER 16

With nothing that needed her urgent attention, Ciara found solace in the shade of a large oak tree, her book resting gently in her lap. This was one of the rare moments of tranquility she found in the midst of her new life. The soft rustling of leaves and the distant murmur of voices from the estate's grounds provided a soothing backdrop as she immersed herself in her reading.

Her peace was interrupted by the sound of approaching footsteps. She looked up to see a footman standing before her, bowing respectfully. "Your Grace, Lady Kirdale has requested your presence," he said.

Ciara closed her book, her curiosity piqued. She knew the Lady, having met her only once, during her hasty wedding to the Duke. Lady Kirdale was his cousin, one he was obviously very close with. She could deduce that much easily.

She nodded to the footman, rising gracefully, only to follow the man across the manicured lawns to where Jonathan and Lady Kirdale were standing, gathered where the servants were finishing setting up a game of Pall Mall.

"Your Grace," Lady Kirdale addressed her. "Thank you for joining us."

"It is a pleasure to see you again, Lady Kirdale," Ciara curtsied before the lady politely. "I apologize for not having welcomed you. I... I had no idea you were here."

"Oh, that is entirely your husband's fault, my dear," Lady Kirdale teased her cousin. "He has this nasty habit of keeping himself to himself which I'm certain you have already witnessed."

Ciara only smiled at the comment, feeling it was not her place to take sides in their game of teasing. She didn't know either of them that well.

“Perhaps I simply like to keep people away from you, Becky,” Jonathan said playfully. “Have you considered that?”

“See?” Lady Kirdale shook her head as if she were a governess whose ward had misbehaved time and time again, and she couldn’t even be mad at him anymore for the simple reason that it served no purpose. “He is utterly incorrigible.”

“Some things are beyond repair, I suppose,” Jonathan shrugged. “You simply wish to make everything perfect as it is in your little bubble.”

“Perfection is a wonderful thing,” Lady Kirdale chirped. “Although I admit, it is extremely difficult to obtain.”

Jonathan sighed, turning to Ciara. “Don’t mind Rebecca, Duchess. She can be... too much at times.”

“And yet, you love me,” Lady Kirdale smirked. Jonathan resisted smiling, but the smile was there, nonetheless, and Ciara knew that their love was unbreakable.

Lady Kirdale then turned to Ciara. “We were just about to play a game of Pall Mall. Would you care to join us?”

Ciara hesitated, her fingers nervously toying with the edges of her book. “I appreciate the invitation, Lady Kirdale, but... I must confess, I do not know how to play.”

Jonathan’s brow furrowed in surprise. “Didn’t your father teach you?”

She didn’t want to tell them the truth. Far from it. She knew she had to resort to a lie as she always did when someone new asked her about her family. Because if they knew the truth, they wouldn’t believe her. No one would believe that a mother and a father could be so insensitive to their own child, so utterly cruel, while pretending

that they were doing it all for the child's sake.

She shook her head slightly, her gaze dropping. "My father was often preoccupied with his work, and I have no siblings to teach me either. And at the nunnery..." Her voice trailed off, realizing that she had almost divulged too much.



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She hastily cleared her throat, hoping that it would help her conceal the fact that she was unable to reveal that part of her life.

“Well then... Jonathan will teach you,” Lady Kirdale suddenly said, stunning Ciara. “Won’t you, Jonathan?”

As it turned out, Jonathan was as shocked as Ciara was by her suggestion. Seeing his reluctance, Ciara immediately responded, “I do not wish to impose,” feeling a bit out of place.

“Nonsense,” Lady Kirdale insisted, with a playful nudge to Jonathan’s side. “It will be his pleasure to teach his wife.”

Jonathan obviously caught his cousin’s determined look, and he turned to Ciara with a polite tone, “Of course, Duchess. I would be delighted to teach you.”

“Splendid!” Rebecca said, taking a step back. “Why don’t you two take a few moments for Her Grace to get acquainted with the rules? I shall wait over there by the shade then once you are ready to commence, we can start the game.”

Before either Ciara or Jonathan could say anything, they were left together, alone, with the game Pall Mall looming over them, demanding something neither of them was quite certain what it was.

Teach someone? He had never been very good at teaching anyone anything. He didn’t have the patience for it. However, the thought of being allowed and even encouraged to stand behind Ciara, dangerously close, touching her even in an effort to show her

how to hold the mallet and how to swing it, entertained him beyond description.

He could sense her nervousness as her fingers fidgeted, playing with her dress. Her confession of not knowing the game surprised him, but the following explanation, or what he was offered as an explanation, evoked a sense of empathy in him, something he didn't usually feel for others.

"All right," he began warmly. "Let us commence with the basic rules."

He picked up a mallet and handed it to her, their fingers brushing lightly. Although the touch was barely there, his body reacted to it with an eruption of desire. He couldn't understand how something so innocent and chaste could evoke such naughty images in his mind.

Usually, a woman would have to seduce him with everything she had for him to be this attracted to her. Yet, Ciara was not even trying. It was simply who she was that mesmerized him so, that thrilled him to the extent of mad desire for her.

"This is the mallet," he said, trying not to focus on the way his manhood throbbed in his pants.

Even his mind was working against him, offering images of her beautifully chaste, naked body on pristine white sheets with pale moonlight as her cover. How he yearned to defile her in every way possible, to make her forget that she ever wanted to be a nun.

"And these are the balls," he said, gesturing to the brightly colored spheres.

"All right," she nodded, holding the mallet with both hands, her fingers curled around it tenderly, as if she were afraid of breaking it.

“Don’t be afraid to hold it firmly,” he said as he placed his hand over hers, squeezing it to drive his point home. “Like this.”

He could feel her body melt into him, and in that moment, he almost prayed for her to press her bottom back into his hips.

Ciara tentatively glanced at him, and he saw her lids half-closed, his mind racing, thinking of all the ways he could make them roll back into her head?—

But he had to compose himself. His cousin was present for Christ’s sake.

As he slid his hand off hers, his knuckles slowly grazed her arm before releasing her completely, knowing fully well the dozens of shivers it’d sent down her spine.

After a tiny exhale, Ciara gripped the mallet tighter.

“That’s how you hold it. Good girl,” he said playfully in her ear.

He wondered if he gave her something else to hold, would her fingers curl in the same manner around it, tenderly and with reverence? His treacherous mind was playing a dangerous game, evoking other images of feeling her lips, her tongue on parts of his body that shivered at the thought.

She lifted her gaze towards him. “Why don’t you try and focus on what we’re doing here?”

He chuckled. It was exactly the response he expected of her. He stepped behind her, close enough to feel the warmth emanating from her. “First, let’s get your grip right.”

He placed his hands gently over hers, guiding her fingers toward a harder grip on the mallet’s handle. Her skin was soft and warm, sending a tidal wave of warmth through

him.

He moved slightly away from her, not wanting to prod her or heaven forbid, have his cousin see him in this awkward position. He tried to focus his mind on anything else. Meowing kittens. A broken carriage wheel. The smell of burnt apple pie. Anything that might distract him from Ciara's presence, from her fragrance, but that was impossible.

"Now, stand with your feet shoulder-width apart," he said, positioning her feet, his hands resting briefly on her shoulders to align her stance. "You want to keep your body relaxed."

He could feel her tension from that slight touch. He wondered if she felt the same way as he did, titillated by their proximity, barely able to control himself not to grab her into his arms and kiss her again. The memory of that kiss lingered like a haunting melody he kept going back to.

“Like this?” she asked, locking eyes with his.

Her lips were slightly parted, a row of pearly whites gleaming through them. She was smiling. A siren if he had ever seen one.

“Yes, exactly like that,” he grinned. “Now, to hit the ball, swing the mallet smoothly, like this.” He demonstrated the motion then placed his hands over hers again to guide her through the swing. As they moved together, their bodies brushed slightly against each other. He realized he had never wanted a woman so badly, so desperately.

He tried to remind himself that it was probably because she refused to succumb to his charms as quickly and easily as the other ladies did. She made him work harder for her attention, something he was not used to. That had to be it.

“Try aiming for the wicket,” he said, pointing to the small hoop ahead of them. “It is all about precision and control.” He stood behind her, his chest almost touching her back, and helped her aim. The proximity made it difficult to focus solely on the game, but he was determined to teach her well.

Ciara took a deep breath and swung the mallet. The ball rolled forward, not quite reaching the wicket, but her face lit up with determination. “You’re getting the hang of it,” Jonathan encouraged, smiling at her progress.

Each touch, each moment of contact, seemed to build a subtle connection between them. When Ciara finally managed to send the ball through the wicket, her triumphant smile made Jonathan’s heart swell with pride. “Well done!” he exclaimed, unable to hide his admiration.

As the three of them continued to play Pall Mall, Jonathan couldn't help but steal a glance in Ciara's direction, admiring the way her body swayed to the motion of her hands. His gaze lingered on her a bit too long, taking in the curve of her waist, the way her dress clung to her breasts as she leaned into her swing, and the soft flush of her cheeks. He wanted to have his hands on her waist, his lips on her breasts. He wanted to be the reason for that gentle flush of her cheeks. He wanted her more desperately than he was ever willing to admit, and it was driving him insane.

"Jonathan, are you paying attention?" Rebecca's voice broke through his reverie, bringing him back to the present moment. "It seems you have a bit of drool dribbling down the side of your mouth."

He blinked at her and instinctively brought his hand to his mouth.

"Rebecca," he growled under his breath, and his cousin raised her eyebrows at him.

"All I'm saying is that it looks like you're quite taken by her," she said.

"Don't be absurd," he replied, waving his hand at her dismissively, tearing his eyes away from Ciara, and forcing a smile. "I was merely focusing on whether she was following my instructions, and I can see that she was. That is all."

"If you say so," Rebecca replied with a mysterious smirk he didn't want to dive into.

Instead, he stepped forward to take his turn, but his thoughts remained on his wife, her presence stirring a deep desire within him.

As the game drew to a close, Rebecca, ever the socialite, brought up the upcoming dinner party. "I hope you're both ready for the Weatherly's dinner party this weekend. It should be quite the event."

Ciara's expression shifted, a flicker of anxiety crossing her features. "Do you know who will be there?" she asked, her voice tinged with hope. "I was wondering if my uncle or Adeline might be attending."

Jonathan shook his head gently. "I'm afraid our hosts have invited mostly other married couples. It's unlikely your uncle or Adeline will be there."

Jonathan could see Ciara's face turning pale as she took a small step back, her hands clasping nervously in front of her. He could conclude that the thought of facing a social event without the comfort of her uncle filled her with unease. However, before he could say anything, Rebecca spoke.

"You'll be wonderful, Duchess," she assured. "You are a lovely lady, and everyone will be as charmed by you as I am."

Ciara smiled back, blushing gently. "Your words are beyond kind, Lady Kirdale. And please, Ciara is more than fine."

"Ciara," Rebecca repeated cheerfully. "Also, Lady Kirdale is for those who are not family. You are family. Rebecca will do."

"Thank you, Rebecca," Ciara acknowledged with a smile. "It's just that navigating these gatherings is still difficult."

Jonathan stepped closer, feeling a need to speak. "You will be fine, Ciara. Rebecca and I will be there. You aren't alone."

His words, coupled with the warmth in his eyes, seemed to ease some of her anxiety. She nodded, taking a deep breath. "All right. I will do my best."

Rebecca clapped her hands together, her usual vivacity returning. "That's the spirit!

Now, let's head inside and have some tea. All this playing in the sun has me thirsty and hungry."

Jonathan and Ciara chuckled as all three of them headed back to the house.

He couldn't explain what had happened, but he also couldn't remember the last time he had so much fun without it being in the bedchamber.

## CHAPTER 17

The grand hall of Lord and Lady Weatherly's manor house was resplendent with glittering chandeliers and opulent décor. As Ciara and Jonathan stepped inside, she tightened her grip on his arm, feeling the weight of the evening pressing down on her. She forced a polite smile as Jonathan led her to the hosts.



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“Lord and Lady Weatherly, may I present my wife, Ciara,” Jonathan said with a proud smile.

Lady Weatherly, a statuesque woman with an air of practiced elegance, inclined her head graciously. “A pleasure to meet you, Duchess. Welcome to our home.”

Lord Weatherly, a distinguished man with a silver mane and a sharp gaze, offered a nod. “Indeed, welcome. We are delighted you could join us.”

Ciara curtsied gracefully. “Thank you for having us, Lord and Lady Weatherly.”

Jonathan then introduced her to the other married couples present, each introduction blending into the next as Ciara struggled to remember names and faces. Most of the guests exuded an air of superiority, their glances and whispers making her feel increasingly out of place. She could sense their scrutiny, a silent judgment that made her stomach churn.

Jonathan, caught by a group of lords discussing estate matters, reluctantly left her side. “I won’t be long, my dear,” he whispered, giving her hand a reassuring squeeze before stepping away.

Ciara found herself surrounded by a cluster of ladies, their curious eyes fixed on her. The leader of the group, Lady Worthington, a tall woman with sharp features, smiled thinly. “Your Grace, do tell us about your life before marriage. It must be fascinating.”

Ciara’s mind raced, trying to find the right words. “I... I spent much of my time at

my family's estate and at a nunnery," she said, hoping to keep the details vague.

"Oh, a nunnery!" one of the ladies exclaimed. "How quaint. Was it terribly dull?"

Another chimed in, "Did you ever think you would become a duchess one day?"

Questions bombarded her from all sides, each one making her feel more exposed and out of place. Her heart pounded in her chest, and she could feel the heat rising to her cheeks.

"Did you take any vows?" one asked with a hint of mockery. "What sort of life did you lead there?"

"She could not have taken any vows; don't be silly!" another one replied. "Otherwise, she wouldn't be able to marry!"

"Goodness me, imagine being a nun," the fourth lady grimaced with disgust.

"Yes, yes, we all know you can't live without your gardener," the first one whispered, and they all burst into a chuckle. Ciara felt as if she were in a chicken coop.

"Whoever it is, I am certain that our lovely duchess also had someone to remind her that being a nun would be a dreadful bore," the first one pointed out, her sharp gaze aimed straight at Ciara.

"No, I... I changed my mind," Ciara managed to muster, glancing around desperately, waiting for Jonathan to return.

"A change of mind requires a reason, my dear," the second one reminded her. "Seeing you went to the nunnery, it meant you wished to live the life of a nun, but then you changed your mind. I wonder why."

“Oh, do tell!” another spoke. “Why did you change your mind?”

Ciara’s throat tightened. The memories of the convent were private, sacred, and she had no desire to share them with these prying, judgmental eyes. She opened her mouth, struggling to find a response that would satisfy them without revealing too much.

Just as she was about to speak, their hosts called out, “Ladies and gentlemen, dinner is served in the dining hall.”

The announcement was a lifeline. Ciara let out a breath she hadn’t realized she was holding and offered a polite smile to the ladies. “Shall we?” she suggested, gesturing toward the dining hall.

As they moved toward the grand dining room, Ciara felt a wave of relief wash over her. She had managed to escape the interrogation, but the evening was far from over. She glanced around for Jonathan, hoping he would rejoin her soon. For now, she steeled herself, determined to make it through the dinner with grace and composure.

The grand dining hall was as splendid as the rest of the mansion, with an elegantly set table that stretched nearly the length of the room. Golden candelabras cast a warm glow over the assembled guests. Ciara felt a wave of relief as she took her seat, grateful to find Jonathan positioned next to her. After all, he was one of the only two people she knew there. Sitting next to a complete stranger would add even more strain to her already frayed nerves. She smiled upon locking eyes with his, exhaling with relief.

The majority of the dinner passed pleasantly enough with polite conversation flowing around the table. Ciara did her best to follow the various topics, contributing when she could and remaining quiet when she felt out of her depth. Jonathan’s occasional glances and encouraging smiles helped steady her.

However, as the meal progressed, the conversation took a turn that made Ciara uneasy. Lord Pembroke, a portly man with a penchant for boisterous humor, leaned forward and grinned. “So, Your Grace, how have you found married life? Have you and the Duke settled in well?”

Ciara hesitated, unsure of how to answer. The subtle undertones in Lord Pembroke’s voice suggested more than just polite curiosity. She fumbled for a response, feeling the weight of everyone’s attention. “We... we are very happy,” she stammered, her cheeks flushing.

It was at that moment that Lady Worthington smirked. “Indeed, Madam? And has His Grace been a... patient teacher in all matters of marriage?”

A ripple of laughter went around the table, and Ciara’s discomfort deepened. She glanced at Jonathan, who seemed equally displeased with the turn of the conversation. In her nervousness, her hand brushed against her fork, sending it clattering to the floor.

Instinctively, Ciara bent down to retrieve it, but Jonathan’s hand on her thigh stopped her. She looked up, meeting his firm but gentle gaze. He shook his head slightly, indicating that it was improper for her to pick it up herself. Instead, he discreetly signaled a nearby servant, who swiftly retrieved the fallen fork.

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Another servant stepped forward with a new fork, placing it beside Ciara's plate with a respectful nod. Despite the smooth handling of the situation, Ciara felt a surge of embarrassment for her clumsiness.

"Yes, those pesky forks do tend to have a habit of running away, don't they?" Lord Pembroke seemed to have noticed a part of the commotion, now directly pointing everyone's attention to it.

Ciara blushed fervently, smiling but it was a weak effort. She felt more out of place than ever before. She reminded herself that she had to endure it.

"Well, not everyone has your impeccable manners, Lord Pembroke," Jonathan suddenly pointed out, "because we all know that you are impeccable at everything you do." He said it in such a dramatic manner that it made everyone chuckle at his words.

Ciara appreciated Jonathan's words although she still felt as awkward as before if not even more. She straightened in her seat, her hands trembling slightly as she took the new fork. Fortunately, she realized that the conversation at the dinner party had slowly taken a different turn, leaving her and her marriage out of it.

"Speaking of impeccable, have you all heard that Lady Olivia Donnahue was caught having an affair with her gardener of all people?" a lady down at the end of the table asked loudly, and all eyes and ears were upon her. "Apparently, she had written love letters to the man, and he wrote back, but Lord Donnahue found them..."

"The letters?" someone else asked.

“No, his wife and the gardener together!” The words were followed by a collective gasp and then, the continuation of the sordid affair that everyone had to know about as if it were their own business.

Ciara was flabbergasted. She didn’t know the woman, nor did she know the circumstances in which she had acted, but she felt sorry for Lady Donnahue, having no right to privacy at a moment such as that one.

However, what shocked her even more was the fact that Jonathan did not remove his hand from her thigh. Instead, he began to stroke her gently, making it appear as if he were not doing anything at all. She turned to him, her cheeks a fervent red, her eyes wide at what he was doing.

Seeing her in such a state, he leaned closer to her, whispering in her ear. “Should I stop?”

Without a second thought, she shook her head. That was the last thing she wanted him to do. He smirked at her, his eyes deep and unfathomable, as heat unfurled in the secret place between her thighs, the place that always seemed to be on fire when she thought of him and his smile.

“I knew you had a wild side in you, my siren,” he murmured right into her ear, making her body explode in gooseflesh.

She couldn’t say what she was thinking aloud. But her eyes spoke more than words ever could. This is highly improper, they were telling him, and he understood more than well, the scoundrel.

“Shhh,” he whispered again without anyone noticing. “Stay still. They won’t know.”

His hand then proceeded to ride up slowly between her legs, her entire body

trembling. She fought the sensation, but it was impossible. Her mind was a blank. She couldn't hear anyone speaking. All she could do was feel his hand between her thighs. His strokes were light through her gown, but she could feel them as if he were touching her bare skin. Everything about her was mad with desire at this most inopportune moment.

Why is he doing this? She thought to herself.

She wanted to close her eyes, to get lost in the pleasure of the moment, but she knew she couldn't. She had to stay focused on what was happening around her, but she couldn't banish the thought of Jonathan's hand between her thighs, driving her mad. She felt the rising of that familiar heat, her thighs clenching to keep his hand in place. She swallowed heavily, feeling her throat becoming parched, but she dared not pick up a wine glass for fear of dropping it.

Just then, Lord Weatherly rose. "Gentlemen, we are to retire to the drawing room for after-dinner drinks. As for you, dear ladies, you are to enjoy your... drinks in the parlor," he said, words which were followed by an amused chuckle.

Ciara didn't laugh. Jonathan pulled his hand away from her, and the act left her gasping silently. Also, the thought of being left alone with vultures such as Lady Worthington made her petrified. But she knew that she had to survive that evening, with or without Jonathan by her side.

Just as the ladies were settling in the parlor, huddled into a small, intimate circle, Lady Worthington took the lead words. "Now, Your Grace, I think all of us here would like to know, given your husband's... infamous reputation, what is he like in bed?"

Ciara turned pale. "In... bed?"

“Why, of course, my dear,” Lady Worthington chuckled, and the rest of them joined in. “You have been married for over a week now. Don’t tell me you have not consummated the marriage?”

Ciara could see the look of shock on the ladies who surrounded her. “Of course... not. I mean, we have consummated it, of course.”

“And?” another lady asked eagerly, leaning closer, her eyes wide with curiosity.

“Does he do the tongue thing?” a third one asked in a whisper. “A friend of mine told me about it, and I nearly died upon hearing it!” she giggled, and a few other ladies joined her.

“Well, one has to use one’s tongue under such circumstances, no?” Ciara said awkwardly, and it was evident that they didn’t like her answer.

“And does he really have a looking glass over his bed?” another lady inquired timidly.

“A looking glass!” a voice exclaimed, impressed.

Once again, all eyes were on Ciara. How on earth could she tell them that she had no idea what her husband’s bedchamber looked like?



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“A lady doesn’t speak of such things,” Ciara said clumsily, much to the chagrin of everyone around her.

“All right, all right,” Lady Worthington continued, calming down the chicken coop. “You forget, my dears, that the Duchess of Silverbrook spent much of her lifetime in a nunnery. This all new to her... or is it?”

Ciara blushed fervently, wanting to tell her that she had no right to speak to her in such a manner, but Lady Worthington continued.

“After all, nuns do change their minds as we’ve had the opportunity of seeing,” she added then turned to the lady to her right. “Now, Lizzie, do tell us about that gardener of yours. I might need my garden... freshened up a bit as well.”

Ciara wanted to leave, but she knew that it would have been considered highly inappropriate. So, she stayed there, listening, realizing that she knew nothing of the experiences they had spoken, whether those experiences were with or without their husbands.

With the thoughts of Jonathan’s hand between her thighs and the fire he riled up inside of her, she realized how painfully insecure and inexperienced she was.

And how could such a girl ever entertain the likes of her husband?

## CHAPTER 18

The carriage ride back to Silverbrook Manor was shrouded in the soft glow of

moonlight. The rhythmic clatter of the wheels against the cobblestone road provided a soothing backdrop as Ciara leaned back against the plush seat, trying to unwind from the evening's events.

Jonathan watched her with a mixture of amusement and affection. "So, did you enjoy yourself tonight?" he asked, a teasing lilt in his voice.

Ciara gave him a sideways glance, her lips curving into a reluctant smile. "It was... enlightening," she replied, her tone diplomatic.

Jonathan chuckled. "Enlightening, you say? You handled yourself quite well, despite the less-than-charming company."

Ciara sighed, her earlier embarrassment resurfacing. "I felt so out of place, Jonathan. And when I dropped my fork..."

"Ah, yes, the infamous fork incident," Jonathan interrupted playfully. "I must say, I found it rather endearing. Only, if I had allowed you to bend and pick it up, I am certain that the guests would think something naughty was happening."

Ciara's cheeks flushed. "You're teasing me surely."

"Just a bit," he admitted, his eyes twinkling with mischief. "But only because I find you utterly charming when you're flustered."

"Too bad you are not charming when I am flustered," she retorted, resisting a chuckle.

"Oh?" he lifted an eyebrow. "And usually, I am?"

"No," she replied. "Not one bit. You are not charming. You are... impossible."

He leaned closer, his voice dropping to a whisper. “Impossible, perhaps. But you must admit, I make things interesting.”

Ciara’s heart raced at the nearness of him, the warmth of his breath against her skin. She met his gaze, her eyes filled with a mix of vulnerability and longing.

“I dare you to make them more interesting...” she said, her eyes upon his, not looking away even for a single second.

He knew exactly what she was thinking. His smile softened, and without another word, he closed the distance between them. His lips met hers in a gentle, tender kiss that quickly deepened. Ciara’s hands found their way to his shoulders, pulling him closer as the kiss grew more passionate. She could feel the heat of his desire, mirrored by her own.

He was kissing her much differently than the last time. She could sense it. This time, he knew it was she he was kissing. The kiss belonged to her, not to some nameless woman.

Everything about their kiss was forbidden and therefore, delicious. She knew she wasn’t supposed to give in to him. At least, not with such ease. But she wanted to. There was nothing she wanted more than to be in his arms.

She kissed him as if that was their first and last kiss, and they both knew there would be no more. She could feel his hunger for her as his tongue riled through her lips, demanding everything of her. His hands were on her hips, keeping her in his lap. His manhood protruded from his trousers, roaring with desire for her.

Every single bad thing that had happened was banished by Jonathan’s kiss. She couldn’t think of anything or anyone else. She was helpless before his desire, before her own desire.

She moaned softly against his lips, and he bit her gently, only to soothe that sting with another kiss. The act inflamed her. Everything about that moment was more intense than she could have imagined.

His hand traveled up to her breast, cupping it through the fabric of her gown. She kissed him back with all the passion she had, every pent-up thought of him she had been collecting until that moment. Although she could not feel his hand on her bare skin, her nipples pebbled even through the layers and layers of fabric that separated their naked bodies. She felt more alive than she had ever been before. She was aware of every inch of her being, of his proximity.

Without thinking, she allowed her desire to lead her. She sucked on his tongue, not even sure if he liked what she was doing. Then, he kissed her harder, and she could tell everything. She was melting in his arms, every inch of her being a nerve-ending that trembled before him. His lips traveled down her throat, kissing it, nipping it, licking it, creating a deliciously wet trail of longing. She arched her back and neck, allowing him access to any part of her body that he wanted.

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Just as their embrace threatened to consume them, the carriage slowed to a stop. The driver announced their arrival at Silverbrook Manor, breaking the spell. Jonathan reluctantly pulled away, his breathing heavy, his eyes dark with unfulfilled desire.

“We’ve arrived,” he murmured, his voice thick with emotion.

Ciara nodded, her own breath coming in quick, shallow gasps. “Yes, we have.”

They exited the carriage silently, and he walked her to her chamber. She wanted him to ask to come inside. She secretly wanted them to continue what was started in the carriage, but much to her disappointment, he simply bid her goodnight, turning away and closing the door to his own chamber, leaving her alone with a palpitating heart and a yearning body.

Ciara had no idea what she was doing, standing by the door that joined her chamber to her husband’s. She should be in her own bed, sleeping. Yet, all she wanted to do was be in his bed in his arms.

Inhaling deeply, she knocked. A moment later, Jonathan opened the door, shirtless, his hair tousled, falling over his forehead in a rakish manner she couldn’t resist. The sight of his naked, muscular torso made her falter. Heat unfurled deep inside of her, making her yearn for him even more.

Noticing her confusion, he lifted her chin. “How may I help you, Duchess?”

She hesitated for a moment then somehow found the words she needed. “I... I wish to continue what we started in the carriage.”

He lifted an inquisitive eyebrow. “You wish to lay with me?”

“Mhm,” she said, swallowing heavily, trying not to lower her gaze to the dark curls on his chest.

“You know that if we do, it will be solely for pleasure,” he clarified. “If love is what you need, I cannot give you that. I wish to be perfectly clear on those conditions.”

“I understand,” she nodded hastily. “That is all I want as well. Just... pleasure, nothing else.” She could see the look of surprise on his face. So, she continued. “If we are to live separately after these two months, I want to experience those bodily pleasures at least once in my life.”

He pouted before speaking. “You’re treading on dangerous waters, siren.”

“I don’t care,” she insisted. “I am free now, in this moment, to do as I please. I want to live life to the fullest, to experience what I never did before. I want...” she paused in an effort to find the right words. “I want you to show me what it truly means to be a woman.”

He grinned, showcasing his own body with his hands like a seller on a market. “In that case, who am I to deny you the pleasure of all this?”

She rolled her eyes at him amusedly, resisting the urge to smile.

“Also,” he continued, “we need some ground rules in case things get too out of hand, such as you falling in love with me.”

She crossed her arms over her chest, frowning. “You have a very high opinion of yourself, you know.”

He shrugged. "I speak from experience. Women have a tendency to fall in love with me when we are intimate on more than one occasion. I truly don't know what it is about me," he grinned mischievously.

"Neither do I," she responded.

"You will soon find out," he teased. "But first things first, we can have one lesson per week."

"That seems fair," she agreed. "Now, shall we get on with it?" She realized at that moment that she was still standing in the doorway. He had not granted her access to his bedchamber yet.

He laughed at her words, a deep, throaty laughter that seemed to emanate from the depths of his very soul. She couldn't remember hearing him laugh like that before.

"Oh, sweetheart," he said darkly, "you are not the one to give orders here."

"I know, I just—" she started, but she wasn't allowed to continue.

He took her into his arms and kissed her without pardon. He lifted her up onto himself, her legs instinctively locking around his waist, keeping herself in place. His hands grabbed her behind, squeezing gently, while his lips devoured hers.

He took her to the bed in her bedchamber, placing her gently onto it, as if she were a rare, sacred thing made of the finest porcelain, and she might break if handled roughly. Her irritation with him had disappeared immediately, a little too fast, but she couldn't think about that right now.

He pulled away from her, lifting the hem of her nightgown and pooling it around her waist. He spread her legs, not taking his eyes off of her.

“Jonathan, what are you?—”

“Shhh,” she heard him say as he lowered himself between her thighs.



“You don’t mean to?—”

“Ciara,” he said in a mockingly stern voice, “you are not being a good pupil.”

Her heart fluttered at his voice, at his eyes, and she nodded. That was all she could do before he lowered his head, and she could feel an onslaught of his hot breath on her most sensitive flesh.

“Oh...” she moaned softly, biting her lower lip. Without thinking, she grabbed a handful of his hair in a desire to keep him there, between her legs.

His tongue found the sensitive bundle of nerves she had dared to touch only a handful of times. The sensation was beyondwonderful. She had forgotten everything she had been trying to tell him as his tongue lapped, flicking over her sensitive bud, creating tidal waves of incredible pleasure. She gasped, her eyes closed, her hips jerking towards him, giving all of herself to him and his knowing tongue.

“Mmmm,” she heard him murmur. “You taste like a most decadent dessert...”

That was when she felt his lips on her as he sucked her into his mouth. Wet heat enveloped her as sensation bloomed with a strength she never even knew she had. Her breathing was ragged, and she could barely keep up with the waves of pleasure he was creating. He knew exactly what he was doing as his tongue flicked over her in steady pulses, creating the perfect friction, bringing her to the edge. She never wanted him to stop.

He lifted his eyes to hers, dark and unfathomable with his mouth on her. That was

when she completely lost control, seeing him in such a carnal, intimate manner. Something inside of her clenched then exploded. Ripples of pleasure spread throughout her entire body as she gently rocked into his mouth until only faint remnants of shivers were left.

He pulled away from her, his lips glistening from her heat. Still trembling, she waited for him to kiss her, to do something else, but instead, he fell to the side of the bed next to her. She waited for a few moments longer then she couldn't resist asking.

“Is... that all?”

He chuckled again, that same wonderfully masculine laughter. “Oh no, siren. We are just getting started. But I think that's enough for your first lesson.”

He got up, and without another word, he left her chamber, closing the door behind him.

All she could hear at that moment was the palpitating sound of her own heart, wondering what on earth she had done.

## CHAPTER 19

Hyde Park was a lush, serene escape from the bustle of London, the perfect setting for a leisurely afternoon walk. Ciara strolled, her arm resting on Jonathan's, her eyes flicking around to catch the curious glances of other park-goers. She knew their presence was drawing attention, but she tried to focus on the company and the conversation.

Hector and Adeline were trailing behind them quietly, occasionally making pleasant conversation.

“You know, Hector is the last person who’d want to join us for a stroll through Hyde Park,” Jonathan admitted, assuring that his friend couldn’t hear which made Ciara even more amused.

“How come he is here then?” she asked in a hushed tone of voice while Lord Islington and her friend were still debating which of the romantic poets was better.

“He owed me a favor,” Jonathan chuckled. “Besides, I always wanted to make him do something like this. He loathes these... propriety-driven rules and regulations of the ton.”

“And you?” she asked although she was certain that she already knew the answer.

“I would lie if I said I didn’t,” he admitted. “Although being a Duke comes with a certain set of responsibilities, ones I simply cannot run away from, no matter how hard I tried.”

For a moment, she believed she could see a glimpse of the man he truly was and not the man he presented himself to be to the world. However, that moment passed as quickly as it had appeared.

“So, I make my own rules,” he concluded. “If the ton likes it, fine. If not, they can all go to the devil, for all I care.”

Ciara knew that feeling well. Only three days had passed since her first lesson, and already, she felt a change in herself. She had undertaken her duchess duties with more enthusiasm, and she could feel herself working with more joy and energy. She wondered if he was responsible for that.

Then, as they were walking, they ran into a lady Ciara didn’t know. However, the lady seemed to know her husband very well as she and her friend stopped to greet

him.

“Your Grace,” the lady smiled, her rouged lips revealing perfectly aligned teeth, “fancy meeting you here.”

“Lady Fletcher,” Jonathan said in a flat tone of voice, so Ciara couldn’t tell if he was happy or annoyed to have to speak to her. He bowed before the lady and her friend. “May I introduce my wife, Her Grace Ciara Whitlock, the?—”

“Duchess of Silverbrook,” Lady Fletcher interjected, finishing his sentence. “Why, it is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Duchess.”

“Lady Fletcher,” Ciara nodded politely although there was something in the way the woman eyed her that sent shivers down her spine.

“I suppose it is marriage then, keeping you so busy,” Lady Fletcher turned her attention back to Jonathan as if Ciara wasn’t even there.

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Jonathan nodded. “Yes, a married man changes his habits, Lady Fletcher.”

“Perhaps, but there are always exceptions to that rule as to any other.” Lady Fletcher chuckled a little maliciously as if she had seen her fair share of exceptions to that rule.

Ciara knew that she didn’t want to remain in the company of that lady any longer, but she couldn’t pull Jonathan away. He had to do it on his own. Fortunately, he seemed to be able to read her mind.

“Yes, exceptions are all around us,” he noted. “It was lovely to see you, Lady Fletcher. We wish you a good day.”

Without allowing Ciara to say goodbye, he gently led her away with Adeline and Lord Islington immediately following them. She wanted to ask about Lady Fletcher and how Jonathan knew her, but she couldn’t get the words to leave the confines of her mind. She was afraid of the answer, just like she was afraid of her husband’s past and how it might always be a shadow over them both.

Lord Islington started a new conversation, and Adeline flowed into it with Jonathan occasionally adding his own thoughts, but she was mostly silent, having remembered something she would rather forget.

That same evening, Ciara was brushing her hair, having given her lady’s maid some time to rest. The truth was, brushing her hair was something she had always done for herself; her mother never had the patience or the will for it. As she grew older, Ciara realized that her mother simply never wanted to do any of those tender things that a

mother did for her daughter. So, she brushed her own hair, learning to calm herself down in the process.

As she was doing so, the door opened, and Jonathan let himself in.

“Jonathan,” she said, her hand stopping mid-stroke.

She wanted to be aloof, to be unavailable to him, but her eyes were already drinking the sight of him. She couldn’t hide the fact that she wanted him there as much as he wanted her.

“Siren,” he grinned. “I forget what lovely hair you have. You always have it tied up.”

“It is the fashion,” she explained timidly.

“To hell with fashion,” he walked over to her, taking the brush from her hand and placing it gently onto the vanity table. He stood behind her, gathering all of her hair in his hands gently, pushing it to the side, revealing her swan-like neck. “You should always have your hair loose like the siren that you are.”

He slowly kissed her neck, and she immediately felt that onslaught of heat completely take over her. The anticipation of the next lesson had her in its grip for the past several days, and she couldn’t wait to see him in her chamber again. Finally, the moment had come. Nothing else mattered but the two of them in that moment.

He took her by the hands and got her to stand up. He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close, kissing her with wild passion. She returned in the same manner, their tongues dancing to the sound of music only the two of them could hear. When he pulled away, she was blushing and breathless, his eyes staring at her very soul.

“You spent half your life in a nunnery, chaste as the morning dew, and yet, you kiss

with such passion, siren. How is that possible?” He grinned through his question.

She blushed even more fervently, deciding to share with him a secret. “Well... there was a stable boy by the name of Peter,” she smiled, remembering the boy who had by then become just a shadow of himself, but the feeling of warmth his name evoked was still genuine. “I was sixteen when we met at the nunnery. I saw him for the first time and remember thinking that I wanted to kiss him. So, I often took up tasks in the stables to steal him away and kiss him.”

“Did you now?” he asked, tilting his head to the side as he gazed at her. “I keep being surprised more and more by this wild side of yours, siren. What else did you do with Peter the stable boy?” he asked in an amused manner.

But that was when she became saddened. She couldn’t even pretend it was any other way. “When Mother Superior found out, I was lashed, and the boy and his family were laid off.”

She looked down at her feet, unable to feel guilty for what had happened simply because she wished to indulge in some pleasure.

He cupped her chin with his fingers and made her look up at him. “I’m sorry, but that wasn’t your fault.”

She shook her head. She wasn’t certain what she was responding to. The guilt? The fact that she believed it wasn’t her fault? She didn’t know. All she knew was that she didn’t want to think about that any longer.

Closing her eyes, she crashed her lips against his again, and he understood what she needed. He took her into his arms, taking her to the armchair this time. She was sitting as he spread her legs, pooling the hem of her nightgown around her waist, just like the last night.

“I want you to watch, siren,” he urged. “No closing your beautiful eyes. Understood?”

“Mhm,” she managed to muster.

She watched when he dug his tongue into her, swirling her, tasting her. She whimpered at the sensation that washed over her. She never wanted his tongue to leave the confines of her body. He glanced up, adding a thumb that gently started to stroke her. She trembled underneath the knowing touch. Then, his finger slowly entered her. It was a strange sensation, one she had never felt before. He took it out, showing her how wet it was. Then, he put it in his mouth, tasting her again.

“Delectable,” he said again, grinning. He lifted himself upward, reaching her lips, kissing her with her own juices on his mouth, making her taste herself. Her need was heightened beyond recognition.

He slid down between her legs once again, taking her into his mouth relentlessly. Her body writhed. It convulsed. She moaned loudly, biting her lip in an effort to be quiet, but that was impossible. She wanted more of him. She wanted him deeper. But he didn’t give it to her yet. And that made her yearning even more ravenous.

He kept sucking her, his finger teasing her only slightly but enough to make her go wild. Finally, she came undone, just like he knew she would. Her body tensed entirely as a million little stars exploded around the periphery of her vision. Through all that, he kept his eyes on hers, refusing to allow her to look away even for a single second which only seemed to heighten the sensation.

Once the onslaught of bliss subsided, she was still breathing heavily. However, this time, she didn’t want to allow him to leave without a promise.



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“Teach me,” she said softly through the shallow breaths. “I want to pleasure you as well.”

His eyes widened in surprise, a flicker of mischief in them then he grinned, nodding. “All right, siren. Come.”

He took her by the hands, getting her to stand up. Then, he positioned himself in the armchair, licking his lower lip. “Get on your knees, siren. Slowly.”

Feeling overcome by the raw need to feel him, she immediately did as he instructed. He opened his robe, revealing his manhood in all its glory. Her lips parted upon seeing it. She had never seen anything like that. She blushed, her heart skipping a beat, but there was more. Her insides throbbed at the sight.

“Take it gently with your fingers,” he whispered, not taking his eyes off her for even a second.

Trembling, her elegant fingers curled around his manhood, and it immediately tightened upon her touch. His eyes flared up at her, and she noticed a droplet of wetness on the tip. She never felt more powerful than at that moment, holding him in her hands, seeing the desire etched on his lips, on his face.

“Caress it,” he whispered again. “Do to it what you wish.”

She swallowed heavily. He had given her free reign over him. She gently started to stroke him, afraid that she might squeeze too hard. Curiously, she swirled her finger over the little droplet, wiping it away. He groaned with pleasure. A part of her wanted

to kiss it, to feel that wetness on her lips. Did she dare do it?

Delicately, she moved her hands up then down, gripping tighter with each stroke. She could see that he liked it. In fact, he loved it.

“Can I... taste it?” she asked, blushing more than ever before, but curiosity won over. She wanted to learn, after all.

He smiled in a way that made her most intimate flesh throb again with need and yearning. She wondered if she could satisfy him as he satisfied her. There was only one way to find out.

“Do with it what you wish,” he repeated with a low groan.

She lowered her head toward the tip, flicking her tongue over it. Her eyes looked up at him. His fingers were gripping the handles of the armchair, keeping himself controlled. Her tongue swirled over him again, longer this time as she moved her hand. His manhood tightened even more, if such a thing were even possible, becoming hard as a rock.

“I love that tongue of yours, siren...” she heard him say, and it made her even bolder.

She locked her lips around the tip, licking it, playing with it. She couldn't even imagine that his pleasure would cause her own as well.

Fire shot throughout her body, and she became even bolder, taking more of him into her mouth as he completely lost control. She felt the pulsation that emanated from him as he reached his peak, and he spilled into her mouth with a hoarse moan.

As she pulled back, she swallowed, and he beamed, still dazed with pleasure.

“Was I good?” she asked mischievously.

“Better than good,” he said, getting up from the armchair and then helping her up as well.

He ran his thumb across her lips. “You are indeed a very apt pupil.”

She chuckled as he placed a soft kiss on her slightly swollen lips and her flushed cheeks.

When he pulled away, he lingered before her for a few moments, as if he had something to say, but then changed his mind at the last minute.

“Right. That’s enough for tonight. Goodnight, siren,” he said softly.

“Goodnight Jonathan,” she replied, and he turned on his heel, leaving her chamber.

As the door closed behind him, she was still smiling, happy and satiated, as she got into bed and closed her eyes, falling asleep that very same instant.

## CHAPTER 20

Two days had passed since Jonathan’s second lesson with Ciara, after which she asked him to teach her how to pleasure him.

The thought amazed him. No woman had ever dared to ask him something like that. Women simply assumed they knew exactly what to do to please him. Mostly, they were right. But the thought of actually teaching a woman all his likes... that went beyond his wildest imagination. But what surprised him even more was his own reaction to her lips and tongue on him. No woman had ever brought him to finish with such ease, with such inexperience, which only seemed to heighten his desire for

her.

That afternoon, he was making his way down a quiet corridor of Silverbrook Manor on his way to his study. The entire house was bathed in the soft light of the afternoon sun emanating through the windows, and the usual noises of the manor house only amplified the sounds of life within it.

As he walked, a soft melodious voice drifted to him from an open doorway. He paused, the unexpected sound catching his attention. The voice was familiar. He could recognize it immediately. It was hers.

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He followed the enchanting melody, his footsteps light on the polished floor as he approached the source of the sound. The corridor led him to the library, its grand oak doors slightly ajar. He hesitated for a moment, leaning to the side of the wall in an effort to peer inside.

Ciara was standing by a large window, her back to him, as she flipped through the pages of an old book. The golden afternoon light streamed through the glass, casting a warm glow around her. She was singing softly, her voice a gentle, lilting tune that filled the room with a serene beauty.

Jonathan stood just outside the doorway, leaning against the frame as he closed his eyes and let the melody wash over him. The sound was like a caress, soothing and irresistible, pulling at something deep within him. He reveled in the moment, letting the music weave its spell around him. Without waiting for the song to end, he hastily rushed to his study, wondering what sort of a spell she had over him.

He wanted her in his bed even more than before, now that he had a taste of her. But his lust for her seemed to be something far more potent, growing into something he couldn't quite explain. The thought made him flinch.

No, no, he assured himself. Nothing is happening.

Over the next few days, Jonathan found himself avoiding his wife, plunging himself into his work with a fervor that bordered on obsession. He shut himself in his study, pouring over estate ledgers, tenant reports, and correspondence. The hours blurred together as he lost himself in the details, using the demands of the estate as a shield against the confusing attraction swirling within him.

He sneaked through the corridors of his own home like a thief in the night. As he walked with his steward that afternoon, learning of the renovations that needed to be done in the overly dilapidated west wing of the manor house, he realized that he was barely able to focus on the conversation.

“The rain ruined a large portion of the roof, Your Grace,” his steward explained as the two men kept walking down the hallway. “Mrs. Dawson has pointed out that it is leaking in several places.”

“Yes, of course,” Jonathan agreed. “We need to mend it as soon as possible.”

“I could bring some men from the village nearby,” the man said. “I know good workers there who will do a fine job.”

“All right,” Jonathan agreed. “That sounds fine.”

“I shall go as soon as tomorrow, and I can...” The man continued to talk, but Jonathan wasn’t listening any longer. He had heard footsteps at the end of the corridor, and he stopped.

One window allowed a good view of the end of that same corridor as it encircled the house, and he thought he had seen Ciara pass by it.

Feeling nervous, he hastily looked around, noticing the door to one of the guest chambers.

“Yes, Arden, make it happen,” he hastily said. “Now, if that is all, I have to... go inside... here.” He pointed at the guest chamber.

Arden lifted an eyebrow, but he didn’t question his master’s strange decision. Still, Jonathan felt the need to clarify. “I need to see if the maids are doing a good job of

cleaning the rooms that aren't in use."

"Of course," Arden nodded again without hesitation.

Jonathan immediately slipped into the room, closing the door behind him and then leaning onto it, as if someone might break through and catch him doing something illicit, something forbidden. Ciara's voice still haunted him, echoing in his mind during quiet moments. Her laughter, her smile, the touch of her hand—they were all distractions he couldn't afford.

When he couldn't hear anyone any longer, he slipped out into the corridor and sneaked back into his study. Those days, he worked late into the night, or at least tried to, and he often forgot to eat, which was something he hadn't even noticed by himself. Mrs. Dawson noticed his waning condition and brought him sandwiches and tea. She placed the tray on his desk with a concerned frown.

"Your Grace, you must eat something," she urged gently. "You've been at this for hours."

Jonathan barely glanced up, his eyes fixed on the documents spread before him. "Thank you, Mrs. Dawson. I'll eat in a moment."

But he didn't. The sandwiches remained untouched, the tea growing cold beside him. Mrs. Dawson sighed and left him to his work though she continued to check on him periodically. He knew that she worried about him as a mother did, and he appreciated it although he could not tell her what made him act in such a manner.

All he knew was that he needed a bit of time away from Ciara to sort out this confusing attraction that was not letting him be. All he could think about was her, the way she tasted, the way she smelled, the way her moans sounded when he made her writhe with pleasure. He wanted more of it, and that was the confusing part.

Usually, his interest would wane after a night in bed. He tried to comfort himself by focusing on the fact that he had not really bedded her yet. What they had was merely an interlude which was driving him mad with desire, constantly yearning for more.

Yes, that must be it, he thought to himself. Once he bedded her properly, this confusion would go away, and everything would go back to normal.

That same afternoon, Jonathan was surprised to have a visit from his best friend. He greeted him with a firm handshake and a welcoming smile.

“Hector, old boy, it is always a pleasure to see you in broad daylight,” Jonathan teased, leading him inside and to his study where the two men got comfortable. “A drink?” he suggested.

“In broad daylight?” Hector replied playfully. Then, he shook his head. “Knowing that you will probably want to talk to me about the difficulties of married life, I will probably need a strong drink to endure all that.”

“Ah, you know me so well, old friend,” Jonathan laughed, proceeding to pour them each a glass of brandy, the amber liquid glinting in the sunlight streaming through the windows.

Hector took a long, satisfied sip of his drink, and then he nodded. “All right, I am ready. So, how is married life treating you, Jonathan?”



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Jonathan also took a sip of his brandy, obviously in need of some courage as well as he contemplated his answer. “It is... different from what I expected.”

Hector raised an eyebrow. Only then did he realize what his friend was referring to. “Different? You mean to tell me that you haven’t even...” He trailed off, his implication clear.

Jonathan nodded, feeling a twinge of defensiveness. “Yes, that’s correct. She was in a nunnery, Hector. I don’t want to rush her into anything she’s not ready for.”

Hector stared at him in disbelief before breaking into a grin. “Well, I’ll be damned. The great Duke of Silverbrook showing restraint. I never thought I’d see the day.”

Jonathan chuckled, shaking his head. “It’s not about restraint, Hector. It’s about respect.”

“Respect, hmm?” Hector teased, leaning forward. “And how long do you plan on maintaining this respect before you drive yourself mad?”

Jonathan laughed, a bit more freely this time. “As long as it takes. Ciara deserves that.”

Or maybe two months, he pondered silently. Maybe more?

Hector shook his head, still amused. “Well, I suppose I can’t argue with that. You’re a better man than I am, Jonathan.”

He raised his glass and then downed his drink. This time, it went exactly the way it was supposed to.

The two men exchanged knowing glances then they burst into a roaring chuckle.

“When are you joining me for a drink at our favorite tavern?” Hector asked once they stopped laughing.

Jonathan thought about it for a moment, and he realized that he had not frequented it since his marriage. “I am a married man now, old boy. Some of my habits need to change.”

“Bollocks,” Hector frowned. “I knew this would happen. You have become a lost cause.”

“Just until the ton finds another poor sap whose life is more interesting than mine,” he assured Hector. “Then, Ciara and I will start our lives apart, both of us doing exactly what we want with neither imposing on the other.”

“Separate lives?” Hector echoed.

“Mhm,” Jonathan confirmed.

“But... still married?” Hector asked for more clarification.

“Yes,” Jonathan confirmed again. “That is exactly so.”

“How much time do you give it?”

“Two months,” Jonathan shrugged. “In that time, I shall bed my wife then give her whatever she wants to live her life merrily away from me, and everyone will be

happy.”

Hector pondered on it for a moment then he nodded with a smile. “I like that. I like it a lot. I might actually try it out myself.”

Jonathan laughed as he got up and poured them both another drink. Their topics slowly turned to less important matters, as usual, and he was reminded how much he missed his friend and their time together.

## CHAPTER 21

That night, Jonathan was immersed in work, going over the suggestions for the roof repair of the west wing. The quiet of his study was always comforting although he was unable to escape his own mind and his thoughts. Just as he was about to delve into another document, a soft knock interrupted him.

“Yes?” he called out, looking up to see who would open the door. “Ciara?” he asked upon locking eyes with her. There was a playful smile on her lips.

She didn’t say anything. She entered the room, gliding gracefully across the floor as her eyes sparkled with mischief.

“You have been cooped up in here for days,” she pointed out, walking over to him and offering him her hand. “Come with me.” Her voice was gentle but insistent, awakening curiosity in him.

He raised an eyebrow. “And where are we going at this late hour?”

“You’ll see,” she said mysteriously.

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Intrigued, Jonathan rose from his chair and took her hand, allowing her to lead him down the dimly lit corridor. They arrived at her chamber, the door slightly ajar, and Ciara pushed it open with a flourish.

The sight that greeted him took his breath away. In the center of the room, a small table was set for two, surrounded by the warm glow of numerous candles. The table was laden with an array of dishes, each carefully chosen to cater to Jonathan's tastes.

Jonathan's favorite wine, a rich, full-bodied red, was decanted and ready to be poured, the deep color catching the candlelight. The sight of his favorite dishes, lovingly prepared and beautifully presented, filled him with a profound sense of appreciation.

"It has come to my attention that you haven't been eating well recently," she said, her eyes upon him, watching his reaction.

He turned to her, his heart swelling with some unknown emotion. "Ciara, this is... extraordinary. Thank you."

"Well, you do need your strength before our next lesson," she said, blushing sweetly at her words.

Usually, he didn't like a blushing woman. That meant she was pure and chaste, unspoiled by wicked desires. But with Ciara, her blushing only drew him more to her because he knew that deep down, there was a mischievous side to her which he was yearning to unearth.

“That is very thoughtful of you,” he grinned as they sat down at the table. “Does that mean you plan on tiring me out this evening?”

She sat opposite him as the candles cast a soft glow over her beautiful face. “That depends on you,” he heard her say.

He loved that side of her. She didn’t show it to anyone else but him. As he took his first bite of the delicious food, he couldn’t help but feel a deep sense of contentment. He was still thinking about what was to follow after the dinner, but he had to focus on savoring the moment and the undeniable love that had gone into preparing that special dinner.

“I have to say, you really are a diligent student,” he teased, enjoying his meal but also enjoying the sight of her blushing cheeks and her eyes that seemed to sparkle like the brightest stars in the night sky. “Whether it is a lesson in Pall Mall or... another sort.”

Her fork lingered in the air as her melodious laughter rang all around them. He loved it when she laughed like that. He caught himself wanting to hear more of it and also, to be the cause of it himself.

He loved it when her eyes gazed at him almost like a child who was in awe of something new it was seeing, something new it was experiencing, and it was yearning for more. He could see that same desire for experimenting, for new horizons in her. Usually, the ladies he had surrounded himself with before mirrored his own desire and nothing else. But with Ciara, he felt as if a part of himself was opening. She was breathing new life into it, and he was seeing everything anew, wanting to experience everything anew... with her.

“You taught me to grip the mallet,” she teased him back, placing the fork into her mouth and taking a sensual bite of the food.

“Iama good teacher, am I not?” he grinned.

“One lesson does not a good teacher make,” she replied playfully.

“Two?” he asked.

“No,” she shook her head mischievously.

“Three?” he asked again, enjoying the banter.

“At least ten.” She surprised him with her response so much that he burst into laughter.

“Ten?” he asked once he was able to speak properly again.

“At least,” she reminded him of the other part of that sentence.

“Goodness me,” he said with a smirk, dabbing the corner of his lip with his napkin.  
“I’d better get to work then.”

He got up, not taking his eyes off her for even a single second. He walked around the table, taking her by the hand and getting her up to her feet. The thought of what she did to him last time made him nearly wild with lust, with desire, with throbbing need for release. His manhood was already stretching the fabric of his trousers, making him uncomfortable, but he wanted to pleasure her again.

Before he could do anything, she suddenly took a handful of mashed potatoes and slathered them all over his trousers. The innocent look she gave him almost made him burst into a chuckle, but what she did next turned him into a beast that was barely keeping itself under control.

“My, my, my... what a mess,” she said shaking her head at him.

Gently, she pushed him back onto the seat, then grabbed a handkerchief and knelt before him. His manhood tightened as she slowly started to move the handkerchief over his trousers. But at the same time, she was applying gentle pressure, massaging him just the way he liked.

“Ciara...” he managed to muster through clenched teeth. “What are you doing?”

She gave him another one of those innocent looks that drove him even more insane with desire. “What does it look like?” she asked with a seductive purr. “I am cleaning you, of course...”

Before he could say anything, he felt her fingers working the buttons on his trousers, revealing what had been concealed, begging to come out. She smiled upon seeing the effect she already had on him. He couldn't take his eyes off of her fingers and with what ease she was doing it.

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“Let’s see if I learned my lesson well,” she murmured as her fingers stroked him from root to the tip that was beading already.

He couldn’t believe the ease with which she was dominating him. He had never seen that in a woman, especially not in a woman he had to instruct himself. She truly was a siren. He had known that from the first moment he laid his eyes on her, and now, he was under her power.

“You know, you are fortunate I am here,” she whispered, her lips dangerously close to his tip, almost touching it. He could feel her hot breath spill all over it, but she wasn’t touching him, and it was driving him mad with need.

He was fortunate. He couldn’t have agreed more. Here was a wife that wanted to do to him everything he had been imagining in the darkness of his bedchamber, all of his wishes coming true.

“We have to get you cleaned off properly,” she purred again, and at that very moment, her lips locked around his tip.

She teased him with her tongue gently and slowly at first. He relished the sensation of the wet heat of her mouth. Then, she surprised him by taking him deeper. Nothing could have prepared him for that moment of her lips sucking him, obliterating every other thought apart from her. He couldn’t control himself. He sank his fingers into her luscious locks, sifting through them.

“Ciara...” he groaned her name as he realized that he wanted her more than he wanted any other woman and not only to be inside of her but to bewithher in every



way a man could be with a woman.

She locked eyes with him, touching the corner of her lips with her thumb as she got up.

The thought almost sent him reeling backward, but a tidal wave of pleasure dissolved that thought and her grip over him tightened, bringing him to the edge momentarily.

She lifted her gown around her waist, ready to sit on his lap. Jonathan would have loved nothing more than to push everything off the table with his hand and ravage her, but he knew that he couldn't do that. Only, the reason behind him was something that surprised him.

He quickly got up, taking the hem of her gown and lowering it to the ground. She looked at him, puzzled, a confusion he tried to soften by kissing her on the forehead, yet another surprising act on his part.

He never kissed anyone on the forehead. That was far too intimate.

"I thought... that we would fully consummate our marriage this time," she admitted, sounding a little disappointed.

He smiled, cupping her chin with his fingers. "We should take it slow, Ciara. After all, you were in a convent," he reminded her.

The truth was far from it. He could not see a single thing about her that spoke of her time in the nunnery. The truth was that the special dinner and the efforts she had gone through had made him feel... vulnerable.

He didn't even know he had it in him. He knew that he needed some time to sort out his head. His heart had no say in anything. He refused to allow that. But the

confusion persisted, and he knew that making love to her would only make him even more confused about everything. Time would make him see things clearly once again... time away from her.

“That is more than enough for tonight, siren,” he said softly. “You are proving to be a better student every time.”

She didn’t say anything to that. He knew that he had hurt her by refusing her wishes. But there was nothing else he could say without revealing more than he wanted to.

“Thank you... for this,” he said again, gesturing around them. “It was lovely. Goodnight, Ciara.”

He hastily left her bedchamber, locking himself up in his. As he thought, sleep did not come to him that night.

## CHAPTER 22

The days following their intimate dinner passed in a blur for Ciara. She found herself engrossed in a myriad of tasks—supervising the household staff, attending to her correspondences, and making arrangements for social visits. She was yearning to speak to Adeline and tell her everything that had happened. Yet, despite her busy schedule, she couldn’t shake the feeling that something was amiss.

Jonathan had obviously been avoiding her. They already took their meals separately, but even when they did pass by each other, his conversation was polite but guarded. She couldn’t help but feel a pang of disappointment each time he made a hasty retreat back to his study, avoiding her gaze. There had been almost a week since their last lesson, and she was longing for more time with him.

That afternoon, she was in the middle of reviewing the household chores in the

drawing room, when the steward entered the room, after having knocked. As always, his expression was respectfully neutral so she could never quite guess why he had come.

“Your Grace, I beg your pardon, but you have visitors,” he announced.

Ciara’s heart leapt with excitement. Perhaps it was Uncle Brendan or Adeline. She had been craving the comfort of familiar faces and light-hearted conversation. In fact, she felt as if she hadn’t seen either of them in ages, and there was so much to talk about.

“Thank you, Arden,” she replied cheerfully, her mind already a swirl of topics to engross in. “Please, show them into the parlor. I shall be there shortly myself.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” Arden nodded respectfully, disappearing behind closed doors a moment later.

She stood up, smoothing her skirts in anticipation. Of course, if it were Uncle Brendan, she wouldn’t be sharing with him the details she wanted to tell Adeline, but seeing him would be enough to ease her mind.

She made her way to the parlor, her mind already buzzing with anticipation. But as she stepped through the door, her smile faltered, and all the blood drained from her face.

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There, sitting primly on the settee, were her parents, Lord and Lady Hartfield.

She stood in the doorway, a part of her mind desperate for an escape before she even exchanged a single word with them, but she wanted to show them that they had no power over her any longer. Her courage was stronger than her fear.

She swallowed heavily before speaking. “Mother. Father,” she greeted, her voice restrained. “To what do I owe... the pleasure?”

All three people knew that it was no pleasure, but Ciara wanted to retain at least the semblance of politeness. She wanted to prove to them that they couldn’t upset her any longer, that she wasn’t afraid of them.

Her mother rose gracefully, her eyes traversing Ciara from head to toe with a critical gaze, as if displeased with the way her daughter had dressed. “We decided it was time to visit our daughter and see how she is faring in her new role.”

“Indeed,” her father added, his tone cold and authoritative. “We want to ensure you are fulfilling your duties as a duchess and a wife.”

Ciara felt a wave of dread wash over her. She took a deep breath, trying to maintain her composure. “I assure you, I am managing quite well. There was no need for you to trouble yourselves with a visit.”

Her mother raised an eyebrow. “No need? Ciara, you must understand the importance of your position. As a duchess, you have responsibilities. We are here to ensure you are adhering to them.”

Ciara clenched her fists, her nails digging into her palms. “I am well aware of my responsibilities, Mother.”

“Are you?” her mother retorted, her tone sharp. “We have heard reports that you are not as attentive to your husband as you should be. A good wife knows her place and fulfills her duties without question.”

Ciara’s anger flared. “There is no one who could have provided you with that information because it is false. I am doing my best to be a good wife, but I will never again be dictated to and ordered around.”

She remembered well what it was like living under their roof. It was a hell she would rather not speak of again, and even worse, she refused to go back to that dark place inside her mind that helped her survive her years at the nunnery. And her parents were the responsible ones for all of that.

As if sensing his daughter’s disobedience again, her father’s eyes narrowed. “You will do as you are told, Ciara. You may be a duchess now, and you might think that you are your own person, but never forget that your behavior reflects upon our family. You are still an extension of us, and we expect you to act with the decorum and obedience befitting your station.”

Ciara felt a surge of defiance and rebellion at the notion that she was an extension of them. She never felt as if she were truly their child. She had never been loved by a mother and father as a child ought to be. “I am not a child, Father. I will not be treated as one. I am capable of making my own decisions and managing my own household.”

Her mother’s lips thinned in disapproval. “This defiance is unbecoming of you, Ciara. Will you prove yet again that you are unworthy of the family that tried its best to bring you up with propriety and obedience in mind? Will you prove yet again that

you are unworthy to be anyone's wife?"

Ciara's vision blurred with unshed tears, her heart pounding with a mixture of anger and hurt.

However, before she could say anything else, the door burst open.

As Jonathan approached the parlor, he heard raised voices and recognized the familiar tone of Ciara's parents.

His pace quickened, concern etched on his face. When he entered the room, he was met with a tense scene: Ciara, standing rigidly with unshed tears in her eyes, and Lord and Lady Hartfield, who immediately adopted a façade of pleasantness upon seeing him.

"Ciara," he said her name softly, walking over to her. He instinctively stood between her and her parents, a shield she could hide behind. "Lord and Lady Hartfield... is everything all right here?"

"Your Grace," Lady Hartfield cooed, a forced smile on her lips. He could immediately see it for what it was. "We came for a visit, and this is just a... little family discussion."

Jonathan's eyes flicked to Ciara, noticing her distress. Anger flared up inside of him at seeing her in such a state. A desire to protect her surged inside of him, wanting to shield her from all harm, especially the harm that came from those that were closest to her. That was the sort of betrayal he knew all too well.

He then turned back to her parents, his gaze hardening. "It seems more than just a little discussion to me," he said evenly. "What have you said to upset my wife?"

Lord Hartfield's smile faltered, and he drew himself up, his tone defensive. "Nothing, Your Grace, honestly. We were merely reminding Ciara of her duties. She has responsibilities as a duchess and as your wife. Her shame reflects upon us as a family, and that is the last thing we wished to have."

Jonathan stepped closer, his presence imposing. "Ciara is well aware of her responsibilities and duties which she has been undertaking with great detail and diligence, not that either she or I have to make excuses to you. That is why she needs no reminders from anyone, least of all in such a manner that would cause her distress."

Lady Hartfield bristled. "Your Grace, we are her parents. It is our duty to ensure that she behaves appropriately."

"Your duty?" Jonathan echoed, his voice calm but there was an unmistakable edge to it. "Your duty as her parents should be to love her unconditionally, to support and encourage her, not to undermine and belittle her at every chance you get, even in her own home."

Jonathan didn't feel like he was crossing the line. In fact, he felt as if it had already been crossed by those very same people who had the audacity to stand there in his own home and make his wife feel inadequate. He refused to stand for it.

Lord Hartfield's face reddened at his words. "How dare you speak to us in such a manner?" the man gasped in shock. "We are only looking out for her best interests."

"I am her husband," Jonathan replied, his tone steely. "I refuse to tolerate anyone causing her such distress. Even her parents." He wrapped a protective arm around his wife's waist, pulling her even closer to himself as he continued to speak. "You have overstayed your welcome, Lord and Lady Hartfield. I suggest you leave immediately."

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Lady Hartfield opened her mouth to protest, but Jonathan raised a hand, silencing her.

“Now,” he said firmly.

There was a moment of tense silence before Lord and Lady Hartfield, their expressions a mixture of shock and indignation, turned and left the room, their footsteps echoing down the hallway.

Jonathan turned to Ciara, his expression softening. “Are you all right?” he asked quietly.

Ciara nodded, her eyes glistening with gratitude. “Thank you, Jonathan. I... Even after all these years, I never know how to handle them.”

Jonathan simply nodded, his emotions swirling. He felt a fierce protectiveness for Ciara, a need to shield her from any pain. The intensity of his feelings overwhelmed him, and he found himself at a loss for words.

“I... I’ll leave you to compose yourself,” he said, his voice thick with emotion.

He turned and left the room, his heart pounding.

The realization of how deeply he cared for her was terrifying. He tried to make sense of it all, reminding himself that it could have simply been a desire to protect a woman who was in distress, but he knew better than to be a fool and believe such a silly lie.

The truth was that he cared for his wife. Which was something he would never have



anticipated.

## CHAPTER 23

A couple of days later, the tension that had hung in the air after the visit from Ciara's parents began to lift, replaced by a sense of anticipation as word arrived that her husband's cousin Rebecca and her husband, Lord Kirdale, along with their children, would be visiting. Ciara found herself looking forward to the distraction and the company of someone who might, in time, become a friend.

The Kirdales arrived in the early afternoon, their carriage pulling up to the grand entrance. Ciara stood at the top of the steps, a genuine smile on her face as she watched Rebecca step down, followed by her husband Archie and their lively brood.

"Ciara, my dear," Rebecca called out, her eyes sparkling with warmth. She hurried up the steps and surprised Ciara with a tight embrace. "You look lovely," she added, once she released Ciara.

"You look even lovelier," Ciara returned the compliment.

"That is because I am taking such good care of her," Lord Kirdale said with a wink as he passed by his wife and greeted Ciara.

"Lord Kirdale," Ciara replied with a smile, "that must be it. How wonderful it is to see you again."

"Yes, you were fortunate enough to have met only me before, without these two whippersnappers," he joked with a charming grin. "And please, call me Archie. Lord Kirdale sounds like I'll be a grandfather all too soon."

"If we are fortunate, my love, you shall be a grandfather one day, but not yet."

Rebecca leaned over to him, kissing him on the cheek.

Ciara knelt down to greet the children, who were full of energy and excitement. “And who are these young ones?” she asked with a smile.

Rebecca smiled. “These are Margaret and Henry.”

“Hello, Your Grace,” Margaret said with a curtsy, her brown curls bouncing.

“Hello, Margaret,” Ciara replied, her heart warming at the sight of the children. “And hello to you as well, Henry. I think Your Grace is far too formal for family. Ciara will do just fine.”

“Ciara,” Margaret beamed at the name while Henry, the younger child, blushed and smiled.

“Come, let’s go inside,” Ciara urged. “Jonathan is in his study, but he is also eagerly anticipating your arrival.”

Inside, the Kirdales were shown to the parlor where tea and refreshments had been laid out. The children immediately made themselves at home, exploring the room and peppering their parents with questions. Jonathan joined them several minutes later, and they were all seated together, catching up.

As the adults settled into their conversation, Ciara found herself naturally gravitating toward the children. Margaret and Henry had captured her attention with their bright eyes and inquisitive natures.

Margaret looked up at Ciara with a shy smile. “Ciara, do you like stories?” she asked, her voice filled with hope.

Ciara smiled warmly, kneeling down to be at eye level with Margaret. “I adore stories, Margaret. Do you have a favorite you’d like to share with me?”

“Please, tell us your favorite, Ciara,” Henry requested softly, his voice barely audible. He was a shy little boy, so Ciara appreciated his comments even more when he had the courage to voice them.

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“Hm, it is very difficult to choose a favorite,” Ciara considered. “There are so many wonderful ones. But... I do have a favorite. It is the one my grandmother used to tell me so many times that I thought it was her favorite, too. It is the story of the Children of Lir.”

Henry’s eyes widened. “Is it about fairies?”

“Yes, it is,” Ciara replied, her voice rich with warmth. “Once upon a time in ancient Ireland, there lived a king named Lir. He had four beautiful children, two boys and two girls, and he loved them dearly. But after the passing of his beloved wife, the children were left heartbroken.”

Margaret leaned in closer, enraptured by the story. “What happened next?”

“King Lir married again, but his new wife was not kind to the children,” Ciara continued. “Jealous of their beauty and the love their father had for them, she used dark magic to turn them into swans, condemning them to roam the lakes of Ireland for nine hundred years.”

Henry gasped, his imagination ignited. “Swans? That sounds terrible!”

“It was indeed,” Ciara said. “But the children remained strong, and despite their trials, they sang beautiful songs that enchanted anyone who heard them. Their voices carried across the waters, filling the land with sorrow and beauty.”

“And did they ever turn back into children?” Margaret asked, her eyes wide.

“Yes,” Ciara replied, a smile playing on her lips. “After nine hundred years, they were finally freed by the sound of a churchbell. As the spell was lifted, they returned to their human forms, but they were old and weary. Yet, they had learned the value of love and family which endured through all hardships.”

Henry clapped his hands, his face alight with wonder. “That was amazing! I want to hear more such stories!”

“Well, all right then,” Ciara smiled. “Let me think of another one...”

While Ciara was telling the children another story, Jonathan took a moment and got up, walking over to the window to open it. A part of him was unable to take his eyes off of Ciara. She had gathered Margaret and Henry around her, her melodious voice guiding their imagination to faraway lands where anything was possible... even him considering having children.

But that was a fleeting moment. Now, he needed another moment to himself, and the notion of opening the window seemed like a good excuse. However, he was not allowed even that semblance of privacy.

“She would make a wonderful mother, wouldn’t she?” He suddenly heard Rebecca’s voice behind him, spoken in a soft tone so as not to be overheard by the others. It was as if she could read his mind, wondering the same thing, then forbidding himself from even daring to think in that direction when he knew well that such a thing was impossible. He would never allow it.

Jonathan felt a pang in his chest. He turned to her, his expression carefully neutral. “That’s not happening,” he said firmly. That was not something he was willing to delve into or even discuss.

Rebecca raised an eyebrow, obviously sensing the tension in his voice. “Why not,

Jonathan? Ciara is wonderful with children, and you know she would?—”

Jonathan cut her off, his tone sharper than he intended. “Rebecca, please. This is not a topic for discussion.”

Rebecca evidently wished to say something else, but Ciara’s voice interrupted her. “How about a game of Pall Mall? The weather is lovely, and it seems like such a waste to spend the afternoon inside.”

Everyone agreed wholeheartedly, and soon, they were out on the lawn, setting up for the game. Margaret and Henry cheered as the adults prepared their mallets and balls, eager to watch the friendly competition.

“Ready to lose, Your Grace?” Ciara teased, a playful glint in her eyes.

Jonathan smirked with Rebecca’s words still lingering in his mind. He couldn’t quite focus on the present moment, but he tried his best. “Oh, you sweet thing... I never lose.”

The game began with light-hearted banter and laughter. Ciara’s competitive spirit shone through, and she surprised everyone with her skillful play. Margaret and Henry ran alongside, cheering and offering tips, their excitement infectious.

Ciara managed to take the lead, her precision and strategy impressing even Jonathan. As she lined up for the final shot, she gave him a challenging look. “This one’s for the win, Jonathan. Are you ready?”

Jonathan chuckled, though the sound was more subdued than usual. “Do your best, Duchess.”

With a decisive swing, Ciara sent her ball through the final hoop, securing her

victory.

The children erupted in cheers, and Ciara did a small victory dance, her joy evident.

“I believe that makes me the champion,” she announced, grinning widely. “What do you say to that, Your Grace?”

Normally, Jonathan would have had a witty retort ready, but today, he felt a strange discomfort. Ciara’s laughter, her closeness, was stirring something within him that he wasn’t ready to face.

He forced a smile and nodded. “You played well, Duchess. Congratulations.”

Ciara noticed his lack of enthusiasm and tilted her head in concern. “Are you all right? You don’t seem yourself.”

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Jonathan looked away, avoiding her gaze. “I’m fine, just a bit distracted.”

Rebecca, observing the interaction, gave Jonathan a knowing look but said nothing. Archie patted his back in an effort to lighten the mood. “Come on, Jonathan, it’s just a game. No need to be a sore loser.”

Jonathan managed a genuine laugh at that. “You’re right, Archie. Well played, everyone.”

The group began to disband, heading back toward the house, chatting joyfully among one another.

Ciara lingered behind with Jonathan, evidently determined to understand his sudden withdrawal. “Jonathan, is everything all right?”

He shook his head, running a hand through his hair. “It’s nothing. I just have a lot on my mind, that’s all.”

Ciara didn’t seem convinced, but he appreciated her decision not to press him further. She always understood exactly what he needed at any moment. “All right, but... I’m here if you need to talk.”

Jonathan nodded, feeling a mixture of relief and frustration. As much as he appreciated her concern, her kindness was starting to unravel the walls he had built around his heart.

He needed to distance himself before he lost control completely.



## CHAPTER 24

Ciara, bustling about the dining room, ensured everything was perfect for the evening meal. The Kirdales had graciously accepted their invitation to stay for dinner, and Ciara wanted the evening to be memorable.

As she moved around the table, adjusting silverware and straightening napkins, her eyes kept drifting to Jonathan. He stood by the window, looking out into the garden, his expression distant. It was clear his mind was elsewhere, and Ciara felt a pang of concern.

“Everything looks wonderful, Ciara,” Rebecca said, coming up beside her. “You’ve outdone yourself.”

“Thank you, Rebecca,” Ciara replied, managing a smile. “I just want everyone to enjoy themselves.”

As the group gathered around the table, the atmosphere was warm and welcoming. Archie entertained everyone with stories of their latest travels. “And there we were, in the heart of Venice,” he began, his voice animated, “when Margaret decided she simply must feed the pigeons in St. Mark’s square. Well, one bird led to another, and before we knew it, we were surrounded by an entire flock! I was convinced we’d be pecked to death!”

Margaret and Henry laughed uncontrollably at their father’s antics. The entire table couldn’t help but join in, the joyous sound echoing off the high ceilings.

Rebecca, with her usual sharp wit, added her own commentary. “You forgot to mention how you slipped on the birdseed and landed flat on your back, Archie,” she teased, her eyes sparkling with mirth.

“Ah, yes,” Archie conceded, a mock-serious expression on his face. “It was a noble sacrifice to keep the pigeons entertained.”

Ciara found herself thoroughly engrossed in the lively conversation. Jonathan, too, seemed more relaxed in that moment than she had seen him in a while, his laughter mingling with the others. For a moment, all thoughts of the tensions and intrigues that had plagued their lives were forgotten.

Rebecca then leaned in, catching Ciara’s eye. “And you, Ciara? Do you have any adventures to share?”

Ciara smiled, shaking her head slightly. “None quite as thrilling as yours, I’m afraid. But perhaps someday. As long as there are no pigeons around.”

The table erupted in laughter once more, the shared joy serving as a balm for everyone’s soul.

Then, Jonathan turned quiet again, picking at his food and barely engaging in the conversation.

As it was late, the children were sent off to bed, leaving the adults for more serious matters of discussion.

At one point, Lord Kirdale leaned forward with a curious glint in his eye. “Ciara, I hope you won’t find this too forward of me, but... I’ve been meaning to ask you about your time at the nunnery,” he began gently, his tone more compassionate than inquisitive. “I’ve heard various accounts, but I would like to hear your experience if you don’t mind sharing.”

Ciara felt as if all blood had drained from her body. The memories he had asked for stood in stark contrast to the pleasantness of the evening and the company that she

shared. But one look at him assured her that he was genuinely curious. He didn't ask that question to be judgmental, like most other people did. He wanted to understand, and that gave her the courage to open up.

She felt all eyes were on her but most of all, Jonathan's. His concern was palpable. She took a deep breath and smiled. "Of course. I spent many years at St. Catherine's. It was... challenging to say the least."

It was difficult to talk about it, so Ciara chose her words carefully. "Life at the convent was strict. The nuns had very high expectations and enforced discipline rigorously."

She glanced over at Jonathan. She could see his jaw tightening as he listened. However, he remained silent, allowing her to continue.

Ciara's voice grew softer, tinged with the pain of old memories. She didn't like to talk about it. She wanted to bury all of that deep down and forget it, but she knew that could never happen. Perhaps sharing the burden was the only way she would be able to overcome what had happened.

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“There were many rules, and the punishments for breaking them were severe. But I made it through.” She smiled, managing to chuckle even, because the pain was too strong to bear. Laughing through it was hard, but those emotions had to go in some direction, and it was better to laugh than to cry. “You could say I even learned something about resilience and strength.”

Things were much worse than she had shared with them.

Lord Kirdale’s eyes were filled with empathy. She could tell that he still had so many questions.

“Did you ever consider bringing these matters to His Majesty’s attention?” He paused for a moment, obviously incredulous about what he had just heard. “Such treatment is unacceptable, Ciara. And in a convent, of all places, where they should preach forgiveness and understanding.”

Ciara almost laughed aloud at those words. She doubted that Mother Superior or any of the other women under her thumb knew of those terms. They had forgotten them somewhere along the way, choosing cruelty and judgment instead, filling their hearts with hatred and the feeling of superiority exercised over those they were supposed to protect and guide.

Ciara shook her head, her expression troubled. “I have thought about it, but I fear that if I did, the other girls who are still there might suffer even more. The nuns might punish them out of spite.”

Rebecca leaned forward, her face determined. “Ciara, you must tell someone. If not

for yourself, then for the other girls. Archie has connections that could help bring about change at St. Catherine's. You could prevent others from enduring what you went through."

She looked over at Jonathan again, noticing his fists were clenched tightly. "No one should ever have to suffer like that," he said, his voice low and controlled.

Ciara looked at Rebecca then at Jonathan. Hope began to flicker in her heart, blossoming despite everything. "You really think it could make a difference?" she asked, her voice tentative and fearful still.

Lord Kirdale nodded firmly. "Absolutely. I know people in positions of influence who could investigate and bring reforms. We could ensure the safety of those girls and at the same time, make sure such an atrocity doesn't happen again."

Ciara felt a surge of determination. If there was a chance to help the girls at St. Catherine's, she had to take it. She owed it to them and to herself as well. "All right," she said, her voice steady. "I'll do it. I'll speak up."

Rebecca smiled warmly, reaching out to squeeze Ciara's hand. "You're doing the right thing, Ciara. We'll support you every step of the way."

She felt renewed, as if she could see that light at the end of the tunnel even clearer, even brighter. As the evening continued, the atmosphere lightened. They spoke of happier times and shared stories that brought laughter and smiles. Yet, beneath the surface, a new resolve had taken root within Ciara. She knew that the path ahead might be difficult, but she also knew she wasn't alone.

It was already quite late when she and Jonathan were saying goodbye to the Kirdales. Rebecca wrapped her arms around Ciara, keeping her in a warm, tight embrace for what seemed to be an entire eternity. That was exactly what Ciara needed at that

moment—the welcoming embrace of someone who cared about her.

“Thank you,” Ciara gushed, turning to Lord Kirdale as well. “To both of you. I don’t know how to thank you.”

“There is no need to thank us; we are family,” Rebecca reminded her. “Family helps each other.”

Ciara had never experienced that feeling, the love and unity of a family who helped each other. Hers was a family of people who betrayed her, sent her away and caused her painful traumas she doubted she would ever forget. Before she could say anything, Margaret and Henry rushed to hug her as well.

“You will come and visit us, Ciara, won’t you?” Margaret’s eyes beamed at her.

Ciara smiled back. “I would love to.”

As the family settled into their carriage, Ciara waved them goodbye until they disappeared from sight. She turned to Jonathan who still seemed lost in thought. She wondered what he was thinking about, but she dared not ask him.

“It’s late,” she heard him say somewhat gravely. “We’d best turn in.”

All she could do was agree.

The walls seemed eerily familiar. It was a small, claustrophobic space with walls of rough, cold stone that seemed to absorb every bit of warmth and light. The air was damp and musty, carrying the faint scent of mildew and decay. A single, narrow window high up on one wall allowed a sliver of pale light to filter in, casting long, eerie shadows across the room.

“No...” Ciara shook her head, looking frantically around her. “It can’t be...”

She looked down. The floor was made of uneven flagstones, slick with moisture and covered in patches of greenish mold. In one corner, a thin, straw-stuffed mattress lay on the ground, offering little comfort against the cold and hardness of the floor. A coarse, threadbare blanket was haphazardly thrown over it, more a symbol of warmth than a source of it.

The door was tightly shut. She rushed to it, banging with her fists which would soon become bruised, battered, and bloody. She knew that well.

“No! Please! Let me out!” she shouted, her voice desperate, filled with the terror of her past which was now merging with her present. “Don’t leave me in here! I promise I’ll be good!”

She suddenly felt two arms around her, holding her tightly.

She blinked heavily, banishing all the remnants of the nightmare which had her in its grip. She realized she was not in St. Catherine’s, but in her own bedchamber, in her own bed, with Jonathan sitting beside her side.

“It’s just a dream, Ciara,” he kept repeating until finally, it reached her.

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She clung to him, her body trembling.

“Jonathan?” she whispered, her voice small and frightened.

“Yes, it’s me,” he murmured, stroking her hair soothingly. “You’re safe now. Breathe with me, Ciara. In and out, nice and slow.”

She tried to match his breathing, her panic gradually subsiding as his steady presence grounded her.

“That’s it, just breathe. You’re safe. No one will hurt you here,” he repeated, his voice a calming balm.

As her breathing steadied, she began to come back to herself. She pulled back slightly, looking up at him with wide, tear-filled eyes.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, her voice shaky. “I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“When I heard you screaming, I...” he started, but something wasn’t letting him finish. He brushed a strand of hair away from her face, his touch gentle.

She pulled herself up, pressing her lips to his. It was a kiss unlike any of the ones they had shared before. She felt vulnerable before him, almost naked, and yet, unafraid and unashamed. Her fingers pressed against his muscular chest, feeling him through the thin fabric of his nightshirt. His hands wrapped around her, keeping her close without breaking their kiss for even a single moment.



He caressed her breast softly, tenderly, cupping it with his hand. She moaned against his lips, feeling the need for him to take control of her. She didn't want only his lips on her. She wanted all of him.

As if able to read her mind, he slowly took off her nightgown, sliding it above her head, leaving her completely exposed.

"You are so beautiful, siren," she heard him say as he lowered his lips to her pebbled nipple and took it into his mouth.

She closed her eyes, surrendering to the sensation. She could feel everything... his tongue, the heat of his breath. Everything was blossoming with pleasure, and that little voice that always told her she was not good enough was silenced for the first time in her entire life.

She gently caressed his head, arching her back, giving all of herself to him. His fingers slid between her thighs, finding her soft mound. It was the gentlest of caresses, and yet, it awakened more desire than anything he had ever done before. What they did before were lessons. What they were doing now was something else, something neither of them could have anticipated.

She relished his scent, his touch, his kisses. Everything about him was magical—who he was and what he was doing to her. She never wanted it to end. His tongue continued to flick over her nipple while his finger dipped inside of her ever so slightly. Sensation unfurled inside of her as heat spread throughout her entire body.

His finger continued to tease her while his tongue did the same. His teeth gently nipped her, but his tongue was there to soothe the unexpected sting while his finger made her wetter with swirl as it parted her folds and slid inside of her more and more.

She didn't even know that she was so close to the edge. His lips were sucking on her

nipple as her swollen bud was being teased and played with. She turned to flame, her entire body tightening under the sudden explosion. It came so gently, so slowly, and it consumed her entire being.

Still breathing heavily, she locked eyes with him.

“I want you, Ciara...”

She swallowed heavily, her entire body yearning to be his. “Take me, Jonathan...”

He gently lay on top of her, adjusting himself between her thighs. She was ready for that moment. She didn’t even know it until she saw her reflection in his eyes. His lips were so close to hers, but he didn’t kiss her. She felt the tip of his manhood pressing against her heat.

There was no fear. There was no hesitation. She knew she wanted him more than she wanted anything or anyone else before.

His eyes were constantly on hers.

“I will be gentle,” she heard him say, and she smiled with a nod.

Without thinking, she locked her legs around his waist, keeping him close. As his manhood pressed into her slowly, inching its way inside, his lips locked with hers.

That kiss changed everything; it changed the very essence of her being. She had never felt so full, so satiated, yet so yearning for more.

The pain was also there, but the pleasure that accompanied it was beyond anything she could have imagined. Her breathing was quick, shallow, and her mind a blank. Her eyes were wide open, staring at him, wanting to drink in the sight of him.

“You feel so good...” she heard him say as he nuzzled his nose against hers. His words made her smile, and that in turn, made him even more mischievous. “Am I making you feel good?”

“Mhm,” she murmured through the smile, not taking her eyes off of him.

He grabbed her hands, raising them above her head and holding her by the wrist. “And now?” he asked, licking her lips as he ended the question.

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Her body erupted into a million goosebumps, running down her spine. Feeling helpless in his arms was one of the most potent sensations she had ever felt. In response, she bucked against him, feeling his manhood inside of her, and his hands locked around her wrists. She was in his power. She was all his, as it should be.

“Yes,” she moaned softly.

“I can’t hear you,” he teased, licking her earlobe then down her neck, leaving a wet trail against her skin.

“Yes,” she said louder.

“Yes, what, siren? Let that voice tell me what I want to hear...”

“Take me, Jonathan... make me yours...” she finally said what she wanted to say all along. And she could see the sheer joy in his eyes.

“That’s it, siren,” he whispered against her lips, and he kissed her.

He started to move, to enter her deeper and deeper, each time bringing more pleasure with him. She was desperate for more, unable to control herself as she bucked against him, giving herself to him completely. He groaned as he moved inside her, pleasure emanating from his every breath which she took into herself with every kiss that she gave him.

He knew exactly what he needed to do to drive her mad with desire. The needs she had mirrored his own. He slid his hand underneath her neck, clutching a fistful of her

hair, holding her tightly. He kept thrusting into her until he was all the way inside.

Her mind exploded from the sensation, but he suddenly pulled away.

“Are you all right?” he asked, and her heart felt as if it would burst.

“Perfect,” she managed to muster when he kissed her again, his motions continuing.

Her hips moved to mirror his own, and the bliss that overtook her made her come undone. A moment later, his own body stiffened on top of her, his hips thrusting deep, only to pull out and thrust in again, shuddering, their bodies intertwined.

He slumped next to her, breathing heavily, not saying anything. There was nothing to say. Words would only ruin that perfect moment.

Ciara had no idea when she closed her eyes. She didn’t want to be awake when he got up and left back to his chamber. However, when she woke up in the middle of the night, she was surprised to find him still there in bed with her, his arm around her, keeping her close.

She smiled, nestling even closer to him and falling back asleep.

## CHAPTER 25

Jonathan had slept throughout the entire night which had never happened. Usually, he would be tossing and turning, his mind plagued by all sorts of thoughts he could not get out, but that night was peaceful. In fact, it was one of the most peaceful nights he had ever had in his entire life.

He turned to the side, feeling Ciara’s warm body next to his. His manhood immediately awakened at the sight of her behind pressed against him. She moved,

and he wondered if she was awake, only pretending to be asleep. He gently caressed her hips, and she moved again, pressing her body harder against his, feeling his desire.

“Morning,” he murmured seductively against her ear.

She turned around, still sleepy, but her eyes were sparkling. “Good morning,” she whispered back.

“Yes, we could make it very good,” he teased, continuing to caress her.

She chuckled at his words.

“Is that the first thing you think of when you wake up?” she asked playfully, turning her entire body toward him, pressing her naked breasts onto his chest.

“When I have a naked siren by my side, yes,” he agreed softly, nuzzling her nose.

She cupped his face, surprising him with a kiss. He opened his mouth to taste her tongue and her lush, full lips. Everything about her was utterly tantalizing, even early in the morning. From that small first kiss that morning, he could see that she had learned a lot from his lessons. He wondered if he had really done himself a favor or if he were simply the master of his own demise.

Because that was what was happening. Instead of having his fill of her, he was falling deeper and deeper under her spell, delving into deep, dangerous waters, wondering if he would ever find his way back.

He tried to remind himself that they had a deal. They both had to uphold it. This was merely... the two of them enjoying the benefits.

He kissed her harder, adjusting her on top of him this time.

“I want you,” she suddenly murmured against his lips, and the sound of her voice, even more what she had said, set his body ablaze.

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“Who am I not to oblige a lady asking so politely,” he grinned, kissing her again, watching her spread her legs and sit on top of him.

He had to be careful. He wanted to ravage her, to slam into her as deeply and as hard as he could, but he couldn't do that. She was still a novice.

“Do it slowly,” he urged softly. “Feel me inside of you, siren.”

She lowered herself onto him languidly, tenderly, while kissing him, and her wet heat obliterated everything inside his mind. She moved as if she had known what to do all along, pressing against his manhood, taking all of him into herself. Although he had been satiated the previous night, he felt that same surge of desire for her as if he had been waiting for months.

She welcomed him into her heat. He closed his eyes, losing control. In fact, he didn't want to refrain from anything with her. His control snapped. He was powerless, and for the first time ever, he was fine with it. His orgasm was swift, furious, all-consuming.

He bucked against her, wanting to fill her with his seed, to make her completely his. Panting, she slumped onto his side, and he pulled her into an embrace, kissing her forehead. A new tenderness had blossomed inside of him, sensations he had been keeping at bay, but now, he couldn't deny them any longer.

“Well, now, we can have breakfast,” she said, and they both burst into a chuckle.

He loved how she managed to diffuse a situation, not making it seem dramatically



important, although it was. There was a serenity about her that he didn't even know he was missing in his life. And now that it was there by his side, he wondered how he ever lived without it.

"Do you have anything special in mind, siren?" he inquired, not letting go of her.

"How about breakfast in the garden?" she mused.

He lifted an eyebrow. "I don't think I've ever had that to be honest."

"Splendid," she teased. "I have also never made love with anyone before, so it is only fair that we both experience something new."

He laughed at her comment. "Yes, it is only fair."

Jonathan and Ciara sat at a small wrought-iron table, laden with an array of breakfast delights. Freshly baked bread, honey, butter, and an assortment of jams sat alongside a platter of fruit and a steaming pot of tea. The garden was a haven of tranquility, and Jonathan found himself relaxing in the peaceful ambiance.

"This is lovely," Jonathan remarked, taking a sip of his tea. "I can see why you enjoy having breakfast in the garden."

Ciara smiled, her eyes sparkling with delight. "I'm glad you like it. This is one of my favorite places here in my new home. My grandmother and I used to sit outside surrounded by flowers just like these and have tea and scones while she told me stories. She was... what kept me going during the darkest hours of my life."

Jonathan felt that was an intimate moment, and he couldn't help but be drawn to her even more. "You've mentioned your grandmother before. Tell me more about her."

“She was wonderful,” Ciara replied, her voice filled with affection. “A strong, kind woman with a heart full of love and wisdom. She had this magical way of making everything seem better, no matter how bad things were. And she told the most incredible stories as you’ve gathered.”

Jonathan smiled, enjoying the way Ciara’s eyes lit up as she spoke about her grandmother. “What kind of stories did she tell you?”

“Mostly Irish myths and legends,” Ciara said, her voice taking on a dreamy quality. “She had a story for every occasion. Tales of fairies, warriors, and enchanted forests. One of my favorites was the story of Deirdre of the Sorrows.”

Jonathan raised an eyebrow, intrigued. “Deirdre of the Sorrows? That sounds rather melancholic.”

“It is,” Ciara admitted. “But it’s also beautiful. Deirdre was a woman of great beauty and kindness, but her life was filled with tragedy. She was destined to bring sorrow to those who loved her. It’s a tale of love and loss but also of strength and resilience.”

Jonathan watched her closely, captivated by the passion in her voice. “It seems that your grandmother was an extraordinary woman.”

“She was,” Ciara agreed softly. “She taught me so much about life and about myself. She used to say that our stories shape who we are and give us the strength to face whatever comes our way.”

Jonathan nodded thoughtfully. “I suppose there’s truth in that. Our experiences and the stories we tell ourselves do shape us.”

“Yes, her stories really helped me,” she continued, sounding melancholic. “I wish she were still here with me.”

“You have people who care about you, Ciara,” he reminded her. “And besides, you carry her with you always. The stories she told you, they’ll always be in your heart, right?”

She nodded.

“Those we love never really die; they never really leave us, not as long as we remember them,” he added.

She smiled. “I like that.”

“It is the truth,” he replied.

“Do you really believe that?” she asked tenderly. He could sense that she needed reassurance. He knew that feeling well although he managed to bury it deep down a long time ago.

Seeing she opened up to him, he felt the need to reciprocate although he didn’t find it very easy to be that open with others. He had forgotten how to do that. Now, he needed to remember that skill once again.

“You know, I don’t remember my mother because she died in childbirth, but I had an aunt who would occasionally visit until my father made it impossible for anyone to stay with us with his severity and refusal to see anyone. But Aunt Ida would read me stories.”

Ciara grinned playfully. “I bet your stories were about heroic knights and grand adventures.”

Jonathan chuckled, shaking his head. He hadn’t thought of Aunt Ida in ages. In fact, he wondered if she were still alive. Being his late mother’s sister made her unwelcome in their home because of his father. She came to visit Jonathan while she still could, eventually being told that she was no longer welcome. As Jonathan grew older, he forgot about her, but now, Ciara prodded her memory, and he silently vowed to search for her.

“Aunt Ida used to read me tales of moral lessons,” he explained. “You know, the sort that taught you to be honest, to be brave, to always do what is right. Quite dull

compared to your fairy tales, but I still liked them.”

Ciara’s eyes sparkled with mischief. “Despite our first meeting and especially your reputation, I can’t imagine you being anything but honest and brave, Jonathan. Though I must admit, I’m curious to see you in a grand adventure. Perhaps slaying a dragon or rescuing a damsel in distress?”

Jonathan laughed, a genuine, hearty sound. “I’m afraid I’d make a poor knight. I lack the shiny armor and noble steed. But I could attempt to rescue you from a troublesome rose bush if that counts.”

Ciara giggled, a delightful sound that made Jonathan’s heart swell. “I’d very much appreciate that, Sir Jonathan. Though I might need rescuing from more than just rose bushes.”

Jonathan leaned in, a teasing glint in his eyes. “Anything else I can save you from, Madam? Perhaps from your own wicked mind?”

“My own wicked mind?” she giggled, teasing him. “It wasn’t wicked until you spoiled it!”

“Yes, and that is exactly why I need to save you from it by pleasuring you well and often.” He winked at her mischievously.

“Perhaps there will be a chance for you to prove yourself then.” She blushed, but he could see that she was enjoying herself immensely.

“I shall hold you to it, Madam,” he said, taking her by the hand and kissing it lovingly.

They continued their breakfast, exchanging playful banter and sharing stories. The

garden, with its blooming flowers and gentle breeze, felt like a sanctuary where they could let down their guards and simply enjoy each other's company.

"Tell me more of your grandmother's stories," Jonathan said, genuinely interested. "I'd like to hear another one."

Ciara's face lit up with excitement. "All right, how about the story of Finn McCool and the Giant's Causeway? It's one I haven't told in a long time."

Jonathan settled back, ready to listen. "I'm all ears."

As Ciara began to weave the tale, Jonathan found himself captivated not just by the story but by the way she told it. Her animated expressions, the passion in her voice, and the sparkle in her eyes made the mythical world she described come alive.

For the first time in a long while, Jonathan felt a sense of peace and contentment. Ciara was by his side, filling him with sensations he thought he didn't even possess any longer. The thought both thrilled him and petrified him at the same time, but he continued to listen, mesmerized, not caring where he would end up.

## CHAPTER 26

Several days had passed idyllically. Ciara could not even imagine that her life could take such a magical turn, and that in Jonathan, she would find everything she had ever wanted. It all seemed like a dream with her afraid that she might wake up.

That morning, Ciara and Jonathan found themselves in the drawing room as the soft morning light cast a golden glow on the elegant furniture and intricate patterns on the carpet. Ciara sat at the writing desk by the window, her heart light as she opened the first of two letters that had just been delivered. Jonathan sat in an armchair nearby, a book in hand though his attention often drifted to her.

As Ciara read the first letter, her eyes widened, and a smile spread across her face.

Good news.

Relief washed over her, mingling with a sense of triumph. She looked up at Jonathan, whose expression softened with pride.

“Good news?” he asked, setting his book aside.

“It’s from Lord Kirdale,” Ciara replied, her voice brimming with excitement. “The King is going to intervene at St. Catherine’s.”

“That’s wonderful, Ciara. You’ve done a great thing,” Jonathan said, his tone warm and encouraging.

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“I just hope it helps those poor girls,” Ciara murmured, the weight of her concern still present.

Jonathan nodded. “It will. You’ve given them a chance at a better life.”

“This is only the beginning,” she replied. “I hope it all goes well.”

“Of course, it will,” Jonathan nodded. “Although it might not seem that way, good does triumph over evil when good people like you take action.”

She smiled, her heartwarming at his words. “It is not only me,” she reminded him. “Your cousin and her husband are such wonderful people. I wouldn’t have started all of this without them and their support and yours, of course.”

“Yes, we are here to support you,” he confirmed. “But you are the one who had to endure all of that. You are the one who truly knows how all those other girls feel, those are still stuck in that horrible place.”

She nodded. It was difficult not to think about all those other girls she had spent years with, crying, trembling, fearing the worst punishment that the nuns could come up with. But now, she could see the light at the end of that long tunnel which she thought she would never see the end of. Life was improving, and she would be the positive action in helping those girls as well. She promised herself she would, regardless of all the doubts and fears she might still harbor.

Buoyed by the good news, Ciara turned her attention to the second letter. She carefully broke the seal and unfolded the paper, her surprise growing as she read.



“It’s an invitation to a ball,” she announced, holding up the letter for Jonathan to see. “Lord and Lady Taversham are hosting it.”

She didn’t know who they were. In fact, that didn’t matter at all. What mattered were her reactions to the invitation itself. She expected a surge of stress and nerves to wash over her, but instead, she felt nothing. She was calm and composed, rereading the lovely invitation and welcoming tone of it.

“We don’t have to go,” he suddenly said as his voice brought her back to the present moment. “I know you don’t really like balls and such social events.”

She thought about it then she smiled. “You know what? I think I am all right.”

“You are?” he asked, sounding surprised. “I thought you would jump at the idea of not having to go.”

She got up and walked over to him, taking a seat freely in his lap. For some reason, she wanted to be close to him, to smell him, to touch him. His proximity provided her with all the courage she could ever need. With him by her side, she could stand against the entire world and be confident in her victory.

“For the first time, I’m not panic-stricken,” Ciara admitted, her smile steady and without faltering. “I actually feel... excited to go.”

He frowned, slightly pulling away from her as he took a deep, long, introspective look. “Are you certain that you are my wife and not an imposter?”

Ciara chuckled. “Perhaps. How does that make you feel?”

He lifted his arms in surrender. “I’m not allowed to touch any other woman but my wife. Be gone, imposter and tell my wife to come back. She still doesn’t have to go to

this ball if she doesn't want to."

She laughed again, leaning closer to him and kissing him on the cheek. "I want to wear the most beautiful gown and make you proud."

He gazed at her in a way he rarely did, as if he was trying to understand something, to come to terms with something. Then, he grinned, back to his mischievous self.

"You know I like you best naked," he teased.

"I cannot very well go to a ball naked!" She laughed, and he had to join in.

"Yes, that would not be proper at all," he mused through his chuckles. "People will talk. There might be a terrible scandal. No, we cannot risk that. It is best for you to remain naked in our home and only there."

"I agree," she purred into his neck, kissing him. "Wholeheartedly."

"Oh, I was certain would, you little minx," he murmured back, gripping her by the waist, but before they could do anything about it, a knock on the door interrupted them.

He frowned. "Go away!" he shouted playfully while she laughed.

"No, no, come in!" she shouted over him as they both lost themselves in laughter.

The door opened, and Mrs. Dawson excused herself, stating that Ciara was needed to decide on the newest carpets and drapes.

"Can't you do that later?" Jonathan whispered as she stood up from his lap.

“No,” she giggled, kissing him on the cheek. “But I promise to make it up to you tonight,” she whispered back, rushing over to Mrs. Dawson, feeling her cheeks blushing with affection and tenderness.

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She could barely focus on the carpets and drapes as the man showed her the fabrics. She smiled at the thought of being in Jonathan's arms again, counting the seconds until that evening when she would remain true to her promise.

The night of the ball had arrived swiftly. Arm in arm, Ciara and Jonathan entered the ballroom together, and she knew that all eyes were on them, even though the place was alive with laughter, music, and the rustle of elegant gowns.

She felt her heart beating inside her throat. She hated being the center of attention, but with Jonathan by her side, she knew she would be. However, as they walked through the crowd, she felt him squeeze her hand tight, trying to reassure her. When they stopped a bit further away from the hustle and bustle, he leaned closer to her, his breath warm against her ear.

"You look magnificent," he whispered, his gaze earnest. "I wish I could keep you all to myself tonight. I have a few things in mind we could do that would be far more entertaining than this."

Ciara felt a blush creep up her cheeks, and she bit her lip, torn between the thrill of his words and the awareness of the eyes watching them. The electric energy of the moment made her heart race. She turned slightly, catching his gaze, and saw the playful glint in his eyes.

"Well, you'll just have to share me," she replied teasingly, a smile dancing on her lips. Then, she added with a seductive glance that only he could see, "For now."

Jonathan chuckled softly, the sound deep and rich. "A challenge, then. But I have no

intention of letting anyone else claim your attention tonight.”

With a sense of exhilaration, Ciara stepped further into the ballroom, her confidence buoyed by Jonathan’s compliment.

As they greeted the hosts, she felt a newfound sense of confidence, a stark contrast to the timid girl she once was. After a few words of pleasantries, she turned around, spotting familiar faces. She and Jonathan excused themselves, walking in the direction of Adeline.

“Look who it is!” Adeline exclaimed, her eyes lighting up as she rushed over.

Right behind her, Penelope followed closely, beaming with delight. It seemed that her two best friends were there, waiting for her.

The girls exchanged warm embraces, and then Ciara noticed James, Penelope’s husband, approaching with her uncle. She beamed at the sight of Uncle Brendan, greeting them both.

Now, surrounded by her dearest people, she felt even more at ease.

“You look so lovely, Ciara,” Penelope said, her enthusiasm infectious. Her eyebrows furrowed as her eyes traversed Ciara’s face in search of something. “There is a liveliness about you that is simply radiant.”

“Yes, whathaveyou been doing, my dear?” Adeline teased, and everyone chuckled at Ciara’s blushing cheeks.

“I suppose that is what happens when you lead a good life,” Ciara said softly, stealing a glance at Jonathan, only to return her gaze to the huddled group. “It is so wonderful to see you all here,” she added, her smile genuine.

Her uncle had a proud look on his face as he spoke. “I must say, I never thought I would see you smiling in such a relaxed manner at a ball. You’ve truly come a long way, my dear. It is remarkable to witness.”

Ciara felt a rush of gratitude for their support and friendship. They continued to chat for a while longer when Jonathan’s friend, Lord Islington, strode over. He greeted Jonathan with a clap on the shoulder before turning to Ciara.

“Ah, the lovely Duchess, how are you this fine evening?” he asked, kissing her hand reverently.

He then noticed the group and proceeded to greet everyone present.

Soon enough, the conversation flowed freely.

Jonathan glanced at Ciara, a smile playing at the corners of his mouth. He took her by the hand, bringing it to his lips. “But I want to dance with my wife.”

“Of course,” she smiled back, accepting the offer.

Ciara followed Jonathan toward where the dancing was taking place.

The music spread all around them, and the couples began to twirl and glide across the polished floor. Penelope and James joined them, laughing and chatting as they stepped into the rhythm of the dance. The atmosphere was electric, filled with joy and the promise of a memorable evening.

As Ciara and Jonathan began to dance, the world around them faded into a blur. With each turn and step, she felt the excitement of the night enveloping her, their movements in perfect harmony.

Jonathan's presence was steady, and she found herself lost in that perfect moment.

## CHAPTER 27

As the first sounds of the music were heard, the dance between Ciara and Jonathan became more than just a series of practiced steps. Their movements were fluid and synchronized, each turn and spin drawing them closer together. The world around them melted away, leaving only the two of them in the center of the ballroom.

Jonathan's hand rested lightly on Ciara's waist, his other hand clasping hers with a gentle but firm grip. The intensity of their connection grew with each passing moment, and he felt his emotions for her deepening, becoming harder to ignore. His heart raced as he looked into her eyes, the vibrant green capturing his attention completely.

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“I always forget how light you are on your feet,” she teased.

He chuckled, his grip on her waist tightening slightly. “And you, my dear, are full of surprises. Who knew you could keep up with me so well?”

“Perhaps you’re just easy to follow,” she quipped, her smile widening.

Jonathan smirked, leaning in closer as they continued to dance. “Or maybe I’m just an excellent leader.”

Ciara laughed, the sound like music to his ears. “Modest as ever, I see.”

Their banter flowed effortlessly, a dance of words that matched the rhythm of their steps. As they moved together, Jonathan felt an overwhelming urge to pull her even closer, to let her know just how much she meant to him. The intensity of his feelings was almost too much to bear.

“Tell me, Ciara,” he murmured, his voice low and filled with emotion, do you always dance this well, or is it just because of me?”

She raised an eyebrow, her smile turning mischievous. “I suppose you’ll never know. But I will say, you make it quite enjoyable.” She glanced away from him then her smile was focused on him once more. “Just look how happy they are.”

“Who?” he asked, wondering who she was referring to.

“Penelope and James,” she gushed. “Isn’t it wonderful to know that you have chosen



your person, and you get to spend the rest of your life with them? That is true happiness...”

As they continued to dance, Jonathan felt a surge of emotion welling up inside him. He reminded himself, with a sharp pang of regret, that he could not afford to fall in love with Ciara. He couldn't allow himself to be vulnerable, to love, because he didn't believe in love. Love only broke people, the way it broke his father when his mother died, leaving him a shell of the man he once was, empty and cruel. Jonathan didn't want to become that. He would rather live life on his own terms, without love, even if that meant fighting it.

The music stopped, and with it, the magic of the moment. Jonathan abruptly shut himself away, his demeanor turning cold. He released Ciara's hand and stepped back, the warmth that had enveloped them now replaced by a chill.

Ciara noticed the sudden change and concerned, followed him toward the other end of the ballroom.

“Jonathan, what's the matter?” she asked her voice soft but filled with worry.

He turned to face her, his expression hardening. “Nothing is the matter,” he said defensively. “I should remind you that soon, the ton will have another marriage to obsess over, so our time together is running out. Perhaps now is a good time to find a lover to take in to entertain yourself after we go our separate ways.”

He regretted those words the moment he had said them, but it was too late to take them back. He knew the words were like a slap in the face as Ciara's eyes widened with anguish. Somehow, she remained calm. He knew that she was good at masking her hurt.

“Is that what you think I should do?” she asked, her voice steady, although he could

see the storm of emotion brewing just underneath the surface.

Jonathan's gaze faltered for a moment before he forced himself to look away. "Yes," he replied, his tone harsh. "It is as we agreed, after all."

Without another word, she turned and walked away. He watched her go, a deep sense of regret gnawing at him. He knew he had hurt her, and the realization cut him deeply. But he convinced himself that it was for the best, that he was protecting them both from inevitable heartache.

As Ciara disappeared into the throng of guests, he felt the walls around his heart solidify once more. He couldn't allow himself to be vulnerable, no matter how much he longed to be with her. He couldn't risk turning out to be like his father, making all those around him utterly miserable.

Just one look at the marriage of his parents was enough proof that even what started with love would end in misery. It was simply better to walk away before he made both himself and Ciara miserable.

And so, with a heavy heart, he resigned himself to the painful distance he had created, knowing he might have just lost the one person who could truly understand him.

Ciara couldn't believe that Jonathan would say something like that, especially after all the time they had spent together. She felt a mixture of rage and hurt brewing inside of her, and she didn't know how to get it all out.

She noticed Adeline standing alone and seized the chance to approach her.

"Ah, there you are," Adeline smiled, then immediately after, her smile was erased. "Is everything all right?"

“Yes, of course,” Ciara nodded. This was neither the time nor the place for intimate conversations because in a place such as this one, even walls had ears. “I’m just a bit overwhelmed by everything. Sometimes, I think I’ll never get used to these occasions.”

Adeline placed her hand gently on her friend’s shoulder. “You are doing just fine. Don’t be so hard on yourself.”

That was exactly what Ciara was doing. But at the same time, she had to remind herself of the boundaries that she had set before, those same boundaries which she and Jonathan had crossed. Returning to the initial place now seemed impossible. She was desperate to discuss everything with Adeline, but she knew that conversation would have to wait.

“I’ll try not to be,” Ciara replied, grateful for her friend’s words. “What have you been up to in my absence? Have you danced with someone?”

Ciara was also desperate to change the topic of the conversation, and fortunately, Adeline was more than happy to oblige.

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“Oh, yes,” Adeline gushed, and Ciara could tell that there was obviously someone special who had caught her friend’s eye. “I just danced with a young gentleman who has swept me off my feet!” she exclaimed, only to look around, giggling, and press her hand to her lips.

Ciara loved seeing her like that, so happy and full of life. “Who is it?” she asked, curiously.

Ciara was grateful for the distraction that her friend’s own commotion offered, but before they could continue, a couple of young gentlemen approached them.

“Your Grace,” one of them greeted her. “I am Lord Prescott; you probably don’t remember me, but I am an acquaintance of your uncle.”

“Yes, Lord Prescott,” she smiled. She didn’t remember the man, but she didn’t want to make him uncomfortable over it. “How do you do? This is my friend, Miss Adeline Middleton.”

“A pleasure, Miss Middleton.” Lord Prescott bowed before Adeline as well, proceeding then to introduce his own friend. “And this is also a good friend of mine, Lord Matthew Kingsley.”

“Lord Kingsley,” Ciara curtsied, and Adeline did the same.

“I hope you won’t take it the wrong way,” Lord Prescott continued in a suave, charming manner, “but you look absolutely radiant this evening.”

He was smiling in a bright and inviting manner, and she couldn't help but smile back, especially when she noticed, with the corner of her eye, that Jonathan had been watching the entire exchange from the opposite side of the ballroom.

A spark of defiance ignited within her. If he wanted to push her away, she would show him that she could also move on, just like him. She turned her full attention to Lord Prescott, her smile growing warmer.

Lord Prescott continued to flirt, his words filled with playful compliments. Ciara laughed at his remarks, the sound carrying through the room. She knew Jonathan was watching, and a part of her relished the idea of doing something to spite him.

"And how is your uncle?" the man inquired politely, glancing around. "Is he here?"

"Yes, he is fine, and he is here," she responded cordially. "You should find him. I am certain that he will be happy to see you."

"Perhaps you and I could find him together?" the man asked boldly. "I must say, I am not really keen on these crowds and elbowing my way through them. And you, as a beautiful lady, have an open path wherever you wish to go. It would be quite useful to have you on my arm during my search for your uncle."

She knew that she had to tread cautiously. It was one thing to make her husband jealous by innocently talking to someone and flirting with her smile. But it was a completely different matter, leaving the ballroom with that man and putting herself in danger of gossip or something far worse.

"Yes, what you say is right." She nodded, still careful not to agree with his suggestion. "But I do believe I saw him here a moment ago. He will appear shortly, I'm certain."

He grinned with intention, obviously not particularly pleased with her response but adamant not to give up. “Well, while we are waiting, perhaps you would honor me with a dance?” he asked, extending his hand.

She hesitated only for a moment. But then, she remembered her husband’s cold demeanor and his even colder words with which he tried to push her away. It was obvious that he didn’t care about her at all. So, why should she care about him?

“Of course,” she replied, taking his hand with a graceful nod.

As they moved to the dance floor, Ciara felt Jonathan’s gaze burning into her. She ignored the pang of sadness in her heart and focused on the dance. She tried not to think about the fact that she could have been dancing with her husband now, staring longingly into his eyes and listening to the sound of his deep voice, forgetting about everything and everyone else. But no. All of this was her husband’s doing. It was all his own choice. Now, he had to deal with it.

Lord Prescott was an excellent dancer, and she found herself enjoying the moment despite the turmoil inside her.

“I must say, I was rather saddened by the news of your recent marriage,” Lord Prescott told her in a way that almost made her believe him.

“Saddened, My Lord?” she inquired, her smile unwavering but still remaining politely distanced.

“Well, yes,” he admitted. “When you returned to London, I noticed you and... I suppose I was too late to show my... interest.”

“That is most kind of you to say, Lord Prescott, but I suppose fate knows what it is doing,” she said, assuring him that she was grateful for his words but that she would

not entertain them.

“I suppose so,” Lord Prescott smiled somehow sadly, but he was willing to agree with her which she appreciated.

The man danced beautifully although much differently than Jonathan. While Jonathan led her with confidence and determination, Lord Prescott was softer, allowing her moments of her own independence in the dance. Still, she missed Jonathan’s guidance as she felt that it was exactly his presence, his guidance, and his affection that helped her grow out of the darkness she had found herself in, coming finally into the light. But she realized now that it was all a lie. The two months were almost coming to an end, and he couldn’t wait to tell her that.

They twirled and glided across the floor, and Ciara allowed herself to get lost in the music and the movement. She glanced over at Jonathan occasionally, noting the tense set of his jaw and the way his eyes followed her every move. You reap what you sow, she thought to herself, refusing to lock eyes with him every time he endeavored to do so.

When the dance ended, Lord Prescott bowed to her, his smile warm. “Thank you for the dance, Lady Ciara. It was truly a pleasure.”

“The pleasure was mine, Lord Prescott,” Ciara replied, her tone gracious.

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He bowed before her, offering other parting words. “I hope your husband knows how fortunate he is because I know you have been looking at him the entire time we were dancing.”

“Oh, I...” she started, but his smile assured her he didn’t hold it against her.

She didn’t have to say anything. He nodded one last time to her and disappeared into the crowd, leaving her even more confused than she was before.

### CHAPTER 28

Jonathan’s jaw tightened as he watched Ciara and Lord Prescott twirl across the dance floor.

The sight of another man holding her, making her laugh, and sharing a moment that should have been theirs filled him with fierce, unfamiliar jealousy. His eyes followed every graceful movement, every smile she bestowed upon Lord Prescott, and it gnawed at him relentlessly.

“Careful, Jonathan,” Hector’s voice broke through his thoughts, laced with a teasing edge. “Your jealousy is showing.”

Jonathan snapped his head towards Hector, his eyes blazing. “I’m not jealous,” he growled, his tone betraying his words. “I simply don’t trust that man.”

Hector raised an eyebrow, a smirk playing at his lips. “Really? Because it looks like you’re about to march over there and challenge him to a duel.”



“Careful, old boy,” Jonathan snapped, his fists clenching at his sides. “You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Although Jonathan would never usually talk to Hector like that, it was obvious that Hector could immediately see what was happening. As with every best friend, he knew not to take it personally, and instead, he kept turning the mirror of self-realization in Jonathan’s direction, so he himself could see what was truly happening to him.

Hector chuckled, unfazed by Jonathan’s anger. “Oh, I think I do. It’s written all over your face. You can’t stand to see her with another man, can you?”

Jonathan’s glare could have melted steel. “I’m warning you.”

Hector held up his hands in mock surrender. “All right, all right. No need to bite my head off. But for what it’s worth, you should talk to her instead of pushing her away. You’re only hurting yourself.”

Jonathan didn’t respond, his gaze returning to Ciara. The dance was ending, and she curtsied gracefully as Lord Prescott bowed. The sight of her, so poised and elegant, only intensified the ache in his chest. He knew Hector was right, but his pride and fear of vulnerability held him back.

But then, he reminded himself that she was his wife.His.

The moment the music ended, and Ciara moved away from Lord Prescott, Jonathan couldn’t contain himself any longer. He crossed the room with determined strides, reaching her just as she was about to rejoin Adeline.

Without a word, he discreetly took her arm and guided her towards a quiet corridor, away from the prying eyes and curious whispers of the ballroom.

“What on earth do you think you are doing?” she hissed quietly, through clenched teeth. “Unhand me!” Her voice was low and furious as they reached the secluded corridor.

He spun around to face her, his eyes blazing with emotion he couldn’t contain any longer. “No, I will not! What were you thinking, Ciara?”

Her eyes flashed back at him, revealing anger. “What was I thinking?” she echoed his question back at him. “You told me to find a lover, Jonathan. So, I did exactly what you suggested.”

The words stung, and Jonathan’s grip on her arm tightened involuntarily. “You know I didn’t mean it.”

“Then what did you mean?” she snapped back. “You push me away then get angry when I do as you tell me. Make up your mind, Jonathan.”

He took a step closer, his face inches from hers. “He can’t have you.”

“Why not?” she demanded, her eyes searching his, not understanding why he would say that and change his mind so swiftly.

“No one else can have you.” Not even he understood, but he allowed the words to flow out of him like a river that had no end.

Before she could respond, he pinned her against the wall, his hands on either side of her head.

“No one else can have you,” he repeated, his voice a husky whisper. “I’ve claimed you. You’re mine now. Mine.”

Then, with a fierce, desperate passion, he captured her lips in a kiss. It was a kiss that spoke of all the longing, frustration, and desire he had been holding back. His hands slid to her waist, pulling her closer as if he could erase all the distance he had put between them with that single, searing kiss.

He could feel her initial shock melting into a mixture of anger and passion as her hands moved to his chest, pushing him away slightly, but in turn, his grip on her tightened, refusing to let go. The intensity of the way she kissed him back left him breathless, his mind spinning with conflicting emotions.

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Jonathan's mind raced as he and Ciara pulled away from their passionate embrace, the sound of approaching footsteps breaking the spell. He quickly adjusted his coat, taking a deep breath to steady himself. He glanced at Ciara, her cheeks flushed and eyes bright with emotion. She looked stunning, even more so now that she was marked by their shared moment.

"We should go back," he said, his voice still rough with lingering desire.

She nodded, and they walked back to the ballroom in silence. Jonathan's heart pounded as they re-entered the room, the vibrant atmosphere of the ball a stark contrast to the intimate quiet of the corridor. He reached for her hand, lifting it to his lips and pressing a kiss to her knuckles, a possessive claim that he wanted everyone to see.

But he didn't stop there. He leaned in, his lips brushing against the soft skin of her neck, his touch deliberate and lingering. The collective gasp of the room was almost audible, and Jonathan could feel the weight of their stares.

He didn't care.

Let them whisper. Let them gossip.

He wanted everyone to know that Ciara was his. No one else would be dancing with her... ever.

"What are you doing?" she whispered as they walked with their heads held up high.

“What I should have done all along,” he said, without any desire to whisper.

As they moved through the ballroom, Jonathan kept his arm firmly around her waist, guiding her with a protective yet possessive hold. He could hear the murmurs of the guests, their scandalized whispers barely concealed behind fans and gloved hands. It only fueled his determination to show them that she belonged to him.

He glanced down at Ciara, her head held high despite the scrutiny. Pride swelled within him. She was strong, resilient, and unyielding. He admired her for that, and it made him want to protect her even more fiercely. She was his shining pearl that he had found in the gutter of the world that did its best to try and destroy her shine. But he wouldn't let them. He would hide her away from everyone and keep her safe. His.

They joined their friends, exchanging pleasantries and engaging in small talk, but Jonathan's attention never wavered from Ciara. He watched her closely, noting every smile, every laugh, every fleeting glance she sent his way. Each moment felt charged with the memory of their kiss, the fire between them still burning hot and bright.

As the evening wore on, Jonathan couldn't shake the feeling of possessiveness that had taken hold of him. He wanted to keep her close, to shield her from the world and its prying eyes. His emotions were a tumultuous mix of desire, protectiveness, and something deeper that he couldn't quite name.

When the night finally came to an end, and they prepared to leave, Jonathan kept his arm around Ciara, guiding her out of the ballroom with a sense of pride and determination. He had claimed her in front of everyone, and he had no intention of letting her go.

As the carriage came to a halt in front of their home, Jonathan stepped out first, extending a hand to help Ciara down. Their eyes locked in a silent exchange of emotions, heavy with the night's events. Without a word, he swept her into his arms,

lifting her effortlessly.

“Jonathan!” Ciara exclaimed, a surprised chuckle escaping her lips. “Have you lost your mind?”

He looked down at her, his eyes filled with a mixture of determination and passion. “Yes,” he admitted, his voice rough with sincerity. “I’ve lost my mind, Ciara. I’m mad about you.”

Her laughter softened, replaced by a tender smile as she gazed up at him. The intensity of his words and the fire in his eyes left no room for doubt. She nestled closer to him, feeling the strong, steady beat of his heart against her.

Jonathan carried her through the grand halls of their home, his grip on her firm yet gentle. As they reached her room, he pushed the door open with his shoulder, stepping inside and gently setting her down on the bed. The room was dimly lit, casting a warm, intimate glow over them.

“Jonathan,” she began, her voice a soft whisper, but he silenced her with a finger to her lips.

“No,” he said, shaking his head slightly. “Let me speak. I’ve been a fool, pushing you away when all I wanted was to be closer to you. Tonight, seeing you with another man... it made me realize how much I need you, how much I want you. I can’t let you go, Ciara.”

“I... I don’t want you to let me go, Jonathan...” she replied as her lower lip trembled with vulnerability.

For a moment, they simply stood there, wrapped in the intensity of their newfound understanding. Then, slowly, Jonathan leaned in, capturing her lips in a kiss that was

both tender and fervent, a promise of the future they would face together.

When they finally pulled away, breathless and heartbeats racing, Jonathan rested his forehead against hers. “I’m mad about you,” he repeated, his voice a soft murmur against her lips.

Ciara smiled, a sense of peace and joy washing over her. “Then I suppose we’re both mad,” she said, her eyes shining with love and mischief.

He chuckled, his arms tightening around her. “Mad together, then.”

Without any other words, she lay back on the bed, pooling her gown around her waist, inching her legs apart and revealing herself to him. He breathed heavily, looking at her soft, pink flesh.

“Do you want me to go completely insane?” he teased, lowering himself onto her. “You know what you do to me, siren...”

“I know,” she purred back, cupping his face and staring at him. “But I’m wondering if I should make you work for it...”

“No, no, no,” he said, smirking. “That...” he pointed at her most intimate place, “is all mine. You can’t take it away from me.”

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“I could,” she teased. “If you misbehave again...”

He neared her even more, grabbing her by the wrists, making it impossible for her to move. Their lips were inches apart, yet neither initiated the kiss yet.

“And now?” he asked in a low, rumbling whisper. “What will I do with you if you misbehave, siren?”

“Take me, make me yours again and again...” she replied seductively, her eyes sparkling with sheer need for him.

“I have to taste you first,” he said as she bit her lip through a smile.

He buried his face between her legs, his lips taking her all in, making her even wetter than she already was. Wet, mad and utterly in love with this man. He slid his finger inside of her, his tongue teasing her, circling her throbbing flesh, until a million little stars exploded right in her field of vision. She moaned loudly, gripping a handful of his hair, keeping him in place as his tongue slid inside of her, lapping up her juices.

She was still trembling when he towered above her, unbuttoning his trousers and releasing his rock-solid manhood from the constraint.

“I need to be inside of you,” she heard him say, and the words drove her mad with desire.

He slid inside of her slowly, completely, feeling her wet heat engulf him completely. He was stretching her deliciously, so hot, as she clung to him. He moved harder and



harder—there was nothing gentle about the way he was claiming her. And she wouldn't be able to endure his tenderness. She wanted him whole. She wanted him rough. She wanted to feel him throbbing inside of her, his juices leaking out of her.

Desire emanated from him, pounding through him and into her. She wanted to remain in that moment for all eternity, being one with him, belonging to him. His hips undulated against her, brushing against her pearl with every thrust, creating friction that quickly brought her to the edge once again.

He groaned against her lips as they shared more feverish kisses wherever they could land them. She came undone so easily, so quickly as her entire body trembled, welcoming him. A moment later, he followed, his body tightening, only to explode deep inside of her, emptying himself on another groan. His forehead dipped to hers as he breathed heavily, waiting for the onslaught of bliss to subside.

Although they had made love a few times, every time was new, and every experience was new. And the same was true with his kisses. She felt as if her lips were exploring his every time, finding something new to be thrilled about.

He held her close as he lay down next to her, just like before. She had no more fear that he would go away, disappear in the night. They were entangled by their emotions now which although confusing, were slowly starting to make sense now. Words failed them so many times, but their bodies never did. Their kisses never did.

She closed her eyes, laying her head on his shoulder, inhaling deeply. She didn't speak, and neither did he. She fell asleep soon after, listening to the soft drumming of his heart, hoping that it was beating for her.

## CHAPTER 29

Jonathan realized that he slept best when he had Ciara in his arms. With his eyes still

closed, he felt a sense of contentment settling over him. He reached out, expecting to find her beside him, but the bed was empty. He sat up, frowning slightly. Where could she be?

He quickly dressed and made his way through the house, checking each room as he went. The drawing room, the library, the breakfast room—all were empty. His concern grew with each passing minute until he finally heard a soft, melodic voice coming from the music room.

He approached quietly, pushing the door open just enough to see inside. There she was, standing by the window, bathed in the morning light. Her back was to him, and she was softly singing to herself, a hauntingly beautiful Irish melody that sent a shiver down his spine.

Jonathan stood in the doorway, mesmerized. Her voice was like nothing else he had ever heard before—pure, clear, and filled with an emotion that touched him deeply. He watched as she swayed slightly with the music, lost in her own world.

He took a step forward, unable to stay away any longer. The floor creaked under his weight, and she turned, her eyes widening in surprise.

“Jonathan,” she said, a smile spreading across her face. “Good morning.”

“Good morning,” he replied, his voice hushed with awe. “Your voice... I was mesmerized the first time I heard it by the pond, but every time I hear you sing, I... I feel more and more enchanted by it.”

Ciara blushed, looking down shyly. “Thank you. It’s just something I do when I’m alone. My grandmother used to sing to me when I was little, so singing makes me remember her and the happy moments we spent together.”

“It’s beautiful,” he said, stepping closer. “You’re beautiful.”

Her blush deepened, and she looked up at him, her eyes shining with affection.

“Thank you,” she said softly. “I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“You didn’t,” he assured her, reaching out to take her hand. “But I’m glad I found you here. Hearing you sing—every time—is like discovering a hidden treasure.”

She laughed softly, a musical sound that made his heart skip a beat. “You have a way with words, Jonathan.”

He pulled her closer, wrapping his arms around her. “I mean every word,” he said, his voice serious. “You’re amazing, Ciara. Every day, you show me something new to be in awe about you.”

They stood there for a moment, wrapped in each other’s arms, the morning light enveloping them in a golden glow. Jonathan pressed a kiss to her forehead, feeling a deep sense of gratitude for the woman in his arms.

“Will you sing for me again?” he asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

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She looked up at him, her eyes filled with love and a hint of mischief. “Only if you promise to join me,” she teased.

He chuckled, shaking his head. “I’m afraid I’m not much of a singer.”

“Then you can listen,” she said, leaning up to kiss him gently. “And I’ll sing for you.”

As her voice filled the room once more, Jonathan closed his eyes, letting the music wash over him. He felt as if he had forgotten everything but that special moment, and nothing else existed. As Ciara’s song came to an end, she looked up at Jonathan with that playful gleam in her eyes that he loved so much.

“Now, it’s your turn,” she suddenly said with a teasing lilt in her voice.

“My turn?” he gasped in mock horror. “I told you, if I start singing, the servants will think some angry cat is lost in the manor house.”

Ciara laughed at his comment. “No, not singing,” she clarified. “Singing is my special thing. Now, you have to do something special for me. It is only fair.”

“Oh,” he nodded in understanding. “Yes, that is fair.” He thought about it for a moment then he smiled, taking her by the hand. “I have just the thing.”

He pulled her, and together, they ran out of the music room, toward his study. He relished the sound of her chuckling behind him when he let go of her, walking up to his writing table. He touched the handle of the drawer, but he didn’t pull it out yet.

“Now, I must warn you, this is a highly guarded secret; no one else knows about this,” he urged.

“No one?” she inquired. “Not even Hector?”

“Especially not Hector,” he gasped through a chuckle. “He would make fun of me the most.”

“I would never make fun of you; you know that.” She smiled tenderly. “Your secret is safe with me.”

He nodded, pulling the drawer out and taking a sketchbook. He placed it gently on the writing table.

As Jonathan opened the sketchbook, the pages fluttered slightly, revealing a collection of charcoal drawings that captured the essence of various subjects. The first page showcased a serene landscape—rolling hills under a twilight sky, the silhouettes of trees framing the horizon. He had poured his heart into the soft strokes, hoping to convey a sense of tranquility.

Turning to the next page, he observed Ciara’s reaction to a delicate portrait of a young woman, her features graceful and expressive. Jonathan had meticulously captured the light in her eyes and the gentle curve of her smile, aiming to evoke warmth and vitality.

“Is this someone you know?” Ciara asked, her curiosity evident.

“Just an inspiration I encountered once,” he replied with a smile. “I like to capture the beauty I see in the world, whether it’s a person or a moment.”

As she flipped through more pages, he watched her marvel at the variety of subjects:

a bustling market scene filled with lively figures, an intricately detailed bouquet of flowers, and even a quiet moment of children playing by a riverside. Each drawing was infused with emotion, the shading expertly applied to create texture and movement.

One drawing caught her eye—a small cottage surrounded by a wild garden, a soft glow emanating from the windows as the sun dipped below the horizon. It seemed to evoke a sense of home and comfort, reflecting a peaceful life Jonathan often dreamed of.

“This is beautiful,” she said, her voice filled with admiration. “You have such a talent for bringing scenes to life.”

Jonathan felt a swell of pride at her words, tinged with vulnerability. “Thank you. It’s my way of preserving moments that touch me.”

He turned the page to reveal a self-portrait, rendered with an unexpected honesty. The charcoal lines were raw, showcasing not just his likeness but also a hint of the emotions he often kept hidden. He could feel his heart race as Ciara leaned closer, taking in the drawing.

“Do you always draw yourself?” she asked gently.

“Not often,” he admitted. “But sometimes, it helps to understand oneself better. I wanted to see how I perceive myself in the world.”

Jonathan watched her gaze linger on the drawing, feeling a warmth spread through him at her appreciation. “You have a way of seeing beauty where others might not,” she said softly. “It’s a gift.”

Her words resonated deeply within him, filling him with gratitude. “And you inspire

me to see even more,” he said, turning to the last page. “This is my favorite. It is done from a painting my father had.”

The charcoal lines depicted a woman with gentle features and kind eyes, radiating warmth and strength. Jonathan had often dreamed about her, the way she would smile, the way she would sound, and how warm her hands would be. He supposed that every motherless child had that one most precious dream.

“It was my way of holding onto her spirit. She had such a calming presence, always encouraging me to pursue my passions.”

As he spoke, Ciara’s gaze softened, understanding the depth of his feelings. “You can see the love in her eyes,” she observed. “It’s clear she meant a great deal to you, that she was with you in spirit if not in flesh.”

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Jonathan felt a surge of gratitude for her understanding. “Thank you. This... It means a lot to me. That you... that you appreciate this,” he said, his heart swelling with emotion. “Perhaps I will take it up again, one of these days.”

“It would be such a shame if you did not,” she agreed.

As the moment lingered, Jonathan found himself captivated by Ciara’s presence and the way she absorbed the emotions behind his drawings. An idea sparked in his mind, and he hesitated, feeling a mix of excitement and shyness.

“Would you... would you consider posing for me?” he asked, his voice soft yet hopeful.

Ciara blinked, a flush rising to her cheeks. “Me? Pose?” she echoed, surprise evident in her tone.

“Yes,” he replied, a hint of bashfulness creeping into his demeanor. “I’d love to capture your essence.”

She bit her lip, her heart racing at the thought. “I suppose I could,” she said, a shy smile breaking through. “But I’m not sure how to pose.”

Jonathan chuckled lightly, his nerves easing. “Just be yourself. I want to capture the spirit of who you are.”

After a moment’s contemplation, Ciara nodded, her blush deepening but her smile growing more confident. “All right, I’ll do it. But promise you’ll make me look



good,” she teased lightly, her playful nature shining through.

“I won’t have to try hard at all, but I promise nevertheless,” he said with a grin, feeling a flutter of excitement at the prospect of drawing her. “Let’s find a spot where the light is good.”

As they moved to a corner of the study, the sunlight streamed through the window, casting a warm glow. Jonathan set up his materials, heart racing with anticipation.

Ciara settled into a comfortable pose, her expression soft yet thoughtful. Jonathan took a deep breath, focusing on the lines and curves that defined her features, ready to capture the essence of the woman who had brought so much light into his life.

## CHAPTER 30

The following days resembled a fairy tale. That morning, the sun streamed through the grand windows of the drawing room as Ciara sat beside Jonathan, both of them enjoying a moment together although Jonathan was reading his newspaper and Ciara was immersed into her book. However, just knowing that he was there, by her side in silence, made all the difference.

Suddenly, he lifted his head to see her watching him. Having been caught off guard, she blushed under his gaze.

“What is it, dear?” he asked, placing his newspaper in his lap, signaling that he was no longer interested in reading. He was interested in her.

“Nothing,” she smiled, blushing even more.

“It is obvious something,” he teased. “You just don’t want to tell me.”

“Well, there’s nothing to tell,” she replied playfully.

“But you are smiling,” he pointed out. “People smile for a reason... women especially.”

“I was just thinking,” she finally said with a little shrug.

“About me?” he asked, truly intrigued by the possible response.

“No,” she laughed melodiously, a laughter that proved to him that her response was a lie.

“It is all right to admit it.” He winked at her. “I am irresistible, after all.”

She laughed again, even louder than before. “And vain.”

“Occasionally,” he nodded, amusedly. “But don’t tell anyone.”

“I think they know,” she was still chuckling. “But I was just thinking how... happy I am here.”

“With me?” he inquired with that same raised eyebrow.

“Well... yes,” she agreed softly, looking away for a moment, only to lock her eyes with his once more.

However, before he could ask more, a knock on the door interrupted their intimate moment together.

“Yes?” Jonathan called out, and the butler appeared.

“I beg your pardon, Your Grace, but Lord and Lady Hartfield are here, asking to be admitted.”

Jonathan exchanged a meaningful glance with Ciara. “Are you expecting your parents?” he wondered, looking as confused as she was.

“No,” she shook her head, completely taken aback.

She didn’t want to see them.

“Then, we shan’t be seeing them,” Jonathan turned to the butler. “You’ve heard me, Winston. You may tell that to the Hartfields.”

“Your Grace, I...” the butler hesitated. “I was told to insist. They knew you would refuse, but they claim to have something of great importance to share.”

“There is nothing that they have to say which either me or Ciara wish to hear,” he said simply.

“Jonathan,” Ciara replied softly, “what if something had happened?”

“To them?” Jonathan scoffed. “We should be so fortunate.”

“Please,” she asked, placing her hand tenderly on his. Even after everything they had done to her, she didn’t wish them ill. She simply wished for them to leave her alone,

so she could live her own life with Jonathan by her side,

“You saw how they behaved last time. They’re only here to undermine you again,” he told her.

“Then, you shall deal with them as you always do,” she smiled, and her words seemed to have the desired effect. She had convinced him.

“All right, but I still do not like the sound of this,” he finally acquiesced, sighing heavily. “Show them in, Winston.”

When Lord and Lady Hartfield were finally announced, Ciara’s heart skipped a beat. She stood, Jonathan at her side, as they entered. Her parents, usually so composed and authoritative, looked uncharacteristically nervous. That, in turn, made her apprehensive as well although she promised herself she would keep her composure.

“Your Grace,” Lord Hartfield began, his voice unsteady. “Ciara... we’ve come to apologize for our behavior.”

Lady Hartfield nodded, her eyes softening as they met Ciara’s. “We were wrong, dear, all this time. We treated you unfairly and were far too harsh. We want to offer a truce, an opportunity to start over as a proper family.”

Ciara’s heart wavered. She had never seen her parents like this—humble, contrite. She glanced at Jonathan, whose expression was guarded. He was still wary, his protective instincts on high alert.

“We were wrong to impose our will on you,” Lord Hartfield continued. “We realize now that you have built a life here, and we want to be a part of it if you’ll allow us.”

Ciara hesitated, her mind racing. The memories of their last visit, the harsh words and

accusations, were still fresh. But beneath the pain, there was a longing for reconciliation, for the family she had always hoped for. She wondered if such a thing was even possible after all the pain and anguish they had caused her.

“How enlightened of you,” Jonathan muttered, his tone dripping with sarcasm.

“I am sorry, Your Grace. I could not hear what you said,” Lord Hartfield replied.

Ciara shot him a look, pleading for him not to start a confrontation. He stared back at her, doubt casting a shadow over his handsome face.

“Just a personal musing, Lord Hartfield. Nothing important,” Jonathan said, and his hand found hers, giving it a reassuring squeeze, signaling to her that he understood her request.

She smiled at him in gratitude. If someone was to doubt her parents’ words, it would be her.

Ciara took a deep breath and looked at her parents. “I appreciate your apology. It means a lot to me. But you must understand that so many things have happened. I just cannot understand why, of all times, now? Has something taken place?”

“No, no,” her father shook his head. He glanced at his wife then back at his daughter. “We realized that isn’t who we want to be, who we ever wanted to be. We just... thought that we were helping you, but we were wrong, so very wrong. We should have listened to you, spoken to you, but instead we were led by erroneous ways.”

Ciara thought about it for a moment. She didn’t believe that people could change so easily, so suddenly. Such core changes only happened after something sudden, and nothing seemed to have happened to her parents. They merely changed their minds about their core behavior and that was what she found the strangest. Still, hope

flickered inside of her like a flame. She wanted to believe them although she knew that she shouldn't.

"I can accept your apology," she finally said. "But that doesn't mean that we will suddenly start being one big happy family. It will take time."

Her mother's eyes glistened with unshed tears. "We understand, Ciara. We just want the chance to show you that we can and are willing to change. We will wait as long as you deem fit. Just... don't push us away, please."

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Ciara nodded slowly, still guarded and cautious of this new development, but her hope flared up. “All right. We shall start all over... slowly.”

Her father’s face lit up with relief. “Thank you, Ciara. We won’t let you down.”

Her mother suddenly smiled, genuine warmth in her eyes. “We’d like to invite you both to dinner next week. A chance to begin again, the first step to a new life.”

Ciara glanced at Jonathan, who remained silent but watchful. She knew he had his reservations and that if it were left up to him, he would probably refuse their invitation. She also knew that he had every reason to do so. He was her guardian, and as such, he felt responsible for her which she appreciated.

However, this was a step she felt she needed to take. “We’ll attend,” she said, despite his reluctance.

Jonathan’s jaw tightened, but he didn’t object. Instead, he stood beside her, a silent pillar of support. That was yet another indication of his deep affection for her.

As her parents left, Ciara turned to Jonathan, her heart heavy with the weight of the decision. “Thank you for standing by me.”

Jonathan pulled her into a gentle embrace. “I’ll always stand by you, Ciara. Just be careful. They’ve hurt you before.”

She nodded against his chest, feeling the strength of his arms around her. “I know. But maybe this time, things will be different.”

Jonathan seemed hesitant, as if there was something he wanted to divulge, but he changed his mind at the last minute. Instead, he kissed the top of her head, his voice a low murmur. “I hope so, for your sake.”

The promise of a new beginning hung in the air, fragile yet hopeful, and Ciara was eager to take it.

Jonathan sat in his study, endeavoring to focus on some ledgers, when a gentle knock on the door revealed Ciara’s face.

He was still displeased with how she handled her parents’ visit. He didn’t trust them. He didn’t believe that they truly changed just like that, almost overnight. It just didn’t seem credible. But seeing her so happy to have at least a small chance at a happy family almost broke him.

“Jonathan, are you busy?” she asked sweetly.

He smiled. “For you, never. Come in.”

She immediately did as he told her, showing him what she was holding in her hand. “The Kirdale’s sent us a letter, inviting us to their estate for a garden party.”

“Have they now?” he asked, tilting his head a little at her. There was always something new about her to notice, a new freckle that he had not seen before, a new manner of her lips moving as she spoke, as she smiled. He loved finding out new things about her.

“Yes, and of course, we have to attend,” she told him, placing the letter on the table that separated them.

“We do?” he asked, lifting a mischievous eyebrow. “But we just saw them...”



recently.”

“She is your cousin,” she reminded him.

“Exactly,” he chuckled. “She won’t be upset if I don’t come.”

Then, she walked around the table, gently placing her hands on his shoulders, stepped over his lap, and lowered herself.

“But I want you there with me,” she purred softly.

It would be a crowd of people he mostly knew, and for that reason, he would have preferred to stay home, but for some reason, Ciara seemed happy to attend.

“You do?” he asked.

He groaned silently, feeling himself harden underneath her. He knew she could feel what she was doing to him.

“Mhm,” she murmured softly, bringing her lips almost to his but not kissing him.

“You don’t know what you do to me, siren,” he said, biting his lip.

“Yes, I do. I am getting you to come with me,” she said, smiling like the vixen that he knew she was.

“Will I be rewarded for it?” he asked, feeling her hot breath spill all over his lips. He was dying to kiss her, but resisting the temptation was more fun.

“Yes,” she nodded. “I have a few things in mind you might like.”

“Like what?” he asked, already titillated by the thought.

“No, no,” she shook her head, and a few strands of her hair fell over her forehead. “You’ll have to wait and see.”

He chuckled. “You will be the death of me, do you know that?”

She finally leaned in and kissed the tip of his nose. “I do,” she chuckled sweetly as she shifted in his lap, trying to move away from him.

“Stay,” he said, inhaling the intoxicating scent of her hair.

“Ah, no, no, no,” she said, pulling away as he was trying to kiss her. “You are trying to get your reward before you do your part. No deal, Your Grace.”

She was now standing at a safe distance from him, leaving his desire for her completely exposed, and he still desired her more than ever.

“Stay,” he repeated. “Just give me a taste of what I will be receiving as my prize.”

“I would but?—”

A knock on the door interrupted her.

“See?” she observed, pointing to the door. “That must be Mrs. Dawson.”

“As always at the most inopportune moment.” He grinned, adjusting himself in his chair so that, whoever it was at the door would not notice him being... indisposed.

“Yes?” he called out, and Mrs. Dawson really appeared in the doorway.

“I shall leave you two alone.” Ciara left with a smile.

Jonathan knew that he would need to be on his best behavior for that reward.

## CHAPTER 31

“You know, when I was your age, I used to spend hours in my grandmother’s garden,” Ciara spoke, enchanting Margaret and Henry during their dinner at the Kirdale’s. “There was this one time we thought we found a fairy ring...”

Henry’s eyes widened, his fork pausing midway to his mouth. “A fairy ring? Really? Did you see any fairies?”

Ciara laughed softly, the sound like a melody. “Well, I didn’t see any fairies, but I believed they were there, watching us. My grandmother and I would leave little gifts for them, like flowers and pebbles, and sometimes, we’d find them moved the next day.”

Margaret clasped her hands together, having that wonderful dreamy expression on her face which Ciara remembered so well. “That sounds magical. I wish we could find a fairy ring here. Do you think there are fairies in our garden, Henry?”

Henry, not to be outdone, nodded vigorously. “Of course, there are! We just need to look harder! Your Grace, will you help us find one?”

Ciara’s eyes twinkled with delight. She could see that Rebecca was listening to their

conversation intently, and it seemed that even the men had stopped chatting, listening to the story of fairies and their ring.

“I’d love to help you look, my dears. But remember, fairies are shy. We must be very quiet and very kind if we hope to see any signs of them.”

Margaret leaned closer, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. “We’ll be the best fairy hunters ever. Right, Henry?”

Henry nodded solemnly. “We’ll even leave them some of our dessert tonight. Fairies like sweets, don’t they, Your Grace?”

Ciara chuckled, glancing at the half-eaten cake on Henry’s plate. “I’m sure they do, Henry. And you know what? They also love stories. Maybe if we tell them a wonderful story, they’ll come out to listen.”

Margaret’s eyes shone with excitement. “Oh, yes! We can tell them the story about the brave knight and the dragon that I read in one of my books. It is my favorite!”

Ciara nodded with a smile. “That sounds perfect. We’ll have to make sure we remember every detail so the fairies will be captivated.”

That was when Rebecca interjected gently. “It seems that we have a grand adventure planned for tomorrow. But for tonight, it is getting late.”

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“Must we go to bed, Mother?” Margaret asked, pleading for more time.

“Yes,” Rebecca nodded tenderly.

“But we have to search for fairies!” Henry whined, but that whine was followed by a yawn, and everyone knew what time it was.

“You’ll do it tomorrow and then, when I see you again, you’ll tell me how it all went,” Ciara assured them, and after her words, the children seemed pacified.

“All right,” Margaret nodded. “We know what to do.”

“I have no doubt about that,” Ciara replied as they bid everyone goodnight, leaving the dining hall.

“You have a wonderful way with children, Ciara,” Rebecca told her after she returned from putting her children to bed.

Archie and Jonathan seemed immersed in their own conversation, while the two women turned to each other.

Ciara smiled, her heart swelling at those words. “I simply adore them. They remind us of the joy and innocence in the world.”

Their conversation continued from there after which it was time for Ciara and Jonathan to bid them farewell and head home in their carriage.

“I had such a lovely time,” Ciara gushed as they hopped off the carriage and entered Silverbrook Manor.

“I have promised the children that I would come for another visit, and it will be so lovely to see them again,” she added as they ascended the grand staircase.

“Ah yes, the children,” he nodded without much interest although he loved the sight of his wife beaming in such a manner. However, the topic of children did not interest him.

To be quite honest, he didn’t think there would be a need for it. Their marriage was one of convenience although the lines of their arrangement were now somewhat blurred. But there were certain things he was adamant about, and those were children.

Or better yet, the lack thereof.

They entered his chambers. After he closed the door behind him, he took off his shoes, his thoughts jumping to the ways he could take off each article of clothing that she wore.

“They are so sweet and well-behaved,” she mused, fidgeting her fingers, obviously unable to remain still with excitement. “Do you think ours will be the same?”

He stood still in front of her.

“Our what?” he asked, missing the point as his eyes were still half-focused on the clothes before him.

She locked eyes with him, beaming like the moon in the darkest of nights. “Our children, of course.”

Jonathan felt his throat go dry, and he had to clear it more than once to feel comfortable again.

He needed to clarify a few things to her, things that they had never discussed before because he didn't think they needed to. Up to now.

"What do you mean our children?" he asked, frowning.

Her smile immediately disappeared. She sounded confused, perplexed. "Well, I... I thought that since things are different between us now, I only assumed that you would want to have children with me, not to mention an heir."

"No," he snapped much more angrily and loudly than he had intended to. "I do not want to have children with you or with any other woman for that matter."

She still had that confused, astonished look in her eyes. But hope held her in its grip hard. "I understand it may seem daunting right now. We can discuss this at a later point. Maybe in the future?"

"No," he cut her off again. "Not now, not ever."

"But... why?" she asked, her voice on the verge of breaking.

"The world doesn't need another descendant of my father."

"I do not know how your father was exactly," she started pleading. "I understand what having... difficult parents may do to someone, but that doesn't mean that you should deny yourself the happiness that children can bring. You don't know?—"

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“No, Ciara, it is you who do not know!” he exclaimed loudly. “You don’t know me. Just because we share a bed and I’ve shown you some of my drawings, it does not give you the right to impose your own desires onto me!”

“Imposing?” she asked, aghast. “Is that what I am to you? An imposition?”

“Well, tell me what else to call this?” he replied to her question with another question. “I tell you that I do not wish to have children, and you try to convince me otherwise. I am not a boy who needs to be shown the error of his ways. I am a grown man, Ciara. I know what I want and most certainly, what I do not want.”

“I know, Jonathan,” she said apologetically. “I wasn’t trying to convince you of anything. I was merely saying what I assumed would be natural for every married couple.”

“We are not like any other married couple, or have you forgotten that already?”

As soon as he said those words, he knew that he had made a grave mistake.

Yes, it was true that they weren’t like any other married couple, but that was because, for them, it all started with convenience. He could see the look of hurt in her eyes, but there was nothing he could do about it now. He had said those words, they left the confines of his mind, and now, he had to deal with the repercussions.

“I know very well what we are,” she said through a voice that was on the verge of breaking. “You don’t need to remind me of anything.”



“Perhaps we should return to our original plan of living separately,” he said, pushing the final boulder off the cliff.

He could see her jaw tightened as she clenched her reply through it.

“Very well. If that’s what you wish husband, so it shall be.”

She turned on her heel and slammed the door behind her, leaving him alone in the dead of night.

## CHAPTER 32

For the next few days, the house felt emptier than usual. Jonathan and Ciara avoided each other, their fight casting a long shadow over their interactions.

Ciara was informed that Jonathan was away during the day, occupied with business matters while Ciara busied herself with managing the household.

Each passing day seemed to widen the chasm between them, and the distance felt insurmountable.

The day of the dinner at her parents’ house arrived. Ciara sat at the breakfast table, pushing her food around her plate absentmindedly.

She glanced at the empty seat where Jonathan usually sat, a pang of sadness hitting her heart. She sighed and looked up at the butler.

“Winston, please remind Jonathan about the dinner at my parents’ house tonight,” she instructed, her voice tinged with hope.

The butler nodded and left the room. Ciara continued to pick at her breakfast, her

thoughts swirling. She hoped that this dinner could serve as a bridge for reconciliation, a chance to mend what was broken between them. She wanted to believe that Jonathan would see the importance of this evening, not just for her but for them as a couple.

After a while, the butler returned. His expression was neutral, but the words he spoke felt like a blow. "I am to inform you that His Grace will not be attending the dinner this evening, Your Grace."

Ciara's heart sank. She had hoped for a different response, one that would show he was willing to meet her halfway. Instead, it felt like another door had closed between them. She took a deep breath, steadying herself. If Jonathan wasn't going to make an effort, then she wouldn't bother with him anymore. One could only hope for so long until their hope dwindled like the flicker of a candle in the wind.

She stood up, her resolve hardening, her fingers curled into angry fists. "Very well," she said, her voice firm. "I'll go alone."

The day passed in a blur as Ciara prepared for the evening. She dressed carefully, selecting a gown that her mother would approve of, and styled her hair meticulously. By the time the carriage was ready, she felt composed, determined to face her parents without Jonathan by her side.

Who needs him, she thought to herself, wanting to banish him from her mind, but that was impossible.

As she rode to her parents' house, Ciara's mind slowly drifted to the dinner ahead. It was supposed to be a new beginning, a chance to rebuild bridges and start anew. Now, it felt like another challenge she had to face alone.

Upon arriving at her parents' house, Ciara was greeted warmly. Her parents were

clearly making an effort, their earlier apology still fresh in her mind. They guided her into the dining room where the table was set elegantly, the soft glow of candles creating a warm ambiance. Everything seemed perfect. But then, a thought unfurled inside of her. Too perfect?

“Your husband will not be joining us?” her mother inquired tenderly, a note of concern in her voice as she pulled Ciara out of the tangled web of her own mind.

Ciara forced a smile. “He couldn’t make it,” she said, endeavoring to keep her tone light, as if it didn’t matter at all.

Her mother’s keen eyes noticed the turmoil beneath the surface. “You seem so upset, my dear. Tell me what happened.”

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This new relationship felt strange. Ciara couldn't tell if it was safe, if it was advisable to tell her mother about what had happened. But she didn't have any of her friends around, and she needed to get her frustration out somehow. She decided to let her guard down against all instinct and common sense telling her to be cautious.

"Are you upset because your husband couldn't join you this evening?" her mother asked, somehow managing to guess immediately.

Ciara hesitated for a moment then she nodded. "Yes. We... argued a few days ago."

"About what?"

"He told me that he doesn't want children, and it took me by surprise," Ciara admitted. "I thought he just said it in the spur of the moment, that he might change his mind, but I doubt that now."

Her mother reached out, taking Ciara's hand gently. "My dear, I can see how much this is hurting you. Perhaps he did say it in the spur of the moment, and just needs more time to withdraw what he said?"

Ciara shook her head. "I doubt it. Jonathan doesn't say things he doesn't mean."

"Remember, Ciara, that sometimes people act out of pride or fear. Your husband may need time to come around. After all, marriage requires a change from two people, a change that helps them adjust to each other, and some people need more time than others for that to happen."

Ciara shook her head, her voice breaking. “It’s not just that. When I tried to reach out, he wasn’t willing to make the effort. And then... It’s like he’s pushing me away.”

Her mother’s expression softened with understanding. She took a moment to gather her thoughts before speaking. “Well... you know, my dear, us women have to endure men. Just look at your father and me. Sometimes, he does silly things, and I do forgive him eventually. It is all right to be upset with him. But if you have a good marriage, you will find your way back to each other.”

Ciara wiped a tear from her cheek. “I just feel so alone. It’s like I’m fighting for something that’s slipping through my fingers.”

Her mother squeezed her hand reassuringly. “You feel now as every other woman has felt at some point in her life. Marriage is hard work. Perhaps you couldn’t see that before, and now, you do.”

Lady Hartfield paused once.

“I mean, I don’t want to say that your marriage wasn’t serious before, it’s just... well, you didn’t know much about him. Now, you do. Perhaps you aren’t meant for each other. Time will tell, and even if this is true, I want you to know that it won’t be the end of the world.”

Ciara nodded. Her mother was right. After all, they didn’t marry because of love but because of convenience. It was nothing more than that. And she should have known that they would never have a real marriage.

“Thank you, Mother,” she said, her burden still present but somehow lightened by her mother’s words.

As she gazed at her mother, a surprising sense of relief washed over her. The

evening's troubles had not disappeared, but the heartfelt conversation with her mother had provided comfort to her troubled heart. For the first time in what felt like ages, she felt a connection with her family, something she had longed for but never fully experienced.

Her mother's kindness and understanding had been more than just words; they had been a revelation. The compassion and support that Lady Hartfield had shown were exactly what Ciara had always wanted—a genuine, open-hearted dialogue with her mother, one that transcended the usual formalities and reached the core of her feelings.

Then her mother surprised her with yet another idea. "Ciara," she began, her voice warm and soothing, "I've been thinking. If it would make you feel more comfortable, you're welcome to stay here for a while. We can send for your things and make arrangements for you."

Ciara's eyes widened in surprise and gratitude. The offer was unexpected but immensely appreciated. She had been struggling with her recent arguments with Jonathan and the subsequent distance between them. The idea of staying with her family, especially after the meaningful conversation they had shared, felt like a good idea.

"Mother, I... I don't know what to say," Ciara stammered, her voice thick with emotion. "Thank you. This means more to me than you can imagine."

Lady Hartfield smiled warmly, reaching out to clasp her daughter's hands. "You don't need to say anything. We'll arrange everything for you."

Ciara felt a wave of relief and happiness wash over her. Although her childhood home was not a place of happy memories, it seemed to Ciara that things were finally changing. Perhaps Jonathan couldn't see the core change that her parents had been

going through. Who was she not to believe them when she wanted to do so with all her heart?

“Thank you, Mother,” she said, her voice trembling slightly. “I’d like that very much.”

“Now, why don’t you go up to your room and write a letter to your husband explaining everything?” her mother suggested. “We can send it off immediately, and then, we can enjoy a nice dinner together as a family.”

Ciara nodded in agreement, leaving her mother and ascending the stairs to her room as a sense of resolution guided her steps. Once in her room, she sat down at the small writing desk by the window, the soft light of the evening casting a gentle glow over her as she prepared to write to Jonathan. Taking a deep breath, she picked up her pen and began to write with a calm, deliberate hand. Her thoughts were clear, and her heart, though still tinged with the remnants of their argument, was at peace.

My Dear Jonathan,

I hope this letter finds you well. I wanted to inform you that I have decided to stay with my parents for a while. After our recent disagreement, I felt that this time apart might be beneficial for both of us.

My parents have arranged for my belongings to be sent to the Hartfield estate. I trust you will handle this with the usual efficiency.

Yours sincerely,

Ciara

She carefully folded the letter, sealing it with a wax stamp. The simple act of putting her thoughts into words felt like a small but significant step toward resolution. With a quiet sigh, she handed the letter to the servant waiting outside her door, instructing him to deliver it promptly.

She couldn't believe how things were developing. She thought that things were wonderful with Jonathan, but he had to revert to the way things were in the beginning, hurting her in the process. She wondered if it was even possible for them to find their way back to each other. Obviously not if he wanted to have things as they agreed them to be in the beginning.

She inhaled deeply, deciding not to dwell on it any longer, at least during the dinner with her parents. That was yet another thing she was incredulous about. She was there, in her childhood home, not wanting to run away from it but actually, the opposite. She never thought that the doors to her home would open up as a sanctuary, and that was the case now.

She smiled, finding her way down to the dining room where her parents were waiting for her.

Only, they weren't alone.

Ciara gasped.

"Hello my lost little sheep," Mother Superior, the very figure from her painful past,



said.

## CHAPTER 33

“What is she doing here?” Ciara demanded, her voice rising in panic.

“You didn’t really think that you would be able to get away with all your wrongdoings?” her father asked, sounding genuinely incredulous.

Ciara felt as if the whole world was spinning around.

“Your behavior affects us all, you know,” he added.

Ciara was silent, completely stunned into speechlessness.

“For instance, that gown you are wearing now,” her mother pointed out. “One must always strive for a bit more elegance, don’t you think?”

Ciara couldn’t believe that with Mother Superior there, her mother was talking about her gown. And the woman just watched Ciara menacingly, as if biding her time. Then, she spoke.

“I have been called here with a plea for help,” Mother Superior finally said. “And I see why now.”

Ciara shook her head, petrified of Mother Superior and what she represented. She felt that same helplessness and lack of control that she was overwhelmed by before. It grabbed hold of her and refused to let go.

“There has been no improvement, Mother Superior,” Ciara’s mother said with a heavy sigh. “We were all hoping for some, but there is none.”

“Of course, there is none,” Mother Superior said disapprovingly. “She left the nunnery while she was still being molded into what she was supposed to become. The process stopped, and of course, she reverted to her old ways.”

“I mean, all her friends are all thriving in their social circles, also having married dukes and earls. At least, she managed that as well, but the rest...”

Her mother’s voice trailed off, leaving the implication hanging in the air. Ciara couldn’t believe that they were talking about her as if she weren’t even there.

Ciara’s heart sank. Her mother was so supportive when she was pouring her heart out about her argument with Jonathan, and now, it seemed that everything had turned upside down. She couldn’t make heads or tails of anything at that moment. All she knew was that she had been betrayed... once again.

“Really, Ciara, one would think you’d have a better handle on things by now. Your choices seem rather... questionable,” her mother said, her tone growing more caustic.

Lord Hartfield added. “Yes, it’s clear you’ve made some unwise decisions. Perhaps it’s time to reconsider your approach. That is why we knew that the only person who could help was Mother Superior.”

“Yes,” her mother added, “your behavior at the ball was rather... scandalous.”

Lord Hartfield took a sip of his wine, and then he continued. “Yes, your behavior with the Duke was highly inappropriate. It’s not becoming of a duchess.”

Her mother’s tone hardened. “Your conduct was utterly improper. The way you carried on with your husband, the public display of affection—such behavior is beneath you. A duchess should carry herself with dignity, not like a...”

She hesitated as if choosing her words carefully. “Not like a frivolous debutante.”

Ciara’s face was flushed with a mix of embarrassment and anger. “I was simply enjoying the evening. I was with my husband?—”

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Her father cut her off. “You need to understand, Ciara, that there are certain expectations and standards that come with your position. Your actions have consequences. The way you’re behaving, it’s as if you need a lesson in propriety.”

“You have not changed at all,” her mother pointed out. “But don’t worry, we know how to rectify that... this time for good.”

Her father turned to Mother Superior. “I think we are done here.”

Before she could process the situation, Ciara felt an overwhelming wave of drowsiness wash over her. Her vision blurred, and her limbs grew heavy. She hadn’t noticed it before as she attributed those sensations to stress and fear, but now, she knew better.

She tried to stand, but her body wouldn’t obey her commands.

Realization dawned on her. “You’ve drugged me,” she whispered, horrified.

A sinister smile spread across her father’s face. “It’s for your own good, Ciara. You need to learn your place.”

Mother Superior stepped forward, a look of cold satisfaction on her face. “You thought you could escape your lessons, didn’t you? You will learn obedience, one way or another.”

As Ciara struggled to keep her eyes open, she saw a man step forward, joining Mother Superior. Her heart raced as she recognized him—one of the guards who had

tormented her at St. Catherine's.

"No," she murmured, trying to resist the encroaching darkness. She attempted to move, to escape, but her body felt like lead.

Her legs buckled beneath her, and she crumpled to the floor, the room spinning around her.

The last thing she saw was the triumphant expressions on her parents' faces and the cruel, satisfied look of Mother Superior.

Then, everything went black.

Jonathan wasn't expecting any letters, especially not at that late hour. However, when Winston brought it to him, Jonathan knew it could not be good news. Good news was not delivered in darkness.

He recognized Ciara's handwriting immediately. With a sigh, he broke the seal and unfolded the parchment. As he read her words, his expression darkened. She was staying with her parents for a while and wanted her things sent over. The implication was clear: she was leaving him, perhaps for good. She had written that the time apart would be beneficial for them, but he knew better than to believe such lies.

His initial reaction was a mix of disbelief and anger. He had been distant, yes, but he never expected her to take such a drastic step. He crumpled the letter in his fist, the parchment crackling under the pressure.

"Damn it," he muttered, his frustration boiling over.

He stood up abruptly, knocking his chair back, and crossed the room to the fireplace. With a swift, furious motion, he tossed the letter into the flames. The paper caught

fire quickly, curling and blackening as it was consumed.

Their relationship was a lost cause; he should have known that from the beginning. What had he expected? That a woman like Ciara, vibrant and full of life, would find happiness with a man like himself?

He clenched his jaw, watching the last remnants of the letter turn to ash.

## CHAPTER 34

Ciara awoke to darkness and a stifling sense of confinement. The hard, unforgiving wooden bench beneath her jostled with the motion of the carriage. Panic set in as she realized she was in a confined space, the walls pressing in on her from all sides. Her breaths came in shallow, rapid gasps, and she felt the cold bite of iron against her wrists—she was shackled.

She struggled to sit up, her heart pounding wildly in her chest. As her eyes adjusted to the dim light filtering through the small, barred window, she saw the thick iron bars surrounding her. She was in the back of a jail coach—a carriage designed like a cell with no means of escape.

Terror gripped her as she pressed herself against the bars, trying to see where she was being taken. The realization of her captivity was suffocating. The space was so small, and the air felt thick and oppressive. She screamed for help, her voice raw and desperate.

“Help! Someone, please help me!” Her cries echoed within the confines of the carriage, absorbed by the unfeeling walls.

Her mind raced, trying to make sense of what had happened. The last thing she remembered was feeling drowsy at dinner, her parents’ smug faces, and the Mother

Superior's sinister presence. They had drugged her, betrayed her. The horror of it all was overwhelming.

She pulled against the shackles, the metal cutting into her skin, but it was no use. Tears streamed down her face as she realized how truly helpless she was. The darkness around her seemed to close in, making it harder to breathe. Her body trembled uncontrollably, her thoughts a chaotic swirl of fear and confusion.

"Please," she sobbed, her voice breaking. "Please, let me out!"

But there was no answer, only the relentless rattling of the carriage as it moved along the rough road. Ciara felt the walls pressing in on her, the small space becoming tighter with every passing moment. She had never felt so trapped, so utterly powerless.

The feeling of claustrophobia intensified, and she closed her eyes, trying to calm herself, but the darkness only made it worse. She could feel her sanity slipping, the terror clawing at her mind. She screamed again, a primal, anguished sound that reverberated through the carriage, a desperate plea to the uncaring night.

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“Shout all you want, girl, but no one will save you,” Mother Superior’s voice came from the driver’s seat, laced with cruel satisfaction. “You are a lost soul, and you deserve punishment.”

Ciara’s heart sank at the sound of her tormentor’s voice. The realization of her situation hit her like a blow to the chest. She scrambled to her feet, clutching the iron bars for support as the carriage jolted and swayed.

“Where are you taking me?” she demanded, her voice trembling with fear and desperation.

“St. Catherine’s, of course,” Mother Superior replied with a mocking laugh. “What did you expect? Stray sheep like you always get what they deserve in the end.”

Ciara felt the world slipping away from beneath her feet. The name of the abbey, the place of her worst nightmares, sent a wave of terror through her. She had fought so hard to escape, to free herself from its clutches, and now, she was being dragged back.

“No,” she whispered, shaking her head in disbelief. “No, please. Please, don’t take me back there.”

But her pleas fell on deaf ears. Mother Superior’s voice turned venomous, filled with righteous anger. “After all your scheming to kick me out of the abbey, even contacting His Majesty? How dare you? There is no retribution for you now.”

Ciara’s knees buckled, and she sank to the floor, her hands gripping the cold metal



bars for support. Her mind raced, trying to comprehend the full extent of her betrayal and the hopelessness of her situation.

“Please,” she begged, as tears streamed down her face. “Please, set me free. I’ll do anything. Just don’t take me back there.”

Mother Superior’s laughter was a cruel, hollow sound. “You brought this upon yourself, Ciara. There is no escape for you now.”

The carriage continued its relentless journey, the wheels rattling over the uneven road. Ciara’s sobs filled the small, dark space, mingling with the rhythmic clatter of the wheels. The weight of her parents’ betrayal, the return to St. Catherine’s, and the knowledge that there was no one to save her pressed down on her like a tidal wave that threatened to drown her.

The road stretched on, leading her back to the place she had fought so hard to escape, and there was nothing she could do to stop it.

A few days passed in a blur for Jonathan, each one more miserable than the last. The house felt eerily silent, the absence of Ciara’s laughter and presence creating a void that nothing seemed to fill. He found himself wandering through the rooms, each one a painful reminder of the life they had begun to build together.

He had thrown himself into his work, hoping to distract himself from the ache in his chest, but it was no use. The house was empty without her. His heart was empty without her.

As he sat in his study, staring blankly at the papers scattered across his desk, he felt a deep sense of regret. He had let his pride and stubbornness drive her away. He had pushed her to the point where she felt she had no choice but to leave. The letter she had sent still haunted him, the words echoing in his mind.

He missed her more than he could have ever imagined. Her absence was a constant, gnawing pain, a reminder of everything he had lost. He couldn't sleep, couldn't eat, couldn't focus on anything other than thoughts of her.

He thought about the nights they had spent talking and laughing, the way she had made him feel alive and whole. He remembered the way she had looked at him, the warmth in her eyes, and the way she had made him believe that he could be a better man.

That afternoon, a knock on the door interrupted his unproductive business attempt.

"Go away," he said loudly, not caring who it might be.

But the doors opened, nonetheless, and Rebecca allowed herself in.

"Oh, it's you," he said with a frown. "I'm busy."

"I can see that," she gave him a displeased glance. "What is going on here, Jonathan? Where is Ciara?"

Jonathan sighed heavily, running a hand through his hair. There was no point in lying, denying the truth, or embellishing it in any manner. There was only one truth, and it could be said in two simple words.

"She left."

Rebecca's eyes widened in shock. "She left? What do you mean she left?"

"I mean exactly that," he pouted. "She left. She is gone. She is not here."

"You know, I am still older than you, and as such, I demand respect," she reminded

him although he knew that there was no ill will behind her words. She was more concerned than she was willing to let on and he knew that.

“She went to stay with her parents,” he clarified, unable to meet her gaze.

“The parents who hate her?” she asked incredulously, obviously in hopes that through some incredible fluke of fortune, Ciara had another, secret set of parents, and she had decided to stay with them. Of course, that was not true.

“Yes,” he murmured.

“And you allowed her?” she gasped.

He frowned again. “I am not her guardian. She can do whatever she wants, and she made her choice.”

Rebecca’s face hardened. “Jonathan, you’re an idiot.”

He flinched at her blunt words. “What?”

“I won’t pretend to know what exactly happened, but I can rightfully assume that you said or did something to drive her away,” she pointed out. He hated it when she was right.

He lifted an annoyed eyebrow at her. “Why do you always assume that I am to blame?”

“Because I know you better than you think,” she said calmly which only seemed to irritate him more because he could see how confident she was in her own conclusion.

“That still doesn’t make me to be the guilty party of every sour conversation,” he pouted.

“No, just this one,” she said simply. “Because I know the other party as well. And someone as kind and compassionate as Ciara would not offend anyone unless she was driven to it. And you are quite good at driving people mad for that matter. I know that from personal experience.”

“So, are you going to tell me the truth finally or do I have to pull it out of you like a weed out of my garden?”

“We had an argument,” he replied, not wishing to delve more deeply into it.

“I knew it.” She shook her head at him. “You’ve pushed away your only chance at happiness for what?” she demanded, leaning forward. “Your pride? Your stubbornness?”

Jonathan’s temper flared. “It’s not that simple, Rebecca.”

“Isn’t it?” she shot back. “You had a wonderful woman who loved you, and you let her go. Why?”

He felt a pang of guilt but masked it with anger. “You don’t understand. You remember what my father was like. That’s how I’ll end up. I can’t be the husband she needs.”

Rebecca shook her head. “That’s a pathetic excuse, Jonathan. You’re not your father. You have the power to change, to be better. Ciara saw something in you, something worth loving. Why can’t you see it?”

Jonathan clenched his fists, his frustration boiling over. “I can’t just change who I am overnight, Rebecca.”

She softened slightly, her voice gentler but still firm. “No one expects you to change overnight, but you have to start somewhere. You have to be willing to try. Ciara believed in you. Don’t you think you owe it to her to at least try?”

Her words cut deep, and Jonathan felt the weight of his own stubbornness pressing down on him. He had pushed Ciara away because he was afraid of becoming like his

father, but in doing so, he had become exactly what he feared.

“I don’t know, Rebecca,” he sighed, getting up and starting to pace about his study as he always did when he was apprehensive.

She inhaled deeply, her hands resting on her hips. “I was hoping that you would do this on your own, that you would realize the error of your ways, but I see you need help.”

Upon those words, she headed toward the door, lingering there only for a moment, turning to face him. “What are you waiting for? A formal invitation? Come on!”

He had no idea where she was taking him or what she had in mind. They walked through the grand corridors of the manor, their footsteps echoing against the wooden floors.

Rebecca led the way up a narrow staircase that creaked under their weight. At the top, they reached a dusty, dimly lit attic. Jonathan looked around, puzzled, until Rebecca pushed open a hidden door at the far end of the attic. She stepped inside, and he hesitated for a moment before following her.

“What is this place?” he asked, having seen it for the first time in his entire life. He had no idea that it was even there.

“This room is dedicated to your mother,” Rebecca said.

“But... who made it?” Jonathan asked, incredulous at what he was witnessing.

Rebecca hesitated for a moment then revealed what he needed to hear.

“It was your father.”

CHAPTER 35

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 2:03 am*

The room was small and dimly lit with a single window allowing slivers of light to pierce through the dust motes dancing in the air. The walls were lined with shelves filled with boxes, old trunks, and furniture covered in white sheets, creating an eerie, timeless atmosphere.

In one corner, an antique writing desk stood, cluttered with delicate trinkets and a small silver mirror. A large wooden chest sat beneath the window, its lid slightly ajar, revealing stacks of yellowed letters tied with ribbon. The room seemed to pulse with memories, the echoes of the past whispering through the stillness.

Rebecca moved toward the chest and gently lifted a bundle of letters. She handed them to Jonathan, who took them with a mixture of curiosity and hesitation.

“Read them,” she urged softly, “then it will all be much clearer.”

He untied the ribbon and began to read, the elegant handwriting of his mother drawing him into a world he had never known. The letters spoke of a passionate and loving relationship between his parents, a stark contrast to the coldness he had known all his life. His mother’s words were filled with warmth and affection, describing moments of joy, laughter, and tenderness. She wrote of their shared dreams, their plans for the future, and the deep bond they shared.

One letter, in particular, caught his attention. It was written shortly after his birth, and his mother poured her heart out, expressing her hopes and dreams for him. She spoke of her desire for him to grow up surrounded by love, to follow his passions, and to never let fear hold him back.



Jonathan turned to Rebecca, his eyes filled with a mixture of confusion and curiosity. “How did you know about all of this?” he asked, his voice trembling slightly.

A secret room, he pondered. Right under his nose. He couldn’t believe that he had not found it himself after all the years of living in his house.

Rebecca sighed, her gaze softening as she looked at him. “Your father showed me this room before he died,” she admitted.

Jonathan’s confusion only deepened. “Why you?”

She gave him a sad smile. “He said that as a woman, I would understand better than you would. He wanted me to show you this room when the time was right.”

Jonathan’s mind whirled with emotions: sadness, hurt, anger, grief. He struggled to process the revelation. “Why didn’t he tell me himself? Why hide all of this from me?”

Rebecca placed a gentle hand on his arm. “I think he believed he was protecting you in his own way. Your father had his reasons, flawed as they might have been. But he wanted you to know the truth eventually, to see that your parents’ relationship was more than what you saw on the surface.”

Jonathan looked around the room again, taking in the personal effects and letters that painted a picture of a vibrant, loving woman he barely knew. His heart ached with the realization of how much he had missed, how much had been kept from him.

“He wanted you to understand that love and happiness are worth pursuing,” Rebecca continued. “That you don’t have to be afraid of following your heart, of embracing your emotions. Your mother wanted that for you, and I think, deep down, your father did too.”

Jonathan's eyes filled with tears as he absorbed Rebecca's words. He felt a wave of grief for the relationship he could have had with his parents, for the love and warmth that had been hidden from him. But amidst the sadness, there was also a glimmer of hope, a sense of possibility.

Rebecca looked at Jonathan with a mixture of compassion and resolve. "You need to break the cycle of your father's coldness, Jonathan," she urged. "Break free and be happy. When did you ever feel so happy with a woman before?"

He thought about it for a moment.

Jonathan nodded, his resolve hardening. He leaned in and kissed his cousin on the cheek. "Thank you, Rebecca. I know what to do now."

She returned his smile. "Go to her, Jonathan. Make things right."

He didn't have any time for another expression of gratitude. He rushed downstairs, his heart pounding with urgency.

"Ready my horse, now!" he barked excitedly at a servant, who scurried off to fulfill the command. He paced the foyer, impatience gnawing at him until the stable hand returned, leading his saddled horse.

With a quick nod, Jonathan mounted and spurred his horse into a gallop. The wind whipped past him as he rode with determination, the landscape blurring in his peripheral vision. Every stride of his horse brought him closer to the Hartfield estate and to Ciara.

He spurred his horse faster, determined to right his wrongs and win back the woman he loved.

Ciara woke up to the harsh reality of the tiny, dark cell of the jail coach. Her body ached from the uncomfortable journey, and her throat was parched. They had been traveling for five days already, and the realization that they had another five days to go filled her with dread. The knowledge that St. Catherine's was on the southern border of Scotland, far from any hope of rescue, made her situation feel even more hopeless.

The tiny cell was stifling, the air stale and suffocating. Every jolt of the carriage sent a shiver of pain through her. She could hear the muffled sounds of the outside world—the clatter of horses' hooves, the murmurs between Mother Superior and the coachman, and the occasional shout.

Ciara's stomach twisted with hunger, and her mouth was dry and cracked from lack of water. She had been given little to eat or drink since they had left, just enough to keep her alive but not enough to sustain her.

She thought of Jonathan, of the life she had left behind, and a wave of helplessness washed over her. Tears welled up in her eyes, but she blinked them back. She couldn't afford to show weakness. She had to stay strong to find a way out of this nightmare. But as the days stretched on and the carriage continued its relentless journey, her hope began to wane. How could she escape when she was so weak, so alone?

As the carriage jolted to a sudden halt, Ciara's heart skipped a beat. She strained to hear the voices outside, her senses heightened by fear and desperation. The coachman's voice, rough and weary, carried through the wooden walls.

"Mother Superior, we need to stop. The horses are tired, and so am I. We can't go on like this."

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There was a pause and then the sharp, authoritative tone of Mother Superior responded, filled with impatience. “We need to get to the nunnery as soon as possible.”

“I understand that,” the man responded, “but dead horses will take you nowhere. They need to eat, to rest. They are living creatures, after all.”

“Very well,” Mother Superior hissed.

Ciara’s pulse quickened as she heard the creak of the carriage door opening, and the heavy thud of boots hitting the ground. Moments later, the voices faded as Mother Superior and the coachman moved away from the carriage.

The realization that they were stopping at an inn filled her with a flicker of hope. Maybe this was her chance to escape. She listened intently, waiting for an opportunity. But as the minutes dragged on, that flicker of hope began to wane. She heard the coachman’s voice again, this time more distant as he secured the horses and conversed with someone at the inn.

Ciara’s mind raced, considering her options. She could try to break free, but her body was weak, and the cell was solidly built. Still, she had to try. This could be her one chance to try and break free.

“Help! Someone, please help me!”

Her cries echoed through the cold night air, but before she could call out again, she heard the heavy footsteps of Mother Superior approaching. The door to the carriage

was flung open, and the imposing figure of Mother Superior stood there, silhouetted against the dim light.

“Silence!” Mother Superior hissed, her eyes burning with anger. “Do you think your cries will save you? No one is coming for you, Ciara.”

Ciara’s heart pounded in her chest, but she refused to back down. “Please, let me go. I’ll do anything.”

Mother Superior’s expression twisted into a cruel smile. “Anything, you say? Very well, then. How about this: if you utter another word, I will simply say that you are sick with madness and that I am taking you to the convent to heal you with the word of God. Who do you think they will believe, even if you do manage to get someone’s attention?”

Ciara’s blood ran cold. She knew that because Mother Superior was a woman of the cloth, anyone would be in a disposition to believe her over Ciara. She knew Mother Superior was not bluffing; she would do whatever it took to break her spirit.

“Do you understand, Ciara?” Mother Superior continued, her voice dripping with malice. “One more word and I will make your stay at the nunnery a living nightmare, just like you’ve made your parents’ lives.”

Tears filled Ciara’s eyes as she nodded silently, her resolve crumbling under the weight of the threat. The harsh treatment she had already endured was hellish enough. She doubted she would be able to survive anything more brutal than that.

Mother Superior seemed satisfied with her compliance. “Good. Now, keep quiet and accept your punishment like the wretched soul you are.”

With that, she slammed the door shut, leaving Ciara in the suffocating darkness of the

cell. The silence was oppressive, broken only by the occasional creak of the carriage and the distant sounds of the inn.

Ciara curled up on the floor, her body trembling with fear and exhaustion. She felt utterly defeated, trapped in a nightmare with no end in sight. But she held on to the thought of her friends, drawing strength from the knowledge that she was protecting them, even at the cost of her own freedom.

## CHAPTER 36

Jonathan felt as if he had been riding for an eternity when he finally arrived at the Hartfield estate, his heart pounding with a mix of anger and worry. He dismounted his horse, throwing the reins to a nearby stable hand, and strode up the grand steps of the estate. His face was set in a determined scowl as he rapped sharply on the door. Within moments, the butler opened it and bowed.

“I need to speak to Ciara, immediately. It is a matter of the utmost urgency,” he demanded, without a greeting.

The butler didn’t show any surprise or shock, almost as if he were used to such sights of emergency in the household. Instead, he just nodded, ushering him into the drawing room. “Please wait here, Your Grace,” he told him. “Someone will be right with you.”

Jonathan paced about the chamber nervously, not thinking about the questions he would ask in case he stumbled onto her parents. There was no time for propriety, and he didn’t care about it in the least bit. In fact, he didn’t even want to be there. As soon as Ciara came to him, he would ask her to take a walk with him outside because what he had to say could not be said inside that house.

But when the door opened, he didn’t see Ciara’s lovely face. Instead, Lord and Lady

Hartfield greeted him, looking stunned to see him.

“Your Grace,” Lord Hartfield began, a forced smile on his face, regaining at least a semblance of composure, “what a nice surprise.”

Jonathan frowned. “I’m not here for false niceties. Where is Ciara? It is her I wish to talk to, not you.” His voice was cold and unyielding, his eyes narrowing as he scanned their faces for any hint of deceit.

They might have deceived Ciara about being changed people and somehow transforming into what they had never been, but they could never deceive him.

Lord Hartfield exchanged a nervous glance with his wife then he focused on Jonathan once again. “Ciara is not here, I’m afraid.”

“Where is she?” Jonathan demanded. “I will not leave this place until I see my wife and speak to her. You have no right to hide her from me.”

“We do,” Lord Hartfield replied. “She told you she needed time away from you.”

“I want her to tell it to me,” Jonathan insisted. “Not you.”

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Lord Hartfield shifted uncomfortably. “She is uhm... visiting some of our relatives, isn’t that right, dear?” he asked his wife.

“Yes,” Lady Hartfield immediately nodded. “That is why you cannot see her.”

Jonathan’s eyes darkened. “Which relatives? Where exactly?”

Lady Hartfield faltered. “She’s, uh, with her Aunt Margaret. Yes, in Bath. She wanted some time away to rest.”

Jonathan stepped closer, his presence menacing. “And why wasn’t I informed of this? I am her husband.”

Lord Hartfield cleared his throat. “Well, it was all very sudden. Ciara needed some a change of scenery, and we thought it best not to trouble you with the details.”

Jonathan’s fists clenched at his sides. “I don’t believe you.”

Lady Hartfield’s face paled. “Your Grace, please, there’s no need for this hostility.”

Jonathan leaned in, his voice low and dangerous. “I will ask you one more time: where is my wife?”

Lord Hartfield’s eyes darted to his wife, who looked just as panicked. “I told you, she’s with her Aunt Margaret,” he insisted, but the tremor in his voice betrayed him.

“When did she leave?” he asked.



“Three days ago,” Lady Hartfield tried to assure him, but it was in vain.

Suddenly, a thought struck Jonathan like a bolt of lightning: the note Ciara had sent him. Why hadn’t anyone come to retrieve her belongings? How had she been living at the Hartfield estate without her things?

He spun back to face Lord and Lady Hartfield, his eyes blazing with renewed suspicion.

“If Ciara has been staying here,” he said slowly, “why hasn’t anyone come to collect her belongings from Silverbrook Manor? How has she been living here without her clothes and personal items?”

Lady Hartfield’s eyes flickered nervously. “Oh, we simply bought her new clothes and other necessities,” she replied with a dismissive wave of her hand. “It was easier that way.”

Lord Hartfield stepped forward, attempting to put on a brave front. “Your Grace, I assure you, Ciara is fine. She’s just taking some time for herself. There’s no need for your concern.”

Suddenly, Jonathan’s patience snapped. He surged forward, grabbing Lord Hartfield by the collar and yanking him to his feet. The older man’s eyes widened in terror as Jonathan’s furious face loomed inches from his own.

“Tell me the truth,” Jonathan growled, his voice low and menacing. “Or I swear, you’ll regret it.”

Lord Hartfield, a complete coward, began to tremble. “All right! All right! She’s being taken to St. Catherine’s!” he blurted out. “Mother Superior is with her; they left a few days ago.”

Jonathan's grip tightened for a moment before he shoved Lord Hartfield violently, sending him sprawling onto the floor. His fury was palpable as he stood over the cowering man.

"You're despicable," he spat, his voice filled with venom. "How could you do this to your own daughter?"

Lady Hartfield gasped, her face pale. "We were only trying to help her," she protested weakly.

"Help her?" Jonathan echoed incredulously. "By sending her back to that wretched place? You're not helping her, you're destroying her. If anything happens to Ciara because of your actions, you will pay dearly. I will see to that myself!"

Jonathan's mind was racing, a million questions swarming inside his mind. Fear gripped him, but he knew that he couldn't give in to that feeling. Ciara was counting on him. He had to save her.

Jonathan's eyes narrowed as he looked down at the trembling Lord Hartfield. "Where is St. Catherine's?"

Lord Hartfield stammered, "It's on the southern border of Scotland."

Jonathan's mind raced. "And when was Ciara taken away?"

"Five days ago," Lord Hartfield replied, his voice barely above a whisper.

Jonathan made a quick calculation in his head. "They must have reached Sheffield by now," he muttered to himself.

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It was obvious. Returning to Silverbrook Manor would take up too much time. He had to get going immediately. Ciara was five days ahead of him, and he needed to ride fast without much rest to catch up with her. He only hoped that he would reach her in time.

Jonathan glared at Lord Hartfield. “You will get me provisions for my journey. It is the least you can do.”

Lord Hartfield nodded immediately, scrambling to his feet and rushing to gather what Jonathan needed. The Duke stood tall, his eyes never leaving the cowardly man. Moments later, a servant returned with a satchel filled with food, water, and other essentials.

Jonathan grabbed the provisions and fixed Lord Hartfield with a menacing stare. “Do not think for a minute that this is over. I’ll be back for you,” he warned, his voice low and dangerous.

Without another word, he mounted his horse, his determination driving him forward. He spurred his horse into a gallop, heading north toward Sheffield.

## CHAPTER 37

Ciara sat in the darkness of the tiny cell within the jail coach, her body aching from days of travel. The faint noises of the inn reached her ears, muffled but persistent. From what she could hear, they were about to continue their journey. Suddenly, there was a loud crack, followed by a series of shouts and curses.

“Blast it! The axle’s gone!” a man’s voice yelled, frustration evident in his tone.

“What do you mean, the axle’s gone?” Mother Superior’s sharp voice cut through the air, laced with impatience.

“I mean it’s broken, madam! We can’t go anywhere until it’s fixed,” the coachman replied, sounding exasperated.

Ciara’s heart raced. She strained to hear more, pressing her ear against the cold metal bars. There were more sounds of commotion outside, heavy footsteps, and the scraping of wood and metal. She thought about calling for help again, in hopes of reaching someone who might dare to help her, but she immediately remembered Mother Superior’s threat. She couldn’t risk receiving even harsher treatment at the nunnery. So, she remained quiet instead, choosing to listen to what was happening outside the carriage.

“How long will it take to fix?” Mother Superior demanded.

“It’s not just a quick fix, madam,” he explained. “We’re in a remote area, far from any blacksmith. It could take days to either find a replacement or make the repairs.”

Mother Superior’s sharp voice cut through the air. “Days? We do not have days! You must find a blacksmith immediately and have him brought here!”

The coachman sighed audibly. “I’ll do what I can, but there’s no guarantee. We’re miles from the nearest town, and there’s no telling how long it will take to get someone here.”

Mother Superior let out an exasperated huff. “Just do it. We cannot afford any further delays.”

The coachman muttered something under his breath then his footsteps faded as he walked away, presumably to start his search for a blacksmith.

Ciara's heart pounded in her chest. She realized this unexpected delay might be a glimmer of hope. If it took days to repair the coach, there might be a chance for her to be rescued. She pressed her ear closer to the bars, trying to gather as much information as possible.

That was when the door suddenly burst open, and Mother Superior's iron grip closed around Ciara's wrist, dragging her from the suffocating confines of the jail coach. The sudden light and fresh air were a stark contrast to the damp, stale darkness she had been imprisoned in. Ciara stumbled as she was pulled towards the inn, her legs weak and wobbly from days of confinement.

"If you make so much as a sound without my permission, I shall make sure that you spend the rest of your life in solitary confinement," she hissed. "Am I making myself clear?"

"Y-yes," Ciara managed to muster as the cold talon of fear gripped her very heart, squeezing harder and harder.

Once inside, the inn's modest warmth and the murmur of patrons contrasted sharply with the cold severity of Mother Superior. She thrust Ciara into a small, dimly lit room, the door slamming shut behind them. Ciara barely had time to catch her breath before Mother Superior turned to her, eyes blazing with a cruel intensity.

"Listen closely, you wretched girl," she hissed, her voice low but filled with venom. "You will stay in this room and not make a sound. Do not even think about trying to escape, for the hounds of hell will be upon you faster than you can imagine."

Ciara's heart pounded in her chest, the threat echoing in her mind. She nodded

meekly, too terrified to speak. Mother Superior sneered then turned on her heel and left the room, locking the door behind her with a resounding click.

Ciara sank to the floor, the reality of her situation pressing down on her. She was trapped, far from anyone who might help her. The inn's walls seemed to close in around her, and she felt a wave of hopelessness wash over her. But even in her fear and despair, a spark of determination remained.

She couldn't give up hope. Not yet.

Jonathan rode hard, pushing himself and his horse to the brink. He couldn't afford to waste any time if he hoped to catch up with Ciara. However, as the sun dipped below the horizon and darkness enveloped the countryside, he knew he had to rest. His horse was lathered in sweat, its steps growing increasingly unsteady.

Reluctantly, Jonathan guided the tired animal to a nearby inn. The establishment was modest with warm light spilling from its windows and the comforting hum of voices from within. He dismounted and handed the reins to the stable boy, his mind racing with worry and urgency.

Inside, the inn was bustling with travelers and locals alike, sharing stories and laughter over mugs of ale. Jonathan approached the innkeeper, a burly man with a friendly face.

"A room for the night, and stable for my horse," Jonathan requested, his voice taut with exhaustion.

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The innkeeper nodded, sensing his urgency. "Right away, sir. You look like you've been through quite a ride. Will you be needing supper as well?"

Jonathan shook his head. "Just the room. And some water for my horse."

The innkeeper handed him a key and directed him to a room upstairs.

As Jonathan stood at the bar, accepting a tankard of water from the innkeeper, a figure approached him. Her dress was low-cut, and she moved with a seductive grace that drew the attention of many in the room.

"Good evening," she purred, sidling up to him. "You look like you've had a long journey. Perhaps I could offer you some... company to warm your bed?"

Jonathan glanced at her, her beauty undeniable, but his mind was elsewhere. The thought of Ciara, alone and frightened, filled his thoughts.

He shook his head, offering her a polite but firm smile. "Thank you, but no. I'm just here to rest."

The woman arched an eyebrow, clearly unaccustomed to such a refusal. "Are you sure? A man like you shouldn't be alone on a night like this."

"I'm sure," Jonathan replied, his tone leaving no room for argument. "I have someone waiting for me. Someone I need to find."

The woman's expression softened slightly, and she nodded, stepping back. For a

moment, he thought he could see sympathy in her eyes and even a desire to have someone like that for herself, someone who would refuse all other women and have eyes for just that one.

She smiled a little wistfully as she spoke. “Very well. If you change your mind, you know where to find me.”

Jonathan nodded and made his way to his room. He didn’t want anyone else in his bed or in his arms other than Ciara. He couldn’t stop thinking about her laughter, her kindness, and the fire in her eyes. He had to find her. Reaching his room, he locked the door behind him and lay down, the exhaustion finally catching up with him.

Tomorrow, he would continue his journey. He would find Ciara and bring her home. With that thought, he finally felt a sense of peace, his eyes growing heavy as he drifted into a fitful sleep.

## CHAPTER 38

Suddenly, with a sharp gasp, Ciara awoke. She felt as if she couldn’t breathe as remnants of a nightmare clung to her like cobwebs, and she couldn’t shake them no matter how hard she tried.

She swung her legs over the edge of the bed, her feet touching the chilly wooden floor.

With great effort, she stood and made her way to the door, her every step more frail than the next. She reached for the handle, hoping against hope that it would open, but found it locked as always.

With a heavy sigh, she returned to bed. She had no idea when or even how she fell asleep. All she knew was that at one point, she suddenly heard the sound of the key



being turned in the lock.

Her eyes fluttered open heavily as she watched the door creak open with a frightening groan, admitting the austere figure of Mother Superior.

“You’re awake then,” Mother Superior said.

Ciara could see a modest portion of stale bread and a pitcher of water, in quantities that offered little comfort to her ravenous state.

Mother Superior shut the door behind her with an authoritative finality. She placed the meager provisions on the small table next to the bed, her movements precise and devoid of any sympathy or sentiment. Then again, Ciara knew better than to expect that of her.

Ciara struggled to sit up, her spirit frail and her body weary. She had no idea what she had done to deserve such harsh treatment.

“Have you no mercy in you?” she asked, her eyes searching the stern countenance before her.

Mother Superior looked at her as if Ciara were unworthy of a longer gaze and as if all of this were nothing but a hassle for her.

“Mercy is not given freely, child. Rather, it is earned through true penitence and piety. From what I’ve seen so far, you have shown me neither.”

A shiver of fear passed through Ciara. “Please,” she begged, her voice trembling with anguish, “do not take me back to St. Catherine’s. It will be the end of me.”

Mother Superior stepped closer, her shadow falling heavily over Ciara’s form. “St.

Catherine's is a place of redemption," she declared with a sternness that brooked no argument. "There, you will find the salvation you seek."

Ciara looked down, completely beaten. Even her eyes, once sparkling with hope, were now sunken and glassy, showing that she was on the verge of giving up. "Redemption through suffering is not salvation," she countered, her voice barely more than a whisper. "It is but a form of torture."

Mother Superior's patience, though formidable, was not infinite. Her expression hardened, her eyes narrowing into a steely resolve. "Enough of your protestations," she said, her tone leaving no room for further debate. She tossed the bread onto the bed with a dismissive flick of her wrist, the stale crust landing with a soft thud beside Ciara.

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“You will atone for your sins,” Mother Superior continued, her voice laced with finality. “And that is the end of it. The path to redemption is arduous, and it is through enduring it that one finds grace.”

With those final words, Mother Superior turned on her heel, the echo of her footsteps fading as she made her way to the door. The lock clicked shut once more, leaving Ciara alone with her scant provisions and hope which was dwindling with each passing moment.

Reluctantly, she devoured the food which didn't help at all in satiating her hunger.

As the quiet of her confinement wrapped around her like a heavy shroud, she began to hum softly, her voice barely a whisper against the silence. It was the tune of her grandmother's song, a melody imbued with the warmth and strength of a past now distant. The notes floated through the air, a fragile bridge to a time when comfort and love enveloped her in a warm embrace.

In the solitude of her cell, Ciara clung to the memory of her grandmother's unyielding fortitude. Ciara's heart ached as she recalled the times when her grandmother's words had been a beacon of hope in the darkest of moments.

With renewed resolve, she whispered a quiet promise to herself. She would endure. She would not surrender to the darkness that sought to envelop her. For if there was even the slightest chance of escape, of finding a way out of her torment, she would grasp it with every ounce of strength she possessed.

So, she kept repeating inside her mind. Hold on. Hold on. Hold on...

As the first light of dawn crept over the horizon, Jonathan stirred from his restless sleep. The night had been fitful, without any rest. He knew that he couldn't dally. He had to keep going because he couldn't know how far away Ciara had been taken.

With a sense of urgency, he threw off the covers, got dressed, and hurried to the inn's stable, his footsteps echoing with purpose in the quiet morning with no one else awake but him. The stable welcomed him with warmth and familiarity as it was bathed in the soft, golden glow of the early sunlight which seemed to beckon him to get going. Jonathan's horse, a strong and well-bred steed, nickered softly as he approached. The animal's coat gleamed with health and vigor, a reassuring sight for Jonathan. He ran his hand along the horse's flank, feeling the firm muscles beneath the sleek coat.

"We've got a long way to go, old friend," Jonathan said with a determined edge to his voice, "but we will find Ciara. We have to."

With practiced ease, Jonathan mounted his horse, the animal shifting beneath him with a gentle nudge. He adjusted his reins, his eyes fixed on the northward path that stretched before him. Every mile traversed was a step closer to his goal, each stride a promise of hope and resolution.

The horse broke into a swift trot, and Jonathan urged it forward with a firm but gentle hand. The familiar rhythm of hooves against the road and the crisp morning air invigorated him. The landscape, with its rolling hills and distant forests, blurred into a tapestry of green and gold as he sped toward his destination.

As he rode north, the miles and hours melded into one continuous surge of purpose. The thought of Ciara, and the desperation to find her, fueled his every stride. With each passing moment, Jonathan's commitment to his search grew ever stronger, driving him forward through the dawning day.

## CHAPTER 39

Minutes turned into hours of riding, and Jonathan knew that he would need to stop very soon. Exhaustion was slowly taking hold of him, and he struggled to keep his eyes open. He had to stop and rest, if only for an hour or so. The journey northward had been long and arduous, and he was slowly succumbing to fatigue. As the sun began to dip toward the horizon, he spotted the welcome sight of another inn, its sign creaking gently in the breeze.

He guided his horse to a halt and dismounted with a weary sigh, his body protesting the effort. The inn's façade was modest but inviting, a beacon of respite in his relentless search. He slowly made his way to the entrance, his eyes searching for any signs of Ciara or Mother Superior.

As soon as he entered, the murmur of conversation filled his ears. Jonathan approached the bar where the innkeeper was polishing a glass, his gaze sweeping over the patrons.

In a quiet corner sat a nun, her habit a stark contrast to the lively atmosphere around her. Her demeanor was demure, her head bowed in contemplative silence. She didn't look anything like the frightening woman he had been told about. Then again, everyone had the capability of pretending to be something they were not when circumstances forced them to.

Could it be? He wondered silently to himself. Even if it wasn't Mother Superior, perhaps it was someone else, someone traveling with them, someone who had perhaps seen them. In any case, just seeing her offered him the confirmation that he needed that he was on the right track.

Jonathan's heart quickened with a spark of hope. He approached the nun with a measured stride, his face etched with both fatigue and determination. "Excuse me,

Sister,” he began, his voice carrying a note of urgency, “I am searching for a woman who may have passed through here. She is the abbess of St. Catherine’s Nunnery. And there is a young woman with her... have you perchance seen them?”

The nun looked up from her reflection, her eyes soft and round with surprise. She offered a small, hesitant smile. “I am sorry, sir, but I do not recall seeing any other woman in cloth apart from myself.”

Jonathan’s hopes began to wane, but he pressed on, hoping against hope that he might have missed something. “Are you certain? She is a tall, stern woman, quite distinguished. I am on a very important matter and any information about her or the young woman accompanying her could be crucial.”

The nun’s gaze lowered once more, her fingers nervously twisting the edges of her habit. “I am afraid I have not seen anyone matching that description, young man. I’ve been here but a short time myself, so perhaps you should inquire with the innkeeper.”

“Yes, I shall do so, thank you,” Jonathan nodded gratefully, turning away from the nun and heading back to the innkeeper. Jonathan’s weariness faded as he approached the man with a new sense of urgency. The innkeeper, polishing a glass behind the bar, looked up as Jonathan addressed him.

“Good evening. Have you seen a nun traveling with a young woman? I’m searching for someone very important, and any information could be vital.”

The innkeeper’s brow furrowed in thought. “I’m afraid I haven’t seen anyone fitting that description. However, just a short while ago, someone mentioned spotting a nun traveling on a jail coach not far from here.”

Jonathan’s heart raced at the mention of the jail coach. He seized upon the information with a glimmer of hope. “A jail coach? How long ago was this?”

The innkeeper scratched his head, trying to recall. “About an hour ago, I believe. The person who saw it said it was heading north.”

Without another word, Jonathan reached into his pocket, tossing a few coins onto the counter as a gesture of thanks. He turned sharply on his heel and dashed outside, his mind racing.

That had to be her! Jonathan couldn't believe that he had managed to catch up with them. His heart was racing like mad, beating inside his throat, and he could barely breathe with excitement and apprehension. But he knew that the most difficult part of the mission still lay ahead of him. He doubted that Mother Superior would just give Ciara back to him. Regardless of what he had to do, he would bring Ciara home. He had vowed to do so.

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Jonathan mounted his horse with practiced speed, his exhaustion forgotten in the face of this new lead.

As Ciara found herself in the carriage cell again, the melody of her grandmother's song still echoed faintly in her mind. That was the only thing keeping her sane.

The sudden, ominous growl of thunder drew her gaze to the barred window through which she could see dark, roiling clouds gathering in the sky.

As if in response to the foreboding sky, a fierce storm broke out with a suddenness that took her breath away. The rain began in torrents, pounding against the window with a relentless intensity. The wind howled through the narrow opening, carrying with it the scent of rain and the distant rumble of thunder.

Ciara could hear the commotion outside—the coachman was cursing under his breath, his frustration audible even through the storm's fury.

Mother Superior's voice cut through the storm's din, sharp and authoritative. "Mind your language!" she scolded, her tone stern and uncompromising. "We will not be deterred by a mere storm."

The coachman's muttered curses continued, drowned out by the roar of the wind. As the storm intensified, the road outside began to transform. The steady downpour turned the path into a quagmire of mud and slush, each wheel of the coach sinking deeper into the mire with each passing moment.

The coach swayed violently as it struggled to maintain its course, the horses straining



against the thickening mud. The rain lashed against the windows, obscuring Ciara's view but amplifying the sense of chaos and turmoil outside.

In her cell, Ciara's heart pounded with a mixture of fear and anticipation. The storm, though frightening, seemed to offer a glimmer of hope. Perhaps the tempest could delay their progress or even cause an opportunity for escape. The violent upheaval of nature felt like a cruel twist of fate, yet it also presented a chance for salvation.

Amidst the storm's roar, she could faintly hear Mother Superior's voice raised in urgent concern.

"There's a large branch fallen across the road!" Mother Superior's voice pierced through the clamor, laced with alarm. "Be careful!"

The driver's curses and the frantic sound of his attempts to control the horses grew louder. The thunder crashed once more, its reverberations more deafening than before. The sheer volume of the storm's assault startled the horses, their panicked whinnies cutting through the tumultuous noise.

Ciara pressed her back against the wall of her cell, her heart racing as the sounds of the struggle outside reached fever pitch. She could hear the coachman's desperate shouts, his voice strained and desperate as he tried to calm the frenzied animals.

Without warning, the coach lurched violently. The force of the impact with the fallen branch was immense.

The sudden jolt threw Ciara forward with brutal force. She was propelled against the side of the carriage, the sharp pain of the collision striking her head with a force that blurred her vision.

The world spun as her senses dimmed, the storm's roar fading into a muffled, distant

noise. Her body crumpled to the floor, and the darkness quickly overtook her.

## CHAPTER 40

Jonathan pressed on through the storm, his determination undimmed by the downpour that had already soaked him to the very bone.

The clouds above him hung thick and ominous, but fate seemed to favor him and his endeavor. The rain had slowly begun to wane, easing to a light drizzle that offered only a fleeting respite.

Jonathan's eyes remained sharp, scanning the road for any signs of trouble. The storm had wreaked havoc on the landscape, turning the once-passable route into a quagmire of mud and debris. His horse, though weary, navigated the obstacles with a practiced gait.

Suddenly, he heard something. It was a faint sound, but he recognized it immediately, that haunting melody that cut through the storm's aftermath.

Ciara.

His exhaustion and the relentless conditions seemed to dissolve in the face of this newfound hope. Driven by a surge of determination, he urged his horse into a swift gallop, navigating the muddy road with newfound urgency.

The road was still as treacherous as before, but he had Ciara's song to guide him now.

As he rounded a bend, the sight that met his eyes nearly stopped his heart. The overturned jail coach lay amid the wreckage, its wheels embedded in the muddy ground. The storm had wreaked havoc on the carriage, but Jonathan's eyes were drawn to the source of the music.

He dismounted swiftly, his soaked cloak flapping in the breeze. The song's melody was a fragile lifeline in the chaos, guiding him to the wreckage. He approached the overturned coach, his hands trembling as he moved.

“Ciara!” Jonathan called out, his voice urgent but tinged with hope. “Ciara, can you hear me?”

His voice reverberated through the storm's remnants, and for a moment, the only response was the sound of the rain dripping from the broken carriage and the distant rumble of thunder.

“Ciara!” he shouted again, his voice breaking through the gloom. “I’m here!”

Finally, a weak, trembling voice answered, faint but unmistakable. “Jonathan...?”

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A surge of relief washed over him, and he moved quickly to the carriage's side, searching for a way to open it. The coach was partially overturned, and the debris made it difficult to access. Jonathan's hands worked with urgency, pushing aside the wreckage and debris that blocked the way.

"Hold on!" he called out, his voice filled with determination. "I'm going to get you out."

As he finally managed to pry open a portion of the carriage's side, the sight of Ciara's pale, exhausted face filled him with both relief and sorrow. Her eyes, though dimmed by the ordeal, lit up with recognition as she saw him.

"Jonathan," she whispered, her voice barely audible. "You found me."

Jonathan's heart swelled with relief as he reached out to her. "Yes, darling. I'm here. We'll get you out of this."

Carefully, he helped her out of the wreckage, his hands gentle yet firm as he guided her to safety. When Ciara stumbled into his arms, she clung to him with a desperation born of fear and exhaustion. Tears streamed down her face as she buried her head in his chest, her body trembling with the release of all the emotions she had held in.

"Are you real?" she kept asking, her voice choked with sobs. "Are you really here?"

Jonathan held her tightly. He looked down at her, his heart aching with both sorrow and joy. Without a word, he pulled her gently back and kissed her, the kiss a tender affirmation of his love and relief.

When their lips finally parted, Jonathan searched her eyes with a mixture of vulnerability and hope.

“Is that proof enough?” he asked softly, his voice thick with emotion.

Ciara’s response was immediate. She hugged him again, her embrace a silent testament to her need for him, her tears mingling with the rain on their skin. Jonathan’s heart swelled with both joy and regret as he held her close, feeling the warmth of her presence and the weight of his own feelings.

“I was miserable without you,” he admitted, his voice barely a whisper. “I missed you so much. I missed your song. You are my siren, and like Odysseus’ men, I would have jumped into the seas for you.”

He pulled back slightly, his eyes searching hers. “I’m sorry for what I told you and how I treated you. You deserve the whole world, not a broken man like me. But I promise, I’ll try. If you’ll have me, I’ll try to be better. I love you, Ciara.”

Ciara’s response was immediate. She leaned in and kissed him, her lips conveying a depth of emotion that words could scarcely capture.

“I love you, too,” she said, her voice steady despite the tremors of the storm and their ordeal. “I’ve always loved you.”

“Let’s go home.” He smiled at her, caressing her wet cheek.

“Yes, my love,” she agreed.

With a tenderness that belied the urgency of their circumstances, Jonathan helped Ciara onto the horse. He ensured she was settled comfortably, her exhausted form wrapped securely in his cloak.

As he mounted the horse and took the reins, Jonathan looked at Ciara, his heart swelling with a mixture of love and gratitude.

They had a long journey back home, but they were now together. And that's all that mattered.

## EPILOGUE

"It's a miracle you were able to find her and bring her home. We've all been deeply worried," Uncle Brendan said, his voice filled with love and tenderness.

Jonathan looked at Ciara, his expression filled with affection and gratitude. "It was the most important thing I've ever done. I would have traveled to the ends of the earth to bring her back."

Several weeks after he'd brought Ciara back home, the garden of Silverbrook Manor had welcomed guests.

At a charmingly set table, Jonathan and Ciara were enjoying lemonade, their spirits buoyed by the serene surroundings. The Kirdales and Ciara's uncle were seated around them.

As Jonathan sipped his lemonade, he looked over at Ciara, who was seated beside him, her hand resting comfortably in his. Her eyes were bright with relief and happiness, the storm's shadows now a distant memory.

Ciara realized she could never express her gratitude for what he had done. The only thing she could do was love him with every breath of her body and show him her love in every way possible.

"And what about Mother Superior?" Archie asked a question that had clearly been on

his mind.

“When the storm subsided and the constables were finally able to search for any remaining traces, we found the bodies of Mother Superior and the coachman on the side of the road. It seems they were thrown from the coach when it hit that large branch. The storm and the accident... they had no chance.”

A hush fell over the group as they absorbed the gravity of Jonathan’s words. The garden’s serene beauty seemed to contrast sharply with the dark turn of the conversation.

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Rebecca had not spoken yet, but she rounded the conversation with her own comment. “It seems a fitting end for a woman so cruel. What she did was unforgivable, and perhaps the storm’s fury was her final reckoning.”

Her husband nodded in agreement, his face reflecting a mixture of relief and resignation. “It is a harsh end, but justice has a way of finding its own path. The suffering she inflicted on others cannot be forgotten, but it seems that fate has dealt with her in its own way.”

Ciara, her gaze distant, seemed to be wrestling with her emotions. She glanced at Jonathan, finding comfort in his presence. “It’s difficult to reconcile such a fate with the lessons we’re taught about justice and mercy. But perhaps it’s a reminder of the consequences of cruelty.”

Jonathan smiled at her. “What matters is that we’re together and safe now. We can’t change the past, but we can focus on the future.”

However, that was not the end of Archie’s questions. “And what of your parents, Ciara?” His wife gave him a frowning look, but Archie only shrugged. “What? They are to blame for this as much as Mother Superior is.”

“Archie!” Rebecca shook his head at him. “I swear, sometimes you are just like a child.”

Ciara smiled. “It’s perfectly all right, Rebecca. It is a perfectly natural question. But I think Uncle Brendan can provide a better response to it than I can, seeing that he went to see them with Jonathan. I just... couldn’t.”



All eyes were on Uncle Brendan, who took a sip of his lemonade and then recounted what had happened.

“Jonathan and I visited their home to inform them of what happened to Ciara and to Mother Superior. We also told them that we would be in search of justice as we seek to resolve the situation. They were, understandably, quite distressed. After some... heated exchanges, and a few well-placed blows from Jonathan, Lord Hartfield and his wife pleaded to be granted permission to leave the country and never come back. We eventually agreed. Better yet, I left it to Jonathan to decide upon. I do believe that they have already left, and it will be as if they were never here in the first place.”

A murmur of approval and sympathy ran through the group. Rebecca glanced at Ciara, who sighed deeply, her gaze distant and reflective. So many things had taken place. Her hopes had been dashed so many times against the rocky shores of reality, but she was wiser now. She knew who her real family was, and she was fine with that.

“I’m glad to hear that,” Rebecca said softly, her eyes meeting Ciara’s with sympathy flickering in them. “You deserve peace, and they should not be part of your life any longer.”

Jonathan, sensing the weight of the moment, wrapped his arm around Ciara and pulled her close. His touch was both reassuring and protective.

“Yes,” he affirmed, his voice firm yet gentle. “You don’t need to see them ever again. We’re here now, and that’s what matters.”

As if to emphasize his support, Jonathan leaned in and placed a tender kiss on Ciara’s forehead. Ciara closed her eyes for a moment, drawing strength from his presence.

Allowing them a moment of tenderness, Rebecca turned to Jonathan and Ciara with a

curious smile once more.

“What are your plans now that everything has settled? What will you two do next?”

Jonathan’s face lit up with a smile, a glimmer of excitement in his eyes. “I am very glad you asked that, Becky.”

Reaching into his pocket, he produced a neatly folded document and extended it towards Ciara. “I have something for you,” he said softly, his tone filled with anticipation.

“What is this?” she asked, her fingers trembling.

“Read it,” he said joyfully.

Ciara took the document, her brow furrowing in confusion as she unfolded it. As she read, her eyes widened in astonishment. She couldn’t believe it. She thought it was all some beautiful dream, and she would wake up at any moment.

“What is it, dear?” Rebecca asked what was obviously on everyone’s mind.

Ciara looked up at her, her cheeks flushing with joy, her heart skipping a beat with delight.

“It is a contract,” she said, her voice on the verge of breaking. “It confirms the purchase of a piece of land...”

She looked over at Uncle Brendan, and she was absolutely certain that he knew what she was about to say. She could see it in his eyes.

“The land where my grandmother grew up...” She tried to hold back her tears, but

that was more difficult than she thought.

Her heart raced as she looked up at Jonathan, her emotions welling up. “Am I dreaming?” she asked, incredulous.

“No, my dear. It is not a dream. It is your reality. Together, we’ll build a home there,” he said gently. “A place where you can feel connected to your grandmother and to your roots. And whenever you desire, we can visit that place of wonder and stay there for as long as you’d like.”

The significance of the gesture overwhelmed Ciara. This man had already done so much for her. He had proven his love for her in so many ways, yet he always managed to outdo himself. Tears of joy filled her eyes as she set the document aside and threw her arms around Jonathan.

“Thank you,” she whispered, her voice choked with emotion. “This means everything to me.”

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Jonathan held her close, his own emotions stirred by her heartfelt response. “I’m glad,” he murmured. “I love you, Ciara. I want us to have a place where you feel at home.”

“You are my home, Jonathan,” she gushed, her heart swelling to the brim.

As they embraced, Jonathan’s eyes sparkled with a hint of mischief.

Drawing back slightly, he looked into Ciara’s eyes and with a playful grin, said, “Taim i’ ngra leat.”

She knew those words immediately. She had not heard them too many times in her life, but she did hear them when she needed them the most as was the case now.

“What does it mean?” Rebecca asked curiously.

“Unless it is something too private,” Archie teased.

Ciara chuckled. “It means I love you in Irish.”

Uncle Brendan, who had been observing with interest, couldn’t help but chuckle. “Ah, Jonathan, that’s a charming sentiment, but your pronunciation needs a bit of work!”

Ciara’s eyes flashed with mock severity as she turned her glare towards her uncle. “Uncle Brendan, that’s not very nice of you! It’s the thought that counts,” she said, her tone half exasperated and half amused.

Jonathan, taking the teasing in his stride, laughed softly. “Perhaps I need a lesson or two from you, my dear,” he said, making her blush. “But I meant every word of it.”

With a tender smile, she looked up at Jonathan and responded in Irish, her voice filled with affection.

“Taim i’ ngra leat freisin,” she said, responding to his expression of love.

Jonathan’s smile broadened, but his curiosity was piqued when Ciara continued speaking in Irish. The words were a soft murmur, and while he recognized the emotional weight of her tone, he didn’t fully grasp their meaning. He simply listened to the melodious sound of her voice, lulling him into a sensation of love and serenity.

Uncle Brendan’s eyes widened in surprise, and he glanced between Jonathan and Ciara with a look of incredulity. Jonathan noticed it immediately, his own inquisitiveness rising with each passing moment. Seeing the confusion on the Duke’s face, Uncle Brendan couldn’t hold back any longer.

With a mix of amazement and excitement, he cleared his throat. “Jonathan, perhaps you would like to know—Ciara just told you she’s with child.”

Jonathan’s eyes widened in shock and delight as he turned to Ciara, his mouth slightly agape. The gravity of her words sank in, and a profound wave of joy and astonishment washed over him.

Ciara’s cheeks flushed with a mix of embarrassment and happiness. She looked up at Jonathan, her eyes sparkling with love.

“I wanted to tell you in a special way,” she said softly.

The world seemed to stand still as he looked at Ciara. Without a second thought, he

swept Ciara up into his arms, lifting her effortlessly. He twirled her around in a jubilant spin, his laughter mingling with her delighted squeals.

“Jonathan!” Ciara exclaimed between laughs, her tone tinged with a hint of amusement. “This isn’t helping my nausea, you know!”

He gently set her back on her feet, his face still radiating the joy of the moment. His eyes were filled with affection and wonder as he looked at her.

“Are you sure?” he asked softly, his voice a blend of curiosity and concern.

“Yes, my love,” she gushed softly.

Tears of joy filled his eyes as he pulled Ciara into another embrace, holding her close.

“Are you... happy?” she asked with a slight tremor in her voice. He knew why she would ask that. He remembered their last conversation about children well. Her fear was justified. But at the same time, he was not the man he was before.

“Yes, my love. This is the most wonderful news,” he said, his voice thick with emotion. “I’m so incredibly happy. I promise we’ll create the best life we can for our little one.”

Uncle Brendan, still looking both surprised and delighted, added with a warm smile, “Congratulations to both of you. This is truly wonderful news.”

With a look of joy and satisfaction, Rebecca raised her glass in a toast. “To the future and the new addition to your family. May it be filled with love and happiness.”

Everyone did the same as Jonathan and Ciara gazed at each other lovingly. The joyful celebrations had filled the air with a warm and festive atmosphere, but now,

Jonathan's heart was set on a more intimate moment with Ciara.

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With a kind yet firm expression, Jonathan addressed their guests. “Dear guests, we love you all, but I’d like to ask you to leave us. Ciara and I would appreciate some time alone to absorb the news and uhm... enjoy each other’s company.”

Ciara turned to Jonathan, a playful scowl on her face. “Jonathan, must you be so forward? Our friends and family are here to celebrate with us.”

Jonathan gave her a mischievous smile. “What’s so wrong with wanting to spend some time with my lovely wife?”

Before Ciara could respond further, Archie stood up with a knowing smile. “I understand completely,” he said warmly. “I know the feeling of wanting to have your wife all to yourself.”

And upon those words, he walked over to Rebecca, picking her up into his arms and taking her away. “Goodbye, everyone!” Archie said through his wife’s giggles.

“Goodbye!” Rebecca waved at them, her face lit up with love for her husband.

As soon as they left, Uncle Brendan got up as well. “It would seem I am the last one to leave.”

“Come to see us soon,” Jonathan smiled, patting the man on the shoulder as they exchanged their goodbyes.

As the garden began to clear, Jonathan and Ciara were left alone in the tranquil, softly illuminated space. The sounds of departing footsteps and the closing of the manor’s



doors marked the end of the evening's festivities, leaving Jonathan and Ciara in their own private haven.

"You know," he said playfully, turning to her, "Archie had a grand idea."

"Which one?" Ciara asked, but before she received her answer, Jonathan scooped her into his arms.

She giggled in response. It was the most beautiful sound he had ever heard. "Where are you taking me?" she asked, looking at him with a mixture of amusement and affection.

"Where you belong," he grinned. "To my bed."

But they didn't reach the bed.

They stumbled into his bedchamber where he pinned her against the wall with her locking her legs around his waist. His heart pounded like mad. His manhood throbbed. His body trembled. His insides were on fire. As he fumbled with the hem of her gown, he stared at her.

"You are so beautiful," he whispered as her bright eyes burned with desire and profound love unlike anything he had ever seen before.

He pulled down her gown, exposing her nipples, dragging his hungry lips over them as she moaned. His other hand fumbled with his trousers, freeing his manhood from the constraint. He pressed against her wet heat.

Her breaths were already short, ragged. She was clutching at him desperately, greedily. His hot mouth surrounded one nipple, sucking on it, licking it, teasing it. He was strong and hard for her.

He had to have her now. He couldn't wait a single moment.

"I need you," he heard her say. "Inside of me, Jonathan..."

"Ciara, my love..." he groaned. "You don't know what it does to me when you speak like that..."

He slid inside of her fully, completely. She felt so good, wet and hot. Everything about her was pure perfection. There was no denying that he was hers in every way a man could belong to a woman, and in turn, she was his. The thought drove him even more insane with desire.

Gripping her behind with both his hands, he slammed into her, thrusting deeper and harder every time.

She was so close already, trembling, clutching at him. She was drenched, and the hot clench of her muscles around his manhood made him finish inside of her moments later, as he pulsed with raw need. She finished at the same time, clenching around him, keeping him inside of her.

Their foreheads touched as they were both still breathing heavily.

"I love you, my beautiful siren..." he murmured against her lips.

"I love you, too..." she whispered back, closing her eyes, and he knew that she was imagining their life together, a dream that they were building.

The End?