



A Bargain with the Rakish Duke (A Game of Rakes #2)

Author: *Ava MacAdams*

Category: Historical

Description: "Enough games, Duchess. I am here to make you mine at last."

Having saved his estate from ruin, the next step for Duke Kenneth is to find a bride. And he must find one soon; otherwise, his aunt won't cease her fruitless matchmaking.

Lady Beatrice must secure a match to escape her mother's clutches. But, even a year after her brother's scandalous behavior, the ton still considers her ruined.

So Kenneth offers a solution to both their problems: a marriage of convenience. Despite her better judgement, Beatrice cannot help but enjoy tempting her rake of a husband. Yet, she quickly discovers that tempting a rake is playing with fire...

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Page 1

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:16 am

Chapter One

“Remember, Beatrice,” Lady Afferton hissed, “we are here to find you a husband, not to be entertained.”

“Yes, Mother,” Beatrice said, giving her a dutiful nod.

Prudence Wickes, the Dowager Countess of Afferton, stood beside her daughter, her sharp eyes scanning the room for potential suitors. At fifty years old, she still had an air of cold elegance, her hair perfectly coiffed and her gown impeccable.

Her lips were pressed in a thin line, her gaze critical and unyielding. Every glance she cast at Beatrice seemed to find fault, from the way she held herself to the smallest imperfection in her attire.

“Had it not been for that wretched Catherine and her baseless accusations, your brother would still be here, not exiled in France. And we would not have had to flee to Wales. Wales, of all places!” Prudence muttered under her breath.

Beatrice clenched her jaw but said nothing. She knew better than to argue with her mother’s twisted version of events.

The isolation of living with their relatives in Wales had been a stark contrast to the vibrant social life her mother had once enjoyed, a constant reminder of the damage her brother had done.

“Hold your head high, Beatrice,” Prudence continued, her voice icy. “We must show

them that we are unaffected by the scandal.”

“Yes, Mother,” Beatrice repeated, taking a deep breath and letting her mother’s words fuel her resolve.

Her friend Catherine, the Duchess of Newden, had once told her that bravery was not the absence of fear but the determination to face it. Beatrice would face this night and whatever it held.

Her fingers nervously clutched the delicate lace of her gown. The dress was a soft shade of lavender, adorned with intricate embroidery with seed pearl accents that shimmered in the candlelight.

The chandelier’s light glanced off her caramel blonde hair, but she felt anything but luminous. Her mother’s sharp voice echoed in her mind, a constant reminder of her purpose there.

Beatrice was not at the Dowager Duchess of Newden’s house party for pleasure. She was on a mission—a mission to secure a match that would save her family from further ruin.

As she scanned the room, her blue eyes caught sight of a familiar face—Lady Featherwell, whispering to a group of equally disdainful ladies.

The widow’s eyes narrowed when they met Beatrice’s, her lips curling into a sly smile.

“Lady Beatrice,” Lady Featherwell greeted her, the words dripping with false sweetness.

“Lady Featherwell,” Beatrice replied, forcing a polite smile.

Lady Featherwell was dressed in a deep burgundy gown, appropriate for a widow who had moved past the initial stages of mourning but still desired attention.

Her dark hair was coiffed in an elaborate style, adorned with glittering jewels that matched the sharp glint in her eyes.

There was coldness in her gaze, a predatory gleam that hinted at her delight in others' misfortunes.

"It's been some time since we've seen you at such an event," Lady Featherwell said with a mocking lilt to her voice. "I suppose one must keep up appearances, even after such... difficulties."

Beatrice's smile tightened. "Indeed. It is important to remain resilient."

Lady Featherwell's beauty was undeniable, but it was the beauty that hid a heart of ice. Beatrice could almost hear the venomous words spilling past her perfectly painted lips, words designed to wound and ostracize.

I will not let her see me falter.

"Well, I must say, it is admirable how you manage to hold your head high," Lady Featherwell continued, her smile never reaching her eyes. "Not everyone could be so... brave."

"Thank you, Lady Featherwell," Beatrice replied, her voice steady. "Like I said, I believe we must all strive to be brave in the face of adversity."

As Lady Featherwell moved on, Beatrice took a deep breath, determined not to show the sting of their judgment. She had faced far worse in the past year and would continue to hold her ground.

I am stronger than they think , Beatrice thought, lifting her chin.

As she walked back to her mother, she overheard a group of ladies nearby, their voices low but their words clear.

“Did you hear about her brother? Attacked the poor Duchess of Newden, he did. Such a disgrace,” one lady said.

“Indeed. The family was quite prominent once, but now... well, you know how these things go,” the other responded.

Beatrice’s cheeks flushed, but she kept her head high, determined not to let the gossip affect her.

Beatrice understood her duty, but there was a simmering resentment that she had to bear the brunt of fixing the damage Patrick had caused. It was unfair that he could escape the consequences, leaving her to navigate the treacherous waters of Society’s expectations alone. Yet, she knew she had no other choice. Her mother’s survival and their family’s future depended on her ability to make an advantageous match.

As she and her mother stepped further into the room, her heart raced—not from fear, but from the thrill of the unknown.

Tonight could change everything.

As they made their way through the ballroom, the strains of a lively waltz filled the air, the sound of violins and pianoforte blending harmoniously. Beatrice allowed the music to wash over her, momentarily drowning out the whispers and judgmental glances. The elegant movements of the dancers twirling gracefully across the polished floor provided a soothing distraction from the anxiety gnawing at her.

They reached a row of seats along the edge of the ballroom where Lady Bernmere was already seated.

The Dowager Marchioness of Bernmere was a kind-looking woman in her sixties, but many considered her to be slightly eccentric. Beatrice cared not a whit. The whimsical nature of Lady Bernmere was a welcome change from her mother's harsh words.

"Ah, Lady Afferton, Lady Beatrice," Lady Bernmere greeted them warmly. "Please, do sit down. Such a lovely evening, isn't it?"

"Indeed," Prudence replied though her tone was clipped.

Beatrice offered a polite smile as she took her seat.

"I hope my nephew will attend the party this time," Lady Bernmere said, her eyes twinkling with anticipation. "It has been far too long since he made an appearance. I fear that he has become a hermit."

The Dowager Duchess of Newden, who was sitting nearby, chuckled softly. "I would not get my hopes up. You know how he is these days—rarely leaving his estate."

Who was this hermit nephew of Lady Bernmere's?

Although Beatrice's interest was piqued, and she wanted to inquire further, she stopped herself when a lady seated nearby leaned over and whispered to another.

"Such a shame about Lady Beatrice's family. The scandal must be unbearable," the lady said.

Her mother's eyes narrowed upon hearing the lady's whispering, her lips pressing

into a thin line.

“Beatrice, fetch me a cup of punch,” she commanded, her voice cold and firm. “Now.”

“Yes, Mother,” Beatrice replied, rising to her feet.

She knew her mother’s command was not just about quenching her thirst but also about removing her from the potentially damaging conversation.

Beatrice wended her way through the dancers gracefully, her lavender gown swishing around her like a soft whisper.

The strains of the waltz provided a comforting backdrop as she made her way to the refreshments table.

A servant, impeccably dressed in livery, stood ready to assist.

“May I help you, My Lady?” he asked, bowing slightly.

“Yes, please. A glass of punch for my mother,” Beatrice requested.

The servant turned to the ornate punch bowl, its surface shimmering under the light of the chandeliers. He ladled the punch into a delicate crystal glass intricately etched with floral patterns that glinted as they caught the light.

As Beatrice accepted the glass, feeling the cool surface against her fingers, she took a moment to compose herself.

Finally, she turned and made her way back, the punch glass steady in her hand.

Navigating through the crowd, Beatrice was almost back in her seat when her foot caught on the edge of a rug.

“Oh!” she exhaled as she stumbled.

Despite her best efforts to steady the glass, a splash of punch flew into the air.

And landed on Lady Featherwell’s dress.

The dark red stain spread across the pristine fabric, an unwelcome and glaring mark.

Oh no , Beatrice thought.

Lady Featherwell gasped, her eyes widening in fury. “You clumsy girl!” she shrieked, her voice echoing through the ballroom. “How dare you!”

“I-I am so sorry, Lady Featherwell,” Beatrice stuttered, her face flushing with embarrassment. “It was an accident, truly.”

“A likely story,” Lady Featherwell snapped, her eyes blazing. “Trying to gain the Viscount’s attention, are you?”

She gestured to the handsome but weak-chinned Viscount Wellington, who stood beside her, looking down at Beatrice with a condescending smirk.

“Really, Lady Beatrice,” the Viscount drawled, “one might think you did it on purpose.”

Beatrice’s heart pounded in her chest. “No, I assure you, it was an accident.”

Lady Featherwell’s lips curled into a cruel smile. “An accident? I think not. It is no

surprise, considering the blood you share with that lecherous brother of yours. You must be just as conniving.”

At that moment, the music stopped, and Lady Featherwell’s voice echoed loudly in the sudden silence.

“I—” Beatrice began to defend herself but halted.

A sharp look from her mother, who was standing close by, froze the words on her tongue.

Beatrice stood there, humiliated, as the eyes of the entire ballroom turned towards her.

And then she fled the scene.

The whispers and judgmental glances followed her as she hurried away, the ballroom’s grandeur now a cage from which she desperately needed to escape.

She felt the hot sting of humiliation burning her cheeks, but she refused to let anyone see her weakness. She had endured too much and fought too hard to let these venomous whispers break her.

Each step she took away from the ballroom was a step towards regaining her composure.

Hold your head high. You are more than their judgment, more than the mistakes of your brother. You are stronger than this.

She struggled to navigate the sprawling corridors of the Dowager Duchess’ grand estate. Her heart raced, and her vision blurred with unshed tears. Each hallway

seemed identical to the last, the opulent decor and many doors turning the house into a labyrinth.

Accustomed to the smaller home she had lived in over the past year, Beatrice felt utterly lost.

Desperately, she tried to recall the path to the rooms assigned to her and her mother. She turned corner after corner, her footsteps echoing in the vast, empty spaces.

Finally, she found a room that looked familiar. The door was slightly ajar.

She slipped inside and shut the door behind her, leaning against it as she tried to steady her breathing.

The room was dimly lit with a single candle on the bedside table casting long shadows on the walls.

Beatrice wiped away her tears, hoping to compose herself before facing anyone else.

Just as she felt a semblance of calm, she heard footsteps approaching.

Thinking it was a maid, she straightened up, attempting to appear calm and collected.

The footsteps grew louder, and a shadow moved across the room.

“Excuse me,” she began. “I?—”

Her words caught in her throat as her eyes adjusted to the dim light.

Standing before her was a man.

A man who wore no shirt.

“What are you doing here?” he barked, his voice deep and authoritative.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:16 am

Chapter Two

“What are you doing here?” the woman stammered, her voice trembling.

Kenneth stood in his chambers, staring at the intruder who had dared to invade his private space.

As she gulped, he noticed the delicate pearl drop necklace that dangled in her décolletage, the tiny pearls glistening in the dim light.

The sight of her in a lavender gown was doubtlessly designed to ensnare a man’s attention. Her beauty was undeniable, the gown hugging her curves perfectly.

She flushed a deep crimson that on some women might not be attractive, but on her, it made her appear innocent and quite fetching. He squashed that feeling immediately.

“This is my room,” he asserted.

“I...”

He strode across the room with purposeful steps, closing the distance between them.

His gaze never left her face, assessing her reaction, watching her discomfort.

He towered over her, forcing her to look up at him.

“If this is a ploy to seduce me, My Lady, it is failing miserably. Well, not miserably.

You are quite... tempting," he said, his voice laced with sarcasm and intrigue.

The thought that one of his old drinking chums from his misspent youth might have sent her to him for a night of pleasure crossed his mind. Perhaps they thought it would be amusing to see the once notorious rake settled into a life of domesticity, or maybe they believed he needed a distraction from his duties.

The idea irritated him, making him even more determined to uncover her true purpose here.

She took a step back, her eyes wide with fear and indignation.

"I assure you I had no such intention," she declared, her voice gaining a measure of steadiness. "I was simply trying to find my room."

Kenneth's eyes narrowed, scrutinizing her. "Your room, you say? And which room might that be?"

She hesitated, clearly uncertain. "I... I believe it is just down the hall, and I must have taken a wrong turn."

"Indeed," he replied, arching an eyebrow. "And how convenient that your wrong turn led you to my private chambers."

"I apologize. I left the ball in such a hurry... and got lost, and..."

She took in the sight of him without a shirt, the color rising to her cheeks again. She bit her lip and quickly averted her eyes.

"Could you at least put on a shirt in the presence of a lady?"

Kenneth raised an eyebrow, a teasing smile tugging at his lips. “I didn’t realize my attire, or lack thereof, would cause such distress. Does it bother you that much?”

She straightened her back, meeting his gaze with as much composure as she could muster.

God, how he missed making women flustered like that.

“It’s simply inappropriate,” she replied, trying to keep her voice steady.

He stepped closer, a mischievous glint in his eyes. “Are you sure it’s just inappropriate? Or do you find it distracting?”

Beatrice’s cheeks flamed, and she turned her head slightly. “I am not accustomed to such immodesty.”

He chuckled, enjoying her discomfort. “Perhaps you should broaden your experiences, then. There’s nothing scandalous about the human body, wouldn’t you agree?”

Her eyes snapped back to his, irritation and embarrassment within them. “Please, put on a shirt.”

He chuckled softly. “Very well, if it puts you at ease.”

Kenneth walked over to a nearby chair where his shirt was draped. He took his time putting it on, his movements unhurried, aware of her eyes following him despite her best efforts to appear indifferent.

“Better?” he asked, fastening the last button.

She nodded. "Thank you."

Kenneth tilted his head to the side, studying her.

"Wait a moment. Aren't you the Duchess of Newden's friend?" he asked, realization settling in. "Lady Beatrice Wickes, if I recall correctly."

Her eyes widened in surprise.

"Who are you?" she asked, her voice trembling slightly.

"Catherine introduced us during a dinner at Newden Estate. It was shortly after their wedding," he said and allowed her a moment to remember.

"Although we barely spoke, I wouldn't think I have such a forgettable face, My Lady," he added as he stepped closer, the faint candlelight casting shadows on her round cheeks.

"Your Grace," she breathed, realization flashing across her face.

The flush on her cheeks made her appear even more alluring, and his pulse quickened.

Now that he was closer, the scent of her perfume filled his nostrils. It was a sweet and intoxicating blend: flowers and a soft breeze of spring.

At that point, most of his irritation had evaporated. Despite himself, he could not help but admire her beauty.

"Yes, and you still have not explained why you are here," he said, a hint of suspicion lingering in his tone. "If your intention is to get into my bed, My Lady, it is not

working as you might hope.”

Her eyes flashed with anger. “I assure you, Your Grace, I have no intention of getting into your bed.”

“Oh? Then what were you doing, wandering into my chambers?”

“I told you, I got lost!” she snapped, crossing her arms over her chest defensively. “Not everyone is here to play games.”

He took another step towards her, the air between them thick with tension.

“Really? Because it seems awfully convenient that you, of all people, would end up here.”

Her jaw tightened, frustration clear in her posture.

“Believe what you will, Your Grace, but I do not appreciate being accused of something so improper.”

Kenneth leaned in, placing a hand on the door beside her head, effectively trapping her.

He could feel the heat radiating from her body. He sensed her attraction, her breathing quickening as he drew closer, the proximity stirring something primal within him.

“You expect me to believe this was an accident?” he murmured, his lips dangerously close to hers.

“Yes,” she whispered, her voice barely audible. “And if you think I am here to seduce

you, you are sorely mistaken. I do not want to be ruined.”

He leaned even closer, his breath mingling with hers.

How long had it been since he was this close to a woman?

He reveled in it.

“Ruined? Perhaps it wouldn’t be so bad,” he teased, “I’ve been told I can be quite... persuasive.”

“Your Grace, this is highly improper,” she managed to say, her voice trembling slightly.

“Improper, perhaps,” Kenneth relented, his lips brushing the shell of her ear. “But undeniably thrilling, don’t you think?”

She shivered at his touch, her resolve wavering. “I am not here to play games,” she insisted, her voice quivering.

“Who said anything about games?” Kenneth’s lips hovered just above hers, a tantalizing promise of what could be. “Unless, of course, you’re afraid to see where this could lead.”

“I am not afraid of you,” she responded.

“Oh, I knew that. What I am saying is that you’re afraid of your own desires, My Lady,” he challenged with a smirk.

“And what would you know of my desires?” she asked, her expression unwavering.

He smirked.

“Enough to know they are worth exploring,” he answered.

“Is that so?”

“Oh yes. And you know fully well that I can fulfill them all.”

She did not immediately respond this time, leaving the words to hang between them; a silence charged with unspoken desires and challenges.

Kenneth’s eyes bored into hers, searching for any hint of deceit. But all he found was a defiant determination that matched his own which did nothing to ease the thrill coursing through him.

So, he dared to lean even closer.

However, before he would dare to do more, a sudden knock on the door shattered the tension. Both their eyes widened in surprise.

“Kenneth,” came the voice of his aunt, Lady Bernmere, from the other side of the door.

Thinking quickly, Kenneth placed a hand over Beatrice’s mouth and pulled her against him.

Her eyes widened in shock, but he silently pleaded for her cooperation, mouthing, “Stay quiet, and she will go.”

Lady Bernmere persisted, however, calling out, “Kenneth, a footman alerted me you had arrived. Are you in there?”

Kenneth growled softly, knowing his aunt would not leave if he did not respond. “A moment, Aunt. I am not decent.”

Removing his hand from Beatrice’s mouth, he signaled for her to hide behind the door. She nodded, her eyes still wide, and hurried to stand next to the doorway, out of sight.

Kenneth grabbed a shirt and hastily pulled it on before opening the door.

“Good evening, Aunt Marjorie,” he greeted, trying to keep his tone neutral.

“Kenneth, you are quite rude for not coming to dinner,” Lady Bernmere chided, her tone reproaching and concerned at the same time.

He forced a smile. “Work at Dunford delayed me, and I found it pointless to join so late.”

“Politeness is not a matter of practicality,” Lady Bernmere pointed out, raising an eyebrow.

“I wish it was,” Kenneth replied, his voice tinged with a hint of frustration.

Lady Bernmere sighed. “Well, let me in. We need to talk.”

Kenneth quickly stepped in front of her, blocking her path. “I am exhausted from the trip, Aunt. I simply need sleep now and would appreciate my privacy. We can talk tomorrow after breakfast.”

Lady Bernmere looked unconvinced, her eyes narrowing with suspicion.

“Kenneth, are you with a mistress? Under the Dowager Duchess’ roof?”

From the corner of his eye, Kenneth saw Beatrice's eyes flash with anger again. He knew he had to get his aunt to leave before Beatrice spoke up.

"Aunt Marjorie, I truly am just exhausted. Please, we can discuss whatever it is in the morning."

Lady Bernmere studied him for a moment, clearly not entirely convinced. "Promise me we will talk after breakfast?"

"I promise," Kenneth said firmly.

He hoped that would convince her.

With one last searching look, Lady Bernmere finally relented. "Very well. Goodnight, Kenneth."

"Goodnight," he replied, and relief flooded through him as she turned and walked away.

He closed the door and let out a breath.

Beatrice darted forward and gripped the doorknob.

Kenneth grabbed her wrist. "Are you mad? She will see you in the corridor. Wait until she leaves."

Beatrice froze, her eyes darting to his hand around her wrist. The warmth of her skin sent an unexpected jolt through him.

They listened intently as Lady Bernmere's footsteps retreated down the hallway, each step seeming to echo louder in the heavy silence of the room. Kenneth's breathing

was deep and even, contrasting with Beatrice's rapid, shallow breaths.

He opened the door a crack, his body tense as he peered into the corridor. After a moment, he turned back to Beatrice and nodded. "It is clear. Go now."

Beatrice did not hesitate. She slipped past him, her skirt brushing against his leg as she moved.

Kenneth watched her hurry down the hallway, her figure a blur of lavender in the dim light.

He began to close the door, the tension in his muscles slowly easing.

But just as the door was nearly shut, he heard a voice call out, "Beatrice?"

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:16 am

Chapter Three

“M other,” Beatrice said, trying to steady her voice as she turned around.

Her heart was still pounding as she took in her mother; she was standing in the hallway, her expression stern and disapproving.

She noticed the door to the Duke’s room slowly close with a soft click, and she breathed a sigh of relief.

The Dowager Countess looked furious. “Beatrice, where have you been? I have been looking for you ever since you made a spectacle of yourself.”

“I... I got lost,” Beatrice stammered, not entirely lying but far from revealing the whole truth.

Her mother seized her arm with a vice-like grip, dragging her down the corridor. “You got lost? How could you be so careless? Do you have any idea how much embarrassment you have caused me?”

Beatrice kept her head down, murmuring apologies. “I am sorry, Mother. I did not mean to...”

“Of course, you did not mean to,” Prudence snapped. “You never mean to. You need to think, Beatrice. We are here to secure a match for you, not to create more scandal.”

They ascended another flight of stairs, the harsh light of the sconces casting

unforgiving shadows on the walls. Beatrice's relief that her mother had not seen her come out of the Duke's room kept her silent. She knew defending herself would only make things worse.

When they finally reached the rooms assigned to them, Prudence released her daughter's arm.

"Get some rest," she said sharply. "And try not to cause any more trouble."

"Yes, Mother," Beatrice whispered, watching as her mother disappeared into her own room.

Beatrice slipped into her bedchamber, closing the door behind her and leaning against it for a moment.

The familiar, comforting scent of lavender greeted her, and she took a deep breath, trying to calm her racing heart.

"Lady Beatrice, there you are," came the soft, soothing voice of her maid, Alice.

Alice was in her late twenties with warm brown eyes and a gentle demeanor that had always been a balm to Beatrice's troubled soul. She had been with the family for years and was one of the few people Beatrice could truly confide in.

Alice helped her out of her gown, her movements calm and efficient.

"How was the evening, My Lady?" she asked, a hint of curiosity in her voice.

Beatrice shrugged. "It was... uneventful."

Alice chattered on, her voice a comforting murmur. "You looked absolutely stunning

tonight. Undoubtedly, the belle of the ball. All eyes were on you.”

Beatrice smiled weakly, her mind replaying the evening’s events. “Thank you, Alice. They were but not because of my gown.”

Alice continued, unaware of Beatrice’s inner turmoil. “I overheard some of the other lady’s maids talking. They were all quite envious of your beauty. And your gown! It was simply exquisite.”

As Alice helped her prepare for bed, Beatrice’s thoughts swirled. The evening had been far from a success. She had nearly ruined her family’s already fragile reputation and found herself in a situation that could have been disastrous. The memory of the Duke’s piercing blue eyes and the tension between them was still vivid in her mind.

Once she was finally in bed, Alice lowered the wick on the lantern and gave her a reassuring smile. “Goodnight, My Lady. Tomorrow is a new day.”

“Goodnight, Alice,” Beatrice replied, her voice barely above a whisper.

As she lay there, staring at the ceiling, she could not shake the feeling that her encounter with the Duke of Dunford was only the beginning of something far more complicated.

How am I going to face him tomorrow?

Embarrassment flooded her cheeks once more.

The next morning, Beatrice descended the grand staircase to the dining room where breakfast was being served.

Long tables were covered in white linens, adorned with silver dishes of eggs, bacon,

sausages, breads, and pastries.

She wore a pale blue muslin morning dress, trimmed with delicate lace at the cuffs and neckline. Her hair was styled simply with soft, loose curls framing her face, a few secured with a pearl comb.

Her mother had insisted on the simplicity of the outfit, reminding her that she was here to secure a husband and that she must appear both demure and desirable.

As Beatrice took her seat beside her mother, Prudence leaned in, her voice a harsh whisper. “Remember, Beatrice, stay out of trouble. You do not want to ruin your chances any further.”

Beatrice nodded though her mind was elsewhere, preoccupied with the events of the previous night and her encounter with the Duke of Dunford. She could still feel the lingering tension, his hand gripping her wrist, his eyes boring into hers.

The dining room buzzed with the quiet chatter of other guests, all dressed in their finest morning attire. Gentlemen in tailored coats and cravats, ladies in colorful morning gowns, their hair covered with delicate bonnets or styled in intricate fashions. Footmen moved silently around the room, refilling cups and replenishing dishes with practiced ease.

From across the room, Lady Featherwell’s sharp gaze landed on Beatrice.

The young widow’s look was one of pure disdain, her lips curling into a sneer before she turned to whisper something to the gentleman beside her—undoubtedly some scathing remark.

Beatrice’s stomach churned, but she forced herself to focus on her plate, taking small bites of the food before her. Her mother continued to murmur instructions and

critiques, but her thoughts kept drifting back to the Duke.

Suddenly, a footman appeared at her side, offering more tea. She nodded absently, lost in her thoughts.

Her mother's voice cut through her reverie. "Beatrice, pay attention. You must not appear distracted. Remember, we are here for a purpose."

"Yes, Mother," Beatrice replied automatically though her mind was still on the Duke. Under her breath, she muttered, "Not all of us can flee to France."

Her mother's eyes snapped to her, narrowing in warning. "What did you say?"

Beatrice straightened, meeting her mother's gaze with a hint of defiance. "I said, not all of us can flee to France, Mother."

Her mother was momentarily taken aback, her eyes widening in shock. But she quickly regained her composure, casting a glance around the room to ensure no one else had heard the exchange.

"We will discuss this later," she hissed, her tone icy.

As the breakfast continued, Beatrice struggled to focus on the surrounding conversations, the exchanges of pleasantries, and the subtle competitive and judgmental undercurrents. She knew she needed to stay composed to show that she was a suitable candidate for marriage, but her heart and mind were elsewhere.

The door to the breakfast room opened, and all heads turned.

Kenneth Spencer, the Duke of Dunford, had entered.

The room fell silent for a brief moment as everyone took in his tall, broad-shouldered figure, impeccably dressed in a morning coat that accentuated his powerful build.

His black hair was tousled, and his blue eyes blazed with intensity as he swept over the room, seeming to search for someone—perhaps his aunt, Lady Bernmere.

It was last night, she had discovered that the Duke of Dunford was her hermetic nephew.

Though he hadn't behaved like a hermit with her.

When his gaze met Beatrice's, her heart skipped a beat. She quickly looked away, focusing intently on the delicate floral pattern on her china cup.

A warm flush crept up her neck as she fought to maintain her composure.

He is so shameless! What if people notice that he stares at me?

He moved with purpose, crossing the room to where his aunt, Lady Bernmere, sat. He bowed slightly, his manner formal. "Good morning, Lady Bernmere."

Lady Bernmere smiled warmly. "Good morning, Your Grace. It is always a pleasure to have you join us."

Kenneth took a seat beside her, his demeanor exuding confidence and a touch of impatience. Several guests nearby attempted to engage him in conversation.

"Your Grace, how are things at Dunford Estate?" inquired Sir Reginald, a portly gentleman with a booming voice.

Kenneth's response was curt. "Quite well, thank you."

“Have you any plans for the Season, Your Grace?” Lady Featherwell asked, her tone overly sweet.

“None,” Kenneth replied, his voice flat and uninterested.

“Surely you must have some engagements planned, Your Grace?” Lady Featherwell pressed, her eyes sparkling with a feigned innocence.

Kenneth’s eyes flicked to her briefly before he replied, “My focus remains on the estate.”

Beatrice watched covertly from beneath her lashes, careful not to let her gaze linger too long when Kenneth glanced her way. His presence seemed to fill the room, making it difficult for her to concentrate on anything else.

Her mother’s voice interrupted her thoughts. “Beatrice, do try to contribute to the conversation. You are being far too quiet.”

“Yes, Mother,” Beatrice murmured, though she felt incapable of forming coherent words with the Duke so near.

Kenneth’s answers to the questions of those around him remained laconic and blunt, signaling his lack of interest in their attempts at polite conversation. His focus seemed divided, as if his mind was elsewhere. Every so often, his gaze would drift in Beatrice’s direction though she pretended not to notice, her heart racing each time.

“Your Grace,” another guest ventured, “have you checked the latest improvements in agricultural techniques? They say it could revolutionize estate management.”

Kenneth nodded slightly, his tone neutral. “I am aware. We are always considering improvements.”

Beatrice risked another glance at him, catching a sardonic smile that played briefly on his lips as their eyes met. Her breath hitched, and she quickly looked away, her cheeks flushing.

What is he thinking about?

She watched him, intrigued by his distant demeanor.

Lady Bernmere, sensing his mood, leaned in to speak quietly with him, drawing his attention back to her. “Kenneth, you seem preoccupied. Is everything all right?”

Kenneth’s expression softened slightly as he spoke with his aunt, a hint of warmth breaking through his otherwise stern demeanor.

“Quite, Aunt Marjorie.”

Lady Bernmere pursed her lips, not entirely convinced by his answer. “Are you certain, my dear?”

Kenneth eyed her carefully. “Yes, Aunt Marjorie. I am quite certain,” he said steadily.

Beatrice watched the exchange with curiosity. Although his tone was stern, it was somewhat warmer when he addressed his aunt.

Lady Bernmere, seeing the cold steeliness in her nephew’s eyes, did not pursue the matter further.

Just as Beatrice took a sip from her tea, the Duke’s gaze landed on her, and she almost choked on her hot beverage. A shiver ran down her spine as he stared at her with the same intensity as the night before.

She looked straight back at him.

Goodness , he was handsome. The blue of his eyes a still, beckoning sea.

Her mind wandered, pondering what would've happened if Lady Bernmere had not knocked on his door. If he had come closer to her, if he'd touched her, if she'd been able to feel the ridges of his muscular torso, his hot breath on her cheeks, her lips?—

For Heaven's sake, Beatrice. Get a hold of yourself.

She took another sip from her teacup, hoping it'd jolt her back to reality.

Despite her mother's chagrin at her silence, Beatrice remained quiet, her thoughts a tumultuous mix of anxiety and intrigue.

She could not shake the feeling that her path and the Duke's would cross again.

The uncertainty of what that might bring left her both apprehensive and strangely exhilarated.

Kenneth finished his breakfast, the polite but shallow conversations grating on his nerves.

He turned to his aunt and spoke quietly, "Aunt Marjorie, would you accompany me for a walk in the gardens?"

Lady Bernmere nodded, a knowing smile on her lips. "Of course, dear."

They left the dining room and made their way through the grand halls. As they stepped into the gardens, the crisp morning air filled Kenneth's lungs, providing a welcome relief from the stifling atmosphere inside. The neatly trimmed hedges and

vibrant blooms provided a picturesque setting, but he was too preoccupied to appreciate the surrounding beauty.

Once they were out of earshot, Kenneth turned to his aunt, his frustration simmering just below the surface, a tight knot in his chest and a tension in his jaw betraying his irritation.

“You told me that coming to this house party would provide me with new investment prospects, Aunt Marjorie. Yet, I see no business-inclined gentlemen in attendance. Just clucking mother hens and indulgent fathers, intent on marrying off their daughters. This was clearly a scheme to get me here and shove some innocent debutante my way.”

Lady Bernmere’s expression remained calm. “Marriage is an investment too, Kenneth. There are plenty of prospects here for you to consider. You have been shut away in Dunford for far too long. It is time for you to venture out and meet eligible young ladies.”

“I do not appreciate being manipulated, Auntie,” Kenneth said, his tone cold. “I will stay one more day for the sake of the Dowager Duchess, but that is it. My friend, Thomas, would never forgive me if I was rude to his grandmother.”

Lady Bernmere opened her mouth to protest, but Kenneth raised a hand, silencing her.

“If I desire to find a wife, I will do it my way on my own terms. I shall brook no further argument.”

Without waiting for a response, he turned and stalked away, his frustration boiling over.

He strode through the gardens and back into the house, his mind a whirlwind of conflicting emotions. As he navigated the maze of corridors, the voices of guests and servants a distant hum, he tried to quell the anger that simmered beneath his composed exterior.

Just as he was about to turn a corner, he paused, drawn in by the sound of voices coming from a room he was passing. The door was slightly ajar, and the conversation within was animated. Kenneth could not make out the words, but something about the tone piqued his interest.

He hesitated for a moment then moved closer, straining to hear. The voices became clearer, and he recognized the melodic cadence of Lady Beatrice's voice.

A stirring sensation gripped him, one he wanted to dismiss but couldn't.

He caught himself holding his breath, picturing her blue eyes lighting up with enthusiasm and the way she jutted her chin defiantly when she spoke her mind.

Why does she have this effect on me?

Kenneth moved closer, drawn in by the conversation. He peered through the small opening in the door, his eyes locking onto Beatrice as she stood beside the Dowager Duchess, her expression animated and full of life. The way she spoke, the grace of her movements—everything about her seemed to capture his attention.

This is foolish. I cannot afford to be distracted by her.

Yet, as he stood there, hidden in the shadows, he couldn't tear his eyes away.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:16 am

Chapter Four

“Good morning, Your Grace,” Beatrice greeted with a curtsy.

She had nearly bumped into the Dowager Duchess of Newden as she rounded the corner.

Her dear friend, Catherine, had married the Dowager Duchess’s grandson, Thomas. And from what Beatrice had gathered, Catherine had implored the Dowager Duchess to help her rejoin Society after the scandal caused by Patrick.

Beatrice was not one for pity, and the Dowager’s sharp eyes betrayed nothing of the sort, much to her relief.

“Good morning, my dear. Enjoying your exploration of the house?”

“Very much so,” Beatrice replied, her eyes sparkling with genuine admiration. “The decor is truly magnificent. The paintings and sculptures are exceptional. I believe I even recognized a few pieces by Thomas Lawrence and John Flaxman.”

The Dowager Duchess’s eyes brightened at the mention of the renowned artists. “You have a keen eye for art, Lady Beatrice. Do you enjoy it?”

“Very much, Your Grace. The beauty and emotion captured in these works always speak to me.”

The Dowager Duchess’s smile widened. “In that case, would you care to accompany

me to the gallery? I think you might find it quite interesting.”

Beatrice’s heart soared at the invitation. “I would love that, Your Grace.”

“Splendid,” the Dowager Duchess said, linking their arms. “Come along, then. The gallery is one of my favorite places in the house.”

As they walked, the Dowager Duchess pointed out various pieces of art and shared stories about their acquisition and the artists who created them. Beatrice listened intently, her admiration for the Dowager Duchess growing with each tale.

They reached the gallery, a spacious room bathed in natural light that filtered through the large windows that lined one wall. The walls were adorned with paintings of various sizes, each one a masterpiece. Sculptures stood on pedestals throughout the room, their forms graceful and evocative.

Beatrice’s breath caught in her throat as she took in the sight. “It is beautiful,” she whispered.

The Dowager Duchess patted her arm affectionately. “I am glad you think so, my dear. Art has a way of touching the soul, do you not agree?”

“Absolutely, Your Grace,” Beatrice replied, her eyes darting from one piece to the next, absorbing the beauty and craftsmanship of each work.

The Dowager Duchess led her to a painting of a serene landscape, the colors vibrant and the brushstrokes masterful. “This one is a favorite of mine,” she said softly. “It reminds me of the countryside where I grew up.”

Beatrice smiled, feeling a connection with her. “It’s lovely, Your Grace.”

The Dowager Duchess looked at her warmly. “You have a good heart, Lady Beatrice. I can see why Catherine speaks so highly of you.”

Beatrice blushed, touched by the compliment. “Thank you, Your Grace.”

As they continued to explore the gallery, Beatrice felt a sense of peace and contentment wash over her. In the presence of such beauty and grace, the worries and tensions of the previous night faded, replaced by a renewed appreciation for the world around her.

After a while, they moved into a smaller, more intimate room adjacent to the gallery. The walls here were adorned with fewer but equally impressive works of art.

“I must show you my latest acquisition,” the Dowager Duchess said with a twinkle in her eyes. “It’s a painting by an up-and-coming artist, Eric Westback. His work is simply magnificent.”

Beatrice’s heart skipped a beat.

“Westback, you say?”

“Mmhm. I’d thought you might know about him, since you seem to be rather knowledgeable,” the Dowager said.

“Oh, no, Your Grace. I am afraid I do not know much at all,” Beatrice replied steadily.

She followed the Dowager Duchess to a large painting displayed prominently on the far wall.

The painting was a breathtaking landscape with sweeping brushstrokes and an

exquisite mastery of color and light—a stormy sea with the sun breaking through the clouds, casting a golden glow over the turbulent waters.

Beatrice pretended to study the painting with a critical eye though inwardly she was bubbling with joy. “It is stunning, Your Grace. The way he captures the light and movement is remarkable.”

The Dowager Duchess beamed with pride at her possession. “Isn’t it? Eric Westback has such a unique talent. His use of color and light brings the scene to life. There’s such mystery about him, you know. No one has ever met him.”

Little did the Dowager know she was standing right before him. Or her, rather.

Beatrice nodded, silently debating how to answer. “I have heard of him, but I have never seen his work up close before.”

The Dowager Duchess continued, her admiration evident, “He is quite the enigma. There are rumors, of course, but no one seems to know who he really is. It is said that he prefers to let his work speak for itself, avoiding public appearances altogether. Such a curious way to live, don’t you think?”

Beatrice felt a surge of happiness at the praise and intrigue surrounding her alter ego.

If only you knew, Your Grace. If only you knew.

“Indeed, it is quite curious,” Beatrice agreed, her voice steady despite the excitement bubbling within her. “But perhaps he finds peace in his solitude.”

The Dowager Duchess nodded thoughtfully. “You may be right. There is a certain freedom in anonymity, I suppose. But it does make one wonder about the person behind the brush.”

Beatrice's thoughts wandered to the nights spent painting in the quiet of her small room in Wales, the joy and solace it brought her amidst the turmoil of her family's scandal.

Her paintings had been her refuge, and through the sales of her work as Eric Westback, she had been able to support her mother without revealing the source of their income.

"I find it fascinating," the Dowager Duchess added, her eyes still fixed on the painting. "To create such beauty and remain hidden in the shadows. It is almost romantic, in a way."

Beatrice felt her cheeks flush with pride and embarrassment. "Yes, Your Grace. It is certainly intriguing."

They stood in silence for a moment, both women lost in their own thoughts. Beatrice reveled in the Dowager Duchess's compliments, feeling a deep sense of fulfillment. Her work, though secret, was appreciated and admired by those who mattered.

The Dowager Duchess turned to Beatrice, her expression soft. "You have a good eye for art, my dear. I am glad we could share this moment."

"Thank you, Your Grace. It has been a genuine pleasure," Beatrice replied, her heart full.

At that moment, the Duke of Dunford entered the room, his tall frame filling the doorway.

The Dowager Duchess noticed him immediately. "Duke, it is unseemly to lurk in the shadows like that."

Kenneth stepped forward, a wry smile on his lips. “I was not lurking. Though I must say Westback’s use of light is what’s unseemly here.”

Beatrice’s heart skipped a beat at his words, her earlier joy quickly turning into indignation.

The Duke continued, his tone critical but not harsh. “Westback’s method is impressive, yes, but he relies too heavily on light. His paintings are bright and pretty, but he seems to dismiss the power of shadow. Without shadow, his works are almost washed clear of true emotion and depth.”

Beatrice felt a surge of indignation. “I must disagree, Your Grace. Westback’s use of light brings his paintings to life. It is his way of capturing the essence of a moment, the fleeting beauty that might otherwise go unnoticed.”

Kenneth raised an eyebrow, intrigued by her passionate response. “But without shadow, the light loses its meaning. It is the contrast that creates depth. Westback’s paintings, while visually stunning, lack the complexity that shadow can bring.”

Beatrice’s eyes flashed with determination. “Perhaps, but Westback’s choice to focus on light doesn’t diminish the emotional impact of his work. It’s a different approach, one that emphasizes hope and beauty, even in the face of darkness.”

The Dowager Duchess watched the exchange with interest. “You must know quite a bit about art to come to such conclusions about Westback, Lady Beatrice. Especially since you have not seen his work until now.”

Beatrice realized she had said far too much.

Swiftly, she put on a polite smile and explained, “I was inspired by what you said, Your Grace. It led me to think more deeply about his work.”

Kenneth's gaze remained on her. "The debate about light versus shadow is old. What matters most is the emotion conveyed to the viewer. Westback has potential, but he could benefit from exploring the darker elements."

Beatrice's heart pounded, but she kept her voice steady. "And yet, Your Grace, there is something to be said for an artist who focuses on the light. It offers a different depth, one that speaks to the resilience of the human spirit."

The Dowager Duchess smiled, clearly pleased with the spirited yet respectful exchange. "I must say, this has been a most enlightening discussion. Art provokes thought and debate, after all."

Beatrice could tell that the Duke wanted to say more, to challenge her further, but he did not wish to rattle the Dowager. In truth, neither did she, despite wanting to prove her point.

So, they both nodded in agreement though the intensity of their gazes suggested that the conversation was far from over in their minds.

Kenneth leaned slightly closer, his eyes never leaving hers. "I suppose we will have to agree to disagree, Lady Beatrice."

Beatrice held his gaze, feeling the weight of his scrutiny.

In her mind, she could hear her mother's voice urging her to gain the Duke's attention by swooning and fluttering her lashes.

The thought made her scoff inwardly. That was not who she was, and she dismissed the idea immediately.

She raised an eyebrow, a playful glint in her eyes. "What do you know about art,

Your Grace? Do you consider yourself an expert?"

Kenneth's lips curled into a slight smile. "I know enough to recognize talent and potential. But you, Lady Beatrice, seem to speak with more authority than most. Do you have a background in art?"

Beatrice felt a surge of anxiety but quickly masked it with a confident smile. "I have always been passionate about art, Your Grace. I have studied it and spent countless hours appreciating various works. One could say it is a... personal interest of mine."

Kenneth's eyes narrowed slightly, the challenge still evident. "Your knowledge is impressive. And rare, for a lady."

Beatrice blinked, taken aback by the sudden compliment.

"Thank you, Your Grace," she replied.

The Dowager Duchess interjected, her tone warm, "Lady Beatrice has a remarkable eye for detail. It's a pleasure to have such stimulating discussions about art."

Kenneth's gaze softened slightly though the intensity remained. "Indeed."

There was a pause as Beatrice felt the weight of his response. It'd only been a single word, yet his tone and the way he stared at her...

She shivered as the image of his bare upper body popped into her mind. The way his muscles rippled...

For a split second, she saw the Duke glance down at her lips. Her heart skipped a beat, her limbs tingling with a vibrant yet dark excitement she'd never experienced before.

It was desire. Hungry, ravenous desire.

“I look forward to seeing both of you at dinner,” Kenneth said curtly, bowing gracefully before turning to leave.

Beatrice watched him go, her thoughts racing.

Did I offend him?

She replayed their conversation in her mind, searching for any hint of displeasure on his part.

He was nothing like the man from the night before, the man who spoke about desire... and its fulfillment. Still, to know he was so well-versed in art did little to satiate her curiosity.

The Dowager Duchess chuckled. “He needs a bit of scolding about his manners, I’m afraid. But he has quite an eye for art. His family’s gallery is one of the most renowned in England, and he has added quite a few remarkable pieces to their collection.”

Beatrice’s expression softened slightly, considering the Dowager Duchess’s words.

“Perhaps I was too hasty in my opinions,” she murmured though she remained unsure.

The Duke had a way of provoking her, but perhaps there was more to him than met the eye.

“Give him time, my dear,” the Dowager Duchess said kindly. “You might find that there is much to admire beneath that stern exterior.”

Beatrice nodded, taking a deep breath. “Thank you, Your Grace. I shall keep that in mind.”

“Good,” the Dowager Duchess said with a nod. “Now, let’s continue our tour. I believe there are a few more pieces that might catch your interest.”

The gallery faded into the background as Beatrice’s mind raced with thoughts of the enigmatic Duke of Dunford, contemplating what future encounters would bring.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:16 am

Chapter Five

“Beatrice, you must participate. Standing on the sidelines does nothing for your prospects,” Prudence insisted, her voice low but firm.

Beatrice stood on the manicured lawn, the late afternoon sun casting long shadows on the green expanse. The air was filled with the sounds of laughter and the gentle clink of mallets striking balls.

Pall Mall was the game of the hour, and while Beatrice had hoped to simply observe, her mother had other plans.

“Mother, I am not skilled at this game. I would rather not make a fool of myself,” Beatrice replied, trying to keep the frustration out of her voice.

“Nonsense,” Prudence said, her eyes narrowing. “Viscount Haddington is here, and you must make a good impression. He is fabulously wealthy and would be an excellent match.”

Beatrice sighed inwardly. Viscount Haddington, a man with a rabbit face and an arrogant air, was not someone she found remotely appealing.

She overheard him speaking to another player nearby and could only wince as his pompous tone grated on her nerves.

“You see, Lady Smythe, the only way to truly appreciate a fine wine is to have an extensive collection of your own,” Lord Haddington declared, his tone dripping with

self-importance. “Of course, not everyone can afford such luxuries. It requires a certain level of sophistication and, naturally, wealth.”

Lady Smythe nodded politely though her eyes seemed to glaze over as the Viscount continued his monologue.

“And then there’s the matter of proper estate management,” he went on. “I’ve always maintained that only those with a keen intellect and a firm hand can truly succeed. Lesser men simply do not possess the necessary attributes.”

Beatrice could barely suppress a groan.

The Viscount’s incessant need to assert his superiority and his complete disregard for the thoughts or interests of others made him profoundly unappealing. His conversation was a relentless monologue about his own accomplishments, interspersed with patronizing remarks about the inferiority of others.

But she understood her duty to her family. She needed a good match to secure their future, and her feelings had little bearing on that necessity.

“Very well, Mother,” she relented, forcing a smile. “I will play.”

“Good. Now go on,” Prudence urged, giving her a gentle but insistent push towards the game.

As Beatrice approached the playing field, she tried to recall the rules of Pall Mall. The game was like croquet with players taking turns to strike wooden balls through a series of hoops set up on the lawn. The goal was to kick the ball through all the hoops in the correct order and hit the final peg to win.

It sounded simple enough, but Beatrice knew from experience that coordination was

not her strongest suit.

The lawn was lush and green, the scent of freshly cut grass mingling with the floral fragrances from the nearby garden. Beatrice could hear the gentle hum of conversation and the occasional exclamation of triumph or frustration from the other players.

The sun was beginning its descent, casting a warm, golden glow over the scene, enveloping the guests in a soft, almost magical light.

Several young women stood in small clusters, chatting congenially, their laughter ringing out across the lawn. They seemed carefree, their conversations filled with light-hearted banter and shared confidences.

Beatrice felt a pang of longing as she watched them. She remembered a time when she, too, had been part of such groups, when her days were filled with friends and laughter. But that was before her brother Patrick had ruined their family with his lecherous behavior.

A sense of sadness settled over her, mingling with the anxiety she felt about the game. She did not see a future where she would once again be accepted into the ton, and the realization was like a weight pressing down on her chest.

She missed Catherine so much. But her friend wasn't there as the Dowager Duchess had carefully selected her younger guests: all of them unmarried or at least widowed.

The loneliness was almost unbearable, a constant ache that she could not seem to shake. She felt trapped in a situation that was beyond her control, burdened by the mistakes of her brother and the expectations of her mother.

"Ah, Lady Beatrice," Lord Haddington greeted her as she joined the group. His thin

lips curled into a smile that did not reach his eyes. “It is a pleasure to see you participating.”

Beatrice forced herself to smile politely, but the effort to maintain her composure added to the heaviness in her heart. The Viscount’s presence, with his rabbit face and arrogant air, only served to remind her of the precariousness of her situation. She felt like an actress playing a role, her true self hidden behind a mask of dutiful compliance.

Prudence, satisfied that her daughter was engaged, made her way to a nearby table where some older ladies were drinking lemonade.

Beatrice watched her mother for a moment, feeling a pang of longing to retreat to a room and paint, to express her true feelings, but she knew better. Her duty was clear, and she would not let her family down.

The game began, and she struggled to keep up.

The other players seemed to maneuver their balls with ease while hers veered off course more often than not. Every time she took a shot, it seemed to go in the opposite direction of where she intended, eliciting stifled laughs and barely concealed smirks from some of the players.

“Bad luck, Lady Beatrice,” Lord Haddington remarked with a patronizing smile. “Perhaps you need a bit more practice.”

Beatrice forced a polite smile though her frustration was mounting. She watched as the Viscount expertly guided his ball through the next hoop, his movements precise and confident.

Nearby, Lady Smythe executed her shot with equal skill, her ball rolling perfectly

into position.

The game continued, and Beatrice did her best to stay focused. However, Lady Featherwell was also playing, and her glares were hard to ignore. Every time Beatrice lined up her shot, she could feel the weight of Lady Featherwell's disdain.

"Oh dear. Lady Beatrice, it seems you're having a bit of trouble today," Lady Featherwell noted with a fake sympathetic tone. "Perhaps you should stick to more ladylike pursuits."

Beatrice bit back a retort, determined not to give Lady Featherwell the satisfaction of seeing her upset. She lined up her shot again, trying to block out the whispers and judgmental glances around her.

"Focus, Beatrice," she muttered to herself before taking a deep breath and striking the ball.

It moved forward, but once again, it missed the mark, rolling to a stop far from the target.

Lady Featherwell's laugh was a light, tinkling sound that grated on her nerves.

"Better luck next time, my dear," she said with a smirk. Then she leaned in closer and whispered, "That's all ladies like you can hope for. Luck ."

Beatrice sighed inwardly. No matter how hard she tried, she could not shake the feeling of being an outcast. Her family's scandal hung over her like a dark cloud, and moments like these only served to remind her of her precarious position in Society.

Nearby, a rather portly gentleman named Lord Oxthorpe fumbled his shot, the ball rolling comically off course and into a flower bed. He let out a hearty laugh,

seemingly unfazed by his failure.

“Well, that’s one way to do it, I suppose!” he declared, earning chuckles from the other players.

At least Lord Oxthorpe can laugh at himself.

Beatrice wished she could be as carefree. As the game wore on, she tried to emulate his good-natured attitude, reminding herself that it was just a game.

The Viscount, however, was not as forgiving.

“Really, Oxthorpe,” he said, shaking his head, “one must take these things seriously if one is to improve.”

“Lighten up, Haddington,” Lord Oxthorpe replied with a wink. “It’s all in good fun.”

Beatrice managed a small smile at Lord Oxthorpe’s response.

Her turn came again, and as she prepared to strike the ball, Lady Featherwell accidentally nudged her mallet just as she was about to swing, causing her to miss the ball entirely.

“Oh dear, I am so sorry,” Lady Featherwell said in an overly sweet tone, her eyes gleaming with malicious pleasure.

Beatrice wanted to protest, to call out the blatant sabotage, but she heard her mother clear her throat nearby, a stern reminder to remain civil. With a deep breath, she smoothed down her dress and tried to compose herself.

As she took her place again, she tried to focus on the game. The wooden balls clinked

as they struck each other, and the gentle rustle of the leaves in the breeze created a serene backdrop that contrasted sharply with the tension she felt.

Lady Featherwell's whispers to her fellow players were as bothersome as a fly buzzing in her ear. Difficult to ignore and persistent.

Her turn came once more, and just as she was about to swing, she noticed a rider approaching the field.

The horse was a magnificent creature, its coat gleaming in the sun, and its rider handled it with expert skill. The man rode with a natural grace, guiding the horse effortlessly over the manicured lawn.

As he got closer, Beatrice recognized him.

It was the Duke, dressed in riding clothes but noticeably without a cravat. His neck glistened with sweat under the sun, and he had undone a button, revealing the top of his chest. The sight of him, so raw and unrefined, sent a tingling sensation through her, an attraction and an excitement that she found hard to suppress.

Lady Featherwell's voice cut through her thoughts. "Lady Beatrice, do hurry up. We haven't all day."

Beatrice glanced at Lady Featherwell, who was also watching the Duke's approach with unmistakable interest. The mocking smile on Lady Featherwell's face was now tinged with a hint of hunger.

Beatrice shook her head, trying to refocus. She lined up her shot, her hands trembling slightly on the mallet.

The presence of the Duke, his disheveled but undeniably attractive appearance, made

her heart race.

With a determined breath, she struck the ball, sending it rolling across the lawn.

Suddenly, a shrill cry pierced the air. Lady Featherwell collapsed dramatically onto the grass. Instantly, everyone rushed to her side, their concern palpable. Kenneth halted his horse and dismounted, running towards the commotion.

“Lady Featherwell, are you all right?” he asked, kneeling beside her.

Lady Featherwell, feigning weakness, leaned heavily into his arms. “Oh, Your Grace, I feel so faint,” she murmured, her eyes fluttering shut.

Kenneth looked genuinely concerned as he helped her to her feet. “I will take you back to the house,” he said, his tone polite.

As he guided her towards the house, he stopped briefly next to Beatrice.

“Lady Beatrice. It seems you have won the game,” he said with a small smile.

Beatrice blinked, looking down at the lawn. With all the fuss, no one had noticed that she had scored the winning point. A small smile of joy began to form on her lips.

But her mother’s hand gripped her arm tightly, pulling her back to reality.

“Beatrice, how could you let Lady Featherwell get away with that? You should have done something!”

“Mother, I cannot control Lady Featherwell’s disposition,” Beatrice replied, trying to keep her voice steady.

Prudence's eyes narrowed. "She did it to get the Duke's attention, and you should have done something too!"

"I will not swoon just to get a man to help me up," Beatrice shot back, her frustration bubbling over.

Her mother's grip tightened painfully around her arm. "Do you understand what is at stake here?" she hissed, her voice low and dangerous. "Our future depends on you making a good match. You cannot afford to be so proud."

Beatrice's heart sank, her mother's words cutting deeply. She felt trapped, suffocated by the weight of her family's expectations. The sharpness of her mother's grip and the intensity of her scolding left her feeling small and powerless.

"I am trying, Mother," she whispered, her voice trembling with suppressed emotion. "I am doing my best."

Prudence released her arm but continued to glare at her. "Your best is not enough. You need to do more."

Beatrice nodded silently, the joy of her small victory now completely overshadowed by the heaviness in her heart. She felt the sting of tears but blinked them back, refusing to let her mother see her cry.

As they walked back towards the house, Beatrice could not shake the feeling of inadequacy that clung to her. Her mother's words echoed in her mind, a constant reminder of the pressure she was under.

She glanced back at the lawn where she had scored the winning point, wishing she could hold on to that fleeting moment of happiness.

But reality was unforgiving, and she knew she had to continue playing the part, no matter how much it hurt inside.

Kenneth strode through the dimly lit hallway, his mind preoccupied with the events of the day.

The Pall Mall game had been an unexpected source of amusement, particularly Lady Beatrice's determination despite her lack of skill. Her spirit was refreshing, a stark contrast to the simpering ladies who usually sought his attention.

His thoughts also drifted to Lady Featherwell's rather dramatic swoon during the game. It was clear to him that her collapse was nothing more than a ploy to capture his attention and sympathy. He had seen such tactics employed by many ladies in the past, and it only served to fuel his growing disinterest in their shallow pursuits.

Lost in thought, he barely noticed a figure rounding the corner until they collided. Instinctively, his hands reached out to steady the person, and he found himself staring into the startled blue eyes of Lady Beatrice.

"Your Grace," she gasped, her hands grasping his arms for balance. "I apologize. I didn't see you."

Kenneth's lips curved into a smirk. "It seems we have a habit of running into each other, Lady Beatrice."

She blushed, the color rising in her cheeks. "So it would seem."

It was the first time they were alone since the night they met, and Kenneth did not realize how quickly desire kicked into him, how desperately he wanted to feel her body against his.

He didn't release her immediately, enjoying the feel of her in his arms. Her warmth seeped through the layers of his clothing, and he caught the faint scent of flowers that seemed to follow her everywhere.

"I must say, I was impressed by your determination on the Pall Mall field today," he said, his voice low and teasing. "Even amidst the... challenging conditions."

Beatrice's brow furrowed slightly. "Challenging? Oh, you mean Lady Featherwell's fainting spell during the game?"

Kenneth nodded, a hint of amusement in his eyes. "Yes, her timing was rather impeccable, wasn't it?"

She sighed, "Still, I do hope she is all right. That sudden collapse of hers was quite alarming."

"Indeed," he murmured, his gaze drifting to her lips. "Though I must admit, I suspect her collapse was more theatrics than ailment."

Beatrice looked up at him, "Oh. You believe she was pretending?"

"Surely you deduced that too, no?"

She glanced away as though she did not want to show that she had guessed what the widow had been up to.

"I prefer not venture into the realm of assumptions," she responded.

Kenneth's lips curled into a knowing smile. "Very astute of you, Lady Beatrice. Either way, it is safe to say that I've seen enough of Lady Featherwell's performances to recognize when she's putting on a show."

“Oh. I see,” she replied.

Distracted by the pretty curve of her lips, Kenneth did not notice that they’d fallen into a soft silence.

The air between them crackled with tension. He leaned in just a fraction closer, the scent of her perfume intoxicating him.

“You, on the other hand,” he said softly, “are refreshingly genuine.”

Beatrice’s cheeks flushed, and for a moment, neither of them moved. The world seemed to narrow down to just the two of them, the space between them charged with unspoken possibilities.

Just as Beatrice parted her lips to respond, the sound of footsteps echoed in the hallway.

They sprang apart, Kenneth’s hands falling to his sides as a servant rounded the corner.

The servant bowed. “Dinner is about to be served in the dining room.”

Kenneth nodded, composing himself. “Thank you. We’ll be right there.”

As the servant disappeared, Kenneth turned back to Beatrice, who was smoothing her skirts with shaky hands.

“Until dinner, Lady Beatrice,” he said, his voice still rough with desire.

She met his gaze. “Until dinner, Your Grace.”

With a final, heated glance, Kenneth turned and walked away, his body humming with the promise of what was to come.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:16 am

Chapter Six

Kenneth knew that the Dowager Duchess had a penchant for scheming, and tonight was no exception.

As he took his seat in the grand dining room, he could not help but notice that Lady Beatrice was positioned directly across from him. He also noticed that Lady Featherwell, seated a few places down, wore a look of clear displeasure, her thin lips pressed into a tight line.

He smirked inwardly. The Dowager Duchess was undoubtedly eager for another debate, perhaps hoping to spark the same spirited exchange about art that had occurred earlier in the gallery. Lady Bernmere sat nearby, her eyes twinkling with mischief. Kenneth suspected that the Dowager Duchess had already told her about his interaction with Beatrice.

As the first course was served, Lady Bernmere leaned forward, addressing the table with a smile.

“I heard there was a fascinating discussion about art earlier today. Kenneth, Lady Beatrice, would you care to share some of your insights with us?”

Kenneth remained aloof, unwilling to fall for the Dowager Duchess’s scheme. He was determined not to be drawn into another debate, especially one orchestrated for the amusement of others.

Beatrice, however, did not share his reticence.

“Your Grace,” she began, her tone polite but firm, “I was merely expressing that light, as used by artists like Westback, can convey hope and beauty, even without the presence of shadows.”

Kenneth responded laconically, “A valid point, Lady Beatrice.” He then leaned back slightly, seeming to concede.

Beatrice took this as a victory, a small smile playing on her lips.

Feeling a twinge of irritation, Kenneth couldn’t help but add, “However, I find it intriguing that one would argue so vehemently for an approach that avoids the complexities of life.”

Beatrice’s smile faded. “Are you implying that those who focus on the light are avoiding reality, Your Grace?”

Kenneth leaned in, his gaze intense. “Not precisely, Lady Beatrice. But it does make one wonder if they are perhaps shielding themselves from the harsher truths.”

Beatrice countered, “Or perhaps they are choosing to see the good amidst the bad. Not everyone has the luxury of dwelling on the shadows.”

“Embracing the darkness can also be a sign of strength, a way to face adversity.”

Beatrice met his gaze steadily. “And focusing on the light can be a way to inspire others, to show that there is always a glimmer of hope, no matter how dire the situation.”

Kenneth’s irritation grew, but so did his admiration. “You speak as if from experience, Lady Beatrice. One might almost think you have faced such adversities yourself.”

Beatrice's cheeks flushed. "I think it is clear that I have, Your Grace. Does that make my perspective any less valid?"

Kenneth felt a pang of regret for pushing too far. "No, I am not suggesting that."

"Then perhaps we can agree that both perspectives have their merit."

Kenneth nodded. "Perhaps we can."

Lady Featherwell, who had been observing their exchange, chose this moment to interject. "My, my, such a passionate debate over mere paintings. One would think there were deeper issues at stake here."

Beatrice straightened, her cheeks flushing slightly. "Art reflects life, Lady Featherwell. Our perspectives on art can reveal much about our own experiences and values."

Lady Featherwell's eyes gleamed with thinly veiled malice. "Oh, I see. And what exactly do your views reveal about you, Lady Beatrice?"

Kenneth's gaze sharpened. "That she has a keen mind and a deep appreciation for beauty, Lady Featherwell. Qualities to be admired, wouldn't you agree?"

Lady Featherwell's smile was all teeth. "Of course, Your Grace. It's just... unusual to see such fervor from someone in Lady Beatrice's position."

Beatrice's eyes narrowed. "And what position is that?"

Lady Featherwell turned to face her. "Oh, you know, with the recent... events surrounding your family. One must admire your resilience."

Beatrice's hands clenched in her lap, but she forced a calm smile. "Thank you for your concern, Lady Featherwell. I assure you, my appreciation for art remains undiminished by personal trials."

The room fell silent, the intensity of their exchange captivating everyone at the table. Kenneth felt the weight of Beatrice's gaze, her blue eyes locked onto his.

The Dowager Duchess broke the silence with a laugh. "Finally, some entertainment for our dinners. I very much look forward to hearing more of your riveting debates, Duke."

Kenneth tore his eyes away from Beatrice. The Dowager Duchess's words echoed in his mind as he considered the unexpected challenge that Lady Beatrice presented.

He cleared his throat, drawing the attention of the table. "I regret to inform you, Duchess, that I will be leaving tomorrow. There are urgent matters that require my attention back in Dunford."

It wasn't just an excuse to get out of the tedious socializing his aunt had subjected him to; there really was work to be done back home.

And despite his urge to stay and get a proper taste of Lady Beatrice, duty called. And nowadays, Kenneth was a man who put that first.

The Dowager Duchess's face fell, genuine disappointment evident in her eyes. "Must you leave so soon, Duke? We were just beginning to enjoy your company."

"I am afraid so," Kenneth replied firmly. "The estate requires my presence, and I cannot delay any longer."

His aunt, Marjorie, leaned in, her brow furrowed. "Kenneth, surely another day or

two would not hurt. You have only just arrived.”

Kenneth shook his head. “I appreciate your concern, Aunt Marjorie, but the matters at Dunford are pressing. I must return promptly.”

Beatrice, sensing the tension, and unable to resist a touch of sarcasm, spoke up. “Please do not let us keep you, Your Grace. I am certain Dunford will appreciate your swift return.”

He wanted to chuckle. Goodness, how he enjoyed it when she showed teeth.

Before he could respond, Lady Featherwell interjected, her tone dripping with false sweetness, “Oh, but it is such a shame for you to leave so abruptly, Your Grace. We will miss your presence dearly.”

Kenneth watched as she shot Beatrice a sly smile.

“And, Lady Beatrice, I am sure you understand how important it is for a man of the Duke’s station to fulfill his duties. Not everyone can afford to linger in leisure.”

Beatrice’s expression tightened, a flicker of anger crossing her features before she quickly masked it.

Kenneth observed this exchange closely, feeling a surge of protectiveness. Lady Featherwell’s words seemed innocuous on the surface, but there was an underlying cruelty that he could not ignore.

He turned his attention back to Beatrice, who kept her composure admirably. “Lady Beatrice, your understanding is appreciated,” he said, his tone sincere.

Lady Featherwell, not missing a beat, continued to draw the conversation back to

herself, recounting some trivial story designed to capture everyone's attention.

"Oh, did you all hear about the new exhibition at the Royal Academy? They are displaying works from various artists. Though I must say, some of them are quite pedestrian. I much prefer the grandiose portraits and landscapes that truly capture one's attention," the young widow prattled on.

Lady Bernmere and the Dowager Duchess politely engaged with her, nodding and making noises of agreement.

"The Royal Academy always has such diverse selections," Lady Bernmere said diplomatically. "It is wonderful to see the range of talent on display."

"Indeed," the Dowager Duchess agreed with a gracious smile. "Art comes in many forms, and it's always fascinating to see different interpretations and styles." With a glint of mischief in her eyes, she leaned forward. "Lady Featherwell, do tell us more about which pieces you found pedestrian. I am always keen to understand different perspectives on art."

Lady Featherwell hesitated, clearly unprepared for such a direct question. "Well, um, some of the landscapes lacked... a certain grandeur. They were... too simple, you see."

The Dowager Duchess raised an eyebrow, her expression both amused and inquisitive. "Too simple? In what way, dear?"

Lady Featherwell's smile faltered slightly. "Oh, you know, just... not as detailed as one would expect. The colors were rather muted, and the compositions somewhat... uninspiring."

The Dowager Duchess nodded thoughtfully. "I see. And what did you think of the

brushwork? Did it convey the same lack of detail?"

Lady Featherwell's eyes darted around the table, searching for support. "Yes, the brushwork was... quite rudimentary. Not at all what one would hope for in a prestigious exhibition."

Lady Bernmere stifled a smile, clearly enjoying the Dowager Duchess's gentle interrogation. "How interesting. I suppose it's true that not every artist can capture the complexity and vibrancy of life in their work."

"Exactly," Lady Featherwell replied, seizing the lifeline. "That's precisely what I meant."

Kenneth hid a smile behind his hand, impressed by the Dowager Duchess's subtle maneuvering. He glanced at Beatrice, who had also noticed the exchange and was biting her lip to keep from laughing.

The Dowager Duchess continued, her tone sweetly inquisitive, "And what about the modern portraits, Lady Featherwell? Did you find any of those to your liking?"

Lady Featherwell's discomfort grew more apparent. "Well, some were... decent, I suppose. But they lacked the... the refinement of the old masters."

"Ah, yes," the Dowager Duchess said, nodding sagely. "The old masters do set a high standard. I recall there was a splendid exhibition at the Royal Academy just last month, however, featuring some modern portraits that truly captured the essence of contemporary life."

Lady Featherwell's eyes widened slightly. "Oh, yes, of course. Those were quite... remarkable."

The Dowager Duchess raised an eyebrow, her expression one of feigned confusion. “Oh, my mistake. That exhibition ended years ago. I must have been thinking of something else. Silly me! It’s so easy to lose track of time with all the events at the Academy.”

Lady Featherwell blushed, realizing she had been caught in her ignorance. “Ah, well, yes. Time does fly, doesn’t it?”

The Dowager Duchess nodded, her eyes twinkling with amusement. “Indeed. It’s always wonderful to meet someone who appreciates art as much as I do.” She exchanged a knowing glance with Lady Bernmere, both women clearly satisfied with the outcome of their gentle prodding.

Lady Featherwell continued, her voice taking on a slightly smug tone. “I do believe that the quality of art lies in its ability to capture reality perfectly. I have always said that if a painting does not look exactly like the subject, then it is a failure. Don’t you agree, Your Grace?” She turned to Kenneth with a saccharine smile.

Kenneth raised an eyebrow, his disinterest evident.

“Art is more than just a replication of reality, Lady Featherwell. It is about evoking emotion and thought, capturing the essence rather than the exact likeness.”

Lady Featherwell, undeterred, continued to prattle on, “I remember when I purchased my first painting. It was a grand landscape, so detailed that you could see every leaf on the trees. That, to me, is true artistry.”

Kenneth tuned her out, his eyes drifting back to Beatrice. She was listening, her expression neutral but her eyes betraying a hint of frustration. He could see the effort it took for her to maintain her composure and not rise to Lady Featherwell’s bait.

Beatrice glanced up, catching his eye for a brief moment.

In that silent exchange, Kenneth felt a connection, a shared understanding of the charade they were both playing.

Lady Featherwell's voice faded into the background as Kenneth found himself drawn to the memory of the night Beatrice had walked into his chambers.

The image of her standing there, the color rising to her cheeks, haunted him. He recalled the way her gown had hugged her curves, the soft candlelight casting a warm glow on her skin. The scent of roses mingled with her unique fragrance had enveloped him, stirring a desire he had not felt in a long time.

His thoughts became more heated, imagining how it would have felt to pull her into his arms, to feel her softness against him, and to taste her lips. The desire that surged through him was potent, and he had to fight to maintain his composure.

Her way of debating, her stubbornness, her refusal to back down—they all infuriated him, yet they also fascinated him. Kenneth enjoyed her spirit, her intellect, and the way her eyes sparkled with determination. It was a stark contrast to the simpering women who usually sought his favor, and he found himself increasingly captivated by her.

Lady Featherwell's chatter became nothing more than background noise as Kenneth's focus remained on Beatrice. His gaze lingered on the curve of her neck, the way her hair framed her face, and the grace with which she carried herself. The desire to close the distance between them, to feel her warmth and softness, grew stronger with each passing moment.

Soon, I will find a way to be alone with her again.

After dinner, the Dowager Duchess called everyone to the drawing room for drinks. The grand space was filled with plush seats, elegant green draperies, and the soft glow of candlelight.

As the guests settled in, Lady Featherwell quickly made her way to Kenneth's side, her intent clear.

"Oh, Your Grace, you must tell me more about your estate in Dunford," she purred, leaning in just a little too close. "It sounds absolutely enchanting. I have always wanted to visit such a grand place."

Kenneth maintained his polite demeanor though he felt a twinge of irritation.

"It is quite a serene place," he replied coolly. "Very peaceful."

Lady Featherwell fluttered her eyelashes. "I do love peaceful places. Perhaps I could visit sometime, Your Grace? It would be delightful to see it with someone who appreciates its beauty as much as you do."

Before Kenneth could respond, another young lady approached them.

"Good evening, Your Grace," she greeted with a friendly smile. "Lady Featherwell."

"Ah, Miss Stenham," Lady Featherwell said dismissively, barely glancing her way. "His Grace and I were just discussing his lovely estate."

Kenneth nodded to Miss Stenham, grateful for the interruption. "Good evening, Miss Stenham."

Miss Stenham seemed eager to join the conversation, but Lady Featherwell immediately turned her back to her, effectively cutting her off.

“Do tell me more about your gardens, Your Grace,” she insisted, her hand lightly touching his arm.

Kenneth’s smile was strained. “The gardens are well-maintained, Lady Featherwell. I am sure you would find them quite pleasing.”

His eyes wandered across the room, seeking an escape from Lady Featherwell’s relentless flirtations.

He spotted Beatrice talking to another lord, a tall, broad-shouldered man with dark hair and a confident air. Kenneth recognized him as Lord Cranfield, a regular attendee of social gatherings.

Beatrice appeared to be engaged in a lively conversation, her face animated and her eyes sparkling.

Kenneth felt an unexpected pang of jealousy which he quickly dismissed. He told himself that he simply disliked Lord Cranfield, whose presence always managed to annoy him. It had nothing to do with the fact that Beatrice’s attention was focused on the man and not him.

Lady Featherwell continued her attempts to monopolize his attention. “Your Grace, I do believe you have the most fascinating stories. Tell me, what is the most exciting thing you have experienced at Dunford?”

Kenneth barely suppressed a sigh. “Dunford is quite tranquil, Lady Featherwell. I am afraid there is not much excitement to speak of.”

Lady Featherwell leaned even closer, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. “Surely there must be something, Your Grace. You strike me as a man who seeks adventure.”

Kenneth's patience was wearing thin, but he remained polite. "I value peace and quiet, Lady Featherwell."

His eyes drifted back to Beatrice and Lord Cranfield. She laughed at something the man said, her whole demeanor light and relaxed. Kenneth felt another surge of irritation. He tried to convince himself that it was merely his aversion to Lord Cranfield, not the sight of Beatrice enjoying someone else's company, that bothered him.

Lady Featherwell's voice cut through his thoughts again, but he barely registered her words. His attention was fixed on Beatrice and the inexplicable pull he felt towards her.

But then he forced himself to look away, his jaw tightening.

This is ridiculous! I do not get jealous.

But no matter how hard he tried to convince himself, the undeniable truth remained: Beatrice Wickes had gotten under his skin, and he wasn't sure how to rid himself of the growing desire to be near her, to get to know her, and to understand the fire that drove her.

As the evening wore on, Kenneth found it increasingly difficult to concentrate on anything else.

Lady Featherwell's attempts to engage him in conversation fell flat, and he responded with curt, polite remarks, his mind constantly wandering back to Beatrice.

Why does she affect me this way? I must find a way to understand this... and her.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:16 am

Chapter Seven

Beatrice stood in the drawing room, holding a glass of sherry and trying to maintain her composure as Lord Cranfield droned on about art.

She had been hopeful when he approached her, his easy smile and confident demeanor suggesting a pleasant conversation.

Her mother had looked on approvingly, especially when Lord Cranfield expressed an interest in discussing art, a topic close to Beatrice's heart.

However, it quickly became clear that Lord Cranfield had no intention of engaging in a meaningful dialogue. Instead, he launched into a long-winded lecture about the merits of classical art, his voice dripping with condescension.

"You see, Lady Beatrice," he said, his voice carrying a smug undertone, "true art is all about precision and detail. Take, for instance, the works of Raphael and Titian. Their mastery of form and technique is unparalleled. Any deviation from such precision, in my humble opinion, is simply a lack of skill."

Beatrice nodded politely though she felt her patience wearing thin.

She glanced around the room, noticing how Lady Featherwell continued to monopolize the Duke's attention. Kenneth's eyes, however, seemed to wander occasionally, landing on her and Lord Cranfield.

Lord Cranfield continued, oblivious to her lack of interest.

“You see, Lady Beatrice, modern artists often lack the discipline of the masters. They get caught up in emotional excesses and abstract concepts that distract from the true essence of art. Women, of course, might find such emotional indulgence appealing.”

Beatrice fought hard to control her frustration. “Lord Cranfield, while I understand your perspective, I believe that art is about more than just technique. It’s about capturing emotion and the essence of a moment.”

Lord Cranfield blinked, clearly taken aback by her statement. He stammered slightly, his confidence wavering. “Well, yes, but... you must understand that precision is the hallmark of true artistry. Something women might not fully grasp.”

Beatrice’s eyes flashed with determination. “Precision is important, but so is innovation. Without artists willing to push boundaries and explore new methods, art would stagnate. The emotional impact of a piece is just as crucial as its technical execution.”

Lord Cranfield seemed to shrink before her, his earlier bravado evaporating. “I see... well, perhaps you have a point,” he mumbled, clearly uncomfortable with the turn the conversation had taken.

Sensing his discomfort, Beatrice maintained her composure. “Thank you for the conversation, Lord Cranfield. It’s always enlightening to hear different viewpoints.”

Lord Cranfield, looking somewhat flustered, muttered a hasty farewell and excused himself.

Beatrice watched him go. Satisfaction and disappointment settled over her. She had hoped for a meaningful exchange, but she had encountered yet another man who underestimated her.

Why do they always assume we know nothing?

Her frustration mingled with a sense of triumph at having stood her ground.

Her mother's approving gaze had turned into a frown, but Beatrice felt a sense of liberation. She would not be patronized, not even in the pursuit of securing a match.

As she glanced around the room, her eyes met Kenneth's, and for a moment, she saw a flicker of something in his gaze—something more physical, more primal. It was brief, but it was enough to make her heart skip a beat.

Kenneth excused himself from Lady Featherwell's clutches and began to make his way towards Beatrice. Her heart fluttered, and heat crept up her cheeks. However, before he could reach her, another gentleman stepped in front of her.

Beatrice noticed Kenneth's scowl at the interloper, his expression darkening with displeasure.

"Lady Beatrice," drawled Lord Hartley, a man with slicked-back hair and an oily demeanor to match. His eyes were small and beady, his smile thin and insincere. "What a pleasure it is to see you this evening."

Beatrice forced a polite smile. "Good evening, Lord Hartley."

"Have you any interest in entomology, Lady Beatrice?" Lord Hartley asked, his voice dripping with condescension. "I have recently come across a most fascinating specimen of the Lepidoptera family. The intricacies of their wing patterns are simply extraordinary."

Beatrice inwardly sighed but maintained her composure. "That sounds... interesting, My Lord."

“Oh, it is more than interesting,” Lord Hartley continued, oblivious to her lack of enthusiasm. “Did you know that there are over two thousand species of moths and butterflies? The diversity is truly astounding. Just the other day, I was examining a rare specimen with iridescent wings, and the patterns were so complex, one could spend hours simply marveling at them.”

As he droned on about his insect collection, Beatrice’s attention wandered. She glanced around the room and saw Kenneth being waylaid by the Dowager Duchess and Lady Bernmere. Despite being deep in conversation, his eyes flicked back to her repeatedly. Noticing this, Beatrice decided to play along with her mother’s expectations and smiled sweetly up at Lord Hartley, even as his monotonous discourse continued.

Kenneth’s scowl deepened at her display of interest.

Why is he looking at me like that?

A small thrill ran through her at Kenneth’s reaction, even as she endured Lord Hartley’s endless prattling about pupae and metamorphosis.

“The transformation from larva to adult is nothing short of miraculous,” Lord Hartley said, “and the study of their life cycles offers such profound insights into nature’s marvels.”

Beatrice nodded politely, her thoughts far from the entomological details being shared.

She caught Kenneth’s eye once more as he made his way towards the garden. She could only read the frustration in his expression. However, there was something else too, something she could not quite pinpoint again—a combination of emotions that made her senses heighten.

With one final glance, Kenneth stepped out into the cool evening air, leaving Beatrice to navigate the remainder of the dull conversation with Lord Hartley.

As Lord Hartley continued to drone on about the life cycles of insects, Beatrice made noncommittal noises of agreement, wishing she could be one of the twenty-four-hour life insects he mentioned, if only to escape his monotonous lecture.

“Oh, and did you know that some of these insects live for only a single day?” he asked, his tone somehow both excited and condescending. “Imagine such a brief existence!”

“Yes, quite fascinating,” Beatrice murmured, her attention waning.

Just then, Lady Featherwell passed by and ‘accidentally’ stumbled into Beatrice, causing her to spill wine all over her gown. Beatrice gasped as the red liquid spread across the delicate fabric.

“Oh dear, how clumsy of me,” Lady Featherwell said with a fake apologetic smile, her eyes gleaming with satisfaction.

Lord Hartley, being a fool, stifled a laugh at the sight, clearly finding the incident amusing.

Beatrice clenched her hands into fists at her sides, and she had to fight the urge to slap the smug smile off Lady Featherwell’s face. Instead, she took a deep breath and composed herself.

“It is quite all right, Lady Featherwell,” she said evenly. “Excuse me, I need to change.”

She turned and walked away, her steps measured despite the burning humiliation she

felt. As she made her way upstairs, she was cornered by her mother in a quiet corridor.

“Utterly useless!” Lady Afferton hissed. “You cannot converse with any gentleman like a proper lady, and now, the Duke is leaving before you have had a chance to secure his attention. You have made a fool of yourself twice tonight.”

“Mother, Lady Featherwell did it on purpose,” Beatrice protested, trying to keep her voice steady.

“Don’t give me excuses!” her mother snapped. “You are a terrible daughter. You don’t care about this family. Unlike Patrick, who was unfairly shunned by Society yet still sends us money because he cares so deeply.” The final blow came with a sneer. “I wish it had been you who went away instead of Patrick.”

Beatrice felt a surge of emotion she could no longer contain.

“Your son? Your son, who assaulted my friend?” she retorted, her voice shaking with anger and hurt. “You want to know the truth about your son? Patrick has squandered our fortune abroad on gambling and mistresses. He has not sent us any money or letters for months. I have been the one caring for this family, not him.”

Lady Afferton’s eyes widened in shock and then narrowed in anger. “How dare you speak to me like that? Patrick is the only one who understands the burden of this family’s legacy. You, on the other hand, are a disappointment. Always making excuses, never taking responsibility.”

“Taking responsibility?” Beatrice’s voice rose. “I’ve been the one holding this family together while Patrick squanders our resources. I’ve sacrificed my happiness, my future, to ensure we survive. And all you do is criticize and belittle me.”

“I am tired of your excuses, Beatrice,” Lady Afferton snapped back. “If you had done your duty properly and found a husband, we wouldn’t be in this mess. Patrick is doing everything he can to help us from afar. We are lucky he sends us money.”

“He doesn’t send us anything!” Beatrice growled, her control slipping. “Everything you think he’s done is a lie. He’s abandoned us, and I’ve been the one picking up the pieces.”

Lady Afferton recoiled as if struck. “You... you’re lying. You? Picking up the pieces? Don’t be ridiculous, Beatrice.”

“I wish I were,” Beatrice said, her voice breaking. “But I’m not. I’ve been the one sacrificing, the one struggling, while you put your faith in a son who doesn’t care about us. I won’t let you belittle me anymore. I’ve done everything I can for this family, and I won’t be your scapegoat any longer.”

Lady Afferton’s face twisted with rage. “How dare you speak to me this way? You ungrateful child! Everything I have done is for this family, and you repay me with insolence? I will not stand here and listen to you speak ill of your brother. He is a good son, and he would never abandon his family.”

Beatrice took a step back, her own anger boiling over.

“Everything you have done is to keep up appearances! You care more about what Society thinks than the well-being of your own children. I will not be your pawn any longer.”

Lady Afferton slapped her, the sharp sting making Beatrice gasp.

“You insolent girl! How dare you speak to me like that? If your father had lived to see this day, he would be utterly disappointed in you. You are a disgrace to this

family.”

Beatrice’s heart shattered. The mention of her late father’s disappointment cut deeper than any slap.

She turned and fled, running through the halls until she found a balcony.

As she stepped outside into the cool night air, she burst into sobs that wracked her body.

She stared up at the night sky, longing for her life to be different, to be anywhere but there. The stars blurred through her tears as she cried, her heart aching with the harshness of her reality.

The sound of footsteps behind her made her stiffen. She quickly wiped at her tears, trying to compose herself.

“Lady Beatrice?”

She turned to see the Duke standing there, concern etched on his face.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:16 am

Chapter Eight

“ I beg your pardon, Your Grace, but I would prefer to be alone,” Beatrice said, her voice strained.

Kenneth ignored her plea, stepping closer.

“Who did this to you?” he asked, his voice hardening with anger. “Was it that idiot Lord Hartley?”

Beatrice shook her head, tears rolling down her cheeks. “Please leave me alone. I don’t want anyone to see me like this.”

Kenneth’s eyes flicked to her dress, noticing the large red stain. “Your dress is stained.”

Beatrice’s eyes flashed with irritation. “Thank you, Your Grace. Your powers of deduction astonish me.”

His patience worn thin, Kenneth bristled. “There’s no need to be rude. I am only trying to help.”

Beatrice squared her shoulders, a spark of defiance in her eyes. “Well, you are not helping. If anything, you are making it worse.”

Kenneth took a deep breath, trying to keep his temper in check. “How did your dress get stained?”

Beatrice hesitated then sighed. “Lady Featherwell ‘accidentally’ stumbled into me and caused me to spill my wine. She apologized, of course, but it was clearly intentional.”

Kenneth’s jaw tightened. “That woman has a talent for cruelty. But surely a stained dress isn’t enough to bring you to tears.”

Beatrice turned away, staring out into the night. “It’s not just the dress,” she muttered.

Kenneth stepped closer, his voice softening. “Then what is it, Lady Beatrice? There must be more to it than a ruined gown.”

Beatrice’s shoulders tensed up, and she took a deep breath. “It’s nothing. I just... it’s been a long day.”

Kenneth frowned, his concern deepening. “My Lady, I can see there’s more troubling you.”

“You needn’t worry about me, Your Grace. You can go ahead and enjoy yourself,” she responded.

“I’m not leaving until you tell me what’s truly bothering you,” Kenneth insisted, his voice firm.

She rounded on him, her eyes blazing. “You wouldn’t understand. This is not something that can be solved with your gallant efforts.”

Kenneth did not back down, his gaze steady. “Try me. I might surprise you.”

Beatrice clenched her fists. “Some things are beyond your reach, Your Grace.”

Kenneth's voice was firm. "Maybe so, but I'm still here, and I'm not leaving until you talk to me."

She stared at him for a moment, taken aback by his words. Her eyes darted to the side before she looked back.

She hesitated, her eyes downcast. "It's... it's my mother. She's pressuring me to secure a match by the end of this house party. Her expectations... they are crushing me."

Kenneth's jaw clenched, but then something occurred to him.

"I have a proposition to make," he announced suddenly.

Beatrice turned back to him, suspicion in her eyes. "What kind of proposition?"

He met her gaze steadily. "Marry me."

Beatrice's eyes widened in shock. "Stop being cruel. This isn't the time for jokes."

"I am not joking," Kenneth said somberly. "You come from a family with a tarnished name, so most gentlemen wouldn't risk their reputations by marrying you."

"And you would?" Beatrice asked bitterly.

Kenneth did not answer directly. "I require a wife to manage my estate and provide an heir. You have shown a commendable sensibility, particularly as you are the only one with the courage to debate art with me, and you do not faint at my mere presence, like so many others. And while I have no immediate desire to sire a child, I understand my duty."

Beatrice looked at him in disbelief. “Since you have sung my praises so far, would you care to tell me why I should believe you are being honest about this proposition?”

Kenneth stepped closer, his expression earnest. “We both need a marriage of convenience. Consider it. You will not have to endure your mother’s relentless pressure, and I will have a wife who isn’t trying to manipulate me for her own gain.”

“I do not like you, Your Grace. Do not expect me to swoon at your feet because you are making me an offer,” Beatrice replied, her voice steady.

Kenneth smiled, finding her defiance refreshing. “I don’t expect you to swoon, nor would I want you to. Swooning women are terribly inconvenient—they always seem to faint at the most inopportune moments.”

Beatrice still hesitated.

Kenneth stepped even closer, lowering his voice. “I understand this is sudden and unconventional, but a marriage of convenience would solve both our problems. You need to secure a match, and I need a wife to fulfill my responsibilities.”

Beatrice’s eyes widened, her reluctance evident. “You can’t be serious, Your Grace. We barely know each other.”

“Do you really think you have any chance of gaining another man’s attention to the point of receiving an offer?” Kenneth asked, watching her carefully.

She hesitated, the weight of his words sinking in. “I don’t know... It feels so sudden.”

“We may not know each other well, but we can come to an agreement. This arrangement could benefit us both.”

Beatrice weighed his words, her mind racing. Finally, she looked him straight in the eye. “I have no dowry, Your Grace.”

“I do not need money,” he stated firmly. “I am one of the wealthiest dukes in England.”

Beatrice hesitated before speaking again. “My mother would need her own residence. And additional funds to support a comfortable lifestyle.”

“That poses no problem,” Kenneth assured her. “I can provide a suitable residence and an allowance.”

“What will you gain from this?” she asked, searching his face for any sign of deceit.

“It is my duty to marry and sire an heir,” Kenneth answered. “Why you? Because you have some taste and are not completely mindless like most women of my acquaintance.”

Beatrice’s eyes flashed with indignation. “Not completely mindless? You think that’s a compliment?”

Kenneth held up a hand to stop her. “Will you accept the proposal or not?”

There was a long pause as Beatrice weighed the implications of his offer. The cool night air brushed against her tear-stained cheeks, and the distant sounds of the evening drifted up from the garden.

Finally, she met his gaze, her voice steady. “I accept, Your Grace.”

Kenneth felt relief and satisfaction at the same time. He had not anticipated this turn of events when he arrived at the house party, but the solution felt unexpectedly right.

He watched Beatrice, noting the determination in her eyes, and felt a newfound respect for her.

“There is one more matter,” she added, her voice firm.

He nodded. “What is it?”

“You will need to write to my brother,” Beatrice said, her eyes unwavering.

Kenneth nodded again. “Of course. I require his approval to marry you since he is the one responsible for you.”

“Patrick may try to coax money out of you,” she continued, her tone cautious.

Kenneth felt a flicker of irritation at the mention of her brother, but he maintained his calm demeanor. “I can deal with your brother. And I shall speak with your mother and take care of everything. Tomorrow, I’ll leave to acquire a special license so that we can be wed as soon as possible.”

“My mother will be thrilled with the arrangement,” she muttered under her breath then looked up at him. “I’d like to request something else,” she said, her voice slightly hesitant.

Kenneth motioned for her to continue. “Go on.”

“Give my mother a residence that’s far away,” she demanded, her expression serious.

He almost smiled at that, understanding the depth of her desire for freedom from her mother’s influence. So he simply nodded. “Consider it done.”

Beatrice blinked, slightly taken aback by his assertiveness. “Thank you, Your Grace.”

As they stood there, the tension between them crackled in the air.

Kenneth felt a sense of resolve settle over him.

This marriage, born out of convenience and necessity, could serve him quite, quite well. He admired Beatrice's strength and intelligence, qualities that would aid them both in the future.

He moved even closer, their faces inches apart. "We have an agreement," he murmured.

Beatrice nodded, her posture relaxing slightly. "Yes, we do."

Kenneth leaned in, drawn by his undeniable attraction to her. The warmth of her breath, the way her eyes sparkled, pulled him closer. His gaze dropped to her lips, and he found himself wanting to close the distance between them.

But just as he was about to, Beatrice placed a hand on his chest, stopping him.

"Someone might see us," she whispered, her voice trembling slightly.

Kenneth stepped back, both frustration and understanding in his eyes.

"Very well," he said, his tone a touch gruff.

With a final nod, he turned and left the balcony, his mind already racing with the tasks ahead.

He couldn't ignore the thoughts that intruded on his sense of duty—thoughts of Beatrice and their impending wedding night. Though he knew this marriage was born of necessity, he couldn't help but think about how desperately he wanted to bed her.

The memory of her defiant gaze, her fiery spirit, and the way her gown hugged her curves haunted him.

Kenneth quickened his pace, his resolve hardening.

He would be a husband soon, and although duty was at the forefront, the desire that simmered just beneath the surface was undeniable.

“You have always been such a dutiful daughter, Beatrice,” Lady Afferton gushed, her voice sickeningly sweet. “And now, securing such an advantageous match! You have truly done our family proud.”

Beatrice forced a smile, her stomach churning.

Her mother had dragged her outside for a walk around the garden right after hearing news of the Duke’s proposal, singing her praises in a manner that felt entirely disingenuous. Yet, Beatrice’s mind raced with the events of the day.

“Thank you, Mother. I am pleased you are happy.”

Lady Afferton beamed, her eyes gleaming with barely concealed greed. “Happy? My dear, I am overjoyed. You have ensured our future.”

Beatrice couldn’t resist a subtle jab. “It’s remarkable how quickly things change. Just last night, you had quite a different opinion of me.”

Lady Afferton, too wrapped up in her own triumph, barely registered the comment. “Oh, nonsense, Beatrice. What matters now is that you’ve made an excellent match. We can put any unpleasantness behind us.”

Beatrice nodded, her forced smile still in place. “I have a headache, Mother. I think I

should retire to my room.”

Lady Afferton’s concern was immediate but insincere. “Oh, of course, my dear. Do take care of yourself. We cannot have you falling ill now, can we?”

Beatrice nodded and excused herself, making her way back towards the house.

The hallways were dimly lit, the flickering candlelight casting shadows on the walls. As she neared her room, the faint rustle of silk and the sharp scent of lavender perfume reached her before a figure stepped out from a nearby alcove.

Lady Featherwell’s piercing gaze met hers, the haughty tilt of her chin making it clear that she intended to confront her. “Lady Beatrice,” she hissed, her eyes narrowing, “how did you manage to ensnare the Duke? Did you compromise yourself?”

Beatrice pushed past her, trying to maintain her composure. “I have no time for your accusations, Lady Featherwell.”

But Lady Featherwell grabbed her wrist, pulling her back with surprising force. “You may be his betrothed, but remember the Duke’s past. He will soon tire of you and seek a mistress. You could never satisfy him.”

Anger and humiliation surged through Beatrice. She wrenched her wrist free and stormed off to her room, slamming the door shut behind her. She collapsed onto her bed, silent tears streaming down her face.

Doubt gnawed at her. She found the Duke handsome, undeniably so, but his arrogance was infuriating. She enjoyed their debates about art, but the prospect of marriage filled her with uncertainty.

Would she have to stop painting now that she was to be a wife?

The thought of giving up her secret passion was unbearable. Painting was her solace, her escape, and the idea of losing that part of herself added to her inner turmoil.

The uncertainty of her situation weighed heavily on her, and she could only hope that, somehow, she would navigate this new path.

She drifted off to a restless sleep, her heart heavy with doubt and fear for what lay ahead.

Page 9

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Chapter Nine

St. Cuthbert's Chapel was an exquisite, intimate setting for the ceremony.

Beatrice found herself standing at the altar, everything around her a blur. The wedding had been arranged in less than a fortnight, and the whirlwind of preparations had left her feeling overwhelmed and slightly detached from reality.

Lady Bernmere and the Dowager Duchess of Newden stood proudly near the front, a comforting presence.

Beatrice's dress was a beautiful morning gown made of soft white muslin with delicate lace trimming the high neckline and long sleeves. The empire waist was adorned with a simple satin ribbon, and the skirt flowed gracefully to the floor, giving her an ethereal appearance. Her hair was styled simply, with loose curls cascading down her back.

The ceremony itself felt like a dream. She barely heard the words spoken by the vicar, her mind swirling with the enormity of what was happening. Kenneth stood beside her, looking handsome and composed in his formal dove-gray morning attire. His presence was an anchor in the whirlwind of her emotions.

As she repeated her vows, her voice was steady though her heart raced. When the ceremony concluded, and they were pronounced husband and wife, it took a moment for reality to sink in. They exchanged a brief, formal kiss, and then it was done. Beatrice was now the Duchess of Dunford.

Lady Afferton approached her, beaming. “You have done wonderfully, my dear. This match will secure our future.”

Beatrice managed a polite smile though her heart felt heavy. She glanced at Kenneth, who was speaking with his friends. He caught her eye and gave her a measured look which did little to ease her tension.

Beatrice glanced at the gathered guests. Her heart swelled with gratitude when she spotted Catherine and Thomas among the crowd.

Catherine looked radiant, her hand resting gently on her growing belly. Beatrice was thankful that her dearest friend could share this moment with her, despite the challenges of her pregnancy.

Beatrice made her way to Catherine and Thomas, a genuine smile on her face.

“Catherine, you look absolutely wonderful,” she said, taking her friend’s hands in her own. “Motherhood suits you well.”

Catherine laughed softly, her eyes sparkling with joy. “Thank you, Beatrice. And you, goodness... you make such a beautiful bride.”

“Thank you, my friend. I am happy you could make it.”

“I wouldn’t have missed my best friend’s wedding for the world.”

Thomas nodded in agreement, his arm wrapped protectively around his wife’s waist. “Indeed, we are both so happy for you and Kenneth. It was a bit of a surprise, but still, we are happy to be here.”

“Surprise indeed,” Catherine whispered, eyeing Beatrice carefully.

Beatrice knew her friend could see right through her. She was actually certain that Catherine could tell that she and Kenneth were no love match at all.

“Thank you again. I do hope you can enjoy yourselves,” Beatrice told them with a smile.

She exchanged a look with Catherine, trying to convey to her that it was all right, that this marriage was something she wanted. Perhaps not something her heart wished, but the best, most practical solution.

Catherine nodded at her, her eyes understanding, and Beatrice felt a tiny wash of relief.

Yet her smile faltered slightly as she caught sight of her mother standing to the side, a scowl directed at Catherine and Thomas.

She prayed that her mother would not decide to air all her grievances with her friend. Not today. Or ever, for that matter.

The wedding breakfast was held in the Dowager Duchess’s dining room which was transformed into a beautiful and welcoming setting for the occasion. The long table was adorned with crisp white linens, elegant china, and gleaming silverware. Fresh flowers in delicate arrangements added splashes of color, their fragrance mingling with the scent of freshly baked bread and pastries.

The sunlight streamed through the large windows, casting a warm glow over the room. Beatrice took a deep breath, allowing herself to be drawn into the moment.

As the wedding breakfast came to a close, it was time for Kenneth and Beatrice to depart. The farewell was brief but warm with Lady Afferton beaming proudly and the Dowager Duchess and Lady Bernmere offering their heartfelt congratulations.

They stepped outside where their carriage awaited them. The gathered guests waved and called out their well-wishes as Kenneth helped Beatrice into the carriage.

“Duchess,” Kenneth began, breaking the silence, “I hope you find Dunford Castle to your liking. It is quite different from London townhouses.”

“I am sure it will be lovely,” Beatrice replied, her voice soft. “I look forward to seeing it.”

Kenneth’s eyes glinted with a touch of cold amusement. “You may find the sea air quite bracing. It takes some getting used to.”

Beatrice couldn’t help but let out a small, nervous laugh, realizing too late that it sounded unnervingly like the tittering of the swooning ladies she had always disdained.

She cleared her throat, trying to regain her composure. “I am sure it will be a welcome change.”

Kenneth’s smile was thin, his demeanor distant. “I hope you’re prepared for the isolation. It’s not exactly the bustling social scene of London.”

Beatrice bristled at his tone. “I’m quite capable of handling a bit of solitude, Duke. Perhaps it will be a refreshing change from the constant scrutiny of Society.”

Kenneth raised an eyebrow. “We’ll see how long that sentiment lasts.”

Beatrice’s eyes narrowed slightly, her temper flaring. “I assure you, I’m not as fragile as you seem to think.”

Kenneth’s gaze hardened, and he leaned back in his seat, crossing his arms over his

chest. “I never said you were fragile, Duchess. But life at Dunford is not what you’re accustomed to.”

Beatrice’s jaw tightened, the tension between them palpable. “I suppose we will both have to make adjustments then.”

Kenneth nodded curtly, the coldness in his eyes a stark contrast to the warmth of the countryside around them. “Indeed.”

The rest of the journey was marked by an uncomfortable silence, each lost in their own thoughts as they drew closer to their new home. The initial excitement and nervousness had given way to a simmering tension.

As the carriage rounded a bend, Dunford Castle came into view. Beatrice’s breath caught in her throat.

The castle was a magnificent structure, its ancient stone walls rising majestically against the backdrop of the sea. Turrets and battlements gave it a fairytale quality while the surrounding landscape was equally breathtaking. Manicured gardens stretched out before the castle, leading down to a private beach where the waves lapped gently against the shore.

Beatrice’s eyes widened in awe, her artistic mind immediately envisioning the seascapes she could paint. The interplay of light and shadow on the water, the vibrant colors of the gardens, and the imposing yet elegant structure of the castle itself—all of it filled her with inspiration.

“It’s... it’s incredible,” she murmured, her voice filled with genuine admiration.

Kenneth glanced at her, a hint of pride in his eyes. “Welcome to Dunford Castle, Duchess.”

The carriage came to a stop at the grand entrance where footmen and maids awaited to assist them. As Beatrice stepped out of the carriage, she felt excitement and apprehension. This was her new home, a place of both beauty and responsibility.

As she stepped into the grand entrance hall of Dunford Castle, she was immediately introduced to the staff. The butler, Mr. Jennings, greeted her with a respectful bow.

“Welcome to Dunford Castle, Your Grace. I am Mr. Jennings, the butler. If there is anything you require, please do not hesitate to ask.”

“Thank you, Jennings,” Beatrice replied, appreciating his calm and efficient demeanor.

Next, she was introduced to the housekeeper, Mrs. Whitfield, a kind-looking woman with a warm smile. “Your Grace, it is an honor to have you here. I am Mrs. Whitfield, the housekeeper. We are all at your service.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Whitfield,” Beatrice said, feeling slightly overwhelmed by the formality of it all.

Finally, she was introduced to her new lady’s maid, a young woman with a serene expression. “Your Grace, I am Anna. I will be attending to your needs.”

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Anna,” Beatrice returned, feeling a bit more at ease with the presence of a personal maid.

Kenneth, who had remained silent during the introductions, turned abruptly and headed for the door. “I have matters to attend to,” he said curtly, not even sparing her a glance. “Rest well, Duchess.”

Beatrice watched him leave, a spark of irritation flaring within her. His cold behavior

grated on her nerves, and she felt a pang of resentment at his abrupt departure.

“Thank you,” she muttered under her breath, the words dripping with sarcasm.

Mrs. Whitfield and Anna guided her to her chambers which adjoined the Duke’s. The suite was elegant and spacious with large windows offering a breathtaking view of the sea. The furnishings were rich and tasteful, exuding an air of both comfort and grandeur.

“Let us help you get settled in, Your Grace,” Anna said softly, beginning to assist Beatrice in taking off her travel clothes.

Beatrice then was helped into a warm bath, the soothing water washing away the fatigue of the journey. Anna and Mrs. Whitfield worked efficiently, and soon, Beatrice was dressed in fresh, comfortable clothes.

Anna’s brush moved smoothly through Beatrice’s hair, the gentle strokes relaxing her. Beatrice glanced at her reflection and met Anna’s eyes in the mirror. “Anna, how long have you been here at Dunford Castle?”

“Five years, Your Grace,” Anna replied, her hands deftly arranging Beatrice’s hair. “It is a beautiful place to serve.”

“It is indeed,” Beatrice agreed. “The Duke seems to have taken good care of it.”

Anna smiled gently. “The castle is better than ever, thanks to him.”

Beatrice’s curiosity was piqued. “What do you mean by that?”

Anna hesitated then shook her head slightly. “I have spoken out of turn, Your Grace. Forgive me.”

“No harm done, Anna,” Beatrice assured her, sensing there was more to the story.

She decided not to press further, respecting the boundaries of their relationship.

Once her hair was done, Anna stood back. “Is there anything else you require, Your Grace?”

“No, that will be all for now, Anna. Thank you.”

Anna curtsied and left the room, leaving Beatrice alone in her new chambers. She took a moment to look around, appreciating the blend of luxury and comfort. The bed was large and inviting, the fire crackled softly in the grate, and the view from the windows was simply stunning.

Mrs. Whitfield appeared in the doorway. “Your Grace, His Grace has sent word. He regrets that he cannot join you for dinner this evening due to an unforeseen problem on the estate.”

Beatrice felt a renewed pang of disappointment. “Thank you. In that case, please arrange for a light supper to be brought to my room. I am quite tired after the journey.”

“Of course, Your Grace. I will see to it immediately.”

As Mrs. Whitfield left the room, Beatrice sat back down, her mind swirling with emotions.

The reality of her situation began to settle heavily upon her. She was alone in a vast, unfamiliar castle, married to a man she barely knew, and already faced with the daunting task of integrating herself into his life and household.

She walked over to the window, staring out at the sea. The waves crashed against the shore with a soothing rhythm, but the sense of isolation only deepened. The grandeur of the castle and the beauty of the landscape were stark contrasts to the loneliness that gripped her heart.

“Am I truly alone in this?” she whispered to herself. “Can I find my place here, or will I always feel like an outsider?”

The door opened again, and Anna returned with a tray. “Your supper, Your Grace.”

Beatrice turned away from the window, forcing a smile. “Thank you, Anna.”

The tray was laden with slices of cold meats, fresh bread, cheese, and a small fruit tart. The sight of it brought a sense of comfort, even if only a small one.

Anna set the tray on a small table near the fireplace. “Will there be anything else, Your Grace?”

“No, that will be all for now, Anna. Thank you for your assistance.”

Anna curtsied once more and quietly left the room.

Beatrice sat down at the table, taking a small bite of the fruit tart. The sweetness lingered on her tongue, but it did little to lift her spirits.

After finishing her meal, she returned to the window, gazing out at the darkening sky. The sea was a constant reminder of change and continuity, of the ebb and flow of life. She would find her rhythm here, just as she had always done.

“Tomorrow is a new day,” she whispered to herself. “And with it, a new beginning.”

With that thought, she turned away from the window, deciding it was time to prepare for bed. She rang the bell, and moments later, Anna entered the room with a quiet knock.

“Your Grace, shall I assist you in preparing for bed?” Anna asked gently.

“Yes, please, Anna,” Beatrice replied, feeling a wave of fatigue wash over her.

Anna moved efficiently, helping Beatrice out of her day dress and into a soft, comfortable nightgown. As she brushed out Beatrice’s hair, she kept up a light chatter.

“It’s a lovely evening, isn’t it, Your Grace? The sea air always makes for a peaceful night’s sleep. And the castle is truly magnificent. The gardens are particularly beautiful in the spring.”

Beatrice was only half-listening, her mind preoccupied with the loneliness of her situation. She had not imagined she would spend her wedding night alone, and the thought weighed heavily on her heart. She found herself nodding absently to Anna’s words, the maid’s cheerful voice a distant comfort.

“Thank you, Anna,” she said once her hair was done. “That will be all for tonight.”

Anna curtsied, her eyes filled with understanding. “Good night, Your Grace. If you need anything, please don’t hesitate to ring for me.”

Beatrice managed a small smile. “Good night, Anna.”

As Anna quietly left the room, Beatrice climbed into the large, inviting bed, pulling the covers up to her chin. The softness of the linens and the gentle crackling of the fire should have been comforting, but the silence of the castle felt overwhelming.

She stared at the canopy above her, the flickering shadows dancing across the fabric.

Her thoughts drifted to the Duke once more. She remembered the sight of him shirtless in his room, the way his muscles rippled under his skin, and the hint of vulnerability in his eyes.

She recalled the way he had looked on his horse during the Pall Mall game, so confident and commanding. A warmth spread through her at the memory, and she chastised herself for thinking about him so much.

Suddenly, Lady Featherwell's words echoed in her mind.

“He'll tire of you, just like he tires of all his conquests .”

Her last thoughts were of Kenneth, of the unspoken tension and the undeniable attraction between them. She wondered if he felt the same pull, the same desire.

As sleep finally claimed her, she hoped that tomorrow would bring clarity and a chance to understand the enigmatic man she had married.

Chapter Ten

“Thank you, Thompson. That will be all for tonight,” Kenneth dismissed his valet, who had been assisting him with his evening preparations.

He returned from a long day of dealing with estate matters. A dispute between two of his tenant farmers had required his immediate attention and mediation, a matter that had unfortunately consumed his entire day.

It was not how he had planned to spend his first day on the estate with Beatrice.

“Very good, Your Grace,” Thompson replied with a bow before exiting the room.

Kenneth removed his boots and hesitated, looking at the door that connected his chamber to Beatrice’s. A part of him was driven by a raw desire to see her, to feel the magnetic pull that had been simmering between them since their first encounter.

With a deep breath, he stood up and, dressed in only his breeches with his shirt open, walked into her chamber.

Beatrice clambered quickly out of bed in alarm, clutching the covers to her chest. Her eyes were wide, and Kenneth could see the tension in her posture. She wore a simple nightgown that accentuated her figure in a way that made him gulp. He wanted her so badly but knew he needed to keep his desire in check.

“Duchess,” he began, his voice coming out rougher than intended, “since we are now married, it seems only fitting that we... consummate our union.”

He saw the flash of surprise in her eyes, and he softened his voice, allowing a hint of seduction to creep in.

“We should think about our future, about producing an heir for Dunford.” His eyes roamed over her form appreciatively, and he added, “Besides, I find myself quite drawn to you, more than I anticipated.”

“I am quite aware of my wifely duties, Duke,” Beatrice replied, her tone a bit acerbic.

Kenneth approached her, his eyes locked onto hers. “Do you really know anything about marital duties?” he asked, trying to keep his voice steady.

Beatrice met his gaze squarely. “I am not an innocent debutante anymore.”

Her words riled him up, frustration and desire coursing through him. “Since you are not an innocent debutante, I should warn you that you should not expect love in our marriage,” he added, his tone sharp as he stepped closer to her.

Beatrice rolled her eyes. “I do not dream of romance, Duke. Especially not with you.”

“Good,” Kenneth replied, feeling his temper rise.

“Then get it over with,” she said, her voice tinged with defiance.

She dropped the covers and closed her eyes, standing there like a sacrificial lamb which only exasperated him further.

“Get it over with? I do not just ‘get it over with’ when it comes to this. You’ll be writhing with pleasure, dear wife,” Kenneth growled at her, and her eyes flew open at the low hum of his voice. “This is not just about duty.”

He growled again and grabbed her, pulling her to him. He kissed her with a passion that surprised even himself, a fierce, consuming kiss that spoke of all the pent-up desire and frustration he felt.

Beatrice's initial shock melted into the kiss, and she responded with equal fervor. The tension between them seemed to ignite, and the kiss deepened, becoming a powerful exchange of emotions. Kenneth's hands roamed over her back, pulling her closer, while her fingers threaded through his hair, holding him to her.

In one swift move, he lifted her and laid her on the bed, pinning her hands above her head.

"Open your eyes, Beatrice," he commanded softly but firmly. "I want you to see me. I want you to feel this."

Beatrice hesitated then slowly opened her eyes, meeting his intense gaze.

For a moment, they stared at each other, the air between them charged with unspoken emotions.

He bent his head down and trailed feather-light kisses down her collarbone to the swell of her breasts. Beatrice let out a moan and arched against him.

When his mouth met the fabric of her nightgown, he heaved a momentary sigh of frustration. She tried to pull him back to her, but he captured her lips and slid his hand up her waist and then to the top of her nightdress. He tugged at the laces until her breasts spilled out.

His tongue explored a taut nipple, his lips gliding over the softness of her skin, leaving her shivering with desire. He kissed up her collarbone until his lips found hers, eliciting a moan from her that sent a shiver down his spine. His lips then moved

to her neck, and he trailed molten kisses down the column of her throat.

“Please don’t stop,” Beatrice moaned.

Kenneth slipped his hand between her thighs and slowly circled the hardened nub at the apex of her sex. He increased the pressure until she was writhing beneath him and letting out small cries of pleasure.

Kenneth trailed kisses down her belly, never ceasing the pressure against her sex. His lips continued their journey until his tongue flicked between her soft, sweet folds. His tongue replaced his finger, and he licked her nub, making slow, lazy circles. Her inner thighs quivered, and her moans became louder as she opened her legs wider. When he flicked his tongue hard against her center, she cried out.

His shaft hardened to the point that he could not hold himself back any longer.

Just as he reached down to undo the buttons of his trousers, a knock sounded at the door, startling them both. They paused, breathless and caught off guard.

Beatrice quickly threw on a robe and moved to answer the door. Opening it, she found a young maid standing there, looking slightly flustered.

“Your Grace, I knocked on His Grace’s door, but there was no answer. I assumed he would be with you.”

Kenneth got off the bed, his frustration simmering beneath the surface as he walked to the door. “What’s the matter?” he asked, trying to keep his voice calm.

The maid curtsied quickly. “There’s been a small leak in the west wing, Your Grace. The steward sent me to fetch you.”

Kenneth groaned inwardly, the weight of his responsibilities crashing down on him. He glanced at Beatrice, seeing the concern in her eyes.

“I will go with her,” he said, resignation in his tone.

Beatrice stepped forward. “Let me come with you.”

Kenneth shook his head, a small, weary smile on his lips. “I will handle it.”

He left with the maid, feeling a deep sense of frustration and unsatisfied desire.

The walk to the west wing seemed longer than usual, the silence of the castle amplifying his irritation. This was not how he had envisioned their first night together, interrupted by the mundane issues of estate management.

Beatrice awoke the next morning to the soft light of dawn filtering through the heavy curtains of her chamber. The spot beside her was empty, a stark reminder of the night before. She had spent her wedding night alone, her new husband absent due to a leak in the roof of the west wing.

Her thoughts swirled; she knew Kenneth had responsibilities, that the management of an estate was demanding and often unpredictable. Yet, she couldn't help but feel a pang of disappointment. She had not expected romance or declarations of love, but she had hoped for at least a semblance of companionship on their first night as husband and wife.

She heaved out a sigh of resignation. This was her reality now, and there was no point in dwelling on unmet expectations. If Kenneth was going to be distant, she would find ways to fill the void herself. She would focus on her duties as Duchess, immerse herself in her art, and carve out a life independent of her husband.

I must make the best of this . If I am to find happiness, it will be on my own terms.

With a sigh, she pushed herself out of bed and rang for Anna. Moments later, the maid entered, her expression bright and eager to please.

“Good morning, Your Grace,” Anna said cheerfully. “Shall I help you dress?”

“Yes, please, Anna,” Beatrice replied, trying to muster some enthusiasm.

As Anna helped her into a soft rose-colored gown, the fabric cool against her skin, she relayed some news. “The Duke has gone out early to check on things around the estate, Your Grace. He seemed quite busy.”

Beatrice’s heart sank slightly, but she managed a nod. “Thank you, Anna.”

Once dressed, Beatrice made her way to the dining room. The long table was set for breakfast, but she found herself alone. A servant brought in a tray of food—freshly baked bread, butter, jam, and a selection of fruits. She picked at her meal, her thoughts drifting back to Kenneth.

Why didn’t he come back?

Was it truly the leak that kept him away, or was he avoiding her? She shook her head, trying to dispel the negative thoughts. Kenneth was a practical man; his priorities were the estate and its well-being. She needed to be patient and understanding, even if it meant enduring some loneliness.

Determined not to let the day go to waste, Beatrice decided to throw herself into her duties as Duchess. She rang for the housekeeper, who arrived promptly, her demeanor efficient and welcoming.

“Good morning, Your Grace. How may I assist you today?” Mrs. Whitfield asked.

“Good morning, Mrs. Whitfield,” Beatrice replied. “I would like to familiarize myself with the household and my responsibilities. Could you show me what needs attention?”

“Of course, Your Grace,” Mrs. Whitfield said with a nod. “Let us start with the inventory and then move on to the management of the staff.”

Beatrice spent the morning touring the estate with Mrs. Whitfield, learning about the daily operations of Dunford Castle. They visited the kitchens, where she met the head cook, Mrs. Potts, who promised to prepare a special dinner for the Duke and Duchess that evening.

“You’re in for a treat tonight, Your Grace,” Mrs. Potts said with a smile as they walked through the bustling kitchen. “His Grace always enjoys a fine meal. He’s really turned things around here, you know. Quite the change from his father, bless his soul.”

Mrs. Whitfield cleared her throat sharply, causing Mrs. Potts to falter.

“I mean, he’s done wonders for the estate,” Mrs. Potts corrected quickly.

Beatrice’s curiosity was piqued. She had heard rumors about the late Duke’s fondness for gambling halls and his less-than-stellar reputation, but she had never paid much attention to gossip. Still, it was interesting to hear how different Kenneth was from him.

“I see,” she said, keeping her tone neutral. “It sounds like a lot of hard work has gone into maintaining the estate.”

“Oh, indeed, Your Grace,” Mrs. Potts replied, more cautiously now. “His Grace has been very dedicated.”

Mrs. Whitfield chimed in, smoothly changing the subject, “Shall we move on, Your Grace? There is still much to see.”

As the day progressed, Beatrice found herself in the grand ballroom, its ornate moldings and high ceilings reflecting the opulence of Dunford Castle. She walked slowly, taking in the intricate details of the room—the rich tapestries, the crystal chandeliers, and the polished wooden floors.

Mrs. Whitfield followed closely, ready to answer any questions. “Your Grace, we could change the draperies and perhaps consider a new color palette for the walls. The current decor is a bit dated.”

Beatrice nodded thoughtfully. “I agree. Something lighter and more modern might breathe new life into the room. What do you think about pale blue or soft gold?”

“I think those would be lovely choices, Your Grace,” Mrs. Whitfield replied with a smile.

As they discussed the possible changes, Beatrice glanced towards the large windows that lined one side of the ballroom. To her surprise, she noticed Kenneth watching her from across the courtyard. His figure was framed by the window of his study in the opposite wing. The moment he realized she had seen him, he turned and walked away.

Beatrice’s curiosity was piqued. “Mrs. Whitfield, is that the Duke’s study?” she asked, nodding towards the window where Kenneth had been.

Mrs. Whitfield followed her gaze and nodded. “Yes, Your Grace. His Grace spends a

great deal of time there, attending to estate matters.”

Beatrice continued to gaze out the window, her eyes drifting to another window on the east side of the castle. “And that room there? The one with the sea view?”

“That is the morning room, Your Grace,” Mrs. Whitfield explained. “It offers a beautiful view of the sea, especially at sunrise. However, His Grace rarely uses it.”

“Good,” Beatrice said with a small smile. “I might make use of it someday.”

Mrs. Whitfield’s eyes sparkled with approval. “I think that would be a wonderful idea, Your Grace. It’s a lovely room, and I’m sure you’ll find it a pleasant place to spend your mornings.”

Beatrice nodded, feeling a small thrill of anticipation. She could already imagine herself sitting in the morning room, the light of dawn streaming through the windows as she sketched or painted the sea. It would be her private haven, a place where she could find solace and inspiration.

As they continued their tour, Beatrice kept feeling that Kenneth was near, watching and waiting. It was as if the very walls of Dunford Castle held their own secrets, and she was determined to uncover them.

Her thoughts drifted back to the glimpse she had caught of him earlier. What had he been thinking as he watched her? Was he regretting their marriage, or was he simply trying to understand her better?

Later that afternoon, a footman approached her with a respectful bow. “Your Grace, a delivery has arrived for you from Wales.”

Beatrice’s heart skipped a beat. “Oh, my belongings!” she exclaimed, her excitement

bubbling over. “Please, show me to them.”

The footman led her to the entrance hall where several trunks and crates were stacked. Beatrice’s eyes lit up at the sight of her beloved items, wrapped and waiting to be unpacked.

She turned to the footmen with a bright smile. “These need to go to the morning room overlooking the sea. I will unpack them myself.”

Mrs. Whitfield, who had accompanied her, raised an eyebrow and said, “Your Grace, the staff can certainly unpack these for you. There’s no need for you to trouble yourself.”

Beatrice smiled, shaking her head. “Thank you, Mrs. Whitfield, but some of these items are quite personal. I would prefer to handle them myself.”

Mrs. Whitfield nodded, her concern quelled. “Very well, Your Grace. If you change your mind, please let me know.”

Beatrice nodded, her mind already racing with plans for her new space. As she stood there, surrounded by her trunks, she felt a sense of determination settle over her.

Since I am all alone in this new place, I can spend time on my art. My sanctuary, my escape.

Chapter Eleven

“What’s going on here?” Kenneth asked, drawing their attention.

Beatrice turned to face him, her eyes widening momentarily before she composed herself. “Your Grace, I was just instructing the footmen to leave my trunks here. I will unpack them myself.”

Kenneth frowned. “I don’t know what life was like in Wales, but here, I cannot let my Duchess do such tasks. The servants will handle it.”

Beatrice lifted her chin defiantly. “These are my possessions, Your Grace. I will take care of them. However, I would appreciate it if the rest of my things, such as my dresses, could be put in my room. I’ll help the servants unpack upstairs.”

Kenneth stepped closer, his towering presence meant to intimidate her. “What are you doing?” he asked, his voice low so the servants couldn’t hear.

“Why are you so interested in my movements?” Beatrice shot back, her eyes flashing with irritation.

“You’re living under my roof. I have every right to be interested,” Kenneth replied frustratedly.

Beatrice stood her ground, her posture straight and unyielding. “It’s also my house now,” she retorted, meeting his gaze without flinching.

She was infuriating, yet undeniably beautiful. He stepped even closer, their faces mere inches apart.

“You are a stubborn woman,” he said, something deeper lacing his voice.

“And you are a controlling man,” Beatrice scoffed.

They stood there for a moment, the air between them crackling with tension.

Finally, Beatrice broke the silence. “Please, just let the footmen do as I ask.”

Kenneth’s jaw tightened, but he stepped back, giving a sharp nod. He turned to the footmen, his voice authoritative. “Carry the rest of her things upstairs.”

Beatrice turned to the footmen, her voice softening. “Thank you, gentlemen.”

With that, she walked away, heading towards the staircase.

Kenneth watched her go, his eyes lingering on her retreating form. The remaining footmen stared at him, waiting for instructions. He groaned inwardly, waving a hand in resignation.

“Put her things in the morning room as she asked,” he ordered. “I’ll let you know when you’re needed to unpack.”

As the footmen hurried to comply, Kenneth stood there, a myriad of emotions swirling within him. This woman, his wife, was proving to be more than he had anticipated. He just wasn’t sure yet whether that was a blessing or a curse.

As he contemplated their encounter, the butler approached. “Your Grace, Viscount Ashford has arrived. He’s here to discuss the potential sale of some of his land.”

Kenneth nodded, his mood shifting. “Show him to my study, Jennings. I’ll be there shortly.”

He made his way to his study, his thoughts lingering on Beatrice before he forced himself to focus on the matter at hand. Viscount Ashford was known to have fallen on hard times, much like his own father had. The comparison stirred a mix of empathy and disdain in Kenneth. He was determined not to follow in his father’s footsteps, and dealing with someone who had succumbed to similar vices was always a bitter reminder.

When Kenneth entered his study, Lord Ashford was already seated, looking rather uncomfortable. Kenneth took his seat behind the large oak desk, offering a curt nod. “Lord Ashford, thank you for coming.”

The Viscount gave a strained smile. “Your Grace, thank you for seeing me on such short notice.”

Kenneth gestured for him to continue, and Ashford cleared his throat nervously. “I am in need of funds and have decided to sell a part of my estate. Given our properties’ proximity, I thought you might be interested.”

Kenneth regarded him coolly. “I am aware of your situation. Tell me, what exactly are you offering?”

Ashford hesitated, his eyes darting around the room before settling back on Kenneth. “A substantial part of my land adjacent to Dunford. It’s prime land, Your Grace. Fertile and well-maintained.”

Kenneth leaned back in his chair, considering the offer. The land was indeed valuable, but he couldn’t ignore the Viscount’s motives for selling. “And what has driven you to this decision, Ashford?”

The Viscount's face flushed slightly. "I have had some... financial difficulties. Debts that need to be settled."

Kenneth's gaze hardened. "Gambling debts?"

Ashford shifted uncomfortably. "Among other things, yes."

Kenneth felt a surge of anger, the memories of his father's reckless behavior flooding back. "I see. It's unfortunate that such circumstances have led you to this point."

Ashford nodded, a flicker of relief crossing his features. "Yes, well, it's necessary."

There was a brief, tense silence before he spoke again, attempting to lighten the mood. "I had almost forgotten, Your Grace. Congratulations on your recent marriage. I hear you've taken Lady Beatrice Wickes as your wife."

Kenneth's eyes narrowed. "Yes, I have."

The Viscount smiled though it didn't reach his eyes. "Quite the match, indeed. Her family's reputation precedes her, especially with a brother like Patrick. One must wonder what kind of duchess she will be, coming from such a stock."

Kenneth's hackles rose at the insinuation. "Lady Beatrice is my wife, Ashford. I would advise you to tread carefully when speaking of her or her family."

Ashford's smile faltered. "Of course, Your Grace. I meant no disrespect."

Kenneth leaned forward, his tone icy. "See that you don't. Now, about the land. I will consider your offer and have my steward review the details. You will hear from me soon."

The Viscount nodded quickly, sensing that the conversation was over. “Thank you, Your Grace. I appreciate your time.”

Kenneth stood up, signaling the end of the meeting.

As Ashford left the room, Kenneth’s thoughts returned to Beatrice. He had defended her without hesitation, and the realization stirred something within him. Despite their rocky start, he felt a growing sense of protectiveness towards her. She was his wife, and he would allow no one to tarnish her name or her honor.

He returned to his desk. The desire gnawing at him was a constant, unwelcome distraction.

As he reviewed the papers before him, his thoughts kept drifting back to her, wondering how he would balance his duty and the intense, undeniable attraction that burned between them.

Beatrice busied herself with unpacking, her hands moving deftly through her belongings. Anna and the young maid, Grace, worked alongside her. The room was filled with the quiet rustle of fabric and the soft thud of items being placed in drawers. Beatrice found the simple task soothing, a welcome distraction from the uncertainties of her new life.

As Beatrice pulled out an elaborate gown, Mrs. Whitfield entered the room, her eyes widening in surprise. “Your Grace, what are you doing?” she exclaimed, her voice tinged with alarm.

Beatrice turned, offering her a reassuring smile. “I just wanted to help, Mrs. Whitfield. I’ve barely anything left to do for today, and I thought I might as well do something useful.”

Mrs. Whitfield hesitated, clearly torn between her duty and the unusual sight before her.

“If that is what the lady of the castle wishes,” she said finally, her tone reluctant but respectful.

As the minutes passed, the atmosphere lightened. The maids, initially unsure of how to act around their new mistress, began to relax. Beatrice encouraged them to share stories about their lives, genuinely interested in getting to know them.

Grace, the younger maid, spoke first, her eyes lighting up as she recounted tales of her family in the village. “My little brother, James, is always running wild in the fields. He’s a handful, but he’s got such a big heart,” she said, her smile widening.

Anna chimed in, her voice filled with excitement, “I have three younger sisters. They’re always underfoot, helping with chores or getting into mischief. They’re the joy of my life.”

Beatrice listened intently, her own heart warming at their stories. “It sounds like you both have wonderful families. It must be lovely to have such close-knit bonds.”

At one point, she couldn’t resist lightening the mood further.

“Have you noticed how the Duke always seems so stern?” She stood tall, her face a picture of exaggerated seriousness. “I am the Duke of Dunford, and I demand order!” she declared in a deep, mockingly authoritative voice.

Anna and Grace burst into giggles, their laughter echoing through the room. Beatrice joined in, feeling a rare sense of camaraderie and normalcy.

Suddenly, a voice came from the doorway, and it was none other than the Duke

himself.

“What are we laughing about?” Kenneth asked, his tone cool and inquiring as he scanned the room.

The laughter stopped abruptly, and the maids quickly looked down, their faces flushed with embarrassment.

Beatrice straightened up, her cheeks still warm from the laughter. “Just a bit of fun, Your Grace,” she replied, meeting his gaze with a touch of defiance.

Kenneth’s eyes flicked to the maids. “Leave us,” he commanded.

Anna and Grace curtsied hastily and scurried out of the room, leaving Beatrice alone with Kenneth.

As the door closed behind the maids, Kenneth’s expression hardened.

“You might want to be careful about mocking me in my own home,” he warned, his tone icy.

Beatrice lifted her chin defiantly. “Or you’ll do what?” she snapped back, her eyes blazing.

Kenneth leaned in, his breath warm against her ear. “You have only had a taste of what I can do to you, darling,” he murmured, his lips grazing her neck.

Beatrice shivered involuntarily, the heat of his breath sending a jolt through her. She tried to regain her composure.

“You are continually frustrating,” she retorted, her voice trembling with anger—and

desire.

Kenneth's eyes blazed with anger and raw intensity. He moved even closer, the scent of leather and something uniquely him enveloping her.

"You challenge me at every turn," he said, his voice low and charged with tension. "Do you think I enjoy this constant battle?"

"Maybe if you weren't so set on monitoring my every move, we wouldn't be constantly at odds," Beatrice spat, her chest heaving.

"This is my home, and like you pointed out so comically earlier, I demand order in it," he responded.

"It is my home too now. I should have some degree of freedom in it."

"I gave you all the freedom you needed when I married you, remember? Or did you prefer staying with your oppressive mother?"

Beatrice halted. "It is precisely because of her that I expect you to give me some free rein here."

Kenneth clenched his jaw. "There are rules to be followed, Duchess. You cannot expect me to allow a stranger to do whatever they please in my home."

Beatrice winced at his words. "A stranger?" she asked.

"Yes. We hardly know each other."

"Is that why you deserted me on our wedding night, then?"

He furrowed his brow at her question. "There was an urgent matter I had to attend to. You remember that," he responded.

"You could have returned after you dealt with it. But in truth, you wished to get away from me, no?" Beatrice raised an eyebrow.

"That is not true," he snapped.

"Then why didn't you come back?"

She expected another angry response, expected him to evade her question.

But instead, the Duke grabbed her and kissed her fiercely. The intensity of his kiss sent a wave of heat through her, and she found herself responding despite her anger.

His hand slid up her back, drawing her closer, and she almost melted into him.

Suddenly, a knock on the door shattered the moment.

Kenneth straightened up, his eyes narrowing in irritation. "What is it?" he barked.

The butler entered the room with a respectful bow. "My apologies, Your Grace. The new saddles for your horses have arrived. I was instructed to inform you immediately."

Kenneth's jaw tightened, but he nodded curtly. "Thank you, Jennings. I'll see to it."

He cast one last intense glance at Beatrice before turning on his heel and striding out of the room.

Beatrice stood there, breathless and confused, her emotions a tangled mess of longing

and frustration.

As the door closed behind Kenneth, she leaned against the bedpost, trying to steady her racing heart.

The encounter had left her more uncertain than ever. The tension between them was undeniable, and she couldn't ignore the intense attraction that simmered beneath their constant bickering.

What is happening to me?

Chapter Twelve

“What should I paint?” Beatrice asked herself as she set up her easel near the window, allowing the soft, natural light to illuminate her canvas.

She handpicked her brushes and arranged her palette, her fingers deftly mixing colors. The familiar scent of oils and the smooth texture of the canvas beneath her hands brought her a sense of calm, images and shades already flashing through her mind as she stared out the window at the sea.

She longed to paint the stunning coastline in front of her, but she knew it was too risky. Someone might recognize the landscape, and her secret identity as Eric Westback could be exposed. She needed a subject that resonated deeply with her yet was far enough from her current surroundings.

A memory surfaced, bringing with it a wave of nostalgia. Her family had visited Cornwall when her father was still alive. Those were happier times before Patrick’s violent actions had cast a shadow over their lives. The rugged cliffs and wild, untamed beauty of the Cornish coast had always stayed with her.

Beatrice dipped her brush into the paint and sketched the outline of the cliffs, the strokes coming naturally as she recalled the vivid details of that visit. The crashing waves, the vibrant hues of the sea, and the windswept grass all came to life under her brush. She lost herself in the process, the act of painting providing an escape from the complexities of her current situation.

Several hours later, she stepped back from the canvas, assessing her progress. The

rough idea of the painting was beginning to take shape, the familiar rhythm of her brushstrokes providing a sense of accomplishment. However, as she looked down, she realized she was covered in paint. Her hands were stained with vibrant hues, and several splatters of various colors covered her dress.

Her mind raced. If she went out into the corridor, all the servants would see her. Even if she claimed she was a hobby painter, someone might grow curious and discover her secret. She needed to keep everything under wraps.

Poking her head out the door, making sure her paint-covered arms and dress stayed hidden, she scanned the corridor.

Spotting a maid passing by, she cleared her throat softly to get her attention. “Excuse me, could you come here for a moment?”

The maid turned, her eyes widening slightly at the sight of the Duchess peeking through the partially open door. She hurried over, curiosity evident on her face. “Yes, Your Grace?”

“Could you fetch the housekeeper for me, please?” Beatrice asked, her voice low and urgent.

The maid nodded quickly. “Of course, Your Grace. Right away.”

She hurried off down the corridor, the sound of her footsteps echoing off the stone walls.

Beatrice closed the door behind her and leaned against it, a smile tugging at her lips despite the situation. She glanced at her paint-covered hands and let out a soft laugh. This was certainly not how she had imagined spending her first few weeks as a duchess.

A few moments later, Mrs. Whitfield arrived, her expression one of mild confusion. Beatrice let her in quickly, shutting the door behind them.

The housekeeper's eyebrows shot up when she saw the stains on the Duchess' arms and dress. Her eyes widened further as she took in the sight of the canvas and art supplies spread across the room.

"Your Grace, I thought you were resting," she began.

Beatrice smiled sheepishly. "I was... busy, but I need your help with something. I must ask you not to tell anyone about this hobby of mine."

The housekeeper looked puzzled. "Why would you want to hide such a harmless activity?"

"Please, Mrs. Whitfield," Beatrice implored. "Just go along with it and keep it from the Duke. It's important to me."

Mrs. Whitfield hesitated, clearly reluctant. "I don't feel comfortable going behind His Grace's back, Your Grace. If he ever finds out..."

"He won't," Beatrice reassured her. "And if he does, nothing will happen to you. I promise."

The housekeeper paused, still uncertain, but finally nodded. "Very well, Your Grace. I will keep your secret."

Beatrice moved as if to hug her but stopped short, realizing she was covered in paint. She laughed awkwardly. "Thank you, Mrs. Whitfield. I don't want to get paint all over you."

Mrs. Whitfield chuckled though she maintained her professional demeanor. “What do you need, Your Grace?”

“I need a washbasin and an apron, so I don’t ruin any more gowns,” Beatrice explained. “And I’ll order some plain dresses that I can put on while I’m in this room. In the meantime, I’ll wear some of my old dresses.”

Mrs. Whitfield nodded. “I’ll help with everything. I’ll fetch a fresh change of clothes and warm water with soap so you can clean up.”

Beatrice’s relief was palpable. “Thank you, Mrs. Whitfield. I appreciate your help more than you know.”

The housekeeper gave a small, reassuring smile before leaving the room.

While she waited, Beatrice moved to the window, gazing out at the breathtaking landscape. The rolling hills and distant sea provided a serene backdrop, but her attention was quickly drawn to the gardens below. There, Kenneth rode his horse with effortless grace. His riding garb was more casual at home, and his shirt was more open than usual, revealing a glimpse of his muscular chest.

She watched him with admiration, unable to look away. The way his thighs looked strong and powerful in his riding breeches sent a shiver through her. He dismounted with fluidity, the muscles in his arms flexing as he did so.

Beatrice bit her lip, feeling a heat rise to her cheeks as she recalled the memory of his touch, the way his hands had felt on her skin, the intensity of his gaze.

Kenneth stretched, his movements languid and unguarded, as his horse rested under the shade of a tree. Beatrice’s breath hitched as she took in the sight of him, every sinew and muscle perfectly defined. Her heart raced, and a deep desire stirred within

her, overwhelming her senses.

For a moment, she allowed herself to be carried away by the fantasy, her thoughts consumed by the man who had so unexpectedly become her husband. The yearning in her chest was almost painful, a reminder of the complicated emotions she felt towards him.

However, she quickly composed herself as a knock sounded at the door, signaling Mrs. Whitfield's return.

Beatrice stepped away from the window, smoothing down her paint-stained dress and trying to calm her racing heart.

Mrs. Whitfield entered with a fresh change of clothes and a washbasin filled with warm water. "Here you are, Your Grace. Let's get you cleaned up."

"Thank you, Mrs. Whitfield," Beatrice replied, welcoming the distraction and the housekeeper's support.

With a last glance out the window, where Kenneth was now leading his horse back to the stables, Beatrice took a deep breath, determined to focus on her art and her duties as Duchess, even as the memory of his touch lingered in her mind.

Later that evening, Kenneth made his way to his study after spending the day riding the fence lines of the estate with his steward. His muscles ached from the long hours of riding, but his mind was sharp, focused on the work that awaited him.

As he turned a corner, he nearly collided with Beatrice, who was dressed beautifully for dinner.

"Oh. Apologies, Duke," he heard her mutter under her breath, her eyes avoiding his.

As he took her in, he noticed that the neckline of her dress plunged just enough to be tantalizing, drawing his gaze to the delicate curve of her collarbone and the swell of her bosom. The gown hugged her curves in all the right places, accentuating her figure in a way that made his breath hitch.

Kenneth's eyes lingered on her longer than he intended, and it wasn't until she spoke again that he realized he had been staring.

"Do you need anything, Duke?" Beatrice's voice held a teasing lilt, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

Beside her, Mrs. Whitfield stood quietly, her hands folded neatly in front of her, trying to make herself invisible.

Kenneth cleared his throat, tearing his eyes away from his wife's enticing form. "No," he told her, his voice rougher than he intended, and then turned to Mrs. Whitfield. "Please have dinner brought to my study."

Mrs. Whitfield nodded, clearly sensing the charged atmosphere. "Of course, Your Grace." She hurried away, leaving him alone with the Duchess.

Beatrice's lips curled into a playful smile. "Just dinner, Duke? Nothing else to tempt your appetite?"

Kenneth felt a surge of heat at her words. "I believe I'll manage," he said, his voice low.

She stepped closer, holding his gaze. "Are you sure? For a man as busy as you, one would think you'd need more than just dinner to be satisfied."

Kenneth's heart raced, and he struggled to maintain his composure. "I appreciate your

offer, but I wouldn't want to delay your dinner."

Beatrice's eyes flickered with amusement. "Very well, Duke. I wouldn't want to keep you from your... work."

As she began to walk away, Kenneth couldn't resist one last innuendo. "Enjoy your meal, Duchess. I hope it is as... fulfilling as mine will be."

Beatrice glanced over her shoulder at him, her smile widening. "I'm sure it will be, Duke."

Kenneth watched her go, the sway of her hips tantalizing him even more. The hunger he felt for her was consuming, an ache that had nothing to do with food. He clenched his fists, trying to rein in his desire, knowing that the night ahead would be a struggle to keep his thoughts focused on anything other than his wife.

He turned on his heel and made his way to his study, trying to push aside the image of Beatrice in that stunning dress. His desire for her was a constant, gnawing presence, one that he found increasingly difficult to ignore.

Reaching his study, he closed the door behind him and leaned against it for a moment, taking a deep breath. The work he needed to do seemed far less pressing now, overshadowed by the memory of his wife's beauty. He forced himself to focus, knowing that he couldn't afford to be distracted by his desires.

Still, as he settled at his desk, the image of Beatrice in the low-cut gown lingered in his mind, a tantalizing reminder of the woman he had married. He could feel the heat rising within him, his frustration growing with each passing moment. She had teased him, tempted him with her words and her presence, and now, all he could think about was her.

A slow, determined smile curled his lips.

If she wanted to play this game, he would be more than happy to oblige. She needed to understand that tempting him came with consequences.

He would teach her a lesson about playing with fire.

Chapter Thirteen

“Kenneth, it’s been far too long since I last visited Dunford,” Lady Bernmere began, her eyes twinkling with mischief.

“You wouldn’t believe the latest scandal in the ton. Lady Fitzwilliam’s pug ran off with Viscount Hartley’s spaniel. Quite the uproar at the last garden party, I assure you.”

Kenneth chuckled politely though he found little amusement in the frivolous gossip. “Indeed, Aunt Marjorie, that does sound rather eventful.”

“Oh, and did you hear about Lord Sinclair’s new valet? Quite the dashing young man, and it seems Lady Sinclair has taken an inappropriate interest in him. The poor valet is practically besieged by her advances,” Lady Bernmere continued, her laughter echoing through the room.

Kenneth managed a forced smile. “How... scandalous.”

Lady Bernmere leaned closer, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. “And you wouldn’t believe what Lady Hemmingway wore to the last ball. A gown so gaudy, it looked like a peacock exploded on her. The poor dear thought it was the height of fashion.”

Kenneth tried to keep his irritation in check. His mind kept wandering to Beatrice. Where could she be? He was certain he had mentioned his aunt’s visit to her.

“Ah, but there is one piece of news you might find interesting, Kenneth,” Lady Bernmere added, her tone shifting slightly. “The Dowager Duchess has commissioned a new painting from Eric Westback. Quite the coup, wouldn’t you say?”

Kenneth’s interest was piqued though he kept his expression neutral. “Eric Westback, you say? That is indeed interesting.”

Lady Bernmere nodded, a knowing smile on her lips. “I thought you’d appreciate that bit of news. I know how much you value fine art.”

Kenneth nodded though his thoughts were still preoccupied with Beatrice. The conversation continued, filled with more gossip and anecdotes about the ton, but his mind was elsewhere.

The door to the parlor opened, and Mr. Jennings entered, standing at attention. Kenneth turned to him with a sharp nod. “Jennings, please have Mrs. Whitfield fetch the Duchess immediately.”

Mr. Jennings bowed and left the room, moving swiftly to find the housekeeper.

Kenneth forced a polite smile as he turned back to his aunt, who was settling herself comfortably on the settee.

What could possibly be keeping Beatrice from her duties as the lady of the castle?

It took several minutes before Beatrice finally appeared in the parlor, a flustered expression on her face. “My deepest apologies for my tardiness. I was engrossed in a most riveting book.”

Kenneth raised an eyebrow, clearly unimpressed. “What book?”

Beatrice hesitated, her eyes darting around the room as if searching for inspiration. Her gaze landed on a history book on the shelf. “Uh... The Conquests of Alexander the Great,” she blurted out.

Kenneth’s suspicion deepened. “Really? And what did you find most fascinating about Alexander’s campaigns?”

Lady Bernmere’s interest was piqued. “Oh, do tell us more about this. It sounds riveting!”

“I do not wish to bore you with the details.”

“Oh no, Duchess. Please go ahead,” Kenneth insisted, noticing his wife’s uneasiness as she spoke. “I would love to hear your perspective on what you read. I am certain Lady Bernmere would too.”

His aunt nodded in agreement, much to his pleasure. He wanted to see what his wife would come up with.

Beatrice launched into an explanation, “Well, if you insist. I... um... I found it particularly fascinating when he used... um... giant eagles to scout enemy positions.”

Kenneth’s eyes narrowed further. “Giant eagles? That’s interesting, considering I do not remember reading about any kind of bird in that book which my aunt knows is one of my favorite historical accounts.”

“Oh, yes, indeed! Kenneth is rather fascinated by the Greek conqueror,” Lady Bernmere confirmed.

Beatrice faltered, her cheeks burning with embarrassment. “Ah, well, I must have confused it with another book,” she mumbled, trying to recover.

Lady Bernmere waved her hand dismissively. “Oh, we can discuss the rest of the Greek general’s conquests later. I have much more exciting things to talk about.”

Kenneth noticed the look of relief that washed over Beatrice’s face.

Lady Bernmere continued, her tone animated, “I would like to officially invite both of you to a ball I’m hosting in two weeks at my London townhouse. I do apologize for the short notice. I got a bit caught up in the preparations and forgot to notify people until the beginning of the week.”

Kenneth rolled his eyes. “A ball? I have better things to do here than make small talk with inane lords.”

Beatrice, however, managed a polite smile. “Thank you for the invitation, Lady Bernmere. We would be delighted to attend.”

Kenneth shot her a glare, his eyes narrowing. “Delighted, are we?” he said, his tone icy.

“Oh, Kenneth, I do wish you would show more excitement,” Lady Bernmere chided him playfully. “It will be a grand event and a wonderful opportunity for you newlyweds to be seen together.”

Kenneth sighed, nodding begrudgingly. “I know you won’t relent until I agree, Aunt Marjorie. So yes, we will attend.”

Lady Bernmere clapped her hands together in delight. “Wonderful! I shall make sure it is an event to remember.”

Kenneth glanced at Beatrice, noting the subtle tension in her posture. He knew she was hiding something. The way she had fabricated that ridiculous story so effortlessly

only heightened his suspicion.

Lady Bernmere's gaze turned to Beatrice, her expression softening. "My dear, how are you finding everything? Adjusting well to your new role?"

Beatrice offered a polite smile, her hands folded neatly in her lap. "It's been quite an adjustment, but I'm learning. The Duke has been very patient with me."

Lady Bernmere's lips twitched with amusement. "Oh, I'm sure he has been. Kenneth patient? Now that's a sight I'd love to see."

Beatrice couldn't suppress a giggle at that, her eyes flicking to Kenneth. She saw the muscle in his jaw tick, a clear sign of his annoyance.

Lady Bernmere shifted in her chair and looked at them both with a twinkle in her eyes. "So, do you two have any happy news to share with me?"

Kenneth, in the middle of taking a sip of his brandy, nearly choked. "Happy news?" he repeated, his voice slightly strained. "I'm not quite sure what you're asking, Aunt Marjorie."

Lady Bernmere's eyes sparkled with amusement. "Oh, Kenneth, don't be so dense. I mean, is there any chance of an heir on the way?"

Kenneth blinked, genuinely taken aback by her directness. "An heir? We've only been married a few weeks, Aunt Marjorie."

Beatrice's eyes widened. She quickly looked down at her hands but not before Kenneth caught the brief smile she tried to hide.

Lady Bernmere leaned forward, a mischievous smile playing on her lips. "Yes,

Kenneth, an heir. Your mother was pregnant with you after only a month into her marriage to your father.”

Kenneth’s mood darkened instantly at the mention of his parents. He muttered under his breath, “And look how that turned out for them.”

Lady Bernmere raised an eyebrow, undeterred by his grim tone. “Oh, come now, dear. I didn’t mean to upset you. It’s just that you two make such a lovely couple. Surely, there must be some joy on the horizon?”

Kenneth felt a flare of irritation but forced himself to remain calm. “Aunt Marjorie, we appreciate your enthusiasm, but we’re taking things one step at a time.”

Lady Bernmere’s eyes sparkled with humor. “I suppose I’ll just have to be patient, then. But do keep in mind, time waits for no one, not even a duke and duchess.”

Kenneth’s jaw clenched, his patience wearing thin. “As I said, we’ve been married for only a few weeks. There will be plenty of time for... happy news.” He stood up abruptly, the sudden movement causing his chair to scrape loudly across the floor. “I have a lot of work to do,” he said, his voice a touch sharper than he intended.

Without waiting for a response, he strode out of the room, feeling the sharp tension forming between his shoulders.

As he made his way down the corridor. The encounter had left him unsettled, the ghosts of his parents’ troubled marriage lingering in his mind.

He reached his study and closed the door behind him, seeking refuge in the solitude of his work. The estate’s ledgers and reports awaited him, offering a welcome distraction from his inner turmoil.

Beatrice watched Kenneth stride out of the room, his tension palpable. She turned to Lady Bernmere, her cheeks tinged with embarrassment. “I apologize for Kenneth’s behavior. He can be quite... brusque.”

Lady Bernmere waved her hand dismissively. “It’s no matter, my dear. I know my nephew well. I shouldn’t have brought up his parents.”

Beatrice hesitated, her curiosity getting the better of her. “If you don’t mind my asking, what happened to his parents? Kenneth never speaks of them.”

Lady Bernmere’s expression softened. “It’s a long and rather tragic story. The late Duchess died when he was only four years old. After Kenneth, she had a difficult pregnancy and suffered a stillbirth. The loss was too much for her, and she passed away shortly after.”

Beatrice felt a pang of sympathy. “That must have been devastating for Kenneth.”

“It was.” Lady Bernmere nodded. “The late Duke was never the same after that. He fell into a life of excess—gambling, mistresses, and lavish parties.”

Beatrice’s heart ached for Kenneth. She had glimpsed the pain in his eyes, but hearing about his past made it all the more real. “And after his father’s death?”

Lady Bernmere’s gaze grew distant. “Kenneth inherited the title and the estate. He was determined to restore the family’s honor, but it hasn’t been easy. The estate was in disarray, and he had to deal with the aftermath of his father’s misdeeds.”

Beatrice leaned forward, her curiosity deepening. “What happened then?”

Lady Bernmere paused, a thoughtful look on her face. “There are some things that are best left for Kenneth to tell you himself, my dear. It’s his story to share when he’s

ready.”

Beatrice nodded, understanding the gravity of the situation. She felt a deeper connection to Kenneth, a desire to understand him better.

That night, the dining hall of Dunford Castle felt unusually tense. Beatrice took her seat next to Kenneth, their first time dining together as a married couple in this grand room.

Lady Bernmere’s presence added an extra layer of formality, yet her demeanor was light and cheerful, contrasting sharply with the undercurrent of tension between the newlyweds.

As the first course was served, Lady Bernmere began to prattle on about children. “You know, you two should start thinking about names for your children. It’s never too early, after all.”

Beatrice tried the polite approach, forcing a smile. “We haven’t really thought about it yet, Lady Bernmere.”

Lady Bernmere, however, was not so easily deterred. “Oh, but you must! Names are so important. For a boy, perhaps something strong like Edward or Henry, and for a girl, something elegant like Isabella or Charlotte.”

Kenneth’s jaw tightened, and he set his fork down with a little too much force. “When my child is born, I will pick the names, and there will be no further discussion about that. He will have a strong name like Horatio Fitzwilliam Spencer or perhaps Jonathan Goodfellow?—”

Beatrice interrupted him, her eyes flashing with defiance. “We will pick the names. Together.”

Kenneth's gaze narrowed. "My heir is my concern."

"If I have to carry him for nine months and then give birth to him, it very much is my concern too," Beatrice shot back. "You cannot mean to make all the decisions about our child alone. Besides, I might give birth to a girl first anyway."

Lady Bernmere looked between them, her expression one of mild concern mixed with amusement.

Kenneth took a deep breath, trying to regain his composure. "I think it's best we move on to another topic."

Lady Bernmere, sensing the tension, began discussing the latest gossip from London.

The conversation shifted, and for a moment, it seemed as though the argument had been forgotten.

But as the meal continued, the underlying tension between Kenneth and Beatrice simmered just below the surface.

"I heard you're considering some new projects, husband. What are they?" Beatrice asked, trying to make conversation.

Kenneth glanced at her, his expression guarded. "Yes, there are several plans in the works. It's a lot to manage."

"Perhaps you could involve me in the decision-making," Beatrice suggested, her tone hopeful.

Kenneth's eyes flashed with annoyance. "The estate is my responsibility. I don't need your help."

Beatrice's hands clenched at her sides. "I'm not trying to take over, Your Grace. I just want to be involved in our life here."

"Our life here? Or do you mean my responsibilities?" Kenneth retorted, his voice rising slightly.

"Must you always be so controlling?" Beatrice snapped, her temper flaring.

"Must you always challenge me?" Kenneth shot back, his voice low and tense.

Lady Bernmere suddenly cleared her throat, drawing their attention. "You know, my dears, a little disagreement is perfectly normal in a marriage," she said, her tone light and conversational. "Why, I remember when my dear late husband and I used to have the most spirited debates."

Kenneth and Beatrice looked at her, their expressions shadowed with surprise and wariness.

Lady Bernmere continued, undeterred. "He would get so passionate about his opinions, and I, of course, would stand my ground. We could go on for hours, arguing about the most trivial things." She chuckled, her eyes twinkling with mischief. "But do you know what we discovered? That the best part of arguing was the reconciliation afterwards."

Beatrice's eyes widened, a blush staining her cheeks at the implication. Kenneth coughed, nearly choking on his wine.

Lady Bernmere, oblivious to their discomfort, leaned forward conspiratorially. "There's nothing quite like a heated argument to stir the blood if you know what I mean. And the reconciliation, well... let's just say it's worth every sharp word."

Kenneth set his glass down with more force than necessary, the sound loud in the sudden silence. “Aunt Marjorie, I hardly think this is an appropriate topic for dinner conversation.”

Lady Bernmere waved a dismissive hand. “Oh, pish posh, Kenneth. We’re all adults here. And I’m merely trying to offer some sage advice to you and your lovely wife.”

Beatrice bristled at his tone, her own temper flaring. “There you go again, Kenneth. Always trying to control everything and everyone around you.”

He turned to her, his expression darkening. “I’m not trying to control anyone.”

“You are not? Throwing around orders like edicts is not controlling?” Beatrice scoffed, pushing back her chair and standing up abruptly.

Kenneth’s jaw clenched, his eyes flashing with anger. “Beatrice, sit down. You’re making a scene.”

She laughed humorlessly, shaking her head. “You see? There it is again. An order, not a request.” She threw her napkin on the table, her appetite completely gone. “I think I’ve lost my appetite. If you’ll excuse me.”

“Beatrice—” Kenneth began, but she stormed off, her heart pounding.

How dare he try to control everything? She was not some silent partner in this marriage.

As she reached the corridor, she heard his footsteps behind her.

“Beatrice, stop!” he called, his voice harsh.

She whirled around to face him. “What now, Duke? Have you come to order me back to the dining hall?”

Kenneth’s eyes blazed. “You were rude and insolent, walking out like that.”

“And you are domineering and inflexible!” she shot back. “Do you think you can control everything, even me?”

His patience snapped. “You challenge me at every turn. Do you think I enjoy this constant battle?”

Beatrice’s voice shook with emotion. “You’re cold and distant. You left me alone on our wedding night without a word. Do you have any idea how that made me feel?”

“I had an actual problem to attend to on our wedding night,” he countered, his tone defensive. “There was a leak in the west wing. But you wouldn’t understand that because you’ve been too busy defying me at every turn.”

Beatrice’s eyes narrowed, her hands clenching into fists at her sides. “I understand you had to attend to that matter. Still, you’ve been avoiding me on purpose since then. The only moments we have interacted, you’ve been bossing me around, acting like you own me. And aside from that one kiss, you haven’t touched me.”

Kenneth stepped closer, his imposing figure looming over her.

“I have to monitor your behavior because you’re too defiant,” he growled, his breath hot against her face.

Beatrice refused to back down, tilting her chin up defiantly.

“And what’s wrong with my behavior?” she challenged, her voice trembling with

both anger and something else entirely.

Kenneth's eyes darkened, a dangerous glint in their depths. "You're disobedient and need to learn a lesson," he said, his voice low and rough.

Before Beatrice could respond, his hand shot out, gripping the back of her neck as he pulled her to him. His lips crashed against hers in a bruising kiss, demanding and unyielding.

Beatrice stiffened for a moment, caught off guard by the sudden onslaught. But as Kenneth's tongue swept into her mouth, tasting and teasing, she found herself melting into him, her own lips moving against his with a fervor that matched his own.

Kenneth's other hand found her waist, pulling her flush against him. Beatrice could feel the hard planes of his body, the heat of his skin seeping through the layers of fabric that separated them.

A moan escaped her as Kenneth nipped her bottom lip, soothing the sting with a swipe of his tongue.

Lost in the haze of sensation, Beatrice barely registered the fact that he was walking her backwards, not until her back hit the wall. He pinned her there with his body, his lips never leaving hers as his hands roamed over her sides, skimming over her curves with a possessiveness that made her shiver.

Just as his hand began to move up her dress, a footman's voice broke through the haze of their passion.

"Y-Your Grace, dessert is served," the footman stuttered, his face flushing with embarrassment.

Kenneth and Beatrice broke apart, both breathing heavily. Kenneth turned to the footman.

The footman looked down, clearly regretting his interruption. “I-I’m terribly sorry, Your Grace. I didn’t mean to intrude,” he stammered, looking like he was ready to bolt.

Kenneth’s jaw tightened, but he forced himself to remain composed. “Thank you,” he said curtly. “We’ll be there shortly.”

The footman bowed hastily and backed out of the hall.

Kenneth turned back to Beatrice, his eyes still smoldering with desire. “This isn’t over,” he murmured.

Beatrice’s breath came in short gasps, her heart still racing from the kiss.

She watched him turn and stride back towards the dining hall, her mind a whirlwind of conflicting emotions. She smoothed down her dress, trying to regain her composure before following him, the taste of his kiss lingering on her lips.

They regained their seats, the tension between them still simmering. Lady Bernmere watched them closely, a small smile playing on her lips.

Kenneth noticed and frowned. “Why are you smiling, Aunt Marjorie?”

Lady Bernmere’s eyes twinkled with mischief. “Oh, nothing, dear. Just enjoying the dessert.”

Beatrice forced herself to focus on her plate, her mind reeling from the kiss and the heated exchange.

The meal continued in strained silence, the atmosphere thick with unresolved tension.

As they exchanged glances, Beatrice felt a flicker of anticipation. It was clear that their evening was far from over.

Chapter Fourteen

Kenneth lay in his bed, staring at the ornate ceiling, his mind a whirl of conflicting thoughts. The silence of the room was broken only by the occasional crackle of the dying fire in the hearth.

His eyes flicked towards the door that connected his chamber to Beatrice's, the temptation gnawing at him.

I shouldn't. It's better this way.

But the memory of her touch, her scent, and the way she looked at him kept pulling him back.

Damn it, Kenneth, have some control.

He rolled onto his side, exhaling sharply.

But why not? She wants you. You want her. Why pretend otherwise?

He clenched his jaw, trying to push away the images of her from earlier that day, the way her gown had hugged her curves, the fire in her eyes when they argued.

It's just physical. That's all it is. Don't complicate it.

Suddenly, the door to his chamber creaked open.

Kenneth bolted upright, his eyes widening as Beatrice stepped inside.

“Duchess?” he breathed as she closed the door behind her with a determined look on her face.

“Enough games,” she said, her voice steady and resolute. “We both know we desire each other. And before you get any silly ideas that I’m fawning over you, let me clarify—it’s purely physical. We should... help each other with this frustration.”

Kenneth stared at her, stunned by her boldness.

She’s serious.

He rose from the bed, his eyes locked on hers. “You don’t know what you’re getting yourself into, Beatrice.”

She took a step closer, her chin held high.

“I am absolutely certain,” she replied, her voice unwavering.

She untied her dressing gown and stood before him naked, glorious as an alabaster statue. Her breasts were perfectly sculpted mounds. The soft moonlight cascaded over her flawless skin, accentuating every curve and contour of her body. Her slender waist led down to hips that swayed with an enticing grace.

His whole body tensed, and his manhood hardened instantly at the sight of her delicious body.

As her dressing gown fell to the floor, the room seemed to hold its breath in awe of her beauty. Her luscious locks fell down her shoulders, framing a face that radiated both innocence and desire. Her eyes sparkled with a mischievous glimmer, inviting

him into a world of forbidden pleasures.

Kenneth clenched his jaw, wrestling with the urge to take her into his arms.

She's right. This is what we both want.

He closed the distance between them, his eyes dark with intent.

"All right," he said, his voice a low growl. "But don't say I didn't warn you."

Beatrice met his gaze, a spark of challenge in her eyes. "I won't."

Somehow, he became even harder at her words. The effect she had on him just by talking...

"I have thought of taking you since the moment I laid eyes on you," he whispered.

With a swift movement, he pulled her to him, his lips crashing down on hers, the tension between them igniting into a fierce, consuming kiss.

All the arguments, the doubts, and the reasons why they shouldn't do this melted away, leaving only the raw, undeniable desire that had been simmering between them from the start.

He pressed his lips to hers, coaxing and demanding a response. And she yielded to him. He wanted her. And it was no secret that she wanted him too. He felt a shudder run through her.

He slid his hands down over her bottom and pulled her hard against him, so she could feel his arousal.

Then his hands moved down her belly to the place between her legs. He slowly kneeled before her, and then his mouth replaced his hands.

Beatrice arched her back, and he added his thumb, increasing her pleasure. His tongue flicked over her folds, and he could feel her losing control.

She whimpered and bucked against him. "I want you, Kenneth."

His hand stilled.

"Do you now?" he asked with a smirk.

"Y-yes," she breathed out, her eyes the darkest he'd ever seen them.

Oh , he was going to enjoy this.

"You've done nothing but tempt me," he whispered. "You're going to have to ask for it. Beg for it."

"B-beg?"

"Yes."

"Please," she whispered.

He stood up and took her chin in his hand. "Come on, darling. You can do better than that."

"Please," she repeated, her breath shaky.

His member twitched in his trousers, her plea stirring him even further. Although he

needed her, this little game, this final little game was too delicious to interrupt.

“Please what?”

Beatrice’s breath hitched. “Please, Kenneth,” she said, the words barely audible. “I want you.”

He released a growl of satisfaction; that was exactly what he wanted.

Then, he slowly resumed his ministrations.

“Good girl,” he murmured, his lips brushing against her ear. “That’s all you had to say.”

He laid her down on the bed, climbed over her, and nudged her legs apart. Her fingers dug into his back, but he didn’t stop.

He slowly moved inside her, allowing the heat to intensify between them. With each deliberate thrust, they moaned. The scent of their desire hung heavy in the air.

When Beatrice’s movements grew more urgent, he stopped.

“Not so quick,” he whispered, his voice husky with desire.

Kenneth lowered his mouth to hers, and she writhed beneath him. He moved down and took her nipple in his mouth. She arched her back, pushing her breasts up. Kenneth swirled his tongue around her nipple while he caressed her other breast. Her eyes were closed, and her head was thrown back as she surrendered to his touch.

Slowly, he began to move again, thrusting hard and deep. Beatrice ground her hips against him, and she clutched at his shoulders, her fingernails digging into his skin as

his thrusts quickened, bringing her closer to the precipice.

When he slowed his thrusts once more, Beatrice let out a whimper of protest. “Please, Kenneth.”

“Do you want more?” Kenneth growled. He wanted her to want him as much as he wanted her.

“Yes. God, yes,” Beatrice breathed. She opened her eyes and looked up at him. “Please, Kenneth.”

Kenneth plunged into her once more, and his rhythm became unrelenting. His groans punctuated each thrust. When she cried out his name, he lowered his hand and rubbed her swollen bud. Beatrice let out a cry.

Unable to control himself any longer, he gave one final powerful thrust and climaxed, waves of ecstasy surging through him.

The room was filled with the intoxicating scent of their desire and the sound of their heavy breathing. Beads of sweat glistened on their foreheads as they surrendered to the overwhelming sensations coursing through their veins.

When their breathing had slowed, Kenneth collapsed next to her. He turned to her, his eyes softening as he reached out to brush a strand of hair from her face.

“Are you all right?” he asked, his voice tender.

Beatrice nodded, a serene smile playing on her lips. “Yes, I’m more than all right,” she replied, her fingers tracing gentle patterns on his chest.

He leaned in. “Good,” he murmured, his lips lingering against her skin. “You are

extraordinary, Beatrice.”

She looked up at him, her heart swelling at his words. “And you, Kenneth, are not as brutish as you pretend to be.”

He chuckled softly, the sound vibrating in his chest. “Don’t let that get around,” he said, his tone light and teasing. “I have a reputation to maintain.”

Beatrice laughed, the sound like a soothing balm to the tension that had always seemed to hang between them.

“Your secret is safe with me,” she promised.

Kenneth pressed a gentle kiss to her lips, savoring the sweetness of her response.

After he pulled away, Beatrice hesitated for a moment, her eyes searching his, and then pulled back slightly.

“I should go back to my room,” she murmured softly, her voice trembling.

Kenneth gripped her hand softly and squeezed as excitement simmered inside him once again.

“Oh, you’re not going anywhere, my dear,” he said, his voice firmer, his grip on her tightening slightly. “I’m not done with you yet.”

Beatrice slowly awakened the next morning. She lay awake with her eyes closed against the sunlight that was peeking through the curtains.

She stretched languidly and reached over to touch Kenneth, only to find the space beside her empty.

She finally opened her eyes, disoriented and unable to remember how she had ended up in her bed. The memories of the previous night flooded back in a rush, and her cheeks flushed with the recollection. She must have fallen asleep in Kenneth's arms, and he had carried her back to her bed.

Her maid, Anna, stood by the window, pulling back the curtains to let in the late morning sun.

"Good morning, Your Grace," she said, placing a breakfast tray on the table next to her bed. "I've been trying to wake you up for some time now, but you seemed quite determined to sleep in. It's almost lunchtime."

Beatrice sat up quickly, the covers falling away as she realized how late it was.

"Oh no, Lady Bernmere!" she exclaimed, swinging her legs over the side of the bed.

Anna smiled at her reassuringly. "The Dowager Marchioness left early this morning. She didn't wish to disturb you or His Grace. She asked the servants to convey her gratitude for hosting her."

Beatrice sighed in relief though she felt a pang of guilt for not seeing Lady Bernmere off. "Do you know where the Duke is?" she asked, trying to keep her voice casual.

"His Grace left for the village of Dunford early this morning to meet with the tenants and see to some estate matters," Anna replied as she helped her out of bed and began to prepare her for the day.

Beatrice nodded. The events of the previous night had left her with a whirlwind of emotions, and she wasn't sure how to face Kenneth just yet.

As Anna helped her dress, Beatrice remembered the commission from the Dowager

Duchess of Newden.

“I need to spend some time in the morning room,” she said, choosing her words carefully. “There’s something I must attend to.”

Anna smiled and nodded. “Of course, Your Grace. Shall I bring your breakfast there?”

“No, thank you, Anna. I’ll eat here and then head to the morning room,” Beatrice replied, taking a deep breath.

She quickly ate her breakfast, feeling the urgency of the work ahead.

Once she was dressed, Beatrice made her way to the morning room. The room was bathed in light, the sea visible through the large windows, and she felt a sense of calm wash over her. She quickly changed into a plain dress, one that she wouldn’t mind getting paint on.

Approaching her easel, she felt her fingers itch to create, to lose herself in the world of art where everything made sense. She stared at the canvas she had started, her mind racing with images and shades. Taking a deep breath, she dipped her brush into the paint and began to work, the outline of the cliffs taking shape under her skilled hand.

A few hours later, Beatrice was deeply absorbed in her painting when a gentle knock on the door broke her concentration.

Mrs. Whitfield entered the room, her expression slightly anxious. “Your Grace, there is a visitor. His Grace isn’t here to receive him,” she informed her.

Beatrice blinked, the transition from her world of art to reality feeling abrupt. “A

visitor? Who is it?"

"Robert Boydell, Viscount Eastfold," Mrs. Whitfield replied. "I will help you clean up and change into a clean gown."

Beatrice nodded, feeling a rush of nerves. She quickly washed the paint from her hands and face while Mrs. Whitfield fetched her a suitable dress. Once she was presentable, Beatrice followed the housekeeper to the parlor.

As she entered, Lord Eastfold rose to greet her. He was a distinguished-looking man with a friendly demeanor and an eloquent manner that immediately put her at ease.

"Your Grace," he said, bowing slightly and kissing her hand after the introductions, "it's a pleasure to meet you."

"Likewise, Lord Eastfold," Beatrice replied with a smile. She rang for tea and then turned back to him. "I apologize for my husband's absence. I wasn't aware that you'd be visiting."

"Please, no need to apologize," Lord Eastfold said, waving a hand dismissively. "I did send a note to His Grace, but I must admit I arrived a bit earlier than planned. I should be the one apologizing for the inconvenience."

Beatrice smiled warmly. "Not at all. It's a pleasure to have company. Are you friends with the Duke?"

Lord Eastfold chuckled. "We're more like business associates, actually. I help him with the curation of his art collection."

Beatrice's eyes lit up at the mention of art. "An art dealer? How fascinating! I've always had a keen interest in art myself."

“Is that so?” Lord Eastfold asked, clearly delighted. “His Grace has excellent taste, and it’s been a pleasure to assist him in building his collection. Do you have a favorite artist, Your Grace?”

Beatrice hesitated for a moment, thinking of her secret identity as Eric Westback. “I admire many artists,” she began carefully, “but I’m particularly fond of Turner’s landscapes. His use of the light is simply mesmerizing.”

“Ah, Turner,” Lord Eastfold said with an appreciative nod. “A master of his craft, indeed. His ability to capture the essence of a scene is unparalleled. But tell me, have you heard of Eric Westback? He’s an up-and-coming artist with a style similar to Turner’s that’s been catching quite a bit of attention.”

Beatrice felt a thrill of excitement at the mention of her pseudonym. “I have, actually. I’ve seen a few of his works. He’s quite talented.”

Lord Eastfold leaned forward, his eyes gleaming with an intensity that made her uneasy. “Indeed. But don’t you find it strange, Your Grace, that an artist of such caliber chooses to remain anonymous? It’s quite rare in the art world, wouldn’t you say?”

Beatrice’s breath hitched, her heart beginning to race. “Perhaps he simply values his privacy,” she suggested, trying to keep her tone casual. “Not every artist seeks fame or recognition. Some prefer to let their work speak for itself.”

Eastfold’s gaze sharpened, his smile taking on an edge that sent a chill down her spine. “Or perhaps he has something to hide. Anonymity can often be a cloak for less savory intentions, wouldn’t you agree?”

Beatrice swallowed, her mouth suddenly dry. “I don’t think that’s necessarily true, My Lord. Many artists choose to remain anonymous for personal reasons, to avoid

the distractions and the pressure from the public.”

He leaned back in his chair, his fingers steeped under his chin. “Personal reasons? How intriguing. One has to wonder what sort of personal reasons would drive an artist to such lengths.”

Beatrice’s heart was pounding now, fear and anxiety twisting in her gut. She knew she had to tread carefully, to not let her investment in Westback’s anonymity show.

“Westback’s work stands on its own merit,” she stated, her voice steady despite the churning of her stomach. “Why should it matter who he is? His art speaks for itself.”

Eastfold’s eyes narrowed, a calculating gleam in their depths. “But don’t you see, Your Grace? The mystery is part of the allure. People are drawn to the unknown, to the idea that there’s a secret to uncover. And I, for one, am determined to uncover it.”

Beatrice felt a chill run through her, a sense of foreboding that settled heavily in her bones. If Eastfold was truly intent on discovering Westback’s identity, it could spell disaster for her carefully guarded secret.

“But why?” she asked, unable to keep the desperation from her voice. “Why are you so determined to uncover his identity? What does it matter?”

Eastfold leaned forward, his voice low and conspiratorial. “Because, Your Grace, knowledge is power. And in the art world, power is everything. Imagine the prestige, the influence that would come with being the one to unmask the great Eric Westback.”

Bile rose to Beatrice’s throat. She knew all too well the value of secrets in their society, the way they could be bought and sold and used as weapons.

Lord Eastfold sat back, his demeanor shifting back to one of polite interest. “But enough about that. Tell me, what did you think of Westback’s latest piece? The one with the stormy sea and the golden light breaking through the clouds?”

Beatrice forced a smile, trying to calm the racing of her heart. “It was stunning,” she replied, her voice sounding distant to her own ears. “The use of light was masterful. The emotion it evokes is... powerful.”

As Eastfold launched into a detailed analysis of the painting, Beatrice barely heard him. Her mind was racing, scenarios of exposure and ruin playing in her head.

The footman entered with the tea, and Beatrice poured a cup for each of them. As they sipped their tea, they continued their animated conversation about art, discussing various artists, techniques, and the latest trends in the art world.

Lord Eastfold leaned in slightly, his expression earnest. “It’s rare to find someone who shares such a deep appreciation for art. His Grace is fortunate to have a wife with such refined taste.”

Beatrice blushed at the compliment. “Thank you, My Lord. It’s a passion of mine, one that I hope to indulge in more now that I’m here at Dunford.”

“I have no doubt you will,” he said warmly. “And if you ever wish to see some pieces I’ve acquired, I would be delighted to show you. Perhaps we could arrange a visit to my gallery in London.”

Beatrice’s eyes sparkled with interest. “I would love that. Thank you for?—”

The door to the parlor opened abruptly, and Kenneth strode in, his expression cool and collected.

“Where exactly were you planning on taking my wife?” he asked, his tone deceptively calm.

Chapter Fifteen

“What’s going on here?” Kenneth asked, his voice steady but tense.

Beatrice turned to him with a serene smile. “Lord Eastfold arrived earlier than planned, so I kept him company while he waited for you.”

Kenneth’s jaw tightened slightly at the friendly rapport between them. “I see,” he said curtly. “Shall we move to my study to discuss our business privately, Lord Eastfold?”

Beatrice, sensing the sudden shift in his demeanor, interjected, “Lord Eastfold was just telling me about some fascinating pieces in his collection. I’m quite envious of his knowledge and eye for art.”

Eastfold grinned, clearly enjoying the compliment. “Her Grace is too kind. But I must say, Your Grace, you are lucky to have such an art enthusiast for a wife. We’ve had quite the delightful conversation.”

Kenneth forced a tight smile, biting back a retort. “Indeed. Beatrice has a keen eye for beauty.”

Eastfold chuckled, looking at Beatrice. “She mentioned that she hopes to see your collection someday. I am surprised you haven’t shown it to her yet.”

Kenneth nodded, his tone clipped. “Perhaps one day. Shall we, Lord Eastfold?”

Beatrice, sensing the tension, smiled warmly at Eastfold. “Will you be staying for

dinner, My Lord? I'd love to hear more about your recent acquisitions."

Eastfold looked as though he was about to accept, his eyes twinkling with genuine pleasure. "I would love to, Your Grace. It's not every day I get to discuss art with someone so knowledgeable."

Kenneth quickly interjected, his patience wearing thin. "The Viscount must be quite busy. We shouldn't keep him."

Eastfold glanced between them, understanding the unspoken command. "Of course," he agreed with a polite nod. "It was a delight to meet you, Your Grace." Standing up, he took Beatrice's hand and kissed it again, his eyes lingering on hers. "I hope we can continue our conversation another time," he said warmly.

Beatrice laughed lightly, clearly enjoying the exchange. "I look forward to it, My Lord."

Kenneth, feeling his control slipping, practically dragged the Viscount away from her, leading him towards his study. As they walked through the hall, Kenneth glanced back over his shoulder and saw Beatrice heading towards the morning room.

He felt a twinge of regret as he remembered their passionate night together. The desire to follow her and repeat their intimate encounter was almost overwhelming, but he forced himself to focus on the business at hand. There would be time for that later, he promised himself, even as the image of her, bathed in the soft morning light, was seared in his mind.

Once inside his study, he closed the door behind them with a firm click, shutting out the light-hearted atmosphere of the parlor. The room was dimly lit, the heavy drapes drawn against the afternoon sun, creating an intimate, almost conspiratorial ambiance.

Eastfold took a seat, his eyes gleaming with amusement. “I must say, Kenneth, I’m quite surprised to hear that you got married. I had to see it for myself. Given up your rakish ways, haven’t you?”

Kenneth shrugged, a faint smile playing on his lips. “We all have to grow up sometime, Robert.”

Eastfold leaned back in his chair.

“Well, now that I’ve met Her Grace, I understand why. She is beautiful and smart. You would have been a fool not to marry her.”

Kenneth felt a flicker of irritation at Eastfold’s probing. He wasn’t willing to admit, even to himself, that his marriage might be more than just a convenient arrangement.

“It was a practical decision, nothing more,” he said dismissively, his tone clipped.

Eastfold raised an eyebrow, clearly skeptical. “Is that so? Practicality and love are often at odds, old friend.”

Kenneth’s eyes hardened slightly. “Let’s stick to the matter at hand, shall we? The reason you’re here is business, not to discuss my personal life.”

Eastfold nodded though his eyes retained a glint of curiosity. “Very well. I came to discuss the new pieces I’ve acquired for your collection. I think you’ll find them quite remarkable.”

As they delved into the details of the art collection, Kenneth forced himself to focus on the conversation. However, his mind kept drifting back to Beatrice, to the way she had laughed and conversed so easily with Eastfold.

His friend's words echoed in his mind, refusing to be dismissed as easily as he had intended.

Later that night, Kenneth sat alone in his study, the flickering candlelight casting long shadows over the room.

He had spent hours poring over the estate accounts, trying to drown his thoughts in numbers and ledgers. The sound of his quill scratching across the parchment was the only noise that broke the heavy silence. He had even taken his dinner alone, hoping the solitude would bring him some peace.

But it hadn't.

His mind kept wandering back to the previous night, to the way Beatrice had felt in his arms. Her soft curves pressing against him, her warm breath fanning his skin, the delicate scent of her hair teasing his nostrils. He remembered the way she had sighed, a contented smile on her lips as she drifted off to sleep. The memory of her weight in his arms as he had carried her to her bed, how light she had felt, how peaceful she had looked.

The figures before him blurred, and he let out a frustrated sigh, closing the account book with a snap. This was pointless. He couldn't concentrate, couldn't think straight with the memories of Beatrice haunting him. The desire he had felt for her was more than physical—it was a gnawing need, a longing that he couldn't quite understand or control.

With a determined breath, Kenneth rose from his chair, the wooden floorboards creaking under his weight. He left his study, the sound of his footsteps echoing in the corridor as he made to find his wife. His mind was filled with thoughts of her, the memories of their passionate night together replaying in his mind, fueling his desire.

As he approached her chambers, he heard soft murmurs. Pushing the door open slightly, he saw Beatrice being bathed by her lady's maid. The sight of her bare shoulders and the soft curve of her back sent a jolt of desire through him.

He stepped into the room, his presence commanding immediate attention. "Anna, retire for the night," he ordered, his tone leaving no room for argument.

Anna's eyes widened in surprise, but she quickly curtsied and scurried away, casting a quick glance at Beatrice before leaving the room.

Beatrice turned to face him, annoyance evident in her eyes. "You can't just order my maid around like that," she protested.

Kenneth ignored her words, rolling up his sleeves with deliberate slowness. "I'll bathe you myself," he said, his voice low.

Beatrice's eyes widened. "I am perfectly capable of bathing myself..." she retorted, but her words faltered as he picked up the cloth and dipped it into the warm water.

He moved closer to her, his presence overwhelming.

"Let me," he murmured, his breath warm against her skin as he began to slowly wash her back.

Beatrice's protests died on her lips as she felt the gentle pressure of his hand, the cloth moving in slow, soothing circles. Her body responded to his touch, a shiver of pleasure running down her spine. She closed her eyes, allowing herself to be lost in the sensation.

Kenneth dipped the cloth into the warm water again then gently ran it down her back, the steam rising around them.

“You were quite friendly with Eastfold earlier,” he noted, his voice calm but probing.

Beatrice glanced back at him, confusion in her eyes. “Is that not what is expected of me as a duchess?”

Kenneth’s hand stilled for a moment before he continued bathing her. “Polite, yes. But there is a difference between politeness and friendliness.”

She frowned slightly. “I don’t understand. Was I not supposed to engage him in conversation?”

Kenneth leaned closer, his breath warm against her ear. “You can be polite, but you should not be friendly with my business associates,” he murmured, his voice low and possessive.

Beatrice opened her mouth to protest, but he moved the cloth to her shoulder, his touch both gentle and commanding.

“You are mine,” he said, his tone leaving no room for argument.

Kenneth continued bathing her, his gaze never leaving her face. He watched as her expression softened, her annoyance melting away, replaced by something else—something deeper, more vulnerable.

As he felt her body slowly relax, he moved his hands further beneath the water.

She let out a small gasp as she felt his hands between her thighs, and he slid two fingers inside her. With unwavering patience, he tenderly massaged her, his thumb circling her bud, sensing its gradual firmness beneath his touch.

As he cautiously slid his two fingers in and out of her, a soft, barely audible sound

filled the air. The scent of her arousal lingered in the air, mingling with the scent of her rose-scented soap. But when she arched her back, a symphony of pleasure erupted through her body, and her breathless gasps filled the air, electrifying the moment.

In response, he quickened his movements, his focus sharpening as he sought to amplify her pleasure. His lips danced across her skin, finding all the right spots that made her gasp and moan, leaving a trail of fiery kisses along her neck, her collarbone, down to her breasts.

He could feel her body responding to his touch, her breathing becoming erratic, her hips involuntarily grinding against his hand. He could sense her nearing the edge, and he was determined to take her there, to unleash waves of pleasure that would consume her entirely.

As the rhythm of his fingers inside her reached a crescendo, Beatrice let out a small cry, and her body shuddered, sending water splashing across the floor. When she came down from her climax, she opened her eyes but didn't speak.

Kenneth picked up the soft, plush towel Anna had left next to the tub. Without a word, Beatrice stepped out of the warm water, her skin glistening with droplets that he carefully patted dry. Each stroke sent shivers through her.

When he was done, he took her to the bed and gently laid her down. Her hands flew up to hide her breasts, but he pushed them aside. He cupped the mounds in his hands and squeezed gently.

Beatrice caught hold of his shirt and dragged it up and over his head. She pressed her hands to his chest, her touch a delicate exploration as her fingers traced the contours of his muscles, tentative curiosity and undeniable desire in every caress. She trailed her fingers down his stomach to his erection, and when she was about to pull away, he reached for her hand and held it there.

Her lips curled into a shy smile. “Do you like that?” she whispered.

“Yes,” he uttered in a ragged whisper.

He pulled her hand away and shrugged off his trousers, impatience spurring him on. He was holding onto his self-control by a thread, and he was about to explode.

In one swift movement, Kenneth thrust into her, and she let out a little cry.

He stilled, hesitating, and asked softly, “Did I hurt you?”

“No, don’t stop,” she said breathlessly.

He pushed into her, and he quickly found a rhythm. She lifted her hips and shifted her body to move with him.

Kenneth looked down at her. The sight of her beauty, with her blue eyes half-lidded with pleasure, was almost too much. He lowered his head, and she arched up and kissed him. He held her close as he quickened his thrusts until she reached the crescendo of her pleasure. Only then did he allow himself to climax.

With a roar of pleasure, he thrust into her deep and hard one last time and spilled his seed inside her.

He collapsed next to her, their breaths mingling in the cool night air. Beatrice rolled over onto her side, her fingers tracing delicate patterns on his chest.

Kenneth felt a strange sense of satisfaction as he took in her flushed cheeks and the glow in her eyes. He rose from the bed, his gaze lingering on her as she lay there, her breathing gradually returning to normal.

Pulling on his clothes, he walked to the door, the scent of their shared passion heavy in the air. As he reached for the handle, he glanced back at her.

“You are mine, Duchess,” he declared, his voice low and commanding, his eyes locking onto hers. “Never forget that.”

With a final, lingering look, he stepped into the corridor, quietly closing the door behind him.

Chapter Sixteen

“ Good morning, Duchess. I trust you slept well?” Kenneth looked up from his newspaper, a small smile playing on his lips as he greeted her.

Beatrice felt a blush creep up her neck, memories of their passionate encounter the previous night still fresh in her mind. “Good morning. I did, thank you.”

As she took her seat beside him, Kenneth poured her a cup of tea, his eyes meeting hers. “So, what does your day hold?”

Beatrice took a sip of her tea, considering her response. She couldn’t very well tell him about her plans to work on her painting for the Dowager Duchess.

“Oh, just the usual. Attending to household matters, perhaps a bit of reading. And yourself?”

Kenneth buttered a piece of toast, his gaze never leaving hers. “I have some estate business to attend to, as usual. Meetings with tenants, reviewing accounts, that sort of thing.”

Beatrice nodded, a playful smile tugging at her lips. “Sounds riveting, Your Grace. Do try not to overexert yourself.”

Kenneth chuckled, a deep, rich sound that sent shivers down her spine. “I shall do my best. Though I must admit, I find myself quite energized this morning.”

He reached across the table, his fingers brushing against hers as he stole a piece of fruit from her plate. Beatrice's breath hitched at his touch, a spark of electricity passing between them.

"I can't imagine why," she murmured, her eyes locking onto his.

Kenneth's gaze darkened, a hint of mischief dancing in their depths. "Can't you? I seem to recall a rather invigorating evening."

Beatrice felt her cheeks heat up, but she held his gaze, a coy smile playing on her lips. "Ah, yes. It's all coming back to me now."

Kenneth's expression grew more serious. "Just remember, Beatrice, you are my wife and the Duchess of Dunford. Your attentions should be directed accordingly."

Her playful demeanor faltered slightly at his words, the reminder of their discussion about Lord Eastfold still fresh.

"Of course, Your Grace," she replied, her tone softer.

They continued their breakfast, the air between them charged with a subtle tension. As Kenneth rose to leave, he paused behind her chair, his fingers tracing along her collarbone.

"Have a pleasant day, Duchess," he murmured, his breath warm against her ear. "I look forward to hearing about your adventures this evening."

With a final, lingering touch, he brushed past her, leaving Beatrice breathless and yearning for more. As she watched him leave the room, she couldn't help but marvel at the growing attraction between them and the way her body responded to his every touch and word.

“Mrs. Whitfield, I’ve finished the Dowager Duchess’s painting,” Beatrice said, setting down her brush. “Could you help me wrap it carefully and get a footman to take it to London? It must arrive safely.”

“Of course, Your Grace,” Mrs. Whitfield replied with a nod. “I’ll see to it right away.”

Beatrice wrote a letter to her dealer, her pen moving quickly over the paper. Her thoughts were clouded with concern about Lord Eastfold’s increasing interest in discovering Westback’s identity.

Once she had sealed the letter, she handed it to Mrs. Whitfield along with the painting. “Please, make sure it’s someone reliable.”

“I will, Your Grace. I’ll find someone trustworthy.”

A short while later, a young footman arrived. “Your Grace, I’ve been instructed to take this painting to London,” he said, bowing respectfully.

“Thank you,” Beatrice replied, watching as he carefully picked up the wrapped painting and exited the room. Once he was out of sight, she moved to the window, her eyes following him as he loaded the painting into a small coach. She continued to watch until the coach disappeared down the drive.

Later that afternoon, a knock sounded at the door to her room.

Anna entered, carrying a large package. “Your Grace, this just arrived for you.”

Beatrice frowned in confusion. “I haven’t sent for anything. Are you sure it’s for me?”

“Yes, Your Grace,” Anna replied, setting the package down on the bed.

Beatrice opened it, her breath hitching as she revealed the most gorgeous pastel blue gown she had ever seen. The fabric shimmered in the light, the intricate embroidery catching her eye.

Mrs. Whitfield, who had followed Anna into the room, smiled warmly. “His Grace ordered it for you, Your Grace. He thought you might like to wear it to the ball.”

Beatrice’s heart skipped a beat. “He did?”

“Yes, Your Grace,” Mrs. Whitfield confirmed. “He wanted it to be a surprise.”

Beatrice ran her fingers over the delicate fabric, her mind racing. She had not expected this gesture from Kenneth. The gown was beautiful, a symbol of his thoughtfulness, yet she could not forget the tension that still lingered between them.

“Thank you, Mrs. Whitfield,” she said, her voice soft. “And thank you, Anna. You both may go now.”

As the door closed behind them, Beatrice held the gown against her, admiring the way the light danced across its surface. She couldn’t help but smile, a small spark of hope igniting within her.

The next day, Beatrice and Kenneth climbed into the luxurious coach, ready for their journey to London.

As they took off and the countryside rolled past, Beatrice turned to Kenneth, attempting to break the silence.

“How is the estate business going? You seem to be hard at work lately.”

Kenneth glanced at her, his expression softening slightly. “Busy as always. There’s much to manage.”

Beatrice nodded, sensing his reluctance to delve into details. “And the riding stables? I’ve heard you’ve acquired a new horse.”

He relaxed a bit more, the topic evidently more to his liking. “Yes, a magnificent stallion. Strong and spirited. I think he’ll be a great addition.”

A small smile played on Beatrice’s lips at his obvious passion. “I look forward to seeing him.” After a brief pause, she took a deep breath and said, “Thank you for the gown, Kenneth. It’s truly beautiful.”

He met her gaze, his voice gruff yet sincere. “Do you like it?”

She nodded. “Very much. Did you pick the color?”

He looked away, mumbling, “Yes. Thought it’d go nicely with your eyes.”

A hint of a smile touched her lips, and she felt a warmth spread through her chest. The gesture, though small, sparked a glimmer of optimism within her. Maybe they would find common ground in the days to come.

They continued their journey in comfortable silence, each lost in their thoughts.

They reached their London townhouse late that night, the streets outside quiet, and the house dimly lit.

Beatrice retired to her room, but as she lay in bed, sleep eluded her. At first, she attributed her restlessness to the excitement of the ball the next day, but deep down, she knew it was something more. She wanted Kenneth.

She tossed and turned, trying to push the thought away, but it was no use. Her mind was filled with the memory of his touch, the sound of his voice, and the way his eyes had softened when he mentioned the gown. Unable to bear the longing any longer, she threw back the covers and slipped out of bed.

She made her way to his door, the plush carpet muting her footsteps. She hesitated for a moment, her heart pounding in her chest, before raising her hand and knocking softly.

The door opened almost immediately, and Kenneth stood before her.

“Beatrice,” he said quietly. “Is something the matter? “Don’t you want to go to sleep early since we have the ball tomorrow?”

She took a deep breath, meeting his gaze. “Actually, I was hoping for something other than sleep tonight.”

The intensity of her gaze spoke volumes, and Kenneth’s eyes darkened with understanding. Without another word, he reached out and pulled her inside, the door closing softly behind her.

His hand slid down her arm, sending shivers through her body. She stepped closer, feeling the heat of his skin even through his shirt. Kenneth’s fingers gently tilted her chin up, their eyes locking in a silent, smoldering exchange. Then his lips crashed against hers, stealing the breath from her lungs.

The outside world faded away as they gave in to their passion in the deepening night.

Kenneth stood in front of the mirror, his valet, Thompson, adding the final touches of his attire. The valet’s deft hands worked quickly and efficiently, fastening the buttons and straightening the cravat.

“I’ve added a touch of blue, Your Grace, to complement Her Grace’s gown,” Thompson said, stepping back to admire his handiwork.

Kenneth glanced at his reflection, noticing the subtle blue accents in his outfit. It was a detail he normally wouldn’t have bothered with. He dismissed himself as ridiculous for even caring about such things. Typically, he never gave two thoughts about matching colors with anyone else.

Why am I even thinking about this?

“Thank you, Thompson,” he said, his tone gruff. “That will be all.”

The valet bowed and left the room, leaving Kenneth alone with his thoughts. He took a deep breath, trying to quell the nervous energy that had settled in his chest. He made his way downstairs to the drawing room where he waited for Beatrice.

Kenneth paced near the fireplace, his thoughts racing. He was used to handling business negotiations and estate matters, but tonight felt different. There was a tension in the air that he couldn’t quite shake.

The soft rustle of fabric alerted him to her presence. He turned around, and the sight of her made his breath catch in his throat.

Beatrice stood in the doorway, her pastel blue gown hugging her curves and dipping dangerously low over her bosom. The color of the dress brought out the rich caramel highlights in her hair which cascaded in loose waves over her shoulders. Her cheeks were a delicate pink, adding to the allure of her appearance.

“You look... stunning,” Kenneth said, his voice low and husky. “Though, I must admit, as pretty as that dress is, it makes me want to rip it off you and take you up against the wall.”

Beatrice's eyes sparkled with mischief. "Typically, I wouldn't object to that," she replied, her voice teasing, "but we must fulfill our social obligations and arrive to the ball on time."

Kenneth cursed under his breath, his desire for her intensifying. "Damn these obligations," he muttered.

With a resigned sigh, he offered her his arm, and together they made their way to the carriage.

Chapter Seventeen

“ K enneth, I believe it’s time for the first dance.” Lady Bernmere nudged her nephew with her elbow, a mischievous glint in her eyes as the music began.

The Dowager Duchess of Newden chimed in, her voice dripping with playful suggestion, “Indeed, Kenneth. You wouldn’t want to disappoint your lovely wife, would you?”

Kenneth shot his aunt a look of mild exasperation before turning to Beatrice, offering her his hand with a slight bow. “May I have this dance?”

Beatrice smiled and placed her hand in his. “I would be delighted, husband.”

As they moved to the center of the ballroom, Lady Bernmere couldn’t resist one more comment. “Remember, dear nephew, a well-executed waltz can be quite... captivating.”

The Dowager Duchess added with a wink, “And it’s said that a man who dances well is equally adept in other... endeavors.”

Beatrice felt her cheeks flush at the insinuation, but she couldn’t help but laugh softly.

Kenneth, however, scowled slightly and shook his head. “Thank you for your sage advice, Aunt Marjorie,” he said with heavy sarcasm “I’ll do my best.”

The crowd parted to give them space, and the music swelled. As the waltz began, Kenneth's hand rested firmly on her waist, his touch sending a ripple of warmth through her.

The soft strains of the violins and the gentle hum of the cellos filled the air, creating an intoxicating melody that seemed to bind them together.

Kenneth's breath was warm against her ear as he whispered, "You look ravishing tonight, Duchess. It's a shame I cannot pin you against the wall and make you mine again."

Beatrice shivered, feeling a delicious heat spread from her ears down to her neck. The scent of his cologne, warm, earthy, and something uniquely him, enveloped her, making her head spin. She could feel the firmness of his body through his clothes, his every movement controlled and precise yet brimming with barely contained desire.

"You're making it very hard to concentrate, Duke," she whispered back, her voice trembling slightly.

Kenneth's lips brushed against the shell of her ear. "Good. I want you to think about nothing else but me."

As they moved gracefully across the dance floor, Beatrice was acutely aware of every point of contact between them. His hand on her waist, the slight pressure of his fingers, the brush of his leg against hers—it all heightened her awareness, making her pulse quicken and her skin tingle.

"Do you know how much I want you right now?" Kenneth murmured, his voice low and husky. "I can't stop thinking about last night."

Beatrice's cheeks flushed. The memory of their night together flashed through her

mind, and she bit her lip to suppress a moan. Her body responded instinctively, leaning closer to him, her fingers curling around his shoulder.

The sweet scent of roses from the nearby floral arrangements mingled with the heady scent of his cologne, creating an intoxicating blend that tickled her senses. The world outside their intimate bubble seemed to blur, the colors and sounds fading into the background as she focused solely on him.

“You’re driving me insane,” she whispered, her voice barely audible above the music.

Kenneth’s grip tightened ever so slightly, a silent promise of what was to come. “Good. I want you to be as mad with desire as I am.”

The dance seemed to stretch on forever, each second charged with electric tension. Beatrice felt like her skin was on fire, every nerve ending alight with anticipation. She longed for the dance to end yet simultaneously wished it could go on forever, just to stay in this sensual, all-consuming moment with Kenneth.

When the final notes of the waltz died down, Kenneth reluctantly released her, his eyes dark with unspoken promises. They made their way back to their friends, but the spell was not entirely broken. Beatrice’s skin still tingled from his touch, her body thrumming with unfulfilled desire.

Catherine and Thomas greeted them with warm smiles, but Beatrice could hardly focus on their words.

The Dowager Duchess’s voice broke through the haze. “You two were wonderful.”

Beatrice managed a smile, her heart still racing. “Thank you, Duchess. It was a lovely dance.”

Kenneth's hand remained on the small of her back.

As they stood with their friends, Beatrice couldn't help but feel a sense of longing, wishing they could escape the prying eyes and finish what they had started on the dance floor.

She smiled at Kenneth as she excused herself, taking Catherine's arm. "We'll be back shortly," she said, nodding to Thomas as well.

The two women walked towards the refreshments table, their steps light and quick.

Catherine squeezed Beatrice's arm affectionately. "It seems you and Kenneth are getting along rather well," she observed, her voice tinged with curiosity.

Beatrice glanced back at Kenneth, who was deep in conversation with Thomas and Lady Featherwell. A pang of jealousy surged through her as she saw Lady Featherwell lean closer, her flirtatious laughter carrying across the room.

"We are managing," she replied carefully. "Our marriage is mostly practical, just as our relations are."

Catherine stopped, looking at her friend with wide eyes. "Practical? What do you mean?"

Beatrice sighed, lowering her voice as they reached the lemonade stand. "We have a... somewhat particular agreement. We satisfy each other's needs, but there are no expectations beyond that."

Catherine looked genuinely surprised. "That doesn't sound like the Beatrice I've known all my life. You always dreamed of a love match."

Beatrice poured them both lemonade, her gaze sweeping over the crowd. "I've changed, Catherine. I've had to grow up. Life isn't always what we dream it to be."

Catherine placed a gentle hand on Beatrice's arm. "I didn't mean to insult you. I was just noting the change. Kenneth seems different now too, compared to what he was like when we first met him."

Beatrice nodded, feeling a pang of guilt about keeping her secret from her friend. "A lot can happen within a year," she agreed, taking a sip of her lemonade.

Catherine tilted her head slightly, concern evident in her eyes. "I understand that you're different now, but are you really satisfied with your arrangement with Kenneth?"

Beatrice thought back to the girl she once was, full of dreams about falling in love with a handsome duke.

Her eyes fell on Kenneth, who was still talking to Thomas and Lady Featherwell. She watched as Lady Featherwell laughed, her head tilted back, fanning herself dramatically in Kenneth's direction. The woman's hand rested lightly on Kenneth's arm, her touch lingering longer than necessary.

She recalled the cruel words Lady Featherwell had said after the news of their engagement, warning her that Kenneth would soon tire of her and seek a mistress. The memory of those harsh words stung anew, amplifying her discomfort.

Beatrice clenched her fan tightly, the delicate ribs biting into her palm. Lady Featherwell's flirtatious behavior was unmistakable, her every move designed to capture Kenneth's attention.

"Yes, I am fine with it," Beatrice replied firmly, even as uncertainty gnawed at her.

At that moment, Viscount Eastfold approached them, his face lighting up with a smile. “Your Graces, what a pleasure to see you both.”

Catherine returned his smile before the Dowager Duchess came over to whisk her away. “Catherine, dear, I must introduce you to some of Thomas’s extended family.”

“Of course, grandmamma. If you’ll excuse me, Bea. I’ll be back,” Catherine said and gave Beatrice’s hand a squeeze before following the Dowager Duchess.

Beatrice was now alone with Lord Eastfold.

The Lord turned to Beatrice, his eyes twinkling. “You look enchanting tonight, Your Grace. May I have the honor of the next dance?”

Beatrice glanced towards Kenneth, who was still deep in conversation with Lady Featherwell.

A surge of defiance spurred her decision.

“I would be delighted, Lord Eastfold.”

As they moved to the dance floor, Lord Eastfold took her hand, leading her into the waltz. His grip was firm but gentle, and he guided her expertly through the steps.

“You seem to be enjoying the ball,” he remarked, his gaze warm and appreciative.

Beatrice nodded, her eyes briefly meeting Kenneth’s across the room before she quickly looked away. “It’s a lovely event,” she replied, focusing on the rhythm of the dance, pretending not to notice his gaze burning into her.

“Indeed, it is,” Eastfold agreed, his eyes twinkling with warmth. “And might I say,

Your Grace, you look particularly stunning this evening. That gown suits you beautifully.”

Beatrice felt a blush rise to her cheeks at the compliment. “Thank you, My Lord. You’re too kind.”

Eastfold chuckled, shaking his head slightly. “Not at all, Your Grace. I’m merely stating the truth. I’m sure I’m not the only one who has noticed your radiance tonight.”

Beatrice smiled politely, unsure how to respond to such flattery.

Her mind flashed back to Kenneth’s flare of jealousy the last time Lord Eastfold had flirted with her, a reminder of the tension it had caused.

She glanced around the room, searching for a safer topic of conversation. Her eyes landed on a large painting hanging on the far wall, depicting a serene landscape.

“I must say, Lord Eastfold, the artwork in this ballroom is quite impressive. Have you had a chance to admire it?” she asked, hoping to steer the conversation in a more neutral direction.

Eastfold followed her gaze, his expression brightening with interest. “Ah, yes. It is a fine collection. I particularly admire the use of light in that landscape. It’s quite masterful.”

Beatrice nodded. “I couldn’t agree more. The artist has captured the essence of the scene beautifully.”

“You have a remarkable understanding of art, Your Grace,” Eastfold commented, his admiration evident.

“Thank you, My Lord. Art has always been a passion of mine,” Beatrice replied, her smile genuine.

“As it should be,” Eastfold said warmly. “There’s something truly magnificent about a piece that captures the essence of its subject.”

Beatrice’s smile widened, but then the conversation took a more practical turn.

“However, not all pieces of art hold the same value. The true worth lies in their potential as an investment. The right piece can bring in a substantial profit if sold to the right buyer.”

Beatrice’s smile faltered. “You see art primarily as a commodity, then?” she asked, trying to mask her disappointment.

Eastfold nodded, oblivious to her dismay. “Indeed. It’s all about knowing the market and seizing opportunities. A well-timed sale can make all the difference.”

Beatrice’s eyes narrowed slightly though her tone remained polite. “But isn’t the true value of art found in its ability to evoke emotion and inspire? To capture the beauty of a moment and connect with the soul of the viewer?”

Eastfold chuckled, shaking his head slightly. “You have a romantic view, Your Grace, but the world is moved by money more than beauty. Art that doesn’t sell is simply a pretty picture collecting dust. The greatest masterpieces are those that fetch the highest price.”

Beatrice’s eyes narrowed slightly. “Is that why you’re so eager to discover more about Westback? Because you see potential profit in his work?”

Eastfold nodded without hesitation. “Yes, precisely. Westback’s growing reputation

makes his pieces a valuable investment. Uncovering his identity could be quite advantageous.”

Beatrice felt a wave of disillusionment wash over her. She had always viewed art as a form of expression, a way to capture and convey the essence of the human experience. Hearing Eastfold reduce it to mere financial transactions was disheartening.

Despite her disillusionment, she kept her thoughts to herself. She didn’t want to let Kenneth see how much Eastfold’s words had affected her. Instead, she used this moment to get back at Kenneth, who was still watching them intently.

“I see,” she replied lightly. “It’s an interesting perspective.”

As the dance came to an end, Eastfold led her back to the edge of the dance floor. “I hope we can share another dance later, Your Grace,” he suggested, his hand lingering on hers.

Beatrice curtsied politely, her smile barely reaching her eyes.

“Perhaps, My Lord,” she said before turning and walking away.

She took a moment to catch her breath, her mind racing.

Kenneth might be more comfortable with Lady Featherwell, but he had to have noticed her exchange with Eastfold.

Yet, the evening had left her feeling more disenchanted than ever.

Was this truly the society she was now part of? A world filled with rakes, gossip, and opportunists?

Nevertheless, it all made sense to her. This was the society that had shunned her because of her brother's actions. Now, she had to put up with their hypocrisy.

Still, despite her conversation with Lord Eastfold and the nauseating feeling it had provoked, her mind couldn't help but wander back to her husband.

And how livid she had felt seeing him close to Lady Featherwell.

Chapter Eighteen

Kenneth watched as Beatrice and Catherine moved away, feeling a pang of something he couldn't quite name. Just as he was about to follow, Thomas approached him, drawing him into a conversation.

"How are you faring, Kenneth?" Thomas asked, his tone casual yet laced with concern.

Kenneth's instinct was to deflect, to focus on the familiar territory of business. "The estate is doing well. We've managed to?—"

Thomas raised a hand to stop him, shaking his head with a wry smile. "I didn't mean business-wise. How are you really?"

Kenneth clenched his jaw, a brief flash of irritation crossing his features. "Good," he replied curtly, not willing to delve into the complexities of his emotions.

Thomas raised an eyebrow, clearly not convinced. "Is that so? You know, my friend, you're a terrible liar."

Before Kenneth could respond, Lady Featherwell approached them, her presence commanding attention.

"Gentlemen," she purred, her eyes lingering on Kenneth, "what a pleasure to see you both."

Kenneth barely mustered a polite nod, his interest waning as Lady Featherwell began her flirtations. She directed most of her attention towards him, her tone becoming more intimate with each word.

She leaned in slightly, her smile coy. “Your Grace, I couldn’t help but notice your wife is quite taken with Lord Eastfold. They make a charming pair on the dance floor, don’t they?”

Kenneth’s gaze snapped to where Beatrice and Eastfold were dancing, a surge of jealousy hitting him like a punch to the gut. The sight of the Viscount’s hand on Beatrice’s waist, the way she smiled at him—it was unbearable.

Lady Featherwell touched his arm lightly, drawing his attention back to her. “Your Grace, it’s been ages since we last danced. Perhaps later, you might spare a dance for an old friend?”

Kenneth forced a smile, his eyes still flickering to Beatrice and Eastfold. “Of course, Lady Featherwell. It would be my pleasure.”

As he watched Beatrice and Eastfold glide across the dance floor, Kenneth’s thoughts were a chaos of frustration and desire. The ease with which they conversed, the genuine laughter they shared—it gnawed at him.

Lady Featherwell continued to chatter beside him, but her words barely registered. His focus was solely on Beatrice, his mind replaying the night they had spent together, mingling with the jealousy that the sight of her with another man stirred within him.

When the dance ended, Kenneth watched as Beatrice and Eastfold parted, exchanging polite smiles. Beatrice turned and began to leave the ballroom, her movements graceful yet hurried.

Lady Featherwell leaned in closer to Kenneth, her voice dripping with suggestion. “Your Grace, I do believe you promised me a dance. Shall we?”

Kenneth barely registered her words, his attention still on Beatrice’s retreating form. “Forgive me, Lady Featherwell. I have an urgent matter to attend to. If you’ll excuse me.”

Without waiting for a response, he strode away, leaving a pouting Lady Featherwell in his wake. His eyes never left Beatrice as he watched her disappear through the doorway.

He quickened his pace, determined to catch up with her. The sight of her in another man’s arms, the way Eastfold had looked at her, had stirred a possessiveness within him that he couldn’t ignore.

As he exited the ballroom, he caught a glimpse of Beatrice turning down a quiet corridor. With purposeful strides, he followed her, his heart pounding in his chest. They needed to talk, to clear the air between them.

And perhaps, he admitted to himself, he needed to stake his claim, to remind her that she was his wife and his alone.

He managed to reach her just as she stepped into a quiet corridor, her expression tight with frustration. His hand shot out, gently grabbing her arm to stop her.

“Beatrice,” he began, his voice low and tense, “what was all that with Lord Eastfold?”

“Why don’t you return to Lady Featherwell?” Beatrice hissed, her voice dripping with sarcasm. “She must feel terribly lonely without you.”

Kenneth barely processed her words, his jealousy bubbling up his chest. “Lord Eastfold, Beatrice? You seemed very eager to talk to him. Did he charm you when he came to our house?”

Beatrice scoffed, crossing her arms over her chest defensively. “Why do you care, Kenneth? Are you jealous?”

Kenneth stepped closer, his eyes blazing with intensity. “Yes, I’m jealous. It drove me mad seeing you dance with Lord Eastfold. I want you, Beatrice. Desperately. You are mine and mine alone.”

She stared at him. “You have no right to be jealous. You made it clear you only want me for my body. So why this sudden possessiveness?”

Their voices were low, but the intensity of their argument was palpable. The sound of laughter and music from the ballroom echoed faintly in the background, contrasting sharply with their heated exchange.

Kenneth’s jaw clenched. “Because I can’t stand the thought of another man touching you.”

“Why? Because it bruises your ego?” Beatrice shot back, stepping closer to him, her breath hot against his skin. “Or is it because you actually care more than you’re willing to admit?”

“You drive me mad,” he growled. The scent of leather and something uniquely him filled her senses.

Before she could respond, he grabbed her hand and pulled her into a nearby library, closing the door behind them and locking it.

“Enough games,” he said, his voice husky. “I want you now.”

Beatrice’s heart raced as she met his intense gaze.

Kenneth’s lips crashed onto hers in a fierce, possessive kiss. The intensity of his kiss sent a wave of heat through her, and she found herself responding despite her anger. His hands roamed over her back, pulling her even closer, while her fingers tangled in his hair.

Their breaths mingled, the heat between them growing unbearable. Kenneth’s hands explored her body, and she felt a shiver of anticipation. Their world narrowed down to just the two of them, lost in the overwhelming desire that consumed them both.

His fingers delicately traced the curve of her spine, eliciting a shiver from her. He pulled back slightly, his eyes locking with hers. A silent understanding passed between them, filled with promises and a smoldering desire.

He traced a line down her neck, his lips following the path his fingers had drawn moments later. As Beatrice gasped, her hands instinctively gripped his shoulders, and she threw her head back, baring her throat to him without reservation.

Every sound she made, every shiver that coursed through her, egged him on. His touch became bolder, more possessive, as he explored her body, relishing the sensation of her skin beneath his fingertips.

He bit her lips gently, then used his tongue to tease her lips apart. With no hesitation, he eagerly explored the depths of her mouth. Their kiss deepened, and he could feel her knees wobble. Her breath hitched in anticipation as his hands skillfully maneuvered the fabric of her gown, exposing the soft skin of her shoulders and the gentle swell of her breasts.

A surge of desire shot through him as he beheld her exposed form, his lips hungrily descending on the swell of her breasts. The warmth of his breath against her sensitive skin sent shivers of pleasure down her spine, eliciting a gasp of delight from her parted lips. The intimate connection between them intensified as he tenderly caressed her bare flesh, his touch igniting a fire within her that could not be quelled.

Kenneth gazed down at her rosebud nipples. Leaning down, he captured a perfect nipple in his mouth. He could feel it harden, the pulsating warmth sending shivers down his spine while the sound of his own heartbeat echoed in his ears.

He scooped her into his arms and carried her to the nearby chaise. Lying next to her, he parted her legs with his own and reached down to the hem of her dress.

Beatrice shifted as his hand explored the softness of her thighs. With each gentle stroke, her breathing quickened, and her heart raced. With each gasp, his hands became bolder, gliding over her skin until his fingers discovered the damp, tender place between her legs. The intensity of the sensation caused her to moan, her lips parting, her back arching ever so slightly. As she succumbed to the pleasure, her legs fell open, allowing him to explore more deeply, each touch causing sparks to course through her body.

He guided her hand downward to his erection. "Touch me."

Beatrice reached out, clasped the top of his breeches and yanked them open. Her fingers found his hard shaft, circling it.

"Do you want me, Kenneth?"

"Yes." Kenneth bit back a groan and plunged his fingers into her.

As he gently pumped his fingers in and out of her, she mimicked his movements with

her own fingers, pumping his shaft. A soft hiss erupted from his throat as his pleasure heightened.

He kissed down her chest as his fingers swirled around the center of her pleasure. She threw her head back and moaned, pushing her breasts up into his mouth.

Growing impatient, he proceeded to lift her up and place her gently on his lap where she could feel his arousal. Despite the surprise that flashed in her eyes, she did not hesitate to take action. With a rocking motion, she sank down onto him, her chest becoming flushed with pleasure.

Kenneth watched her with half-lidded eyes, waiting for her to climax. When her movements quickened, and he felt her insides begin to pulse around his shaft, he spilled into her.

The world narrowed down to this single moment where their bodies moved in perfect synchrony in that perfect, delicious dance.

As the waves of pleasure subsided, Kenneth pulled Beatrice close, his arms wrapping around her in a tender embrace. She sighed contentedly, her head resting on his chest, listening to the steady rhythm of his heartbeat.

For a few moments, they simply held each other, basking in the afterglow of their lovemaking. Kenneth's hand traced lazy patterns on Beatrice's back, his touch gentle and soothing. Beatrice nuzzled closer, her own hand resting over his heart, feeling the strong, steady beat beneath her palm.

"That was..." Kenneth murmured, his voice low and intimate, "incredible."

Beatrice smiled against his chest, a warmth spreading through her that had nothing to do with their physical exertion.

“It was,” she agreed softly, tilting her head to look up at him.

Kenneth’s gaze met hers, and in that moment, something shifted between them. The usual intensity in his eyes was tempered by a softness, a vulnerability that Beatrice had never seen before.

His hand came up to cup her cheek, his thumb brushing lightly over her lips.

“You’re amazing, Beatrice,” he whispered, his words filled with a quiet reverence. “I must admit... I’ve felt nothing like this before.”

Beatrice’s heart swelled, a lump forming in her throat. She leaned into his touch, her own hand coming up to cover his.

“Neither have I,” she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper.

For a long moment, they simply looked at each other, their eyes saying what their words could not.

Finally, Kenneth leaned in, his lips brushing against Beatrice’s in a soft, tender kiss. It was different from the passionate, hungry kisses they had shared before. This was a kiss of affection.

As they parted, Beatrice settled back into his arms, her body molding perfectly to his. Kenneth pulled her into his strong arms, cocooning them in warmth and comfort. They lay there, limbs entwined as a peaceful silence settled over the room.

“We should return soon,” Beatrice murmured as she nuzzled into Kenneth’s neck.

“Mmhm. In a bit,” Kenneth mumbled back and she nodded; she wanted to revel in the moment just as much.

Right there, as she lay secure in her husband's embrace, Beatrice felt a flicker of hope in her heart.

Perhaps, just perhaps, their marriage could be something more than just a practical arrangement.

The next afternoon, Kenneth took Beatrice to the gallery, a place she had been eager to see since her arrival at Dunford Castle. As they reached the grand doors, Kenneth paused, his hand resting on the ornate handle.

"This is where I keep my collection. Some of these pieces have been in the family for generations."

He pushed open the doors, revealing a room, bathed in soft light from high, arched windows. The walls were lined with paintings of various sizes, each one meticulously framed. Beatrice's eyes widened as she took in the sheer number of artworks.

Kenneth led her through the gallery, stopping occasionally to point out a piece of particular significance. His knowledge of art was evident in the way he spoke, his passion shining through despite his usually stoic demeanor.

As they paused in front of a particularly striking landscape, Kenneth turned to her. "The brushstrokes convey such movement and depth."

Beatrice nodded, her eyes tracing the lines of the painting. "It's the way the strokes blend together, creating a sense of fluidity. Each one is deliberate yet effortless."

As they stopped in front of another painting, Kenneth leaned in closer.

"Do you remember when we argued about brushstrokes?" he murmured, a teasing smile playing on his lips.

Beatrice laughed softly, the memory bringing a warm flush to her cheeks. “Yes, I remember. You were quite insistent that without shadow, the light loses its meaning.”

“And you were adamant that light emphasizes hope and beauty even in the face of darkness,” he countered, his tone light. “I must admit, your words have made me appreciate the beauty in both.”

Beatrice felt a thrill at his words. “Thank you, Kenneth. That means a lot coming from you.”

They continued their tour, the conversation flowing easily between them. Kenneth pointed out a portrait of a woman with a serene expression, her eyes seeming to follow them as they moved.

“She was a distant relative,” he explained. “The artist captured her elegance perfectly. What do you think about this one?”

Beatrice tilted her head, studying the portrait. “Hmmm. I would add a bit more light to it to bring out the depth of her eyes.”

Kenneth’s hand tightened around hers. “I have no doubt you could. You have an incredible eye for detail.”

As they reached the end of the gallery, Beatrice turned to Kenneth, her eyes shining with admiration. “Thank you for showing me this, Kenneth. It’s incredible.”

He nodded, a small smile tugging at the corners of his lips. “I’m glad you appreciate it.”

They stood there, surrounded by the timeless beauty of the paintings, a new understanding forming between them.

An understanding that something deeper was blossoming.

Chapter Nineteen

“Welcome. I’m so delighted you could join me today,” the Dowager Duchess of Newden greeted them warmly, her eyes twinkling with mischief as they entered her parlor.

The parlor was adorned with rich draperies and ornate furnishings, the perfect backdrop for the painting that took center stage. The light from the tall windows glanced off the canvas, drawing Kenneth’s attention immediately.

Beatrice smiled, curtsying gracefully. “Thank you for the invitation, Duchess. We’re honored to be here.”

The Dowager Duchess waved a hand dismissively. “Oh, nonsense, my dear. It’s I who am honored to have such a lovely couple grace my home. Now, do come and see the new Westback painting. It’s quite extraordinary.”

She led them to the painting. Kenneth stood before it, his breath catching in his throat.

The play of light and shadow, the intricate details of the coast, and the delicate brushstrokes that captured the essence of the scene—all of it spoke to him on a profound level.

“How do you find it, Duke?” the Dowager Duchess asked, standing beside him with a warm smile.

“This is a significant improvement,” Kenneth observed, his voice tinged with awe. “The light and shadows are far more balanced. This is the work of an artist who truly evolves.”

The Dowager Duchess beamed with pleasure. “I’m glad you think so. Lady Bernmere and I were just discussing how talented this Westback fellow is. Such a mystery, though, don’t you think? He continues to be mysterious, not disclosing where this beach is. He must love riddles, this artist.”

Kenneth nodded, noticing a man on horseback in the background. The figure was small, almost an afterthought, yet it added a layer of depth and mystery to the scene.

Turning to Beatrice, the Dowager Duchess asked, “And what about you, Duchess? What do you think of the painting?”

Beatrice, who had been staring at Kenneth with an unreadable emotion in her eyes, stepped forward. “I believe it doesn’t truly matter where this beach is,” she began, her voice soft but clear. “What matters is where it transports each viewer. The emotions it evokes, the memories it stirs. That’s the true beauty of art.”

The Dowager Duchess clapped her hands in delight. “Beautifully said! You have such a keen eye and a way with words. Doesn’t she, Duke?”

Kenneth, captivated by Beatrice’s words and the depth of her understanding, simply nodded. “Indeed.”

The Dowager Duchess’s eyes sparkled with mirth. “I must say, you two make quite the pair. Tell me, how are you finding married life? Lady Bernmere and I are always eager for a bit of gossip.”

Beatrice glanced at Kenneth, a faint blush coloring her cheeks. “It’s been... an

adjustment, Duchess. But we're learning more about each other every day."

The Dowager Duchess smiled knowingly. "Of course, of course. Marriage is always a learning experience. Speaking of which, Thomas and Catherine are so excited about the upcoming addition to the family. I don't suppose you have any similar news to share?"

Beatrice's blush deepened, and Kenneth cleared his throat uncomfortably. "No, Duchess. We're... we're taking things one step at a time."

The Dowager Duchess waved her hand, chuckling. "Ah, well, there's no rush. But do keep me informed, won't you? I do so love good news."

Sensing the couple's discomfort, she changed the subject. "Now, shall we have some tea and discuss this painting further? I'm curious to hear more of your thoughts, Duchess."

As they moved to the seating area, Kenneth couldn't help but steal another glance at Beatrice. As she engaged in a lively discussion about art with the Dowager Duchess, her passion and intelligence shining through, he felt a growing admiration for her.

Perhaps, he thought, there was more to their marriage than just a practical arrangement. Perhaps, with time and understanding, it could turn into something more.

After returning to their townhouse and freshening up, Kenneth suggested a walk in the gardens to enjoy the evening air. Beatrice readily agreed, and they made their way outside, the city's hustle and bustle fading into the background as they entered the serene gardens.

The evening air was perfumed with the delicate scent of blooming flowers. The soft

rustling of leaves in the gentle breeze created a soothing ambiance, enveloping them in a world of their own.

Kenneth found himself irresistibly drawn to Beatrice, his gaze lingering on her as she walked beside him.

The way her brow furrowed slightly when she was lost in thought, as if pondering the mysteries of the universe, captivated him. Her slender fingers traced absent patterns on her gown, their graceful movements a mesmerizing dance that sent shivers down his spine. Every little gesture, every subtle expression, pulled him deeper under her spell.

Unable to hold back any longer, Kenneth broke the comfortable silence that had settled between them.

“Beatrice,” he said softly, her name a gentle caress on his lips, “the way you speak about art is absolutely enchanting. Your comments about the painting were not only profound but also incredibly moving.”

Beatrice looked up at him, her eyes widening slightly in surprise. A delicate blush bloomed on her cheeks, making her even more breathtaking in the fading light of dusk.

“Thank you, Kenneth,” she replied, her voice soft and filled with warmth. “It means a great deal to me that you find my thoughts so meaningful.”

Kenneth nodded, a small smile tugging at the corners of his lips. He felt a surge of admiration for this remarkable woman who could express herself with such passion and grace.

“Seeing your love and knowledge for art come alive as you speak is truly impressive.

It's like watching a master artist paint a canvas with words, each brushstroke revealing a new depth of understanding."

As they continued their stroll through the gardens, Kenneth couldn't tear his eyes away from her. The moonlight bathed her in a soft glow, making her look ethereal, almost otherworldly. The air between them was charged with an undeniable tension, and he knew he couldn't resist any longer.

"Beatrice," he whispered, his voice thick with desire.

She turned to him, her eyes wide and questioning.

Before she could say a word, he stepped closer, his hand gently cupping her cheek. He leaned in, his breath warm against her skin, and pressed his lips to hers in a slow, deliberate kiss.

Beatrice responded to his kiss with equal fervor, her hands sliding up to grip his shoulders. Kenneth deepened the kiss, his arms encircling her waist and pulling her closer.

The scent of blooming flowers and the rustling leaves seemed to fade into the background, leaving only the sound of their breathing and the pounding of their hearts.

He broke the kiss, his forehead resting against hers. "Come with me," he murmured, his voice a husky whisper.

Beatrice nodded, her body thrumming with a mix of anticipation and desire.

Kenneth took her hand, leading her through the winding paths of the gardens until they reached a secluded alcove, hidden from view by tall hedges and blooming roses.

He turned to her, his eyes dark with lust.

“You’re mine, Beatrice,” he whispered, his voice filled with raw emotion.

Beatrice’s breath hitched as she met his gaze. “I’m yours, Kenneth,” she replied softly, her words a promise, a surrender.

With that, he pulled her into his arms once more, capturing her lips in a searing kiss that left her with no doubt about his intentions.

Slowly, he began to undo the laces of her gown, his movements sure and deliberate. The dress fell open, revealing the swell of her breasts and the creamy skin of her shoulders. He trailed his fingers along her collarbone, and she shivered with desire.

“God, you’re beautiful,” he whispered, his breath hot against her ear.

Beatrice moaned as he nipped her earlobe, sending shivers of pleasure down her spine.

His hands roamed over her body, leaving trails of fire in their wake. She could feel herself growing wet, and the aching desire between her legs intensified.

Kenneth unlaced the back of her corset, freeing her breasts from their confines. She gasped as the cool air hit her bare skin, her nipples hardening into tight peaks. He dipped his head, taking one into his mouth and sucking gently. She arched her back, pressing herself closer to him.

His teeth grazed her nipple, sending waves of pleasure to her core. She could feel herself growing wetter by the second, and she could tell from the growing bulge in his trousers that he wanted her just as badly.

With trembling hands, she undid the buttons on his waistcoat, revealing a taut, muscular chest. She ran her hands over his firm pectorals, feeling his heart beating rapidly beneath her fingertips.

Kenneth's fingers trailed down her abdomen before pushing down her pantaloons. She stepped out of them, revealing herself to him. She was bare and vulnerable, and it felt exhilarating.

His fingers brushed against the curls at the apex of her sex, and she shuddered with anticipation as he began to caress her. His touch was slow and deliberate, like a master artist painting a beautiful masterpiece.

Kenneth leaned closer, his breath hot and heavy against her ear. "Are you ready for me?" he asked, his voice low and husky.

Beatrice looked into his eyes, her heart pounding in her chest. "Yes," she whispered, her voice barely audible.

He slid his fingers inside her, and she gasped at the intrusion. He started to move his fingers in and out of her, creating a rhythm that had her rocking her hips against him. Her breath came in ragged gasps as pleasure shot through her body.

She opened her legs wider for him, giving him better access to her most intimate place. His fingers teased and tormented her, building her need for him with every stroke.

Beatrice protested as he stopped and stepped away from her. Kenneth kicked off his trousers before grabbing her around the waist and pulling her tight against his length.

"Please," she begged.

He nuzzled her neck and then trailed kisses down to her shoulder, his hands still moving between her legs, watching her body shake with pleasure.

Then, with a groan, he lifted her and pushed inside her.

Beatrice gripped his shoulders hard and let out a low moan as he slid into her slowly until he was buried all the way inside.

She gasped at the delicious fullness. His strong arms held her tight as he thrust deep inside her. Their cries of pleasure blended with the sounds in the moonlit garden.

They remained intertwined for several moments, savoring the aftermath of their passion. Sweat trickled down their bodies, mixing together as he held her in his arms, their heartbeats slowing down to a steady rhythm once more.

“That was amazing,” Kenneth murmured.

Beatrice smiled softly, feeling her chest rise and fall against his as she took in deep, shaky breaths.

“And you were incredible,” she whispered back, her voice raw and husky.

Kenneth chuckled softly, his breath warm against her ear.

“As much as I enjoy our garden rendezvous,” he murmured, his voice low and seductive, “perhaps we should continue in the privacy of our bedchambers before we shock the servants.”

Beatrice laughed quietly, the sound a sweet melody in the night air.

“That might be wise,” she agreed, her fingers tracing lazy patterns on his chest.

Chapter Twenty

Beatrice stood in the morning room, lost in the strokes of her brush as she worked on her latest painting.

The room was filled with the scent of fresh paint and the soft, rhythmic sound of her brush gliding across the canvas. She wore an old, paint-stained dress that had seen many such sessions, her hair tied back loosely to keep it out of her face. The world outside faded away as she immersed herself in her art.

A few hours later, just as she was adding the finishing touches to the rough draft, a knock on the door jolted her out of her reverie.

Startled, she stepped back, her heart racing. She glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece. It was around the time Mrs. Whitfield usually brought her tea.

“Coming,” she called out, her voice steady.

She wiped her hands on a rag and moved towards the door, her footsteps echoing in the quiet room.

But before she reached the door, she heard a voice that sent a chill down her spine.

“Beatrice, what are you doing in there?” Kenneth asked, a touch of irritation in his voice.

Her eyes widened, panic surging through her veins. She glanced around the room,

taking in the scattered art supplies and the half-finished painting on the easel. What was she going to do? There was no way to hide her secret now.

“Just a minute,” she called back, trying to buy herself some time.

Her mind raced, searching for a plausible excuse, but nothing came to mind.

“Beatrice, open the door,” he demanded, his voice firmer this time.

She took a deep breath, steeling herself for the inevitable. There was no way around it. She had to face him. With trembling hands, she unlocked the door and opened it, her heart pounding in her chest.

Kenneth stepped inside, his eyes narrowing as he took in the sight of her paint-stained dress and the chaotic state of the room.

He was about to ask why she had locked the door when his gaze fell on the easel. His expression shifted from irritation to curiosity.

“Is that what you’ve been doing in here?” he asked, a hint of amusement in his voice as he approached the painting.

Beatrice closed the door behind him and pressed her back against it. Her mind was a whirlwind of emotions—fear, anxiety, and a touch of defiance. She watched as he studied the painting, his eyes narrowing as he took in the details.

“Eric Westback. Eric Westback. Beatrice Wickes. Huh,” he muttered to himself.

The air was thick with tension, almost crackling with it. Beatrice’s heart raced as she watched him, waiting for his next words, unsure of what to expect.

Kenneth turned around, his eyes glinting with amusement and realization. “You know, ‘Eric Westback’ sounds like an anagram for Beatrice Wickes.”

Beatrice faked a laugh though it came out strained. “You’re being ridiculous, Kenneth. I was merely inspired by Westback’s style.”

He didn’t buy it. “Beatrice, since your brother cut you and your mother off, how did you survive in Wales? By the money you made from these paintings.” He paused, his gaze piercing as he put all the pieces together.

Beatrice gulped, expecting him to be furious. Instead, he calmly took a chair and placed it across from the easel. To her surprise, he began removing his coat, cravat, and shirt.

“What are you doing?” she asked, her voice shaky.

“I want to see what ‘Eric’ does with this masterpiece,” he said, gesturing to his body with a teasing smile.

Beatrice bit her lip, her buzzing nerves and sheer excitement bubbling within her. “Fine. Only if you take off your breeches too.”

Kenneth grinned, taking off his breeches. He sat down, completely naked, his eyes never leaving hers. “You won’t sell this painting, will you?”

She chuckled, setting up her canvas. “Although I very much believe it’d make us good money, I’d rather keep this one to myself. Now stay still, please.”

He shifted slightly in his seat, a playful glint in his eyes. “I’ll stop moving, but with that delicious look of concentration on your face while you paint, a certain part of me may start shifting soon.”

Beatrice rolled her eyes, unable to suppress a smile. “You are incorrigible.”

Kenneth’s grin widened. “And you love it.”

As she began to paint, the room filled with a charged silence, both of them acutely aware of each other. Beatrice’s brushstrokes were steady, but her heart raced with every glance at him. The intimacy of the moment was undeniable.

Kenneth stretched, his muscles rippling as he moved. “I need to get up and stretch,” he said, his voice breaking the comfortable silence that had settled over them.

Beatrice looked up from her easel, nodding. “Go ahead. I’ve got the rough sketch done.”

He rose gracefully, his muscles tensing and relaxing with each movement, and then walked towards her, his predatory strides sending a shiver down her spine. He stopped just in front of her, his eyes dark with intent.

Before she could say anything, his lips captured hers in a searing kiss. The heat between them flared instantly, a spark turning into a blazing inferno. His hands found her waist, pulling her close, and she responded with equal fervor, her fingers threading through his hair.

Their kiss deepened, becoming more urgent and demanding. Kenneth’s hands roamed over her back, pulling her even closer. Beatrice could feel the heat radiating off his body, his strong arms holding her tight. Her heart raced, each beat echoing the passion that consumed them both.

He broke the kiss, trailing his lips down her neck, leaving a trail of fire in his wake. Beatrice gasped, tilting her head back to give him better access. Her nails dug into his shoulders, feeling the solid muscles beneath his skin.

“Kenneth,” she whispered, her voice breathless and filled with longing.

He pulled back slightly, his eyes meeting hers. “Beatrice,” he murmured, his voice husky with desire, “you have no idea what you do to me.”

Her response was a moan as his lips found hers again, more demanding this time. The world outside the morning room ceased to exist, leaving only the two of them, wrapped in a cocoon of desire and need.

The easel and canvas stood forgotten, the nude portrait a silent witness to their passion. At that moment, nothing else mattered but the heat between them, the desperate need to be as close to each other as possible.

Kenneth’s hands roamed lower, gripping her hips and pulling her against him. She could feel his hard length pressed against her, igniting a new wave of desire. She trailed her hands over his chest, feeling the rapid beating of his heart beneath her palms. He quickly unlaced her gown, dropping it to the floor.

“Kenneth,” she whispered again, her voice a plea.

With a growl, he lifted her, placing her on the edge of the worktable. He stepped between her legs, his hands never ceasing their exploration of her body. Their kisses grew more frantic, each touch, each caress fueling the fire that burned between them.

Kenneth pulled away, ignoring her protests. He reached over and grabbed a paintbrush from the table. Slowly, he painted an arrow on her belly pointing down. She gasped as the brush tip tickled her skin.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Just showing you where my tongue’s going,” he answered with a triumphant smirk.

He slid down and lowered his head between her thighs. His tongue delved deeply into her, possessing her intimately, and Beatrice moaned deeply, lost in the sensation.

He licked and nipped, his face buried between her thighs as he pulled her close to him, driving her to even higher levels of pleasure. She arched her back, clawing at him, her legs hooked around his neck as she came, her body bucking with the force of it.

When she stopped quivering, Kenneth straightened up, pulled her to the edge of the table, and then thrust into her. His grip on her hips tightened as he plunged deeper into her. The sound of their bodies moving together filled the room, mingling with her soft cries and his guttural groans.

He slammed into her again and again, and she moaned with his every thrust, bucking her hips against him. Her breathy moans of pleasure grew louder and louder until she screamed in ecstasy, pulling him deep into her as he spilled inside her.

They were both breathing heavily as they came down from their climax. Kenneth took her face in both of his hands and gave her a gentle kiss.

As they parted, Beatrice's eyes fluttered open, a contented smile playing on her lips. In the aftermath of their lovemaking, amidst the scattered paints and brushes of her worktable, she felt a sense of wholeness that had eluded her for so long.

Kenneth's acceptance of her identity as Eric Westback had been a turning point, a moment of profound vulnerability and trust.

As they stood there, wrapped in each other's arms, Beatrice felt a laugh bubble up from deep within her chest. Kenneth raised an eyebrow, curious about the sudden mirth dancing in her eyes.

“What’s so funny?” he asked, a smile tugging at the corners of his lips.

Beatrice reached up, her fingers lightly tracing a smudge of blue paint on his cheek. “It seems we both got a bit... carried away,” she said, her voice warm with affection.

Kenneth glanced down, noticing the streaks of color on their bare skin. Reds, blues, and greens mingled with the sheen of sweat, creating an abstract masterpiece on the canvas of their bodies.

He chuckled, his eyes sparkling with amusement. “Well, you did say you wanted to capture my essence on canvas. I’d say we achieved that quite literally.”

Beatrice grinned, trying to hold back a giggle but failing. “Indeed, we did. Although I must say, I prefer this method of artistic expression.”

Kenneth pulled her closer, his arms tightening around her waist. “As do I, Beatrice. As do I.”

Chapter Twenty-One

“Y our Grace, breakfast is served,” a footman called softly from the doorway, breaking the morning’s stillness.

Kenneth stirred awake as the first light of dawn filtered through the heavy drapes of his bedchamber. He stretched, feeling the warmth of the early sun on his face.

With a sigh, he rose and dressed, his thoughts already turning to Beatrice as they so often did these days.

He quietly made his way to the morning room, the house still enveloped in tranquil silence, the only sound the soft padding of his footsteps on the plush carpet.

Opening the door softly, he stepped into the room, the scent of fresh paint and the slight tang of turpentine greeting him.

Beatrice was at her easel, her back to him, completely absorbed in her painting.

The morning light spilled through the windows, casting a soft, golden glow around her, highlighting the caramel hues in her hair and making them shimmer like strands of silk. Her paint-stained dress clung to her form, accentuating her curves in a way that made his breath hitch and his heart skip a beat.

A footman entered quietly, carrying a tray laden with tea and biscuits, the delicate china clinking softly. He placed it on a small table near the door and left as silently as he had come, a ghost in the periphery of Kenneth’s awareness.

Kenneth took the tray, the weight of it solid and grounding in his hands, and walked over to Beatrice. He gently set it down beside her, careful not to disturb her concentration.

“Good morning,” he said softly, his voice barely above a whisper, not wanting to startle her from her creative reverie.

Beatrice looked up, a smile lighting up her face, her eyes sparkling with warmth. “Good morning.”

He gestured to the tray, the steam from the tea curling up invitingly in the air. “I thought you might need this.”

She set her brush down, the action deliberate and careful, and reached for the tea, her fingers brushing against the delicate china. Her eyes sparkled with gratitude, a silent thanks that made his heart swell.

“Thank you. I always lose track of time when I’m painting.”

Kenneth settled into a nearby chair, the leather creaking slightly under his weight. He watched her as she took a sip of her tea, admiring the way her lips curled around the rim of the cup, the way her throat moved as she swallowed.

“What are you working on today?”

“A new piece,” she replied, her voice brimming with excitement, her eyes alive with passion. “It’s a landscape inspired by the view from here. The sea is just so mesmerizing.”

Kenneth nodded, his gaze drawn to the rough sketch on the canvas, the lines bold and confident. “Another Westback?”

Beatrice's smile faltered slightly, a flicker of uncertainty in her eyes, and she nodded. "Yes. It feels right."

Kenneth leaned back in his chair, studying her, taking in the determined set of her jaw, the fire in her eyes. "But why continue with the Westback pseudonym now that we're married? It's not about the money anymore, is it?"

Beatrice shook her head, setting her tea down, the cup clinking softly against the saucer. "No, it's not about the money. It's about having something that's completely mine. Not my father's, not my brother's, not even yours. It's a part of me that I get to keep."

Kenneth felt a surge of admiration for her, for her strength, for her independence. "I understand."

She reached for his hand, her fingers warm and slightly rough from her work. "Thank you, Kenneth."

Kenneth watched her for a moment longer, taking in the way the light danced across her features, the way her eyes shone with a quiet determination.

He stood up and moved behind her, looking over her shoulder at the painting. The scent of her hair, a sunny lavender field, filled his senses. The view of the sea was indeed mesmerizing, the waves captured in delicate strokes of blue and green, alive with movement and light.

"It's beautiful," he said softly, his breath stirring the fine hairs at the nape of her neck.

"I wanted to capture the way the sea makes me feel—free and infinite."

Kenneth's gaze lingered on her, a growing warmth in his chest, a feeling he couldn't quite name.

They lapsed into a comfortable silence, the only sound the soft whoosh of the waves outside and the distant call of seabirds—a symphony of nature.

Kenneth felt a newfound appreciation for the woman beside him, her talent and passion adding layers to the person he was beginning to know, to understand.

Beatrice picked up her brush again, her movements fluid and confident, as if the brush were an extension of her being. Kenneth watched her for a while, content to simply be in her presence, to bask in the calm she seemed to radiate.

In that quiet room, with the sea as their backdrop, he realized that his feelings for her were evolving, becoming something more profound and meaningful.

It was more than just lust, more than just a physical attraction. It was the start of something deeper.

The realization was both exhilarating and terrifying, a leap into the unknown.

The next morning, Kenneth led Beatrice out to the stables, a glint of excitement in his eyes.

“I want to show you something,” he said, his hand resting gently on the small of her back as he guided her.

Beatrice's eyes widened as they entered the stables, the scent of hay and horses enveloping them. Before her stood a beautiful chestnut mare, its coat gleaming in the soft light.

“This is Firefly,” Kenneth announced, his voice filled with pride. “She’s gentle and perfect for beginners. I thought you might like to try.”

Beatrice hesitated, her stomach fluttering. “I’ve never ridden a horse before,” she admitted.

Kenneth smiled reassuringly. “I’ll be right here with you. Trust me.”

With his help, Beatrice mounted the horse, his strong hands guiding her into the saddle. He showed her how to hold the reins and gently nudge Firefly forward.

As they rode out into the open fields, Kenneth staying close by her side, Beatrice felt a rush of freedom and exhilaration.

The wind whipped through her hair as they picked up speed, Kenneth’s laughter mingling with her own. She marveled at the way he moved with the horse, his motions fluid and confident. Under his patient guidance, she began to relax, enjoying the thrill of the ride.

After an invigorating morning, they returned to the stables, both flushed and grinning.

“You’re a natural,” Kenneth praised, helping her dismount. “With a little more practice, you’ll be outpacing me.”

Beatrice beamed at his words, a sense of accomplishment warming her from within. “Thank you for this, Kenneth. It was wonderful.”

Hand in hand, they made their way down to their private beach, the salt-tinged breeze tousling their hair. The sand was warm beneath their bare feet as they strolled along the shoreline, the rhythmic crash of the waves a soothing backdrop.

As they walked, Beatrice's thoughts turned to her father. She spoke softly, her voice tinged with nostalgia, "My father used to take me on walks like this when I was a child. He loved the sea."

Kenneth squeezed her hand gently, silently encouraging her to continue.

"I miss him terribly," Beatrice confessed, her eyes glistening with tears. "He was the one who encouraged my love for art. He always believed in me."

Kenneth listened attentively, his thumb tracing soothing circles on the back of her hand. After a moment, he shared his own story. "My father was quite different. He was consumed by his own desires, neglecting his duties and those who loved him."

Beatrice looked up at him, her heart aching at the pain in his voice.

"After my mother passed, he lost himself completely. He squandered our fortune and ruined our reputation. When he died, I was left to pick up the pieces."

"You have done such great work here," she said.

"Thank you. My only wish is to do better than him."

Beatrice stopped, turning to face him fully. "Kenneth, I want you to know that you are ten times the man your father was. You've taken the broken pieces he left behind and rebuilt something strong and honorable. Don't ever doubt that."

Kenneth's eyes shone with emotion, her words striking a deep chord within him. He pulled her close, his forehead resting against hers.

"Thank you. For seeing me, for understanding me."

Chapter Twenty-Two

“Good morning, Mrs. Potts,” Beatrice greeted with a warm smile.

The morning sun was high in the sky when Beatrice entered the kitchen, a mischievous glint in her eyes. She found the cook bustling about, preparing the day’s meals.

Mrs. Potts turned, her round face lighting up at the sight of the young Duchess. “Good morning, Your Grace! What brings you to the kitchen this fine day?”

Beatrice leaned against the counter, her fingers tapping lightly on the surface. “I was hoping you could help me with a little surprise. I’d like to pack a picnic lunch for His Grace and myself. We’re going for a walk on the beach, and I thought it would be nice to enjoy a meal there.”

Mrs. Potts clapped her hands together, her eyes sparkling with delight. “Oh, what a wonderful idea, Your Grace! I’ll prepare a basket for you right away. Some cold meats, cheeses, fresh bread, and perhaps a few of those lemon tarts His Grace loves so much?”

Beatrice nodded, a grin spreading across her face. “That sounds perfect, Mrs. Potts. Thank you so much.”

As Mrs. Potts set about preparing the picnic basket, Beatrice made her way to Kenneth’s study. She paused outside the door, taking a deep breath before knocking softly.

“Come in,” his voice called from within.

Beatrice stepped inside, her eyes taking a moment to adjust to the slightly dimmer light.

Kenneth sat at his desk, surrounded by ledgers and papers, his brow furrowed in concentration. He looked up as she entered, his expression softening at the sight of her.

“Beatrice,” he said with a hint of surprise in his voice, “is everything all right?”

She smiled, moving closer to the desk. “Everything is wonderful, actually. I was hoping you might join me for a walk on the beach. Mrs. Potts is preparing a picnic lunch for us.”

Kenneth glanced at the papers scattered across his desk, a flicker of hesitation in his eyes. But as he looked back at her, at the hopeful expression on her face, his resolve melted.

“A walk and a picnic sound lovely,” he said, a smile tugging at the corners of his lips. “Just give me a moment to tidy up here.”

Beatrice watched as he gathered the papers, stacking them neatly and setting them aside. There was something endearing about the way he moved, the careful precision of his actions.

As he stood up, offering her his arm, Beatrice felt a warmth spread through her. This was a side of Kenneth she was just beginning to know, a side that was relaxed and open.

They made their way to the kitchen, where Mrs. Potts had a large wicker basket

waiting for them. She handed it to Kenneth with a knowing smile.

“Enjoy your picnic, Your Graces. And don’t forget to bring back the basket when you’re done!”

Beatrice laughed, thanking Mrs. Potts once again before they set off. The walk to the sea was pleasant, the sun warm on their faces and the breeze carrying the scent of salt and wildflowers.

As they neared the shore, Beatrice took a deep breath, the familiar sight of the waves crashing against the sand filling her with a sense of peace. She turned to Kenneth, her eyes bright.

“I’ve been wanting to spend more time here,” she explained, gesturing to the sprawling beach before them. “It helps me capture the essence of the sea in my paintings. There’s something about the way the light glances off the water, the way the colors shift with each passing hour.”

Kenneth nodded, following her gaze. “I can see why it captivates you. It’s a view that never gets old, no matter how many times you see it.”

They found a spot near the dunes, spreading out a soft blanket from the basket. As they unpacked the food, Beatrice couldn’t help but marvel at the spread Mrs. Potts had prepared. There were slices of cold roast beef, wedges of sharp cheese, crusty bread still warm from the oven, and a variety of fresh fruits.

But it was the lemon tarts that caught Kenneth’s eye. A boyish grin spread across his face as he reached for one. “Mrs. Potts certainly knows my weaknesses.” He chuckled, taking a bite of the tart and closing his eyes in appreciation.

Beatrice watched him, a fondness blooming in her chest. It was rare to see him so

unguarded, so openly enjoying the simple pleasures of life.

They ate at a leisurely pace, their conversation flowing easily from art to literature to childhood memories.

“Tell me more about your childhood adventures,” Kenneth said, his eyes sparkling with curiosity as he reached for another slice of bread. “I want to know everything about the young Beatrice.”

Beatrice laughed, her cheeks flushing slightly. “Oh, I was quite the troublemaker, I’m afraid. Always getting into scrapes and giving my poor governess heart palpitations.”

Kenneth grinned, leaning forward. “I can hardly imagine you as a troublemaker,” he teased, his voice lowering to a murmur. “Although, come to think of it, I’m not surprised at all. You’ve been driving me insane since the day we met.”

Beatrice playfully smacked his arm, a mischievous glint in her eyes. “Well, someone has to keep you on your toes, husband. We can’t have you getting too comfortable now, can we?”

He chuckled, the warmth in his eyes growing. “And you do it so well, my dear. I daresay you’re more effective than any of my advisors at keeping me on my toes.” He reached out, boldly tucking a stray lock of hair behind her ear. “Now, do tell me about your youthful exploits. I’m all ears.”

A shiver ran down her spine at his touch.

She leaned in, a mischievous glint in her eyes. “Well, there was the time I decided I was going to climb the tallest tree in our garden. I was convinced I could see all the way to London from up there,” she revealed, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper.

Kenneth raised an eyebrow, a teasing smile playing on his lips. “And did you? Perhaps you caught a glimpse of a dashing young duke in the distance?”

Beatrice grinned ruefully. “I’m afraid not though that would have been quite the sight. I never made it that far. About halfway up, I lost my footing and fell. Broke my arm in two places.”

Kenneth winced in sympathy. “Ouch. That must have been quite a tumble. I hope someone was there to catch you.”

“Are you offering to be my personal protector, Your Grace ?” Beatrice asked coyly, allowing her fingers to intertwine with his.

“Always,” Kenneth replied, his tone suddenly serious despite the playful glint in his eyes.

Beatrice’s breath caught at the intensity of his gaze. She cleared her throat, continuing her story, “It was quite the ordeal. But you know, even as I lay there on the ground, crying and cradling my arm, I remember thinking that I couldn’t wait to try again.”

Kenneth chuckled, shaking his head in admiration. “That’s the Beatrice I know. Always ready for another challenge, no matter the risk.”

She met his gaze, her smile softening. “Well, what about you? Surely you have some tales of youthful misadventures to share. Or were you always the perfect, well-behaved little Duke?”

Kenneth laughed, his eyes glazing over with memories. “Perfect? Hardly. Oh, I have my fair share. Although my adventures were more calculated.”

“Oh?” Beatrice leaned in, her eyes alight with interest. “Do tell. I’m most intrigued to hear about the wild escapades of young Kenneth Spencer.”

“There was one time when my friends and I decided to ‘borrow’ my father’s best hunting horse for a midnight ride.”

Beatrice’s eyes widened. “Kenneth! How daring! Hmm. Perhaps I find this rebellious streak of yours rather attractive.”

Kenneth’s eyes flashed at her words. “Is that so? Perhaps I should misbehave more often, then.” He shook his head. “It seemed like a grand idea at the time,” he continued, his grin turning slightly sheepish. “Until we got lost in the woods and couldn’t find our way back. We spent hours wandering around, trying to retrace our steps.”

“And did you find your way home?” Beatrice asked, already guessing the answer. She leaned closer, her breath warm against his cheek. “Or should I have been there to guide you?”

Kenneth’s breath hitched at her proximity. “Had you been there, my dear, I doubt I would have wanted to find my way home at all.”

Beatrice snorted, slapping his arm playfully.

Clearing his throat, Kenneth shook his head ruefully. “Eventually. But not before my father had noticed the horse was missing and sent out a search party. Let’s just say, he was not pleased when we finally turned up, dirty and exhausted with the horse in tow.”

Beatrice giggled, picturing a young Kenneth, his hair tousled and his clothes muddy, facing his father’s wrath. “Oh, I can only imagine. Though I must say, the image of

you all disheveled is quite appealing.”

“Is that so?” Kenneth murmured, his eyes darkening. “Perhaps I should arrange for us to get lost in the woods sometime, just the two of us.”

Beatrice felt her cheeks flush at the suggestion. “And what would you do then, husband?”

His eyes darkened further at her question. “I would show you all the animalistic ways I could make you mine.”

A shiver went down Beatrice’s spine. One minute he was the uptight Duke, the next he was a man who would push her up against the tree and rip off her dress.

And oh, how she craved the latter.

“We do not need to get lost in the woods for you to do that, Duke,” Beatrice heard herself respond.

Kenneth growled, and in a moment, he had her on her back with her wrists pinned above her head.

“Careful what you wish for, Duchess,” he whispered in her ear, sending tingles down her neck, her chest, her stomach, and finally to her most secret parts.

“What if I do not want to be careful?” she teased, looking deep into his blue eyes.

“Then I shall make sure you get exactly what you’re asking for,” he replied, his voice a smoldering promise.

And with that, he claimed her lips with his own.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Beatrice shuddered as Kenneth's lips slid down her neck, his teeth digging into her soft flesh.

The pain mixed with pleasure as his hands roamed over her body.

"Yes," she breathed, unable to control the sounds that spilled from her lips.

While he continued leaving hungry, open-mouthed kisses all over her neck and chest, his hand drifted up beneath her skirt and squeezed her upper thigh hard.

Beatrice spread her legs, feeling his manhood pressing against her.

Soon, his fingers started exploring her hidden folds and toying with her most sensitive spot. She squeezed her eyes shut, stars bursting behind them.

"My ravenous, little wife," Kenneth purred and lifted his head to look at her face as he plunged a finger inside her. "So wet and ready for me already."

It wasn't long before he slid a second finger into her, his motions slow and inquisitive at first, his eyes dark as he scanned her face for the tiniest reaction.

Quickly, the ache inside her buzzed, and she rolled her hips against his hand, seeking more friction.

"What is it?" he asked, placing his other hand on her jaw.

“Please...” Beatrice breathed.

“Use your words, wife,” he replied, his tone commanding.

“More... I need more,” she begged, her whole body trembling with need.

“Say please one more time,” he said, “then I’ll think about it.”

She gasped, her mind swirling, trying to process his words as his fingers pumped in and out of her faster, her pleasure intensifying.

“Please, Kenneth... please.”

“Mmm. That’s more like it. Good girl,” he murmured and pulled out his fingers.

Beatrice whimpered in protest, but before she could say anything, Kenneth flipped her on her stomach and lifted her skirts, baring her rear to the cool sea breeze.

“You said we didn’t need the woods, didn’t you?” he told her.

Her breath caught in her throat as he teased her entrance with the tip of his shaft.

“I did,” she breathed, not caring if anyone could see them—perhaps that even heightened her desire.

“Hmm. Let me grant you your wish then.”

And he plunged deep inside her, his fingers digging into the flesh of her hips as he started pounding into her.

Beatrice clutched the blanket, unable to control the moans that spilled out of her

throat.

He was claiming her, marking her as his, and she loved it.

Her body trembled with each deep, hard thrust, clenching around him as her pleasure swelled, catapulting her into heights she never thought she could reach.

“Touch yourself, darling. I want to feel you come on my cock,” Kenneth commanded.

Had she been sober—because this kind of pleasure pushed her far from the realms of sobriety, intoxicating her with a nectar she couldn’t possibly describe to a clear mind—she would have blushed. But with the way he was claiming her, all her inhibitions had been chased away by the salty breeze.

Without a second thought, her hand went between her legs, and she started rubbing herself as he slammed into her.

Barely a moment later, her thighs shook as her climax thundered through her body, the sensation hot like the sun and sweet like the most decadent honey at the same time.

“Yes, that’s it,” she heard him moan through the haze.

And swiftly, he found his own release, spilling inside her with a deep growl.

Her insides still throbbed and clenched around him, sensitive and raw from their animalistic lovemaking.

After sighing once, Kenneth pulled out of her and collapsed next to her on the blanket, pulling her skirt down her bottom.

Beatrice turned onto her side, and he pulled her to his chest.

“That was...” she trailed off, still speechless.

Kenneth nodded with a lazy smile, his thumb rubbing small circles on her cheek.

Beatrice rested her head on his chest. He watched her, admiring the way the light caught the golden strands in her hair, the way her skin seemed to glow with contentment.

“Thank you for this,” he said softly, his hand finding hers on his stomach. “For getting me out of that stuffy study and... helping me get some fresh air.”

Beatrice lifted her head, lacing her fingers through his. “You’re welcome.” She giggled. “I think we both needed a... break from our daily routine. And what better place to find respite than here with the sea and the sky and the soft breeze?”

Kenneth’s eyes met hers, a tenderness in their depths that made her heart skip a beat. “Indeed. You bring a lightness to my life that I didn’t know I was missing.”

Beatrice felt a blush creep up her cheeks, a warmth that had nothing to do with the sun overhead. “I feel the same way.”

They lay there for a moment, hands intertwined, the sound of the waves a gentle backdrop to the beating of their hearts.

Then, with a sudden burst of energy, Beatrice jumped to her feet, pulling Kenneth with her.

“Come on,” she said, a mischievous grin on her face. “Let’s go for a walk along the shore. But first...”

She bent down, unlacing her boots and pulling them off, along with her stockings. Kenneth watched as she wiggled her bare toes in the sand.

“Your turn,” she said, nodding towards his boots.

Kenneth hesitated for a moment, the propriety ingrained in him warring with the desire to follow her lead. But as he looked at her, at the joy radiating from her, he found himself bending down, removing his boots and stockings.

Hand in hand, they walked along the shore, the cool water lapping at their bare feet. They talked and laughed, splashing each other playfully as they went.

“You know,” Kenneth said, his eyes twinkling mischievously, “I think I’ve discovered your weakness, my dear.”

Beatrice raised an eyebrow, intrigued. “Oh? And what might that be?”

“Your inability to resist my charms,” he replied with a wink, pulling her closer.

Beatrice laughed, her eyes sparkling. “Is that so? I think you might be overestimating your allure, husband.”

“Am I?” Kenneth challenged, his voice lowering seductively. “Shall we put it to the test?”

Before Beatrice could respond, he scooped her up in his arms, spinning her around. She shrieked with laughter, the sound carrying across the empty beach.

“Put me down this instant, you rogue!” she squealed, her eyes sparkling with mirth.

Kenneth grinned, tightening his hold on her. “Not until you admit you enjoy being in

my arms.”

Beatrice feigned a pout though her arms tightened around his neck. “Never! I’m quite content to walk on my own, thank you very much.”

“Are you certain?” Kenneth murmured, his lips brushing her ear. “Because I find holding you like this to be utterly intoxicating.”

Beatrice’s breath caught, her cheeks flushing. “Well, perhaps it’s not entirely unpleasant.”

He chuckled, setting her gently back on her feet but keeping her close. “High praise indeed, Duchess. I shall treasure your grudging approval.”

She smirked, brushing a lock of hair from her face. “You, Sir, are incorrigible.”

“And you, Madam, are irresistible,” he replied, leaning in to steal a quick kiss. “Shall we continue our adventure? I’m eager to discover what other weaknesses you might be hiding.”

Beatrice laughed, “Lead the way, Duke. But beware, I may just splash you again. I have a few tricks up my sleeve as well.”

Kenneth raised an eyebrow, a playful challenge in his eyes. “Oh, is that so? Then I shall have to be on my guard. Though I must say, the prospect of you trying to best me is rather enticing.”

“My, my,” Beatrice drawled, running a finger down his chest. “Is the mighty Duke of Dunford admitting he might be bested by his wife?”

Kenneth caught her hand, bringing it to his lips. “In your case, my dear, I’d gladly

admit defeat... if you can manage it.”

As he kissed her palm, sending shivers up her arm, Beatrice looked up at him, her eyes sparkling with happiness. “I haven’t had this much fun in... I can’t remember how long.”

Kenneth brushed a windswept strand of hair from her face, his touch lingering on her cheek. “Neither have I. You bring out a side of me that I thought was long gone, a side that knows how to let go and simply enjoy the moment.”

Beatrice leaned into his touch, her heart full to bursting. “I’m glad. Because I quite like this side of you. The side that isn’t afraid to get his feet wet, literally and figuratively.”

He chuckled, pulling her closer. “Well, I have you to thank for that, my temptress.”

She smiled up at him, her arms winding around his neck. “You’re very, very welcome. Though, I must say, this temptress role is quite new to me. Perhaps I need more practice?”

Kenneth’s eyes darkened with desire. “Oh, I think that can be arranged, my dear. I’d be more than happy to assist you in honing your skills.”

“How very generous of you,” Beatrice breathed, her fingers toying with the hairs at the nape of his neck.

“What can I say?” Kenneth replied, his voice husky. “I’m a generous man.”

He bent his head, his lips brushing against hers in a soft, sweet kiss. The world around them faded away, the only sensation the feel of his lips on hers, the heat of his body pressed against her own.

As the kiss deepened, Kenneth's hands began to roam, skimming along the curve of her waist, the gentle touch sending shivers down her spine. She buried her fingers in his hair, holding him close as their tongues danced and dueled.

Lost in the moment, Beatrice barely registered the fact that Kenneth was slowly lowering them to the sand, his body covering hers as they sank into the soft dunes. His lips trailed from her mouth to her jaw then down the column of her neck, leaving a trail of fire in their wake.

Beatrice gasped, her fingers clutching at his shoulders as he found a particularly sensitive spot just below her ear.

"Kenneth," she breathed.

Kenneth hummed against her skin, the vibration sending a jolt of pleasure through her body. His hands roamed down her sides, his touch at once gentle and electrifying.

But just as Beatrice was about to lose herself completely in the sensations, a strange sound broke through the haze of their passion. It was a sort of barking, followed by a splash then another bark.

Kenneth lifted his head, his eyes heavy with desire but also curious. "Do you hear that?"

Beatrice blinked, trying to clear her mind enough to focus on the noise. "What is that?"

Together, they turned their heads towards the source of the commotion. There, on a cluster of rocks not far from shore, was a group of seals. The sleek, dark creatures were lounging in the sun, their fins occasionally slapping the water as they barked at one another.

Beatrice couldn't help but laugh, the absurdity of the situation hitting her all at once.

"It seems we have an audience," she snorted, nudging Kenneth with her elbow.

Kenneth looked down at her, his own laughter rumbling deep in his chest. "Indeed, we do. And as much as I enjoyed putting on a show earlier..." He leaned closer, his breath hot against her ear. "I much prefer a private performance."

Beatrice shivered, her body instantly reacting to the suggestive tone of his voice. "Is that so?" she murmured, her own voice husky with want.

Kenneth pulled back just enough to meet her gaze, his blue eyes dark with promise. "Very much so. In fact, I think it's time we took this little interlude somewhere more... intimate."

Beatrice bit her lip, her heart racing at the implication of his words. "What did you have in mind?"

He stood up, pulling her up with him. His hands remained on her waist, his thumbs rubbing tantalizing circles on her hipbones through the fabric of her dress. "I was thinking somewhere with a bed. Or a desk. Or a wall."

Beatrice felt a rush of heat flood her body at his words and at the undisguised hunger in his gaze.

"Then what are we waiting for? Let's go find that somewhere."

Kenneth grinned, a wicked, wonderful thing that made her knees go weak. "As my wife commands."

They gathered their picnic things in record time, Kenneth stopping every few

moments to steal a kiss or whisper a heated promise in her ear. By the time they started back towards the castle, Beatrice was practically thrumming with anticipation, her body alive with the need to be close to him to finish what they had started on the sand.

As they walked, Kenneth kept her hand clasped tightly in his, his thumb stroking her knuckles in a maddening, teasing rhythm. Each brush of his skin against hers was a reminder, a preview of the pleasure to come.

They reached the castle in a flurry, barely acknowledging the staff as they made their way up to their chambers.

Once inside, Kenneth wasted no time in pulling Beatrice to him, his mouth claiming hers in a kiss that was all heat and hunger, passion and promise.

“Now then,” he murmured against her lips, his hands already working at the laces of her gown. “Where were we before our seal friends so rudely interrupted us?”

Beatrice grinned, her fingers making quick work of the buttons on his shirt. “I believe you were about to show me the benefits of a private performance.”

Kenneth’s answering smile was pure sin, his eyes glinting with mischievous intent. “Ah, yes. Let the show begin.”

As he gently lowered her down onto the soft mattress, his warm body pressing against hers, Beatrice savored the moment. The sound of their hushed breaths, mingling in the air, created a gentle symphony that resonated within her. The subtle scent of him enveloped her senses, heightening the intimacy of the moment.

In that instant, Beatrice couldn’t help but appreciate the untimely arrival of the seals, for it had granted her this exquisite pleasure, surpassing any distractions or intrusions

that may have occurred.

Feeling empowered, she firmly pushed him away, their bodies separating with a slight rustle of fabric.

“What are you— Oh ...” He began to voice his objection but halted as she swiftly maneuvered herself on top of him, the bed creaking under their weight.

“You were saying?” she teased, and with deliberate slowness, she began trailing tender kisses along his jawline, her lips leaving a gentle, tingling sensation in their wake.

“Mmm, never mind,” he purred as she kissed down his neck, her warm breath fanning his skin.

Unyielding in her desire, she continued, her lips and tongue exploring every inch, the sensation sending shivers through him. While her lips were busy, her hand explored further, reaching down and firmly grasping him, eliciting a gasp of surprise mixed with pleasure.

She continued trailing open-mouthed kisses down his chest, following the small trail of hair until it reached the top of his trousers. Her small fingers fumbled with the buttons, quickly undoing them. When he was finally free of his trousers, she took his hardness in her warm, sweet mouth.

Kenneth groaned and buried his fingers in her hair, guiding her. She gripped him with her lips, sliding up and down. When she stopped and glanced up at him through lowered lashes, he let out a groan of frustration.

“Is this all right?” she asked.

“It is more than all right,” he rasped.

She climbed on top of him, her thighs spread wide as she straddled him. He reached up and cupped her breasts, causing her nipples to stiffen. Swiftly, she leaned down, and her curls tumbled down to caress his cheeks as she began to ride him.

He thrust his hips up to meet her, each movement harder and quicker. When her inner muscles clenched and she let out a cry, he stopped, letting her ride out her climax.

But before she could resume riding him, Kenneth flipped her over on her back.

With his knee, he parted her legs and thrust into her. Her moan answered his groan as his hand found her nipple.

This, the feel of his hardness inside her, the sound of her name on his lips, the building pleasure that threatened to consume her whole... this was worth everything.

She gasped as he hit a deep spot inside her, her body swimming with sensation. He leaned over her, his lips seeking hers, and she met his tongue with her own, their kiss deep and hungry.

He began to move steadily inside her, pulling out almost completely before pushing back in, causing her to moan and arch her back. The fire between them was burning hotter and higher, an explosion that would soon consume them both.

The friction between their bodies as they moved together was intoxicating, and she wrapped her legs around his waist, allowing him deeper access. She clung to him, the ecstasy building with every move.

His tongue flicked against her nipple, causing her to whimper and writhe beneath him.

“Now, Kenneth,” she cried out, her voice sweet and pleading. Her body yearned for release, feeling every inch of him filling her again and again.

He obeyed as her cries grew louder and more insistent.

Finally, her body shook once more with release. He followed closely behind, lost in the waves of pleasure crashing over them.

Chapter Twenty-Four

“Y ou know, my dear,” Kenneth murmured, his voice low and husky, “I find myself quite distracted this morning.”

The morning sun streamed through the windows of the breakfast room at Dunford Castle, casting a warm glow on the intimate scene within. Kenneth and Beatrice sat close together, their hands intertwined beneath the table.

Beatrice raised an eyebrow, a coy smile playing on her lips. “Oh? And what, pray tell, is causing such distraction, Duke?”

Kenneth’s eyes darkened as they roamed appreciatively over her form. “I’m afraid it’s you, my dear. That dress is positively sinful.”

“This old thing?” Beatrice teased, smoothing down the fabric of her gown. “I had no idea it would have such an effect on you.”

“Everything you wear has an effect on me,” Kenneth growled, leaning in closer. “Though I must admit, I prefer you in nothing at all.”

Beatrice’s cheeks flushed, but her eyes sparkled with mischief. “Oh my, what would the servants say if they heard you speaking so scandalously?”

“Let them talk,” Kenneth replied, his hand sliding up her thigh beneath the table. “I’m more interested in what you have to say or perhaps what sounds I can coax from those lovely lips of yours.”

Beatrice's breath hitched as his fingers traced tantalizing patterns on her skin. "Kenneth," she whispered, her voice trembling with desire, "we can't... not here..."

"Can't we?" he challenged, his lips brushing against her ear. "I'm the master of this castle after all. I say we can do whatever we please."

Just as Beatrice was about to give in to temptation, a discreet cough from the doorway made them spring apart. Mr. Jennings stood there, his expression as impassive as ever though a hint of amusement glinted in his eyes.

"A message from the Dowager Duchess of Newden and Lady Bernmere, Your Grace," he announced, his voice as impassive as ever.

Kenneth took the letter, his expression growing more bewildered as he read it. "It seems, my dear," he said to Beatrice, "that we are to have visitors for tea today. The Dowager Duchess and Aunt Marjorie are on their way to visit the Dowager Duchess of Whittleby and wish to stop by."

Beatrice's eyes widened. "Today? But we haven't prepared anything!"

Kenneth chuckled, reaching across the table to squeeze her hand. "My dear, I don't think a royal banquet would be enough preparation for those two. We'll just have to weather the storm as best we can."

As the hour of the visit approached, Dunford Castle was a flurry of activity. Maids dusted and polished, footmen arranged flowers, and Mrs. Potts muttered darkly about "last-minute visits from relatives" as she prepared a veritable feast of tea cakes and sandwiches.

At precisely three o'clock, the Dowager Duchess of Newden and Lady Bernmere swept into the drawing room, a whirlwind of lace, feathers, and strong opinions.

“Kenneth, my boy!” Lady Bernmere exclaimed, engulfing her nephew in a lavender-scented embrace. “You’re looking peaky. Beatrice, are you feeding him properly?”

Before Beatrice could respond, the Dowager Duchess of Newden had taken her arm. “Never mind that, Marjorie. What we really want to know is when we can expect a little pitter-patter of feet around this drafty, old place.”

Beatrice felt her cheeks flame. “We... that is to say... we’re not?—”

“Now, now,” Lady Bernmere interrupted, lowering herself onto the sofa. “No need to be coy, my dear. We were young once too, you know. Why, I remember when my dear late husband and I first got married. We could barely keep our hands off each other!”

Kenneth choked on his tea while Beatrice wished fervently for the ground to open up and swallow her whole.

“Perhaps,” Kenneth managed, once he’d recovered, “we could discuss something else? The weather, perhaps?”

But the two older ladies were not to be deterred. For the next hour, they regaled the mortified couple with tales of their marriages, interspersed with increasingly outlandish advice for conceiving an heir.

“Oysters, my dear,” the Dowager Duchess insisted, fixing Beatrice with a stern gaze. “At least a dozen a day. They worked wonders for my grandson.”

“Nonsense,” Lady Bernmere scoffed. “What they need is to sleep with their heads pointing north. It’s all about the magnetic fields, you know.”

Kenneth and Beatrice exchanged helpless glances as the suggestions grew more and

more bizarre. Standing on one's head after relations, drinking a concoction of herbs that sounded more like a witch's brew, and even howling at the full moon were all proposed as surefire methods to produce an heir.

As the visit mercifully drew to a close, the Dowager Duchess fixed Kenneth with a penetrating stare. "You are doing your duty, aren't you, young man? No shirking your marital obligations?"

Kenneth spluttered, his face turning an alarming shade of red. "I assure you, Duchess, I am... that is to say... we are?—"

"What my husband means to say," Beatrice interjected smoothly, taking pity on him, "is that we are very much looking forward to starting a family when the time is right."

This seemed to satisfy the two ladies, who finally took their leave amidst a flurry of kisses, last-minute advice, and promises to visit again soon.

Kenneth and Beatrice stood in the doorway, watching the carriage disappear down the drive. For a moment, there was silence. Then, almost simultaneously, they burst into laughter.

"Did you see Aunt Marjorie's face when Mrs. Potts brought out the oysters?" Kenneth gasped, tears streaming down his face.

Beatrice leaned against him, shaking with mirth. "I thought the Dowager Duchess was going to demonstrate that ridiculous headstand right there in the drawing room!"

They made their way back inside, still chuckling. As they reached the foot of the stairs, Kenneth pulled Beatrice close, his eyes twinkling with mischief.

“You know,” he murmured, his lips brushing her ear, “some of their advice didn’t sound half bad. Perhaps we should... experiment?”

Beatrice grinned up at him, her heart light with love and laughter. “Well, husband, I suppose it is our duty to try everything in our power to produce an heir.”

Kenneth’s eyes darkened with desire as he pulled her closer. “Indeed, it is, my dear. Though I must say, I’m particularly intrigued by Aunt Marjorie’s suggestion about magnetic fields. Shall we rearrange our bed to face north?”

Beatrice laughed, her fingers toying with the lapels of his coat. “Oh? And here I thought you might be more interested in the Dowager Duchess’s recommendation to eat oysters.”

“Hmm,” Kenneth mused, his hands sliding down to her waist. “I can think of something far more appetizing than oysters right now.”

Beatrice raised an eyebrow, a coy smile playing on her lips. “Is that so, husband? And what might that be?”

Kenneth leaned in, his breath hot against her neck. “Why don’t you come upstairs and find out?”

“Goodness,” Beatrice whispered, her pulse quickening. “How very forward of you, Sir. What would the Dowager Duchess say?”

“I believe,” Kenneth replied, his voice husky with desire, “she would say we’re doing our duty admirably.”

Beatrice laughed, the sound rich with promise. “Well then, husband, lead the way. We mustn’t shirk our responsibilities.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

“A nother commission,” Beatrice murmured to herself, a smile tugging at her lips as she carefully opened the letter from her dealer.

Her heart raced with anticipation as she read its contents. The thrill of having her work recognized and sought after never ceased to amaze her.

But as she read further, her smile faltered. The client had given Westback a tight deadline of just two weeks. Beatrice glanced at her inventory, mentally calculating what she would need. It quickly became apparent that her current supplies would not suffice.

She took a deep breath, steeling herself. She knew what she had to do. Gathering the letter, she made her way to Kenneth’s study, her footsteps echoing in the quiet hallway.

Knocking softly on the heavy wooden door, she heard his deep voice calling, “Enter.”

Beatrice opened the door and stepped inside, finding Kenneth immersed in work at his desk.

“Beatrice,” he greeted, a small smile playing on his lips, “what brings you here?”

She walked over to him, the letter clutched in her hand. “I received a new commission from a lady in London,” she began, her voice steady despite the butterflies in her stomach, “but she’s given Westback a deadline of only two weeks.”

Kenneth leaned back in his chair, his fingers steeped under his chin. “Two weeks? Sounds like a rush.”

Beatrice nodded, biting her lower lip. “Yes, and I’m afraid my current supplies won’t be enough.” She paused, gathering her courage. “I was hoping I could go to London to shop for new supplies.”

Kenneth furrowed his brow slightly, a flicker of concern in his eyes. “London? Alone?”

She squared her shoulders, holding his gaze. “I can handle it, Kenneth. I’ve done it before.”

He rose from his chair and rounded the desk to stand before her. His hand reached out, gently cupping her cheek. “I know you can, Beatrice, but I have some business to attend to in London anyway. I’ll accompany you.”

Beatrice leaned into his touch, a warmth spreading through her. “Are you sure? I don’t want to disrupt your plans.”

Kenneth’s thumb brushed across her cheekbone, his eyes darkening with desire. “You could never disrupt anything, Beatrice. We’ll go together.”

She smiled, turning her head to press a soft kiss to his palm. “All right then.”

Kenneth tilted her chin up, his lips capturing hers in a heated kiss. As they parted, he rested his forehead against hers. “You’re mine, Beatrice. Don’t forget that,” he whispered, his breath warm against her lips.

She grinned, her pulse quickening. “I wouldn’t dream of it. Though perhaps I need a bit more convincing?”

Kenneth's eyes darkened with desire. "Is that so? Well, I'd be more than happy to oblige." His hands slid down to her waist, pulling her closer. "How about we start the 'convincing' right here on this desk?"

Beatrice gasped. "Kenneth! What would Jennings say if he walked in?"

"He'd say 'Pardon me, Your Graces' and quietly back out of the room." Kenneth chuckled, his lips trailing along her jawline. "Besides, I'm the Duke. I can do as I please in my own study."

Beatrice's fingers tangled in his hair, her body arching into his. "Mmm, is that so? And what exactly does the Duke want to do right now?"

Kenneth's voice lowered to a growl. "Oh, I have a few ideas. All of them involving you, my dear, in various states of undress."

"My, my," Beatrice breathed, her eyes sparkling with mischief. "And here I thought we were discussing a trip to London. How easily distracted you are, husband."

He smirked, his hands roaming teasingly over her curves. "Can you blame me? With a wife as enticing as you are, it's a wonder I get any work done at all."

Beatrice laughed, the sound rich with promise. "Well then, perhaps we should make this trip to London a quick one. After all, we wouldn't want to neglect your duties here at Dunford."

"Indeed not," Kenneth agreed, stealing another kiss. "Though I must warn you, my dear. Even in London, you won't be safe from my attentions. I plan to thoroughly 'remind' you of your place as my Duchess at every opportunity."

She raised an eyebrow, a challenge in her eyes. "Is that a threat or a promise?"

“Both,” he growled, pulling her flush against him. “Definitely both.”

Beatrice’s breath hitched at the contact. “Well then, Duke, I look forward to our trip.”

Kenneth grinned, his eyes alight with desire and amusement. “As do I, my dear. As do I.”

The next day, the carriage rolled to a stop in front of their London townhouse, the bustling city streets a stark contrast to the serene grounds of Dunford Castle. Beatrice stepped out, her mind already racing with the tasks ahead. The two-week deadline loomed over her, a constant reminder of the pressure she was under.

Kenneth, sensing her unease, placed a gentle hand on the small of her back as they entered the house. “You’ll have everything you need here, Beatrice. Don’t hesitate to ask for anything.”

Beatrice managed a tight smile, her fingers clutching her sketchbook. “Thank you, Kenneth. I just hope I can do this commission justice.”

He leaned in, pressing a soft kiss to her temple. “You will. I have no doubt.”

Despite his reassurance, Beatrice’s anxiety continued to grow. She knew that maintaining the same quality in her work was crucial, and this commission could either solidify her reputation or shatter it completely.

The next morning, she sought out Anna, her trusted lady’s maid. “Anna, I need your help. We must visit the art shops today to gather supplies.”

Anna, ever loyal, nodded without hesitation. “Of course, Your Grace. I’ll ready myself immediately.”

As they navigated the crowded London streets, Beatrice's mind buzzed with calculations and color schemes. She carefully selected the finest brushes, the most vibrant pigments, and the sturdiest canvases. Each decision carried the weight of her secret identity, the fear of discovery always lurking in the shadows.

Upon their return, Beatrice wasted no time in setting up her workspace. She chose the study with the best natural light, the large windows offering a clear view of the garden below. Anna helped her arrange her supplies, the maid's quiet efficiency a welcome balm to Beatrice's frayed nerves.

As the hours passed, Beatrice lost herself in the painting, her brush dancing across the canvas in a frenzy of inspiration and determination. The colors blended and swirled, the image slowly taking shape under her skilled hand.

The next day, she continued to work tirelessly, her focus unbroken except for the occasional glance out the window at the bustling city below. By the time the afternoon sun began to dip below the horizon, she felt a sense of satisfaction at the progress she had made.

Just as she was cleaning her brushes, the door to her studio opened, and Anna appeared. "Your Grace, Lord Eastfold has arrived for a business meeting with His Grace."

Beatrice's heart skipped a beat. She had hoped for a quiet day to focus on her work, but she knew the importance of maintaining cordial relations with Kenneth's business associates.

She straightened up and nodded. "Thank you, Anna. I'll be there shortly."

Descending the grand staircase, Beatrice smoothed down the fresh dress she'd changed into, so Eastfold wouldn't see any paint stains on her, and took a deep

breath.

As she entered the parlor, she found Kenneth and Eastfold deep in conversation. Eastfold's eyes lit up when he saw her.

"Ah, Your Grace," he greeted with a charming smile, rising from his seat. "It's always a pleasure to see you."

Beatrice offered a polite smile, keeping her tone measured. "Lord Eastfold, it's good to see you as well. I hope your journey was pleasant."

Eastfold nodded. "It was, indeed..." He paused before continuing, "I have a question for you, Your Grace. Have you ever considered that the finest art often comes from the most unexpected places?"

Beatrice smiled politely. "Indeed, My Lord. Art can surprise us in many ways."

Eastfold chuckled. "Much like this city, wouldn't you agree? Full of surprises and hidden gems. Speaking of which, I recently stumbled upon the most delightful, little gallery. They had a piece that reminded me of one of Westback's earlier works. Have you seen it?"

Beatrice's eyes lit up with genuine interest. "Oh? I would love to hear more about it."

Eastfold launched into an anecdote about the eccentric gallery owner, his animated storytelling coaxing a soft laugh from her.

"And then," he continued, "the owner insisted that the painting was haunted! Can you imagine? A haunted painting in a London gallery!"

Beatrice laughed. "That's quite the tale, My Lord. I can only imagine the look on

your face when you heard that.”

Kenneth cleared his throat, his expression unreadable. “Lord Eastfold, shall we continue our discussion in my study?”

Eastfold nodded, rising from his chair. “Of course, Your Grace. Lead the way.”

Beatrice watched them leave, a small sigh escaping her lips. She picked up a book from the nearby table and settled into a chair by the window. The rhythmic turning of pages soon became a soothing background to the muffled conversation drifting from the study.

After a while, the door to the study opened, and the men emerged. Kenneth’s expression was tight while Eastfold wore his usual charming smile.

As Eastfold approached Beatrice, he took her hand and raised it to his lips, a flirtatious gleam in his eyes. “Your Grace, it has been an absolute pleasure. Until we meet again.”

Beatrice smiled politely, a slight blush bloom in her cheeks. “Thank you, My Lord. Safe travels.”

Eastfold held her gaze for a moment longer than necessary before releasing her hand and turning to Kenneth. “Kenneth, thank you for your time. I look forward to our next meeting.”

Kenneth moved closer to Beatrice and gave Lord Eastfold a curt nod. “Indeed. Safe journey, Lord Eastfold.”

As the door closed behind Eastfold, the tension in the room thickened as Kenneth turned to Beatrice, his eyes dark and questioning. “Why do you laugh at his every

word?" he asked, his voice tight with barely suppressed anger.

Beatrice bristled. "I was simply being courteous. He's your business associate after all."

Kenneth's gaze narrowed. "Courteous? It looked like more than that."

Beatrice met his gaze evenly, her own frustration mounting. "Lord Eastfold may be charming, but his views on art are entirely mercenary. He sees it as nothing more than a means to make money. It's disappointing."

Kenneth's eyes searched hers, his expression softening slightly. "I don't like the way he looks at you."

Beatrice sighed, feeling the weight of his distrust. "And I don't like being accused of something I haven't done. You need to trust me, Kenneth."

Kenneth's face hardened again, his jealousy flaring. "You think I haven't noticed how you laugh at his jokes? How you smile at him? It's as if you enjoy his company more than mine."

Beatrice's eyes widened in shock and hurt. "That's ridiculous! I am simply being polite. He's your business associate, and I have no interest in him beyond that."

"Polite?" Kenneth scoffed. "It seems like more than politeness to me. You looked so... comfortable with him."

Beatrice felt a surge of frustration. "Comfortable? Kenneth, I was trying to be a good hostess, nothing more. Why can't you see that?"

"Because I see the way he looks at you," Kenneth replied, his voice rising. "And I see

the way you respond to him.”

Beatrice’s temper flared. “Respond to him? Do you think I would betray you? After everything, you still don’t trust me?”

Kenneth stepped closer to her, his eyes blazing with jealousy. “I don’t like seeing you with him. It eats at me.”

“I can’t believe this. You’re letting your jealousy cloud your judgment. I’ve done nothing to deserve your distrust,” Beatrice scoffed, her voice trembling with anger and sadness.

“You don’t understand,” Kenneth said, his voice low but still tense. “I can’t stand the thought of losing you.”

Beatrice’s heart ached at his words, but her anger and hurt were too strong. “If you can’t trust me, then what kind of marriage do we have? I can’t live like this, constantly defending myself against baseless accusations.”

Kenneth reached out as if to touch her, but she stepped back. “Beatrice, I?”

“I need to be alone,” she cut him off, her voice cold and resolute. “I’m going to my chambers.”

Without another word, she stepped out of the room, leaving him standing alone.

Kenneth stood there, staring at the closed door. His anger simmered just beneath the surface, threatening to boil over. With a frustrated growl, he yanked off his boots, flinging them across the room with force. One hit the wall with a dull thud, and the other skidded across the floor.

He began to pace, his mind replaying the scene with Eastfold and Beatrice. The way she had laughed at Eastfold's jokes, the way her eyes sparkled as she listened to him—it all gnawed at him.

Why did she have to be so friendly with him? He clenched his fists, his jaw tightening. He was flirting with her for God's sake. How could she not see that?

His footsteps echoed in the room as he continued to pace. He thought about Beatrice's words, her hurt and frustration clear in her voice.

Maybe I was being unreasonable...

No, I wasn't. She needs to understand what it looked like.

He stopped by the window, staring out into the dark night.

I can't stand seeing her with him. The way he looks at her... It's maddening.

Kenneth sighed, running a hand through his hair.

I let my jealousy get the best of me. She's never given me any reason to doubt her, and yet I let my insecurities cloud my judgment.

He turned around abruptly, determined to make things right.

With a resolve born of a deep desire to mend the rift between them, Kenneth strode towards the door, his hand reaching for the handle.

But as his fingers touched the cool metal, he hesitated. The image of Eastfold and Beatrice's shared laughter, the way her eyes had sparkled as she listened to his tales, flashed through his mind. The uneasy feeling in his gut, the one he had tried to

dismiss as mere jealousy, resurfaced with a vengeance.

He stepped back, his resolve wavering. He had seen the way Eastfold's eyes had lingered on her, the way his smile had held a hint of something more than mere friendliness. And Beatrice... she had seemed so engaged, so captivated by his every word.

No. I won't make a fool of myself. If there's something between them, I won't beg for her attention.

His pride, wounded and raw, wouldn't allow him to take that step. He couldn't bear the thought of going to her, only to be rejected—or worse, pitied. The very idea made his stomach churn.

Kenneth turned away from the door, his jaw clenched with a stubborn determination. He would not go to her, would not expose himself to the possibility of further hurt.

If Beatrice wanted to make amends, she would have to come to him.

Chapter Twenty-Six

“T his is ridiculous,” Beatrice muttered, staring at the canvas before her.

The colors blurred together, refusing to take shape as her mind raced with thoughts of her argument with Kenneth.

Two days had passed since their heated exchange, and the tension between them had only grown thicker, a palpable presence that seemed to suffocate the very air around her.

She set her brush down with a frustrated sigh, realizing that her attempts to lose herself in her work were futile. The painting, which had once been a source of solace and escape, now felt like a burden, a reminder of the growing distance between her and her husband.

Her mind wandered to the past two days of awkward silences and carefully orchestrated avoidance. Kenneth had taken to having his meals in his chambers, and she had retreated to her studio, throwing herself into her art with little success.

The nights were the worst—her bed felt impossibly large and cold without his warm, solid presence beside her. She missed the comfort of his arms, the sound of his steady breathing, and even the occasional snores that she used to tease him about.

Their routine had been disrupted, leaving a void that neither seemed to know how to fill. Even the servants had noticed, walking on eggshells around them. The tension was palpable, hanging heavy in the air like an oppressive fog.

I can't go on like this.

Her chest tightened with anger and longing.

We need to talk, to find a way past this.

With a determined set to her shoulders, Beatrice rose from her stool and made her way towards Kenneth's study. She knew it wouldn't be easy, that their pride and stubbornness could make any attempt at reconciliation a battle in itself, but she was willing to take that first step.

As she approached the heavy oak door, she was surprised to find it slightly ajar. The sound of voices from within made her pause, her hand hovering over the handle.

A feminine voice, all too familiar, drifted to her ears, the words making her blood run cold.

"Kenneth, darling, you must be so terribly bored with that little wife of yours," Lady Featherwell purred, her tone dripping with false sympathy. "A man like you needs excitement, passion. Something I'm sure she can't provide."

Beatrice felt her heart clench, a wave of jealousy and hurt washing over her.

How dare she speak of me that way! And in my own home!

"Come now, Kenneth," Lady Featherwell continued, her voice lowering seductively. "Surely you remember our delightful flirtations? The spark between us? I could fan those embers into a roaring flame in an instant."

There was a pause, and Beatrice held her breath, straining to hear Kenneth's response. When it came, his voice was low and noncommittal.

“Lady Featherwell, I don’t think?—”

“Don’t think, darling,” Lady Featherwell interrupted. “ Feel . Let me show you what you’re missing out on.”

Why isn’t he stopping her? Why isn’t he defending our marriage?

Beatrice’s mind raced, her heart pounding in her chest. The very idea of Lady Featherwell trying to tempt Kenneth, to lure him away from her, made her feel nauseous.

Before Lady Featherwell could spew more poisonous words, Beatrice knocked firmly on the door and entered, her head held high despite her inner turmoil.

“Lady Featherwell,” she greeted coolly, her eyes narrowing at the sight of the other woman draped across the chair opposite Kenneth’s desk. “What a surprise to find you here. Will you be staying for tea?”

Kenneth cleared his throat, his expression unreadable. “No, Lady Featherwell was just leaving. She came to seek some advice on the renovation of her summer estate which is some miles away.”

Beatrice felt her jaw clench at the insinuation. “How fortunate for you. I’m sure Kenneth’s expertise has been invaluable.”

“Oh, my dear.” Lady Featherwell laughed, the sound grating on Beatrice’s nerves. “I have always sought the best... advice.”

“I’m sure you have,” Beatrice replied, her smile razor-sharp. “Though one wonders why you’d travel so far for mere advice on renovations. Surely there are competent tradesmen closer to home?”

Lady Featherwell's eyes narrowed slightly. "Quality is worth traveling for, wouldn't you agree? But I mustn't keep you. I'm sure you have... things to attend to."

"Indeed," Beatrice said, her voice dripping with honeyed venom. "Do have a safe journey home, Lady Featherwell. The roads can be so treacherous for those who don't watch their steps."

With a curt nod to Beatrice, Lady Featherwell swept out of the study, the door closing behind her with a decisive click.

Beatrice turned to Kenneth. "I heard what she said to you before I came in. How she tried to tempt you away from me."

Kenneth's jaw clenched, his posture stiff and defensive. "You were eavesdropping? Spying on our conversation?"

Beatrice drew herself up, her voice steady. "I wasn't eavesdropping. I happened to hear it as I approached. And I'm not sorry I did."

"My conversation with Lady Featherwell was nothing of importance," Kenneth said.

"Nothing?" Beatrice scoffed, her hands balling into fists at her sides. "Then why didn't you put a stop to her advances immediately?"

Kenneth's jaw tightened. "Lady Featherwell and I have known each other for years. I was merely being polite. Besides, you shouldn't worry about Lady Featherwell and me when you've done nothing to discourage Lord Eastfold's attentions."

Beatrice recoiled as if she'd been slapped. "How dare you! Lord Eastfold is a friend because he is your business associate, nothing more. I've never given you cause to doubt my loyalty."

“Haven’t you?” Kenneth raised an eyebrow, his voice dripping with sarcasm. “His lingering glances, the private conversations... It’s all rather suspicious, wouldn’t you say?”

“You’re being ridiculous,” Beatrice spat, her cheeks flushing with anger. She took a step towards him, her body trembling with barely contained rage. “I’ve done nothing wrong. You’re the one entertaining the advances of other women!”

Kenneth ran a hand through his hair, frustration evident in every line of his body. “Beatrice, this isn’t getting us anywhere. I think we need to discuss our arrangement.”

Her heart sank, a chill creeping into her bones. The sudden shift in his tone made her stomach churn. “What do you mean?”

Kenneth looked down at the floor, unable to meet her eyes. “Perhaps we should halt our arrangement for a while. Take some time away from each other,” he said, his voice devoid of emotion.

The words hit Beatrice like a physical blow, knocking the air out of her lungs. She struggled to breathe, to think clearly through the haze of pain that enveloped her. How could he suggest such a thing after everything they’d been through?

She felt as if the room was spinning. She gripped the back of a nearby chair for support, her knuckles turning white.

“I see,” she choked out, her voice barely above a whisper. “If that’s what you want, then fine.”

Without waiting for a response, she turned on her heel and strode out of the study, quickening her steps as she fought back tears.

She wouldn't give him the satisfaction of seeing her break down. Not now. Not ever.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Beatrice sat in the parlor of their London townhouse, her fingers absently tracing the delicate patterns on the teacup in her hands.

The house was quiet, save for the soft ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece and the distant sounds of the servants going about their daily tasks.

Kenneth had been absent for well over a week, ever since their heated argument over Lady Featherwell and his decision that they should take some time away from each other.

How did we come to this? Barely speaking, barely able to stand the sight of each other. Is this what our marriage has become?

Her heart ached. She was still furious with Kenneth for his jealousy, for his lack of trust in her. But beneath the anger, there was a deep, yawning emptiness, a void that only his presence could fill.

A sudden knock at the door pulled her from her thoughts. Setting down her teacup, she rose to her feet, smoothing down the skirts of her pale blue morning gown.

Who could it be at this hour?

As she entered the foyer, she saw the butler opening the door to reveal the familiar figure of Lord Eastfold.

Beatrice's heart skipped a beat.

What is he doing here?

"Lord Eastfold," she greeted, her voice calm and polite despite her quickening pulse. "What an unexpected visit."

Eastfold stepped inside, his eyes meeting hers with an intensity that made her skin prickle.

"Your Grace," he returned, bowing slightly. "I apologize for the intrusion, but I must speak with you on a matter of utmost importance."

Beatrice's brow furrowed, confusion mingling with the growing disquiet in her chest.

"I'm afraid His Grace is not at home at the moment," she said, motioning for Mr. Jennings to take Eastfold's hat and coat. "If you'd like to leave a message, I can ensure he receives it upon his return."

Eastfold waved a dismissive hand. "No, that won't be necessary. It's not the Duke I wish to speak with, Your Grace. It's you."

Me?

A thousand possibilities flashed through her mind, each more unsettling than the last.

She forced a smile, trying to maintain her composure. "Of course, My Lord. Please, come into the parlor. Shall I ring for tea?"

"No, thank you," Eastfold replied, following her into the elegantly appointed room. "What I have to say won't take long."

Beatrice sat on the sofa, her hands clasped tightly in her lap to hide their trembling. Eastfold remained standing, his imposing figure cutting a striking silhouette against the sunlight streaming through the windows.

He cleared his throat, his gaze never leaving hers. “Your Grace, I must confess, I have made a discovery. A discovery about you and your... shall we say, extracurricular activities.”

Beatrice’s heart stopped, cold dread seeping into her veins.

He can’t possibly know... can he?

“I’m afraid I don’t know what you’re talking about, My Lord,” she said, her voice trembling slightly despite her best efforts to keep it steady.

Eastfold smiled, a slow, predatory curve of his lips. “Oh, but I think you do, Your Grace. Or should I say, Eric Westback?”

The world tilted, the room spinning around her as the blood drained from her face.

No. No, it can’t be. How could he have found out?

“I... I don’t... I’m not...” she stammered, her mind reeling, her carefully constructed world crumbling around her.

Eastfold held up a hand, silencing her denials. “Please, Your Grace. There’s no need to pretend. I have proof.” He reached into his jacket, pulling out a folded piece of paper. “A note from your dealer. Obtained through some... persuasive methods, I admit. But effective nonetheless.”

Beatrice’s eyes widened, fear and anger warring within her. “You blackmailed him,”

she accused in a low voice.

Eastfold shrugged, unrepentant. “A necessary evil, I’m afraid. But it was worth it to uncover the truth about the elusive Eric Westback.”

She stood up, her hands clenched at her sides, her heart pounding in her chest. “Get out,” she bit out, her voice shaking with barely suppressed fury. “Get out of my house, and never come back.”

Eastfold laughed, a cold, cruel sound that sent shivers down her spine. “Oh, I don’t think so, Your Grace. You see, I hold all the cards now. I know your secret, and I intend to use it.”

“Use it?” she repeated, confusion and dread mingling in her gut. “What do you mean?”

He stepped closer, his breath hot against her cheek. “I mean, Your Grace, from now on, I will be your dealer. I will control the sale and distribution of your work, and you will do as I say. Otherwise, I will reveal your secret to the world, and your days as an artist will be over.”

Beatrice’s heart sank, despair washing over her in icy waves.

He’s right. If the world finds out that Eric Westback is a woman, my credibility will be destroyed. No one will buy my paintings—no one will take me seriously ever again.

“I... I can’t,” she whispered, her voice barely audible over the roaring in her ears. “I won’t let you control me—control my art.”

Eastfold narrowed his eyes at her and roughly gripped her arm. “Come now, Your

Grace, let's be reasonable. Haven't you faced enough scandal with your brother's unfortunate business? Do you really want to add to that?"

His words were like a knife twisting in her gut. Beatrice flinched, but Eastfold pressed on, his voice a silky poison.

"Besides, who does my selling your art truly harm? You'll still be creating, still expressing yourself. I'm merely offering you protection, a buffer between your talent and a world that wouldn't understand. Think of the good we could do together, the heights your art could reach with my connections."

Beatrice felt sick at his twisted logic, at how he tried to paint his blackmail as a kindness. "You're manipulating me," she spat, trying to pull away.

Eastfold's grip on her arm only tightened, his smile turning cruel. "Manipulating? Such an ugly word. I prefer to think of it as... a mutually beneficial arrangement. But make no mistake, Your Grace. You don't have a choice. Either you agree to my terms, or I will ruin you. It's as simple as that."

She stared at him, her mind racing, searching desperately for a way out, a solution to this impossible situation. But there was none. He had her trapped, cornered like a helpless animal, and she had no choice but to submit.

"What about Kenneth?" she asked, grasping at straws. "He'll notice if suddenly all my paintings are being sold through you."

Eastfold laughed, a cold, mirthless sound. "Oh, I'm sure we can come up with a convincing story. After all, isn't that what you've been doing all along? Lying to your dear husband? What's one more deception between a man and wife?"

His words cut deep, reminding her of the rift between her and Kenneth. She felt

utterly alone with no one to turn to.

“Fine,” she relented at last, her voice hollow, defeated. “I’ll do as you say.”

He gave her a cold, triumphant smile. “I knew you’d see reason, Your Grace. You’re a smart woman, after all. This is for the best, truly. You’ll see.”

With that, he turned on his heel and strode out of the room, leaving her standing there, her world shattered, her dreams crumbling to dust around her.

Beatrice felt dirty, used, as if Eastfold’s touch had left an oily residue on her skin. She wanted to scrub herself clean, to erase the memory of this encounter, but she knew it would be impossible.

As the door closed behind him, she sank to the floor, her legs no longer able to support her. The weight of what had just happened, of the trap she now found herself in, threatened to crush her.

How had it come to this? How could she have let herself be so vulnerable? So exposed?

And worst of all, how could she face Kenneth now, knowing that she would have to lie to him again?

Beatrice was still reeling from Eastfold’s visit when she heard the front door open and the familiar sound of Kenneth’s footsteps in the foyer.

What will I say to him? How can I hide the truth?

She scrambled to her feet and took a deep breath, trying to compose herself as he entered the parlor. He looked tired, his usually impeccable appearance slightly

disheveled.

“Beatrice,” he said, his voice weary. “I didn’t expect to find you here.”

Beatrice forced a smile, her hands clasped tightly in front of her. “Where else would I be, Kenneth? This is our home.”

He sighed, running a hand through his hair. “I know. I just thought... after everything that’s happened, you might prefer some space. That is, after all, what we agreed to.”

Space.

The word hung between them, heavy with unspoken meaning.

Beatrice swallowed, her throat suddenly dry. “And what about you? What do you prefer?”

Kenneth met her gaze, his eyes searching hers. For a moment, she thought she saw a flicker of hurt, a glimpse of the pain he kept so carefully hidden. But it was gone in an instant, replaced by a cool, distant expression.

“I’ve decided to return to Dunford,” he replied, his voice carefully neutral. “There are matters that require my attention there.”

Beatrice’s heart sank, a wave of panic washing over her.

If he goes back to Dunford, he’ll be away from London, away from Eastfold. But if I go with him, Eastfold will know something is wrong. He’ll suspect that I’ve told Kenneth the truth.

She took a deep breath, steeling herself for what she knew she had to do. “I... I think

I'll stay here, in London. To continue my work as Westback."

Please understand, she silently pleaded . Please don't ask me why.

Kenneth was silent for a long moment, his jaw tight with emotion. Finally, he nodded, a short, sharp jerk of his head.

"I understand," he said, his voice cold. "Your art comes first. I respect that."

Beatrice's heart twisted, the lie bitter on her tongue.

He was already turning away, his broad shoulders tense with suppressed emotion.

"I should go," he uttered. "I have a long journey ahead of me."

She watched as he strode out of the room, his footsteps echoing in the suddenly too-quiet house. The sound of the front door closing behind him was like a physical blow, a final, terrible punctuation to the end of their conversation.

Beatrice sank onto the sofa, her head in her hands, tears streaming down her face.

What have I done?

Despair crashed over her in waves.

I've pushed him away, lied to him, hurt him. And for what? To protect a secret that could destroy us both?

She knew she should go after him and tell him the truth about Lord Eastfold and his visit. But the thought of his reaction, the anger and betrayal she knew she would see in his eyes, kept her rooted to the spot.

Kenneth strode out of the townhouse, his jaw clenched so tight that it ached. The cool London air did nothing to soothe the burning rage and hurt that threatened to consume him. He barked orders at his driver, not caring how harsh he sounded, and threw himself into the carriage.

As the wheels began to roll, taking him away from Beatrice, away from the life he thought they were building together, he felt something inside him shatter.

His hands clenched into fists, his nails digging painfully into his palms. He welcomed the pain, using it to anchor himself against the tide of emotions threatening to overwhelm him.

“Damn her,” he muttered, his voice rough with suppressed emotion.

The memory of her face as she told him she was staying behind flashed through his mind. Had there been regret in her eyes? Pain? Or was it merely relief at finally being free of him, free to pursue her passion without his interference?

Kenneth laughed, a harsh, bitter sound that filled the carriage. How foolish he’d been to think that Beatrice truly cared for him, that their marriage could be more than just a convenient arrangement. He’d allowed himself to hope, to dream of a future with her by his side, and now, those dreams lay in ashes at his feet.

Never again. I won’t make the same mistake twice. From now on, Beatrice can have her art, her life in London. I’ll focus on what truly matters—Dunford, my legacy, my duty.

As the busy streets of London faded into the distance behind him, Kenneth felt a cold resolve settle over him. He would bury himself in his work, in the running of his estate. He would be the Duke his title demanded, nothing more and nothing less.

And if, in the quiet of the night, a small part of him ached for Beatrice's warmth, her laughter... well, he would simply have to learn to ignore it.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

“A nother round, Your Grace?” a jovial voice broke through Kenneth’s haze.

The din of the crowded pub barely registered in Kenneth’s mind as he nursed his third tankard of ale. Or was it his fourth? He’d lost count, much like he’d lost track of the days.

He looked up to see a well-dressed gentleman with a neatly trimmed beard. “The Duke of Dunford, isn’t it? I’m Baron Whitcombe, passing through on business. We met at Lord Darby’s ball two years ago. Mind if I join you?”

Kenneth gestured vaguely to the empty chair. “Be my guest.”

As the Baron settled in, Kenneth signaled for two more ales.

“What brings a man of your standing to drown his sorrows in this establishment?” Whitcombe asked.

Kenneth snorted. “Women. They’re nothing but trouble.”

“Ah.” Whitcombe nodded sagely. “Wife troubles?”

“She doesn’t understand the nature of our arrangement,” Kenneth grumbled. “One minute of perceived slight and she’s off in a tizzy.”

Whitcombe leaned in, his eyes gleaming with interest. “Do tell, Your Grace. What’s

this arrangement you speak of?”

Kenneth, his inhibitions lowered by the ale, revealed their secret. “We agreed to a marriage of convenience, you see. Both of us free to pursue our own interests as long as we maintain appearances.”

“A most modern arrangement,” Whitcombe commented, raising his tankard in approval. “But I take it the Duchess is not holding up her end of the bargain?”

Kenneth’s face darkened. “She accuses me of impropriety with other women, yet she spends countless hours alone with Lord Eastfold. The hypocrisy of it all!”

“Women,” Whitcombe scoffed, shaking his head. “They demand freedom for themselves but seek to chain us down. You’re absolutely right to be upset, Your Grace.”

Kenneth nodded vigorously, spilling some ale in his enthusiasm. “Exactly! And now she’s locked herself away, painting of all things. As if that’s a proper occupation for a duchess.”

“Painting?” Whitcombe raised an eyebrow. “How... quaint. Surely she should be focusing on more important matters, like running your household or preparing for social engagements.”

“One would think,” Kenneth agreed bitterly. “But no, she’s obsessed with her art. And don’t get me started on her friendship with Eastfold. The way they look at each other...”

Whitcombe patted Kenneth’s arm sympathetically. “Your Grace, you have every right to be aggrieved. A wife should know her place, especially one who agreed to such an arrangement. You’ve done nothing wrong.”

Kenneth felt a surge of vindication at the Baron's words. "You understand perfectly, Whitcombe. If only Beatrice could see reason like you do."

As they continued to drink, Kenneth's grievances poured out in a torrent. Whitcombe listened attentively, offering sympathetic nods and murmurs of agreement. With each tankard, Kenneth's sense of righteousness grew, along with his resentment towards Beatrice.

A flash of caramel-blond hair caught his eye, and for a moment, his heart stopped. "Beatrice?" he mumbled, half-rising from his seat.

The woman turned, and Kenneth's hope crashed. It wasn't Beatrice, but Martha, the tavern owner's wife. She gave him a concerned look before bustling off to the kitchen.

"You still pine for her even after the way she's treated you?" Whitcombe asked.

Kenneth slumped back in his seat, his momentary hope replaced by a fresh wave of bitterness. "Weakness on my part," he muttered. "She's bewitched me, Whitcombe. Made me forget myself."

"Then it's high time you remembered who you are," Whitcombe declared, raising his tankard. "To the Duke of Dunford, a man of honor and standing. Don't let her manipulations sway you from your path."

Kenneth clinked his tankard against Whitcombe's, a grim smile on his face. "To remembering who I am," he echoed, downing the rest of his ale in one long gulp.

As the night wore on, Kenneth's resolve hardened. Bolstered by Whitcombe's unwavering support and the numbing effects of the ale, he convinced himself that he was entirely in the right. Beatrice was the one who needed to change, to remember

her place and the terms of their arrangement.

By the time the tavern began to empty, Kenneth was barely able to stand.

Whitcombe, seemingly less affected, helped him to his feet. “Come, Your Grace. Let’s get you home. Remember what we discussed. Stand firm in your convictions.”

Kenneth nodded unsteadily, his mind a haze of alcohol and righteous indignation. As he stumbled out into the cool night air, one thought remained clear: he would not be the one to bend. Beatrice would have to come to her senses and accept things as they were.

After all, he was the Duke of Dunford, and he answered to no one.

The morning sun filtered through the heavy curtains, assaulting Kenneth’s eyes as he groaned and rolled over in bed. His head throbbed mercilessly, a stark reminder of the previous night’s excesses. As he slowly sat up, clutching his temples, the events of the past week came rushing back.

Beatrice. Their argument. His foolish declaration that they should reconsider their arrangement.

“Bloody hell,” he muttered, wincing at the sound of his own voice. “What a fool I’ve been.”

As the fog of sleep and alcohol slowly lifted, fragments of the previous night’s conversation with Baron Whitcombe drifted back to him. He remembered ranting about Beatrice, about her painting...

His stomach clenched. Had he revealed her secret? The thought of betraying her trust, even in his drunken state, filled him with a sickening guilt.

A gentle knock at the door made him flinch.

“Enter,” he growled, immediately regretting his harsh tone.

Mr. Jennings glided into the room with a silver tray in hand. “Good morning, Your Grace. I’ve brought your morning tea and a letter that just arrived.”

Kenneth grunted in acknowledgment, reaching for the steaming cup. As he sipped the restorative brew, his eyes fell on the envelope. His stomach churned when he recognized Lord Eastfold’s seal.

With trembling fingers, he tore open the missive and began to read. Each word felt like a dagger twisting in his gut.

To the Duke and Duchess of Dunford,

I hope this letter finds you both in good spirits. I write to inform you of an upcoming art exhibition and auction at Somerset House. As patrons of the arts, I’m sure you’ll find the collection most intriguing. There will be a grand ball following the auction, and I do hope Your Graces will attend. Your presence would greatly enhance the evening.

Yours sincerely, Lord Eastfold.

Kenneth’s vision blurred with rage. He crumpled the letter in his fist and hurled it into the fireplace, watching with grim satisfaction as the flames consumed it. Any guilt he had felt moments ago evaporated, replaced by a burning anger.

“Jennings!” he barked, startling the butler. “Tell the stablehand to prepare my horse. I’m going out for the day.”

“But, Your Grace,” Mr. Jennings protested, his usual composure slipping, “you haven’t eaten, and in your current state?—”

“Did I ask for your opinion?” Kenneth snarled, swinging his legs over the edge of the bed. “Do as I say, and be quick about it!”

Jennings bowed stiffly and retreated from the room.

As Kenneth dressed, his movements jerky and uncoordinated, his mind raced. The nerve of Eastfold, addressing them both as if nothing had changed. And Beatrice—was she already aware of this invitation? Had she perhaps orchestrated it herself?

He stomped down the stairs, ignoring the concerned glances from the staff. His head was still pounding, but the pain only fueled his anger.

As he reached the foyer, he bellowed, “Where are my riding boots?”

A terrified footman scurried forward with the boots, nearly dropping them in his haste.

Kenneth snatched them away, muttering darkly under his breath. He’d show them all. Beatrice, Eastfold, the entire ton. He was the Duke of Dunford, and he answered to no one.

With a final glare at the assembled staff, he wrenched open the front door and strode out into the morning light, leaving bewildered silence behind him.

The cool morning air hit him like a slap to the face, momentarily clearing his head. He strode towards the stables where a groom was already waiting with his horse, a magnificent black stallion named Tempest. Kenneth swung himself into the saddle,

ignoring the twinge of pain in his head, and nudged the horse into a gallop.

As they thundered across the grounds, he felt some of his anger dissipate, replaced by a grim determination. He slowed Tempest to a trot as they approached the eastern fields where new irrigation systems were being installed. This was his doing, his vision for improving the estate.

He dismounted, patting Tempest's neck absently as he surveyed the work. The laborers, upon seeing him approach, redoubled their efforts. Kenneth nodded approvingly. This was what he should be focusing on, not the drama with Beatrice.

For the next few hours, he rode across the vast Dunford estate, inspecting various projects and improvements. He spoke with tenant farmers, reviewed plans for new outbuildings, and even rolled up his sleeves to help repair a broken fence. With each task, he felt more centered, more in control.

As the sun reached its zenith, Kenneth found himself atop a hill overlooking the castle. From this vantage point, he could see the full extent of the Dunford lands. Fields of wheat swayed in the breeze, dotted with grazing sheep and cattle. The newly repaired mill wheel turned steadily, its rhythmic creaking carrying on the wind.

Kenneth's chest swelled with pride. This was his legacy, the fruit of his labor. When he had inherited the title, the estate had been on the brink of ruin, thanks to his father's excesses. Through sheer determination and hard work, he had turned it round, making it profitable again.

"I did all this without her," he muttered to himself, a hint of his earlier bitterness creeping back into his voice. "I was fine before Beatrice, and I'll be fine now."

Yet, even as the words left his mouth, he felt a hollow ache in his chest. The estate might be thriving, but the castle felt empty without her.

Kenneth took a deep breath, his resolve hardening. He would not be his father. And he would be fine with or without Beatrice.

A week had passed since Kenneth's departure, and Beatrice found herself alone in their London townhouse, accompanied only by a handful of servants, including her trusted lady's maid, Anna. The once lively halls now felt empty and dull, a reflection of the void in her heart.

She had thrown herself into her painting, desperately seeking solace in the familiar strokes of her brush. But even as she worked, her mind was consumed with thoughts of Eastfold and the leverage he now had over her.

How could I have been so blind?

Her brush slashed across the canvas with a fury born of frustration and self-recrimination.

I thought him charming, intelligent, a friend to Kenneth and me. But now I see the truth. He's nothing but a wolf in sheep's clothing, a man consumed by his greed and ambition.

The memory of his smug smile, the glint of avarice in his eyes as he spoke of her art as nothing more than a commodity, made her stomach churn with disgust.

He cares nothing for the beauty, the emotion, the soul of my work. To him, it's just another means to line his pockets, to increase his wealth and status.

Her current painting, a seascape, was a departure from her usual style. Dark, turbulent waves crashed against jagged rocks, the sky above a roiling mass of angry clouds. The scene was lit by a single, feeble ray of light, struggling to pierce the gloom. It was a reflection of her inner turmoil, the darkness that threatened to consume her.

Kenneth... I should have told you the truth from the start. I should have trusted you, trusted in your strength. But I was so afraid of losing you, of seeing the disappointment in your eyes when you learned of my deception.

She knew that her husband was a man of honor, a man who valued honesty and integrity above all else.

What will he think of me now? Will he ever be able to forgive me for my lies? For the secrets I've kept from him?

The thought of losing Kenneth, of seeing the warmth in his eyes replaced by cold disdain, was almost too much to bear.

I have to make this right . I have to find a way to stop Eastfold, to protect my art and my identity, without losing the man I ? —

As she wrestled with her thoughts, a sudden clarity washed over her.

This wasn't just about the physical attraction that had always drawn them together. It wasn't about the passion that ignited every time they were near each other.

This was love .

Deep, undeniable love. She loved Kenneth with all her heart, and the realization filled her with both fear and determination. She couldn't lose him.

But how could she protect her secret and their future together? Eastfold was a powerful man with connections that reached into the highest echelons of society. And she was just a woman—a duchess, yes, but still bound by the constraints and expectations of her gender.

No. I am more than just a duchess. I am an artist, a creator, a woman with a voice and a vision. And I will not let Eastfold or anyone else silence me.

She stepped back from the easel, her eyes roaming over the angry, turbulent seascape. It was raw, unpolished, a far cry from the serene, idyllic scenes she was known for. But it was honest, a true reflection of her heart and soul.

A knock at the door jolted her out of her dark thoughts.

“Your Grace,” Anna’s voice called softly. “Lord Eastfold is here to see you.”

Beatrice’s heart sank, cold dread seeping into her veins.

So soon?

Her hand trembled slightly as she set down her brush.

I thought I would have more time, more space to breathe before he descended upon me once again.

But she knew she had no choice. With a deep, steadying breath, she rose to her feet, smoothing down the skirts of her paint-stained dress.

“Send him in, Anna,” she said, her voice sounding far calmer than she felt.

Moments later, Eastfold strode into the room, his footsteps heavy on the polished wooden floor. He was followed by two burly footmen, their arms laden with empty canvas bags and packing materials.

“Your Grace,” he said, his voice dripping with false warmth.

His gaze fell on the painting on her easel, and he paused. His brow furrowed, a flicker of displeasure crossing his features.

“What’s this? This isn’t Westback’s usual style.”

Beatrice stiffened, jutting her chin in defiance. “It’s a new direction I’m exploring. Art is about growth, about pushing boundaries and exploring new territories.”

Eastfold’s eyes narrowed, his tone sharpening. “Art, Your Grace, is a commodity. And I will not lose value because you’ve decided to be uncooperative. You will paint in Westback’s style, the style that my clients expect and demand. Is that clear?”

Beatrice felt a surge of anger at his words, at the way he presumed to dictate her creative process. But she swallowed her pride, knowing that, for now, she had no choice but to comply.

“Of course, My Lord. In fact, I have the painting you commissioned in Westback’s usual style, just completed yesterday. It’s over there, leaning against the wall. Eastfold followed her gesture, his expression softening as he took in the painting. It was a serene landscape, all soft colors and gentle lines, a far cry from the turbulent seascape on her easel.

“Excellent,” he uttered, his lips curling into a cold smile. “This is more like it. My client will be most pleased.”

Beatrice watched in silence as his men carefully removed the painting from its resting place, wrapping it in protective cloth and placing it in one of the canvas bags.

“I will have your payment delivered to you within the week,” Eastfold said, his tone businesslike. “And I will be back soon with new commissions. I have several clients who are most eager to acquire a Westback original.”

Beatrice's stomach twisted at the thought of more paintings, more deadlines, more of her soul poured into the canvas for Eastfold to sell to the highest bidder. But she forced a smile, inclining her head in a nod of acquiescence.

"Of course, My Lord. I look forward to our continued partnership."

The words tasted like ash on her tongue, but she forced them out, knowing she had no other choice.

For now, I must play his game, dance to his tune. But it will not be forever. Somehow, some way, I will find a way out of this nightmare. I will reclaim my art, my life, my freedom. I must. Because the alternative is too terrible to contemplate.

Eastfold's smile widened, a predatory gleam in his eyes. "As do I, Your Grace. As do I."

With that, he turned on his heel, striding out of the room with his men in tow. The door closed behind them with a soft click, but to Beatrice, it sounded like the slamming of a prison gate, the sealing of her fate.

She sat in stunned silence, staring at the closed door. The room seemed to shrink around her, the weight of his threat pressing down on her chest. She felt a profound sense of isolation, a loneliness that gnawed at her insides.

Her gaze fell to her brushes, still wet with paint. She rose mechanically, her movements robotic as she began to clean them. The familiar rhythm of rinsing and wiping usually brought her comfort, but now, it felt hollow, an empty gesture in the face of her inner turmoil.

Kenneth's face flashed in her mind. She longed to go to him, to seek his comfort and support. But the memory of their argument, the cold anger in his eyes, and the biting

words they had exchanged stopped her short.

How could I turn to him now when he clearly doesn't trust me? How could I turn to him after everything that's happened? He sees me as a burden, not a partner.

The realization cut deep, a fresh wave of despair washing over her. She had never felt so alone, so trapped. Even her art, once a sanctuary, now felt tainted by Eastfold's threats.

I need someone to talk to. Someone who will understand, who will help me find a way out of this nightmare.

A name floated to the surface of her thoughts—Catherine. Her dearest friend, her confidante, the one person who knew her better than anyone else. Catherine would know what to do.

I'll go to her.

A flicker of hope sparked in Beatrice's chest.

I'll tell her everything, and together, we'll find a way to stop Eastfold, to break his hold on me.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Beatrice sat with Catherine in the drawing room, feeling much calmer after having poured out her heart to her dear friend.

Catherine's expression was simultaneously sympathetic and indignant as she listened to Beatrice's tale.

"I swear, I'm going to kill Kenneth for treating you this way," she declared, her eyes flashing with anger.

Beatrice managed a small smile, placing a hand on Catherine's arm. "Please, spare your energy in your condition, my dear. It's not worth the strain."

Catherine sighed, leaning back against the sofa cushions. "You're right, of course. But it doesn't make me any less furious on your behalf."

Beatrice hesitated for a moment then took a deep breath, deciding it was time to share the truth she had kept hidden for so long. "Catherine, there's something I need to tell you," she began, her voice soft but steady. "Something I've kept secret from almost everyone, but I trust you more than anyone in the world."

Catherine leaned forward, her brow furrowed with concern. "What is it, Beatrice? You know you can tell me anything."

Beatrice nodded, steeling herself for the revelation. "It's about my art, about how I've been able to continue painting even after everything that happened with Patrick and

the scandal.”

She paused, collecting her thoughts.

“The truth is, I’ve been selling my work under a pseudonym. That’s how Eric Westback was born. It was my way of maintaining anonymity and protecting Mother and myself from further scandal.”

Catherine’s eyes widened. “Eric Westback? Beatrice, that’s incredible. I’ve heard so much about his— your —work. It’s famous.”

A small smile tugged at Beatrice’s lips. “It’s been a lifeline, truly. But now, it’s become a source of trouble.”

“What do you mean?” Catherine asked, concern etched on her face.

Beatrice sighed, her shoulders slumping. “Lord Eastfold has discovered my secret. He’s blackmailing me, threatening to expose my identity if I don’t paint for him and sell my work through him.”

Catherine gasped, her hand flying to her mouth. “That’s horrible! How did he find out?”

“He tracked down my dealer and blackmailed him into revealing my identity,” Beatrice explained, her voice trembling slightly. “And now, he holds all the power. If I don’t do as he says, my career as an artist will be over.”

Catherine reached out, taking Beatrice’s hand in hers. “Oh, Beatrice. I’m so sorry. This must be incredibly difficult for you.”

Beatrice nodded, tears pricking her eyes. “It is. And to make matters worse, Kenneth

and I had a terrible fight. Lady Featherwell tried to proposition him, and when I confronted him about it, he was so cold and dismissive.”

Catherine’s eyes flashed with anger. “The nerve of that woman! And Kenneth... how could he treat you like that?”

“I don’t know,” Beatrice whispered, her voice cracking. “I thought we were building something real, but now... I don’t know what to believe.”

Catherine squeezed Beatrice’s hand, her expression thoughtful. “Beatrice, I think you should confront Lord Eastfold. Try to reason with him, to make him see how wrong this is.”

Beatrice looked up, surprise and doubt flashing across her face. “Confront him? But what if it only makes things worse?”

“It’s a risk,” Catherine acknowledged. “But you can’t let him control you like this. You have to fight for your art, for your freedom.”

Beatrice considered her words, a flicker of determination sparking in her eyes. “You’re right, Catherine. I can’t let him win. I have to try.”

Catherine smiled, pride shining in her eyes. “That’s the Beatrice I know and love. Strong, brave, and willing to stand up for what’s right.”

Beatrice felt a rush of gratitude for her friend, for the unwavering support and love she offered. “Thank you, Catherine. I don’t know what I would do without you.”

Catherine waved away her thanks. “That’s what friends are for, my dear. Now, let’s talk about something more pleasant. Would you be so kind as to give me a demonstration of your artistic skills? I believe there are some old art supplies

somewhere in the house.”

Beatrice felt a rush of excitement at the prospect, her fingers itching to hold a brush once more. “Of course, Catherine. It would be my pleasure.”

As Catherine called for a servant to fetch the supplies, Beatrice felt a sense of peace settle over her. Here, in the company of her dearest friend, she felt a renewed sense of purpose, a determination to forge ahead with her life, no matter what challenges lay ahead.

I will survive this. I will find my way, with or without Kenneth by my side.

Kenneth sat in his study at Dunford Castle, a glass of brandy in hand, staring listlessly at the pile of correspondence before him. The room felt cold and empty without Beatrice’s presence. He reached for another letter, hoping to distract himself, when a particular envelope caught his eye.

The handwriting was unfamiliar, and the paper was of poor quality. Frowning, Kenneth broke the seal and unfolded the letter. As he read, his mood darkened, his anger building with each word.

To His Grace, the Duke of Dunford,

I hope this letter finds you well, brother-in-law. I trust you and my dear sister are enjoying marital bliss. I write to you from my continued exile, a situation I’m sure you understand is entirely based on unfounded accusations.

Life abroad has its challenges, and I find myself in need of financial assistance. A sum of five thousand pounds would go a long way in ensuring I can maintain my distance from England, sparing our family any further scrutiny or gossip.

I'm certain a man of your means would find this a small price to pay for family harmony. After all, we wouldn't want any misunderstandings about past events to resurface, would we?

I eagerly await your swift and generous response.

Your brother-in-law, Lord Afferton.

Kenneth crumpled the letter in his fist, fury coursing through him. The audacity of the man to claim his actions were "unfounded accusations" when Kenneth knew the truth of what had happened to Catherine!

He stood up abruptly, pacing the length of his study, the memory of Thomas recounting Catherine's ordeal fresh in his mind.

His first instinct was to ignore the letter, to let Patrick rot in whatever hole he'd dug for himself. But as his anger cooled, Kenneth found himself thinking of Beatrice. Despite their estrangement, he couldn't bear the thought of her brother returning to England and causing her more pain.

With a heavy sigh, he sat at his desk and pulled out a fresh sheet of paper. He dipped his quill in the inkpot and began to write, his hand steady despite his inner turmoil.

Lord Afferton,

Your attempt at extortion is as contemptible as your character. I will not be manipulated by thinly veiled threats, especially not from a man who has brought nothing but pain and shame to his family.

Your claims of "unfounded accusations" are laughable. We both know the truth of your actions, and I assure you, there are those in England who have not forgotten.

However, for Beatrice's sake, I will give you a one-time sum of one thousand pounds. This is more than you deserve, and it comes with a warning. If you ever attempt to return to England or contact me or Beatrice again, I will use every resource at my disposal to ensure you face the consequences of your past actions.

The funds will be sent through my solicitor. Do not write to this address again.

The Duke of Dunford.

Kenneth sealed the letter, his jaw clenched. As he rang for a servant to have it sent, he found himself wishing he could share this burden with Beatrice. Despite their arguments, despite the distance between them, he missed her counsel, her strength.

For a moment, he considered writing to her, telling her about Patrick's letter. But pride and hurt held him back. Instead, he poured himself another glass of brandy and raised it in a bitter toast.

"To justice," he muttered sardonically, downing the drink in one swallow.

As night fell over Dunford Castle, Kenneth remained in his study, haunted by thoughts of Beatrice and the growing certainty that, somehow, he needed to find a way to heal the rift between them. The weight of protecting her, even from afar, settled heavily on his shoulders.

Beatrice stood before the imposing oak door of Lord Eastfold's London residence, her heart pounding in her chest. The impropriety of her visit—a married lady calling on a bachelor—weighed heavily on her mind. But the risk of scandal paled in comparison to the threat hanging over her head.

Taking a deep breath, she raised the brass knocker and rapped sharply. After a moment, the door swung open, revealing a stern-faced butler.

“I’m here to see Lord Eastfold,” Beatrice declared, her voice steady despite her nerves. “It’s a matter of some urgency.”

The butler’s eyes widened slightly at the sight of her, but he maintained his composure. “Of course, Your Grace. Please, come in.”

Beatrice followed him through the opulent foyer, her footsteps muffled by thick carpets. The house exuded wealth and power, much like its master.

Lord Eastfold was waiting in his study, a glass of brandy in hand. His eyes lit up with amusement as she entered.

“Your Grace,” he drawled, setting down his glass. “What an unexpected pleasure. To what do I owe this... clandestine visit?”

Beatrice steeled herself, lifting her chin. “Lord Eastfold, I’ve come to appeal to your better nature. This arrangement between us cannot continue.”

Eastfold’s smile widened, revealing teeth that seemed too sharp. “Oh? And why is that, my dear?”

“It’s wrong,” Beatrice said firmly. “You’re using my art, my passion, for your own gain. Surely you can see how unethical this is?”

Eastfold chuckled, the sound grating on her nerves. “Ethics? My dear, this is business. You create; I sell. It’s a mutually beneficial arrangement.”

“Mutually beneficial?” Beatrice repeated, incredulous. “You’re blackmailing me!”

“Such an ugly word.” Eastfold tsked, rising from his desk and moving closer to her. “I prefer to think of it as... motivation. After all, your secret remains safe, and your

art reaches an adoring public. What could be better?"

Beatrice felt her resolve weakening in the face of his smug confidence. "Please, My Lord. I'm begging you to reconsider."

His eyes gleamed with a predatory light. "Begging? Now that is a pretty picture. Speaking of which..." He paused, tapping his chin thoughtfully. "I think I'd like a Westback original for my personal collection. No commission, of course. Just a little... gift, shall we say?"

Beatrice's stomach churned with disgust, but she kept her expression impassive. "And if I refuse?"

Eastfold's smile turned cold. "Then perhaps it's time the world learned the truth about the mysterious Eric Westback. I wonder how your dear husband would react to such news?"

The threat hung in the air between them. Beatrice wanted to scream, to rage against the injustice of it all. But she knew it would do no good. Eastfold held all the cards, and he knew it.

With a supreme effort of will, she nodded curtly. "Very well. You'll have your painting."

"Excellent," Eastfold purred, clearly savoring his victory. "I knew you'd see reason, Your Grace. You're so much more... agreeable than your husband."

Beatrice felt her skin crawl at his insinuation, but she refused to give him the satisfaction of a reaction. Without another word, she turned on her heel and strode out of his study, her back ramrod straight.

It wasn't until she was safely in her carriage, hidden from prying eyes, that she allowed a single tear to fall. But even as it traced a path down her cheek, she felt a spark of determination ignite within her.

This isn't over. I will find a way to beat you, Lord Eastfold.

Chapter Thirty

Kenneth sat in his study, a glass of whiskey in his hand. The amber liquid swirled in the cut crystal, catching the light from the flickering fire in the hearth. It was his third glass that evening, a habit he had fallen into since returning to the estate without Beatrice.

Beatrice.

Her name echoed in his mind, a constant ache that refused to be soothed. He had thought that throwing himself into his work, into the management of the estate and the endless cycle of meetings and paperwork, would distract him from her absence. But if anything, the long hours and the solitude only made him feel her loss more keenly.

He missed her. Missed her quick wit, her bright laughter, the way her eyes sparkled when she spoke of her art. Missed the warmth of her presence, the feel of her soft curves against him in the night.

I should have fought harder.

Guilt and regret twisted in his gut.

I should have insisted that she come with me, should have made her see how much I need her, how much I...

He couldn't bring himself to finish the thought. The words, the depth of his feelings,

still felt too raw, too vulnerable to voice.

A knock at the door startled him from his brooding.

“Enter,” he called, his voice rough from the whiskey and the weight of his emotions.

To his surprise, it was Lady Featherwell who swept into the room, her skirts rustling with the movement.

Kenneth felt a surge of irritation at the sight of her, at the memory of their last encounter and the role she had played in driving a wedge between him and Beatrice.

“Lady Featherwell,” he said, his tone cold. “To what do I owe this unexpected... pleasure?”

She smiled, a coy, practiced curve of her lips. “Your Grace,” she purred, moving closer. “I heard you had returned to Dunford, and I simply had to come and see you. It’s been far too long since we last spoke.”

Kenneth’s jaw tightened, his grip on the whiskey glass tightening. “I’m afraid I’m not in the mood for company, Lady Featherwell. If you’ll excuse me...”

But she didn’t take the hint, instead perching on the edge of his desk, her skirts brushing against his leg.

“Oh, but, Your Grace,” she persisted, her voice low and suggestive, “surely you must be lonely here, all by yourself. Without your Duchess to keep you warm at night.”

Kenneth’s temper flared, his patience snapping.

“My wife is none of your concern,” he growled, setting his glass down with more

force than necessary. “And I’ll thank you to keep your insinuations to yourself.”

Lady Featherwell’s eyes widened, a flicker of surprise crossing her face before it was replaced by a sly, knowing look. “Forgive me, Your Grace,” she said, her tone anything but apologetic. “I meant no offense. I only thought you should know...” she trailed off.

Kenneth’s heart raced, cold dread seeping into his veins. “Know what?” he demanded, his voice low and dangerous.

Lady Featherwell’s smile widened, a predatory gleam in her eyes. “That your dear wife has been seen in the company of Lord Eastfold. Quite frequently in fact. One might almost think?—”

Kenneth was on his feet before she could finish, his hand clenching into a fist at his side.

“Get out,” he snarled, his vision red with rage. “Get out of my house, and never come back.”

“But I?—”

“I do not care to hear any more of your words, Lady Featherwell. Leave.”

Lady Featherwell rose, her expression one of mock hurt.

“As you wish, Your Grace,” she said, sauntering towards the door. “But don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

The moment she was gone, Kenneth started barking orders at his servants to prepare for his immediate return to London. His mind raced with a maelstrom of fury and

betrayal and a sickening, twisting fear that he had been played for a fool.

Beatrice and Eastfold...

The thought left a bitter taste in his mouth.

All this time, while I've been here, mourning her absence, she's been in London, playing the merry widow with that snake.

The journey back to the city passed in a blur, Kenneth's anger simmering just beneath the surface.

By the time he reached their townhouse, he was ready to explode, his temper hanging by a thread.

He found Beatrice in her studio, sitting before a blank canvas, her face a mask of misery.

At the sight of him, her eyes widened, shock and something that looked almost like fear flashing across her face.

"Kenneth," she said, her voice trembling. "What are you doing here?"

"What am I doing here?" he repeated, his tone mocking. "I could ask you the same thing, dear wife. Or perhaps I should ask Lord Eastfold. I hear you two have become quite close in my absence."

Beatrice's face paled, her hands twisting in her lap. "Kenneth, it's not what you think?—"

But he cut her off, his anger boiling over. "Isn't it? You couldn't wait to be rid of me,

couldn't wait to run back to London and your precious art. And Eastfold was only too happy to keep you company, wasn't he? Tell me, Beatrice, how long have you been making a fool of me?"

She was instantly on her feet, her temper flaring. "How dare you?" she cried, her voice shaking with fury and hurt. "How dare you accuse me of being unfaithful? I have done nothing to deserve your mistrust, your jealousy. Eastfold is blackmailing me, Kenneth. He discovered my identity as Westback, and he's forcing me to paint for him, to sell my work through him. That's why I've been meeting with him. That's why I stayed in London. To protect my secret, to protect my art."

Kenneth stared at her, shock and a sickening sense of guilt washing over him.

"Beatrice," he choked out, his voice rough with emotion. "I... I didn't know. I'm sorry, I should have trusted you, should have?—"

"Yes, you should have," she snapped, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. "But you didn't. You never do. One day you want me, the next you push me away. One day you're jealous, accusing me of betrayal, the next you're apologizing, begging for forgiveness. I can't do this anymore, Kenneth. I can't live like this, never knowing where I stand with you, never certain of your faith in me."

Kenneth's expression softened with regret. "I didn't know. I never meant to hurt you like this."

Beatrice took a shaky breath, her voice trembling. "Yet you still have. More than you can imagine."

Kenneth reached out, his hand hovering near her arm. "Beatrice?—"

"I'm sorry, Kenneth, but I can't do this anymore," Beatrice murmured, her voice

breaking. "I need time, space to think, to heal. And I can't do that here with you."

But before he could say anything more, Beatrice turned and stumbled out of the room.

Kenneth stood frozen, watching her go, his own heart heavy with the realization of how deeply he had failed her.

He let out a long, shuddering breath, his hands shaking as he walked over to the decanter on the sideboard. Pouring himself a generous measure of brandy, he downed it in one gulp, the liquid burning its way down his throat. The pain in his chest was a dull, relentless throb, matching the ache of regret that settled deep within him.

"Kenneth, dear, you look dreadful," Lady Bernmere remarked as she entered the study, carrying a small, well-worn notebook and a cup of tea.

She set the tea down and flipped open the notebook, her sharp eyes assessing him critically. "Now, where is your wife?"

Kenneth shrugged, his expression carefully blank. "I don't know, and frankly, I don't care."

Lady Bernmere's eyes narrowed, her voice taking on a hard edge. "What have you done, Kenneth?"

"Excuse me?" he bristled, his temper flaring.

"You heard me. What have you done?" she repeated, her gaze unwavering.

Kenneth clenched his jaw, his pride rearing its head. "I'll thank you not to speak to me in that manner, Aunt Marjorie."

Lady Bernmere scoffed. “I’ll speak to you however I please when you’re behaving like a stubborn mule. Now, why is your wife not here?”

“We had an argument,” Kenneth admitted, his voice tight. “We’ll be living separately from now on.”

His aunt’s expression turned thunderous. “You fool,” she hissed. “For the first time in your life, you’ve found a lovely woman with a passion for art that equals your own, and you’re willing to throw it away so easily?”

Kenneth’s defenses rose, but Lady Bernmere cut him off before he could speak.

“This is about your father, isn’t it? You’re letting his mistakes, his failures, dictate your life.”

He looked away, his jaw clenched.

Lady Bernmere softened her tone, her hand coming to rest on his arm. “Kenneth, you are a far greater man than your father ever was. And with Beatrice, you have a chance at true happiness.”

“My father became the way he was because he lost his wife,” Kenneth argued, his voice raw with emotion. “The same will happen to me.”

Lady Bernmere shook her head. “So you choose to be miserable anyway? Yes, love is risky. But you cannot close yourself off in fear of getting hurt. It’s like injuring your leg and swearing never to walk again to avoid getting injured again. You deserve happiness, Kenneth, and I’m certain you can find it with Beatrice.”

Kenneth swallowed hard. He looked out the window, his voice a mere whisper. “I don’t know where she went.”

Lady Bernmere sighed, her exasperation tinged with affection. “You idiot. When a woman is in distress, she seeks out her friends. Where is Beatrice’s closest friend now?”

Realization dawned on Kenneth, and he turned to his aunt, hope coursing through him. “The Newden’s London home. Catherine.”

Lady Bernmere nodded, a small smile playing on her lips. “Then what are you waiting for? Go to her, Kenneth. Make this right.”

Kenneth sighed, running a hand through his hair. “Everything is still a mess. I can’t just show up and expect things to be fixed.”

Lady Bernmere placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. “You don’t have to fix everything at once, but you must start somewhere. Beatrice needs to know you’re willing to try.”

He nodded, his resolve hardening. “You’re right. I’ll go to her, but I need to be sure of what to say.”

Lady Bernmere gave him a gentle pat. “Good. Take your time, but don’t take too long. She needs to see that you’re committed to making things right.”

With that, she turned and left him to his thoughts. Kenneth poured himself another drink, the brandy a small comfort as he mulled over his next steps.

His eyes drifted to the portrait of his father that hung above the fireplace, the late Duke’s cold, imperious gaze seeming to mock him from beyond the grave.

Kenneth felt a surge of anger, a lifetime of resentment and bitterness bubbling to the surface.

“Are you happy now, Father?” he snarled, his words slurring slightly as the alcohol began to take effect. “Is this what you wanted for me? A life of misery and loneliness, just like yours?”

He staggered to his feet, the empty glass clutched in his hand. His vision blurred, the room spinning around him as he made his way towards the portrait.

“You never loved anyone,” he hissed, his chest heaving with the force of his emotions. “Not Mother, not me. You only cared about yourself, about your own pleasure and satisfaction.”

With a roar of rage, he hurled the glass at the portrait, the sound of shattering crystal echoing through the study. The whiskey splattered across the canvas, dripping down his father’s face like bitter tears.

And then, like a flash of lightning in the darkness, a memory surfaced. Beatrice’s words, her confession about Eastfold’s blackmail, his coercion and threats.

Cold fury washed over Kenneth, his hands clenching into fists at his sides.

Eastfold.

The name was a bitter curse on his tongue.

That snake, that vile, manipulative bastard. He’s the reason behind all of this, the reason Beatrice was forced to lie, to hide her meetings with him. He’s the reason I’ve lost her.

With a growl of rage, Kenneth pushed himself to his feet, his eyes burning with a fierce, desperate determination. He knew what he had to do, knew the only way to make this right.

He had to find Eastfold, had to make him pay for what he'd done. Had to end his hold over Beatrice, his twisted games and cruel machinations.

I'll make him suffer. I'll make him regret the day he ever dared to lay a hand on my wife, to threaten and blackmail her. I'll make him wish he'd never been born .

Chapter Thirty-One

“Eastfold!”

Kenneth burst into Eastfold’s club, his eyes scanning the room with predatory intensity. He spotted his quarry lounging in a leather armchair, a smug smile playing on his lips as he sipped his brandy. The sight of him, so calm and self-satisfied, made his blood boil.

He crossed the room in three long strides, his hand shooting out to grab Eastfold by the lapels of his expensive jacket. With a forceful yank, he pulled the man to his feet, their faces mere inches apart.

“Eastfold,” Kenneth growled, his voice low and dangerous. “We need to talk.”

Eastfold’s eyes widened in surprise then narrowed in annoyance. “Your Grace,” he said, his tone dripping with false politeness. “This is most unexpected. And might I add, most inappropriate. Unhand me at once.”

Kenneth’s grip only tightened. “Inappropriate?” he snarled. “You want to talk about inappropriate? How about blackmailing my wife? How about forcing her to paint for you under threat of exposure?”

A flicker of fear crossed Eastfold’s face before he schooled his features into a mask of innocence. “I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about, Your Grace. Perhaps you’ve had too much to drink?”

Kenneth's patience snapped. He shoved the man back into his chair, looming over him menacingly. "Don't play games with me, Eastfold. Beatrice told me everything. How you discovered her secret, how you've been using it to control her."

Eastfold's composure cracked. He glanced around nervously, noticing the other club members watching the scene with avid interest. "Your Grace, please," he said in a low voice. "This is hardly the place for such a discussion. Perhaps we could adjourn to a more private setting?"

"No," Kenneth uttered flatly. "We'll have this out here and now. I want witnesses to your shame, Eastfold. I want everyone to see what kind of man you really are."

Eastfold's face paled. "You're making a scene, Your Grace. Think of your reputation, your standing in Society."

Kenneth laughed, a harsh, bitter sound. "My reputation? That's rich, coming from you. A man who would stoop so low as to blackmail a woman, to threaten her with ruin if she doesn't comply with your demands."

He leaned closer, his voice dropping to a menacing whisper. "Tell me, Eastfold, how long did you think you could get away with this? Did you really believe I wouldn't find out?"

Sweat beaded on Eastfold's brow. "Your Grace, please," he pleaded. "It wasn't like that. I was merely trying to help Her Grace. To provide an outlet for her talent without risking scandal."

Kenneth's eyes flashed dangerously. "Help her? By threatening to expose her secret? By forcing her to paint on your schedule to your specifications?"

Eastfold squirmed under his gaze. "I... I may have been overzealous in my

approach,” he admitted. “But surely you can see the benefit? Her paintings have been selling for unprecedented sums. I’ve made her famous!”

“You’ve made yourself rich,” Kenneth corrected, his tone icy. “At the expense of my wife’s peace of mind and her freedom to create as she chooses.” He straightened up, his voice rising so that everyone in the club could hear. “Well, it ends now, Eastfold. You will never contact Beatrice again. You will forget you ever knew the name Eric Westback. You will cease all dealings in her artwork immediately.”

Eastfold’s eyes widened in panic. “But... but the upcoming exhibition! The auction! I’ve already made arrangements, sent out invitations!”

“Cancel them,” Kenneth said flatly. “I don’t care how you do it, but you will end this charade. If I hear of a single painting by ‘Eric Westback’ being sold after today, I will hold you personally responsible.” He leaned in once more, his voice dropping to a dangerous whisper. “And believe me, Eastfold, you do not want to face the consequences of crossing me again. I will destroy you. I will use every ounce of my influence, every connection I have, to see you ruined. Do you understand?”

Eastfold nodded frantically, his face ashen. “Yes, Your Grace. I understand. It’s over, I swear it. You’ll never hear from me again regarding this matter.”

Kenneth held his gaze for a long moment, searching for any hint of deceit. Finally satisfied, he stepped back.

“See that I don’t,” he said coldly. “Because this is your only warning, Eastfold. Cross me or my wife again, and it will be the last thing you ever do in polite society.”

With that, he turned on his heel and strode out of the club, leaving a stunned silence in his wake.

As he emerged onto the street, Kenneth felt a surge of grim satisfaction course through him. He had protected the Spencer name, the dukedom, and by extension, Beatrice.

The cool night air filled his lungs as he walked, his steps purposeful and steady. He had done his duty as the Duke of Dunford, defending his family's honor and putting Eastfold in his place. It was a victory, albeit a bitter one.

Yet, as the thrill of the confrontation began to fade, Kenneth felt the weight of his unresolved issues with Beatrice settle back onto his shoulders. He had eliminated the threat of Eastfold, yes, but the rift between him and his wife was still there.

I've done what needed to be done. I've protected her, even if she doesn't know it. Even if she doesn't want it.

Beatrice arrived at Catherine's home, her body weary and her mind in turmoil. As she was shown into the parlor, she saw Catherine rise from her seat, a look of concern etched on her face.

Catherine, heavily pregnant, moved forward as quickly as she could to greet her friend. "Beatrice, my dear, what's happened now?" she asked, her voice filled with worry.

Beatrice collapsed onto the sofa, her shoulders slumping in defeat. "Oh, Catherine, everything's fallen apart."

Catherine lowered herself beside her, taking her hand. "Tell me everything."

Beatrice took a shaky breath. "I confronted Lord Eastfold about his blackmail as you suggested. But he... he refused to stop. He's demanding even more paintings now with impossible deadlines. I've been painting non-stop, and it's horrible. The art... it

feels tainted, corrupted by his greed.”

Catherine’s eyes flashed with anger. “That despicable man! How dare he continue to threaten you!”

“That’s not even the worst of it,” Beatrice continued, her voice cracking. “Kenneth... he found out I’d been speaking to Eastfold. I tried to explain about the blackmail, but he wouldn’t listen. He’s been so volatile lately, his emotions swinging wildly. One moment he’s cold and distant, the next he’s accusing me of betraying him.”

Catherine squeezed her hand. “Oh, Beatrice. I’m so sorry you’re going through this.”

“I’m just so angry, Catherine,” Beatrice said, tears welling up in her eyes. “Angry at Eastfold for his manipulation, angry at Kenneth for not trusting me, and angry at myself for getting into this mess in the first place.”

Catherine wrapped an arm around her friend’s shoulders. “You have every right to be angry, my dear. But none of this is your fault. Eastfold is a scoundrel, and Kenneth... well, he’s being a fool.”

Beatrice leaned into Catherine’s embrace. “I don’t know what to do anymore. I thought Kenneth and I were building something real, but now... How can we have a marriage without trust?”

“Men can be stubborn creatures,” Catherine said softly. “Kenneth’s pride has been wounded, and he’s lashing out. But that doesn’t excuse his behavior.”

Beatrice nodded, wiping away a tear. “I just wish he would listen to me—truly listen. I’ve tried to explain about Eastfold, about why I kept it secret, but he seems determined to believe the worst.”

Catherine furrowed her brow in thought. “Perhaps... perhaps it’s time to force the issue. To make Kenneth see the truth of the situation.”

“What do you mean?” Beatrice asked, looking up at her friend.

“I mean, my dear, that sometimes we must take drastic action to protect ourselves and those we love,” Catherine replied, a determined glint in her eyes. “We need to find a way to neutralize Eastfold’s threats and make Kenneth understand the gravity of the situation.”

Beatrice felt a spark of hope ignite in her chest. “Do you really think it’s possible?”

Catherine nodded firmly. “I do. You are not alone in this.” Suddenly, her eyes lit up with a sudden idea. “Beatrice, my dear, I think I might have a solution—at least for part of your troubles.”

Beatrice looked at her friend curiously. “What do you mean?”

“You’ve been painting as Westback, under the pressure of Eastfold’s demands,” Catherine began. “But what if you were to paint as yourself? Not for him, not for anyone else, but simply for your own peace of mind?”

Beatrice’s brow furrowed. “I... I’m not sure I understand.”

Catherine smiled softly. “Paint something that speaks to your heart, Beatrice. Something that represents your true self, your feelings, your struggles. Don’t think about style or technique or what others might want. Just let your emotions flow onto the canvas.”

Beatrice considered this for a moment, feeling a glimmer of excitement at the idea. “I haven’t painted for myself in so long,” she admitted. “It’s always been about meeting

Eastfold's demands or maintaining the Westback persona.”

“Then it’s high time you reclaimed your art for yourself,” Catherine declared, taking Beatrice’s hand and leading her toward the paints and canvas still on the easel from Beatrice’s last visit.

Beatrice looked at the familiar setup. “I don’t know if I can,” she whispered, her voice barely audible.

“You can,” Catherine insisted softly. “You must. Your art is a part of you, Beatrice. It’s where you find your strength, your voice. Don’t let anyone take that away from you.”

Soon, Beatrice found herself standing before a new canvas, a palette of vibrant colors at her disposal. The sunroom was filled with warm, natural light, and the scent of blooming flowers wafted in through the open windows.

“Remember,” Catherine said softly from her seat nearby, “this is for you and you alone. Let your heart guide your hand.”

Beatrice took a deep breath, closed her eyes for a moment, and then began to paint. At first, her strokes were hesitant, uncertain. But as she allowed herself to sink into the familiar rhythm of creation, something shifted within her.

Colors flowed from her brush—deep blues of sorrow, fiery reds of anger, soft greens of hope. She painted her pain, her frustration, her longing to be understood. The canvas became a mirror of her soul, reflecting the tumultuous emotions she’d been grappling with.

As she worked, she felt a weight lifting from her shoulders. Each brushstroke was an act of catharsis, releasing the pent-up feelings she’d been holding inside. She lost

track of time, completely absorbed in her painting.

When she finally stepped back from the canvas, the sun was setting, casting a golden glow over the room. Beatrice gasped softly as she took in her work.

The painting was unlike anything she'd ever created before. It was raw, emotional, and deeply personal. At its center was a figure—clearly her—surrounded by swirling colors and abstract shapes that somehow managed to convey the complexity of her current situation.

Catherine moved to stand beside her, her eyes wide with awe. “Beatrice,” she breathed, “it’s magnificent. I’ve never seen anything quite like it.”

Beatrice felt tears welling up in her eyes, but for the first time in days, they were tears of relief rather than sorrow. “I feel lighter,” she murmured softly. “As if I’ve poured all my turmoil into this painting.”

Catherine squeezed her hand. “That’s exactly what you’ve done, my dear. You’ve reclaimed your art, your voice. This is the true Beatrice, not the mask of Eric Westback.”

As Beatrice stared at her creation, she felt a renewed sense of purpose. This painting represented her truth, her journey. It was a reminder of her strength, her passion, and her resilience.

“Thank you, Catherine,” she said, turning to embrace her friend. “You were right. I needed this more than I realized.”

Catherine smiled warmly. “Sometimes we need to return to our roots to find our way forward. This painting is a testament to your spirit, Beatrice. Don’t lose sight of that, no matter what challenges you face.”

Chapter Thirty-Two

“Beatrice!” Kenneth’s voice echoed through the entrance hall, his tone laced with desperation and exhaustion. “Beatrice, where are you?”

Thomas rushed into the hall, his eyes wide with alarm. “Kenneth, what in God’s name are you doing, screaming bloody murder in my home?”

Kenneth ignored him, his gaze frantically searching the hall as he continued to call out, “Beatrice! Please, I need to see you!”

Thomas grabbed him by the shoulders, shaking him slightly. “What’s the matter with you, man? Have you gone mad?”

“I need to see my wife,” Kenneth said, his voice hoarse from hours of riding without rest. “I have to speak with her, to make things right.”

Catherine appeared at the top of the staircase. “Beatrice doesn’t want to see you, Kenneth. She’s made that quite clear.”

Kenneth’s heart clenched, but he refused to back down. “She should tell me that to my face, Catherine. I won’t believe it until I hear it from her lips.”

Catherine shook her head, her hand resting protectively on her swollen belly. “You’ve hurt her deeply, Kenneth. She needs time to heal, to find her strength.”

Kenneth opened his mouth to argue, but Thomas cut him off, his voice low and

warning.

“You will respect my wife’s wishes, Kenneth, and you will respect Beatrice’s need for space. I won’t have you upsetting them further.”

Kenneth clenched his jaw, his hands balling into fists at his sides. He wanted to fight, to demand that he be allowed to see his wife, but the look in Thomas’s eyes made him pause. He knew he was a guest in their home, and he had already pushed the boundaries of propriety by barging in unannounced.

“Fine,” he ground out, his shoulders slumping in defeat. “But I’m not leaving. I’ll stay here until Beatrice is ready to see me.”

Thomas sighed, running a hand through his hair. “Very well. You may stay in the guest wing for tonight. I’ll have a bath drawn for you because, frankly, you smell like a hedgehog that’s rolled through a fishmonger’s stall.”

Kenneth glared at him, but he couldn’t deny the truth of his words. He was filthy, his clothes stained with sweat and dust from the road.

Thomas led him upstairs, his footsteps heavy on the polished wood. Kenneth’s gaze darted to each door they passed, his heart leaping with each one.

Which one is Beatrice’s?

His fingers itched to reach out and knock. But Thomas seemed to read his mind, his voice firm as he spoke, “If Beatrice wants to see you, she’ll come to you, Kenneth. Until then, you’ll respect her need for space.”

Kenneth wanted to argue, to demand that he be allowed to see his wife, but the long journey had rapidly caught up with him. His limbs felt heavy, his eyes gritty with

fatigue.

As Thomas opened the door to the guest room, Kenneth stumbled inside, barely registering the opulent furnishings or the soft glow from the fireplace. He sank onto the bed, his body surrendering to the plush mattress and silken sheets.

I'll rest for a moment. Just a moment, and then I'll find a way to see Beatrice.

But even as the thought crossed his mind, sleep claimed him, dragging him down into a dreamless oblivion. The last image that flashed through his mind was of Beatrice's face, her eyes filled with hurt and betrayal.

Beatrice sat with Catherine in the library, their heads bowed together as they pored over a book of poetry. The morning sun streamed through the tall windows, casting a warm glow over the room.

Despite the events of the previous day, Beatrice found solace in her friend's company, in the familiar comfort of the written word.

Just as Catherine was about to read a particularly moving passage, the butler entered the room, his expression grave. "I apologize for the interruption, Your Grace, but there is a visitor demanding to see the Duchess of Dunford."

Beatrice and Catherine exchanged a curious glance.

"Who is it, Mr. Jameson?" Catherine asked, setting the book aside.

The butler cleared his throat, his discomfort evident. "It is Lady Afferton, Your Grace."

Beatrice felt her stomach sink, a sense of dread washing over her. She had not seen

her mother since her wedding, and the prospect of facing her now, after everything that had happened, filled her with trepidation.

Catherine placed a comforting hand on Beatrice's arm, her eyes filled with understanding. "We will face her together, my dear. You are not alone."

"You do not have to do this, Cathy. Especially with everything that happened with Patrick, I feel?—"

"No, Bea. You are my friend. What happened with Patrick is in the past. He is gone now. But you are here with me, and what kind of friend would I be if I let you do this alone?"

A smile formed on Beatrice's lips.

"Thank you, my friend."

"No need to. You're my best friend, and I love you. And I will not allow anyone I love to face their battles alone," Catherine said and pulled her into a hug, squeezing her.

Beatrice squeezed back as lightly as she could, considering her condition.

"Oh, for goodness's sake, Bea, I am pregnant, not made of twigs," Catherine teased.

Beatrice chuckled, some of the tension already leaving her body. She was so grateful for that.

After they pulled back, Beatrice took a deep breath, steeling herself for the confrontation to come.

“All right. I’m ready,” she told Catherine.

The Duchess of Newden nodded to Mr. Jameson. “Please show her to the parlor. We will be there shortly.”

As they made their way to the parlor, Beatrice could hear her mother’s shrill voice echoing through the halls, her tone laced with anger and disapproval. She braced herself, jutting her chin with a quiet resolve.

Lady Afferton stood in the center of the room, her posture rigid and her face twisted with rage.

“Beatrice!” she snapped as Beatrice and Catherine entered. “How dare you behave in such a manner? All of London is whispering about how you left your husband’s home in a hurry, and then the Duke ran after you on a horse like a madman. How dare you behave this way and tarnish our family name like that? You are a terrible daughter and an even worse duchess!”

Beatrice flinched at her mother’s words, the familiar sting of criticism cutting deep. But before she could respond, Catherine stepped forward, her eyes flashing with indignation.

“Lady Afferton, I must ask you to lower your voice. This is my home, and I will not tolerate such disrespect towards my guests.”

Lady Afferton rounded on Catherine, her face contorted with fury. “You! This is all your fault! If it weren’t for you, my son would not be in exile. You ruined him, and now, you’re ruining my daughter with your influence!”

Beatrice felt a surge of anger rise within her, a testament to the strength her friend’s presence gave her.

She moved to stand beside Catherine, her voice firm and unwavering. “Enough, Mother! How dare you speak to my friend that way? Have you no respect for her condition?”

Lady Afferton’s eyes widened, flickering with shock at her daughter’s commanding tone.

Beatrice seized the moment, stepping forward. “And how dare you criticize me when Patrick is the one who has done the most abominable things?”

Her voice shook with years of pent-up anger.

“I have worked ceaselessly over the past year to take care of you. I was the one who pleaded with our relatives to take us in, I was the one who funded our lodgings—how do you think they managed to accommodate us, when they also struggled to find means? Did you think Patrick was the one doing all that?”

Lady Afferton gulped.

“No. Your dear son keeps drinking and whoring through our family’s fortune. He did not send us a penny. Yet all you did was sing his praises. What a good son he was, what a misunderstood man he is. No, Mother, he’s nothing like that. He never cared for anyone but himself.”

The words spilled out of her like a torrent shattering through a dam.

“I have done nothing but follow your orders all my life, but I never received a single kind word from you, let alone love! God forbid, you showed me any affection. Your ‘prodigal’ daughter. But you know what? I am done with you. If you so wish to be reunited with your precious son, go to him and see how he treats you!”

Lady Afferton paced the room, her skirts swishing angrily around her feet. “Do you think your precious Duke will stand by you when he learns of your true nature? When he sees what a shameless child you truly are?”

Beatrice could feel the heat of fury emanating from Catherine. She glanced over at her friend, giving her a look that told her she could handle her mother.

Beatrice stood her ground, her voice steady despite her trembling hands. “Kenneth knows everything about me, Mother. Unlike you, he accepts me for who I am.”

Lady Afferton laughed, a harsh, bitter sound. “God, how coddled you are. You are a naïve child, Beatrice. You are nothing but?—”

“Enough,” Kenneth’s voice came from the doorway, and Beatrice turned to its direction.

He’d entered the parlor alongside Thomas, their faces etched with concern. They had heard the raised voices from above and come to investigate.

Lady Afferton opened her mouth, ready to continue her tirade, when Kenneth stopped her again.

“You will not speak to my wife in such a manner. She is the Duchess of Dunford, and you will show her respect,” he said with a stern expression.

Lady Afferton sputtered, her face flushing an ugly shade of red. “How dare you!”

Kenneth’s eyes narrowed. “No, how dare you! Your daughter is an exemplary woman. A far better person than you can ever hope to be.”

“Exemplary?” Lady Afferton scoffed.

Kenneth growled, “Yes. Exemplary. And the more I speak with you, Lady Afferton, the more certain I am she takes everything after her father.”

Lady Afferton gasped, “You?—”

“You have said enough. As of now, I will provide you with funds to purchase a residence outside the country and live comfortably. But if you ever come near Beatrice again, I will cut you off, leaving you to a fate of your own making... or worse, your son’s,” he asserted.

A deafening silence followed his pronouncement.

Lady Afferton stood there, her mouth agape, unable to find her voice in the face of such a threat.

Thomas cleared his throat.

“Jameson, please show Lady Afferton out. I’m afraid she has upset all of us more than enough, especially my dear wife in her delicate condition.”

With a curt nod, the butler ushered a flabbergasted Lady Afferton out of the room.

“Goodbye, Mother,” Beatrice said.

As Prudence disappeared into the corridor, Beatrice felt the tension drain from her body, leaving her feeling strangely light.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Kenneth stood facing Beatrice, his heart pounding in his chest as he gazed into her eyes.

The air between them crackled with unspoken emotions, the weight of their shared history hanging heavy in the air.

Then, Beatrice turned to Catherine. “I am sorry about that, Cathy. I did not mean to upset you in your home, especially in your condition?—”

“Nonsense. No harm was done to me, Bea. I am simply glad you are rid of that foul woman. I know she’s your mother and all, but she treats you abominably,” Catherine said, taking Beatrice’s hand into hers.

“Yes. I am glad she’s left too,” Beatrice admitted, “Are you certain you’re all right?”

“Absolutely. Don’t you worry about me.” Her friend gave her a reassuring smile and then glanced to the direction where Kenneth and Thomas were standing.

Beatrice mirrored her movement, and she caught Kenneth’s gaze again.

Thomas, sensing their need for privacy, gently guided Catherine out of the room.

“Come, my love,” he murmured, his hand resting protectively on the small of her back. “Let us give them a moment alone.”

As the door closed softly behind them, Kenneth and Beatrice remained still, their eyes locked in a silent conversation. The distant sounds of servants moving about the house filtered through the walls, a reminder of the world outside the room.

Beatrice cleared her throat, breaking the spell.

“Perhaps we should find somewhere more private to talk,” she suggested, her voice soft but steady.

“Yes,” Kenneth nodded, following her lead as she guided him up the stairs and into the library.

The room was bathed in warm sunlight, the scent of leather-bound books and the faint traces of oil paint hanging in the air.

As they entered, Kenneth’s gaze fell on a canvas set up near the window, a sketch resting on the easel. Beatrice noticed his curiosity and smiled, moving to stand beside him.

“Catherine wanted to see my work,” she explained, lightly trailing her fingers over the rough texture of the canvas. “I was just beginning to show her when...” she trailed off, the events of the morning still fresh in her mind.

“Beatrice, I need to explain?—”

“Kenneth, about what happened?—”

They stopped, looking at each other.

“Please, you go ahead,” Kenneth urged.

Beatrice took a deep breath, her hands trembling slightly as she looked up at him. “There’s something I need to tell you, Kenneth. About Lord Eastfold and... and my paintings.”

Kenneth’s jaw tightened, but before he could speak, she held up a hand, her eyes pleading.

“Please, let me finish. I need to get this out.”

He nodded, his posture stiff but attentive.

Beatrice wrung her hands, her voice quavering. “I tried to confront Eastfold, to end his blackmail. But he... he refused. He demanded even more paintings with impossible deadlines.” Her voice broke. “I’ve been painting non-stop, and I hate it, Kenneth. I hate what it’s become.”

Kenneth started to interrupt, his face darkening with anger, but Beatrice pressed on.

“Please, let me finish,” she begged, tears welling up in her eyes. “I need you to understand. My art... it used to be my solace, my home. But now it feels tainted, corrupted. Eastfold sees it as nothing but a commodity to be sold to the highest bidder.” She wrapped her arms around herself, looking small and vulnerable. “I feel so alone, Kenneth. So trapped.”

Kenneth’s expression softened, his anger melting into concern. He stepped forward, gently taking her hands in his.

“Oh, Beatrice,” he murmured. “I had no idea. I’m so sorry you’ve been going through this alone.” He took a deep breath, his thumbs rubbing soothing circles on her palms. “But you don’t have to worry about Eastfold anymore. I’ve taken care of him.”

Beatrice's eyes widened, a flicker of concern crossing her face. "What do you mean?"

Kenneth smiled reassuringly. "I confronted him, made it clear that his blackmail and threats would no longer be tolerated. I told him that if he ever dared to contact you again, to try to coerce or manipulate you, he would deeply regret it."

He paused, his gaze intense with love and conviction. "He won't bother you again, Beatrice. You're free to paint as you wish... or not paint at all if that's what you want."

Beatrice stared at him, her eyes shining with unshed tears.

"You did that for me?" she whispered, her voice trembling with emotion.

Kenneth nodded, pulling her closer. "I would do anything for you, Beatrice. Anything to protect you and ensure your happiness and safety."

She tentatively raised her hand to his cheek, and he leaned into her touch, his eyes fluttering shut for a moment.

"And about Lady Featherwell," he continued, his voice low and earnest. "I need you to know that I turned her down. I would never, ever betray you like that."

Beatrice felt a rush of relief, a knot of tension unraveling in her stomach. "I believe you. I do. I just... when I heard her proposition, heard the way she spoke about me... it hurt. It made me doubt myself, doubt us."

Kenneth wrapped his arms around her, pulling her closer. "Never doubt us, Beatrice. You're the only woman I want—the only one I'll ever want."

She looked up at him, her eyes shining with unshed tears. “You’re the only man I want, too. Even when you’re being an insufferably stubborn, exasperatingly jealous brute.”

He laughed softly, pressing a kiss to her forehead. “I know I can be... difficult. Stubborn. Infuriatingly so, at times. But it’s only because I love you so much, because I’m so terrified of losing you.”

Beatrice started to protest, but he continued.

“Your stubbornness, your fire... it’s part of why I fell in love with you. You challenge me, you push me, you make me want to be a better man. For you, for us, for our future.”

She smiled, a watery laugh escaping her lips. “I do enjoy provoking you, but only because I know, deep down, that you’re the best man I’ve ever known. The only man I’ll ever love.”

Kenneth’s heart swelled, a wave of emotion crashing over him. “I love you, Beatrice. More than words can say. And I promise, from this day forward, to trust you and to believe in us, whatever challenges may come.”

Beatrice nodded, her own vow falling from her lips. “And I promise to always be honest with you and to never let doubt or fear come between us again.”

They sealed their promises with a kiss.

Beatrice reached out, dipping her fingertip into the paint that lay beside the canvas. With a steady hand, she drew an arrow on her chest, pointing directly to her heart.

“This is where you are, Kenneth,” she whispered, her voice trembling with emotion.

“In my heart. Always.”

Kenneth buried his face in her hair, breathing in her scent, the warmth of her body against his a balm to his battered soul.

“You’re forever captured in my heart, Beatrice. I won’t ever drive you away again,” he murmured, his voice thick with emotion. “I promise to cherish and protect what we have.”

Beatrice pulled back slightly, her eyes shining with love and forgiveness. “And I promise to stand by your side, loving you fiercely, no matter what challenges we face.”

He nodded, his forehead resting against hers.

“Together,” he echoed, the word a vow, a promise of a future filled with love and understanding.

Then, with a tenderness that stole her breath, he lowered his head and captured her lips with his own. The kiss was soft, reverent, a sealing of the bond between them.

He pulled back slightly, his hand cupping her cheek as he gazed into her eyes. “I love you, Beatrice. More than words can say.”

She smiled, her hand coming up to cover his. “And I love you, Kenneth. With every beat of my heart.”

As they stood there, lost in each other’s eyes, in the steady hum of love and possibility that flowed between them, Kenneth felt something he had once thought impossible. He felt whole, complete, and utterly at peace.

This was where he belonged. And everything—every moment of pain and heartache, every misunderstanding and every tear—had been worth it, just to bring him to this moment. To bring him home to the woman who held his heart and soul in the palm of her hand.

He leaned down, capturing her lips with his once more, pouring every ounce of his love, his devotion, into the kiss.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:16 am

Ten Months Later

The sun shone brightly over Hyde Park, casting a warm glow on the lush greenery and the elegantly dressed ladies and gentlemen strolling along the paths. Among them were the Duke and Duchess of Dunford, walking arm in arm with contented smiles on their faces.

Beside them, the Duke and Duchess of Newden pushed a pram containing their nine-month-old son, George. The infant cooed and gurgled, his tiny hands reaching up to grasp at the ribbons dangling from the pram's hood.

"He's grown so much since we last saw him," Beatrice remarked, leaning over to peek at the baby. "And he's just as adorable as ever."

Catherine beamed with motherly pride. "He's quite the little charmer, just like his father."

Thomas chuckled, his eyes twinkling with mirth. "I'll take that as a compliment, my dear."

The group was joined by Lady Bernmere and the Dowager Duchess of Newden, both ladies resplendent in their fashionable walking attire. They fell into step with the two couples, their faces alight with the latest gossip.

"Have you heard the news about Eric Westback?" Lady Bernmere asked, her tone conspiratorial. "He's become the most sought-after artist in the ton. Everyone is clamoring for a piece of his work."

Beatrice exchanged a secret smile with Kenneth, her heart swelling with pride. “Is that so? How wonderful for him.”

The Dowager Duchess nodded, her expression one of smug satisfaction. “Indeed. I always knew he had talent. It’s no surprise that the rest of Society has finally caught on.”

Kenneth squeezed Beatrice’s hand, a silent gesture of support and understanding. “It seems Mr. Westback’s star is on the rise,” he said, his voice warm with affection. “I’m sure he’ll continue to dazzle us all with his brilliant creations.”

Lady Bernmere leaned in, her eyes sparkling with mischief. “Speaking of dazzling creations, have you heard about Lady Featherwell and Lord Eastfold?”

Beatrice’s brow furrowed, a flicker of unease crossing her face at the mention of Eastfold’s name. “No, what about them?”

The Dowager Duchess smirked, fluttering her fan in front of her face. “They were caught in a most compromising position at Lady Ashton’s ball last month. Quite the scandal, as you can imagine.”

Lady Bernmere nodded. “They had no choice but to marry, of course. And from what I hear, they’re making each other thoroughly miserable.”

Kenneth chuckled, shaking his head. “It seems they’ve found their perfect match, then. A pair of vipers, the both of them.”

Beatrice shuddered, remembering her unpleasant dealings with Eastfold. “I can’t say I’m surprised. They deserve each other.”

Catherine, sensing her friend’s discomfort, changed the subject. “Beatrice, have you

heard anything from your mother or brother recently?”

Beatrice shook her head, a peaceful smile playing on her lips. “No, and I can’t say I’m disappointed. It’s been the most tranquil ten months of my life, not having to deal with their constant demands and criticisms.”

Kenneth pulled her closer, pressing a kiss to her temple. “You’ve been thriving, my love. Free from their toxic influence, you’ve blossomed into the strong, confident woman I always knew you were.”

Beatrice leaned into him, her heart full to bursting. “Thanks to you, Kenneth. Your love and support have meant everything to me.”

Kenneth grinned, his eyes twinkling with mischief. “And here I thought it was my devilishly handsome looks and irresistible charm that won you over.”

Beatrice laughed, swatting his chest playfully. “Well, those certainly didn’t hurt. But it was your kind heart and unwavering faith in me that truly won my affections.”

“Ah, so you admit you find me irresistible?” Kenneth teased, his hand moving to the small of her back, pulling her closer.

Beatrice raised an eyebrow, a coy smile playing on her lips. “I never said that, darling. But I will concede that you’re not entirely without your charms.”

Kenneth chuckled, leaning in to whisper in her ear, “Not entirely without my charms? My dear wife, you wound me. Perhaps I should demonstrate just how charming I can be when we’re alone later.”

Beatrice felt a delicious shiver run down her spine, her cheeks flushing at the promise in his voice. “I look forward to it, husband mine.”

Their flirtatious exchange was interrupted by the giggles of Lady Bernmere and the Dowager Duchess, who had apparently overheard their conversation.

“Oh, you two!” Lady Bernmere exclaimed, her eyes dancing with amusement. “Still as besotted as the day you got married. It warms my heart to see it.”

The Dowager Duchess nodded, a fond smile on her face. “Indeed, it does. I must say, from the moment I saw Beatrice, I had a feeling that she would be a perfect match for our Kenneth.”

Kenneth raised an eyebrow, a wry grin tugging at his lips. “Is that so, Duchess? And here I thought you were just enjoying the entertainment of watching us navigate our marriage.”

The Dowager Duchess chuckled, waving a dismissive hand. “Oh, there was certainly an element of that, my dear. But I could see the potential between you, even if you couldn’t see it yourselves at first.”

Lady Bernmere nodded in agreement. “Quite right. I remember the way they challenged each other, the spark of passion in their debates. It was only a matter of time before that spark ignited into something more.”

Beatrice blushed, leaning into Kenneth’s embrace. “Well, I suppose we have you both to thank for your keen observations and your unwavering support.”

Kenneth pressed a kiss to her temple, his eyes soft with affection. “Indeed, we do. Though I must admit, I never would have guessed that our early disagreements would lead us to this point.”

“Ah, but that’s the beauty of love, my boy,” the Dowager Duchess said, her tone wistful. “It has a way of sneaking up on you when you least expect it.”

Lady Bernmere sighed, a faraway look in her eyes. “Too true, Your Grace. Why, I remember when my dear husband and I first met. We couldn’t stand each other! But then, one day...”

As she launched into the tale of her own courtship, Beatrice and Kenneth exchanged a smile.

As the group continued their stroll through Hyde Park, Beatrice and Catherine found themselves falling a few steps behind the others. The Dowager Duchess and Lady Bernmere were engrossed in a lively discussion about the latest fashions while Kenneth and Thomas walked ahead, pushing baby George’s pram and talking animatedly about estate matters.

Catherine glanced at Beatrice, a concerned expression on her face. “Beatrice, I know you said you haven’t heard from your mother or brother, but have you had any news of them at all? I hate to think of you worrying about them, even after everything that happened.”

Beatrice sighed, a wry smile tugging at her lips. “Well, I haven’t had any direct contact, but you know how gossip travels. Apparently, they’ve taken up residence in a leaky cottage somewhere in France, and they’re about as happy as two cats in a rainstorm.”

Catherine raised an eyebrow, a hint of amusement in her eyes. “A leaky cottage? My, how the mighty have fallen.”

Beatrice shrugged, “I suppose it’s a fitting end for them, after all the misery they caused. But I can’t bring myself to feel sorry for them. They made their choices, and now, they must live with the consequences.”

Catherine nodded, linking their arms in a gesture of support. “You’re right, of course.

And you've moved on, built a beautiful life with Kenneth. Speaking of which, how are things between you two? Marriage can be quite the adventure as I've learned."

Beatrice's face softened, a warm glow of happiness spreading across her features. "Oh, Catherine, I couldn't ask for a better husband. Kenneth is my rock, my partner in every sense of the word. He supports me in everything, including my work as Eric Westback."

Catherine grinned, her eyes sparkling with mischief. "Ah, yes, the elusive Mr. Westback. How does it feel to be the talk of the ton, even if they don't know it's you?"

Beatrice laughed, a blush staining her cheeks. "It's surreal, honestly. To hear people gushing over my work, speculating about the identity of the mysterious artist... it's both thrilling and a bit overwhelming."

"But you deserve every bit of the praise, Beatrice," Catherine said earnestly. "Your talent is extraordinary, and I'm so glad the world is finally recognizing it, even if they don't know the true genius behind the brush."

Beatrice squeezed her friend's arm, her heart full of gratitude. "Thank you, Catherine. Your support means the world to me. And having Kenneth by my side, cheering me on every step of the way... it's more than I ever could have dreamed of."

Catherine sighed contentedly, her gaze drifting to Thomas, who was now making faces at baby George, eliciting delighted giggles from the infant. "Isn't it wonderful, Beatrice? To have found our perfect matches, the men who complete us in every way?"

Beatrice followed her gaze, her smile widening as she watched Kenneth and Thomas's antics. "It is, Catherine. I wake up every morning feeling like the luckiest

woman in the world. And to think, it all started with a scandalous encounter in a bedchamber!”

The two women dissolved into laughter, their mirth ringing out across the park. Kenneth and Thomas glanced back at them, their faces splitting into grins at the sight of their wives’ joy.

“Oi, you two!” Thomas called out, beckoning them over. “Stop gossiping, and come join us! George is putting on quite the show, and you’re missing it!”

Catherine rolled her eyes good-naturedly, quickening her pace to catch up to her husband. “Coming, my love! Though I daresay our conversation was far more scintillating than any baby’s antics!”

Kenneth fell into step with Beatrice, his hand finding hers and twining their fingers together. “And what were you two lovely ladies discussing so intently?” he asked, his tone teasing.

Beatrice leaned into him, her head resting on his shoulder. “Oh, just how incredibly fortunate we are to have married such wonderful men,” she replied, her voice soft with affection.

Kenneth pressed a kiss to her temple, his heart swelling with love. “I assure you, my darling, the feeling is entirely mutual.”

Thomas, who had been quietly listening to the conversation, suddenly perked up. “Oh, I almost forgot! I received a letter from Philip the other day. He says he’s planning to return to England soon and for good this time.”

Kenneth raised an eyebrow, surprise and curiosity flashing across his face. “Really? That’s quite the news. Philip has always been such a free spirit, always chasing the

next adventure.”

Beatrice looked between the two men, a hint of confusion in her eyes. “Philip? I don’t believe I’ve had the pleasure of meeting him.”

Thomas smiled at her warmly. “Philip is the Duke of Northbridge, an old friend of ours from our school days. He’s been traveling the world for the past few years, seeking out new experiences and cultures.”

Kenneth chuckled, shaking his head fondly. “He’s always been a bit of a wanderer, never content to stay in one place for too long. It’s hard to imagine him settling down.”

Thomas nodded, a knowing smile playing on his lips. “Yes, it’s rather intriguing, isn’t it? He hinted that he might have found a reason to settle down, but he didn’t elaborate.”

Beatrice’s curiosity was piqued. “A reason to settle down? How mysterious! I wonder what, or perhaps who, could have captured his heart.”

Catherine grinned, bouncing little George in her arms. “Perhaps he’s found his own Beatrice, someone who makes him want to put down roots and build a life together.”

Beatrice blushed, glancing up at Kenneth with a tender smile. “If that’s the case, then I wish him all the happiness in the world. There’s nothing quite like finding the love of your life.”

As the conversation continued, Beatrice found herself growing increasingly uncomfortable. A wave of nausea washed over her, and she felt a sudden need to return home.

“Kenneth,” she said softly, placing a hand on his arm, “would you mind if we found a coach and returned to the townhouse? I’m feeling a bit unwell.”

Kenneth furrowed his brow in concern, and he immediately turned to face her, his hands grasping her shoulders. “Of course, my love. What’s wrong? Are you ill? Should we call for a doctor?”

Beatrice shook her head, a small, exasperated smile tugging at her lips. “No, no, I don’t think that’s necessary. I just need to rest for a bit.”

But Kenneth was not to be dissuaded. He fussed over her, his hands fluttering around her as if she were made of glass.

“Are you sure? Perhaps we should have you examined, just to be safe. I won’t take any chances with your health.”

Beatrice sighed, her patience wearing thin. “Kenneth, really, I’m fine. I just need to?—”

But he cut her off, his voice rising with anxiety. “No, I insist. We’ll send for the doctor as soon as we return home. I won’t have you falling ill on my watch.”

Beatrice’s temper flared, her frustration boiling over. “Kenneth, stop! I’m not ill, I’m pregnant!”

A stunned silence fell over the group, everyone staring at Beatrice with wide, surprised eyes.

Kenneth’s mouth fell open.

“Pregnant?” he whispered, his voice trembling with emotion. “You’re... we’re going

to have a baby?”

Beatrice nodded, her anger melting away at the look of pure joy on her husband's face. “Yes, my love. We're going to be parents.”

Kenneth let out a whoop of delight, swooping her up into his arms and twirling her around. “A baby! Oh, Beatrice, this is the most wonderful news!”

The others gathered around them, offering their congratulations and well wishes.

Catherine hugged Beatrice tightly, tears of happiness shining in her eyes. “I'm so thrilled for you both,” she said softly. “You're going to be amazing parents.”

As the news sank in, as the reality of their impending parenthood settled over them, Beatrice and Kenneth found themselves lost in each other's eyes, their hearts full to bursting with love and anticipation.

“I love you,” Kenneth murmured, his hand resting gently on Beatrice's still-flat stomach. “I love you both more than I ever thought possible.”

Beatrice smiled, her own eyes glistening with tears of joy. “And we love you, Kenneth. You're going to be the most wonderful father.”

After a flurry of hugs, congratulations, and well wishes from their friends and family, Kenneth and Beatrice managed to extract themselves from the group and hail a carriage. As they settled into the plush seats, Kenneth pulled her close, his arm wrapping around her shoulders.

“I can't believe it,” he murmured, his free hand coming to rest on her stomach. “A baby. Our baby.”

Beatrice smiled, leaning into his embrace. “It feels like a dream, doesn’t it? A wonderful, beautiful dream.”

Kenneth pressed a kiss to her temple, his lips lingering on her skin. “A dream come true, my love. You’ve already made me the happiest man on earth, and now, you’ve given me the greatest gift of all.”

As the carriage wound its way through the streets of London, the couple sat in contented silence, basking in the glow of their newfound joy. When they finally arrived at their townhouse, Kenneth helped Beatrice down from the carriage, his hands lingering on her waist a moment longer than necessary.

They entered the house, the servants greeting them with polite nods and curtsies. But Kenneth barely noticed, his attention solely focused on the woman by his side. As soon as they were alone in the privacy of their bedchamber, he pulled Beatrice into his arms, his lips capturing hers in a searing kiss.

Beatrice melted into him, her hands sliding up his chest to wrap around his neck. She poured all her love, all her joy and excitement, into the kiss, her body molding to his in a way that felt both familiar and thrillingly new.

Kenneth’s hands roamed over her back, his touch igniting sparks of desire beneath her skin. He walked her backwards until the back of her knees hit the edge of the bed, then lowered her gently onto the soft mattress.

Breaking the kiss, he hovered over her, his eyes dark with passion and adoration. “You are so beautiful,” he whispered, his fingers tracing the delicate curve of her cheek. “So strong, so brilliant, so utterly perfect.”

Beatrice’s heart swelled, her love for this man threatening to overwhelm her. “I’m only perfect because I have you by my side,” she murmured, cupping his face in her

hands. “You make me better, Kenneth. In every way possible.”

He captured her lips again, the kiss deep and full of promise. His hands began to wander, skimming over her curves with a reverence that made her shiver. Beatrice arched into his touch, her own hands exploring the hard planes of his back, the rippling muscles that flexed beneath her fingers.

Lost in each other, in the heady rush of love and desire, they took their time, savoring each kiss, each caress. The outside world faded away, the only reality the cocoon of their embrace, the steady beating of their hearts.

And later, as they lay tangled together, their desires sated and their souls entwined, Beatrice knew that this was just the beginning of a lifetime of moments like these.

Moments of passion and tenderness, of laughter and tears, of the kind of love that could weather any storm and emerge stronger than ever.

She snuggled closer to Kenneth, her head resting on his chest, his heartbeat a soothing lullaby beneath her ear. “I love you,” she whispered, her voice heavy with contentment. “More than words can say.”

Kenneth’s arms tightened around her, his lips brushing the top of her head. “And I love you, Beatrice. With every fiber of my being, every beat of my heart.”

As they drifted off to sleep, secure in the knowledge of their love and the bright future that lay ahead, Beatrice felt a sense of peace wash over her.

This was where she belonged. Here, in the arms of the man she loved, the man who had seen past her secrets and her scars, who loved her wholly and unconditionally.

Kenneth strode through the halls of Dunford Castle, a smile playing on his lips as he

sought out his wife. He knew exactly where to find her—the east-facing morning room had become Beatrice’s sanctuary, her creative haven where Eric Westback’s latest masterpieces came to life.

As he approached the partially open door, he paused, taking a moment to observe her unnoticed. Sunlight streamed through the large windows, illuminating the room and casting a warm glow on Beatrice as she stood before an easel, her brow furrowed in concentration, her brush moving with confident strokes across the canvas.

The scene before him was a perfect blend of the old and the new—Beatrice, with her swollen belly visible beneath her paint-stained smock, stood amidst the centuries-old grandeur of Dunford Castle. The juxtaposition of her modern artistry against the backdrop of ancient tapestries and family portraits was not lost on Kenneth. His breath caught in his throat as he took in the sight of her.

Her caramel-blond hair was piled atop her head in a messy bun, tendrils escaping to frame her face. A smudge of blue paint adorned her cheek, and her eyes sparkled with the fire of creation. The large windows of the morning room not only provided ample light for her work but also offered a stunning view of the Dunford estate’s manicured gardens and rolling hills beyond.

To Kenneth, she had never looked more beautiful, more at home in the ancestral seat of the Dukes of Dunford.

The painting before her was a departure from Eric Westback’s earlier works. Gone were the rigid landscapes and formal portraits that had once graced the walls of London’s finest homes. In their place was an explosion of color and emotion, abstract forms that seemed to dance across the canvas, evoking feelings rather than depicting concrete scenes. It was daring, innovative, and utterly breathtaking.

Unable to hold back any longer, Kenneth pushed the door open fully and stepped into

the room.

“I do believe Eric Westback has outdone himself this time,” he said softly, his voice echoing slightly in the high-ceilinged room.

Beatrice turned around, her face lighting up at the sight of him. “Kenneth! I didn’t hear you come in.” She set down her brush and palette, moving to meet him.

He enveloped her in his arms, mindful of her swollen belly, and pressed a tender kiss to her forehead. The scent of oil paints mingled with her sweet fragrance, a combination he had come to associate with home and happiness.

“I didn’t want to disturb your creative flow, but I couldn’t stay away for long.”

Beatrice laughed, a sound that never failed to warm his heart and seemed to breathe new life into the ancient walls of Dunford Castle. “Well, I’m glad you’re here. Your son or daughter has been quite active today. I think we may have a future dancer on our hands.”

Kenneth’s hand moved to rest on her belly, a look of wonder crossing his face as he felt a strong kick against his palm.

“I still can’t believe we’re going to be parents,” he murmured. “A new generation of Spencers to grace these halls.”

“Speaking of which,” Beatrice said, a mischievous glint in her eyes, “have you given any more thought to names?”

Kenneth groaned. “Oh no, not this again. I thought we’d settled this argument at Aunt Marjorie’s dinner party.”

Beatrice's laughter filled the room once more, echoing off the wood-paneled walls. "You mean when you insisted that if it's a boy, we should name him Horatio Fitzwilliam Spencer?"

"It's a strong name!" Kenneth protested, trying and failing to keep a straight face. "A name fit for a future Duke of Dunford."

"It's a name fit for a character in one of Shakespeare's more ridiculous comedies," Beatrice retorted, her eyes dancing with mirth. "Besides, you're not even the second. Where did you get 'the Third' from?"

Kenneth shrugged, pulling her closer. "It sounded more impressive that way. More... ducal."

"Well, my love," Beatrice said, rising on her tiptoes to press a quick kiss to his lips, "I'm afraid I must put my foot down. No child of mine will be saddled with Horatio Fitzwilliam as a name, duke or not."

"No?" Kenneth asked, his hands moving to her waist. "And what would you suggest, oh wise and talented wife of mine?"

Beatrice pretended to consider for a moment, her gaze drifting to the family portraits lining the walls. "Well, if it's a girl, I've always been partial to Eugenia Hildegard Spencer."

Kenneth's eyebrows shot up. "Eugenia Hildegard? And you thought Horatio Fitzwilliam was bad? I'm not sure even these sturdy old walls could contain such a name."

"I'm only teasing, you goose." Beatrice laughed, swatting his chest playfully. "Though the look on your face was priceless. It would have made a wonderful

portrait to add to our gallery.”

Kenneth chuckled, shaking his head in amusement. “You, my dear, are incorrigible. What am I going to do with you?”

“Love me forever?” Beatrice suggested, her eyes softening as she gazed up at him, the strength of their bond seeming to add warmth to the grand but sometimes imposing castle.

“Always,” Kenneth murmured, leaning down to capture her lips in a tender kiss. As they parted, he rested his forehead against hers. “Though I still think Horatio Fitzwilliam has a certain ring to it. It would certainly stand out in the family records.”

Beatrice rolled her eyes fondly. “Keep dreaming, my love. Keep dreaming.”

As they stood there, wrapped in each other’s arms, surrounded by the vibrant canvases that represented Beatrice’s evolving artistry and the centuries of Spencer history, Kenneth felt a profound sense of contentment wash over him.

Whatever name they chose, whatever challenges lay ahead, he knew that together, they could face anything.

And as Eric Westback’s latest masterpiece dried on the easel behind them, a symbol of Beatrice’s growth and their shared secret, Kenneth silently vowed to always support her dreams, to protect her art, and to love her with every fiber of his being.

Beatrice stood before the easel in the morning room, her paintbrush gliding across the canvas with practiced ease. The light from the large windows bathed the room in a soft, golden glow, illuminating her latest work.

Despite the admonitions of Kenneth, Mrs. Whitfield, and her lady’s maid, Anna,

Beatrice found solace in her art, even in the late stages of her pregnancy.

“Your Grace,” Anna suggested, her tone gentle but firm, “perhaps it’s time to rest. You’ve been painting for hours, and the doctor did say?—”

“I know what the doctor said,” Beatrice interrupted, her hand instinctively moving to her swollen belly. “But lying in bed all day exhausts me more than painting ever could. I feel so restless, so confined.”

Anna sighed, a look of understanding crossing her face. “I know it’s not easy, Your Grace. But you must think of the baby. And yourself.”

Beatrice set down her paintbrush, turning to face her maid. “I am thinking of the baby, Anna. Painting calms me, soothes my nerves. And a calm mother means a calm child, doesn’t it?”

Just as Anna opened her mouth to respond, Beatrice felt a sudden twinge in her abdomen. She gasped, her hand flying to her stomach.

“Anna,” she whispered, her eyes widening, “I think it’s time.”

Anna’s eyes widened, and she immediately sprang into action. She helped Beatrice to the chaise longue, propping pillows behind her back for support.

“I’ll fetch Mrs. Whitfield and send for the doctor,” she said, her voice trembling with excitement and nerves. “Just stay calm, Your Grace. Everything will be all right.”

As Anna hurried out of the room, Beatrice leaned back against the pillows, her heart racing. This was it, the moment she had been waiting for, the moment that would change their lives forever.

Another contraction rippled through her, stronger this time, and she gritted her teeth against the pain.

The next few hours passed in a blur of activity. Mrs. Whitfield arrived, her face a mask of calm efficiency as she took charge of the situation. The doctor came soon after, his black bag in hand and his sleeves rolled up to his elbows. Maids scurried in and out of the room, carrying towels and basins of hot water, their faces flushed with excitement.

Through it all, Beatrice focused on her breathing, on the life growing inside her, on the love she already felt for this tiny being she had yet to meet. She thought of Kenneth, of the joy and wonder that would fill his eyes when he held their child for the first time.

The thought gave her strength, helped her through the pain and the fear. And then, in a moment of blinding clarity, it was over.

A thin, reedy cry filled the room, and Beatrice felt tears of joy and relief coursing down her cheeks.

“Is it...?” she whispered, her voice hoarse.

“A boy, Your Grace,” Mrs. Whitfield said, her own eyes suspiciously bright. “A healthy, beautiful baby boy.”

Beatrice closed her eyes, a smile of pure happiness spreading across her face. A son. They had a son.

A soft knock at the door drew her attention, and she looked up to see Kenneth standing in the doorway.

“Beatrice,” he whispered, his voice trembling, “are you... Is the baby...?”

“Come and see for yourself,” she said, holding out her hand to him.

Kenneth crossed the room in three long strides, his hand finding hers and gripping it tightly. He looked down at the bundle in her arms, his eyes widening as he took in the sight of their son.

“Oh, Beatrice,” he breathed, tears spilling down his cheeks, “he’s perfect.”

Beatrice smiled, leaning against him. “He is, isn’t he? Our little Henry.”

Kenneth’s head snapped up, his eyes meeting hers. “Henry? Not Horatio?”

Beatrice laughed, the sound weak but filled with joy. “No, my love. I think we can save Horatio for the next one.”

Kenneth grinned, pressing a kiss to her forehead. “As you wish, my darling. As you wish.”

As they sat there, cradling their newborn son between them, Beatrice felt a sense of peace and contentment wash over her. This, right here, was what mattered most. Family, love, the unbreakable bond that tied them together.

This was home. And it always would be.

Forever and always.

The End?

Chapter One

“O h dear!” Nancy cried out as her ball sailed neatly past the hoop. “Not again.”

“If you are not having fun, Nancy, we can stop,” Cecilia called over, though she was loath to. Even against a player as sweet-tempered and uncompetitive as her best friend, it was difficult not to enjoy a game of pall-mall on such a beautiful day.

“No! I shall soon improve. I am merely out of practice. They did not play pall-mall in Venice.”

“I’d imagine not,” Cecilia teased her. “You’d hit the ball straight into a canal.”

“I would, would not I,” Nancy said mournfully.

With her light brown hair, blue eyes, and petite figure, she looked almost like a porcelain doll—even while pouting. Of course, Nancy never did pout for long.

“Oh, but it is just as well. We were much too busy. I was always accompanying Aunt Mary to some event or the other. Operas, museum outings, monuments. And then in Paris, there was so much shopping to be done—oh! I cannot wait for you to see my new gowns!”

“Nor can I! I expect you’ll be the very height of fashion when the Season begins. You will be setting all of the trends. All the young ladies of the ton will dress according to your fashion, and the men will be swept away by your worldly European beauty.” Cecilia sighed. “Oh, Nance, it sounds just wonderful.”

“You would have loved it, Celie.” Nancy gave her a sympathetic look. “It is not fair, you know. You being stuck here, while your brother gallivants across the continent.”

“Fairness has nothing to do with it. And besides, it has only been two years since Father’s passing. I needed to be here to take care of Mother.”

True, she often was jealous of her older brother’s freedom. But there was no use complaining about it—even as she dreamed of the life she might lead abroad if she’d had the means and motive to go beyond the English borders.

She shook her head and turned back to her friend. “In any case, I have you to regale me with your stories!” She plastered a brave smile onto her face. “When you describe your adventures, you do it so vividly, I feel as though I am seeing it all for myself.”

Nancy placed a gentle hand on her wrist. “You will see it all for yourself,” she said. “I am certain of it.” She brightened, the moment of seriousness passing as a wry smile crept onto her features. “Perhaps on your honeymoon!”

“Nancy!” Cecilia could not help but giggle herself. “I should think that is far off.”

“Not very far off. Celie, you are beautiful, clever, and accomplished. Any man would be pleased to have you as his wife.”

“The question remains as to whether either of us will find a man who we would be pleased to have as a husband,” she replied. “I am both more and less optimistic about my brother’s chances than my own. I promised my father to marry an honorable man, and that I would ensure Zachary found a respectable match of his own. But there is such a shortage of honorable men in town—my brother included—that I doubt either of us will be able to satisfy such promises. I see no options to marry but rakes. And Zachary, it pains me to say, is unlikely to attract an honorable and respectable lady on his own.”

“You worry too much, Cecilia,” Nancy tutted. “I have heard you speak quite fondly of your brother. He cannot be all that terrible, for you to care for him so. And I am certain there are other gentlemen in the ton who will surprise you yet.”

“I hope you are right.”

Though she tried to keep a calm and practical head, Cecilia could not stop hope from fluttering up in her heart. Of course, there were bound to be at least a few gentlemen of honor. But what really ate away at her—what she could never admit to anyone, even Nancy—was that most secret desire: that she should find not only a respectable match but a love match.

Foolish, she knew. In her mind, she held her duty firm and clear. Her father had raised her to be as practical-minded as any man—giving her books, teaching her chess, and even taking her hunting on a few occasions.

Still, she could not stop herself from tumbling into romance novels night after night, when she was sure no one could see.

Cecilia knew it would be difficult enough to find a husband worthy of fulfilling her first promise to her father, without trying to complicate matters further with love. What were the odds she would be able to find both in one man?

“Nancy! Cecilia!” called a voice from the garden entrance.

“Hello, Mother.” As she walked in Susanna Forbes, the Dowager Countess of Lindbury’s direction, Cecilia noticed her mother was not alone. Shielding her eyes, she looked more closely—and then immediately broke out into a run. “Zachary!” she called across the garden.

Her brother hugged her tightly. “Afternoon, sister.” Stepping back, he held her at

arm's length. "I see you haven't gotten any taller in the year since I have left. Though—" He pointed at her nose, pretending to squint at something. "Dear me, are those freckles?"

She swatted his hand away. "Stop it." Immediately she broke back out into a smile and hugged him again. "Oh, we all missed you so very dearly!" She pulled back. "How was Europe? Did you have a favorite city? Did you write anything interesting in your travelogue for me to read? Oh, and Nancy is just back from a European tour, as well, and we were just saying that?—"

"Cecilia." Lady Lindbury cleared her throat, and nodded her head sideways, towards the second new arrival. "Would not you like to greet His Grace, as well?"

With no small amount of reluctance, Cecilia turned her attention to the second newcomer.

Tall. Dark, thick-haired. Every feature was infuriatingly well-formed. Though they had only met once—and though that meeting had hardly been a pleasant memory—there was no denying the power of that strong jaw, and those deep blue eyes. His were the sort of looks that could haunt a woman's dreams.

If, of course, that woman had not already previously overheard him prattling on and on about his disdain for marriage.

Cecilia gave him an icy grimace and her most perfunctory curtsy. "Your Grace."

"Lady Cecilia." He bowed in response to her abbreviated curtsy. "Wonderful to see you, after so many months away."

"Yes. Yes, it has been many months, I suppose, since we last saw each other," Cecilia said.

“Caught any good gossip in the meantime? I know you have quite a talent for listening at doorways,” he said.

Cecilia’s cheeks went red as she recalled that night. “And I know you have a talent for proclaiming your disdain for marriage for anyone to hear who might happen to be passing by,” she said.

She remembered how the duke had gone on at length, boasting about a widow with whom he had been having an affair—a lady who, according to him, was unusually sensible for her kind, as she knew well enough not to expect anything so silly as love from her dalliance with the duke.

“I imagine you have not mended your ways, while you and my brother took your adventures across the continent?” she added.

“I am not aware of any ways I have that might have needed mending, I am afraid,” he replied.

“Of course you do not,” she said. “Allow me to give you a piece of advice, then. If you do not wish for people to overhear you, you would perhaps behoove yourself to avoid speaking so loudly as to wake up an entire household.”

“Cecilia!” her mother said, stepping in closer and interrupting their argument. “I am glad to see you taking in the sunlight on such a beautiful day. And you have a friend over?” She shielded her eyes from the sunlight as she looked down the lawn.

“Yes,” Cecilia said, trying to cool her temper. She glanced once more at the duke, then smiled, turning her attention more fully to her mother. “Nancy has come to visit. You have caught us in the middle of a game—Nancy!” She waved. Nancy walked over, mallet swinging at her side.

“Lady Lindbury, it is so very good to see you,” she began, sweet as ever. “And...” She trailed off as she locked eyes with Zachary, her delicate cheeks reddening in a light flush.

“Nancy, this is my brother,” Cecilia said. “And Zachary, this is?—”

Zachary stepped forward, taking Nancy’s hand in his. “It is a pleasure to meet you. Miss...”

“Banfield,” Nancy said softly. “Miss Nancy Banfield.”

“Miss Banfield.” He kissed her hand, then smiled up at her. He had the same coloring as his sister, all golden hair and fair skin. Nancy blushed even deeper.

Both Cecilia and Ian’s eyes widened. But before Cecilia could say anything, the duke swept forward, repeating Zachary’s hand-kiss with an even more dazzling smile. “A lovely name for a lovely lady,” he murmured. “It is true what they say—even the greatest wonders of the world cannot hold a candle to a true English rose.”

Though Nancy continued to blush at this new flattery from the duke, there was no mistaking the way her eyes continued to flicker in Zachary’s direction.

Zachary’s eyes lit when they fell on the mallet in Nancy’s other hand. “You were playing a game, you said? What were you playing? Pall-mall?”

“Yes!” Cecilia proffered her mallet. “We have room for one more if you would like to join.”

“Only one?” Her mother cleared her throat, nodding at the duke before walking away to sit down once more.

Cecilia sighed as her mother walked away, but turned to the duke with a strained smile. “Your Grace,” she said through gritted teeth, “of course you would be welcome to join.” As Nancy and Zachary walked away to fetch the other mallets and balls, she continued, “Though I wonder why you haven’t tired of swinging your mallet about, after your European escapades.”

Ian’s mouth twitched up at the corner. “You remain thoughtful as ever, Lady Cecilia,” he said, a twinkle in his eye. “I appreciate your concern for my... mallet, in particular.”

Rather than back down, she tilted her head. “My concern is not for your mallet, Your Grace, but rather for the women you bother with it.”

“Well. In that case, you may rest assured, Lady Cecilia, there is no bother. When I offer a woman my mallet, she comes willingly.” He smiled. “I assumed you knew that, given your penchant for eavesdropping.”

“I was not?—”

“Well then,” Zachary interrupted, stepping forward and handing the duke a mallet. “Here you go, Harwick.” The tension still hung thick in the air. He looked between the two of them, seemingly oblivious to it, before smiling back down at Nancy. “Shall we play?”

As they set up, Lady Lindbury retired to drink tea in the shade. The sun blazed high overhead, and bees buzzed pleasantly through the gardens.

“So, Miss Banfield,” Zachary said, knocking a ball neatly past hers and through the hoop. “You say you were also traveling this past year?”

“Yes, with my aunt. She has a great many friends across the Continent and wanted to

see them all. We went to Paris, Nice, Venice, Athens...”

“You don’t say! That mirrors our itinerary very near exactly!” he exclaimed. “You say you have only just returned?”

“Yes, a few days ago. From Greece.”

“Ah, that explains it. We began in Greece; I’d imagine our travels went in rather opposite directions.”

“Still, it is a wonder our paths never crossed,” Nancy said. “Not even in the middle! I suppose fate wished to keep us firmly apart.”

“Or perhaps we were merely meant to meet here, in London.”

Nancy looked up at this, right at the very moment she swung her mallet. The ball careened wildly off the path, and her cheeks went even pinker than usual.

“Oh, dear,” she lamented. “I am not very gifted at pall-mall at the best of times, and yet I seem to be playing worse than ever.” She looked over at Zachary, shy. “You must not think too poorly of me, my lord.”

“How could I?” With a gentle click of his mallet, Zachary hit his ball—so that it landed right beside Nancy’s. He nodded towards them. “There. It seems we are now on equal footing. Let us retrieve them together, and then I would be more than happy to assist you with your swing.”

She smiled, and nodded, taking the arm he offered and allowing him to walk her down the field. “I would like that very much.”

From a bit away, Ian observed the two of them—and, more intriguingly, watched

Lady Cecilia observing the two of them.

Although, most infuriatingly, her observations were punctuated by her dedication to whipping him soundly at pall-mall.

“Hah!” Lady Cecilia jumped in glee as her ball went perfectly through yet another arch. Clapping her hands together, she turned to Ian with an unrelentingly smug expression, and a playful, mocking curtsy. “Your turn, Your Grace.”

Ian followed suit, though his ball hit the arch just on the corner. He groaned. “Not again.”

Cecilia smiled. With her fair complexion and golden hair lit by the sun, she looked bright as a sunflower, and moved just as gracefully, as she easily knocked her ball towards another arch. “You know, with all your earlier talk of mallets, I wasn’t anticipating such a swift and easy victory.”

“You have not won yet, Lady Cecilia.” He knocked the ball again, repositioning it in front of the missed arch. “And I am afraid I am a bit...distracted, today. Under normal circumstances, I think we both know the swift victory would be mine.”

“I know no such thing,” she said coolly. “And I certainly do not see what there is here for you to be distracted by. Nothing but sun, and lawn, and friendly competition.”

“Ah, yes,” he observed dryly. “Very friendly.”

She chuckled. “Unless, of course, you merely find yourself bored by the lack of disreputable activities to be found?”

“Disreputable activities?” His eyebrows lifted. “Why, Lady Cecilia, I haven’t the faintest idea what on Earth you could be referring to.”

“No gambling, for a start. And—” She sighed. “Oh, I do not know. Whatever other shameful activities you supposed gentlemen get up to while roaming across the continent.”

“Is that all?” He chuckled and walked around to stop in front of her, blocking her shot and prompting a glare. “Please, do go on. I am most curious to hear what the young ladies of London consider to be shameful activities.”

“I am certain you are.” She swept around him to make her next swing. “Likewise, I also have no doubt you did your best to drag my brother towards your way of thinking.”

“There wasn’t much dragging involved, Lady Cecilia,” he said, following her across the lawn. “Nor anything I feel ashamed about in the slightest. I believe your brother would agree with me. It is perfectly natural for a young gentleman to wish to see the world beyond his backyard, particularly before he is shackled to the altar.”

She stopped and spun to face him. “Shackled! Is that really how you think of marriage?”

“I’d imagine it is how most men think of marriage.”

She scoffed. “I have known plenty of men who would say otherwise.”

“Oh, I would not say that in front of your mother. Or your brother, for that matter.”

“You know perfectly well that is not what I meant.”

“I know no such thing,” he said, mimicking her tone from before. “Fear not, Lady Cecilia. I would never presume anything against your spotless reputation. Though I am curious to hear the names of these supposed paragons of virtue. I shall eat my

mallet if you could name even one man of the ton who awaits married life with anything but a sense of duty.”

“My father, for one,” she said after a beat. “And he raised Zachary the same way. I understand my brother may have fallen in with your kind this past year, but now that he’s back, it is only a matter of time before he returns to his respectable ways and takes a wife.”

“My kind?” The duke’s voice lifted in interest. “And what kind is that?”

“You know exactly what I mean.”

“I might. I might not.” He shrugged. “In either case, I certainly wish you’d tell me.”

She paused. “Rakes,” she said bluntly. “The kind of man who proclaims his disdain for both love and marriage to anyone within earshot. The kind of man who has no interest in any kind of relation with anyone other than himself.”

“When have I ever said a word against relations?” He took a step closer. “There are all sorts of relations in the world that do not require marriage. Or love, for that matter.”

Her eyes dragged across his face, but she did not back down. “None of them respectable, I am sure.”

“You know, Lady Cecilia, you speak with a great deal of confidence, for someone who has experienced none of what you speak,” he said. He stepped in closer still. “Pray tell, where did you come to find all of these ideas of what is and is not respectable? In your books?”

She laughed in disbelief, eyebrows raised, and crossed her arms. “So you disdain

books, now, as well?"

"Certainly not. I am merely pointing out that you have seen very little of the world, and yet seem to have formed such strong opinions on it when you do not know the first thing about it."

She lifted her chin. "I know plenty."

"Plenty about love?"

"More than you, clearly."

"There is that confidence again," he said—more quietly, now that they were only a few steps apart.

In the afternoon sun, she seemed to glow from within; the light turned her hair to pure gold, and her eyes to the soft green of a clear, still pond, even as fire flashed behind them. Her lips were soft and pink, and he could not help but wonder what it would feel like if?—

A giggle broke him out of his reverie.

At once, the two of them turned to see Miss Nancy Banfield, standing nearly as close to Zachary as Ian was to Cecilia, and laughing charmingly at something he'd said.

"Well," Cecilia said, the smile rising once more to her lips. "Well, well, well. That is not bad at all."

"Really?" the duke asked, sounding surprised as he crossed his arms. "Am I to understand that you are pleased to see your brother making eyes at your best friend?"

“Why shouldn’t I be?” Cecilia shrugged. “Nancy is beautiful and charming and sweet and intelligent. I would be most lucky to count her as a sister-in-law of mine. Anyone would.”

“Ah. That.” The duke snorted. “If that is what you are hoping for, I would not count so soon, if I were you.” Cecilia looked up at him, brows furrowed, and he sighed. “Oh, let him have his flirtation. This is exactly what I was referring to: the poor man has barely been back in London a day, and already he can’t so much as speak to a woman without his overbearing sister trying to push him down the altar.”

Cecilia’s jaw dropped. “Overbearing?” she said, voice rising. “How dare you!”

Ian chuckled. “I assure you, Lady Cecilia, I meant no offense.” He nodded at the couple across the lawn. “I only wish to point out what is quite plainly right in front of you.”

“You are wrong.” Cecilia shook her head. “Zachary would not just flirt with Nancy. I mean, with Miss Banfield. He would not do that to her.” She crossed her arms with a huff and shook her head again. “Moreover, he would be a fool to let someone like Miss Banfield slip through his fingers on the marriage mart. She is a most accomplished woman.”

“Woman? Hardly. Miss Banfield is still a girl,” Ian said dismissively. “He’ll tire of her sooner or later. Sooner, if I had my guess.”

Cecilia glared at him, then looked back and forth between the two flirting across the lawn. Tire of her? Tire of Nancy? Zachary would not. He couldn’t!

And yet...if everything the Duke implied was true...

Even if it is true, it does not matter, she thought resolutely. She had made a promise

to her father, one she intended to keep. Zachary had to give up his libertine ways and settle down eventually, and he would be lucky to make a match like Nancy. And she certainly could not let Nancy be the victim of any kind of rakish plot.

But if they were to marry...

Perhaps even fall in love...

Ian, still looking at her, cocked his head. Even having known Lady Cecilia for such a short time, it was clear from her expression that she had set some scheme in motion. "You are plotting something," he said accusingly. He bent down and knocked his ball through the second to last hoop. "I would be careful if I were you, Lady Cecilia. Do not interfere with business you are ill-prepared to deal with. You are fighting a losing battle."

Those maddeningly green eyes returned to him, stopping his breath a moment. Within seconds, that musical laugh returned. "Oh, Your Grace. Believe me, when I set my mind to something..." She knocked her ball cleanly through the final hoop. Resting her hands on her mallet, she returned to him with a sweetly devilish grin. "I always win."

Ian narrowed his eyes at her. Finally, he gave a little nod. "Very well," he said. "It looks like the game is on."

Chapter Two

“... to which she replied that she would have no such intentions, and he would be better off jumping into the canal!”

Everyone at the table burst into laughter as Ian finished retelling one of his and Zachary’s travel anecdotes.

Everyone except for Lady Cecilia, who stared daggers at him from across the table.

It had been Lady Lindbury’s idea to host a dinner—just a few close friends and family, to celebrate Zachary’s return. It seemed Lady Lindbury was quite good friends with Lucinda Banfield, the Dowager Viscountess Sheridan, Miss Banfield’s mother, and if the two of them were invited then they could jointly celebrate Nancy’s return from Europe alongside Zachary’s.

It did not escape Ian’s notice that Zachary and Nancy had been seated directly next to each other. While he did not have any proof, he would not have been surprised to find out Cecilia had had a hand in the seating chart. After all, if Nancy and Zachary just so happened to be seated next to each other, it would only be natural for them to engage in conversation, would it not?

Though Miss Banfield had yet to speak much. It was becoming apparent that her already shy demeanor became somehow shyer still when seated next to Zachary. Between her reticence to speak, and Lady Cecilia’s commitment to addressing Ian with nothing but short, icy remarks, their end of the table had started off rather quiet, indeed. Ian had done his best to remedy the silence, with great success. Even if

Cecilia was determined to dislike him, at least he had had no trouble winning over Lady Sheridan and Lady Lindbury.

It was a lovely evening, Ian had to admit. Since the death of his parents, it had been a long time since he had felt so at home at a family table.

When there was at last a lull in the laughter, Lady Cecilia cleared her throat.

“Goodness, that sounds delightful. I have long wished to visit Venice. The canals, the festivals...it all sounds absolutely wonderful.” She turned to face her friend, catching Nancy’s eye. “Nancy, didn’t you say you and your aunt went for a ride in one of those funny boats?”

“Oh, yes! Gondolas, they call them,” Nancy said, nodding. She let out a nervous chuckle. “Though I must admit, I was frightened the entire time that we might tip!”

The rest of the table joined in her laughter at that.

“I have no doubt you have plenty more stories of your own, Your Grace,” Cecilia said, swallowing. “Though one wonders if they are of...suitable taste for sharing at the dinner table?”

“Cecilia!” her mother gasped, before turning to the duke. “I apologize, Your Grace.”

The duke laughed. “No need,” he assured her, before turning his gaze upon Cecilia. She met his gaze evenly, those fiery green eyes piercing and passionate as ever. He loved the fire in her, even as it scorched him. “Rest assured, my lady, on my travels I collected stories aplenty. But I must confess, my adventures pale in comparison to the tales of true exploration with which your friend regales us.”

Cecilia gave him a tense smile. She narrowed her eyes. “How very modest of you to

acknowledge the wonders of travel, Your Grace,” she said, not trying to disguise the sarcasm in her voice. “I am sure your insights into the world are truly enlightening.”

“Indeed, my lady, I am but a humble wanderer.” He briefly paused, eyes running up and down her face, noting with pleasure the flush that extended down her neck to her chest. The sight stirred a heated desire within him; a longing to trace the line of her throat with his lips, to feel her pulse quicken beneath his touch. “Unlike some, who seem to have mastered the art of guiding others down the path of their own choosing.” He finished this last dig with a smirk.

Cecilia’s cheeks went red, bosom heaving as she fairly boiled with rage where she sat. He wondered how those flushed cheeks might look if he had her alone, tangled in sheets, his hands in her hair.

Lady Lindbury, looking back and forth, cleared her throat. “You must tell me how you are enjoying the meal, Lady Sheridan—it is a new recipe I had my cook try?”

“Yes,” Cecilia blurted out. “Society is full of those who will attempt to sway the easily led. It is one of the great tragedies of our day that many of the kindest, pure-hearted, well-intentioned individuals are the ones most often taken advantage of by those who cannot fathom the existence of such goodness.”

So she was not only attacking his character, but his friendship with her brother! Ian clenched his jaw, imagining the feel of her soft skin under his hands as he held her closer, forcing her to confront the raw tension between them.

“You know, I understand you have not done much travel yourself, Lady Cecilia,” he said, “for all your opinions on the travels of others. Why is that?”

Cecilia paused, taken aback by the sudden change of topic. She sat up straighter in her seat, cheeks pink. “Well,” she said stiffly. “I have not yet been afforded the

opportunity to travel so widely as you, my lord, it is true. But I have read much on the subject of places abroad and found each nation and culture of which I read to be rather fascinating. Indeed, I would very much like to travel someday.”

Ian nodded. “I see. So you plan to travel, then. Across Europe?”

“For a start. Greece, Italy...perhaps France...”

“Ah. A similar itinerary to the one that your brother and I followed on our travels. Not to mention your dear friend Miss Banfield, as well,” he said, nodding in each of their directions respectively.

“Yes, a very similar itinerary. You see, I take the stories of traveler’s as inspiration. And, of course, as cautionary tales.” She smiled at him, more sweetly than he knew her capable of being, though there was a strain in the expression that let him know very well her insincerity. “Plenty of those to be seen, both in my readings and in what I have heard from others out about the ton . You know how society likes to talk.”

“I do.” The duke cleared his throat. “So, from what you have heard and read if you were to go to—say, Paris. Is there anything in particular you would want to see?”

“The Arc de Triomphe, certainly,” she said without pause, voice suddenly relaxing and filling with passion. As she continued to speak, the angry flush in her cheeks seemed to turn to one of excitement. Her eyes were still bright, but with stars rather than fire. “The churches. I have a great interest in the architecture.” She tilted her head. “Unlike some, who I am sure would be more interested in frequenting the more disreputable establishments.”

Of course, she could not resist but slip in that last dig, thought the duke.

And yet he could not help but laugh, entirely unoffended by her comment or her tone,

even as the rest of the table watched on looking positively scandalized. He found her defiance intoxicating, imagining the feel of her pressed against him, their heated arguments turning into something far more primal.

“My dear Lady Cecilia,” he said, “In my experience traveling, I have often found that the disreputable establishments are where one may find the best, most intriguing stories. Would not you agree, Lindbury?”

Zachary, caught off guard and still lost in conversation with Nancy, turned, surprised. “Yes, yes, I suppose so.”

“It is true,” Nancy added, after a brief awkward pause, “one can often find adventure in the least expected places.”

Cecilia smiled tightly. It seemed she understood that, while she may have found easy victory on the pall-mall court, the battle tonight was not hers to win. “Well,” she said. “You have certainly convinced me, my lord. Perhaps you would not mind lending me your travel diaries sometime, so that I may study from someone with true travel experience.”

“I appreciate your interest in my perspectives and my travels, my lady,” Ian replied. “Thought I am not certain it would be wise or kind of me to oblige this particular request.” He leaned in closer, relishing the way her breath caught and her brows lifted slightly in anticipation of what he might say. “You see, I fear my journals are not for the faint of heart.”

Cecilia did not respond. Her jaw tightened, but she remained silent.

Lady Lindbury cleared her throat. “Well! Anyone for some dessert?”

As the servants brought out the dessert, a mouth-watering concoction of baked apples

and pudding, Cecilia leaned forward to address the duke, her voice pitched so that only the two of them could hear. It was the type of tone Ian was used to hearing from a lover, not a combatant, even as the words that followed assured him she was firmly the latter: “I assure you, Your Grace, my heart is far from faint. You will be sorely disappointed if you are expecting me to back down.”

He watched as her chest heaved with the deep breath she took, her eyes flashing with a mix of fury and something deeper. This battle of wills, this delicious tension... It was something he knew they both thrived on.

“My dear Lady Cecilia,” he said, voice lowered to match hers perfectly. “I would be disappointed if you did. I am certain you will not back down—and neither will I.”

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“I had such a wonderful time at dinner last night, Cecilia.” Nancy’s eyes were bright as they walked along the park path, with their mothers Lady Lindbury and Lady Sheridan trailing behind as chaperones. “I must thank you and your mother again for having us over. Such stimulating conversation, would not you agree?”

“Mmhm,” Cecilia replied, trailing off into her thoughts as Nancy continued to speak. Even just thinking about the events of last night needled Cecilia to no end. How easily she had let the duke get the better of her!

That rude, arrogant, self-important scoundrel, she thought furiously.

Worst of all was how difficult he was to shake from her mind. Impossible, even. Even now, walking arm-in-arm with her best friend through Hyde Park, her attempts to enjoy the clement weather and verdant lawns kept being interrupted by thoughts of those low-pitched taunts, those sharp blue eyes...

“—do you not think, Celie?”

“Hm?” Cecilia snapped back to attention.

Nancy looked up at her with bright blue eyes, and even brighter flushed cheeks. “Are you quite all right, Cecilia? You seem to have been quite out of sorts since last night.”

“It is nothing.” Cecilia shook her head. “Forgive my rudeness. I did not sleep as well as I had hoped.” That, at least, was true. She had lain her head down on her pillow, still fairly fuming with frustration at the duke’s persistence in annoying her, only to find him raking her dreams, as well—disturbing her sleep with sly smirks, smart

retorts, and those dark blue eyes. It was almost too much to bear.

She forced herself to push him from her head and smiled down at her friend. “What is it you were asking me?”

“Well...” Nancy paused and bit her lower lip. Suddenly she faced forward, as though she could not bear to look at her friend when she said what she said next. “I only said that—travel seems to agree with Zachary, does it not?”

“Does it?” Cecilia asked, trying not to be too obvious. She pursed her lips, nodding as they continued to walk. “I suppose it does. I have heard that food overseas can be good for one’s health, and that the rigors of travel are meant to have a beneficial effect on both body and spirit.”

“Yes. Yes, of course,” Nancy agreed. Her voice softened. “And when he speaks—it is with a great passion and reverence for the places he has seen. It is clear he took every opportunity to learn, while still holding England nearest and dearest to his heart. He was a great conversationalist last night, and fetching, too—not that—I...” Nancy trailed off.

Cecilia gave her a moment, before prodding gently, “What is it you are trying to say, Nancy?”

“Only that—” Nancy squeezed her eyes shut. “I am rather fond of him,” she said quickly, then peered up at Cecilia out of one eye. “Oh, you mustn’t be cross with me, Celie!”

“Cross? Why would I be cross? You are my best friend, and he is my brother; you are two of the people most dear in the world to me. I should be cross if he had done something to sour you against him; if you are fond of him, that simply means he was polite to you as he ought to have been.”

“More than polite. I mean, not more than—he has behaved most properly around me.” Nancy stumbled over her words, her cheeks practically crimson. She glanced back over her shoulder and seemed relieved to find their mothers engaged in their own conversation, rather than listening in. “What I mean to say is, speaking with him was so enjoyable, and—well. I know it has been only a short while since we have known each other, and yet I find my heart inspired with feelings.” She looked up sideways at Cecilia, as though trying to read her reaction. “Feelings for him.”

“You have...feelings...for my brother?” Cecilia tried to feign surprise, while simultaneously hiding a slight grimace.

For all that Nancy and Zachary would be an excellent match, and for all her delight that her plan was moving so swiftly and easily, it was still strange to hear anyone speak of him romantically. He was still her brother, after all.

Nancy’s eyes widened, and she clutched onto Cecilia’s arm more tightly still. “Are you dreadfully upset?”

Cecilia shook her head and smiled. “Not in the slightest.” She leaned in, squeezing her friend’s arm playfully. “If anything, I am relieved to hear that his feelings are matched by yours.”

“His—” Nancy’s eyes widened somehow further, a smile rising to her lips. “Oh! Surely you do not mean...” The smile fell slightly.

Cecilia’s brow furrowed. “What is the matter?”

“Only that I find it difficult to believe that he would have feelings for someone like me.”

Cecilia chuckled. “Why shouldn’t he have feelings for someone like you, Nancy? You are absolutely wonderful.”

“Yes, it is only—well. It is only that I have heard talk that he may be something of a...” She glanced back at their mothers walking behind them and then lowered her voice. “A rake.” All of a sudden, she clapped a hand over her mouth, as though only just realizing what it was she had said. “Oh, dear! Forgive me, Celie. I know he is your brother. Surely you do not wish to hear?—”

“I assure you, Nancy, I do not?—”

Nancy continued babbling, in a panic, “—and of course, I am certain the rumors are greatly exaggerated?—”

Cecilia stopped walking, and turned to face her friend, squeezing her hand reassuringly. “It is quite all right, Nancy,” she said, kindly. Then, more firmly, “As you say, I am certain the rumors, whatever they may be, are greatly exaggerated. In any case, any such rumors belong to Zachary’s past.”

“Yes. Yes, of course,” Nancy assured her.

Cecilia raised her chin. “Truth be told, I am certain they are less a reflection of his true character and more the result of his association with that awful friend of his.”

“Awful friend?” Nancy’s eyes went wide as she looked back up at her friend. “Oh, surely you do not mean the duke?”

“Surely I do,” Cecilia replied. “To whom else could I possibly be referring?” She thought of Ian’s infuriating smirk, and his lowered tone last night, heat rushing through her at the mere memory.

“But he was so kind!” Nancy protested.

“Everyone is kind to you, Miss Banfield,” Cecilia said teasingly. “In addition to which, I am certain he was further inclined to be kind by your stature as a young,

beautiful, accomplished, unmarried lady.”

“Me?” Nancy chuckled through her blush. “Oh, Celie. I assure you, he most certainly was not looking at me in that way.”

Cecilia scoffed and rolled her eyes. “I would not be so certain if I were you.”

“Well, I am,” Nancy said firmly, though even Nancy speaking firmly was a dozen times sweeter than anyone else Cecilia knew. “Particularly given the way he could not seem to take his eyes off of?—”

Suddenly, Lady Sheridan was upon them, having bustled up closer with Lady Lindbury in tow. “Did I overhear you speaking of the Earl?”

A hush fell over the two younger women. They looked at each other than their mothers.

“Yes, Mama,” Nancy admitted at last, even more bashful than she had been in confessing her feelings to Cecilia a few moments prior. Her voice was softer now, and her cheeks burned beet red. “It is only normal that we would. He is Cecilia’s brother, after all, and he just returned from travels much the same as ours, and it was so lovely to speak to him last night and compare our stories of travel.” She turned to address Cecilia’s mother, as though eager to change the topic of conversation. “Speaking of which! I must thank you again for having us to dinner, Lady Lindbury.”

Lady Lindbury nodded and opened her mouth. But Nancy’s mother could not and would not be dissuaded. Before Lady Lindbury could say anything, Lady Sheridan pressed onward, “Yes, yes, of course! I observed that the two of you had a great deal to talk about last night, it seemed. One could even say the Earl seemed quite taken with you.”

“Mama!” Nancy sounded scandalized.

“It is true!”

“Mama, it is not—it is not proper...” Nancy’s eyes darted back and forth between her mother and Cecilia’s, and about the park at large, as though fearful that someone else out on a promenade nearby might overhear. “Lady Lindbury, I must apologize...”

Cecilia’s mother took a step forward, with a kind expression on her face, and pressed a gentle hand to Nancy’s cheek. “Do not worry, Miss Banfield. You are so close to my Cecilia that you are nearly like a daughter to me already. While I have no intention of meddling in Zachary’s marriage prospects, I cannot say it would displease me to have your status as daughter further confirmed.”

“It is settled, then.” Lady Sheridan clapped her hands together. “We shall host a ball. The finest of the season. Dazzling, but still intimate. French fashions, in honor of your trip. And if the earl doesn’t fill up your dance card before the night’s properly begun, I will eat my hat. And, of course, you will have the opportunity to dance with other gentlemen, as well. It may do something to spur the earl on, if a spark of jealousy were to align in his heart.”

“Mama, we cannot just host balls on a whim anymore,” Nancy reminded her, sounding a bit embarrassed. “The new viscount, remember?” He controls the accounts, and the estates.”

“Oh, leave the viscount to me. I am more than certain he will say yes to let us throw a ball. Particularly when I mention it is to aid in your prospects of marriage.”

“Well. I suppose if the new viscount approves, I can hardly protest,” Nancy said, that small smile returning to her cheeks.

Cecilia grinned back at her best friend, her external excitement barely holding a candle to the thrill that lit her insides. All was going perfectly according to her plan.

She couldn't wait to see the look on the Duke of Harwick's face.