



A Duchess Disciplined (Dukes of Dominance #1)

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Category: Historical

Description: "Have you forgotten your marriage vows already? You promised to obey. Now, turn around, wildcat..."

Known as a wild spinster, Catherine knows she will never marry. Until the Duke of Sarsen shows up, with a contract older than either of them in hand, demanding a bride he cannot have: her sister. So she does the unthinkable...

Duke William is not a man who takes no for an answer. So the spinster sacrificing herself to his desire in her sister's stead should be a problem. But William knows exactly how to put her in her place. And, by the way she melts into him, he plans to enjoy it all too much...

*If you like a realistic yet steamy depiction of the Regency and Victorian era, then *A Duchess Disciplined* is the novel for you.

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Page 1

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PROLOGUE

Twenty-Six Years Ago

“To Lady Dorothy!” Charles Richards, the Duke of Sarsen, raised a crystal glass filled with amber-colored brandy. “May Her Grace continue to bear you many more healthy children!”

Benedict Leedway, the Duke of Reeds, shook his head. “You speak as if she is a brood-mare, Sarsen! My Lord...”

Sarsen grinned shamelessly. It was an expression Benedict knew quite well from their shared days at Oxford.

Benedict, being inclined to study, had spent many hours attending lectures and taking exams. He had a knowledge of law which rivaled that of any barrister. Sarsen, however, had become an irredeemable rake, whose reputation for mischief was well known. Every time the man was caught engaged in some untoward activity, he would give that same rakish smile.

Sarsen was a handsome man, too. Benedict had seen countless well-bred ladies utterly charmed by a glance from Sarsen’s green eyes. Even though he was approaching five-and-thirty years, Sarsen still cut a dashing figure.

“Reeds, you cannot expect a man to speak properly when he is in his cups!” Sarsen exclaimed. “And if ever there was a night to drink like a rogue, it is surely tonight!”

Benedict shook his head, although he did not disagree. He had also indulged with more enthusiasm than usual. It was not only the arrival of his daughter which pleased him but his wife's good health. While his lady's first birth—that of their son Elias—had been quick and uneventful, Dorothy had been difficult from the start.

“Perhaps, you are right,” Benedict replied at last.

“I know that I am right!”

Sarsen finished his glass of brandy and gestured for it to be filled again, which promptly was. “Fill his as well,” Sarsen said, gesturing to Benedict's glass.

Benedict leaned back in his chair, just barely glancing at the young man who filled the glass with brandy.

“How is your duchess?” Benedict asked. “Shall we soon anticipate an heir for you?”

“Not for some months.” The man was not slurring his words, but his voice was unusually loud. “My lady has written that she is well. She asked to stay in Bath during her pregnancy.”

That was to be expected. The Duchess of Sarsen had a well-known dislike for the city of London. She found it too loud and crowded for her nerves, which were quite fragile. Benedict took a swallow of his brandy, savoring the warmth the drink caused to spread through his chest.

“We must celebrate when your heir arrives,” Benedict said.

Sarsen shook his head. “We do not know if the child will be an heir yet. My lady is quite nervous. Her own mother produced only daughters.”

“Seven of them,” Benedict said. “Each more beautiful than the last.”

Sarsen winked. “That is why I married the youngest.”

“But surely, that does not mean your union will produce only daughters,” Benedict replied. “On the contrary, I feel rather certain that your first child will be an heir.”

Sarsen chuckled. “Do you?”

“Indeed.”

Benedict drank more of the brandy. He would not say that he was truly intoxicated, but the world around him was beginning to take on a warm and pleasant feeling. Everything in the club seemed softer somehow, and his worries over his wife seemed like nothing more than fleeting nightmares, vanquished by daylight.

“Well,” Sarsen said, “if my first child is an heir, I will marry him to your Dorothy.”

Benedict laughed. “Will you?”

“Why not?”

Benedict sipped his drink, trying to find a witty retort, but he had none. “Let us suppose that my daughter does not like your son. What if he grows into a rake like his father?”

Sarsen gasped in mock dismay. “I am wounded, Reeds! How dare you call me a rake?”

“Surely, my insult is no more offensive than your lies!” Benedict exclaimed, laughing. “If your son is just like you, I would call that justice!”

“My son will be a good man! A proper Duke of Sarsen!”

Benedict arched an eyebrow. “Hmm.”

“Anyway,” Sarsen said, gesturing widely with his glass. “Who needs love? My lady and I did not wed for love. Nor did you and Her Grace.”

“Be that as it may...”

“You are romantic,” Sarsen said. “I know. If your daughter marries my son, you will at least know that she will be treated well. You will know that my son has the means to ensure that she has a comfortable life as the Duchess of Sarsen. That is more than many young misses have.”

Benedict swirled his glass, took a drink, and frowned. “I think I am too inebriated to make these decisions.”

Sarsen roared with laughter. “You cannot argue with my logic, can you? All those lectures you attended in rhetoric—utterly wasted! For shame, Reeds.”

“Knowledge is never wasted.”

“Of course. How can I forget how invaluable your knowledge in common law is?”

“It is of value,” Benedict replied. “Do you want to always be dependent on solicitors to know the law for you?”

“That is generally why one hires solicitors.”

“Suppose your solicitor is mistaken or errs in some legal matter?”

“Then, I hire an army of solicitors,” Sarsen said. “And I believe that you, Reeds, are trying to distract from my brilliant proposal because you have no good reason for disagreeing with it. If my first child is a son, I will wed him to your daughter. If my first child is a daughter, I will wed her to your son. I trust that any Duke of Reeds with you as a father will grow into a wholly admirable young man.”

A warmth came over Benedict, the heady result of alcohol and his friend’s confidence in him. “I might just agree with you.”

“Then, we continue the celebrations!” Sarsen exclaimed. “Not only has your daughter arrived, but we have already found her husband! Or else, we have found your son a wife! One of your children will not have to endure a long wait on the marriage mart.”

“You did not seem to find your own long wait too arduous,” Benedict quipped.

“You are never going to allow me to forget my rakish misdeeds, are you? I tell you that I am a changed man.”

They both knew that was untrue. Despite his declarations of being reformed, Sarsen was still a notorious lover of actresses and singers.

“How does Her Grace manage you?” Benedict asked.

Sarsen waved a flippant hand. “We have an understanding, my lady and me. She does not interfere with my affairs, and I give her the independence she wants in the country.”

“I see.”

“Bah! I have let you lead me astray again,” Sarsen said mournfully. “We were discussing your child’s marriage to mine.”

“I think your jest has grown old by now.”

“It was not a jest. Why should we not do it? You write the contract, and we will both sign it!” Sarsen declared. “My firstborn will marry one of your children. Elias if my wife bears a daughter, Dorothy if the child is a son.”

Benedict finished his glass, which was promptly filled again without him having to ask. He knew that he would regret such indulgences in the morning, but at the moment, it was difficult to care all that much.

“Fetch a solicitor,” Benedict said, waving a hand.

“Why?” Sarsen asked. “You were just discussing how impressive your knowledge of law is. You write it.”

“Neither of us have a pen,” Benedict said.

Sarsen scoffed and stood, nearly falling into the nearby table. “As if I will be deterred by that!”

The man walked unevenly across the club, presumably in search of a pen and paper. Benedict shook his head in bemusement and continued drinking. The idea was absurd—but not too absurd. He supposed that there was something appealing about it, about continuing his friendship with Sarsen through their children.

Besides, his friend was right. There were worse matches that their children might find, and it would surely be better for them to wed a trusted family friend. Even if Sarsen was an incurable rake, he was a good man, and those were difficult to find.

“Found it!” Sarsen exclaimed, waving a sheet of paper.

Benedict straightened his spine. “So I see.”

Had his words emerged less clearly than they usually did? Benedict could not be certain, but he thought they had.

With a victorious grin, Sarsen slammed the paper down onto the table between them. In his other hand, he held the pen and ink. As he placed them on the table, he nearly spilled the ink on the paper that had inspired such joy.

“Are we truly going to make this a contract?” Benedict asked, reaching for the pen.

“Why not?”

Why not, indeed?

Benedict shrugged and wrote the date—7 December 1788—in bold, looping script atop the page.

“Is it the seventh?” Sarsen asked.

“I believe so,” Benedict replied.

Admittedly, he had not thought much of the date in the past week. His thoughts were entirely consumed with the imminent arrival of Dorothy, and there was little space for something as pedestrian as the date.

“On this day,” Benedict said, as he wrote, “An agreement was made between Benedict Leedway, the Duke of Reeds, and Charles Richards, the Duke of Sarsen.”

CHAPTER 1

Catherine grimaced at her poor hand of cards with the same intensity that she might have had if someone had insulted her mother. Such an expression did not suit a proper lady, but Catherine had known since girlhood that she was not proper.

While her governess tried valiantly to coax Catherine into appreciating ladylike pursuits, Catherine always tried to escape the woman. She would hide in the gardens and climb trees, if necessary, to avoid embroidering a single stitch or learning her mathematics. The gardens were alive and beautiful, always promising adventure, while her governess had only dull papers and long, wasted hours to offer.

“I think you do this purposefully,” Catherine said. “You always want to play whist because you know I have no head for that particular game.”

Across the table, her brother Elias grinned. “My dear sister, would I do something like that?”

“Yes,” Catherine said.

“Indeed,” Bridget said, who was the youngest of the Leedway siblings.

“I feel obliged to agree with my sisters,” Dorothy said. “We ladies must look after one another.”

Catherine gave her elder sister Dorothy a nod of mock solemnity. “Certainly, the gentlemen cannot be depended upon to look after us.”

The siblings had only recently returned to the countryside from an unfruitful Season. As a young woman of two-and-twenty years, Catherine knew she had little time left to find a suitable match. She suspected that this was partly her own folly.

She was not an unattractive woman. Like her brother and sisters, she had been blessed with their mother's thick, dark hair. Her eyes were blue like her father's and Elias's. She was tall and slender, and the family's modiste was excellent. Elias spared no expense, no matter how great, to ensure his sisters looked lovely for the Season. But Catherine was wild and impulsive in a way that ladies were not meant to be.

"Perhaps, next year," Elias said. "I believe that Bridget and I are victorious. Shall we play again?"

"Do you wish to humiliate me so soon?" Catherine asked. "Were the previous nine victories insufficient for you?"

Elias grinned, his eyes gleaming in delight. Although he was the oldest of the Leedway siblings, Catherine had found that he had a penchant for mischief, which often made him seem younger. "I do not know what you mean, Cat. How are you to improve if you do not practice? I am only trying to help you refine your skills."

Catherine cast him a vexed look. "Somehow, I suspect your intentions are not that noble. Why might that be?"

"I am wounded that you would think me capable of any ignobility," Elias said, putting a hand to his chest.

Catherine crossed her arms. "Truly? I find it impressive that you can lie so brazenly."

"Where is the lie?"

“Is it a lie?” Catherine asked. “I think the ton would disagree.”

Elias smirked. “I did nothing in London that every young man does not do.”

“Be nice, Cat,” Dorothy said. “It is only a game.”

“I would be happy to play speculation instead,” Elias said.

“Another game at which you excel!” Catherine exclaimed.

“And I suppose you would prefer a game that you can easily best me in?” Elias asked. “How would that be different from what I am allegedly doing to you?”

“It is entirely different.”

Elias shook his head. “Truly, Aristotle himself would be envious of your nuanced understanding of ethics. Impressive.”

“Maybe he would be. Have you asked him?” Catherine retorted.

“I have not,” Elias said. “Should I find the ghost of Aristotle whilst wandering the moors, I shall be certain that I ask him that.”

“I think it would be rather exciting to meet a ghost,” Bridget said, her expression brightening. “It would be just like one of Miss Radcliffe’s novels.”

“I do feel that some of the allure is lost if the ghost is Aristotle,” Catherine said, folding her cards atop the table. “If I was to encounter a ghost, I would want it to be that of someone romantic. Chivalric, even.”

“Aristotle is very romantic,” Elias said. “He is the father of ethics, law, and rhetoric. I

should think that any lady would find such a learned man to be the epitome of romance.”

Dorothy shrugged. “I have no desire to wed at all.”

“Is that how you woo ladies? You approach them and say, ‘excuse me, madam. I wish to converse with you about the beauty of ethics’?” Catherine asked in her best impression of her brother’s voice.

A flush spread across her brother’s cheeks, emerging so quickly that Catherine nearly laughed. “No,” he replied. “Most of my female acquaintances are actresses. They prefer that I quote Shakespeare.”

“Of course,” Catherine said dryly.

She had no strong feelings about her brother’s dalliances, which were known to most of the ton. While Elias was unquestionably a rake, he was—above all else—a loving brother and a competent duke. Catherine also silently admitted, with a small twinge of guilt, that few other brothers would allow their young, unwed sisters the considerable freedom he gave her.

“So,” Elias said. “Whist or speculation?”

“I believe that we should have an embroidery contest,” Catherine said. “We shall see how adept you are at stitches.”

Admittedly, Catherine would not prevail at an embroidery contest either. Dorothy was the most gifted with a needle, rivaled only occasionally by Bridget, who had the patience to craft the most remarkably detailed flowers.

“As entertaining as that might be—” Elias’s eyes drifted past Catherine’s shoulder.

“What is it, Geoffrey?”

Catherine turned in her seat to see the aged butler standing in the doorway of the parlor. He bowed stiffly, the movement exposing the thinning patch of white hair atop his head. “Apologies for the interruption, Your Grace. You have just received correspondence from the Duke of Sarsen. I am told that it is urgent business.”

Catherine frowned, mentally trying to recall if she had ever met or spoken to the Duke of Sarsen. Although the name was familiar, she had no specific recollections of the man. She supposed that was promising. If the Duke of Sarsen was dreadful, she would have remembered him in an instant.

“Urgent?” Elias asked, his voice echoing Catherine’s confusion. “I cannot imagine what that might be, but we will have it.”

“Shall I read it to everyone?” Dorothy asked.

Elias nodded. Geoffrey crossed the room quickly and placed the letter in Dorothy’s hand. “Again, apologies for the interruption,” he said.

“No need,” Elias replied, waving dismissively. “If the Duke of Sarsen says the matter is urgent, I suppose we ought to handle the matter at once.”

Dorothy undid the wax seal and unfolded the letter. The paper was very fine, parchment rather than the thinner kind used for everyday correspondence. It seemed to Catherine as though the Duke of Sarsen had decided to emphasize the importance of the missive through the excessive use of materials.

Dorothy cleared her throat. “It is addressed to you, Elias.”

“That is to be expected,” he said.

“Has His Grace made a previous promise to visit us?” Dorothy asked.

“I am unaware of any engagement with us,” Elias replied. “Why?”

“Well, the letter is quite short. His Grace says he will be joining us for tea tomorrow. It seems that he has discovered some recent news which he feels that he must share without delay.”

“The Duke of Sarsen is asking for an invite, surely,” Catherine said. “He cannot simply demand to join us for tea.”

“And yet he does,” Dorothy said, sounding mystified. “I shall join you for tea tomorrow and share what I have discovered amongst my father’s papers.”

“Can he do that?” Bridget asked. “Join us without asking ? Without having an invitation extended to him?”

“No,” Dorothy replied, “but I imagine that our brother will want to greet him graciously all the same.”

“Why should he?” Catherine asked. “Elias is a duke, also, and he would never invite himself to someone’s estate—especially with so little notice!”

Elias sighed. “I did not make the dukedom successful by accumulating unneeded enemies, Cat.”

“If wishing for a duke to follow proper conventions will make him an enemy, he was not a friend from the start,” Catherine retorted. “Perhaps, that we had another engagement tomorrow or otherwise did not wish to meet him! Would His Grace still insist on forcing his company upon us?”

“Perhaps, the news he carries is truly urgent,” Elias said. “If that is true, I suppose we should be grateful that he has given us warning of his imminent arrival, rather than appearing unannounced in our foyer.”

“I suppose,” Catherine said begrudgingly.

If the matter was truly urgent, the Duke of Sarsen would have been unable to announce his intentions to join them. Surely, he would have, instead, arrived without warning, harried from the journey.

“What do you know of him? His name sounds familiar,” Catherine said.

Dorothy furrowed her brow. “I vaguely recall our father being distraught over the death of a friend. I believe that was the late Duke of Sarsen, was it not?”

“Yes,” Elias replied. “The late duke’s sons used to visit sometimes.”

“I do not remember that,” Catherine said.

“You were very young,” Elias said.

Dorothy hummed. “If memory serves...one of them was a menace.”

“Only one?” Catherine asked, waving a hand towards Elias.

“Hilarious,” Elias deadpanned. “You have some audacity for calling anyone a menace, Cat. You may have forgotten all the trees you tried to climb as a girl, but I have not!”

Catherine grinned. “You are just jealous because I could climb them better than you!”

That was not a difficult feat, for her brother had never climbed a tree. Meanwhile, Catherine had become as adept as a squirrel in increasingly desperate attempts to evade her long-suffering governess.

“Well, I assumed that menace went without saying,” Dorothy said, waving a hand at their brother, who adopted a look of mock offense. “Was it Thomas? He used to vex your governess so. He would hide behind hedges and in trees, and when the poor woman approached, he would leap from hiding and frighten her.”

“That was Thomas,” Elias said, smiling fondly. “He was an adventurous boy. I remember him talking about how much he admired naval officers. He wanted to embark on great adventures and fight in wars.”

Bridget, the most romantic-minded of them all, sighed longingly. Catherine imagined that her sister was probably thinking about how much she loved the idea of a brave, young naval officer fighting in wars and returning home to her loving arms.

Bridget was to be introduced to London society the next Season, and a small part of Catherine fluttered with worry every time she thought about her lovely sister trying to decide which, if any, man to wed. She was so innocent and kind, so inclined to find the good in everyone. Bridget did not realize that some men were wolves, seeking to devour young ladies and leave them ruined.

“Wait,” Catherine said. “I seem to recall he died in a duel. I think that is how I know the name.”

“In all likelihood,” Elias said. “I am surprised that you know that much.”

“Why?” Catherine asked.

“Because I was...” Elias trailed off. “We did not talk often after Mother and Father

died.”

Catherine privately wondered if the sudden responsibility of becoming the Duke of Reeds and being responsible for three younger sisters had driven him apart from his old friend. Sometimes, the weight of her brother’s sacrifices struck her very strongly, and Catherine felt a spark of sorrow for her brother being burdened with such a powerful responsibility and at such a young age.

“Do you wish that you had?” Catherine asked.

Elias shrugged. “Sometimes, I suppose, but perhaps, it is for the best that we no longer kept in touch with one another. His Grace had a reputation for being reckless.”

“Be careful,” Dorothy said quietly. “You also have a reputation for being reckless.”

Silence fell over the table, and Catherine was quite sure that they all had similar thoughts. A shiver jolted down the path of Catherine’s spine when she thought of her brother—usually a man who smiled easily and readily—with his features set in grim determination as he went to fight a duel for the sake of his honor.

After a long moment, Elias cleared his throat. “Well, I have yet to offend anyone that badly. Dorothy, you need not worry over me. I may be impulsive, but so are most young men. I would never do anything that might result in shame or harm coming to our family.”

Dorothy plucked at the lace edging the right sleeve of her gown. “That is easier said than done,” she said. “You are a young man, after all.”

“The late Duke of Sarsen did not have you to ensure that he was careful,” Elias said. “If he had a good sister, I do not imagine that he would have been quite as reckless.”

Dorothy bit her lip and looked askance.

“This is William,” Elias said, his voice edged with something melancholy.

Catherine glanced between her siblings, desperate to smooth the tension between them. Although none of them really fought in earnest, Catherine still found that the icy disagreements made her uneasy.

“What can you remember about him?” Catherine asked. “Was he a menace like you and Thomas?”

Elias frowned and absentmindedly flipped a card between his fingers. “Truthfully, I cannot recall much about him at all. We have exchanged pleasantries during the Season, but beyond that, we have communicated very little. I am uncertain if we have even shared a real conversation with one another.”

“Perhaps, it is some venture that his father undertook with ours.” Dorothy sounded reluctant, and Catherine suspected that her sister would have preferred to discuss Elias’s reckless streak. “Or perhaps, an investment of some manner.”

“If it was that, I would surely know about it,” Elias said. “I have spent a great deal of time looking over our father’s ledgers. There is not a penny unaccounted for. And if I missed some substantial sum, surely you would have noticed.”

While Elias was impulsive in some regards, like with the female company he chose to keep, he was utterly meticulous in others. One such area was the ledgers. He checked them as often as his solicitor did, and when the numbers did not match what he calculated, he enlisted Dorothy’s aid. Her acumen for numbers was unrivaled.

“A mystery,” Bridget mused. “How exciting!”

“I would not be too excited,” Catherine replied. “I imagine that it is something dreadfully boring. If it was an exciting matter, he would have told us.”

“In all likelihood, yes,” Elias said, straightening his spine. “Regardless, I suppose that we should prepare to greet His Grace tomorrow. He will solve our mystery readily enough.”

“It would have been nice if he had afforded us a little more time,” Dorothy said. “Then, we might have been able to properly prepare.”

“Perhaps, we ought to turn him away,” Catherine said. “Or maybe it would be best for us to find some other engagement. That might dissuade His Grace from being so inconsiderate in the future.”

“We shall greet him with grace,” Elias said.

“Yes,” Dorothy agreed. “Another man’s impropriety is not just cause for abandoning our own.”

Catherine shook her head. Sometimes, she did not understand why her siblings remained so insistent on embodying perfect behavior. Who would be the wiser to their true motivations if they decided to take an unexpected trip to Bath? No one.

What was the harm, then? They could avoid this unexpected visit, return the duke’s impropriety in kind, and keep the family’s reputation intact. It all seemed quite obvious to Catherine.

“I do not anticipate that Sarsen will expect much,” Elias said. “If His Grace is a reasonable man, he will realize that we did not have sufficient time to prepare for his arrival.”

“Because of his behavior,” Catherine said. “He chose to invite himself to the estate. He ought to be grateful that we are making ourselves available to him.”

Catherine drummed her fingers on the table, wondering what manner of man the duke might be to so brazenly ignore conventions. Despite her irritation with his assuming that his presence would be so readily accepted, she was forced to concede that his brazenness alone made the man far more interesting than most gentlemen of the ton.

Dorothy set the letter aside. “Nevertheless, I do think you ought to mention—tactfully, of course—that His Grace is being most ungracious in demanding that we meet him so suddenly.”

“I will do no such thing. It is only a small offense,” Elias said, sweeping all the cards from the table and into his hands. “So, shall we play again? Whist or speculation?”

“Neither,” Catherine said, climbing to her feet. “It is a lovely day, and I think we ought to engage in some exercise. I am going to walk along the moors.”

Her brother grinned. “Running from a challenge, I see.”

She arched an eyebrow. “A true gentleman would not be so smug.”

Elias shook his head. “You always have a witticism prepared. It is really quite remarkable. If you were born a man, I daresay you might have made an unusually clever solicitor.”

“Thank you,” Catherine replied. “Does anyone else wish to join me?”

“I will!” Bridget exclaimed.

“Wonderful,” Catherine said cheerily. “Dorothy? If you agree, Elias will be forced to

abandon any card games that he might wish to play.”

Elias made an effort to look affronted, but Catherine was clearly aware that his lips twitched as he tried in vain to hide a smile. “You are unnecessarily cruel to me.”

“You are truly the picture of suffering. Elias the martyr,” Catherine said, shaking her head in mock pity. “Dorothy?”

Dorothy shook her head. “I think I will continue playing.”

There was a note in Dorothy’s voice, which indicated that—despite Elias’s efforts to abandon the conversation about his reckless ways—Dorothy was not inclined to leave the conversation so quickly. Catherine imagined that the cold atmosphere would only grow once Catherine and Bridget had left.

“Enjoy your walk,” Dorothy said.

Bridget rose. She and her sister linked arms and left the parlor. It was unfortunate that Dorothy had not joined them. Then, Catherine would have felt truly victorious. “What do you think about His Grace?” Bridget asked. “It is exciting that he will be here!”

“We shall see,” Catherine replied.

She was still of the opinion that they ought to leave the estate for the day and let the duke realize that they had gone. Their country estate was a remote place where they seldom entertained visitors. For her entire life, Catherine had considered it the domain of no one but her siblings. His Grace was an interloper, a man who had no reason to disturb their peace.

Even if she was just a little intrigued by the thought of him.

CHAPTER 2

“Y our Grace, welcome,” the butler said. “The Duke of Reeds is anticipating your arrival.”

William Richards, the Duke of Sarsen, narrowed his green eyes and considered the house before him. There was nothing remarkable about the Duke of Reeds’s country estate. Even when William searched his memory, he could recall only a few scattered moments spent by a lake.

“He should be,” William said. “I sent him a missive informing him about my arrival.”

The butler looked suitably cowed. “Of course, Your Grace.”

William raised his hand to his wind-ruffled, brown hair to smooth it. Then, squaring his shoulders, he approached. He had come to find his promised bride, and the sooner he had her, the better.

The butler led William through the foyer and past the parlor. William’s eyes flitted through the rooms as they passed them. The country house was filled with polished, rosewood furniture, tapestries, portraits, and rugs. This dukedom was either prospering, or the debt collectors had not yet arrived. William suspected the former. If the Duke of Reeds was endangered by his creditors, the ton would already be awash with gossip about the man.

“His Grace and the ladies enjoy taking tea outside,” the butler said.

“I see.”

The butler opened the door and bowed. Behind the house was a long stretch of green, decorated with marble statues bought from Greece by the late Duke of Reeds. A pavilion had been pitched just beyond that, and even from this distance, William readily identified the Leedway siblings. They were all pale and dark-haired. He had not looked often at the ladies, but if they were not different ages, William would have found them indistinguishable.

Seeing his approach, Reeds rose and approached him. “Sarsen,” he said. “It has been some time.”

William nodded curtly. “It has.”

They shook hands, and Reeds tilted his head toward the table behind him. The man somehow managed to make even that small gesture appear simpering and proper. “Shall I introduce you to my sisters, or is your matter something which ladies ought not to hear?”

“The ladies may hear it, as it concerns them.”

The sooner this affair was settled, the better. Why waste time speaking with Sarsen and then relaying the information to his bride-to-be when he could simply address everyone at once?

A change seemed to come over Reeds. It was difficult to say precisely what it was, but the man’s features seemed to harden. “I see. Join us, then.”

William wondered if Reeds might challenge him after all. That seemed doubtful, though. Reeds was a mostly proper man who seemed to believe that a little rakish behavior was daring. He knew little about truly improper behavior.

William followed Reeds to the table, and introductions were made. His eyes fixed on Lady Dorothy, the eldest of the Duke of Reeds's daughters. She was lovely enough, suitable for taking as a wife. Black curls framed Dorothy's soft face, and her green eyes were brighter than the finest emerald. The lady's white gown accentuated her firm, generous breasts and her slender waist. He wondered how she would look without her gown.

William seated himself to Reeds's right. A nearby maid promptly offered him tea and biscuits. He would rather forego the pleasantries and have the whole affair finished. At its heart, marriage was just like a business transaction. It was best finished quickly and efficiently.

"Sarsen has not yet told me the purpose of his visit, but he assures me that it is a matter of importance to you as well as me," Reeds told his sisters.

"Is it?" Lady Catherine asked, raising an incredulous brow.

William knew of her by reputation. She was supposedly the most spirited of the Leedway daughters. Spirited was what men said in polite company, of course. In less polite company, they called her obstinate. Some even said that she was in need of a firm hand, which William could believe readily enough.

"It is," William said, glowering at the young woman. "As you may or may not be aware, I became the Duke of Sarsen a few years ago. It took some time to gain my bearings, so to speak."

"Understandably," Reeds said.

William had carefully rehearsed what he wanted to say to the Duke of Reeds and his sisters, and he would prefer that Reeds not interrupt him. He had neither the time nor the inclination to listen to the man's empty, sympathetic platitudes.

“Now that the dukedom is flourishing, I have decided that I will take a wife. Not only do I have a duty to produce an heir, but my younger sisters are in sore need of a maternal presence. Their governess is insufficient.”

“Is this your urgent business?” Reeds asked, sounding confused.

Reeds clearly had no idea what was coming. That was unsurprising but irritating.

“It is.” William produced the ragged piece of paper from his jacket and offered it to Reeds. “I found this contract among my father’s possessions. I am promised a bride, specifically Lady Dorothy, and I have come to collect her.”

“What?” Lady Dorothy asked, all the color draining from her face.

“I see that you were unaware of this agreement,” William said. “Nevertheless, I intend to see it fulfilled.”

“It is our father’s signature,” Reeds said. “I would recognize it anywhere!”

“That cannot be true!” Lady Dorothy exclaimed.

“You want to marry my sister?” Lady Bridget asked.

Lady Dorothy nearly leaped to her feet and joined her brother, her eyes wild as she read the paper over his shoulder. Lady Bridget quickly joined the pair. Only Lady Catherine remained in her chair.

William crossed her arms. He supposed he ought to have anticipated their surprise, but it was still vexing.

“Well, you were not a disappointment,” Lady Catherine said, sipping her tea.

“I did not come here hoping to entertain you, my lady,” William said. “And this matter does not concern you—only your sister Lady Dorothy.”

“This cannot be—I knew nothing of this contract,” Reeds murmured, sounding disbelieving. “If this were legitimate, I am sure that I would know about it.”

“I hope that you are not implying I forged this document,” William said, fixing Reeds with a fierce stare. “I can assure you that I have not, and I hope that you have the good sense not to keep me from what is rightfully mine. It would be a dreadful embarrassment if we were forced to settle this matter before the public.”

“I was not implying that,” Reeds said, still sounding as though he did not quite believe what William had said. “It is only that...you wish to marry my sister.”

Had Reeds always been so feckless? The man was not even really fighting, just floundering like a fish!

“Marriage to Lady Dorothy is the most advantageous choice for me. Give the history between our families, I cannot imagine any reason for your objection, unless Lady Dorothy’s previous Season was more successful than I had heard.”

He knew that he was right. None of the Leedway daughters had managed to secure a husband. Reeds ought to be glad that William was willing to take one of his unwed sisters as his bride.

“Charming,” Lady Catherine said. “I cannot fathom why you must depend upon a contract to find a suitable duchess. Certainly, ladies must be swooning in your presence, tearing one another to pieces for a chance to marry you.”

William fixed his gaze on the younger Leedway sister, who smirked at him. “And with your sharp tongue, I imagine that all the lords in Britain are begging to be your

lord,” he said.

Her smirk only widened. The insolence of her! William hid a smile. Some man would have an enjoyable time, indeed, crafting that brazen young woman into a proper lady and wife. It was almost a pity that his bride was to be the demure Lady Dorothy, instead of this fiery creature. While the rest of her family simpered in disbelief, Lady Catherine had decided to be sharp and angry instead.

William would delight in bringing Lady Catherine over his knee, hitching her skirts past her waist, and teaching her to be a proper duchess with his hand. He imagined her pale face flushed with color, as he pinkened her buttocks with every strike. His loins stirred in anticipation.

“My brother does not have to honor this contract,” Catherine said. “It does not matter if our father wrote it. He is the Duke of Reeds, and he decides who my sister will wed!”

“Perhaps, you should consider it,” Lady Bridget murmured. “It might be romantic!”

William was not a romantic man. “If your brother values his title and reputation, he will do exactly as I ask. I only want what is mine and what has been promised to me.”

“My sister does not wish to wed you,” Catherine said. “If you were a good man, you would care about that! You would not marry a woman who does not desire to be your wife!”

He crossed his arms and forced his attention to Lady Dorothy. Her face fell, and she glanced about her like a trapped animal searching for escape. “Your Grace, I mean no offense. There is no fault to be found in you. It is only that I do not envision myself marrying any man,” Dorothy said. “I have resolved to be a spinster, so I may better support my family.”

“As my duchess, you will have my sisters to care for. You need not find yourself without a family, my lady,” William said.

“That is hardly the same,” Lady Dorothy murmured, her shoulders slumping.

“You do not need to marry him,” Catherine said heatedly. “He has come to us with a piece of paper that we have neither seen nor heard of before this day. I am sure that we owe him nothing!”

“We cannot offend him!” Reeds argued. “An honorable man?—”

“An honorable man would give me the wife I was promised,” William finished, his voice leaving no room for argument.

Not that any of them seemed intent on arguing.

Except for Lady Catherine. Their eyes met across the table. Her smirk had faded. Instead, concern etched deep lines across her forehead. As she rose from her seat, Lady Catherine’s eyes never left his face. She strode slowly to him and tilted her head a little, as though she were a cat and he was some curiosity that she had found.

“You speak too boldly, my lady,” William said.

“Am I bolder than a man who demanded to join us and arrived with such startling news, so as to catch us unaware? You could have mentioned in your letter the purpose of your visit, yet you did not.”

“Catherine,” Reeds said warningly.

Catherine seemed to pay her brother no heed. Now, William understood the cause of the young woman’s defiance. Her brother had never bothered to teach her how to

behave, how to be a proper lady. Reeds was too soft and had indulged this young lady until she believed herself equal to every man in the room.

William tilted his head towards her. She stood near him, allowing him a clear look at her slender figure. She was slighter than Lady Dorothy with a smaller bosom and less prominent hips. Still lovely, though. She was like a flower in full bloom, and with a more masterful hand, she might be molded into the perfect wife.

“And why, my lady, do you imagine that I was not more forthright?” William asked.

He felt as though the entire world was just himself and this brazen young lady. William took a step closer to her, so he towered over the young woman.

She lifted her chin, craning her head back to meet his eyes. William was sure that the position was uncomfortable, but Lady Catherine gave no indication of discomfort. “I believe that you enjoyed the thought of distressing us. You felt that it would be like—like some play upon a stage. You would arrive with some unexpected letter to start the third act.”

“I want what is mine,” he said in a low voice. “If you were promised a husband, I imagine you would be equally vexed at having that promise reneged upon.”

“We are not reneging on it,” Reeds said. “I wish to send for my solicitor, though. That is reasonable for all parties.”

It seemed as though Reeds had grown a spine.

Lady Dorothy fidgeted with her gown. “There is our family?—”

“Surely, it is not the third act already,” William interrupted, turning his attention back to Lady Catherine. “This is surely one of Shakespeare’s comedic interludes, rather

than a dramatic moment.”

What other metaphor might be used to describe a family clucking like hens and refusing to launch a proper defense, save for one foolish slip of a lady?

“Is it? Which play are you thinking about?”

“ A Midsummer Night’s Dream .”

“Are you Puck?” Lady Catherine asked.

“Do you believe I am Puck?”

Lady Catherine smiled. “I do not think you want me to answer that question, Your Grace.”

He kept his expression cold and composed. William strongly suspected that Lady Catherine meant to insult him, perhaps by suggesting that he was the character of hapless Nick Bottom, who was transformed into a man with an ass’s head. She thought she was clever, did she?

William desired nothing more than to remove that smirk from her pretty face, the foolish girl. His palm twitched. He ached to correct that haughty behavior over his knee. Would it not be enjoyable to teach this woman the pleasures of the bedroom, which he knew well, and to mold her into a perfect Duchess of Sarsen?

“Enough!” William snapped.

Beside him, Lady Catherine started. Her blue eyes widened, and she took an uneven step backward. “Your Grace—” Her voice was nearly reproachful.

William stood and raked his hand through his hair, shaking away the few dark brown strands that caught on his fingertips. “Enough,” he repeated. “I would expect that the Duke of Reeds would be more dignified. Instead, you simmer and argue, and you let this disgraceful slip of a girl insult me! Think of your father’s memory. He wanted this marriage. Why should you refuse him?”

For a long moment, there was only silence. Even Lady Catherine seemed to have lost all her words. The Duke of Reeds worked his jaw and shook his head.

“This matter concerns my family, and we must think carefully about the consequences of honoring our father’s contract with you,” he said, his words measured. “Given that you have sisters of your own, I am sure you understand my reasons for hesitation. I do not imagine that you would wed them to a man who you scarcely know.”

“You do know me,” William argued.

“We have not been in one another’s company for some time,” Reeds insisted, glancing towards Lady Catherine. “While it is true that our families were once staunch allies, that is no longer true. I will not gamble with my sister’s happiness.”

Interesting. It seemed as if the young woman held such sway over her brother that he would bend to her wishes. This entire household was amiss.

“I see.”

“You are welcome to stay at our estate,” Reeds continued, “while we decide if we wish to honor our father’s agreement. If you desire otherwise, we will send word for you once we have reached our decision.”

William clasped his hands behind his back and gazed at the duke coldly. Reeds

glanced at his sisters, his expression frantic. It was obvious that the man drew courage from them. What a soft-hearted man!

“I will remain here and sample your hospitality,” William said. “Perhaps, by the time you have decided to honor your father’s wishes, we will know one another a little better. We are to be brothers, after all. I respect your love for your sisters and will allow you time to consider my proposal. In the meantime, I will stay here and enjoy your hospitality.”

He would wait for the solicitor, if only because the law would support his claim. William was owed a bride, and it would be easier to get her if he humored Reeds this once.

“Will you?” Catherine asked.

“Yes,” Reeds said, shooting his sister a fierce look.

William nearly rolled his eyes. It was far too late for Reeds to try to rein in this young miss. He should have done that ages ago.

“My sisters and I will thoroughly discuss the matter,” Reeds said.”

“I imagine so,” William said. “I should like to be shown to my bedchamber now. I assume that your butler knows where it is?”

Eventually, Reeds would agree. As Lady Dorothy had suggested, refusing to honor the contract would mar the Leedway family’s reputation, especially if William chose to inform the rest of the ton about the contract’s existence. Despite Reeds’s unbecoming behavior, William felt a begrudging spark of admiration for the man, who so clearly loved his sisters. In another time and place, they might have even been friends.

“Geoffrey,” Reeds said, gesturing to the family’s butler.

“This way, Your Grace,” the butler said.

William dared a glance at Lady Catherine, who met his intense stare with one of her own. As he let the butler escort him to the bedchamber, it was her face and voice that lingered in his mind. She was unlike any woman he had ever met among the ton and real in a way that most ladies were not.

“Thank you,” William said. “A pleasure to make your acquaintance, my ladies, and to become reacquainted with you, Reeds.”

Reeds smiled thinly. “Likewise.”

William followed the butler, who bowed formally. “It is my honor to escort you to your bedchamber, Your Grace.”

“How kind,” William replied.

As he approached the bedchamber, his trousers grew tighter. It had been far too long since William had engaged in a manner of amorous exercise, and he strongly suspected that he would spend the night dreaming, fantasizing, wanting Lady Catherine.

It was unfortunate that she was not destined to be his wife. Lady Dorothy was lovely and unobtrusive, like a fine piece of art, but Lady Catherine was as bright and lively as flame.

CHAPTER 3

The house was silent, save for the faint creak of the floorboards, which sounded as loud as a gunshot to Catherine. She did not want to wake anyone, but reckless energy pulsed through her. When Catherine tried to find sleep, she found His Grace's composed face and intense gaze instead.

The memory of him was like a fire, blazing through her body and leaving her awake and restless. She imagined that it was worse for poor Dorothy, who had been signed away to the future Duke of Sarsen mere days after her birth.

Catherine quietly pushed open the door to her sister's bedchamber, relaxing a little when she saw the flickering light from the fireplace dancing upon the wall. Her sister sat nearly doubled over, clad in a white nightgown. Dorothy's loose, black hair fell over her back and shoulders. Small, muffled sobs filled the air, striking at uneven moments like a poorly tuned instrument.

"Dory," Catherine said softly. "May I join you?"

Her sister's head snapped towards her, and Dorothy nodded. There were no nearby chairs, so Catherine sat on the floor beside her sister. Dorothy's eyes were red. She had been crying for a long time.

"Do you want to talk about what transpired today?" Catherine asked.

Dorothy's breath shuddered unevenly, and she curled further into herself. "I cannot marry him, Cat."

“Elias will not make you.” Catherine pressed her cheek against Dorothy’s knee. “Even if the Duke of Sarsen insists upon it, you know that our brother will not make you wed that man.”

“I know,” Dorothy said. “Just as I know that it would be unwise for him to refuse. Whether we like it or not, His Grace has a contract promising my marriage to him. The ton would look poorly upon Elias if he refused.”

“Do we care what the ton thinks?” Catherine asked.

She already knew the answer, though. They cared very much.

Dorothy sighed. “We must. Even if I have resolved never to wed, you have not. Bridget has not, and Elias must. The dukedom will need an heir.”

“But no matter how I try to convince myself that marrying His Grace is the best course of action, I find that I cannot make myself believe it,” Catherine said. “I cannot imagine a life away from all of you. I feel as though marrying the Duke of Sarsen would be the death of my very soul.”

Catherine’s chest ached. “Then, you must not do it.”

Dorothy nodded slowly. “I know that, just as I know that my refusal will have consequences. I wish that His Grace would relent, but I do not think that he will. If he were a kinder man, he would not have come unannounced into our home and demanded my hand.”

Catherine bit her lip, trying to think of some solution, but she could find none. It seemed the best solution would be not to wed the man, but she understood too well the dangers of refusal. In her mind, refusal could not possibly be worse than seeing her sister married to that man, but Catherine knew her insistence to the contrary

would fall upon deaf ears.

“Perhaps, we can persuade him to reconsider,” Catherine said, “or else, we can ask for more time to make our decision.”

“That will only delay the inevitable.”

“Not necessarily!” Catherine argued. “If we have more time, we may find some means of persuading the duke to choose another course of action!”

Dorothy’s smile was fond, but her eyes shone with doubt. “I do not want to wed him, but there is also nothing that I would not do for this family. If marrying him is what it takes to ensure everyone’s happiness, I must do it. I will do it.”

“Dory, you cannot,” Catherine said, clasping her sister’s hands in her own. “You cannot sacrifice your own happiness for us. None of us would want that for you.”

“Sometimes, you do not always have the luxury of making a choice to preserve your happiness,” Dorothy said. “Sometimes, you must simply accept the hand that fate has dealt you, regardless of if you agree with it.”

“I think fate has dealt our family more than its share of unfairness,” Catherine replied heatedly. “It is unfair that you should also be taken so suddenly from us.”

“I know,” Dorothy said. “But it may not be so dreadful. You can watch over Elias and Bridget in my stead until you are wed. It is not as though they will have no one in the world.”

Catherine shook her head. “I would do anything to preserve our family’s happiness, but I cannot replace you. I cannot look after Bridget or counsel Elias like you always have. I am not...I am not proper or nurturing like you are. I am a failed lady, and we

both know it.”

Dorothy squeezed her sister’s hands. “You are not. You are as good a lady as any young miss in the ton, and if the gentlemen do not see that, they are unworthy of you. It is as simple as that.”

Catherine’s first impulse was to argue, but she had meant to comfort Dorothy. She did not wish for the conversation to become about her complaints instead.

“Still,” Catherine said, “I am not you. No woman could hope to match your compassion, patience, and devotion.”

“That is kind of you,” Dorothy replied. “But you will never know if you do not try, dear sister.”

On the contrary, Catherine did not need to try to know. She only smiled, though.

“Perhaps,” Catherine muttered. “I still think you should refuse the marriage, though. Given time, I am sure Elias could justify such a choice. If nothing else, he may convince the ton of the document’s inauthenticity.”

Dorothy sighed. “Maybe. I do wonder if this is a battle that we ought to fight, though. His Grace is right about the match being advantageous to both our families. What would we do if something happened to Elias? If he fell ill or became involved in some terrible accident, we would have no one to care for our family.”

“You,” Catherine said.

“A woman’s word does not hold the same sway as a man’s,” Dorothy said softly. “You know that. I am the eldest daughter, so I must bear these things in mind. Do not despair, Cat. Whatsoever we decide, I am sure that everything will be well. Perhaps,

different. But well.”

Dorothy fixed her attention on the fire, her eyes still bright with freshly shed tears. A lump rose in Catherine’s throat. How could everything be well if Dorothy was wed against her will? Catherine wanted to scream and rage and fight. But how could she when Dorothy was already resigned to her fate and Elias only willing to offer the feeblest—most proper—resistance?

“I am tired,” Dorothy said. “I think I should retire. You ought to, also. It has been a rather trying day.”

Catherine stood, stretching to soothe the ache in her knees. “Good night.”

“Good night,” Dorothy replied, sighing. “The matter will be less frightening in the morning. I am sure of it.”

It would not be. Catherine left her sister’s room, still thinking about their conversation. Dorothy should not have to wed, especially not at the behest of some man who had the gall to force himself into their estate and demand a bride.

Still, she found her thoughts lingering in a decidedly improper way about how handsome he was. He was as cold and composed as a marble statue, and he seemed to have the physique of one, too. The duke’s shoulders were broad and tapered to a thin waist. His jawline was strong, and his eyes held an unusual, piercing sharpness. When he looked at her, Catherine had felt as though his green eyes could see all the way to the very depths of her soul, and the intensity of his gaze had left her breathless.

Catherine was so consumed with her thoughts that she failed to notice His Grace until she stumbled into a wall of hard muscle. Heat rushed to her face, and she stumbled back. Catherine hurried to find words, as the Duke of Sarsen stared at her in the

darkened light of the corridor.

“What are you doing?” she finally asked, her temper flaring. “It is far too late for you to be wandering the corridors, Your Grace.”

The Duke of Sarsen did not even have the grace to look sheepish at being caught outside his bedchamber at such an unseemly hour. Catherine knew that it must be approaching midnight. After a heartbeat, his features sharpened into a mask of disdain.

“I might ask the same of you, my lady. Why are you wandering the corridors when you ought to be abed?”

Catherine’s jaw clenched. “Unless you have forgotten, Your Grace, this is my home. I think I have far more reason to wander the corridors at such a late hour than you do. Besides, what I choose to do is hardly any business of yours. You have come unannounced and unwanted to my brother’s estate—to my family home—and demanded an exorbitant price from us!”

A small part of Catherine knew that she ought to cease speaking, or else, she chanced deeply offending the Duke of Sarsen. As her face grew hot and her temper frayed, Catherine found that she could not bring herself to care about the consequences of offending him, though.

Maybe she could make him angry enough that he would storm away and leave them be. Sure, Elias would be forced to contend with the embarrassment should His Grace spread the story to anyone else, but it was certainly preferable for his wayward sister to cause a scandal than for him. No one would be surprised if she caused trouble.

“You have come here to take my sister with no preamble, and you do not even care what taking Dorothy away will do to our family!”

His Grace's nostrils flared, and he took a bold step towards her. Then, another. Catherine glowered at him, her chin tipped up in defiance.

"Do you deny it?" she asked.

Another step. He had become improperly close, so Catherine took a step back. However, she met the wall and found herself trapped. His Grace towered over her, so near that she could reach out and touch him. Catherine tilted her head back until her neck ached, so she could look him in the eye.

The scent of his cologne, a warm mingling of orange blossoms and spice, swept over her and consumed her senses. Catherine's breath shuddered, and then, it seemed impossible to breathe at all. Heat curled inside her chest, and her lower muscles clenched.

A beat passed in silence with them simply staring at one another. "So," His Grace drawled at last, dragging out that single syllable. "You are so angry about your sister, yet you do not feel inclined to do anything to remedy the situation. So much anger and no rational thought."

"I have many rational thoughts!" Catherine snapped. "I have said nothing untrue, have I?"

"No, but a rather obvious solution presents itself," the Duke of Sarsen said. "It is quite astonishing that you have not already thought of it yourself, my lady. If you do not wish for Lady Dorothy to marry me, you may take her place. I am promised a bride from the late Duke of Reeds's daughters, and I do not particularly care which one."

"How romantic," Catherine said between her clenched teeth.

“You are both equally attractive,” His Grace continued, as though he had not heard her. “You are both young and likely to produce heirs for my dukedom. I have no preference for Lady Dorothy over you.”

“How dare you?” Catherine asked, her face growing hot. “You speak as though my sister and I are interchangeable, as though we are livestock to be traded and offered to you without hesitation!”

“The offering has already been made,” the Duke of Sarsen replied. “It is your duty—or your sister’s—to fulfill it. You may dislike that, but it is nevertheless true.”

“My brother will not relent.”

“We both know that he will ,” His Grace said, his eyes gleaming darkly with enjoyment. “I always obtain what I want, my lady.”

Catherine could not explain her reaction to those words. She felt that she ought to have grown angrier, but instead, that strange and unwanted heat stirred within her. Catherine’s heart raced, and her eyes lingered on his face.

His lips. The Duke of Sarsen was so near her that they could have kissed, and a jolt of pleasure swept through her. Catherine fought to ignore it.

“How confident you are,” Catherine said.

“My confidence is warranted,” he replied, his voice low and husky. “But I will warn you that I expect my wife to be a proper lady and Duchess of Sarsen. If you choose to trade your hand for your sister’s, expect to be put in your place.”

“My place ?” Catherine scoffed. “How should you know what a woman’s place is?”

His eyes gleamed with anticipation and the promise of something Catherine could not quite grasp. When the Duke of Sarsen tilted his head towards her, his warm breath brushed against her cheek. Catherine's toes curled inside her slippers. She ought to flee, but she could not. It was as if her body was fastened to the floor.

"Your place," His Grace confirmed, tucking a wayward curl behind Catherine's ear.

The touch was as light as a butterfly lighting on a flower, but to Catherine, it was like being struck by lightning. Her breath shuddered unevenly, and her pulse jumped.

"Properly and thoroughly," he murmured.

New anger sparked inside her, burning to greater heights than before. She dug her nails into the palms of her hands. Catherine could not imagine precisely what the Duke of Sarsen meant, but she defied any man to put her in her place, as if she did not already know it. As though she was some wayward servant who had spoken out of turn, rather than a lady and the sister of the Duke of Reeds!

"You will do no such thing," Catherine said, her voice shaking. "To either my sister or to me."

He smirked. "We shall see. Enjoy your night, my lady."

"I will," she said, smiling tightly. "Thank you."

Without another word, he turned away. Catherine waited until he rounded the corner before inhaling deeply. The air shuddered in her chest. She tipped her head back against the wall and closed her eyes, trying to steady herself. It was difficult, for so many contradictory feelings swept like a tempest within her.

Catherine was angry. She longed to storm after the Duke of Sarsen and demand that

he leave the estate at once without any bride at all. The man's confidence was like a thorn in her thumb, and she ached to rip him free. Beneath the anger, there was something deeper. A longing, which she recognized, but wished she didn't.

His Grace was a detestable and ill-tempered man, unquestionably so, but he was very handsome. Catherine forced down the lump that rose in her throat. His Grace's solution, as detestable as it was, had a sort of beautiful simplicity to it.

"I can marry him," Catherine muttered to the night and the quiet. "If I do, Dorothy will not have to do it."

It was a terrible thought, and she loathed herself for considering it. Still, she could not deny that marrying His Grace would fulfill the promise that her father had made. It would appease the Duke of Sarsen, and Dorothy would not need to leave their family.

Had Catherine not said that same night that she would do anything for their family? Anything except take Dorothy's role? She squeezed her eyes closed and bit the inside of her cheek. Catherine would do it. For her family, she would wed His Grace.

* * *

The Duke of Reeds was seated at the head of the table, his face as hard as stone. Despite Reeds's obvious desire to exude confidence and dominion over his estate, his eyes betrayed his exhaustion. His sisters seemed to be in similar states of fatigue. Lady Dorothy's eyes were red and swollen—evidence that she had spent the night crying. Lady Bridget stifled yawns behind her hand, and Lady Catherine looked like a feral cat, overly tired and prepared to strike with little provocation.

William chewed silently on his eggs. It had been some time since he had experienced such an uncomfortable breakfast. He had won, even if Reeds had not yet officially agreed to his victory.

“I have been thinking about our contract,” Reeds said stiffly.

“As have I,” William said. “I trust that you have decided to do the honorable thing and fulfill it, as your father intended.”

Reeds clenched his jaw. The man’s body was tense, his shoulders drawn, and his back straight. William sensed that the young man probably wished to defy him, to insist that the contract would never be fulfilled.

And yet, Reeds cast Lady Dorothy a quick, apologetic glance. In that look, William saw that Reeds had already agreed to the terms. William would leave with a lovely, young wife and a new maternal presence for his sisters, Hannah and Hester. It took all his strength not to let his eyes wander to Lady Catherine. He had asked for the eldest sister, and although she did not stir the same passions within him that her younger sister did, William was certain that Lady Dorothy would be an adequate wife. He had won, as he always did.

“My sister and I have discussed the contract at length,” Reeds said. “We are considering agreeing to your proposal.”

“Considering?” William asked.

Where had this courage come from? William did not imagine that it would last for long.

“Yes,” Reeds said. “First, I wish to verify the authenticity of this contract. I wish to speak with the Baron of Westwood to determine if he has any recollection of our fathers making this agreement. Then, I shall speak with my solicitor to determine if he has any knowledge of this arrangement.”

“Do you suspect me of deceiving you? If I desired one of your sisters to be my wife, I

am quite certain that I could devise some means of obtaining one without resorting to such an absurd scheme.”

Reeds took a sip of his coffee. William suspected it was a delay tactic to consider his answer. The man looked as though he was on the verge of saying something regrettable. How pathetic!

“I suppose so,” Reeds said, “but I am sure you understand the reason for my hesitancy. I would not wed one of my sisters to you without being certain about the contract’s authenticity.”

“You distrust me.”

“I distrust everyone with my sisters,” Reeds replied. “I especially distrust the man determined to marry the sister of mine who has resolved herself to spinsterhood. Are you incapable of finding a willing woman to marry you?”

It sounded like something Lady Catherine would say. William wondered if she was responsible for her brother’s sudden courage. Perhaps she had spoken to him during the night.

“You act as though I am unreasonable,” William said coolly. “Many lords of the ton marry ladies who are not particularly besotted with them. That is the truth of an arranged marriage. Were you convinced that all husbands and wives were love-matches? I had not thought you so naïve.”

Lady Catherine sighed. When William glanced at her, the young lady smiled sharply and stabbed her eggs as though she intended to murder them.

“Are you vexed, my lady?” William asked.

She wore a pale pink gown that beautifully traced her delicate, feminine figure. It reminded William of the night before. He had stood so near her that, when he gazed down, he had been able to appreciate her firm breasts and her slender neck.

The memory of that slight touch, when his fingertips brushed the shell of her ear, burned within him. He ached to touch her again and longer. William's pulse quickened when he imagined Lady Catherine on her knees or seated on his bed, gazing up at him with such boldness.

"I am," Lady Catherine said.

"Perhaps, you ought not to display such feelings of displeasure before your guests," William said. "It is unbecoming."

"I may do as I please," Lady Catherine snapped. "This is my home."

It was becoming readily apparent why Lady Catherine was so spirited. Her brother failed to correct the young lady and showed no interest in requesting that she display even the smallest feminine graces. If she were William's bride...

If she were his wife and he caught her wandering outside the bedchamber in the early hours of the morning, he would have caught her about her waist and kissed her until he left her breathless. Then, he would have carried Lady Catherine to their bed and taught her the consequences for a young lady wandering where she ought not to.

"How long will it take your solicitor to arrive?" William asked.

"I sent correspondence to him this morning," Reeds replied. "I thoroughly explained the situation to him, so I am certain he will answer quickly."

William caught the veiled criticism. He had not been so forthcoming when presenting

the contract to Reeds. That was because Reeds was too proper and afraid to fight for what he wanted.

“We should have our answer in two days. My solicitor is in London,” Reeds continued. “So we need to wait for an answer.”

“Then, I see no need to delay writing the marriage contract since we will be forced to wait two weeks before our wedding anyway,” William said. “I am sure that the solicitor’s report will be entirely satisfactory.”

“We will write nothing until we receive word,” Reeds insisted. “That is what Dorothy and I have agreed to do.”

“Once we receive word,” Lady Dorothy said, “if it is sufficient, I will marry you. As per the contract.”

“What?” Lady Bridget whispered, her eyes wide.

“To maintain our family’s honor,” Reeds said. “It is what must be done.”

A fork clinked loudly against a fine porcelain plate. Everyone’s heads turned to Lady Catherine, who curled her hands into fists atop the table. William somewhat feared for the lace covering the table. Her nails looked ready to tear it asunder. “No,” Lady Catherine said. “No, Dorothy will not marry him.”

William raised an eyebrow. His lips curved into a sly smile. The expression seemed to anger the lady, for she scowled in reply. Her face was too comely to be threatening, and his blood became alight with anticipation. Did she intend to keep resisting, or had she realized that offering herself would be the simplest solution for her family’s plight?

“His Grace wants a wife from this family,” Lady Catherine said. “Dorothy does not want to marry him, so she should not. However, I have a string of failed Seasons behind me. I am of marriageable age and have not made such promises.”

William let his face betray nothing, but his pulse jumped in anticipation of his victory.

“What are you saying?” Reeds asked.

“Do not say something foolish,” Lady Dorothy said. “I have already discussed this with Elias, and?—”

“ And ,” Lady Catherine interrupted, “I ought to marry His Grace. If he will accept me, I would be proud to be the Duchess of Sarsen.”

William feigned cool acceptance. Inside, his body stirred with warmth and desire. This arrangement was far better than the one he had anticipated. It seemed as though Lady Catherine had seen the wisdom, the elegance, of his solution.

“ What ?” Reeds asked.

A strangled sound emerged from Lady Dorothy’s throat, and Lady Bridget nearly choked on her toast and jam.

“What an interesting solution you propose,” William said. “I accept.”

“Wait!” Reeds exclaimed. “Cat, have you—why would you?—?”

“I have already explained my reasoning,” Lady Catherine said. “You will not change my feelings on the matter. This is the choice that makes the most sense. It is the best option.”

“I agree,” William said. “I think you will make a wonderful duchess.”

With the appropriate amount of correction, of course.

It would be some time before Lady Catherine became worthy of that title, but he was sure that she would be—eventually.

“Yes, but...” Lady Bridget trailed off.

Lady Catherine’s eyes glinted with fury. “That is, of course, provided that the solicitor’s answers are satisfactory,” she said. “If they are not, there will be no wedding. Do you agree to those terms, Your Grace?”

They would be satisfactory. Lady Catherine had lost this gamble, and she knew it. This was simply a weak bid for more time.

“I do,” William said. “I will impose on your hospitality a little longer, Reeds.”

“Of course.”

Although Reeds spoke to William, his gaze remained fixed on Lady Catherine. William wondered if the man was vexed that his sister had spoken over him and agreed to marry without her brother’s consent. If Reeds was angry, he did not allow his fury to show.

“Then, I will enjoy the chance to learn more about my future wife,” William said. “You will take a walk through the gardens with me, my lady.”

“Of course, Your Grace. Shall we go at once?”

Her tight words and fierce expression were, to William, like the call of a siren,

irresistible and haunting.

“I have finished eating,” William said. “Have you?”

“So I have,” Lady Catherine replied.

Reeds cleared his throat. “I wish to speak to my sister first. This has all happened rather quickly.”

William considered declining the request, but the thought of his own sisters made him more inclined to mercy than he otherwise might have been. He offered the smallest nod of acknowledgement. “I shall wait in the gardens for my young bride.”

“For Lady Catherine,” Reeds said reproachfully. “She is not your bride yet .”

“She will be. That is close enough.”

After offering a curt bow to Lady Catherine, William left the room and set a slow path to the gardens. Doubtless, the family would be arguing for some time. He hoped it would not take too long, though. Last night’s unexpected encounter with Lady Catherine burned strongly in his mind. He longed to be alone with her again, if only for a few moments.

William waited by the garden’s entrance and tried to decide if he was brazen enough to touch her. Would Lady Catherine be receptive to his advances? Or would she be appalled? Perhaps, all her boldness was merely a facade.

He knew some wayward misses like that. They were all fire and anger until presented with the unknown, and then, all their fire became extinguished in an instant. He hoped that she was not such a lady and that he had not been tricked into promising to wed such a boring bride.

At last, he heard the faint sound of slippers on the floor behind him. He turned his head and found Lady Catherine standing there, her lady's maid a few steps behind. "You thought of a chaperone," William said.

Adorable.

"Of course," Lady Catherine said. "A proper lady must not be without one."

"I was not under the impression that you were a proper lady."

William tilted his head in the direction of the gardens. He began walking along the well-maintained garden path. Sweeping grasses and cheerful flowers bloomed, as yet untouched by the faint autumn chill. If William listened very hard, he could hear Lady Catherine's faint steps and the whispering of her gown as she walked beside him.

She seemed determined to put as much space as possible between the two of them. A quick glance over his shoulder confirmed that the same was not true of the insipid lady's maid, who followed so closely that any illicit dalliance would be impossible.

They kept walking, and the more they did, the more Lady Catherine fidgeted. William hid a smile. She was as wild as the flowers around her, but with proper care, she could become a carefully cultivated rose.

Lady Catherine scoffed. "You insisted on this walk around the gardens, and you have nothing to say at all."

He smirked. "This is your first lesson in manners, my lady. I expect my duchess to speak only when spoken to."

Her face reddened until her cheeks rivalled the reddest of roses. Lady Catherine

worked her jaw for a heartbeat, like she was trying to decide the best barb with which to wound him.

“We need to come to an understanding if I am to be your wife,” she said.

“I agree.”

“I am marrying you only to spare my sister this fate,” Lady Catherine said. “I do not intend to make this a pleasant arrangement. On the contrary, I intend to be so insufferable that you decide to abandon your search for a wife entirely. Then, it will be your honor that is besmirched, rather than mine or my sister’s.”

“I see,” William said. “And do you suppose that you will escape unscathed if I tell the ton that you are a wild and aimless woman?”

“The ton already knows that. They will believe that you are a foolish man who did not care to learn his wife’s character before marriage.”

“No. They will marvel at how I have made you a perfect duchess,” William said. “We spoke yesterday of Shakespeare. I am sure that you are familiar with *The Taming of the Shrew* ?”

“Not his best work.”

“A shrew would think so.”

“Are you frightened of ladies who have their own thoughts and desires?” Lady Catherine asked. “I will always be high-spirited, and I am not unshaped clay or some plaything that you can mold into what you want. I am not a pet or a pupil to be lectured.”

William said nothing. It was readily apparent that arguing with her was an exercise in futility. Instead, he merely gazed calmly at her, while Lady Catherine's scowl deepened. That would vex her more than outright disagreement.

"You are infuriating!" she snapped. "Purposefully so!"

She turned away from him. Seeing she was about to leave, William seized her wrist and pulled her to him with more force than he had intended. Her back pressed against his chest, and a gasp escaped the young woman.

"Listen," he said.

She looked at him, a smirk playing across her lips. "Is this appropriate behavior, Your Grace? Grasping a lady and holding her against you?"

He clenched his jaw. Lady Catherine was not only determined to be defiant, but she also delighted in mocking him.

"You are not the only one who can become angry, my lady, so I would advise you to tread very softly."

Lady Catherine shivered against him and arched her back. William doubted that she even noticed her body's movements, whereas he was far too aware of them. His manhood throbbed. If they were already wed and the chaperone elsewhere, he could have taken her right there along the garden path.

He would have seen her laid upon the grass and been astride her waist in an instant. At the moment, the most he dared do was grasp her hand and hold her against him, breathing in the scent of lavender and roses.

Her gown was such a light garment. If he pressed more insistently against her, he

might be able to feel her stays beneath it.

“You are not a plaything or a pet,” William said humbly.

Lady Catherine’s breath hitched. “ You seem to think so.”

“Not in the least. However, if you are to be a duchess, you must learn,” he continued, “and I am more than happy to teach you.”

“I will be a difficult student.”

He laughed darkly. “That is already apparent.”

“Well, do your worst, Your Grace. Whatever lesson you might devise, I can assure you that I have no intention of learning anything from you,” Lady Catherine said. “I quite like the woman I am.”

His eyes darted to her lips, still tilted in that coy smirk. Lady Catherine really thought that she could challenge him. She really thought that she could best him in any encounter.

William leaned nearer to her, aware but uncaring of the lady’s maid’s startled gasp. He licked his lips and was rewarded with another sharp inhale from Lady Catherine.

The flush from her face spread downward towards her throat and the tops of her breasts. Her blushes were as wild as she was. Rather than a pretty and delicate sweep of color, hers were uneven spatters of red strewn across a red canvas.

“I cannot wait to break you,” he said, slowly and deliberately. “It will be a wonderful pastime, indeed.”

CHAPTER 4

Catherine was a wild woman, but she was not a foolish one. She knew that she ought not to vex His Grace too terribly. How was she to resist, though, when he smirked at her like he did? When he was so absurdly self-assured? When he made her knees so weak?

I cannot wait to break you. It will be a wonderful pastime, indeed.

They were wretched words, and yet something deep inside her came alive with them. Her body shivered with anticipation, longing even, for him. This situation was his fault. Silently, Catherine cursed himself and her own body for reacting so amorously to him. She clung to his jacket, and laughter rumbled in his chest. The sound struck her like lightning, shaking Catherine to her very core.

“Quiet, at last,” he said. “As I wanted.”

She would never be his quiet, proper wife. Catherine pulled herself to him, her chest flush against his. The fine material of his jacket brushed against the tops of her breasts, where they rose above her bodice. Then, she pressed her lips to his. She scarcely thought about anything except him and the blood roaring in her ears.

Catherine had read of kisses before, but she had never experienced one. Her first thought was that it was strange, the feeling of her soft lips pressed against his. Her second thought was that she ached to kiss him longer and more deeply.

His Grace tasted of coffee and sugar, and when she tilted her head, the slight dusting

of hair along his jaw scratched pleasantly along her lips. While her body was ablaze with want of him, she forced herself to break the kiss. It had only lasted a heartbeat, but to Catherine, it seemed as though it lasted an eternity.

“Is that the proper behavior you desire of me?” she asked.

His expression darkened, and his right hand found her hair, just beneath the brim of her sunhat. He crashed his lips against hers, muffling her startled gasp.

The Duke of Sarsen kissed her so deeply that Catherine thought he might very well devour her. An awkward, startled moan escaped from her lips. His fingers tightened in her hair, pulling and sending a throbbing sensation crawling across her scalp. Catherine moaned again, unable to describe the feelings coursing through her body. Her chest ached for air, but she?—

He broke the kiss, and she stared at him with wide eyes. Her chest heaved. Suddenly, Catherine’s stays felt too tight against her straining breasts. If her knees had felt weak before, now her entire body trembled. A deep ache pulsed between her legs, and when she squeezed her thighs together in a vain attempt to ease the sensation, His Grace’s eyes darted downward.

She felt instinctively that the man knew what he had done to her. He knew about all the wonderful and terrible feelings pulsing through her. His Grace released her, and Catherine stood frozen for an instant. When he touched her wrists, she retreated as if he had burned her.

“Your hair looks like a bird’s nest,” he said. “I suggest that you make yourself presentable.”

“You should not have touched my hair,” Catherine said. “My lady’s maid spends a significant amount of her morning ensuring that it is presentable.”

Catherine reached for her hat. It felt as though it was misplaced. She clenched her jaw and hastily tucked her curls back beneath it. If her brother or sisters saw her in this state, they would have questions, and Catherine would not be able to answer them.

“You have only yourself to blame, my lady,” His Grace said. “If you had not kissed me, I would never have felt the need to touch your hair.”

“If you had not behaved in such an ungentlemanly manner, I would not have kissed you,” Catherine said flatly. “You provoked me.”

“ You provoked me . It is quite careless of you to blame your folly on others, my lady.”

“And it is ignoble of you to deny your own flaws, Your Grace.”

“Do not test me, my lady. I shall not release you so easily next time,” he said, smiling tightly. “I trust that you can finish your walk about the gardens without flinging yourself at another man in such an unbecoming manner? Or is that yet another lesson you need?”

Catherine gasped. “How dare you question my virtue?”

“Given your behavior, I think questioning your virtue is more than appropriate.”

He turned away, stepping neatly past Elizabeth, Catherine’s gawking lady’s maid. Catherine fought the urge to fling something at the man’s retreating back. She put her hands to her face, aware of how hot her skin was to the touch.

“Are you...well, my lady?” Elizabeth asked hesitantly. “Shall I fetch His Grace?”

For a wild moment, Catherine thought that Elizabeth referred to the Duke of Sarsen,

and a mix of horror and want swept through her. Her racing heart calmed as she realized that it was surely her own brother, the Duke of Sarsen, whom Elizabeth meant.

“Say nothing ,” Catherine hissed, the moment she was certain His Grace could not hear.

Elizabeth looked at her with wide blue eyes. “Are—are you certain, my lady? Surely, your brother?—”

“He does not need to know!” Catherine snapped. “I will tell my brother when—and if—I feel that it is necessary. I do not wish for you to say anything on my behalf. Do you understand?”

“Yes, my lady.”

“And you would never betray my trust, would you?” Catherine said.

Elizabeth bit her lip and furrowed her brow. The lady’s maid wore an expression that Catherine knew well. Elizabeth did not want to keep her silence. “No, my lady,” the young woman murmured at last. “If it is your wish that I say nothing, I will not.”

Catherine nodded sharply. “Good.”

She would never tell Elias about what had transpired between the Duke of Sarsen and herself, especially given that she did not entirely understand the encounter herself. His Grace was a monster—callous and cruel. Cold, except for that kiss?—

She had never before felt so alive . It was as if a new world had opened to her, one where everything was wonderful and frightening. Her body hummed with anticipation. Catherine was not a child. She knew why her body felt like it did, and on

occasions, she had thought about all those amorous activities that were usually confined to the marriage bed, for ladies at least.

Never before had she wanted to ardently partake in those activities. Why did she so strongly wish for them when faced with this man? She had always imagined that these feelings would be inspired only by a man whom she truly loved, and she could imagine no man less worthy of her love than His Grace.

“I need time to think,” Catherine said. “I believe that I will return to my bedchamber for a while. I do not wish to be disturbed, so you may have the rest of your evening to do what pleases you.”

“As you wish, my lady. Thank you.”

Catherine stormed from the gardens, her fury warring with her own desire. She clenched her jaw, her mind racing. She could not marry that man. Dorothy could not either.

Her heart was beating so rapidly that its echo reverberated inside her own skull. There must be some way to escape His Grace with dignity. That was why she had resolved to vex him. If he broke the engagement, her reputation might suffer, but his disgrace would be far greater. What would she do if her plan failed, though? The Duke of Sarsen did not seem like the kind of man who would accept losses easily. For every barb she cast his way, he gave her one in kind!

If he would not relent, what other options were there? She would not allow her sister to marry that man, but she could not bear to wed him either. There must be some solution that she had not thought of. She entered the house, consumed in thoughts of His Grace, as she set a brisk pace towards her bedchamber.

“But Dory?—”

Catherine halted abruptly, just past the parlor. Bridget's soft, plaintive voice drifted through the walls. Catherine's heart ached at the distress present in her younger sister's voice. It did not take a considerable amount of thought to surmise what had caused her sister to feel such grief.

"—she cannot truly mean to marry him, can she?" Bridget asked. "Cat?"

"I believe she does mean it," Dorothy said.

Catherine pressed herself against the wall and took a steadying breath. She ought to join her sisters, rather than listening to them hidden from view, but Dorothy's gentle voice gave her pause. That was the voice Dorothy used when comforting them, the voice she had always used.

"She does not even know him!" Bridget exclaimed. "None of us do! What if he is a horrid man? A monster like—like in Perrault's Bluebeard !"

Dorothy laughed softly. "He is no monster. I am quite sure that His Grace has no chamber of dead wives to be discovered. He has never even wed."

"I did not mean literally," Bridget replied. "But what if he does have some dark secret? We would not know until Catherine was already the Duchess of Sarsen. What, then?"

"Then, we would rescue her," Dorothy said. "Elias would never allow any of us to remain in an unhappy marriage. It is true that we must consider our reputations among the ton, but our brother would never choose his reputation over our happiness."

"Is that not what he is doing in allowing Catherine to marry the Duke of Sarsen?" Bridget exclaimed, her voice taking a higher pitch. "Is that not sacrificing her

happiness and freedom, so we might appease the vicious tongues of the ton?"

"Catherine is of age," Dorothy said. "She may make her own choices."

Catherine closed her eyes and dug her nails into the palms of her hands. It was her choice. Dorothy had agreed to marry His Grace, and Catherine could have remained silent. She had chosen to speak and offer herself instead. She had chosen to take His Grace's proposed solution. There was no one she could blame save herself.

"Besides," Dorothy continued. "We do not know that she will marry him yet. Perhaps, the Baron of Westwood will say that the contract is forged, or maybe the solicitor will insist that it is not legally binding, and therefore, need not be honored."

"I know."

"Then, we need not worry about Bridget's marriage until it happens. We have some time," Dorothy said.

"I know," Bridget replied. "But what if she does marry him? What can we do, then?"

"We will think of something," Dorothy said. "We always do. As long as we are family, we will always have one another. Even if we do not live together, that will be true."

Catherine bit the inside of her cheek. Dorothy always knew what to say to lift others' spirits. She was quite unlike Catherine, who was adept at sharp retorts but always floundered when she tried to comfort others. She could not replace Dorothy, so if one of them must wed the Duke of Sarsen, Catherine knew it must be her.

"And someday," Dorothy continued, "you will wed and begin a family of your own. That is your dream, is it not?"

“Yes,” Bridget said.

“I will be happy for you,” Dorothy replied. “If you and Catherine are happily wed, it will mean that everything Elias and I did worked. All we have wanted for the two of you is to see you both happily wed and safe in the arms of loving husbands.”

“But Catherine may not be happy,” Bridget said. “I always imagined that she would find a love match. Did you not see the disappointment in her face after the Season ended? Of course, Catherine tried to hide it, but if I noticed it, you must have.”

Catherine winced. She had thought that her disappointment was hidden well, but it seemed that Catherine was not quite the accomplished actress she might have assumed. Her failure of a Season was not unexpected, yet she had still found herself deeply dissatisfied with her poor prospects.

She had attended several balls and soirees, and she had received only a handful of callers—far fewer than a lady of her position ought to gain. Maybe the duke’s arrival was meant to be her penance for her failure to be a lady. Her punishment for being unable to remain true to herself and fulfill the ton’s expectations.

“I know. Perhaps, she might,” Dorothy said. “It is easy to linger on the worst that may occur from this situation, but it is equally likely that the arrangement will end well. Catherine and His Grace are not well-acquainted yet. It may be that they realize they love one another.”

Catherine shook her head. That would never happen, but she did not have the heart to tell her sisters that she would never have even an inkling of affection for the Duke of Sarsen. The muscles in her stomach clenched tightly. His Grace certainly inspired feelings within her, but those were not affection.

They were not love, and they never would be. Catherine pushed herself away from

the wall and wandered slowly up the stairs. She trailed her hand over the banister. In the two years after their parents' deaths, they had spent most of their days on the country estate. She might be leaving soon.

"All will be well," Dorothy continued. "I promise, Bridget. Our family is strong. We have survived far worse situations. We will survive this one, also."

"I know," Bridget said. "You are right. You are always right."

Her sisters' voices sounded louder. Catherine turned her head and saw them emerge from the parlor. Her breath caught in her throat. A wave of fondness overcame her as she gazed at them.

"How was the walk in the gardens?" Dorothy asked, her voice betraying nothing of the tumultuous conversation she had just shared with Bridget.

She longed to tell her sisters about what had happened, Dorothy especially, but Catherine could not. Even if her sisters were willing to forgive her impropriety, which they would, Catherine did not wish to increase their burdens.

"It was pleasant enough," Catherine said. "His Grace is an unusual man. I have much to think about after our conversation."

It was the most neutral answer that she could give without lying about how the walk had been.

"I imagine so," Dorothy said. "He is certainly a man who inspires conversation."

Catherine was that.

"It is something that you might have in common," Dorothy added.

“Perhaps.”

Catherine looked further up the corridor and smiled. “I am a little tired after my walk. I think I will spend some time in my room.”

Dorothy frowned, her eyes bright with concern. “Of course, Catherine.”

“Shall I bring you a book to read?” Bridget asked. “I have just finished reading *Mansfield Park*. I think you might enjoy it.’

“Maybe another time,” Catherine replied. “Thank you, though.”

Catherine had still not entirely managed to vanquish the conflicting feelings inspired by His Grace, and love was the last subject she wished to read about.

CHAPTER 5

The day was perfect. Warm sunlight flitted through large, white clouds, which moved lazily across the sky. The air stirred with a faint breeze. Flowers and trees bowed their heads and swept their limbs, making a soft symphony of sound that whispered throughout the garden. William closed his eyes and inhaled, letting the sweetness of flowers fill his senses. He caught the faintest whisp of lavender and roses, conjuring the image of Lady Catherine in his mind.

After their kiss, she had gazed at him with wide eyes and startled, parted lips. The lady had appeared flushed and disheveled, much like the flowers when the wind disturbed them. He imagined Lady Catherine on her knees, her lips parted and ready to receive something far more intimate and brazen than a kiss.

“Good afternoon, Your Grace.”

His eyes snapped open. As if his thoughts had summoned her, Lady Catherine stood before him in the gardens. He had wondered if she would be inclined to speak to him again after the events of the previous day. Most young ladies would make themselves conspicuously unavailable. Not Lady Catherine, it seemed.

Her lady’s maid trailed her. The young woman’s face was flushed scarlet, likely because she recalled the episode from the day before. As delightful as that interlude had been, William had spent the previous night pacing his room and wondering if he had made a terrible error. He had anticipated Lady Catherine telling her brother and His Grace raining retribution upon him like an angered god. But there was nothing. William suspected that neither the maid nor Lady Catherine had told anyone.

He straightened his spine and affected an ambivalent expression. “Good afternoon, my lady. Join me.”

Lady Catherine neatly seated herself on the bench beside him. He looked askance at her, observing her delicate profile. Lady Catherine was not a great beauty. There was nothing which made her uniquely lovely when compared with the many ladies of the ton, yet there was something singularly intriguing about her. He found that he longed to let his gaze linger on those fine cheekbones, soft chin, and crystal-blue eyes.

“Are you enjoying your book, Your Grace?” Lady Catherine asked, gesturing towards the discarded volume.

“It is Samuel Butler’s *Hudibras*,” William replied. “Are you familiar with the piece?”

“No.”

“A pity. It is rather enjoyable,” William replied. “I found it in your brother’s library and thought to read it again.”

“I am told that you must open books to read them,” Lady Catherine said.

“I found myself distracted by the beauty of these gardens.”

“My mother designed them,” Lady Catherine said. “We have kept them unchanged since her death. Well, as unchanged as one may keep a garden.”

“To honor her?”

“Yes.”

William hummed and fixed his gaze forward, thinking. A change seemed to have come over Lady Catherine. She seemed almost as though she were making an effort to be a polite, young miss. That was promising.

“You have my sympathy,” William said. “I also lost my mother at a young age. My one regret is that my sisters were never able to know her.”

“You mentioned your sisters before.”

“Yes. Hannah and Hester.”

“You must love them very much,” Lady Catherine said, “to sacrifice your own happiness for their well-being.”

“Why would you assume that?”

“You mentioned that you wish to wed for them,” Lady Catherine replied, “so they will have a maternal presence.”

“I would not call marrying a sacrifice.”

“No?” she asked, raising an eyebrow. “I cannot imagine that you are particularly eager to wed me.”

“Why would you imagine that?”

“Because I am not the lady who suits you,” Lady Catherine said. “Otherwise, you would not seek to change my nature.”

“Even perfection can be improved.”

“So I am perfection? Those might be the kindest words you have spoken to me.”

William scoffed. “You are far from perfection, as is made abundantly clear by you misinterpreting my words in such a deliberately obtuse manner.”

“And now, you do not wish to admit that you have said something very kind about me,” Lady Catherine said, nodding solemnly. “I understand, Your Grace.”

“Do you?” he asked dryly.

“I do, indeed. You are embarrassed to admit how utterly perfect I am,” Lady Catherine replied. “It makes you reflect more strongly on your flaws.”

Lady Catherine was the most absurd woman he had ever met in his life!

“Do I have my flaws?” William asked. “Perhaps, you ought to make me aware of what they are, my lady. I cannot imagine that you know me so well as to have already made a nuanced observation of my character.”

Her expression became sly and sharp, more closely resembling the fact that she had shown him the day before. “Are you certain that you wish for me to recount them for you? I would not wish to upset you, Your Grace.”

“I find that difficult to believe.”

“You are doubtful,” Lady Catherine said. “You always assume that I have some ill intent, despite having no evidence to the contrary.”

“Is that everything?”

“Hardly. You are hypocritical,” she said. “You insist that I be a proper lady, but you

are hardly a proper man.”

He bit back the insistence that he was not, for he realized that—from Lady Catherine’s perspective—he did seem to be an improper man.

“It is hardly improper to insist that an agreement be honored,” William said. “I should have been offered a bride from your family years ago.”

“Do you think so?” Lady Catherine said. “If that were true, I imagine that your father would have mentioned something.”

“That he did not doesn’t mean that I am not owed a wife.”

“Believing you are owed a wife does not necessitate arriving as quickly and unexpectedly as you did.”

“But it does,” he replied. “How was I to know that you and your sisters were not already being courted by other suitors? It would be most unfortunate if I had to break the hearts of all the men in the ton by claiming either you or Lady Dorothy.”

Her lips twitched into a small smile. “How can I argue with such flawless logic?”

“You cannot.”

Reeds, Lady Dorothy, and Lady Bridget entered the gardens. Reeds and Lady Dorothy carried mallets, while Lady Bridget held the balls needed to play pall mall.

“Oh!” Catherine exclaimed, her face brightening. “I am quite splendid at playing pall mall.”

“Are you?”

“The best,” she said.

Reeds laughed heartily as he reached the bench where William and Lady Catherine sat. “Did you just tell our guest that you are the best at pall mall?” Reeds asked. “That is a gross exaggeration of the truth.”

“It most certainly is not!” Lady Catherine argued. “When we last played this game, I emerged victorious!”

“You managed to best me once,” Reeds replied. “I do not think that makes you the best at pall mall.”

“More than once,” Lady Catherine replied.

“Twice.”

Lady Catherine scowled. “More than that. I have bested you quite often.”

“I would be astonished to learn that either of you kept a record of every game,” Lady Dorothy replied, smiling with amusement. “Can you both not simply enjoy the game?”

“No,” Reeds said.

“Decidedly not,” Lady Catherine agreed.

William said nothing, silently watching as the siblings seemed to forget his very existence. Reeds and the other ladies had thus far not even acknowledged his presence. It was no mystery why Lady Catherine was such an unusual lady. Her family behaved in an uncomfortably familiar way, even before guests.

“You ought to have anticipated that answer, dear sister,” Lady Bridget said, smiling wryly. “You know how they behave when there is a game.”

“I believe that I will emerge victorious today,” Reeds said.

Lady Catherine leaped to her feet. “I regret to humiliate you, especially before a guest, but I am quite sure that I shall win. Prepare yourself for defeat, my brother.”

“We shall see,” Reeds said. “Will you join us, Sarsen?”

“Certainly.”

William stood, noting that the Leedway siblings had already brought an additional mallet with them. They had anticipated inviting him to join them. William supposed he ought to think kindly upon their hospitality, and he might have, if they were not otherwise so informal in their mannerisms.

Reeds led their journey through the garden path until they reached a flat expanse of grass with the iron loops already placed in the ground. Lady Catherine took a mallet from her brother without one even being offered.

“Excuse you!” Reeds exclaimed in mock offense.

Lady Catherine grinned, her eyes alight. “I hope you are prepared to be defeated.”

Lady Bridget shook her head. “Every time.”

The rest of the mallets were distributed, and William stood awkwardly, leaning against his as though it were a cane. He tried to think of some excuse not to join them, for it was readily apparent that he did not belong. The Leedway siblings were all clustered together, watching as Reeds made his first strike and sent the ball flying

over the ground.

He was, admittedly, quite good.

Lady Catherine struck a ball next. It hit her brother's ball and sent it skipping over the ground and away from the next ring.

"You!" Reeds exclaimed. "How could you?"

"All is fair in love and war," Lady Catherine declared.

As Lady Dorothy prepared to take her turn, Lady Catherine glanced over her shoulder. Her eyes met his, and she slipped away from her siblings. "Are you going to join us?" she asked. "Or do you intend to stand here and observe us, like a particularly ill-tempered cat?"

Lady Dorothy's strike was met with an enthusiastic shout from Reeds and a groan from the unfortunate lady. It seemed as though pall mall was not a game at which Lady Dorothy excelled.

Lady Bridget's strike achieved little distance. She sighed and shook her head. Without hesitation, Reeds prepared for his next turn.

"Do not speak of things that you know nothing about," William said. "You know nothing yet of my temperament."

If she did, the young miss might run away screaming.

He could have justified himself to her, but he would not. Why would he, with a woman like Lady Catherine, who treated formality as an inconvenience which need not be followed? Formal behavior was the shield he used to protect himself from

everyone and everything. It was why he had survived, while his brother had not.

“My turn!” Lady Catherine exclaimed.

She turned away from him and hurried to the game. William grimaced. He could make her recognize the importance of being a proper lady. It would take some time and effort, but she was an intelligent woman. She could surely learn.

Lady Catherine struck the ball and yelled in delight as it swept through the remaining hoop. “Guess who is winning?” she asked.

“You,” Reeds said. “For now. I cannot simply demolish you from the start, Cat. I must give you at least the chance to score a few points.”

“Oh, please!” Lady Catherine exclaimed, waving a dismissive hand.

Lady Dorothy shook her head. “Be nice, children.”

“Yes, Mother,” Reeds said.

“I am only returning his behavior in kind,” Lady Catherine said.

Lady Dorothy approached her ball and prepared to strike.

“Oh, wait! You have not yet had a turn,” Lady Catherine said, turning to William.

“I am enjoying myself sufficiently by watching,” William said dryly.

“Are you certain?” Reeds asked. “You have only missed a single round.”

“Quite certain.”

Reeds shrugged. "Very well."

As the game resumed, Lady Catherine swept to William's side once again. "Very strategic," she said. "You know that I would defeat you, and you would be embarrassed. It is a pity that my brother has not yet learned that lesson."

He clenched his jaw to keep from smiling.

"Haughtiness does not befit a young lady," he said.

"Do you expect me to be made of ice?" Lady Catherine asked. "Like you?"

Lady Dorothy's strike was passable. Lady Bridget took her turn next.

"Do you believe me to be made of ice?" he asked, lowering his voice. "You did not seem to believe that in the garden yesterday. I recall being quite warm to you then."

She flushed and glanced at her siblings, as though afraid they might overhear. William, of course, was careful not to speak that loudly.

"You were warm," she conceded softly. "But only in some attempt to humiliate me."

"You attempted to humiliate me first," he said.

He recalled her kiss all too well, the heat of it and how she had consumed his senses. When he lay awake in bed that night, she haunted his dreams. No woman had ever kissed him like that before. He kissed them .

"You deserved it," Lady Catherine said.

"What an interesting assertion."

She bit her lip, and William thought about how delightful it would be to bite that lip himself. Lady Catherine's mouth was as soft as kissing a rose.

"You grabbed my wrist," Lady Catherine reminded him. "I only reacted to what you had already done."

William searched his mind for another retort, and with every passing second it took him to find one, Lady Catherine's smile grew wider.

"Have you accepted defeat, Cat?" Reeds asked jovially.

Lady Catherine started and turned to look at her brother. "What?"

"It is your turn," Reeds said. "Were you and Sarsen engaged in such a diverting conversation that you forgot the game?"

"Oh!"

While Lady Catherine hurried to her ball, Reeds cast William a startled look. "You and my sister are enjoying one another's company?" Reeds asked.

"Very much so," William replied.

Even if Lady Catherine's behavior was odd, during the game, the young woman had seemed more like the lady he knew. She was too informal and always prepared with a sharp remark. He could not forget her behavior in the garden, though. She had seemed peaceful and almost ladylike.

Something inside him softened when he thought of how she gazed at him when he mentioned his mother. They were two very different people, but it could not be said that they had no commonalities between them. Lady Catherine had lost her mother,

too, and she loved her family. Even if she did not yet behave like a duchess ought to, William could not deny that her devotion to her family was admirable.

Lady Catherine's ball swept over the grass, and she grinned widely. "Another excellent stroke!" she declared.

"Adequate," Reeds said.

Lady Catherine's smirk widened. "Do you feel the cold grasp of defeat approaching?"

"Not yet!"

"Honestly," Lady Dorothy said. "You act as though it is a matter of life and death who will win!"

Lady Bridget laughed. "They do!"

"Because it is ," Reeds said.

"Indeed," Lady Catherine agreed. "Do not worry, my dear brother. I shall ensure that everyone remembers you fondly."

She returned to William's side. Lady Bridget leaned towards Lady Dorothy, murmuring something low in her ear. Both ladies glanced at William, making him wonder if he was the topic of their whispered conversation.

"You are formal when it benefits you," Lady Catherine said in a lowered voice, "or when it gives you feelings of superiority. When it does not—when you want something—you are entirely too eager to abandon all sense of propriety."

“Would you like me to be the perfect gentleman all the time?” William asked in a low voice. “Are you certain?”

Her breath audibly hitched, and William had his answer.

CHAPTER 6

Catherine did not best Elias at pall mall, much to her disappointment. Her brother was not as obnoxious as he might have been, given his victory, but he did continue to cast Catherine smug smiles across the table at dinner. She silently fumed and might have accused him of cheating—had she any proof that he had done such, which she did not.

A bowl of chestnut soup was placed before her. The brown of the nuts might have made the dish appear dreary, but the cook had added sprigs of parsley and shredded carrots to brighten its appearance. Catherine ate a spoonful, savoring the explosion of flavor on her tongue.

“Mr. Davies is to arrive this evening. My solicitor,” Elias added, likely for His Grace’s benefit.

“Very good. We may finally have this matter settled,” the duke replied. “I am sure your solicitor will be adequate for writing a marriage contract.”

“More than adequate,” Elias replied. “Mr. Davies is quite skilled at his trade.”

His Grace smiled thinly and said nothing, instead eating another spoonful of soup.

“So quickly!” Dorothy marveled, her brow furrowing in distress. “I had anticipated him taking longer to arrive.”

Catherine privately wondered if her sister had hoped that the solicitor would not

make haste, for fear that the man might agree that the contract was legally binding. The longer it took for Mr. Davies to agree, the more time they had to free Catherine of her promise to wed His Grace.

But Catherine feared that no solution would be forthcoming. She would be forced to marry the Duke of Sarsen, but it was better that it was her rather than Dorothy.

“I told him the matter was urgent,” Elias said, clearing his throat. “I would not wish to keep His Grace waiting.”

“Of course not,” Dorothy murmured, her voice holding not even the slightest suggestion of sarcasm or rebellion.

Catherine felt a wash of affection and adoration for her sister, who tried so hard to be the perfect lady. It had always seemed so effortless to Catherine, but she watched as her sister slumped just a little. Maybe the pressure of being a lady weighed on her sister more heavily than she had assumed.

“Will you be departing once Mr. Davies delivers his decision?” Bridget asked.

“It depends on what that decision is,” His Grace replied, his voice brokering no room for disagreement.

Catherine strongly suspected that if the Duke of Sarsen was refused her hand, he would wish to fight and insist on claiming her as his bride. She supposed that she ought to detest such a thing with her whole being, but the more she interacted with the duke, the less she really detested him. It was not as though she held any measure of fondness or attraction for His Grace, but her interactions with him awakened something deep within her.

The memory of their recent kiss sent her blood pulsing more quickly through her

veins, and everything inside her grew hot and ached. She had thought of that delicate place between her legs before, as most young ladies did—without admitting that they did, of course—but the sensations that swept through her when she remembered His Grace’s lips on hers were beyond words. She wanted to know if she could feel more, if it was possible that there were yet still many more glorious emotions that might unfold if she let His Grace kiss her or touch her. Already, it seemed to Catherine as though he set her blood ablaze.

“We must abide by it,” Elias said, “whatever it may be.”

“Of course,” His Grace replied. “If your lawyer disagrees with my claim, I shall employ my own solicitor to challenge yours, and I trust the matter will be settled in my favor. I will indulge you this once, but I will not be taken for a fool.”

Elias and the Duke of Sarsen meet one another’s gazes across the dinner table, the tension between them so thick and heavy that Catherine swore it must be a physical, tangible thing. At last, her brother looked askance, choosing to break His Grace’s stare.

The Duke of Sarsen smiled in grim satisfaction, as though he enjoyed wielding power over everyone else. Heat rose to Catherine’s face, indignation at the treatment of her brother warring with the duke’s stern warning in the garden that he would teach her to behave . What had he meant? She had not the faintest idea, but she shivered with desire when she considered the possibilities.

“None of us would ever attempt to take you as a fool, Sarsen,” Elias said quietly.

“I am pleased to hear it,” His Grace said. “If you did wish to challenge me, I would wonder if you had taken leave of your senses.”

“Why would he take leave of his senses?” Catherine asked. “You have only arrived

without warning, demanded my brother's hospitality, and decided to marry his sister, seemingly without consideration for anyone's desire but your own."

"That is untrue."

"Is it, Your Grace?"

She arched an eyebrow and took a dainty spoonful of soup. His Grace's eyes narrowed, his expression as dark as London on a stormy day. Catherine's chest fluttered in anticipation of his retort. It was sure to be as swift and bright as lightning.

The Duke of Sarsen only smiled and ate a spoonful of soup himself. Had he realized she was trying to coax some snide remark from him? Was this just another symptom of his domineering attitude? He would not let her have even a minor victory? The thought should not have been thrilling, but it was. Maybe that was because Catherine was not the usual, proper lady.

The next dish was roasted mutton, seasoned with springs of rosemary and tiny specks of paprika and served in a bed of butter-glazed asparagus. Catherine's favorite.

"I shall miss our cook," Catherine said, after swallowing a delectable piece of mutton.

"Mine is equal to this," His Grace said.

"Impossible," Catherine argued.

The Duke of Sarsen shook his head. "Entirely possible. True, actually."

"I would imagine that your cook is quite excellent," Elias said. "It would be most unbecoming for any duke to have a poor cook."

“Unless the cook is secretly a prince in hiding or some such,” Bridget interjected. “Then, I suppose it would be permissible.”

Dorothy laughed. “And where are all these princes pretending to be cooks?”

Bridget’s face brightened. “I was thinking about Sir Thomas Malory’s *The Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkney*. He was a prince and disguised himself as a kitchen page.”

Catherine’s lips twitched in amusement, and she tilted her head towards the Duke of Sarsen. “And how many princes dwell in your kitchens, Your Grace? I do not wish for just any cook.”

His Grace narrowed his eyes. “I must confess that there is no prince in my kitchens. I fear that having a prince in my kitchens would make me feel territorial.”

“Oh? Would you be anticipating a violent overthrow of your household?” Catherine asked.

“No, because I would put that down,” His Grace replied. “I take pride in how orderly my household is, and I would never let anyone disturb it.”

Although the duke spoke of a hypothetical prince, Catherine felt as though the words were a warning meant for her. But what could she possibly do? She might be improper, but she was nonetheless a lady. And it was well-known that people seldom listened to ladies. Why should she assume that her husband and his household would be different from all the rest?

“Who would dare dream of destroying your household, Your Grace?” Catherine teased. “I can scarcely imagine anyone bold enough to try.”

“I can think of one young miss,” he said, his eyes narrowing.

Catherine smiled and widened her eyes, affecting a look of mock innocence. She did not imagine that the Duke of Sarsen would go so far as to repeat some of their talk in the garden before her own family over dinner. Perhaps she had the advantage for the moment.

“Why, I would never dream of such a thing,” Catherine drawled, casting a sly look at her siblings.

Bridget grinned. Dorothy bit her lip, failing to hide her worry. Elias opened his mouth as if to say something, but no words emerged.

“I feel as though you would,” His Grace said. “I imagine that you are already planning on how you might manage the estate, how many gowns you will purchase, and how you will destroy my wealth and name.”

“Oh? Are you a psychic?” Catherine asked. “A prophet?”

“One does not need either to understand the whims of a woman who is soon to be wed,” His Grace replied.

“As you have doubtlessly noticed, I am unlike most women,” Catherine countered. “How do you know that I shall want the same things as the others? Perhaps, I have in mind a different design.”

He considered her for a long moment, and Catherine fought the urge to squirm in her seat beneath his intense stare. Only he had ever gazed at her that way, as though he saw all the way to the innermost depths of her soul and found a challenge there. He looked as though he anticipated a challenge, welcomed one even.

“I doubt you can surprise me,” His Grace said dismissively, “though you will obviously try. Stubborn women always do.”

“It is fortunate that I am not a stubborn woman,” Catherine replied, smiling brightly.

Elias snorted. “ Cat .”

“What?” Catherine asked. “I am not!”

“You are the very picture of stubbornness,” he said.

“There is a kinder way to say it,” Dorothy said. “Resolute, perhaps.”

“Mulish,” added Bridget. “Contrary.”

“Those are significantly less kind!” Catherine exclaimed. “Bridget, how could you say such inconsiderate things about your own sister? I fear that you have cause incomparable harm to our family with your harsh words. His Grace will not wish to marry me, knowing that he is to have such a cold sister.”

“Oh, I doubt that,” the Duke of Sarsen replied. “On the contrary, I think His Grace continues to insist on marrying.”

“Perhaps you are a man who makes poor choices,” Catherine said, shaking her head. “Alas!”

His Grace ate a piece of mutton, his eyes fixed upon Catherine’s face as though she was someone that he needed to watch very carefully. Or maybe something , like she was a deer, and he was a particularly hungry wolf.

“I am not a man who makes poor choices,” he replied. “My every move is carefully calculated.”

What calculations had he made in asking her to be his bride? Catherine’s heart

hammered against her ribs. Her initial thought was that he had made none, but she recalled suddenly their rendezvous in the corridor outside Dorothy's room, where he had suggested that she offer herself in her sister's place. Perhaps she had become part of his design, although Catherine could not fathom why any man might choose her over Dorothy.

"I do not know if I believe you," Catherine replied. "Maybe you are merely a man who wishes to present himself as strategic when you are not, for I can imagine no man who would wish to be perceived as foolish."

His Grace's jaw clenched, and a surge of satisfaction went through Catherine at having successfully vexed him. She was forced to concede that his stormy nature was a little amusing. Catherine had a penchant for saying things which upset men on occasion; that was true. She had never seen one react quite like this, however, and she found that she liked it.

"I suppose not, but I find that fools reveal themselves quite readily," the duke said. "By their nature, they are unable to conceal their folly."

"A good point," Elias interrupted, as though reminding them that there were other people present at the table.

Catherine smiled sharply at her brother. "I disagree."

"Do you?" he asked.

Dorothy looked at Catherine with an expression that might have been faint concern, while Bridget's eyes gleamed with that sort of dreamy expression that she often had when thinking of something romantic.

"Indeed. I can think of many foolish men, who others believe to be clever," Catherine

replied. “Therefore, your initial assumption is incorrect, Your Grace. Foolish men do not always reveal themselves.”

“Foolish men reveal themselves readily enough to reasonable men,” His Grace countered. “The men you speak of have found even more foolish men.”

“I wonder what that says about parliament, then,” Catherine mused.

The Duke of Sarsen snorted. “Plenty, I assure you.”

“Indeed,” Elias agreed.

“You seem to be in good humor, Your Grace,” Dorothy said, her eyes fixing on Catherine’s face.

“Why should I not be?” he asked. “I am soon to have a wife.”

“We shall see,” Catherine teased. “If Mr. Davies disagrees, you may soon find that you are forced to court me like a proper gentleman.”

From the gleam in his piercing, green eyes, Catherine suspected that His Grace was more likely to throw her over his shoulder and storm away with her as his captive bride than he was to court her.

Admittedly, the image of his hulking form and stern expression softening in the expected ritual of courting and simpering was immensely amusing. Catherine’s lips twitched into a small smile.

No, she could not imagine this man courting anyone. Maybe that was why he was willing to accept her. No other woman would have him. Still, it was thrilling to be chosen—the improper lord and the improper lady. What a pair they would make! The

more Catherine thought about it, the more she began to think that being the Duchess of Sarsen might just be a well-deserved fate.

CHAPTER 7

Reeds's solicitor was a slight, simpering man whom William could only describe as disheveled. A more generous man might have assumed that travel was the reason for the solicitor's rumpled clothing and disarrayed hair, but William suspected that Mr. Davies was simply a man who lived in a state of general chaos. The man had brown eyes that darted this way and that, as though he anticipated some unknown assailant leaping from behind the door and accosting him.

Still, Reeds would not have employed this timid, pathetic man if he was not intelligent. William crossed his arms and scowled at Mr. Davies, who read the contract with agonizing slowness.

"Well?" William demanded. "It is legitimate, is it not?"

Mr. Davies glanced at Reeds. The three men were alone together in Reeds's study. Reeds had offered them both brandy. William and Mr. Davies had declined, but Reeds had nonetheless poured himself a glass. William suspected that Reeds was anxious and wanted something to distract from it, for he had drunk little of the brandy and instead paced the floor, swirling the glass in his hand as though he had never seen spirits before.

"What do you think?" Reeds asked softly. "I have never heard of this agreement before."

"It is your father's signature," Mr. Davies confirmed. "I would recognize that anywhere."

“Is it possible that it is...” Reeds trailed off, shooting William an anxious glance. “A forgery?”

William’s scowl deepened. “A forgery,” he said flatly. “As though I would ever resort to such desperate measures to secure a bride. It is fortunate that we are to be brothers, Reeds, or I would consider such an accusation to be an affront on my honor.”

“I did not mean it like that,” Reeds replied quickly.

“In what manner did you mean it, then?” William asked. “Do you mean to insinuate that my father forged the signature?”

“No,” Reeds muttered.

The man’s continued protestations were becoming tiring. Of course, Reeds ought to think of Lady Catherine’s best interests, but she could do far worse than marrying a wealthy duke. If Reeds would just accept the terms of this agreement, it would be best for all involved.

“Then, you agree it is legitimate, Mr. Davies,” William said.

The solicitor started, as though he had not anticipated being spoken to. “It does appear that way,” the man said, his voice shaking. “Apologies, Your Grace.”

Reeds cast Mr. Davies a mournful look. “There is no need to apologize. Your trade is the law, not in pleasing me,” he said. “I wish that I had been made aware of this agreement earlier. That is all. It seems rather sudden.”

“I wish to have the marriage contract drawn up at once,” William said. “Your solicitor, I assume, is capable of doing that.”

“Yes,” Reeds said.

“Once we have both signed, I shall leave,” William said. “In two weeks, I will marry your sister. Verdant Castle has a magnificent chapel that seems an appropriate place for such a wedding.”

“The preparations will need to be made quickly,” Reeds said. “And it will take some time for the ton?—”

“Does the ton need to be in attendance?” William asked. “It seems to me as though your sister has no reason to desire their presence at her nuptials.”

Lady Catherine was not only a most improper lady, but she had just finished a failed Season. William supposed that was to his benefit, for of the available options, Lady Catherine did seem the most suited to his tastes.

“I suppose not,” Reeds said, “but my sister is only going to be married once. I would like for her wedding to be proper. I do not want her to feel as though her marriage is simply...a hasty, piecemeal affair.”

Reeds was clearly trying to bid for time, doubtlessly hoping that he would be able to escape this contract, even with the mounting evidence that he could not without disgracing his name and that of his sisters.

“It will not be,” William said firmly. “I shall ensure that your sister receives an adequate wedding. Now, if Mr. Davies would be so kind as to draw up the contract for us...”

* * *

With the stroke of a pen, the matter was done. In two weeks, William would marry

Lady Catherine in Verdant Chapel. He would have a wife, and his dearest sisters would finally have the feminine presence that was so desperately needed in the household.

Having achieved his goals, William wanted to leave with all haste. Doubtlessly, Reeds and his sisters would be upset. They would want to exchange mournful farewells, as though Lady Catherine was being sent to the gallows rather than to a prosperous marriage.

As he approached the foyer, he found Lady Catherine waiting for him. His lips twitched in amusement, for she reminded him in that moment of a proper lady seeing off her husband. William knew that Reeds had already informed his sisters of the marriage contract, while William was left with the simpering, anxious solicitor.

“My lady,” William said.

“Your Grace.”

“I shall see you in two weeks,” he said. “You need not worry about the state of the wedding. It will be more than adequate for you.”

“Indeed, an adequate and quick wedding.” Lady Catherine clasped her hands behind her back and took a step towards him, her eyes searching his face for a long moment. “How romantic.”

“It will be. My sisters would be upset if I brought home a bride and did not provide them with a proper wedding to celebrate.”

“Even my own wedding is not mine,” Lady Catherine said dryly.

“Is it ever really for the bride’s sake?” William asked. “It seems to me as though

weddings are largely for the ton, so all the lords and ladies can gossip about who had the most extravagant showing.”

“I suppose.” Lady Catherine paused and furrowed her brow. “I would ask that you think more about this.”

“I shall not. You have agreed to be my wife, and the contract is signed. I am sure that I need not remind you of what damage may come to your reputation if you refuse to marry me now.”

“It is not that,” Lady Catherine said. “Your sisters...I am not a maternal woman. I cannot be a mother to them. I have never wanted that, and I am ill-suited for that role. If you truly wish to find a bride for their sake, you should reconsider your decision.”

William crossed his arms. He strongly suspected that Lady Catherine would be displeased with him if he announced instead his ready agreement to marry Lady Dorothy. She did seem like the mothering sort. It was a pity that Lady Catherine was the more interesting sister.

William shook his head. “I am not asking you to be their mother. You will be a guardian, a female presence that my sisters sorely want and need in their lives. That is all I request of you.”

“I see.”

“I trust that you will be adequate for that.”

“You keep saying adequate, as though that is sufficient,” Lady Catherine said. “As though you want better—wish you might have better—but know that you cannot.”

“I am realistic.”

Lady Catherine nodded, and a determined look crossed her face. “I wish to make a contract with you.”

William laughed darkly. “My lady, we have already made our contract.”

“I want a stipulation.”

“I might humor you.”

“I will try to be a good female presence for your sisters, and I will try to be a worthy duchess in public,” Lady Catherine said. “However, in private I wish to be myself and only that.”

William arched an eyebrow. He imagined Lady Catherine as the Duchess of Sarsen, prim and proper like a lady ought to be. When he tried to imagine the wild, sharp-tongued lady demurring to him and smiling vaguely in that way ladies did when they were trying to be inoffensive, William found that he could not do it. He strongly suspected that Lady Catherine would flounder wondrously at such things.

As the Duke of Sarsen, he would need to correct such behavior. Lady Catherine could be a proper duchess, but she lacked the discipline to become one without assistance. His assistance, of course. William smiled and wondered how long it would take Lady Catherine to make a misstep worth correcting.

“Perhaps, I have a stipulation on that,” he said, letting his voice become low and husky. “If you are not a good duchess in public, I have leave to correct your behavior. Again and again until I see satisfactory results.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

He took a step towards her, and Lady Catherine trembled nearly imperceptibly. Color

rose to her cheeks, and William knew that her pulse was racing. “Come closer,” he purred. “I have found only one method that works for making a wild woman behave. This is not a negotiation.”

They were so near that he could kiss her. His eyes darted down to her plump, coral lips—slightly parted—and an urge to do precisely that seized him. Oh, he ought to be gentlemanly, but what would change if he was not? He and Lady Catherine were already to be wed, and they were alone. She must have sent the butler and maids elsewhere to ensure that she could send him off alone. What a wicked girl!

“I do not know what you mean, Your Grace,” she said.

She was doing this on purpose, goading him. William growled and pressed his mouth forcefully against hers. Lady Catherine moaned into his mouth, and he wrapped his arms around her. She kissed him harshly back in a haphazard attempt to gain dominance. A low chuckle rumbled through William’s throat, and he let a hand cup her right breast. She gasped into his mouth and took fistfuls of his jacket.

William reached inside that sinfully low-cut bodice and roughly traced his thumb around her nipple, raising it to a rosebud peak. Lady Catherine melted against him, her hips bucking and brushing against him. William pinched Lady Catherine’s nipple hard, and she cried against her mouth. The sound went straight to William’s hardening manhood, and he knew that he must end this before he could restrain himself no longer.

He gave her nipple a final pinch and her breast a parting squeeze. Then, he stepped back and clasped his hands behind him, the very picture of ducal sophistication. “Why did you...” Lady Catherine trailed off, her breath coming in great heaves. “Why did you stop?”

Her face was flushed, and her lovely breasts rose above the bodice of her gown. The

right one was still freed, the pink nipple rising defiantly from above the confines of the fabric.

“Make yourself presentable!” he barked. “A duchess does not allow herself to be so flustered.”

Her eyes widened, and her swollen lips remained parted in a manner that made William want to seize her again. Hastily, Lady Catherine pulled at the bodice of her gown. William’s pulse jumped as the lady struggled to work her freed breast back into her stays. At last, she did, but her dress still remained a little rumpled. The color across her face had spread down to her chest.

“You—you did that on purpose,” Lady Catherine rasped. “You made me flustered.”

“I presented you with a test that you failed miserably,” William replied, shaking his head in mock disappointment. “A proper lady would have pushed me away. I will see you in two weeks, my blushing bride. I am assuming that we have an agreement?”

She nodded mutely, her eyes wide.

William turned abruptly and walked away, aware of Lady Catherine watching his retreating back. It would be an interesting marriage, especially given that the lady was so willing. He smirked to himself. Lady Catherine had already exceeded so many of his expectations.

CHAPTER 8

Catherine's last two weeks with her siblings swept by like leaves caught in a violent gale. It seemed as if William had left her flustered and wanting in one second, and in the next, she was being whisked away to Verdant Chapel to marry His Grace.

Catherine let her cheek rest against the seat of the coach, watching the rolling green hills of the Yorkshire countryside as they swept by. A lump rose in her throat. She was to marry this man. Somehow, she still could not entirely believe that she was to be the Duchess of Sarsen.

"It sounds like a romantic place," Bridget said. "Verdant Chapel. It reminds me of a medieval romance, like a place where Sir Gawain would go."

"I suppose the name is apt given the countryside," Catherine replied distractedly.

Elias sighed deeply. "Catherine, I have been wanting to...to apologize for this. I never imagined that I would force you to marry against your will, but I?—"

"You can see no way to escape without destroying our reputation," Catherine interrupted. "I understand. It is not your fault, and at least, Dorothy will be able to keep the promise she once made to herself."

Dorothy fidgeted with her skirts, her eyes darting from Elias's face to Catherine's. "I thank you for that," Dorothy said softly.

"You do not need to thank me."

Catherine sensed that there was more her sister wished to say, but instead, Dorothy fell quiet. She clasped her hands in her lap, the picture of a perfect lady, and fixed her gaze on her slippers, peeking from beneath the folds of her gown.

“This mood is all rather melancholy,” Catherine noted dryly. “I feel as though we ought to be celebrating. I am to marry a duke, after all. Did any of us anticipate that I would marry anyone, much less so well?”

“You would have!” Bridget exclaimed, reaching across the space to clasp Catherine’s hands in hers. “You would have found someone perfect to marry!”

Catherine shook her head and squeezed her sister’s hands. “We both know that is unlikely.”

“It would have happened,” Bridget insisted.

“It may still,” Elias ventured. “It may be that Cat and the Duke of Sarsen become friends. That is not the same as love exactly, but it is a foundation from which love might eventually grow.”

Catherine thought of her parting kiss with His Grace. She still felt the phantom touch of his hand on her right breast, kneading it with his hand and pinching her nipple. His touch had sent jolts of aching pleasure straight to her core, and after His Grace left, she noticed that her thighs were damp with the evidence of her desire.

The Duke of Sarsen claimed that he would correct her behavior if she was not a proper duchess, and although Catherine did not know precisely what that meant, she wondered if it might have anything to do with how fiercely he had kissed her. If that was his manner of correction, Catherine might wish to reconsider her promise to be a proper Duchess of Sarsen. At least, she relished the chance to learn more about that.

“We shall see,” Catherine said.

“He does seem rather frightening,” Bridget said, biting her lip. “Perhaps, he will prove to have hidden depths, though.”

“Most men do,” Dorothy said. “He seems frightening to us, I suspect, because he is taking Catherine from us.”

“Does he seem frightening to you?” Catherine asked, looking at her brother. “You have known him longer than the rest of us.”

“Indeed,” Elias said, “but I must confess that Sarsen and I have seldom spoken in recent years. Who can know if the boy I remember from my childhood resembles anything of the man now?”

“We all do change a little over time,” Dorothy said, “but I think that there are some inherent parts of us that even all the time in the world cannot change. I know, for example, that I will always love all of you. My affection will never diminish, no matter what life may give me.”

“His Grace has sisters,” Catherine said suddenly. “He hopes that I can be a feminine presence in their lives. I cannot recall if I mentioned that.”

“You mentioned the sisters,” Dorothy said. “I did not realize that his intention was for you to be their mother.”

“He says it is not that,” Catherine said, “quite fortunately. Just a feminine presence—not their mother. I leave the nurturing to you, Dory.”

Dorothy hummed. “You know that if you need anything, you can always come home. Always.”

The coach came to a halt, and Catherine took a deep breath. “I know.”

The footman opened the coach and bowed stiffly. “Welcome, Your Grace and my ladies.”

They left the coach one at a time. As Catherine’s feet lighted upon the stone path, she looked about her. Verdant Castle, the ancestral home of the Duke of Sarsen, was aptly named. The magnificent castle stretched as far as the eye could see. It harkened back to the Middle Ages, but only a few remnants of that time remained. Over the centuries, towers had been rebuilt and arches designed anew. It now bore flying buttresses, elegant carvings of flowers and vines, and soaring towers. In some, there were windows set of elegant-colored glass, which must look even more splendid inside those long corridors. In the distance, Catherine spied a church; it looked like a traditional English church with a rose window and a modest interior.

Both buildings were surrounded by green . The color was present in the delicate, sweeping fronds of weeping willows, in the lush grass, and in the thin stems of purple and pink wildflowers. Bridget had been right on one account; Verdant Castle did look as though it belonged in a medieval romance. She almost anticipated the otherworldly enchantress Morgan le Fay to make a grand appearance.

“It is quite lovely,” Bridget said with a dreamy sigh.

“Yes,” Catherine replied. “Beautiful and remote.”

Appropriate for the Duke of Sarsen, perhaps.

“Shall we?” Elias asked.

Catherine steeled herself. She and her siblings began the short walk to the castle entrance, where the butler promptly admitted them. Inside Verdant Castle was just as

beautiful as its exterior. The entryway was filled with portraits in gilded frames, a flawless Persian rug, expensive rosewood furniture, and a sweeping staircase with railings carved in the shapes of dragons.

“Lady Hannah and Lady Hester will be eager to meet you,” His Grace’s butler said, bowing deeply. “His Grace asked that you meet them immediately after your arrival. May I direct you to the parlor?”

Catherine raised an eyebrow. A more gracious host would have allowed his guests time to rest after such a long journey, but she had already noted that the Duke of Sarsen was unlike most men. She wondered what the sisters would be like.

“Yes,” Elias said. “We are likewise eager to meet the young ladies.”

They went into the lavishly decorated parlor. Catherine seated herself on the settee, Dorothy to her left and Bridget to her right. Elias sat in a lone chair nearby. A young parlor maid swept in at once, bringing tea and biscuits for them. Catherine found herself grateful for the cup and saucer, for it gave her something to hold, to occupy her hands.

“Do you know anything about these sisters?” Bridget asked.

“Nothing,” Elias said.

“I know nothing either,” Dorothy said.

Catherine sipped her mint tea, thinking. His Grace claimed he did not want a mother for his two young sisters. But was that really true? Catherine’s heart ached when she thought of her own mother, who had been taken from her when she was so very young.

Maybe it was His Grace's intention that the young girls did not need a mother, but what if they disagreed? Catherine was so ill-suited for a maternal role, and it would be a disaster if these girls expected her to fulfill one.

And if they did, how could she refuse? Catherine had the sudden horrifying image in her mind of making two girls cry with her floundering efforts to be a proper lady, mother, and duchess. One of those roles had never been achievable, and she did not foresee having any better success with the other two.

"I am sure they will be very fond of you, though," Bridget said. "How can anyone dislike you, Cat? You are so lively!"

Catherine's failed Season was proof that she could be quite unlikable, but she was forced to concede that there were very few ladies among the ton who held her in poor esteem. She had always suspected that other women were fond of her, mostly because she did not present competition for the affections of the many eligible bachelors among the ton.

"They will like you," Elias said, as he brushed a few crumbs from his jacket. "I have no doubt of that."

Catherine nodded, as though she agreed, but she could not manage to smother her tremor of doubt. "As you say," she said, even though she did not really believe that.

The butler returned and cleared his throat. "It is my pleasure to introduce Lady Hester and Lady Hannah."

Everyone rose. Elias bowed, and the ladies curtsied to one another. Ladies Hester and Hannah were young girls, scarcely twelve years of age by Catherine's estimation. Both were identical in appearance—curled brown hair that had been pulled back and twisted into chignons, and the same sharp green eyes of His Grace.

Although the girls' faces were soft with the full bloom of youth, both their expressions were quite stern. Catherine was reminded at once of her governess trying futilely to bring her to heel.

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance," Dorothy said, once they were all seated again.

Lady Hannah and Lady Hester occupied the remaining two chairs. They sat still and stiff, as if they were dolls rather than real girls. Catherine waited to see if they would offer a smile to Dorothy, who had always managed to coax children into liking her, but she received nothing save two identically curt nods. If Lady Hannah had not worn a pink gown and Lady Hester a white one, Catherine would have been unable to tell the two apart, for even their mannerisms offered no clues as to which girl was which.

"And yours," Lady Hannah said, sipping delicately from her teacup.

Elias cleared his throat. "I suppose I ought to speak to His Grace. Do you know if he is available?"

"No," Lady Hester replied.

There was a pause, where Catherine—and seemingly her siblings—anticipated some clarification, but Lady Hester gave none. Catherine was unsurprised to hear that His Grace, the man who treated propriety as though it was a lost art, was not available to speak with them. He had probably purposefully made himself scarce just to make their visit more uncomfortable. The Duke of Sarsen seemed to delight in making others uneasy.

"That is unfortunate," Elias said.

"Do you find the present company lacking?" Lady Hannah asked disapprovingly.

“Not in the least,” Elias replied. “It was only that there are some gentlemen’s matters that we must settle.”

“You have a lovely home,” Bridget said suddenly. “Verdant Castle must be a wonderful place to have a childhood, for it is so vast and beautiful.”

“I suppose,” Lady Hannah replied stiffly.

“The gardens are quite extravagant and varied. There is one which contains all manner of roses and another that holds only poisonous plants,” Lady Hester said with what might have been a kernel of enthusiasm in her voice. “There are also many places for riding and sailing on the estate.”

“I should like to see all of it,” Catherine said.

“I imagine you will,” Lady Hannah said. “You are to be the Duchess of Sarsen, after all. It will be your domain alongside our brother’s.”

“Yes,” Lady Hester agreed.

An uneasy feeling settled over Catherine’s shoulders. She looked at those young, motherless girls and sensed every inch of her insecurity over her new position. Her doubt was like a weight crushing about her shoulders and threatening to overwhelm her.

Catherine thought she might drown from it. What was she to say in response? Should she ask about their mother? That seemed like too intimate a question for someone she had just met, much less a small child.

“You would probably like to rest after such a long journey,” Lady Hannah said, as imperiously as a queen. “Geoffrey will show you to the chambers His Grace has

assigned to you.”

His Grace? That address seemed far too formal for one’s own dear brother. “Splendid,” Catherine said at something of a loss.

How had these two cold, reserved girls sprung from the same cloth as His Grace, who was bold and brazen? Catherine mulled over the question as the butler Geoffrey arrived to guide them to their rooms. They went together down a long corridor lined with portraits of stately men and women—doubtlessly His Grace’s ancestors. At last, they came to an imposing oak door.

“These three rooms connect to one another,” Geoffrey said. “His Grace thought that you might wish to remain close to one another since Lady Catherine is soon to leave your household.”

“That is kind of him,” Dorothy said.

“Your room is further along the corridor, Your Grace,” Geoffrey said, nodding to Elias.

“Ah, thank you.”

Elias gave them an obviously forced smile and followed the butler.

Catherine heaved open the door, half-anticipating that her groom-to-be might have decided that her lodgings were to be a dungeon or some other medieval monstrosity, but the room was nice. Elegant, if a little sterile.

Tapestries depicting unicorns and forests lined the old stonework, and the rugs over the floors softened the room. The chamber split into three, as the butler had said. Catherine peered into the nearest room, which was awash with light sweeping in from

the window that overlooked the rose gardens.

“So we agree,” Bridget said, “Ladies Hester and Hannah are very...unusual.”

“I would not say it so directly,” Dorothy replied, sounding hesitant.

“But they are ,” Catherine said, glancing at her sisters. “They are very cold and proper.”

“Perhaps, they are slow to warm,” Dorothy conceded. “If given time, I am sure that you will come to see that they are just...proper.”

Catherine sighed and resisted the urge to fling herself forlornly over the nearest bed. “But how am I going to be anything to them?” she asked. “I am so different! They will know that. They probably know it already.”

“That does not mean they will dislike you,” Dorothy replied soothingly. “They are just girls. I do not imagine they will judge you for not being the proper lady. Let us not forget that this meeting was surely as awkward for them as it was for all of us.”

Catherine bit the inside of her cheek, unable to argue with that logic but still wanting to do so. She supposed that Dorothy was right. Catherine began pacing along the floor, her slippers whispering over the finely made carpet.

“I suppose you are right,” Catherine said begrudgingly.

And what did it matter if Dorothy was wrong? Catherine had already made the agreement, and the marriage contract had been signed. It was too late to change course.

CHAPTER 9

If anyone had cared to ask William, his marriage to Lady Catherine would have been the quietest marriage in all of Britain. They would have said their vows before the local clergyman, and that would have been sufficient.

The only other aspect of marriage that William would have insisted upon was the wedding night, but he would not have it said that he had done nothing for his bride. In the two weeks since securing Lady Catherine as his promised bride, William had ensured that Verdant Chapel was splendidly decorated, and he had insisted on having a special menu made for the day—something he hardly ever cared about.

He had even directed the staff to clean and furnish the duchess's chambers for their new occupant. The rooms had been left mostly untouched since his mother's passing, but he insisted that they not only be cleaned but also made somewhat in line with the present fashion.

Now, he sat at the wedding breakfast, silently counting the hours until he would be married. William supposed that Lady Catherine's siblings would be hesitant to depart quickly, but he would make it as apparent as he could that they were not to linger. Lady Catherine would have new duties, and it would not do for her to neglect them for overly long.

"Good morning," Lady Catherine said, seated beside her brother.

"Good morning," William replied.

Lady Catherine's wedding gown was quite lovely. It was a white muslin garment, embellished with white embroidery and tiny, glittering pearls that shone in the sunlight. The design was clearly the work of a gifted seamstress, for the dress's bodice perfectly cradled Lady Catherine's perfect, white breasts. He feigned nonchalance as he ate his toast and its generous coating of orange marmalade. Inside him was an inferno. He ached to touch those breasts, just as he had two weeks before. William wanted nothing more than to tear that gown from her shoulders, to see that brilliant flush cover her face, and hear her shocked, feminine gasps.

"It is a nice morning for a wedding," Reeds said in a paltry attempt to make conversation.

"Yes," William agreed.

"The place is quite nice, too," Lady Bridget said. "I can see the chapel outside my chamber's window, and it looks so beautiful during the midday sun when it strikes the stone. It looks like something from a fairy tale."

"Fairies do not exist," Hester said. "And fairy tales are created for children. How would you know what it looks like?"

Lady Bridget blinked, appearing taken aback. "I—I suppose I have imagined it as such," the lady stammered.

William hid a small smile. Few people understood Hester's sharp wit and odd sense of humor. She made people uncomfortable, as he often did, but, while Williams's behavior was often—in his own mind—dominant and aggressive, Hester's was sly and logical.

"It would be nice if fairies existed," Hannah said, "like Queen Titania, of course. Not the mischievous variety."

The mention of Shakespeare's Queen Titania seemed to earn Hannah a friend, for Lady Bridget's face brightened at once.

"We used to hunt for fairies," Lady Dorothy said, smiling. "Do you remember that?"

Reeds grinned. "Yes. I remember someone —" He shot an obvious look in Lady Catherine's direction. "—always insisting that she had seen fairies in trees or in bushes, and being the indulgent brother that I am, I was always forced to look."

If Reeds had been less indulgent, maybe he would have a proper younger sister. William took a sip of his coffee, his eyes flitting toward Lady Catherine. She ate some of her eggs, and he watched her delicate jaw move as she chewed her food. Then, she swallowed, and his attention drifted to her white, swan-like neck.

He imagined those coral lips swollen and red from kisses and her wide eyes fixed solely on him with that same sense of confusion and pleasure that he had seen just weeks before.

After the wedding, he would see that look once again—and likely many times after it. Perhaps he ought not to complain, for if Reeds had given him a proper bride, the marriage bed might have been significantly less pleasant than it was bound to be with her .

"I remember," Lady Catherine said. "I knew that you did not believe me, but I insisted that I saw fairies in increasingly absurd places. I wanted to see if you would continue to look for them or if you would correct me someday. You never did."

"No," Reeds replied.

"I remember only a little of that," Lady Bridget said. "I think."

“You would have been very young,” Lady Dorothy said. “I would be surprised if you remembered anything at all.”

“But what of you?” Lady Catherine asked, inclining her head towards Hester and Hannah. “What do you do with your days here?”

This might produce something interesting.

“Besides lessons, you mean?” Hester asked. “I quite enjoy walking in the gardens and sketching the plants around Verdant Castle. Sometimes, it is also enjoyable to take the boat onto the lake, for there are often fish swimming about.”

Hannah wrinkled her nose, as she often did when the lake was mentioned. She detested anything dirty and preferred to avoid the lake and the forest that lined the property. With some coaxing, Hannah would tolerate a stroll through the gardens, but she would become vexed if dirt stained her slippers or the hem of her gown.

“I prefer embroidery,” Hannah said. “Besides, flowers made of thread last forever, whilst the ones in the gardens wilt and die.”

“That is what makes them beautiful,” Hester argued.

Hannah shook her head and glanced at William, as though she expected him to deliver the final verdict and end their little debate.

“Both are beautiful in different ways,” Lady Catherine said. “Perhaps the fleeting nature of flowers is why we wish to embroider them so often. We want to take that fleeting beauty with us always.”

William grunted. It was an acceptable answer, but it sounded very unlike Lady Catherine. Perhaps this was her attempt to be a proper Duchess of Sarsen. He

supposed that he ought to be pleased she was taking her role seriously, yet he found himself waiting—and wanting—for Lady Catherine to inevitably earn the correction that she so clearly needed.

* * *

Following the wedding breakfast, they walked to the church together in a mostly silent procession. Mostly because he heard Lady Dorothy and Lady Catherine engaged in a whispered conversation. He could not decipher the exact words exchanged between them, but Lady Dorothy sounded worried.

William hauled open the doors and entered the chapel. It was not a particularly impressive building, more suited for the common people who had once lived on the estate hundreds of years before. Now, the church was seldom attended.

Only his eccentric great-great-grandfather, with his unrivaled passion for history, had kept the church from falling entirely into disrepair. William had made further efforts to ensure that the place was prepared for his bride. Bouquets of white roses and trailing ivy were spread throughout the chapel, lending a little color to the otherwise gray and dismal stone.

The vicar, an aged man who always behaved as though he was a mouse only a hairsbreadth away from a cat's angry paw, jumped and bowed so quickly that the old man nearly toppled over. "Your Grace!" he exclaimed.

William nodded curtly. "I am here with my bride. I trust that you are ready to perform the marriage rites?"

"Yes, of course, Your Grace."

The sooner the ceremony began, the sooner it would end. William was not a romantic

man, and he had always found weddings to be needlessly long affairs. Besides, what mattered was receiving the bride at the end, not everything that came before it.

Perhaps what happened after the wedding matters, too. William glanced at Lady Catherine, his eyes lingering on her full bosom and slowly sweeping down over her delicate curves, hidden by those full skirts and layers of fabric. Soon, he would see that all stripped away and cast aside. He wondered if she would still be brazen then.

The Leedway siblings seated themselves in the empty pew on the right. Hester and Hannah took their position on the left. William rolled back his shoulders and fixed his attention on Lady Catherine's face. She stood across from him, her gaze calm and unreadable.

The vicar produced The Common Book of Prayers and opened it. "Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today in the sight of God..."

Most regrettably, the vicar's voice did nothing to alleviate the length of the ceremony, for his voice was dull and flat. Halfway through the proceedings, the man paused and retrieved his spectacles. Lady Catherine smiled serenely, while William grew hot with impatience.

"If any man can show just cause, for why these two shall not be wed, let him speak now or forever hold his peace," the vicar said.

There was a pause of silence and a heaviness in the air. Lady Catherine's eyes darted in the direction of her brother and sisters, and her calm, unreadable composure wavered for just an instant. William clenched his jaw.

He was so close to having his bride and a feminine presence for his sisters, a woman who could guide them into society and later marriages. William would not accept a refusal then. If Lady Catherine or Reeds did anything to prevent this union?—

The moment passed before William could continue the line of thought, and the vicar resumed speaking. At last, the vicar reached the only part of the sermon that mattered. “Will you, William Richards, Duke of Sarsen, take this woman Lady Catherine Leedway to have and to hold as your lawfully wedded wife?”

Lady Catherine exhaled softly, her eyes wide and her lips trembling. The vicar asked some more things—the usual questions about cherishing her and forsaking all others—that fell away to a faint hum, like the sound of a bee flitting to a flower.

She was beautiful. She was everything he could ask for, everything he had been promised, and some things that he had not been. Lady Catherine could be the duchess he wanted.

“I do,” William said.

Lady Catherine audibly gulped, and her breath quickened. William watched her body as the vicar repeated the same questions to her. This was the last moment that she might feasibly escape. Once they were wed, she would be his forever.

“I do,” she said.

William smirked, wondering how long it would be before Lady Catherine wanted to test the promise to obey him as her lawfully wedded husband. A feeling of victory surged through him, like lightning crashing into a tree. He had his wife and duchess! Here was a woman to be a guardian to his sisters and to produce his heirs. It had all been so easy in the end.

Reeds stood. This was the part of the ceremony where he was to give his sister away. William tried not to look too satisfied, but there was a small, smug part of him that wanted to remind the other man of just how frustrating he had made this process and all for nothing. Lady Catherine was now his, the Duchess of Sarsen, in the eyes of

God and everyone present.

William had won, as he always did.

CHAPTER 10

Catherine was the Duchess of Sarsen, and it was her wedding night. She paced across the floor in the duchess's chambers, newly given to her. Soon, her husband would join her. Her husband . Catherine's breath shuddered in her breast.

She wore her cotton nightdress and over it her dressing gown. Catherine had considered her night cap as well, but the maid had already arrived and stoked a fire in the fireplace. The room was not cold.

It was warm and comfortable, so why did she feel suffocated? Catherine threw herself across the loveseat and propped her head up against the back cushion. She watched the flames flicker in the fireplace. A knot twisted in her chest. Dorothy would know what to do. Her parting question, "Are you sure that you are all right?" still lingered in Catherine's mind.

Even though their departure had been inevitable, she wished her siblings had not left so hastily. Catherine rubbed the heels of her palms against her eyes, trying to put all the conflicting and colliding thoughts into some coherent order, but she still found it difficult to believe that she was the Duchess of Sarsen. A wife.

The door opened, and Catherine bolted to her feet. His Grace entered, clad in only his trousers and shirtsleeves. Catherine inhaled sharply, having never seen a man in such a state of undress. "Your Grace," she rasped.

"My lady," he said. "I see that you have made yourself comfortable."

“Have I?”

She did not feel comfortable, and his presence made her pulse jump wildly. While the room had felt warm before, the temperature now felt as though she was walking through fire.

He approached her boldly, and she trembled in anticipation as his green eyes bore into her. “Do you know what comes next?” he asked lowly, his eyes dark with desire.

“Some,” she said, scarcely daring to breathe.

His Grace chuckled, the sound a low rumble from deep in his chest. “Some,” he echoed. “I take that to mean that you know very little about the matter but wish to pretend as though you do.”

Her face grew hot, mostly because he had surmised correctly. “I know enough.”

“We shall see,” her husband replied, his hands going to her dressing gown.

Catherine drew a sharp breath as he took the garment and pushed it from her shoulders. She stood before him in only her nightdress, aware of the thin fabric. His green eyes trailed the length of her body, slowly exploring every inch of her.

“You behaved yourself appropriately at the wedding,” His Grace said. “Perhaps you deserve a reward for your good behavior.”

“Only perhaps ?”

His eyes flashed. “Do not make me reconsider. Remove your nightdress.”

She shivered. All her muscles went taut as Catherine pulled the garment over her

head. She let it fall to the floor in a whisper of fabric. A lump rose in her throat, as she stood entirely naked before His Grace. She should have been indignant. Deep inside, she felt the urge to push him a little, but she could not ignore the desire curling within her.

A large part of Catherine was curious to know what he would do. She wanted to experience this new thing, whatever it was. After all, Catherine had never been a proper lady, and the duke's commands had awakened a newly found desire within her. She wanted this, even if she did not know why.

“Good girl,” he purred. “I like this.”

“This?” she whispered faintly.

“Turn around, and I shall show you,” he said.

Catherine's throat went suddenly dry. What did he mean? Her blood roared in her ears.

His Grace clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. “Have you forgotten your marriage vows already? Among other things, you promised to obey ,” he said, grinning wolfishly. “Now, turn around.”

She had promised that. Still, a rebellious streak leaped inside her, but Catherine's sense of curiosity drowned out her desire to rebel. She turned around, facing the loveseat. Without warning, her husband's front pressed against her back. His body was hard and warm, and Catherine trembled, as he cupped his breasts with his large, firm hands.

“ This ,” he murmured, his lips pressing against her neck.

The Duke of Sarsen firmly kneaded her breasts between his hands, and she groaned.

“Grasp the back of the loveseat,” he ordered.

She did, bending just a little. He moved with her, still fondling her breasts. Catherine became acutely aware of his weight pushed against hers and of the hardening manhood pressed against her back.

“So eager ,” His Grace taunted. “Just like in the foyer of your family’s home. I will bet that you were disappointed we could not go further that day. If I had not stopped you, how far would you have let me go?”

Catherine’s breath quickened, and her thoughts grew foggy and hot. A dull ache curled between her legs, and she pressed her thighs together in a vain attempt to soothe the coiling, persistent sensation of near-pain.

He pinched her nipples, and a jolt of pain and pleasure mingled together. Catherine’s back arched against him.

“Answer me,” he rumbled.

“I—I do not know,” she stammered. “I?—”

He pinched her nipples and rolled them between his thumbs, and a low whine tore from Catherine’s throat.

“I think you are lying to me.” Her husband’s breath was hot against her neck. “I think you would have let me deflower you. You are a wicked girl, and you enjoyed that. You enjoy this too, do you not?”

Catherine’s breath came in ragged pants, her senses consumed by all the sensations

inspired by his skilled hands. She was too aware of the firmness of his hands and fingers cupping her breasts and pinching her nipples, of his hard manhood against her back, his weight against her body, and the sweat gathering at the back of her knees and along her spine.

“Answer,” he said, placing a bruising kiss on the side of her neck.

Another pinch, and Catherine rocked her hips. Desperation rose within her. “Yes,” she breathed. “Please.”

That ache grew inside her until her body shivered beneath his ministrations. He chuckled and swept her hair over her right shoulder. “Please, what?”

His Grace kissed her neck.

“I—I do not know. It...” Catherine trailed off, trying to find the proper words.

But everything was so hot, and need unlike any she had ever felt before swelled within her. A low whine tore from her throat.

“Oh, that is a delightful sound, my blushing bride,” His Grace said.

He wrapped his right arm around her chest, while his left drifted lower. Catherine’s nails dug into the back of the loveseat. His Grace’s hand drifted over her ribs and down her stomach. As he neared that aching place between her legs, Catherine tossed her head back and groaned.

He did not touch her there. Instead, he traced her hips and swept back up. His fingers grasped her left buttock, and she jolted against him. Her thighs were damp and warm with the proof of her desire, and Catherine felt as if she might come undone if he did not just—just?—

Stop. Keep going.

“I had thought to take you to the bed, like a proper duchess,” His Grace growled, “but you are so eager that I doubt you will make it to the bedchamber. Perhaps, I should deflower you right here.”

Catherine’s face flushed with heat. Was that something that happened? Brides taken over loveseats and rather than beds? Her mind raced, as she tried to find some witty reply to the suggestion.

His Grace’s thumb found her entrance, flicking over that place of pulsing need. Catherine shouted, as the feelings grew and grew , and she felt the sense of almost achieving something. His Grace pinched her nipple hard, and the world seemed to burst around her.

Black spots dotted Catherine’s vision, as she rode a wave of pleasure. It was a most wondrous feeling! Her breath came in loud gasps for air, and her chest heaved. “What was that?” she asked. “What did you do to me?”

Could he make her feel that way once again? He chuckled darkly. “The French call it *petit mort* , the little death.”

An odd name! But if that was death, it was glorious .

She bucked her hips and arched her back, silently urging the duke to continue. There was a slight pinch as his thumb entered her, but His Grace seemed to realize that there would be some discomfort, for he stroked her entrance with his forefinger..

“Do you like that?” the duke murmured.

“I—I do not know,” she said, her hips bucking without any conscious thought on her

part.

“Does it hurt?”

“No, it just feels strange.”

His Grace chuckled. “I see. That is to be expected.”

He kept his thumb inside her, while his other fingers caressed her folds, up and down. Her legs quivered, as the anticipation of that nameless thing grew inside her. All her muscles tightened.

He rubbed quickly, and Catherine felt a dull rush of embarrassment that he would notice the dampness of her desire. His Grace worked her with his fingers until she felt as though she might come undone, for there was certainly no possible way for any human being to be this tight inside.

She was wet and trembling by the time he withdrew his hand. Her breath came in haphazard pants, as she endeavored to clasp that nameless sensation building inside her that left her hot with need for something for which she had no words.

“I think my duchess is ready now,” he murmured.

His hand left her breast, and Catherine looked over her shoulder. Her body felt tense and sensitive, and she still trembled with the force of the pleasure she had found. He unfastened his trousers and freed his member. Catherine gasped, her eyes fixed on it. Although she had no real reference for comparison, it looked as though he was impossibly huge.

“I like this,” he said. “Bend lower and spread your thighs.”

“You are...” Catherine licked her lips anxiously. “You are really going to deflower me over the loveseat.”

He pumped his thumb inside her, and Catherine clenched her thighs together around his hand. Her hips jerked forward, her body reacting to his touch without conscious thought.

“You have said that you are not a proper lady,” His Grace said. “That was why our marriage had a stipulation that you would be proper in public . Proper ladies are taken to bed. Improper ladies are taken like this.”

Catherine’s breath hitched. She had no retort for that, but she—she did not want to leave this moment and go to bed. Catherine wanted to know what would happen next and how it would feel, and that same impossible tightness was twisting inside her once again.

She bent a little more and turned her head, letting her cheek rest atop her hands. Catherine spread her thighs further apart, and despite the warmth of the room, the air seemed cool against her exposed maidenhood. His Grace withdrew his hand and instead used it to guide his member to her entrance. He pressed against her, and Catherine groaned. She arched her back, torn between pushing herself against him and pulling away.

“You are so wet and ready for me,” His Grace said. “You were anticipating this. I imagine you laid in bed, restless every night wanting me to do just this to you.”

The words seemed to curl around inside her mind, awakening desires that she had not even known she had.

“I—I did,” she confessed.

He pressed slowly inside her, and Catherine's inner walls pressed against him. She writhed beneath him, wanting more of him and desperately trying to adjust to the unfamiliar sensation of his girth pressing so hard against her.

He did not hurry to fully enter her. Instead, he acted as though he had all the time in the world to complete the act, and slowly, Catherine's muscles loosened. With slow and steady strokes, he fully sheathed himself in her. Catherine gasped, her thoughts too scattered to even form coherently.

He drew himself out and slid in again. And again. With every thrust, Catherine's body pushed against him, urging him to go deeper and faster. He grasped the back of the loveseat, one hand stretched on each side of her. She looked over her shoulder, so that she might see him. As if guessing her intentions, he tilted his head, so their eyes met. Catherine bucked like a wild animal, desperate to reach that same pinnacle of feeling once again.

"Oh, please!" she exclaimed.

She could feel that sensation curling within her. It was like a feeling of desperation that swept through her entire being, like a discomfort that she was desperate to soothe, for once she did, it would be wonderful. With every thrust of his manhood, that feeling curled stronger inside her. Soon, she was gasping, and her body shook.

Distractedly, she wondered if anyone had expired while trying to reach this point. Was that why the French called it the *petit mort*, the little death? She moved as fast as she could, and that feeling grew tighter and tighter inside her.

Then—the wave of pleasure overcame her once again, and she shouted in pleasure. Her body shook, and His Grace pounded into her. Then, he trembled, and warmth spread inside Catherine. She gasped for air—all her muscles becoming lax. He withdrew himself and planted a fierce kiss on her cheek.

To her surprise, he drew her into his arms and swept her off her feet. Catherine scrambled to keep from pitching out of his grasp and onto the floor. “You are spent,” he said. “Let me take you to bed.”

She did not argue. Instead, she let her muscles all go lax and remained docile in his grasp. He carried her effortlessly to her bed and laid her down upon the soft linens, which smelled faintly of English lavender.

“Well done,” he said. “Consider yourself a passable duchess—for the moment.”

Catherine’s breath shuddered, and she pressed her cheek against the pillow. Strangely, she was filled with the sudden desire to sleep. Although she had not noticed any building exhaustion, tiredness had come over her without warning. “I—I thought I was an improper lady,” she rasped.

“An improper lady,” he said, “but you have fulfilled your marital duties. I shall leave you now.”

“Leave me?”

“Yes. Would you like the maids to prepare a bath for you?”

Catherine closed her eyes, trying to understand everything that had just happened. She did not even have the words for it, and if she had, Catherine still suspected that no amount of instruction would have prepared her for this moment. She was suddenly, pleasantly tired and spent.

“I think I wish to rest, Your Grace.”

When her husband did not answer, Catherine peered over her shoulder at him. He considered her for a long moment with his heated eyes. Then, he fastened his trousers

once again.

“Of course,” he said. “Send for the maids when you like.”

“Yes.”

“Good night,” the duke said, nodding curtly.

Catherine blinked at him, caught off guard. He seemed to have become a different person in an instant. She did not know him well, but at the realization that he was leaving her, Catherine found herself feeling...strangely forlorn.

She was too proud to ask him to stay.

CHAPTER 11

William had a wife. That was good. It was strange .

He drummed his fingers against the polished wood of his desk and considered the young woman. Their wedding night had been pleasant, as expected, and he supposed that she was doing well.

A better man might have joined her at breakfast or arrived at her chambers to ensure that her first amorous congress had come to a satisfactory conclusion and had resulted in only a little pain, but he was not most men. Besides, he had far too many obligations as the Duke of Sarsen to let himself become distracted by a wife. As fetching as she was.

There was a polite knock at his door. "Enter," he announced.

The door opened, and Geoffrey bowed deeply. "As requested, Your Grace."

The butler stepped aside, revealing the massive form of Algernon Hamilton, the Earl of Brookshire. He grinned rakishly, sauntering into William's study as if he owned it. The man's brown eyes were warm and alight with good humor. "I hear that you have been married, and you did not invite me," Hamilton said.

William sighed. If Hamilton had been any other man, William would have found the comment irritating, but of all his companions from Eton and Cambridge, Hamilton was the closest thing William had to a real friend. He was someone William should have invited to the wedding.

“How did you even learn about that?” William asked instead.

“Pour me a drink, and I will tell you.”

William scowled, but Hamilton remained unaffected. Instead, the man dropped into a chair and mockingly cocked a leg over the arm of it. Hamilton had never taken himself very seriously. Indeed, he did not take anything seriously, aside from a peculiar and enduring fondness for the poor in London.

“I am mystified as to why I remain friends with you,” William said, reaching for the decanter.

“You have excellent taste,” Hamilton quipped.

William filled a glass and pushed it to his friend, who took it in an instant. “However,” Hamilton drawled. “I shall not let you distract me from my original topic, which was that you neglected to inform me of your wedding.”

William considered the decanter of brandy and poured a glass of his own. “How did you learn of my wedding? It only happened yesterday.”

Hamilton waved a dismissive hand. “Irrelevant. Why did you not invite me? I would have liked to have been there.”

“It was a rather quick affair and would have been quicker still if my wife’s brother had not been so frustrating,” William said.

“The Duke of Reeds is well-known for being protective of his sisters,” Hamilton said. “I cannot say that I am surprised by his hesitancy to relinquish one to the marriage bed.”

Hamilton's source was clearly someone with access to the ton and apparently quite a gossip, unsurprising given most of Hamilton's company.

"I am surprised that you chose Lady Catherine," Hamilton continued. "Do you know anything about her, my friend?"

"Of course," William said. "I married her."

Hamilton took a sip of his brandy and tilted his head slightly, an expression that William recognized all too well.

"You do not need to look at me as though I have taken leave of my senses," William said gruffly. "She is a suitable bride and will be an adequate duchess."

"She is unlike most ladies of the ton," Hamilton cautioned. "She is too...fiery. Undisciplined."

"I am surprised that you did not get along well with her," William replied dryly, "given that you are also ruled chiefly by your passions and are the very embodiment of undisciplined."

"You wound me," Hamilton said. "I have no particular dislike for the young lady, and you are right. We very well might have become friends with her if we had any mutual acquaintances in our circles. Because she is your wife, we may yet become friends. But I would not wish to marry her. She is too much like me."

"I hope she is not too much like you," William said, thinking about all the salacious stories he had heard about Hamilton over their years of friendship.

"You know what I meant," Hamilton scoffed. "Still, if you are happy, I am happy for you."

“Good,” William said. “I really married her for Hester and Hannah, though. They need a womanly presence in their lives.”

“They have a governess,” Hamilton said. “A pretty governess with good breeding.”

“She is insufficient,” William said. “She tries to manage the girls, but she is young and inexperienced. Besides, she was unable to marry well. I need a lady who can prepare my sisters for their Seasons and help them make advantageous marriages.”

Hamilton raised an eyebrow. “Until quite recently, your own wife was not particularly adept at securing marriage proposals. How do you foresee her managing your own sisters any better?”

“My duchess did not secure marriage proposals because she did not really want them and because Reeds did not make her behave like a proper lady,” William said. “My wife has assured me that she will be a proper duchess, and on our wedding day, I saw that.”

“We shall see,” Hamilton replied, not bothering to conceal his disbelief. “You seem satisfied with your choice, though. I suppose congratulations are in order.”

“Yes.” William paused and narrowed his eyes. “But why are you here? Is this only a social visit?”

Hamilton smiled. “Mostly. I was hoping to solicit your support on a matter, if you are not opposed to discussing parliament.”

William shook his head. “The Season is over, my friend,” he said gravely. “Are you already so eager to do business?”

“As eager as you,” Hamilton replied, nodding to the desk. “Otherwise, you would not

be hidden away in here buried under papers.”

William sighed. “I am still trying to untangle the snarl that my brother made of the dukedom.”

“God rest his soul,” Hamilton said flippantly.

William clenched his jaw. “ Careful .”

“Apologies if I have caused offense,” Hamilton replied, waving his glass. “It is only the alcohol speaking.”

As if the three sips of brandy could be responsible for anything that Hamilton was doing. William raked a hand through his hair and grimaced. He held his brother, the late Duke of Sarsen, in peculiar and contradictory regard. Thomas had been beyond bad for the dukedom. He had spent money as though it was a limitless resource, hosting extravagant balls, raking across the continent, and drinking to excess.

It had been a surprise to no one when Thomas offended another gentleman and died in a duel. They had never been close, but still, William found that he loved his brother and held no small measure of familial loyalty for the man.

“I wanted to draft some legislation to provide additional relief to the poor,” Hamilton said. “I wondered if you would be willing to look over it once I finish and if you might be willing to support me. You know that I often...come across wrongly to some of the lords.”

“You have made no effort to remedy that,” William said.

“Should I?”

William realized rather suddenly that he had somehow found himself surrounded by wild, eccentric people. How had that happened?

“It might help you on occasion,” William said dryly. “And the gall of you to insist that my wife is unsuitable when you behave just like her! By your own admission, no less!”

Hamilton only shrugged. “You know as well as I that a man has more freedom than a woman in terms of permissible behavior. Besides, I am not vying to become a duchess. When I inevitably marry, I do not anticipate a shortage of brides. Any baron’s daughter will happily wed even the most detestable earl if it means that she might become a countess.”

“I suppose I will help you,” William said. “The cause is just, even if its champion is a den of vices.”

Hamilton winked. “Shall I pretend that you have no vices yourself?”

“That would be ideal given that you are requesting a favor of me,” William pointed out.

Hamilton grinned and raised his glass in a mock toast. “Then, you are among the most moral of men with nary a vice to your name.”

William’s thoughts wandered to his young bride and how she had appeared bent over the loveseat the night before. In his mind’s eye, he heard her harsh gasps for air and saw the beads of sweat tracing the length of her spine. She had a perfect figure, so fine that even Aphrodite herself would be flushed with envy.

This was not good. He could not let his wife prove to be a distraction.

“And you are a liar,” William said dryly.

“All men are,” Hamilton replied. “Especially those among the ton. We would tear each other apart if we spoke truthfully every moment of our lives.”

“In all likelihood.”

“So how is the dukedom faring?” Hamilton asked, leaning forward and peering at the papers spread across the desk. “Every time I speak to you, it seems as though you uncover a new rot.”

William sighed. “It feels that way. This time, I discovered a bride.”

“Lady Catherine?”

William briefly recounted the story of finding the contract buried in a stack of his late father’s papers, which he strongly suspected that Thomas had never even touched. Once William finished, Hamilton whistled between his teeth.

“What a surprise that must have been. But you chose Lady Catherine over Lady Dorothy?” Hamilton asked. “Would she not be a far better maternal presence in the lives of your sisters? I know that Lady Dorothy has sworn herself to spinsterdom, but I cannot imagine that she would deny the Duke of Sarsen.”

“No,” William said. “Eventually, she would have done as I asked.”

“But?” Hamilton inquired, arching an eyebrow.

William shrugged. “I chose the younger sister. She seemed like she would be more suitable, and she agreed to marry me with significantly less complaint.”

Privately, he thought about how intriguing his wife was. It was rare that anyone had the courage to defy him, and there was something admirable about that, especially given that the courage had come from such a young lady. Reeds was a duke in his own right, but even his shows of defiance had been small and easily quelled. His wife—his duchess—was something entirely different.

“Interesting,” Hamilton said, downing the rest of his brandy. “Perhaps I do not know your bride as well as I thought.”

William grunted. “You know her well enough,” he said warningly.

Hamilton laughed. “I meant nothing of it. There is no need to try and intimidate me.”

William took a sip of his brandy and narrowed his eyes. “No?”

“No,” Hamilton said warmly. “You are my friend, and I would never do anything to sully the reputation of either you or your duchess. Do you not know that by now?”

William frowned. “I trust you.”

He was not quite sure that was true. Hamilton was the only person around whom William really felt that he could be himself. Around Hamilton, William could abandon all pretense and not worry about how he might look or how the dukedom might look, and yet he knew his friend’s reputation well. Hamilton had bedded a married woman before. A newly married duchess might be a prize that was difficult to resist.

“Good. You had better,” Hamilton said, placing the empty glass upon William’s desk. “After all, I have done nothing to earn your dis trust.”

“Not yet,” William said.

“Not ever,” Hamilton replied, grinning. “And I never shall. I will not keep you from your fascinating papers, though. I know how you can be.”

Hamilton stood.

“What do you mean by that?” William asked. “How I can be?”

Hamilton shrugged. “I mean, that when you are working, you are often reluctant to quit. You can be rather terse if kept away from manners of business for very long.”

“That is untrue.”

“It is entirely true. If you do not believe me, ask anyone. Ask your wife,” Hamilton said, his eyes gleaming with mischief. “I would warrant that you have not yet even spoken to her this morning.”

Indeed, he had not, but William had no intention of giving Hamilton the satisfaction of having predicted his behavior so accurately.

“You are mistaken,” William said smoothly.

Hamilton bowed. “Enjoy your afternoon.”

After the man departed, William glanced at the empty glass. Maybe he did work a little more than he ought to, but someone had to save the dukedom. Thomas had left a mess of things, and sacrifices would have to be made if the Dukedom of Sarsen was to be whole and prosperous once again.

CHAPTER 12

A week had passed since Catherine became the Duchess of Sarsen, and she had not truly seen her husband since that night of shared passion. Had Catherine not known better, she might have thought that she had imagined the wedding entirely. It was as if she had married a ghost.

“Your embroidery is quite exceptional,” Catherine said, looking at the delicate, purple blossoms that Hannah had added to the edge of her sampler.

“Thank you, Your Grace,” Hannah said, her lips twitching into what might have been a half-hearted attempt to smile.

Your Grace . Catherine forced down the lump that rose in her throat. The title was a persistent reminder of what she had become and who she had married. It was a strange feeling, being married to a man whom she barely knew but who also consumed her thoughts.

Then, there were his sisters. She was now their guardian and knew even less of them than of their brother. They remained prim and proper, cold and distant, and Catherine felt as though her every reaction was being coolly analyzed. She must try to win their hearts, though.

“You do not need to call me Your Grace ,” Catherine said. “I like Catherine .”

The formality was maybe what bothered her the most. Her family was lively and loving. Formality had never held a place of importance in their household or in their

hearts, and she felt now as though she had been thrust into an unfamiliar world of rules and restraint.

“That would be highly informal,” Hannah said, tipping her chin up. “We are to respect you because you are the Duchess of Sarsen.”

Would it not be more respectful to call her Catherine like she so dearly desired? She bit the inside of her cheek, considering how best to approach this situation. These were only girls, after all.

“While that is true,” Catherine said carefully, “I do hope that we shall become very fond of one another.”

“We are fond of our brother and call him Your Grace ,” Hester argued. “How we address a person has no bearing on if we are especially fond of them or not.”

“I suppose that is true to an extent,” Catherine replied.

Her gaze drifted to her own embroidery, a string of tiny pink flowers that were simply adequate . She had always despised needlework, and from her grimace, Catherine suspected that Hester felt similarly. It was difficult to say with certainty, though, when neither girl smiled very much.

“But I also find that how we address others does indicate something about how we feel towards individuals,” Catherine continued, thinking through her response even as she spoke. “It may denote a certain closeness that is otherwise absent.”

Neither girl looked convinced. Catherine smothered a sigh, refusing to show any evidence of frustration with herself. Dorothy would know what to do in this situation. She would have already charmed these young girls with her good humor and smiles.

“I am beginning to believe that His Grace lives in his study,” Catherine said carefully. “I have scarcely seen him since I married him. Is that his usual manner of doing things?”

Hester wrinkled her nose, and something seemed to spark in her eyes. Whatever fleeting emotion it was vanished so quickly that Catherine had no time, even to identify it.

“Yes,” Hester said. “His Grace’s usual habit is to work in his study, and if he is not there, he is traveling to London or elsewhere.”

“He has much business to attend to as the Duke of Sarsen,” Hannah added, emphasizing her words with a solemn nod.

Perhaps, I ought to be honored he did not miss our wedding night.

Catherine’s face grew warm when she remembered the night. Even though she had been sore the next day, she had found herself wanting to have another experience just like it. She had anticipated seeing him at breakfast and casting sly smiles at one another. She had thought that he might tease her or seek her out later to engage in another amorous encounter, but he had done neither.

“Of course,” Catherine said. “My brother Elias is also a duke, so I know well how much work is involved.”

Elias was never so distant, though. It was true that Catherine’s brother was not the best duke in the world, but he was a fine duke nonetheless. And he had ample time to ensure his family knew he loved them. What excuse could His Grace possibly have for behaving as he was?

“Yet he found the time to chase fairies in the garden with you,” Hester said. “He must

not be as busy as ours.”

“But surely, your brother leaves his study sometimes,” Catherine said. “He must also join you on walks through the gardens and riding, I imagine.”

Hannah shook her head. “Sometimes, he will join us for meals.”

“And on holidays,” Hester added.

Catherine considered the girls for a long moment. Had His Grace wanted a guardian for his sisters because he was entirely uninvolved in their lives? She had assumed that he was a frequent presence in their lives, and she was merely a woman being asked to play the part of guardian when he could not be. From how the girls spoke, though, it seemed as though he was not involved much at all in their lives.

“I have heard there is a wonderful park nearby,” Catherine said. “We should go tomorrow. Perhaps, we might persuade His Grace to join us.”

“He will not,” Hester said. “We have asked him to join us before, but he insists that he is too busy. I do not foresee this time being any different.”

Hannah nodded in agreement. “It does not matter how much we plea. He will be unable to join us.”

“It is best to say nothing of it,” Hester said. “Otherwise, we will disturb his solitude, and His Grace will be unable to work.”

“But surely, he cannot work all the time,” Catherine said. “It would be enjoyable if he could come with us, would it not?”

Hannah stabbed her needle through her sample with significantly more force than

necessary. “Yes. But the point is irrelevant, as he will not come with us. He never has time to spend with us.”

“That is why he married you,” Hester said, “so you may spend time with us, while he cannot.”

Catherine winced, for although she had surmised as much herself, she felt as though it might have been better had the girls not known. How terrible they must feel, thinking that their brother did not wish to spend time with them?

And certainly, Catherine did not imagine they would think more kindly of her, given that they knew her role was to be a replacement for their brother. A guardian where previously they had not had one. A knot tightened in Catherine’s chest.

“Perhaps, I might persuade him otherwise,” Catherine said. “I shall endeavor to try, at least. As your guardian, I will suggest that you will benefit immensely from his joining us tomorrow.”

“Do you believe that will work?” Hannah asked doubtfully.

“I imagine he will say that you are sufficient,” Hester added. “If you are with us, there is no need for anyone else.”

“Maybe,” Catherine replied, “but it is surely worth a try. I will approach him this evening and ask.”

Hannah hummed. “He has not joined us at the park since Thomas was the Duke of Sarsen.”

“Thomas?” Catherine asked.

She assumed that was not the girls' father. Such formal children would doubtlessly not call him Thomas .

“Our older brother,” Hester said. “He was the duke before His Grace.”

“Oh,” said Catherine.

Thomas must have died very young. Catherine furrowed her brow. She did have the faintest recollection of a young Duke of Sarsen being involved in a duel a year or so before.

That meant Hannah and Hester had lost both their mother and brother in close succession. Catherine's heart ached for them. How difficult it all must be! And their one surviving relation spent all his hours locked away in his study, too obsessed with his work even to join them at the park.

“When he was the duke, Thomas was not always in his study,” Hester said, “but he did not spend time with us either. Most often, he was in London or abroad.”

“I see,” Catherine murmured.

It was a small wonder that these girls were so cold and formal. They had grown accustomed to looking after themselves, and Catherine suspected they were too afraid that—if they dared hope for more—their hopes would be for naught. Catherine bit her lip. Dorothy would know what to do, but these poor girls had only her.

She must do her best. That was all anyone could ask of her, yet Catherine feared that her best efforts might not be enough.

“Well,” Catherine said. “I must make the effort, and if His Grace will not agree to join us this time, I shall try again and again until he relents.”

“Do you believe he will relent?” Hannah asked. “You are a lady, and everyone knows that lords do not listen to ladies.”

“I am unlike most ladies,” Catherine said firmly. “I have been told so time and time again. I will not give up until your brother joins us at the park. I promise.”

Hester smiled tentatively. “His Grace did inform us that you are known to be unusual.”

“Unusual?” Catherine asked. “Is that what he said?”

Hannah nodded. “Unusual, but you are going to teach us to be proper ladies.”

They already seemed like proper ladies. Too proper, in fact. Catherine set aside her embroidery and clasped her hands in her lap. “Well, we shall see about that,” she said. “Neither of you have to worry about being proper just yet, not until you are properly introduced to society.”

“It sounds like a dream,” Hannah said, sighing. “All the balls and gowns.”

“It is like a dream sometimes,” Catherine agreed. “And dancing is quite enjoyable. My sister Bridget always dreads the end of the Season because there are fewer balls in the countryside, and she delights in dancing so much.”

“I remember her,” Hannah said. “Your younger sister.”

“Yes.”

“You seem like an....unusual family,” Hester said, her tone seeming to suggest that the words had been chosen with great care.

I might say the same about your family, Catherine thought.

Which was more unusual, after all? A family where they all seemed to love each other too much, or one where they did not seem to spend any time with one another? Certainly, it was not Catherine's family that was strange. There must be some reason for His Grace's behavior, though she could not fathom what it might be.

Was it that the duke himself was still grieving the death of his brother and mother? Maybe he had decided to isolate himself, so his grief was less apparent to his sister. If so, that approach seemed to be working. Instead, they believed that he was always busy and had no time that he might spend with them.

"We may be unusual," Catherine said at last. "But I like being a little unusual. We are happy as a family, and that is certainly more important than anything else."

"Is it?" Hannah asked doubtfully. "Does it not vex you that others might perceive you as unusual?"

"Sometimes," Catherine admitted, "but I would rather have some perceive me as a little strange than I would not be true to myself."

"But what of your reputation?" Hester asked. "Would you not be concerned that it might suffer?"

"Maybe," Catherine conceded, thinking.

His Grace would probably prefer that she not be entirely honest about such matters.

"I think of myself, and I am myself in private," Catherine said. "But I am the Duchess of Sarsen in public. I think of it as a performance, as if I am an actress playing a role. Once the night is done, I am finished with my performance and allowed to be only

myself.”

“Oh,” Hannah said quietly. “How interesting.”

“Yes,” Hester replied.

For the first time all week, the girls looked as though they were genuinely interested in her words. They appeared deep in thought, as if they were mulling them over.

“It is an interesting premise,” Hannah said at last. “Be oneself in private and an actress before others.”

“I quite like it,” Hester said.

“It seems deceptive to me,” Hannah said, fixing a stern look on Catherine’s face. “How are we to know that you are being yourself with us?”

“I am your guardian,” Catherine replied. “I will always be myself with you.”

Even as she said it, she felt a tremor of doubt. At the moment, she felt quite unlike herself. Instead, it was as if she was playing a role, an inadequate facsimile of her sister Dorothy. Still, for the sake of these girls, she had to try.

And the first step to doing right by these girls was persuading their brother to leave his study.

CHAPTER 13

His wife burst into his study like a Fury, come to punish him for his misdeeds. He arched an eyebrow as she stood in the open doorway. The woman had not even bothered to knock or ask for entrance, and William was certain that Catherine knew she ought to do that.

He glanced at the clock on the wall. It was late in the evening, and he had worked through dinner, as often happened. William carefully set down his pen, watching as Catherine closed the door and stormed across the floor.

“You are infuriating,” Catherine said.

William arched an eyebrow. “Am I?”

“Yes,” she said, curling her hands over the back of the chair across from his. “We have been married a week, and I have not seen you since our wedding night.”

His eyes flitted to the bodice of her gown, pleased with what he saw. He let his gaze wander leisurely down over those sinfully attractive curves. “Am I to assume that you are here to fulfill your wifely duties? You seem terribly eager,” William said. “It is most improper of you, my lady.”

Color rushed to the woman’s face, and William smirked.

“That is not why I am here, Your Grace.”

“Oh?”

“It concerns your sisters.”

William straightened his spine, his easy attitude vanishing in an instant. “What of them?”

“You would not need to ask that question if you had spent time with them,” Catherine replied, crossing her arms.

“Excuse me?”

“Your sisters are lonely,” Catherine said. “They need their brother to tear himself away from his desk long enough to show them attention.”

William scowled, frustration rising inside him. “That is why I married you , so they will not be lonely.”

“As if I am a replacement for their brother!” Catherine snapped.

“You have no place to tell me what to do,” William said. “Leave before I remind you of your place.”

“My place?” she scoffed. “Our agreement was that I could be myself in private , and we are in private . This is who I am. I am acting as Hester and Hannah’s guardian, which is the task you charged me with, and I am of the opinion that their brother needs to spend more time with them. They are lonely, and I am insufficient company. They need a family member.”

William scowled at her and tried to think through his feelings towards the young woman. On one hand, he found himself forced to admire her boldness. She was

correct; their arrangement had been that she might be herself in private, and he had no argument for that.

On the other hand, a wife was not supposed to behave like this , and he found himself wanting to storm to her, take her over his knee, and give her a well-deserved reminder of what a wife was supposed to be.

“I am trying to manage the dukedom,” he said through gritted teeth. “Being a woman, you likely have no idea of everything involved with that.”

“I know exactly what is involved with that,” Catherine replied. “Do not forget that my brother is a duke as well.”

“A duke who wastes his time hunting fairies in the garden,” William said, scowling.

“A duke who loves his family!” Catherine retorted.

The young woman took a brazen step forward, her face bright red and her eyes alight with fire. She was beautiful when she was angry, and William’s manhood stirred with interest. No woman had ever dared be so obviously angry with him before, and that was novel enough to be alluring.

And yet infuriating .

“I love my sisters,” William said. “More than life itself. But I also have a responsibility to my tenants. I must ensure that they are well taken care of.”

“And do you imagine that if you leave your desk for just a handful of hours that the entire dukedom will fall into disarray?” Catherine asked, putting her hands on her hips. “It that is true, I fear that you are not doing an adequate job to begin with.”

“It does not befit a duke to become too comfortable,” William retorted. “Not that I would expect you to know.”

Catherine glared at him. “Excuses,” she said. “It will not be detrimental to the dukedom if you occasionally enjoy your sisters on some outing. Do you not realize how much they miss your company?”

“They are welcome to visit me any time that they wish,” William said, gesturing towards the door. “It is not as though my study exists on another continent.”

“No,” Catherine agreed. “But they will not. They fear that you will be vexed by their disturbances, and they do not wish for you to turn them away.”

William stared hard at her for a long time, considering her words. Hannah and Hester were his sisters . He would never find their presence vexing. Certainly, they knew that.

And yet, he had noticed that his sisters were lonely. That was why he had married Catherine, after all. She was meant to fill that void in their lives, and it seemed as if she was already trying to avoid those duties. William sighed and raked a hand through his hair. Even as he thought that, he knew it was an ungenerous interpretation of Catherine’s words.

“Do you truly believe that my sisters feel that way?” he asked quietly.

“Yes,” she said. “I know they do. You must make some time for them, Your Grace.”

“William,” he said suddenly.

“Excuse me?”

“You do not seem like a woman who would naturally call me Your Grace. If you are to be yourself when you are in private, you ought to call me William .”

Catherine stared at him for a long moment, and her fingers curled more tightly around the back of the chair. “I will not let you distract me from the topic at hand, William. Your sisters need you, and even if you mean well, it is unkind of you to hide yourself from them.”

“Perhaps, you are right.”

Catherine blinked at him, appearing taken aback. “I—I am right,” she said.

William’s lips twitched in amusement, and he almost laughed. It seemed as though Catherine had been anticipating more of a fight, and she did not know what to do when he had failed to provide one.

“We are going to the park tomorrow,” Catherine said. “It would be nice if you could join us.”

William sighed, his gaze drifting unwillingly to the documents spread out before him. “I have a great deal of work to do, and you are proposing that I abandon it all rather suddenly. You must provide me with more notice, my lady.”

“Catherine. If I am to call you William , I ought to be Catherine .”

He smiled, and she responded in kind.

“It is sudden,” William continued, “and I have much work to do. Perhaps, if you had asked me to join you at some engagement in a few weeks.”

“A few weeks?” Catherine asked in disbelief. “You cannot be serious.”

“I am entirely serious.”

“You need a little spontaneity in your life,” Catherine replied. “What is the worst that will happen if you abandon your papers for just a day? They will still be there on your desk tomorrow, and I doubt you will have already forgotten all of their contents so quickly.”

She abandoned the chair and instead splayed her fingers over his desk and smiled at him.

“Just one trip to the park,” she said softly. “It will not even be an affair that takes you all day—just a few hours spent with your wife and your sisters. You can manage that; I am certain.”

William clenched his jaw and gazed at her. Something about Catherine had softened, and where there had been brazenness before, there was instead just feminine softness.

“And what of you?” William asked. “Would you like me to join you in the park?”

Catherine’s cheeks pinkened. “I suppose I should like to see you more, also. We are married, after all.”

“Perhaps, you would like to see me in a different context,” William said, allowing himself a long, luxurious look over the length of her body.

Catherine’s breath hitched. “I do not...I am sure that I do not know what you mean.”

“I could show you,” he mused.

Catherine smiled, and her breath audibly quickened. “I should like that.”

“But not now,” he teased. “I have much work to finish, and you are determined to take me away from my desk tomorrow.”

He did not miss the look of disappointment in her eyes, fleeting though it was, and William delighted in it. His wife was a wicked, hungry woman. He considered briefly amending his teasing and instead making love to her with Catherine spread open above the desk.

“I see,” Catherine said. “You consider me to be a distraction. That is useful information to have.”

“Useful, how?”

She smiled coyly. “I do not feel inclined to tell you. I am sure that you will figure it out, though. With all your knowledge and experience.”

William clenched his jaw, and his loins stirred with interest. “If you continue to prove to be a distraction, I shall correct that behavior.”

“Will you?” she asked, her eyes wide with mock innocence. “I thought our agreement was that I might be myself in private. Perhaps, I wish to be distracting in private.”

“I suspect you are equally distracting in public,” he growled.

He needed her to leave before he succumbed to the temptations of her soft curves and sly smirks.

“You have delayed my work for long enough,” William said. “I shall take your words under careful consideration and determine if I may join you at the park tomorrow. The more that I accomplish today, the more likely that is to happen.”

Catherine nodded. “Very well,” she said. “I hope I am not disappointed in you.”

“I hope so, also.”

He considered her retreating back as she slipped from his study. He did not want to disappoint her, he decided. That was a problem. William did not like feelings, much less ones that involved a desire to please another person. Feelings were irrational and did not suit men with responsibilities. He preferred to be rational and focus his attention on facts. Catherine was his wife. He did not owe her anything.

But maybe in this matter, she was right.

CHAPTER 14

The carriage was prepared for their trip to the park. It was only a few miles away, and Catherine would have enjoyed the exercise of walking there. Hannah and Hester were much younger than she, however, and likely did not have her stamina. Thus, they were obliged to ride.

Catherine's nerves hummed with energy, as if she had been struck by lightning. This was to be her first outing since marrying His Grace— William , she had been told to call him—and becoming the Duchess of Sarsen. She might encounter some of the ton at the park. Catherine could not decide how she felt about that.

“Autumn is the best season to visit the park,” Hester said, as they approached the carriage. “The weather is agreeable, and one is able to watch all the songbirds flitting in the air.”

“I do enjoy the cooler weather,” Hannah added.

Catherine walked behind them, listening them talk to one another; she suspected that the conversation was really for her benefit, though. The girls were trying to include her in their lives. She bit the inside of her cheek, guilt gnawing at her stomach. It seemed remarkably unfair that the very moment she had won their respect, she had failed them by failing to persuade William to join them.

“Going somewhere?” His voice came from behind, startling her.

Catherine whirled around. William himself stood behind her, as if she had summoned

him with her thoughts.

“You!” she exclaimed.

“Me,” he agreed, smirking. “Or were you expecting some other man?”

Her heart rose in her throat. Hester and Hannah had stopped their conversation, and although her back was to them, Catherine sensed the girls watching her. Watching and waiting to see if their brother would deign to join them.

“I was not expecting any man,” Catherine replied. “But you are here, and I must confess that I am not displeased to see you. Am I to assume that you will be joining us at the park, then?”

“I believe I will. It is not as though the dukedom will fall into utter disarray if I am absent for only a day, after all.”

Catherine smiled slightly. He had remembered her precise words from the day before. Although he had said that he would consider joining them, she had not really thought that he would. William had seemed far too consumed with his duties for that. He was trying, though. That was good.

“Besides,” William continued. “It is long past time that I enjoy a pleasant day out with my beloved sisters. It has been a while since I went to the park with you.”

“It has,” Hester said, her face brightening.

It was as if the sun had been hidden behind clouds for a lifetime and had suddenly chosen that moment to emerge. Catherine felt a small jolt of satisfaction. While it was true that she was not Dorothy, she had managed to offer these girls some small measure of happiness.

“And during the journey, you will be able to tell me of everything that you have been learning, while I have been hard at work ensuring that the dukedom is prospering,” William said.

“Indeed!” Hannah exclaimed. “There is much to say.”

They entered the carriage, and the footman closed the door behind them. As she settled against the seat, listening to Hannah and Hester regale their brother with tales of their embroidery and sketching, Catherine found that she almost felt like she was...home.

“How are you finding the estate, my lady?” William asked.

My lady. She supposed that being with the twins was public enough for William to want to behave a little formally.

“Adequate,” she said. “I would be more pleased with it if my husband would tear himself away from his desk and ask after my welfare now and again.”

She was thinking mostly of Hannah and Hester, but upon further reflection, Catherine realized that the words were true enough regarding her, too. Catherine could not quite say why. Maybe it was because she was so accustomed to her siblings always being about, or maybe it was that her pride was—admittedly, shamefully—a little wounded by his marrying her, giving her a night of incomparable pleasure, and behaving as though he had no further use for her.

“I will consider it,” William said, his eyes smoldering.

Everything inside Catherine grew hot and tight as she considered how William might ask after her welfare. She imagined being bent over the loveseat again, as he kissed her neck and asked her to tell him about everything she had done that day.

“How generous,” Catherine said. “You will consider it.”

“The ton will be at the park,” Hannah said. “I always enjoy watching the ladies and seeing what their gowns look like. They are always so beautiful and refined.”

“Indeed, they are,” Catherine replied.

“And someday, I will be wearing such finery,” Hannah continued with a longing sigh. “You will ensure that I am properly attired when I come out into society, right, Your Grace?”

It took Catherine a heartbeat to realize that it was she who was being asked.

“I will,” she replied. “You shall be the most beautiful girls to ever enter society. You and Hester.”

Hester wrinkled her nose. “I do not know if I want to enter society,” she mused. “It sounds as though it is very tiring.”

“It can be,” Catherine said.

“You will come to enjoy it,” William said. “Her Grace will ensure that you are prepared to face the ton.”

“Yes,” Catherine said.

Hester’s smile wavered for just an instant, and Catherine felt as though she was looking at a younger version of herself. She had once been hesitant to join the ton, but Elias had indulged her. He had not been like William, who was cold and imposing.

Elias would probably have let Catherine never marry if she had really wanted that.

Even when William had asked for her, Catherine was confident that her brother would have relented if she had just refused.

But she had not.

“It is not all bad,” Catherine said. “Sometimes, it can be enjoyable being with the ton. The balls are grand and often enjoyable. The music is beyond reproach! And you meet so many handsome gentlemen.”

That sounded almost like something Dorothy would say if she needed to comfort Catherine.

“We shall see,” Hester murmured. “I rather think that I am destined to become a bluestocking.”

“You are too young to know if you will be a bluestocking,” William replied. “You have many years ahead of you to mature and grow into a proper, young lady.”

Catherine never had. She wryly noted the irony of it all. William expected her to be the woman who could teach his sisters to become proper ladies of the ton, a feat which she had never accomplished herself. Oh, Catherine supposed that she knew in principle how to be a proper lady, but that did not mean she was capable of explaining it to someone else.

“I suppose so,” Hester said, her eyes flitting toward the window.

She sounded unhappy. Did William notice?

It was difficult to say, for when she looked at him, his face was unreadable. Maybe he regretted having come along with them and was already thinking of returning to his work.

“There are some men who favor bluestockings,” Catherine said. “I would not say that you need to be entirely one thing or the other. You know that as well as me, William.”

He fixed her with a stern glare, and Catherine’s lips twitched in amusement. William might be angry with her for the remark, and he might wish to correct it later. Catherine was still not entirely certain what that meant, but thus far, nothing that William had done to her had been bad. Not even remotely. A shiver of delight traced down her spine in anticipation of something she could not know.

But she wanted to know.

“We shall see,” William replied. “I am sure that under your tutelage my sisters will become proper ladies. That does require some education.”

Hester bit her lip. “Maybe I can marry a man who enjoys nature as much as I do.”

“Is that something you favor greatly?”

Hester nodded. “I have always liked nature—plants and animals and the sunlight. The world is so beautiful, and it seems like a terrible pity to spend so much of our lives in ballrooms and corridors when we might be instead free beneath the sun and sky.”

Catherine softened. “I am sure that you will find someone who loves nature as much as you do. There are many scientifically-minded men among the ton, and I am certain there will be when you are ready for marriage, too.”

“And men who are interested in other things, right?” Hannah asked, her eyes wide with concern.

“Yes,” Catherine said.

William cleared his throat. "Indeed," he said. "Lords have many interests and admire...many things about women. As long as you both grow into proper ladies, I do not imagine you will encounter difficulty in finding respectable husbands."

Catherine nodded.

Privately, she did not know if the girls would so easily find husbands, but she did not wish to destroy their hopes. Besides, they might very well be proper ladies. Who was she to assume that they would not? Once, she would have thought it impossible for her to find a respectable husband, but she had.

Well, given a certain definition of respectable . Catherine was unable to deny that her husband did not entirely fit that definition, given some of his behavior.

The carriage jolted into movement, its wheels clattering against the smooth, well-worn road. Catherine turned her own gaze towards the window, watching as the countryside swept her by. An ache twisted in her chest, a knot of longing for her brother and sisters. When would she see them again?

She knew she could ask to visit them, but Catherine was also aware that young ladies were expected to spend a certain amount of time with their husbands, adjusting to new households. She could not simply request to return to her family whenever she wanted. It would be improper, even for her.

"How did you meet?" Hannah asked. "Was it at a ball?"

Ah, so he has not told them this part, thought Catherine.

William cleared his throat. "That was not when we decided to wed, but we had met one another before at balls."

“Did you dance?” Hannah asked.

“No,” William replied, his sharp gaze flitting towards Catherine.

“Did you ever see me and want to dance?” Catherine asked, genuinely curious.

She could not even recall much about him before their marriage. Catherine supposed that she must have seen him once or twice at a ball, but they had never spoken. They had never even exchanged a glance.

“I have not thought much of dancing in recent years,” William replied.

No, she supposed he had not. That was unsurprising given that he seemed to devote nearly every waking moment to the paperwork in his study.

“Now that I know you, I suppose I wish that I had,” William said. “Our wedding was quite sudden. It would have been...less so if we had danced and conversed beforehand.”

Catherine nodded. She tried to imagine it. What would she have felt if she—the perpetual wallflower because everyone knew she was not a proper lady—was asked to dance by this cold and proper duke? It was unfathomable.

“Perhaps,” she said.

She did not want to diminish the girls’ hopes for a happy marriage. Catherine clasped her hands together to keep from fidgeting. She ought to ask William precisely what he had told them. Catherine knew only a vague sketch, that he had told Hester and Hannah she was to be their guardian and to teach them to be proper ladies. What else had he said, though? Had he claimed that there was love between them?

The carriage rattled along, and Catherine fell silent.

“I am glad that you were able to join us, Your Grace,” said Hannah. “I know that you are always so busy.”

William grunted in response. “I am. And I shall have much to do when we return home. Do not anticipate seeing me for dinner.”

“He had no plans to join us anyway,” Catherine said, seeing how Hannah’s face fell. “Do not let him make you feel guilty. He would have remained working late into the night, regardless of what any of us might have said or done.”

William fixed her with a stern look, and Catherine raised an eyebrow, suspecting that he wanted to disagree with her. However, he did not. Instead, the duke merely offered a small nod of his head, as if conceding the point.

“I am glad, too,” Hester said.

Catherine glanced at William, searching his face for any reaction to his sisters’ words. If he found their gratitude to be heartwarming, he did not show it. He was such a strange man! Would nothing move him? Catherine could not decide if his heart was made of stone or if he was merely a man who insisted upon building a stony facade in every aspect of his life.

She remembered bending over the loveseat and the attentions that he had given her. On their wedding night, he had not seemed like a man incapable of emotions. On the contrary, she had found him passionate and full of fire. Would she ever see that man again? Catherine had fantasized about him many times since their wedding night, but he had never reappeared.

“We are nearly here,” William said.

Indeed, she could see more carriages and elegantly dressed couples mingling about by the road. At long last, the carriage halted. Catherine reflexively adjusted her skirts, although she knew they would inevitably be disturbed when she left the carriage.

“No one has asked if you like parks, my lady,” William said.

“I do,” she replied, as the footman opened the carriage door.

They exited one at a time. Catherine lit upon the ground and stretched her calves, rising onto the tips of her toes. The sun was pleasantly warm, its heat tempered by the autumn breeze.

“It is beautiful,” she said, gazing at the greenery surrounding them.

“It is the best park in the county,” Hester said enthusiastically. “It has a wonderful duck pond.”

“Does it?”

Hester nodded eagerly. “I am rather fond of it,” she said, lowering her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “I have always thought of chasing the ducks, but I have always worried that it would be seen as improper.”

Hester’s eyes flickered fleetingly to her brother, who was engaged in a discussion with the footman and did not seem to notice that he was the topic of conversation. Beside Hannah, Hester bit her lip and looked askance, as though she had been caught in the act of committing some misdeed.

Catherine was beginning to understand a little. It was unclear if the sisters found William as intimidating as she did or if they were merely overly eager to please him, but it was apparent that they did not feel as if they could truly be themselves around

him.

A knot tightened in Catherine's chest, for she knew too well what that felt like. Before realizing that she would simply never be a proper lady, she had tried to charm suitors. She had tried to be proper like Dorothy and Bridget were, but in the end, she was forced to concede that such behavior simply did not suit her.

"We can chase them today," Catherine whispered.

Hester inhaled a sharp, disbelieving breath. Hannah looked horrified.

"We cannot!" Hester exclaimed.

"Unthinkable," Hannah murmured.

"Why?" Catherine asked slyly.

"His Grace will be displeased," Hester whispered. "He does not like for us to behave in an unladylike manner. He says that it will prevent us from being married in the future."

"And the ton are here," Hannah said, gesturing around them.

Catherine saw readily enough the ladies in their fine gowns and the gentlemen in their expensive jackets. Hannah was right.

"You will only be young once, though," Catherine said. "Every girl needs the opportunity to be a little unladylike, and there is no better time than when you are young. You need not be concerned, for I shall take the blame and make sure everything is well with His Grace."

Hester and Hannah exchanged doubtful looks. At last, William ended his conversation with the footman and joined them. “Shall we?” he asked.

Catherine winked at the girls. “We shall .”

CHAPTER 15

Catherine kept her head high and her shoulders rolled back as she walked through the park, Hester and Hannah following close behind. She looked like a proper duchess, as she had promised to be. Given her whispered remarks about being unladylike, William had anticipated something appalling.

Still, her promise left him feeling on edge. Many of the ton were at the park, and a large number of them seemed to be gossiping about William and his new bride. He saw how ladies' eyes cut towards him, as they murmured to one another behind their fans, and nearly every gentleman they passed gazed too hard at Catherine before grinning at him, as if to say, ah, you have a fetching lady.

"Lovely weather," Catherine said.

It was a droll choice of topic but entirely appropriate, so William supposed he did not have the grounds to complain.

"Indeed, it is," William replied. "The first beautiful day in a while."

"How could you know? You never leave your study."

That remark was a little less proper but admittedly deserved. "My study has a window, darling wife. I can see that the sky has been dreary and overcast for the past several days."

"You must still look up from your papers to see the sky," she replied, her eyes bright

with amusement.

“I will confess that my eyes do wander from my work on occasion,” he said. “In those moment, I look at the sky.”

“I see.”

“I like the rain sometimes,” Hester said. “The sound of it is soothing, and there is nothing as beautiful as watching lightning strike in the distance.”

“Lightning is terrifying,” Hannah said, wrinkling her nose. “I do not understand how anyone can derive enjoyment from it.”

“You never understand my enjoyment in anything,” Hester replied. “Just as I do not understand your fondness for embroidery.”

“What about you?” Hannah asked, turning her attention toward Catherine. “What do you enjoy?”

Catherine pressed her lips together, thinking. “A great many things, I suppose. I will confess that I have never been overly fond of embroidery, but I admire ladies who are skilled with needlework. I have seen some truly exquisite creations.”

Hannah beamed at Catherine, seemingly quite satisfied with that answer. “Well-constructed embroidery is an unparalleled artform,” she said. “I think there ought to be museums of it.”

“Museums?” Hester asked dubiously.

“Indeed,” Hannah replied. “There are museums for statues, paintings, and waxwork. Why not embroidery, also?”

“What a novel idea,” Catherine murmured.

William did not understand why there ought to be a museum dedicated to embroidery, a skill which most ladies developed, but if Hannah wished to imagine one, he would say nothing against the idea.

“Perhaps, you shall create one,” Catherine said.

Hannah nodded and furrowed her brow. “I would need much time to embroider enough pieces to fill an entire building.”

“Indeed, you would,” Catherine replied. “I would offer you my assistance, but I am quite slow and regrettably uneven with my stitches.”

“Maybe I could have other ladies helping me, though,” Hannah said. “Those who are not quite so reckless with their stitches.”

Hannah did not seem to realize that she had just indirectly insulted Catherine, but when William looked at his wife, searching her face for any sign of vexation, he found only frank amusement.

“I suppose I could help,” Hester mused. “Although I am not usually fond of embroidery, I should like to inspire others to understand the beauty in nature as I do. Perhaps, I could embroider illustrations of fauna, much like I record in my herbarium.”

“I think that would be a lovely addition to the museum,” Catherine said.

“Or perhaps, you might all use your enthusiasm for embroidery in some other manner,” William said. “Mother used to visit seminaries for young ladies when she was in London. The women in such institutions would probably enjoy spending an

evening embroidering with proper ladies.”

Of course, it would not really be the entire evening. William imagined that Catherine and his sisters would make proper quarter-hour visits.

“How thoughtful, Your Grace,” Catherine said. “But I do not see why a lady could not found an embroidery museum. The work of women is as worthy of admiration as that of men, is it not?”

William smiled thinly. “And embroidery is admired. Households would be quite lacking without it.”

“If it is sufficient for a noble household, it is sufficient enough to grace a museum,” Catherine replied sharply.

“Ladies ought to concern themselves with the home,” William said, “or else, with representing their husbands. It does not suit a woman to do something as immodest as to promote her wifely skills in such an obvious manner.”

“No?” Catherine asked. “But when young ladies go on the marriage mart, we are expected to flaunt our talents for many suitors and to promote ourselves over other ladies. Why should it be shameful if a lady wishes to do something for herself?”

William looked at her for a long moment, unsure what to make of this strange, young lady. She liked to argue, which ought not be an attractive trait in a woman, but he found himself growing increasingly... charmed by her strange tendency to fight and argue with all his well-reasoned thoughts.

“If you wish to do something for yourself, you may embroider as many linens as you like, my lady,” he said, “but there is no need to advertise how industrious you are. Doing so is at odds with a modest woman’s nature.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Bold of you to presume that I am modest, my lord. You must not know me well at all.”

Hannah and Hester glanced at the two of them, their expressions a strange mix of excitement and confusion. William grimaced, trying to decide how much of Catherine’s witticisms he was willing to tolerate. Their bargain had been that she would be a proper duchess in public, and the park was a public place. Her suggestions were not entirely appropriate, but William also did not find them overly offensive.

Besides, the ton walking past on their morning strolls did not seem as though they were paying much mind to his conversation with Catherine. And Hannah and Hester did seem more enthusiastic than he had ever seen them. They seemed to like Catherine, and that was what he had wanted, was it not?

Well, no. He had wanted for Catherine to teach Hester and Hannah to be proper ladies and to—someday—help launch them into society. William had not wanted Catherine to encourage outlandish dreams like a museum for embroidery, and yet he could not deny that his sisters seemed livelier in Catherine’s presence than they had been in a long time. Catherine was...good for them, if not exactly in the way he intended.

“For the sake of the dukedom, I should hope that you are more modest than you claim,” William said in a warning tone.

“I assume that you recall our agreement,” she said, her eyes narrowing.

“I do,” he replied.

Their eyes met for just an instant. Catherine’s gaze was fierce and determined; she had no intention of conceding. William’s lips twitched in amusement as he imagined means of persuading her to accept his point. His mind conjured images of Catherine

tossed across his lap, squirming and moaning as he administered the promised correction.

“We are in public, my lady,” he said, “in case you failed to notice.”

“Perhaps, the fault lies with you. I do not recall you ever offering a definition for what constitutes as a public situation.”

“Being willfully contrary is not an attractive trait in a lady,” William said dryly.

“No?” Catherine asked. “I do not see why you ought to be bothered by it. On the contrary, I strongly suspect that you would be bored if I always agreed with you.”

William grimaced. “You are much mistaken,” he said. “If I wanted someone to argue with me, I would talk with my solicitor.”

Catherine’s lip thinned into a line. It seemed as though she had no retort for him. Pleased with his victory, he let himself relax a little. Thus far, she had only made a few improper remarks, and he knew she could have done far worse damage.

“Oh, look!” Hester exclaimed. “There are so many ducks!”

Indeed, there were. They had reached the small pond towards the center of the park, and several brown and white ducks waddled about and flapped in the water.

“I have always found ducks to be amusing animals,” Hannah said. “I enjoy watching how they walk.”

“They are amusing,” Catherine agreed. “When I was a little girl, I made a sport of chasing them.”

“You did not!” Hannah exclaimed, sounding scandalized.

“I should hope not,” William agreed disapprovingly.

Catherine cast him a cross look. “There is little harm in chasing a few ducks.”

“There is great harm in it,” he argued. “It is terribly undignified.”

Catherine looked displeased with him, but rather than arguing, she remained mercifully quiet. William found that he liked this side of her, the woman who quietly acquiesced to his desires, but the pleasure of her obedience was nothing compared to the fissure of excitement that he felt when she disobeyed him. He was a contrary man, and sometimes, being contrary was a curse.

They walked a little longer along the path, and William idly noted they were alone. If his sisters were not present, he might have been tempted to engage in some exercise other than mere walking. The path turned just ahead, and there was a small cluster of trees, where one might hide and engage in more intimate pursuits.

“You seem to believe that everything is undignified, my husband,” Catherine said.

“Whereas you seem to believe that dignity or the lack thereof does not matter,” William replied.

“I would argue that your perspective is more harmful than mine,” Catherine said. “At least, it sounds significantly less enjoyable.”

“Propriety is not meant to be enjoyable.”

“Maybe it should be,” she countered.

“What propriety should or should not be does not matter,” William said. “We live in the real world, Catherine.”

Rather than looking frustrated, as he had expected, Catherine looked sly. A cold sense of foreboding swept over him. He sensed that she was planning something, but he had no sense of how he might counter a reckless action.

Without warning, Catherine yelled. She ran across the grass towards the ducks, her arms spread wide. “Join me!” she exclaimed as she chased the ducks.

They quacked wildly and waddled away, their wings spread wide. Catherine laughed as she bounded after them. Heat rushed to William’s face, fury coiling inside him.

With a bright laugh, Hester darted after his wife. The two ran after the ducks together, sending the fowl waddling away, alarmed quacks coming from their beaks. William inhaled sharply.

“Wait for me!” Hannah exclaimed, laughing.

His wife and sisters ran after the ducks with reckless abandon, chasing them around and around the pond. William’s nostrils flared, and he dug his nails into the palms of his hands. His patience was a quickly fraying thread as he watched his duchess flounder into the mud. The ducks fled from her, some taking flight. Their wings dully beat the air.

Catherine had done this just to vex him. William was certain of that. His pulse jumped, and his palm twitched. After what felt like an eternity, during which he was all too aware of how suddenly one of the ton might appear, Catherine dropped her skirts and doubled over with the force of his laughter. His sisters grinned at one another.

“You should have joined us!” Catherine exclaimed, laughing as she looked at him.

William clenched his jaw. “This will not happen again. You should be ashamed of behaving in this manner. It is entirely unbecoming of a duchess.”

Her laughter ceased. She straightened her spine and met his gaze evenly. He saw a challenge there: so what are you going to do about it?

Oh, Catherine had no idea.

CHAPTER 16

The carriage ride back to the estate had been silent and awkward. William's disapproval was like a storm cloud, filling the entire carriage with a dark and foreboding sensation. It reminded Catherine of walking along the coast of Cornwall just before a storm, knowing it was coming from the coolness and the lightning that surged in the air.

"Go to your bedchambers!" William snapped, his stern gaze fixed on his sisters. "I want you to reflect on what you have done today. This will not happen again."

Hannah and Hester fled without another word. Catherine's blood boiled as she witnessed such masterful behavior. It had only been a little harmless game! Why did he behave as though they had murdered someone?

"There is no need to be this upset," Catherine said evenly.

He gave her a sharp glare. "We will continue this conversation away from curious eyes and ears. I will not have the staff overhearing my correction of my wife."

Catherine curled her fingers into the folds of her skirts as he beckoned for her to follow. He led her through the familiar corridors of the house until he arrived at his bedchamber. William shoved the door open and jerked his head, silently gesturing for her to enter.

She squared her shoulders, as she stepped into his bedchamber. It seemed as though they were going to have one of their marital arguments. She strongly suspected that

most of their marriage was going to be a series of arguments. When William closed the door behind him, she whirled about to face him.

“Well?” she asked. “What is it that has you so vexed?”

“ You ,” he replied. “You chased after ducks, and worse, you convinced my sisters to chase them with you!”

Catherine arched an eyebrow. “And? It was a harmless game!”

“Harmless? I brought you here, so you could help my sisters grow into proper young ladies and someday help them procure respectable husbands! Instead, you are doing the exact opposite! You are teaching them to behave like—like?—”

“Like children ?” Catherine interrupted. “They are just girls, and there is no harm in them chasing after ducks.”

“Someone might have seen you.”

“I did not see anyone.”

“That does not mean there was no one!” William snapped. “And someone might very well have heard you! My sisters might have been ruined today!”

“Ruined?” Catherine asked in disbelief. “You forget that I managed to marry, and I was much wilder than both of them combined and at a much older age!”

“You only managed to marry because I made it so!”

He was right . The realization struck Catherine as if it was a bolt of lightning. Her face fell, and a cold, creeping dread fell over her like a cloak. She wanted to argue

with him, but that was difficult, for Catherine found that she could not truthfully deny his words. “I suppose you are right,” she murmured, her shoulders slumping.

William gazed at her with an unreadable expression. After a long moment, he sighed and raked a hand through his hair. “I suppose I cannot blame you,” he said. “Do not worry overly about the park. After all, I know that you do not vex me on purpose.”

Catherine sighed. “I cannot deny my own nature,” she murmured.

“No,” he agreed, cupping her cheek in his hand. “You have only grown the way that you were nurtured, and that is no fault of your own.”

Catherine frowned, an inkling of displeasure forming in the pit of her stomach. She could not have said precisely why, for she found that she had no real defense for his words. Still, Catherine had never been a woman who liked to accept defeat.

“I disagree,” she said.

“Of course, you do.”

“I have grown this way because it is in my nature,” she said. “You cannot blame everything on my brother, for I am quite certain that I wrote many chapters of my own salacious nature. What do you say to that, Your Grace?”

His lips pressed against hers. She inhaled sharply, breathing in the scent of his Albany cologne. A low groan tore from her throat as she wrapped her arms around his neck and urged him closer. He seized her by the waist and pulled her flush against him, and pleasure bloomed in her core. William kissed her with such passion that she nearly lost her breath.

By the time he drew away, Catherine’s jaw ached, but she cared not. She would

endure all the discomfort in the world if she could just continue kissing him until the end of time. He pressed his forehead against hers and gazed into her eyes. "I must still teach you a lesson, though."

"Must you?"

If it was anything like the lesson of their wedding night, she found that she welcomed it. He sat on the bed with an imperious expression. "Lift your skirts," William said.

Heat rushed to her face. "No."

He raised an eyebrow. "Is that an acceptable answer, Catherine?"

She anxiously wet her lips, swollen still from the kiss. Catherine slowly raised her skirts up past her waist.

"Petticoats, too."

She did, and the warmth grew more fiercely across her face. With her hands full of her petticoats and skirts, she was entirely exposed from the waist down. Cool air brushed over her buttocks and the apex of her thighs, making her tingle with anticipation.

William leaned forward and caressed her thigh. Catherine trembled and leaned into his touch as his knuckles swept over that delicate part of her leg. She stifled a groan, her body already quite aware of the masculine aura that he exuded.

"Beautiful," he murmured, his breath hot against her thigh. "Spread your legs for me."

As she did, that familiar ache began to form between her thighs. He leaned nearer to

her, and Catherine's breath caught in her throat. She waited, as he tilted his head. Pain bloomed in her inner thigh, and she gasped in surprise. He had bitten her!

Catherine stumbled and nearly fell, but William caught her in his arms. "Y—you!" she gasped.

He tipped her over his knee, and Catherine started, surprised by the sudden movement. She hurriedly pressed her palms against the floor to keep from tipping face-first onto it.

"Fifteen will be sufficient," he said. "I expect you to count."

"Count?" she asked. "Count what?"

He took a handful of her skirts and pulled them up, keeping her bared. Cool air brushed against the apex of her thighs. She shivered in delight and anticipation, feeling wonderfully exposed.

A sharp crack split the air, and Catherine gasped, registering the sound before the sting of the slap. He had struck her right buttock, as if she was some wayward child!

"How dare you?" she cried, indignant.

He slapped her again, drawing a startled shout from her throat. "I said count the strikes. If you falter or lose count, I shall be forced to start again."

Another slap.

"You cannot do this!" Catherine exclaimed, squirming and struggling to free herself.

He lifted a leg and placed it over hers, and his left hand seized her hair, pulling so

hard that Catherine's scalp smarted. "As a husband, I have a duty to correct my wife's behavior. If you recall, I promised to administer correction before we were even wed, and you agreed to accept it."

"I did not mean this !"

William slapped her again, and Catherine arched her back. The motion made his grip tighten on her hair. She rocked her body, as a dull ache began to bloom between her thighs.

"Perhaps, you should have clarified what you meant," William said smoothly. "I told you to count. If you had obeyed me, we would have already made significant progress in your lesson. But alas."

Slap! The crack of his hand against her right buttock was so loud that it seemed to echo throughout the entire room. Catherine had the horrifying thought that one of the servants might hear, and wetness dripped between her thighs.

"What if someone hears?" she asked.

"A man has a right to discipline his wife," he replied, "especially if she has been wicked, as you have. Now, count ."

His hand struck her again, and her back arched. The muscles in her stomach tightened, and her inner walls gave an insistent, little pulse of need. "One!" she gasped.

With his left hand, he gathered up her hair and pulled hard, forcing her head back. He struck again on the other side, and Catherine whined deep in her throat. "Two!"

Her husband administered his correction again and again, while Catherine counted

each strike. With every crack of his palm against her rear, jolts of pain and pleasure collided in her body. The inside of her thighs was wet with her arousal, and she burned with want for release of the tightness curling inside her.

After eleven strikes, he adjusted his grip on her. "See? You can be a good wife and accept your correction with grace," he murmured, kissing her neck and causing gooseflesh to rise along her skin. "I am sorry that it hurts so much, but I have to be certain that you remember the lesson. I know you can endure it, my good girl."

She groaned, just as he struck the crease where her left thigh met her buttock. Catherine jerked as the stinging pain spread through her. "Twelve!"

He struck her right thigh next. "Thirteen!"

Catherine was heady from the stinging and burning from his strikes and from her core. She squeezed her eyes shut, as her core throbbed with need. William spanked her again, harder. A ragged cry tore from her. "Please!" she begged. "Please!"

"Is please a number?"

Catherine swallowed hard, her mind racing as she tried to remember the count. "Fourteen," she rasped. "Fourteen."

His final strike came lightning-quick, and she arched her back as the slap tingled through her thigh. When he was done, she lay limply over his thigh. She was hot all over, and her core throbbed painfully with need. Catherine pushed her thighs together, desperately trying to relieve the ache.

"Please," she whispered. "Please."

Catherine felt as though she was out of her own body. She squirmed in his grasp,

trying to force his leg to rub against that delicate bundle of nerves at the apex of her thighs. Her breath came in hot pants for air, and when William stroked her warm buttocks, she nearly came undone.

Catherine's eyes stung, tears forming from the frustration of being unable to relieve the feeling between her thighs. "Dear God, please ."

"Please?" he asked. "What is it that you want?"

"I—I do not..." she trailed off, unable to put the words together to ask.

William chuckled, and when she looked over her shoulder, he shook his head in a look of mock pity. "Perhaps, it is this."

He rubbed his finger through the dampness of her arousal and sank the digit inside her. Catherine's walls clenched around him, and she wailed with need. She shifted her hips back, trying to urge him deeper. William pumped his finger in and out. Catherine struggled and twisted in his grasp, trying to meet his every thrust, but the position made it impossible.

"Oh, please!" she gasped. "Please, let me have my release! Please!"

"As you wish."

He increased his speed, and Catherine bucked helplessly against his finger. The tightness and ache inside her grew, and her thighs quivered. Her body moved of its own accord without her having any conscious thought, and at last, she reached that glorious sensation of release.

White light dotted her vision, as the waves of pleasure thundered through her. She tossed her head back and screamed. When the crisis passed, she gasped for air and lay

limply over his thigh, her chest heaving.

Idly, she noticed that her breasts had nearly freed themselves of her stays. Her hard, pink nipples rose impertinently over the bodice of her gown.

“I am not finished with you yet,” William growled.

He took her by the waist and pulled her onto the bed. She landed on her back and lay there, gasping for air. He grasped her thighs and placed a gentle kiss on her stomach, his eyes never leaving her face. Catherine inhaled sharply, as his lips moved down to the inside of her thigh. His teeth scraped against her skin, and she braced herself as he bit down.

A dull, throbbing sensation bloomed across her thigh. He soon turned his administrations to her other leg, and that familiar heat built inside Catherine once again. William trailed kisses and bites up her legs, slowly making his way to her center.

“Oh, what are you doing there?” she exclaimed.

He brushed his lips over her nub, and she gasped. Surprise thundered through her, for she had never imagined that a man might press his lips against her core. And his tongue. It was the strangest sensation, having his tongue flit against her nub and her folds. Her thighs trembled, and something about the idea of him kissing her in that secret place made her blood roar in her ears.

Her desire twisted inside her, like a wild thing aching to be freed. She cried out, just as his lips pressed against her entrance. Catherine’s release swept over her, taking her away once again. She shouted and tossed her head back, her body shaking. After the climax had ended, she remained lying on the bed and clenching the counterpane in a death grip. “Oh...” she breathed.

“Shall we see if you can achieve another one?” William asked.

“I cannot possibly!” she exclaimed.

He narrowed his eyes. “But would you like to try?”

Her breath caught. “Yes.”

William took a finger and carefully swept it between her folds. Catherine’s body shivered, already so sensitive to his touch that even the smallest caress sent her aquiver. He pressed the digit into her and pumped a few times.

She could hear the sounds of his fingering. They were horrible squelching sounds, like a poorly tuned violin. The sounds were so uncomfortable and lewd that her face grew hot. He certainly heard them, too.

Her breath quickened in time with his thrusts, and she felt another finger press into her entrance. She gasped, as he slowly pressed the second finger in her. Catherine’s inner walls shivered once again, clamping tightly against his fingers. Her muscles grew taut, her body jolting with want of the pleasure.

It grew and grew, and she found her pleasure once again. This time, it soared through her and lingered. She rode the wave even after the strongest part of it had passed and lay gasping in the aftermath.

William chuckled and lightly slapped the inside of her thigh. She groaned raggedly. “Better,” he said. “I trust that you will behave as you ought to now.”

“Yes,” she rasped. “Yes. I will not play like that with the girls in public anymore. I promise.”

“Good,” he said. “I do not anticipate you forgetting this lesson soon.”

She shook her head, too aware of how even the soft bed linens felt rough against her heated bottom. “I—I will not. I promise.”

“Good. Make yourself presentable before you leave this room,” he said. “I have work to do. Already, I have lost more time than I wanted to.”

“I still appreciate you coming to the park,” she said between breaths of air. “The girls enjoyed it, too.”

“Yes. Well.”

“You must tell them that they did nothing wrong,” Catherine added, pleading with her eyes. “They only chased the ducks because I did.”

William’s expression was unreadable. After a long moment of staring at her in silence, he turned away. Catherine remained sprawled over the bed, listening. After a heartbeat, she heard the door open and close. Her husband was gone.

CHAPTER 17

William rubbed his eyes and grimaced at the neat rows of numbers before him. He had not been working with the numbers for very long, but he found that he was already weary of them. His mind longed to wander to some other place; that was not like him, for William had always been quite proud of his strong self-discipline.

Maybe it was Catherine. He had no reason for believing it was her, but she was the largest change in his life of late. Maybe her poor habits were affecting his own. He drew in a sharp breath of air. Shouts rang in the air, and William looked askance toward the window. They were not alarmed shouts, but the hitch-pitched sounds of children at play.

“It is you,” he muttered, as he rose from his desk.

William walked to the window and clasped his hands behind his back. The gardens spread out before him, and there was Catherine running about with her skirts hitched up past her knees. From where he watched, it was not readily apparent what she ran from. Perhaps, it was Hannah and Hester, who ran after her with reckless abandon. William grimaced at the muddied hems of their gowns. Doubtless, the laundress would be quite vexed with them.

More irritating, was this not the same behavior that he had demanded that Catherine cease? Certainly, there were no ducks this time, but she still ran carelessly through the gardens as though yesterday had not happened. He wondered if he had been mistaken about her not purposefully vexing him. Maybe Catherine did wish to irritate him. Maybe she enjoyed him more when he was a little rough with her.

Or maybe she had decided that this behavior was permissible because she was in private. William could not have said. He crossed his arms and watched, considering the situation more thoroughly. It was in private, and the agreement was that Catherine might be herself in private. She had not broken their agreement, but he nonetheless felt his blood heat seeing her. Catherine had not learned her lesson the night before, so perhaps another was needed.

Hannah shouted something, and Catherine spun around. Her hair hung in disheveled strands about her face, and her cheeks were colored pink with exertion. She said something which he could not quite hear. They all seemed to be enjoying themselves, and with a twinge of guilt, William remembered what she had said about the girls needing their brother.

Perhaps, I ought to join them .

It would be a delightful surprise if he did. He could imagine too easily how Catherine's eyes would light up and how his sisters' faces would brighten at the sight of him. Suddenly, another scream filled the air, but this was not one of joy. Hannah pitched forward and fell hard on the ground.

William's pulse jumped, and he stormed away from the window. Hannah was hurt, and it was all because of Catherine's influence. If they had been behaving in a more ladylike manner, this would not have happened.

What if his sister was badly injured? What if she had broken her leg? William's heart thundered so harshly against his ribs that he felt as if it might burst from his chest. It seemed as though it was no time at all before he reached the ground floor and tore open the doors that led to the gardens.

The spring air whirled about him, warm and welcoming. "Hannah!" he boomed, his voice a harsh contrast with the serenity of the day.

Hannah, who had climbed to her feet, stared at him with wide eyes. A large streak of green stained the front of her white gown; William did not imagine that the stain would be easily vanquished. Beside Hannah, Hester stood and twisted her fingers into her skirts. Catherine stood behind them, looking like a wild woman with her hitched-up and mud-drenched skirts.

“What were you thinking?” he roared, gesturing towards Hannah.

“I was thinking that we would have some exercise!” Catherine exclaimed. “There is no harm in that!”

“No harm,” he scoffed. “No harm, except that my sister fell and hurt herself!”

“Children fall! Adults fall!” Catherine protested. “You can see that she is fine.”

“I am fine,” Hannah said meekly. “Truly.”

“This time!” he countered. “What about the next time you trip and fall? You could have been seriously injured!”

“By running in the garden?” Catherine asked, disbelief heavy in her voice. “You are being unreasonable.”

“Unreasonable?”

“I am really—” Hannah cut off abruptly, as William fixed her with a stern glare. She shrank back from him, looking appropriately chastened.

William fixed his gaze next on his wife, who crossed her arms. “You are being unreasonable,” she repeated. “It was just a minor mishap. It happens.”

“I do not have to answer to you. Find a more appropriate pastime to engage in.”

He turned on his heels and stormed away.

“I will talk to them,” Catherine murmured behind him.

William scowled, as he entered the house. She would talk to him, would she? His wife had become far too comfortable with him, and it seemed as though his punishment had done nothing. William clenched his jaw. If she was going to follow him, at least, they would argue away from his sisters’ prying eyes.

He slammed the door behind him, only to hear it wrenched open a moment later. “Do not walk away from me!” Catherine exclaimed. “We need to have a serious conversation about what just happened.”

“No, we do not,” he replied, making for the stairs. “I had presumed that you would have learned your place after that lesson, but it appears as if I was mistaken.”

“No, you are mistaken!” Catherine argued, following him. “Our agreement was that I could be myself when we were away from public, and the gardens are not public. You had no reason to be upset!”

William bristled, less bothered by her defiance than he was by her point being entirely rational. She was right. Catherine had been in private with his sisters, which meant that she was allowed to be herself. Seeing his sister fall had made him feel as though he was witnessing his mother once more in her final days. Hannah and Hester were the only people he cared about and the only family he had left.

Certainly, it was unlikely that Hannah would have been fatally injured by tripping in the garden, but the possibility still remained. Accidents happened. If something had happened to Hannah while she was running about in the gardens, he would have

never forgiven himself.

“Listen to me!” Catherine insisted.

He thundered up the stairs. She followed, her slippers a faint, shuffling whisper behind him.

“Hannah and Hester are children!” Catherine exclaimed. “They ought to be allowed to enjoy themselves! I have told you about all the fond memories I have of my childhood. Would you deprive your own sisters of those same memories?”

He bristled at the question, for it struck him more strongly than it should have. What did she know about being both guardian and brother to two young girls? Nothing! Yet she dared to presume that she knew more than he did about the matter!

“Do not ignore me!” she cried. “That will not resolve the matter!”

He reached his study and flung the door open. A few bold strides brought him to his desk. Catherine came behind him, of course, and crossed her arms. She fixed him with a stern gaze as he seated himself behind his desk. His mind was awl with the situation and his own reaction. With a sudden rush of guilt, he realized that he had reacted more strongly than he ought to have. Even if the behavior had been unladylike and worthy of chastisement, it had been unlikely that his sister would be seriously injured.

Catherine did not seem inclined to leave. He poured himself a glass of brandy and, after some consideration, poured her one, too. William pushed the glass to her and took his own, taking a small sip. The spirit was warm and invigorating, and he felt himself relax a little from the burn as he swallowed.

“We need to talk about this,” Catherine said, swiping the glass of brandy from the

desk. “You cannot just ignore me.”

He could not —should not—just ignore her. He realized that Catherine was right. William should not have reacted as angrily as he had, but he had been unable to control himself. Hannah was his sister .

A lump formed in his throat, and he forced another swallow of brandy down. He could not admit that Catherine was right, that her criticisms were valid. William’s only hope was to distract her in some way, so she would forget to argue the matter with him.

“I am not ignoring you,” he said, eyeing her sternly. “I am trying to decide how best to address your rather unwomanly show of defiance.”

Catherine lowered herself into the chair before him. “I see,” she said dryly.

“I might have been mistaken,” he said. “I think you do misbehave on purpose. You behave improperly because you want to be punished.”

Her face reddened. She tossed her head back and finished her glass of brandy in a single gulp. “Or maybe you want me to be punished,” she said tartly. “That is why you mention the matter.”

“Haughty as always,” he said, sighing. “You will not win, Catherine. I am the master of this household, and all the protests you make will not change that.”

The young woman placed her empty glass on his desk. Her eyes were fierce. “We shall see about that.”

“So we shall,” William replied, sipping his drink. “I hope you enjoy foregone conclusions, Catherine.”

She shook her head. “You say that because you have never met someone like me. Do not underestimate the strength of my will.”

“I do not.”

Catherine slowly rose. “I did not break our agreement,” she said. “It is unkind of you to chastise me for following the terms of our arrangement.”

William took a larger swallow of his brandy and grimaced. “I am beginning to suspect that you are the manner of woman who would argue with St. Peter at the gates of Heaven.”

“I might say the same of you.”

“Only because you insist on being contrary,” William said, standing.

They faced one another, so near that William could have reached out and touched her. Images flooded his mind of Catherine bent over that desk, her pretty brow furrowed as he administered correction.

He wondered if her rear might be sore following the previous night’s activities, and a thrill of delight shot through him. William hoped that she thought of him every time she sat, and that his lesson had left her sore and squirming in discomfort.

“I am not contrary,” she murmured.

“I do not have time to argue with you. I must work,” William said, gesturing toward the door.

“You do not want to concede that I am in the right.”

“Ridiculous,” he said, opening the door and offering her a curt bow. “Look after my sisters.”

“You wish for me to return to the same task that you just criticized me for doing,” she said.

He smiled thinly, and as she came close, he leaned near her face. “Find something ladylike to do,” he said, carefully enunciating each word. “Otherwise, I will be forced to correct your wayward behavior once again.”

Her eyes were hard and bright like steel. “We shall see.”

“Indeed, we shall.”

Catherine left in a whirl of stained skirts and likely soiled petticoats, and William closed the door after her. Once he was alone, he smiled to himself. Catherine was quite a spirited lady, even more so than he had initially anticipated. She would need far more correction if she was to be a proper duchess.

As William returned to his desk and lowered himself into his familiar chair, he found himself quietly anticipating that reality.

CHAPTER 18

Catherine's husband was proving himself to be entirely too masterful. She reflected on this as she spied him across the long expanse of grass. Since his intrusion the morning before, Catherine had elected not to run through the gardens with the sisters. Instead, they had gone to the lake with a small boat. Hester wanted to sketch the fish that swam beneath the surface of the lake.

He had probably come to tell her that boats were not ladylike. Catherine scoffed. The man probably believed everything except dancing and embroidery to be unladylike!

"Do you think he will want to join us?" Hannah asked, her voice filled with hushed excitement. "I have not been able to sketch a male subject in some time."

Catherine clenched her jaw. She suspected that he had come to yell at them, and even if he had not, she would prefer that he not join them. Doubtlessly, any potential enjoyment would be ruined by his presence, for it seemed to Catherine as though William's chief delight was in finding new errors in her.

He tipped his hat to them. "Good evening, my wife and sweet sisters."

"Good evening," Catherine said, making certain that her tone expressed the depths of displeasure she felt at his presence.

William grinned. A more generous person might believe that he had not noticed her displeasure, but Catherine did not feel particularly gracious toward him at the moment. She had an inkling that he enjoyed being unwanted and sought to torment

her with his presence.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Taking a boat,” Catherine replied. “I hope that is not too dangerous for us?”

“It is not,” he said, “as long as you have a man to accompany you. I shall do quite nicely.”

Heat washed over Catherine’s face. “Jonathan has agreed to accompany us.”

She gestured to the groundskeeper, an elderly man with wisps of white hair and brown eyes. He bowed stiffly at the acknowledgement.

“That is kind of him,” William said. “He can accompany Hannah and Hester, and I will accompany you. There are two boats, after all.”

She curled her hands into fists at her sides. “I am certain that you are too busy for such frivolities.”

“Oh, yes!” Hannah exclaimed, her face brightening. “Please, join us!”

Hester nodded vigorously. “It has been so long since we have been on the lake together.”

Catherine smiled tightly at William’s smug expression. The detestable man knew that she would not wish to upset Hester and Hannah, and it was obvious that he hoped to force her agreement.

“Very well,” Catherine said. “You should ride in the boat with Hester and Hannah, and I will join Jonathan.”

William's smile broadened. "The boat shall be much too full then."

That did not remotely make sense!

"Jonathan will accompany my sisters, and I shall get in a boat with you. If we row alongside one another, we shall all be together."

"An excellent plan, Your Grace," Jonathan said.

Catherine sent the man a silent glare. How dare he choose William's side so quickly and without even being asked to? Something like fury coursed through her veins. She might be the duchess of this estate, but it was obvious who held the real power.

"Fine," Catherine said through gritted teeth. "I suppose that is an excellent plan."

With a shriek of delight, Hester clambered into one of the boats. Hannah followed silently, but once she had joined her sister, the pair whispered excitedly together. Jonathan ambled over and climbed in with them. Then, he took the oars and pushed against the bank until the boat bobbed into the water.

"Shall we?" William asked.

Catherine deliberately did not look at him. She could feel his pleasure at having gotten what he wanted, and if she argued—no matter how justified her fury—he would use it as an opportunity to tell her that she was not a proper lady.

She gathered her skirts in one hand and gingerly lowered herself into the boat, aware that William hovered nearby. If it was any other man, she might have found it endearing the way that he sought to catch her if she fell.

She managed to sit in the boat without issue, drawing herself up as primly as she

could. Maybe she was approaching this all wrong. If William desired a proper lady, maybe she ought to be the most proper lady who ever lived. She would see how well he liked her then!

William deftly seated himself beside her and pushed away from the bank. She had anticipated no issues with this, and indeed, there were none. The fact that William did not encounter difficulties nevertheless vexed her. He might have at least slipped or faltered a little.

“This is quite lovely,” William said, rowing the boat into the lake.

He stayed near his sisters, but not directly on top of them. Catherine spied Hannah gazing at her sketchbook, her pencil working furiously on the page. Hester’s book was open, but she had not yet drawn anything. Instead, she bent her head and peered into the water.

“Are you not going to tell your sister how dangerous it is to look out of the boat like that?” Catherine asked. “She might fall into the water.”

William grinned. “I very much doubt that. Thank you for your concern.”

Catherine clenched her jaw. Running in the garden was unsafe, but peering over the edge of a boat was not. Her husband’s definition of safe seemed to be whichever ideas were his own, and her ideas were all unsafe in contrast. It was entirely illogical! And how was she to argue with this man when he insisted on behaving in such an irrational manner?

William brought the boat to a halt, still maintaining some distance between his sisters. “What a splendid idea to go onto the lake today,” he said.

She swore he was being so cheerful just to spite her. Catherine forced a smile and

said nothing.

“What? I have just given you praise for your idea,” William said. “A proper lady would thank me for the compliment.”

“I will thank you for your compliments when you sincerely offer one,” Catherine said. “Any person can choose a suitable activity on a beautiful day. That is not something worth praising.”

“I see.” He sighed heavily. “What a shame! I endeavor to make peace with my wife, and she will not accept the proverbial olive branch.”

“For good reason,” she shot back. “Do you know that you are the most contradictory man I have ever had the displeasure of meeting?”

“Have you been in the company of enough men to know if they are contradictory or not?” William asked. “Given your lack of suitors, I am forced to wonder if you have spent much time in the company of men at all.”

“Have you forgotten that I have an elder brother?”

“No. However, your brother does not seem as though he cared to teach you anything about proper behavior. I do not believe he should count,” William said.

“That is precisely what I mean!” Catherine exclaimed. “You make rules about everything, until they no longer suit you. Then, you simply change them! You tell me that one act does not befit a lady and approve of an equally unacceptable act! You declare that I do not know many gentlemen, and when I disapprove that notion, you change your definition of gentleman !”

William arched an eyebrow. “I have not the faintest idea what you mean.”

“You do know what I mean!” she argued.

“I do not.”

Catherine crossed her arms and looked askance. “I suppose this is your new strategy for making me a proper lady ? You intend to argue until I relinquish the fight?”

“Yes, that is it,” he said sarcastically. “You have found me out, my sweet.”

Catherine inwardly bristled. She did not need his empty endearments, which she was certain held no real fondness for her. For a man who had fought so hard for a wife, she believed that he might detest her. At least, that was?—

That was what she wanted to believe. Catherine could not quite say that it was entirely true. He did not detest her; at times, he seemed as though he quite enjoyed her company. It was only that he wanted her to be someone else, would prefer her a different way than she was.

What an ill-matched pair they were!

“I thought you would be pleased to see me,” William continued.

“Pleased?”

“Indeed. You had requested that I spend more time in my sisters’ company, and I have done so. Not all men heed the counsel of their wives as I have.”

Catherine clenched her jaw and refused to look at him. He only heeded her counsel if it might give him the pleasure of upsetting her! And that ought not even be defined as heeding counsel . It was more like he was twisting her own words and actions to suit his own ends.

“Indeed, I would argue that I am an exemplary husband because I am so willing to listen to you,” he said. “You should be delighted that you have wed such a wonderful man.”

Wonderful ! As if she had been given any real choice in the matter! It was either marriage to her or Dorothy, and that was hardly a choice at all. At least, Dorothy had not wed this man, though. Catherine had spared her sister any frustration at having to handle this man and being subjected to his whims and arguments.

But the amorous encounters were...unexpectedly pleasant. Heat flooded her face, and she hoped that William did not notice the way that her cheeks assuredly pinkened when she recalled their most recent encounter. She was certain that proper ladies did not find pleasure whilst being cast over their husbands' knees and chastised soundly.

William heaved a long-suffering sigh. “Meanwhile, I am being forced to handle a wife who acts as though she detests being a lady. That is a great pity.”

“Perhaps, that is the only woman you deserve,” she said dryly. “You are trying to vex me, so I lash out. Then, you can criticize me for it.”

He grinned. “You believe that I would do such a thing?”

“I know you would.”

William shook his head in mock dismay. “I am wounded that you have such a low opinion of me,” he said. “What have I done to gain your ire?”

“You came to my brother's estate and demanded that my sister or I marry you,” Catherine said. “That is what you have done, and you well know it.”

“You volunteered, as I recall,” William replied. “If you want to discuss

contradictions, you need look no further than yourself. I asked for your sister, and you volunteered to be my bride with the full understanding of what that arrangement involved. Now, you want to act as if I have misled you in some manner.”

“I did not understand everything that you wanted,” Catherine argued, her gaze darting to the boat where Hester and Hannah were. Satisfied that the girls were distracted by one another’s company and would not overhear, she added, “I did not know what you meant by correction .”

“That should have been obvious.”

“It was not.”

William shrugged. “Then, you ought to blame your brother for not teaching you what to expect. Or perhaps, your sister. I have often held that women ought to have those conversations with one another.”

“I doubt most husbands are like you,” Catherine said.

Admittedly, her only experience with husbands came from her own father and from novels, usually written by ladies, about such things. Certainly, none of those had ever involved chastisement or amorous encounters. At most, stories would use some delightful euphemism about how the couple had made passing glad .

“You might be correct on that account,” he said. “Most husbands would not tolerate such a disrespectful wife. At least, I am willing to encourage your improvement.”

“How gracious.”

He smiled brightly, as if the compliment was genuine. “There is the gratitude that I was hoping for.”

“I am curious, though,” Catherine said suddenly. “What will you do when I become a proper wife and duchess? You will no longer have any means by which to occupy your time.”

“I am certain that I will find something.”

Catherine peered into the water, watching as fish darted about between the delicate purple-pink flowers of the lily pads. They were not particularly pretty fish, just brown and black spotted things. She tried to see why Hester loved them so much. Perhaps, it was the elegant way they moved in the water. They swayed about, their translucent fins wading effortlessly through the lake.

“And what will you find?” Catherine asked.

“Who can know? It will need to be quite a large task if it is to consume as much energy as you do.”

“It seems to me as though you spend little energy on me,” Catherine replied. “The papers in your study seem to receive most of your attention.”

“Those papers are the dukedom.”

Catherine removed her glove and let her fingers idly move through the water. It was cool to the touch, and the light reflected upon it as though it was a finely faceted jewel.

“Just think,” Catherine said, “about how much more time you could spend with those papers if you would leave tormenting me.”

“I have thought about it. I have decided that a new duchess requires that some initial time be invested, however, so I am content to neglect the papers for a little while.”

“I see.”

“I thought you might.”

“Women do not like being referred to as investments . I would assume you know that.”

William shook his head. He took the rows and moved their boat a little. Jonathan, the gardener, had moved Hester and Hannah further into the lake. Hester gasped in delight and pointed to something that she had found in the water.

“Nevertheless, women are investments,” William said. “That is why the ton places so much thought in who to wed. A wealthy wife might line one’s coffers more effectively than any property or cargo.”

For that, she found that she had no answer. While William’s words were true enough, Catherine did not want to concede that there was the matter of propriety . Ladies wished to believe that they were something more than investments, and proper gentlemen would behave as though they were.

“How would you feel if a man referred to your sisters as investments?” Catherine asked.

“I should call him an enterprising businessman,” William replied. “You must do your job well, so they may be acquired by an adept businessman, a clever man who can ensure that their every need is met, rather than some penniless charlatan.”

“What a romantic view you have of the world,” she murmured.

“I never claimed to have a romantic view. You cannot be disappointed in that, can you?” William asked. “You claim that I am always seeking fault in you, but I would

argue that treatment is well-deserved. It does seem as if you are always seeking fault with me, after all.”

“I do not have to seek for anything,” she replied. “Your nature is readily apparent to even the most casual observer.”

“Is that so?” he asked.

“As far as I can discern.”

“That only makes me wonder if you are a discerning woman,” William said. “Maybe I have hidden depths, and you have simply not cared to look for them.”

Catherine watched him for a long moment, contemplating that answer. She felt a little as though she ought to take offense, but the thought that William might have depths she had not previously discovered was an intriguing notion. What might they hold?

“With time, I suppose I may discover something of interest,” she said.

His eyes were bright with merriment. “Perhaps, you shall.”

CHAPTER 19

Catherine was frustrated with him. He might have temporarily achieved some measure of peace with her during the boat ride, but the moment that she was not forced into close quarters with him, his wife sought to avoid him.

When he found her in rooms or in corridors, she scowled and promptly fled. William had discovered that she could only be coaxed into good behavior if Hester and Hannah were about, for it seemed as though she did not wish to upset the girls.

It was vexing that she wished to avoid him, but at least, she liked the girls. Given the circumstances, that was more than he had dared hope for. William arrived at breakfast and eyed his sisters seated at the table. He saw how their faces brightened when they saw him.

“Good morning!” he greeted.

William’s eyes lighted next on Catherine’s scowling face, and his grin widened.

“My lovely wife,” William said. “You are looking especially luminous this morning.”

He thought that a rather clever turn of phrase, for Catherine’s face strongly resembled a storm cloud.

“My husband,” she said.

No compliment followed.

Predictable. William refused to let the lack of praise diminish his good mood. “I thought that I would join everyone for breakfast,” he said, “rather than hiding away in my study, as I often do.”

He took his place at the head of the table and smiled at Catherine as he took a piece of toast with orange marmalade. William savored the sweetness of the spread and grinned at his wife. Her face reddened. Catherine shoved a spoonful of eggs into her mouth; he might have described the motion as vindictive .

“What are you going to do for the rest of the morning?” Hannah asked.

“Her Grace said that we might visit the village soon,” Hester said. “Would you like to join us?”

“That sounds like a delightful pastime. I would be delighted to join you,” William said. “My beloved wife need only tell me the day and time that you are going.”

Catherine shoved more eggs into her mouth, followed quickly by a bite of toast. Next, she drank a generous portion of coffee. And another.

William wondered if she intended to spend the entire breakfast in icy silence. “I have not yet decided how I will spend the day,” he said, spearing a piece of roasted potato with his fork. “Perhaps, I might join you, my sisters.”

“I would like to spend some time reading,” Hannah said. “Maybe you would be willing to join us. You could read to us.”

He had not read to them in years. There was always too much for him to accomplish. The papers were endless, and some distant corner of the dukedom always seemed in danger of some new peril. “I would like that,” William said. “I do have some papers that I need to tend to this morning, but I am certain that I could make some time to

read to you.”

“We will have to decide on what we want you to read,” Hester said. “Oh, there are so many options!”

“Perhaps, he should read them all,” Catherine said. “Spend the entire day searching through the pages of books.”

“Only if you join me, my dear wife,” William replied. “Or did you assume that you would be elsewhere?”

“I have affairs of my own to attend to,” she said. “There is correspondence that needs answering, and I must speak to the housekeeper. As a duchess, I am also expected to maintain a certain amount of correspondence. I will need to speak to my siblings and the ladies of the ton.”

Somehow, William suspected such correspondence was not as urgent as Catherine made it seem.

“I am certain that you can tend to your correspondence, while we read,” William said.

“You are mistaken, my husband. I cannot concentrate on my correspondence if there is any sound at all,” Catherine said. “Although I would greatly enjoy listening to you read, I do not believe that would be possible.”

“That is unfortunate,” Hannah said, frowning. “I wish that you could join us.”

“As do I,” Hester murmured, taking a bite of her roast potatoes.

Catherine averted her gaze, her expression softening a little. “Perhaps, I may make a little time to listen to you read.”

“That is good of you,” William said.

She took a sip of her coffee and said nothing. William’s eyes lingered on her chest. Catherine’s gown was a soft lilac, the bodice decorated with tiny embroidered leaves and flowers. The cut was scandalously low, proudly displaying the tops of her full breasts. He ached to take her breasts in his hands, to weigh them in his palms, and draw her close.

As if she sensed him staring at her, Catherine’s cheeks pinkened. She ate another piece of toast, and William idly noted that she had quite an appetite for such a slender lady.

“I would like to read something about knights and ladies,” Hannah said, sighing dreamily. “Perhaps, something with Sir Gawain or Sir Lancelot.”

“Or Perceval!” Hester suggested. “I have always enjoyed reading about the Waste Forest.”

“I have never understood why it was called that,” Hannah said. “The stories always describe it as green and lively. There is nothing wasteful about it!”

“What do you like to read?” William asked Catherine.

“Novels,” she said. “I am especially fond of Miss Radcliffe.”

Somehow, he found himself unsurprised by that fact. Catherine did seem like the sort of woman who would delight in sensational literature. He wondered if she liked to imagine herself as such a heroine. Maybe she was writing the story in her head with their every conversation.

Perhaps, she was casting herself as the beautiful and imperiled heroine, wed to a

dangerous and wicked man. Catherine would spend her days and nights leaving no stone unturned until she had found all his secrets and brought them to light.

“I am not terribly familiar with Miss Radcliffe’s works,” William conceded. “I have only heard of her novels from others who have read them.”

“You ought to read her. You might find that you enjoy her writing.”

“So I might. Regrettably, I do not believe that we have any of Miss Radcliffe’s works on the estate.”

“Indeed, that is regrettable.”

“Perhaps, I might procure them for you,” William said.

“Perhaps, you might.”

Despite Catherine’s spoken agreement, it was obvious that she suspected they were merely exchanging witticisms. She did not anticipate him truly doing anything kind for her. He would have to show her differently. William wondered if unexpected kindness would earn him the same vexed looks as his argumentations.

“I have never read her works,” Hannah said. “I do admire lady novelists, though.”

Hester wrinkled her nose. “I find most of them to be quite silly.”

“That is because you prefer to read about more scientific works,” Hannah said. “It has nothing to do with the lady writers themselves.”

“I find that lady writers understand the emotions of ladies far better than the male writers do,” Catherine said. “Women possess such delicate dispositions that a man

cannot do them justice.”

He caught the gleam of a challenge in her eye. Did she have the same disposition that she claimed? It was difficult to believe that there was anything delicate about this woman, and it seemed as though she delighted in being different from the proper ladies.

“But the physicians are all men,” Hester said thoughtfully. “They must understand women, mustn’t they?”

“They try,” Catherine said, shaking her head in mock dismay.

“Perhaps, we ought to make you a physician for ladies,” William said. “Since your understanding of them is so refined.”

“That is not an unsound notion,” Catherine replied, smiling thinly. “I could found a school to educate lady physicians, who would work specifically to cure ladies’ afflictions.”

“Or maybe you could simply tell men about the nature of your afflictions, so they might be better able to aid you, my wife,” William said.

She took a sip of her coffee and cast him an assessing look over the gold rim of the porcelain cup. “Why would I do that? The more men know about women, the more weapons they would have to wield against us. It is for the best that they are always a little uneasy about their places in the world.”

“Is that how you justify your own behavior?” William asked.

If so, her efforts were in vain. William knew precisely where his place was in the world, and he had no intention of leaving his position. It was too enjoyable to bend

Catherine over his knee and instruct her in the intricacies of proper, wifely behaviors.

“I do not need to justify my behavior to anyone,” Catherine replied. “Such behavior is in my nature. Do you ask a cat to explain why she delights in tormenting mice? Or a bee why it likes to light on flowers?”

William finished his breakfast and considered her for a long moment. “The cat and the bee both know their place in the world,” he said. “In that manner, they are quite different from you.”

Catherine hummed. “I wonder if men are plagued by that same affliction.”

“Some of them.”

Footsteps echoed in the dining hall, and William turned his head. Geoffrey, the butler, stood at the entrance. He bowed stiffly. “Apologies for my interruption, Your Grace, but I have received a letter for you. Knowing of your fondness for receiving correspondence without delay, I thought it best to deliver this directly to you. It is from the Earl of Wyte.”

“Ah,” William said, beckoning for the letter.

“The Earl of Wyte?” Catherine asked.

“You have not had the pleasure?” William surmised. “He is our nearest neighbor. Wyte is a very influential man in certain circles, which I also happen to be involved in. It is very important to remain in his good graces.”

“I see.”

William undid the seal on the letter. It was Wyte’s familiar handwriting—thin and

spidery—and William quickly read the contents. He was too aware of the three faces in the room watching and waiting for his reaction.

“What is it?” Catherine asked. “What does he want?”

Predictable.

“Every year, Wyte hosts an extravagant masquerade ball. It is expected for him to send me an invitation,” William said. “This year, he has also requested that my lovely duchess accompany me.”

“Oh! That is unsurprising!” Hannah exclaimed. “I am certain that all the ton must wish to meet you. Do you already have gowns for the ball, or will new ones need to be made?”

“If so, we must consult with the modiste at once,” Hester said. “It is not long until the equinox. That is when Lord Wyte usually holds his ball.”

“Indeed, it is. You have a good mind for dates,” William said. “Nicely done.”

“I am certain that I have a gown which will suffice,” Catherine replied.

Certainly, Catherine’s gowns would be sufficient. However, William could not say if the duchess’s would be equally suitable. Wyte’s ball had already drawn quite near, and he doubted that he would have sufficient time to craft his wayward wife into a proper lady.

“We shall need to discuss this matter,” William said, giving her a pointed look.

Catherine’s chin lifted just a little, and defiance sparked in her eyes. It was the same look she had given him when he had tipped her over his knee and planted that first,

open-palmed slap upon her rear. William's trousers grew a little tighter, as he imagined a similar confrontation regarding the circumstances of Wyte's ball.

"So we shall," she said, sounding displeased with him.

William rose from the table. "No time like the present. Shall we discuss the matter in my bedchamber?"

"Of course."

She rose fluidly from her chair. For all that Catherine was an unrefined rebel, she maintained a lady's grace when she moved. Her eyes narrowed upon his face, and William grinned. He had a feeling that this confrontation would be enjoyable, indeed.

CHAPTER 20

As Catherine sat across from William, she reflected on the state of the room. There was a warm, masculine quality about his private sitting room, and when combined with William's pointed look over the breakfast table, it made her feel anxious. It was as if lightning traced along the path of her spine.

William poured two glasses of brandy and offered her one. Catherine took it from the desk and held it in her hand, swirling the spirit about and watching as the amber-brown liquid climbed the sides of the glass. "Am I to be lectured?" she asked. "Simply because you received an invitation? If you are so concerned about me embarrassing you, you need not even ask me to accompany you."

"No, that will not do," William said. "I am a newlywed man, and if I do not arrive with my wife, the gossip will be merciless."

"I see."

It was to be a lecture, then.

"I have been displeased with your behavior of late," he continued. "You find an opportunity to argue at every occasion, and even when you seek to avoid me, you manage to make me feel as though you are defying me. You huff and puff and glare. Such behavior does not suit a duchess."

Catherine inwardly bristled. "You provoke me."

“Sometimes. But often, you find reason to be provoked. The most innocuous statement might send you into a fury.”

Catherine could not honestly argue with that. She took a small sip of brandy and nearly coughed at how much the spirit burned her throat.

“A duchess,” William continued, “should not react to displeasures. Even when she is ignored or dismissed, she must maintain a graceful disposition and not play childish games.”

But he seemed to be playing a game of his own. Catherine sipped the brandy and said nothing still. She did not expect William to admit to his own games, for he seemed to believe that he was capable of doing whatsoever he pleased. It was only women who were told to always be proper.

“Remove your clothing,” he said.

She started and stared at him in disbelief. That familiar heat rose to her face. “Excuse me?”

“I know that you heard me,” he said smoothly. “I asked you to remove your clothes, and I expect you to do so. I do not like repeating myself, wife.”

She set her brandy aside and stood, conscious of his eyes on her. William leaned back against the cushions of his loveseat, fixing her with an imperious expression. Catherine’s toes curled in her slippers as she undid the fastenings of her gown and laid the garment over her chair.

William took an idle sip of his brandy and watched her with narrowed eyes. She unlaced her stays, fingers fumbling with the cords that held them together.

Catherine could not have said if it was anxiety or anticipation that caused her clumsiness, but at last, she had removed them. Next, she removed her petticoats and at last her chemise. Her core pulsed with need, arousal forming within her at even the smallest hint that there might be something intimate in nature to follow.

“Nicely done,” William said. “It seems that you can obey.”

Heat rushed to her face. Catherine could not decide what to do with her hands, so she kept them at her sides. Her fingers twitched as she tried to decide if she ought to cover between her thighs or her breasts with their hard, pert nipples. Or should she cover anything at all? William had already seen everything that she had to offer, but Catherine still felt as though being naked before him was...

It was exhilarating and terrifying all at once. She dug her nails into the palms of her hands. “I do not have to obey you in private. I can be myself in private. Remember?”

William rose fluidly and set his brandy aside. “Your wedding vow says otherwise.”

She scowled at him and wondered how long he was going to mention the wedding vow to justify his behavior. “Everyone knows that wedding vows are traditional,” Catherine said. “The words are less important than the spirit of the vows.”

“You are sounding once more like a solicitor, and I do not like that,” William said. “Stand still. I am going to train you to be a proper duchess.”

Her breath caught in her throat. Her impulse to argue warred with her curiosity and her deep-seated need to feel his hands on her and his manhood sheathed inside her.

William touched her upper back, and Catherine jolted in surprise. “Now, my good girl,” he said. “You must remain still no matter what I do. This will teach you restraint.”

“I see,” she said.

Catherine straightened her spine and squared her shoulders. Remaining still seemed simple enough in principle, but already, her breath had quickened. Her muscles were all tight with anticipation of what might come. William trailed a single finger down the length of her spine, and although Catherine remained still, her body wanted to shiver at the small touch. She ached to press against him, for he touched her so lightly. It was as if his touches were a butterfly flitting about a flower.

“I know it is hard,” he murmured against her ear. “I know that it goes against your nature to be so still, but I would not ask this of you if I did not think you could do it.”

Her toes curled. Catherine took a deep breath, trying to steady herself. She imagined that she was a woman carved from marble, a woman who would remain still and silent no matter what happened to her.

“Close your eyes,” William said.

She did.

“Very good,” he murmured. “You are so good at being obedient when you want to be.”

William traced a line from one of her shoulders to the other. He moved his fingertips over her collarbone and her throat, down her arms and up her ribs. Catherine clenched her jaw, as the heat between her thighs grew. She must remain still, as he had asked. She wanted to remain still. It was a challenge, and Catherine was determined to win.

With a pulse of need, Catherine realized that a small part of her also wanted to be his proper duchess, his good girl who could endure anything. Abruptly, pain surged through her nipple, as William pinched her there and rolled the pink bud between his

fingers. Her eyes snapped open, and a ragged groan tore from her throat.

William clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. "I said be still ."

He slapped her rear, and she jolted forward with a rather uncomely squeak. A light stinging spread through her right buttock, and she fought back the urge to reach behind her and caress the place where he had struck.

"Be still and silent," he said. "If you do not obey me, I shall correct you."

"You are unkind, sir."

Another slap. Catherine clenched her buttocks and stifled a groan. William's fingers rolled her other nipple, and a rush of liquid trickled between her thighs. Her breath quickened, and sweat gathered beneath her breasts. Still, she fought to remain still.

His hands caressed over the marks left by his corrections and down her thighs. William's fingertips swept through the proof of her arousal, and Catherine's knees felt weak.

Be still. Be still. Be still.

He approached her from behind and pressed against her, so his hard manhood bulged against the small of her back. He cupped her breasts and kneaded them between his hands. Catherine's hips bucked, and she realized her error too late.

William rewarded the motion with two quick slaps, one on each buttock. Then, his hands returned to her breasts. His lips pressed against her throat. "Be my good duchess," he murmured. "I know that you can do what I am asking of you. Be still and let me do as I please."

She forced down the lump that rose in her throat. Catherine's pulse raced, increasing in tempo with every ministrations. Her center ached madly, pulsing and dripping with need. She ached to rub herself and soothe the growing urge, but she could not. William fondled her breasts, his touches very gently. Without warning, he pinched her nipples. Catherine bit back a groan as the twin points of painful pleasure grew.

William continued pinching and rolling her nipples between his fingers, and Catherine's need grew so great that her eyes burned with unshed tears. His fingers drifted lower, and he ran them through the curls of hair between her thighs. William's hand drifted lower, and Catherine's breath quickened as he approached that one place where she wanted him to touch her the most.

He moved his hand away and slapped her thigh instead. Catherine arched her back. She whimpered with longing. Her thoughts were heady and incoherent with the weight of her desire. Catherine had the wild thought that she might have preferred it if he had instead slapped her center, and the thought of that sharp, stinging slap against the apex of her thighs sent another surge of arousal pulsing from inside her.

"You are not learning this lesson well," William said, sighing in mock disapproval. "I wonder if I ought to reward you for making the attempt, at least."

"Please," she breathed. "I cannot bear it much longer."

"You will," he said, chuckling.

Catherine's entire body trembled, and sweat pooled at the small of her back. She was so very hot, the need inside her like an inferno. By the time William's torment ended, Catherine was panting for air.

He stepped away, and she heard his heavy footsteps cross the floor. The scrape of a chair followed next. "Come," William said.

On trembling legs, Catherine did as he asked. She was far too gone with desire to even consider defiance.

“Sit,” he said.

She did, and he gazed at her with a dark expression. A shiver of delight coursed through her.

“Spread your legs.”

Her breath hitched, and she spread her legs apart. Catherine’s core pulsed, and her blood roared in her ears. She was so exposed to him and anyone else who might happen into the bedchamber.

“Wider,” he said.

Catherine tilted her hips forward, vying for a more comfortable position. She spread her thighs so far apart that it nearly hurt, and William grinned victoriously. “Your task is not to make a sound,” he said. “If you can manage that, I will reward you.”

She wanted to ask how, but because he had bid her to be silent, she only nodded. William knelt before her and placed his hands on her thighs, his thumbs caressing her bare skin. Catherine’s breath came in uneven gasps for air. He could see her wetness glistening on her thighs.

“Close your eyes. I did not say that you could open them.”

She did, dread and desire mingling within her. Catherine felt something wet press against her core, and a gasp ripped from her throat. It was his tongue !

“Quiet,” he reminded her, his breath warm against the coils of hair between her legs.

She clenched the arms of the chair so hard that her knuckles hurt. William's tongue flicked once more against her center, and her inner walls clenched. He drew his tongue over her pearl and down between her lower lips. Catherine's hips bucked, and her legs quivered. She clenched her jaw tightly and furrowed her brow, trying not to cry out.

Her muscles all became tense, and her release coiled inside her. The need grew greater and greater until she felt that she could endure it no longer. Catherine felt as though she must break if she was forced to remain silent for just another second. William's tongue on her thighs and the stinging ache across her buttocks and the dull pain of her nipples all became too much.

"Oh, William!" she cried out, as her orgasm crashed into her.

White light obliterated her vision, and she shattered with the wave of pleasure. It lasted for only an instant, but it felt to Catherine as though she had left her own body. She remained, damp with sweat, panting in the chair.

"You did mostly well," William said. "Until the very end."

She opened her eyes, and he grinned at her, looking entirely too satisfied with himself. Catherine's mind raced as she desperately tried to find some clever retort. Her body and mind were so spent that she could find nothing, though.

"Stand."

Catherine rose on trembling legs, and William pulled her into his arms. Her body felt so sensitive and exhilarated that the fabric of his waistcoat and jacket felt rough against her. "You seem tired. Perhaps, a brief respite?"

"Yes," she breathed, finding her voice at last.

In a single, fluid motion, he swept her off her feet. Catherine gasped at the sudden movement, and he only grinned. “Let us take a rest, my dearest wife, and once you are recovered, I think I shall make use of you for my own pleasure.”

Catherine shivered. “You have such a way with words,” she murmured, as the tiredness seeped into her.

William carried her to bed and laid her upon the bedlinens. She gasped for air, her muscles relaxed, and her eyelids fluttered. Catherine’s final thought was that she was—most certainly—a devoted student, if nothing else.

CHAPTER 21

William wondered what his friend Hamilton might have said about the matter. Although he was quite certain that Catherine was not yet the proper duchess that he needed her to be, it did strike William as though the situation was a little odd. Perhaps, even unreasonable. It was not as if Catherine did not know how to be a lady, after all. She simply did not behave as though she ought to. However, she was still a lady and a woman; she was not a child who needed someone to guide her through everything.

Nevertheless, William had thought it best to try attending some other occasion before going to Wyte's ball. Lady Beckingworth's garden party seemed as though it would be the perfect opportunity for Catherine to make her appearance before the ton. It was certain to be a more intimate affair than the ball and less well attended, and William knew that he could depend on Hamilton to smooth over any scandals that Catherine might inadvertently cause.

"You look very dashing today, Your Grace," said Edward, his valet. "If I may say so myself."

William said nothing. He looked as he always did. There was nothing particularly special about his appearance, and little vexed William more than when his servants turned into simpering sycophants in an effort to please him.

"I shall see if Her Grace is ready," he said brusquely.

Edward bowed and hastened away. At least, he had a good head for being a valet. He

did not try to befriend William, as some of his previous valets had.

William left his bedchamber and made to enter the duchess's chambers. He turned the knob to the door and opened it. At once, a peal of laughter sliced through the air. William halted, for he recognized that the joyous, feminine sound must certainly be his wife's laugh. Never before had he heard her express such merriment. What was the source of such joy? It certainly could not be dressing for the garden party.

He paused, straining to hear.

"I do not believe that I have ever been told I looked like a daffodil before." Catherine's voice drifted faintly through her bedchamber and the small parlor, which the duchess's chambers opened into. "I must thank you for the creative compliment. In truth, I am rather fond of the color jonquil, but it is one that I seldom wear."

"Why not?" Hannah asked. "It looks lovely on you."

"I have never thought that it suited me," Catherine said. "It was my sister Dorothy who suggested this color to me, and because she has such good knowledge of fashion, I agreed to buy this gown. However, I have not worn it even once."

"It looks beautiful on you," Hester agreed. "You look like a goddess of spring. Oh! Or maybe one of the Three Graces!"

Catherine's laughter rang again, as clear as a bell. "I would never say anything so extravagant about myself!"

"Then, it is fortunate that you have us to say such things for you!" Hannah said. "Hester is right. You do look so very lovely today. I think you should wear the yellow gown more often."

William smiled. For all that Catherine delighted in his sisters' company, they seemed to appreciate her just as well.

"You seem to love your family very much," Hester said. "You always sound so wistful when you speak of them. Do you miss your brother and sisters?"

Catherine had not been separated from them for very long, but Hester was, as always, very astute in her observations. His wife always spoke of her family with such a heavy longing that a kinder man might have felt guilty for taking her away from them.

"I do," Catherine replied. "They are—were—my entire world. I had thought that I might simply live together with Elias and my sister Dorothy forever."

William shook his head at the absurdity of that idea. He pressed his fingertips against the door, prepared to reveal himself. Then, Hannah cleared her throat. "Is your brother stern like ours is?"

The question gave him pause, and he furrowed his brow. Stern ? His sisters had never described him as stern before, and he found himself wondering if this was how Hannah had always felt about him. And did Hester feel similarly?

"He is not," Catherine. "Elias cares about appearances, but he is also quite content to let my sisters and me live as we please."

"Any way you please?" Hannah asked, her tone so hushed that William barely heard it.

He grimaced and tried to decide if it might be wise to interrupt before Catherine managed to turn his own sisters against his authority. William had told her she might be herself in private, though, and this was who she was. Catherine was a lovely,

young lady who cared for her family and for his sisters. A lump rose in his throat as he considered his own relationship to Hannah and Hester.

They called him stern . And although William loved his sisters, he had not spent much time with them before Catherine's arrival. It was really only his wife's insistence that had him venturing from his study more to spend time with them.

"Any way that you please?" Hester asked wonderingly.

"Indeed. Elias is a good man."

"I do not think His Grace would let us live however we wished to," Hannah said. "He wants us to be proper ladies."

"Yes," Hester said.

William inhaled sharply. His sisters did not sound distraught exactly, but their voices were unhappy. Solemn. A knot twisted in his chest.

"Your brother has good reasons for what he does. While he could be a little less stern, he is only trying to be a good brother and ensure that the both of you have happy lives with good husbands, who can see to your every need."

One of them sighed. "I suppose," Hester said. "But I do not want to think about husbands at such a young age. Can that not wait until I am older?"

"Mostly, it will."

William moved away from the door. His sisters were unhappy, and he did not know how to face that unsettling realization. Since their mother's death, William had thought his sisters were content. They had been growing up into proper girls, and he

had felt that a feminine presence was needed only to give them a little polish. Now, he knew differently.

How long had they been dissatisfied with their lots in life? William took a steady breath of air and wandered slowly away from the door. Was it Catherine's influence that had caused such dissatisfaction from his sisters, or was it something that had been boiling inside them for years and escaped his notice? William sighed and raked a hand through his hair, his thoughts awhirl with the possibilities.

"Are you ready to depart, Your Grace?" Geoffrey asked.

William, who had not noticed that the butler stood scarcely a few feet away, jolted at the unexpected address. "I am," he replied, "but Her Grace is not. I will resume work in my study. Send for me once she has resolved to leave."

The butler furrowed his brow, confusion apparent on his face, but he said nothing. William swept past the man and bounded up the stairs to his study. He entered the room and closed the door behind him. William stormed to his desk and fell into his usual chair. With a heaving sigh, he tipped his head back and stared at the ceiling.

What was he to do? His sisters were unhappy with him for trying to raise them to be proper ladies, and he had no idea what to do with that notion. Although William loved his sisters, he could not change the ways of the ton.

He could not allow them to run wild and free like Catherine, or they would find themselves unwed and unsafe in a world of wolves set to take advantage of them. But he also did not want them to be unhappy. Could he make his sisters find happiness somehow, or was that feeling something that would bloom with time?

There was a light knock on his study door. William tipped his chin down against his collarbone. "Enter!"

The door opened, and Catherine peered inside at him. His breath caught in his throat as his eyes traced along the delicate curves of her slender form.

In the yellow gown, Catherine did look like a daffodil. She was as delicate and beautiful as any lady of the ton, and he had the passing thought that abandoning the garden party and taking her over his desk might be a far more enjoyable way to pass the evening.

“Are you ready to go?” she asked.

“I have been for some time,” he replied. “I was beginning to wonder if you might have decided to spend the entire day arranging your hair.”

Catherine gently patted her curls. “Rose did splendid work this morning. There is no need to insult her skills as a lady’s maid,” she said. “And she most certainly did not take all day, only the amount of time that was needed. Perhaps, you do not realize how long it takes for a duchess to make herself presentable.”

His lips twitched in amusement. Despite his desire to argue, Catherine did make a compelling point. William had not lived with a duchess for some time, and he had not the faintest idea how long it might take a woman to make herself appear presentable.

“I suppose I cannot argue when the results are so comely,” he said.

William considered asking about the overheard conversation with his sisters, but he could find no way of doing so without admitting that he had been lingering outside the lady’s door and listening in on her personal conversations. He did not wish to do that, for it was a most ungentlemanly thing that he had done. Catherine would be merciless if she knew.

“I am certain that you could devise an argument if you wished to,” Catherine said.

“You clearly delight in being the most contrary of men.”

“You also delight in being contrary, although I have hopes that you will exhibit some restraint today,” William said, rising from his chair. “This garden party will be the first event where I introduce you as my duchess, and I need you to look the part.”

She did look the part, but William could not say the same for her attitude. Still, what was the worst that she might do? He considered the question for a brief moment but quickly decided that the possibilities were too horrifying to contemplate at the moment. This woman had chased after a gaggle of ducks, after all. Who was to know what she might do if she encountered a clustering of song birds in the garden?

Horror surged through him as he imagined Catherine’s lovely yellow gown stained with mud and grass and her curls all askew.

“I will look the part,” she said. “I shall be a perfect duchess in public, as promised. You have no need to doubt me, Your Grace.”

She curtsied elegantly, as if to prove her point. If William was a softer man, he might have been thoroughly convinced by the display of propriety. But he was neither soft nor foolish. A fierce feeling of foreboding overcame him.

Even if Catherine did her best to be the perfect duchess, something was bound to go terribly wrong.

CHAPTER 22

Catherine was determined to prove that she could be the duchess William wanted, although she was uncertain that he had given her much of a reason for why she ought to be. If she was not the perfect duchess, he would correct her behavior, but Catherine had grown to find that experience inappropriately pleasant.

As she lighted from the coach, she was aware of William's eyes on her. Her buttocks still tingled faintly from his attentions the day before, and the sensation made her feel delightfully daring.

Lady Beckingworth's gardens were large and extravagant, boasting a wide variety of colored flowers and sweeping grasses that partially covered the stone path that wove through the gardens. The lady herself was a woman well into middle age. She was quite plump and clad in a blossom-pink gown that did not quite suit her form, but she seemed happy with herself. Her smiles were infectious, and when Lady Beckingworth's green eyes landed on Catherine, a warm feeling swept over her.

"Oh! This is the lovely duchess!" Lady Beckingworth exclaimed. "You are so beautiful, Your Grace!"

William nodded curtly. "Yes, she is the Duke of Reeds's sister."

"I know him well," Lady Beckingworth said, "as well as his predecessor. God rest his soul."

Catherine curtsied politely. "Regrettably, my brother has never spoken of you. I can

scarcely believe why he would wish to hide such a delightful lady from me! What was he thinking?"

Lady Beckingworth laughed. "Who knows? I find that men are regrettably forgetful when it comes to introducing ladies to one another. Perhaps, they fear we shall become too powerful if we form alliances."

Catherine shot a swift look towards William, who watched her with a sharp intensity. He seemed to anticipate her failing this interaction somehow. For the first time, Catherine felt herself soften a little at the sight of his concern. She had spent much of her admittedly short marriage being frustrated with William's refusal to recognize that she was strong and independent and did not need a man to tell her how to be a proper duchess.

Seeing him look so obviously concerned made her realize that he cared deeply about appearances. She was unsure precisely why, but she sensed that it was not merely wanting to meet the usual expectations of the ton that drove him. There was something more to his motivations. This was important to him, so she would be perfect. For him.

"I am certain that is the case," Catherine said, lowering her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "It will displease His Grace deeply, but I would be honored if you would introduce me to some of your female acquaintances. We might forge more alliances, all the better to vex my dear husband."

Lady Beckingworth laughed behind her fan. She snapped it closed and looked at Catherine with eyes that glittered with mirth. "Oh, I like you," she said. "I think we will get along famously. Your Grace, might I borrow your lovely wife and introduce her to my ladies?"

William chuckled. If one did not know him well, Catherine suspected he would have

appeared confident and composed, but she caught the minute twitch of his jaw. He wanted to protest.

“It would be nice to meet some of the ladies in the country,” Catherine said, looking aside at her husband. “Regrettably, we do not have many acquaintances in common, my lord.”

“That is true,” William said, gesturing for the ladies to go ahead. “Please, enjoy yourselves.”

“Follow me,” Lady Beckingworth said.

Catherine readily fell into step beside the lady, as they made slow progress through the garden. Dimly, Catherine was aware of William coming behind them. She resisted the urge to turn around and cast a glance at his expression. A duchess was supposed to be composed. She had learned that lesson well.

“It is unfortunate that I was unable to attend your wedding,” Lady Beckingworth said. “I am certain that it was a lovely ceremony.”

“It was very small and intimate,” Catherine said, ensuring that her tone was just the right amount of apologetic. “We wished to marry with all haste, so a larger ceremony was impossible.”

“I see,” Lady Beckingworth replied. “I must say that I am surprised to hear that His Grace wanted to marry so quickly.”

“Oh?”

Lady Beckingworth’s eyes darted about, and a mischievous expression crossed her face. “I do not wish for you to be offended,” she said quietly, “but I had thought that

your husband would never wed.”

“I am surprised to hear that,” Catherine said.

“Indeed,” Lady Beckingworth said. “Some of the ladies had wagers about when or if he might wed.”

Catherine grinned. “I see. Did you win anything?”

“Regrettably, no. Ah—Mrs. Abernathy!” Lady Beckingworth exclaimed. “Please, come and meet Her Grace, the Duchess of Sarsen.”

An elegant woman with red hair twisted into a sleek chignon said a few parting words with her male companion before approaching Catherine and Lady Beckingworth. Mrs. Abernathy wore a pale green gown that glittered with tiny crystal beads, crafted into fanciful swirls and flowers. “A pleasure, Your Grace,” Mrs. Abernathy said, curtsying.

“Mrs. Abernathby is a close friend of the family,” Lady Beckingworth said. “She leads our little group of bluestockings when we are in the countryside. We meet monthly to discuss what books we are reading.”

“Bluestockings!” Catherine exclaimed. “How delightful! What manner of books do you read?”

“All manner of them,” Mrs. Abernathy said. “I am partial to Miss Radcliffe’s works myself, but my betrothed favors Greek and Latin texts. I will confess that he is slowly winning me to his side, so my reading has been remarkably varied of late.”

“Can you read Greek and Latin?” Catherine asked.

Mrs. Abernathy shook her head. "Of course not," she replied, gesturing to her companion, who seemed involved in an in-depth conversation with another gentleman. "My betrothed is very scholarly minded, so he translates the texts for me."

"I find the notion to be very romantic," Lady Beckingworth said.

"Yes," Mrs. Abernathy said, sighing happily. "He is quite different from my late husband."

Catherine noted that Mrs. Abernathy did not sound particularly upset about her late husband's death. She wondered if Mrs. Abernathy had married first for the advantage, second for the love-match. That was the strategic way for a lady to wed.

"Ah, I should have asked. How is marriage suiting you, Your Grace?" Lady Beckingworth asked, shooting a sly glance toward William.

Catherine's husband had found his own acquaintances. He and a few other lords stood some small distance away, conversing together beneath a tree. Even though William was being regaled by an enthusiastic, dark-haired companion, Catherine sensed that his eyes remained on her.

How did marriage suit her? Catherine could not honestly say. It was complicated. She did not dislike it. Even though her husband still remained a stranger in many ways, there were certainly some enjoyable aspects of matrimony. If Catherine had not resolved to be the perfect duchess, she might have been able to find some subtle way of asking the ladies if they also found such pursuits to be pleasurable.

"I think it suits me well," Catherine said. "His Grace and I complement one another well, and I love the girls."

"That is wonderful," Mrs. Abernathy said, her face soft. "The young ladies have been

too long without a feminine presence in their lives.”

“Indeed,” Lady Beckingworth said.

“My betrothed appears impatient,” Mrs. Abernathy said fondly. “He keeps casting glances towards us. Shall I invite him to join us?”

“I think you ought to let the poor man suffer for a little longer,” Lady Beckingworth said, grinning.

Catherine chuckled. “How unkind!”

“A man ought to learn patience,” Lady Beckingworth said, clearly amused. “Shall I introduce you to more of my friends, Your Grace?”

“That would be lovely.”

Catherine braced herself for all the encounters. She had performed well thus far, and it was the thought of performance which Catherine used to keep her strong. She would just pretend that she was an actress playing a role in a French theater. During the garden party, she would be playing the role of the perfect duchess, and once the party was at an end, she would be herself once again.

Lady Beckingworth was a gracious hostess who introduced Catherine to a dizzying array of lords and ladies. Catherine made certain to smile at them all. She complimented the ladies’ gowns and feigned interest when the lords briefly recounted their favorite diversions. After what felt like an eternity of introductions, she joined William once more at the white pavilion, which had been pitched in the center of the gardens.

“You seem to be gathering a whole host of admirers,” William said, seating himself

beside her.

They were at a large table, laden with food and drink. Catherine had already eaten a few delicate pastries and now sipped a glass of lemonade, as she surveyed the gardens and listened to the idle talk of the lords and ladies around her.

A light breeze blew, sending the fronds of a weeping willow sweeping across the path; the fronds were near enough that Catherine could have reached out and touched them. Her mind conjured a delightful image of weaving beneath the sweeping fronds of the willow tree and pressing herself against the trunk, while William seized her hips and pulled her close.

“You seem to have already gathered admirers of your own,” Catherine said. “I am working quite hard to find as many as you have.”

“You appear to be succeeding,” William said, eyes narrowing. “I wonder if I ought to be concerned, given your talk of alliances with Lady Beckingworth.”

“If you are concerned, it is a mess of your own making,” Catherine replied, taking a dainty sip of her lemonade. “You were the one who invited me to the garden party. If you had not, I might never have made Lady Beckingworth’s acquaintance.”

“It would have appeared strange if I did not arrive with my wife,” William said, “especially being a newlywed man.”

“True.” Catherine glanced about to see if anyone might be eavesdropping on them, but there was no evidence to the contrary. “Are you pleased? I think I am doing quite well.”

“I do not think it befits a duchess to brag about how great she is doing,” William said, his lips twitching in amusement. “But you have performed very admirably. I am

proud of you.”

Catherine’s face warmed with pleasure. “Thank you, Your Grace.”

“You are very welcome. The praise is well-earned.” William paused and seemed to deliberate on something for a few moments. Then, he pressed his lips close to her ear. “I will be certain to reward you handsomely for your good behavior.”

She shivered instinctively at the promise of a future amorous encounter. Catherine had, thus far, only seen his corrections. What might it be like to be rewarded by him?

Catherine let out a low breath of air. “I shall be ensure that you keep your word. If you do not, I shall never forgive you.”

His eyes crinkled in amusement. “And I shall keep you to your word. If you continue to do this well, you have no need to fear.”

“There is our new friend!” exclaimed Lady Beckingworth, gesturing to Catherine.

Catherine smiled. “I will keep my word,” she said, climbing to her feet and waving to Lady Beckingworth. “Join us!”

Lady Beckingworth spoke to yet another lady, and they both crossed the path to join Catherine and William. Catherine straightened her spine and composed herself. She pretended that she was marble, smiling and unmovable.

It was time to play the role of the perfect duchess once again.

CHAPTER 23

Catherine had performed admirably at the garden party. By the time the party had drawn to a close, she had managed to accumulate a small crowd of lords and ladies about her. They had gazed at her as if her every word was of incomparable value, and they laughed at her little jests. William knew that he should have been pleased. Beyond pleased.

But William had not anticipated the dull, aching feeling inside his chest. It was accompanied by a litany of possessive thoughts. I want her to speak to me.

When Catherine had walked alongside Lady Beckingworth, William had clenched his jaw and thought about how much he would prefer that she walk beside him instead. And when Mrs. Abernathy's betrothed—a young and frustratingly handsome young man—had smiled and winked at Catherine, William had found himself filled with the sudden urge to punch that man.

William fought to bury those feelings deep as he and Catherine entered the foyer. He flexed his fingers at his sides, watching as Catherine untied her bonnet. His eyes swept over her form, which did look lovely in that gown. Everyone else had probably noticed that, too.

They had probably spoken about how beautiful and shapely his new duchess was.

“Well?” Catherine asked, grinning at him. “How did I do?”

He inclined his head. “You did well throughout the entire event. I will confess that I

am impressed.”

She beamed at him, and his heart seemed to skip a beat. It was late, and aside from Geoffrey, they were the only ones awake. He cupped Catherine’s face between his hands and kissed her deeply. Her body was warm and pliant, as she wrapped her arms around his neck and drew him close. As William kissed her, he inhaled Catherine’s sweet scent. She smelled of rose oil and lavender mixed with the many flowers in Lady Beckingworth’s garden.

He broke the kiss, and she stared at him with wide eyes. Catherine’s lips were swollen and slightly parted, and a little thrill rushed through him at how ready she looked to be ravished.

“Shall we go to the bedchamber?” he asked.

“Oh, yes!”

William put a hand between her shoulder blades and bent over, so he could sweep an arm beneath her knees. He lifted her up, and she gasped in delight. She was as light as feather, and he easily carried her up the stairs. Catherine was so warm and pleasant, so eager for him.

“Once we reach the room,” he said in a low voice, “I am going to tear that gown from you, and I am going to kiss every inch of you. I noticed how many men were gazing at you today.”

Catherine’s breath audibly hitched. “I do not know what you mean.”

“I do not believe that somehow, but regardless of whether you know or not, no other man will see you like I do.”

“No,” she agreed.

He quickened his pace, as best as he could with Catherine held in his arms. William knew her body well. He had already gazed at her so much and touched her so often. Once they reached his room, he nudged open the door with his foot. He crossed the sitting room and entered the bedchamber. William promptly deposited Catherine on the bed and seized the skirts of her gown.

He hitched them up past her thighs. Catherine lifted herself onto her knees, so he could pull her gown over her head. William untied her stays, working the laces so quickly with his fingers that they nearly tore. Catherine’s breasts heaved and strained, and his blood warmed with the sight. “So beautiful,” he murmured, placing a kiss on each breast.

He tore the stays from her and cupped her breasts. Catherine moaned and put her hands on his shoulders. William worked her breasts between his hands, enjoying their weight in his palms. His thumbs rubbed rough, quick circles over her nipples. They grew to hard peaks before his very eyes, and color rose to Catherine’s face.

“Oh, please!” she exclaimed.

“Whatever you want,” he growled.

He tore away her petticoats and chemise, and she was naked on her knees before him. With feverish need, William kissed her everywhere—her jaw, her throat, her breasts, her stomach. He worked a path down to her core, trailing hot kisses. Catherine groaned and dug her nails into his shoulders.

She writhed and bucked and twisted, like a woman out of control. He sensed the pleasure growing within her and marveled at how readily she reacted to his touch. William’s trousers grew tighter, his member growing hard at the sight of his wife,

entirely nude.

He flicked his thumb over her pearl, and she bucked, urging him to touch her there. “Please,” she said, tossing her head back. “Oh, please .”

William traced hard circles around her core before dipping his finger between her delicate folds. He found her already damp with desire. “Look at you,” he said. “You are always so very ready for me. What a good, attentive wife you are.”

Catherine groaned. “I will be the best wife in the world if you keep doing this.”

“I intend to,” he said.

He slipped a finger inside her, and Catherine’s inner walls clamped around the digit. She rocked her hips, bringing herself down hard on him. William grinned. He ceased his movements, but she quickened her pace. Catherine brought herself up and down on him, her thighs clenching as she sought to find her release.

William grinned, watching as her face grew as red as a rose. Her curls bounced around her face, as sweat began to dot her brow. “Oh, please! Please, I am so close!”

Perfect .

He withdrew his finger, and Catherine emitted a small, need-filled wail. She gazed at him with a dazed and desperate look. “ Please ,” she begged. “Please, I was so close.”

William slowly removed his jacket, while she gazed at him with wide eyes. He tossed the garment on the floor, followed by his waistcoat. Catherine gulped. William removed his shirt next, giving her a long moment to take in his appearance.

His manhood ached insistently, and William feared that he would spend in his

trousers if he did not sheath himself inside her. He unfastened his trousers, and his manhood sprang forth, already hard and nearly weeping.

“Is this what you need?” he asked. “My manhood in your tight passage.”

She squeezed her thighs together and nodded. William smiled and stroked himself, shivering as the pleasure began to curl in his abdomen.

“Yes, I want you inside me,” she said.

He quickened his strokes, groaning as the pleasure grew. Catherine inhaled sharply and watched him. William could tell that the pleasure was beginning to take hold of her, too. She could not remain still on the bed. Instead, she kept shifting on the bedlinens. Her hips and thighs bucked and quivered.

“Lay back,” William said, his voice throaty.

She hastened to obey, falling on her back against the bedlinens. Catherine spread her legs wide and lifted her hips, affording him a view of her wetness. He climbed onto the bed and held his member in one hand. William guided himself to her entrance. Catherine tensed and curled her fingers into the bedlinens as he pressed inside her.

“Take it all, my good duchess,” he purred. “You deserve this.”

William’s thighs trembled with the exertion of holding back, but he did not wish to hurt her. Instead, he grasped her thighs and worked himself in inch by inch. Catherine groaned and shifted her hips. Without warning she brought herself down on him, and he was entirely sheathed inside her. She gasped. Her thighs shook, and her inner walls pulsed madly.

Catherine tossed her head back and screamed. William grunted, as her waves of

pleasure crashed over him, too. As she achieved the little death , he thrust into her. He quickened his pace, and with a startled cry, Catherine worked hard to match him. She met him thrust for thrust. William clenched his jaw, as sweat gathered along his body. The bed creaked in time with his thrusts, and with a roar, he spilled his seed into her.

He withdrew with a lewd, wet sound and gazed at Catherine. Her face was flushed, and her hair was wild. Catherine's breasts shook with her ragged breaths, and sweat glistened along her soft, feminine body. He smiled in satisfaction. No one else would ever have this view of Catherine, utterly spent and under his mastery.

"Do you see what you have done to me?" William asked, straddling her waist. "You temptress."

He put his weight down on his forearms and took her right nipple between his lips. William flicked it with the tip of his tongue, and Catherine gasped. "Oh, you cannot lick me there !"

He drew his head back. "I have licked you in far more intimate places," he said, drawing a hand over her core.

Catherine's thighs clenched together. "You are...quite experienced at this," she said between pants of air.

"Soon, you will be quite experienced in this, too," William said. "And I will be the only one who sees this part of you."

She tossed an arm over her eyes. "Of course."

"It is my favorite part," he said, "seeing you so spent and disheveled in my bed. If I were not a duke, I would spend every hour of every day engaged in this amorous behavior with you."

Catherine laughed shakily. "I am unsure that I could bear that, my husband. You are as spirited as a stallion."

He cupped her breasts, content to play with her for a while longer. It seemed unbelievable that he had deprived himself of a wife for so long. Now, it was as if he could not have enough of a woman's body.

"Besides, I might grow bored if we did this every hour of every day," Catherine said.

"I doubt that. There are so many pleasures of the bedroom that I have not even shown you yet," William replied. "I could keep it interesting. We would only have to be a little...creative."

His mind was suddenly full of images of what else he might do with Catherine. He imagined taking her from behind and bent over the desk in his study. He thought of spiriting her away to darkened corners of ballrooms and secluded park benches and pleasuring her beneath her skirts.

Catherine lowered her arm and laughed a little. "I would like to ask for you to tell me about all your ideas, but I am unsure if I can manage any more stimulation this evening."

"Understandable," he said.

He rolled onto his back and gazed tenderly at her. She grinned at him. "I find it interesting," she said, "that this is one matter upon which we can both agree."

William laughed. "I suppose that is more than some married couples in the ton have."

Catherine propped herself up on one elbow. "I suppose so," she mused. "Although I have wondered of late if our exchanges are necessarily adversarial. You keep likening

me to your solicitor, and I have difficulty in believing that you do not derive some level of enjoyment from our exchanges.”

“I suspect that you feel similarly about my corrections,” William said. “You have not once complained.”

“I would not give you the satisfaction.”

He lowered his hand and dug his fingers into her left buttock. She shifted in the bed, as he caressed her skin. Catherine’s rear pinkened nicely with his slaps, but while he delighted in seeing that, he was a man who was well-aware of his own considerable strength. He took care never to strike her hard enough to leave marks that lasted for more than a couple hours.

“No,” William said. “Nevertheless, I am impressed with your strength of will.”

Catherine stifled a yawn behind her hand, and a wave of fondness swept over him. “Apologies, my husband.”

“The hour is late,” he said. “It is well past the time to retire. If you like, you are welcome to stay in my chamber.”

She nodded. There was a little shuffling, as they arranged the bedlinens and pulled the covers up over themselves. Catherine shifted towards him, and William pulled her into his arms. Their bodies fit together like two links in a chain, as if they were always meant to be together. He pressed his lips against her hair, indulging in the scent of rose oil.

William laid awake for a long time, well after Catherine had fallen into a deep sleep in his arms. She had not been the wife he had ever expected having. She was certainly not the duchess that he had imagined marrying. He had never imagined feeling any

tender feelings for her, and yet...

He could not deny that he held no small measure of affection for Catherine, his unconventional Duchess of Sarsen. She was nothing that he had ever wanted, but she seemed to be everything that he needed.

CHAPTER 24

“Y ou ought to tear yourself away from your desk and greet the day properly,” Catherine said, arms crossed as she confronted her husband.

It was approaching noon, and the man had yet to leave his study. This was not unusual behavior, but of late, William’s behavior had been much improved. It was Catherine’s duty as his wife to ensure that he did not return to his old habits.

William arched an eyebrow. “Really?” he asked. “I do not believe you have any reason to criticize me, for you rose only an hour ago yourself.”

Her face grew so hot and so quickly that Catherine suspected her face must be the color of the setting sun. She reflexively squeezed her thighs together. Catherine had awakened with a faint ache between her legs and with a pleasant sort of tiredness that pulled at her limbs. It had taken significantly more willpower than usual for her to leave the bed.

“I engaged in some rather vigorous exercise last night,” Catherine said. “If memory serves, that was your doing. You are responsible for my behavior this morning.”

“Well-reasoned,” William replied, eyes gleaming with dark mischief. “However, I am certain that you do not wish for me to spare you from future exercises. Do you?”

Catherine adopted a look of mock offense. “I am upset at the suggestion, sir, but I doubt that you could manage to refrain from such exercise either.”

“You might be right,” he conceded. “Now, what is it that you wish for me to do?”

Catherine clasped her hands behind her back and smiled. “As I am certain you have noticed, it is a beautiful day.”

He glanced at the window, seemingly having not noticed that it was a beautiful day. The sky was blue and devoid of clouds, filled with sunshine and a gentle breeze that sent ripples skipping over the surface of the lake. “So it is,” he said.

“Yes. Well. Hannah and Hester wish to play in the gardens. When we last did that, I recall you being quite upset with me. You said that it was dangerous.”

William folded his hands over his desk. “Are you here to ask for my permission? That does not sound like you. Who are you, and what have you done with my duchess?”

She laughed. “He jests! In truth, I had hoped that you might be willing to compromise. Perhaps, you would like to come and watch over us to ensure that we are safe.”

William’s face softened. He sighed and looked at his papers. Catherine took a step forward, curiously eyeing the documents. She balked a little when she saw the carefully written columns of numbers. Although she was quite good at arithmetic, she had never developed a strong liking for numbers.

“You are busy,” Catherine said. “I am sorry that I am always trying to take you away from your desk.”

“What an odd thing to say.”

“It is true,” Catherine said. “I am always coming to ask you to join us, and while I do

think that your presence benefits your sisters greatly, I have never really told you that I understand how difficult it is to manage the dukedom. It is no wonder that you are always so busy.”

“Yes, well...” William trailed off. “I would not envy anyone my position, but someone must do it. Our tenants are the lifeblood of our dukedom, and I must ensure that they have everything they need to live peaceful and prosperous lives.”

“An admirable goal,” Catherine said. “What do you think? Maybe you can join us for just a little while. That will leave the rest of the evening for you to work on your papers.”

William hummed and tapped his pen against the desk. “Very well,” he said, rising from his chair. “Let us enjoy the garden.”

Catherine went onto the balls of her feet and placed a quick kiss on his cheek. “Thank you, my lord. Your sisters and I will be waiting downstairs for you.”

“No need,” he said, offering his arm. “I shall join you at once.”

She smiled shyly at him and accepted his arm. Together, they left his study and went down the stairs.

Catherine felt a smoldering glow of pride for persuading him to come with her, for her husband could be as stubborn as a cantankerous old mule. He had progressed nicely over the course of their marriage, however, and she could not help but feel a burst of pride that she had managed to coax him from his study much more easily than she had in the past.

“We have had many beautiful days in the country,” Catherine said. “I am rather enjoying them.”

“Indeed,” William said. “I am surprised that we have not had more rain. The last time I was in the country, I am certain that it was a tempest every day.”

“I suppose that you would be most distressed if I decided to enjoy the gardens even if it was raining,” Catherine said wryly, her lips twitching in amusement.

“I would ,” he replied. “And for good reason. You might catch your death to a chill.”

“I am certain that you would find some means of warming me,” Catherine replied, grinning.

Her husband seemed to attempt a stern face, but his lips twitched in amusement. “I am certain that I would, and I doubt that you would enjoy it.”

“I would,” Catherine insisted, “just to spite you.”

William shook his head. He briefly dropped his arm so he could open the door for her. William offered a gallant bow, and Catherine curtsied. “Thank you, my gracious lord.”

“Of course, my lady.”

Catherine took his arm once again, and they walked down the marble steps leading into the garden. They walked past the hedge maze with its elegant marble statues, where Hester and Hannah waited for them.

“You came!” Hannah exclaimed.

“We are so happy that you could join us!” Hester declared, grasping her skirts and swaying them a little in her hands. “I was reading about songbirds, and I want to catalogue how many different species we have on the estate.”

“A noble pursuit,” Catherine said. “You will be just like a proper biologist!”

Hester beamed at her. “Yes, exactly!”

“Well, we do not want to keep the songbirds waiting,” William said. “Shall we?”

Hannah and Hester both nodded. They turned and excitedly bounded into the maze. Catherine and William followed, as the girls ran about, laughing and shouting at one another, as they tried to find their way through the maze. They had seemingly not entered it very often, for they came to dead ends again and again.

At the center of the maze was a lake surrounded by gardens and a tall, sprawling oak tree. It was the most marvelous place that Catherine had ever beheld, and she would have greatly enjoyed having such a place in her youth.

She wondered if Hannah and Hester had spent much of their childhood enjoying that secret, hidden garden. Or had their brother’s protectiveness kept them from spending their days running about there?

“I would like to have a modiste come to the estate,” William said suddenly.

Catherine raised an eyebrow and looked aside at him. “Oh?”

“Yes,” he replied. “Based on your performance at the garden party, I think you have proven that you will be a worthy companion at the ball, but I feel as though you ought to wear something new. Worthy of being a duchess.”

“Do you find my gowns to be insufficient?” Catherine asked.

He laughed. “Not at all! I find all your gowns to be lovely,” William said, lowering his voice into a conspiratorial whisper. “Do you want to know why? It is because I

am able to see all of those lovely gowns on the floor of my bedchamber.”

Catherine’s face grew hot. “You are a rogue, my lord. Do you know that?”

William grinned. “I do know that, but it is difficult to keep a leash on my more base impulses when I have such a beautiful and challenging wife.”

Catherine hummed and nudged his shoulder with her own. “You flatter me.”

“Any flattery is deserved,” William said. “A more romantic man might be inclined to write poetry to your visage.”

At that, she laughed. “You are beginning to sound insincere! No man would ever write poetry to me. I might be lovely, but I am certain that I am no lovelier than any other well-bred lady of the ton.”

“I disagree.”

“You would.”

At last, they reached the end of the maze. Hannah shouted in victory, and Hester grinned. “Look!” Hester exclaimed, pointing. “The cardinals are such perfect birds. I am always struck by how bright and red they are.”

“Some of them,” Hannah said.

Hester nodded. “Yes, only the male birds.”

Catherine followed the direction of Hannah’s hand. Four cardinals flitted about in the hedges, swooping down to the ground and plucking seeds from beneath the sweeping fronds of grass and flowers that surrounded the lake. A light breeze drifted through

the area, casting ripples over the lake's mirror-like surface.

"I have always found that interesting," Hannah mused, "how the male birds are the ones that are so colorful."

"It is because the female birds remain in the nest with the babies," Hester said matter-of-factly. "They must be dully colored to remain hidden from predators."

Catherine considered making some manner of jest about how the dandies were like male birds, but although the joke seemed like it might be promising, she could not find the proper words for it.

"Let us see if we can have a closer look," Hester said, "without frightening them."

"I doubt that we can get much closer," Hannah replied.

Still, the two of them slowly edged along the hedges, approaching the birds. Catherine also doubted that the girls would be able to venture much closer, but perhaps they might, if the young ladies moved very slowly. The birds would be well-accustomed to the gardeners, after all. It was not as if they had never seen a human before.

"Shall we take a turn?" William asked.

"And leave your sisters unattended?" Catherine asked.

William let out a low breath of air. "I believe they will be fine. If we just walk along the lake, we will still be able to see them."

Catherine nodded in approval, and they walked slowly together. A stone path ran around the course of the lake; it was a smooth path, and her slippers never caught or

wavered on the stones. It was nice; she reflected. Although Catherine was a wild woman who delighted in running about with reckless abandon in gardens and fields, she was forced to concede that she had developed a kind of fondness for these quiet walks through the garden with him.

William had a firm and sturdy strength about him, and she found herself deriving comfort from him. She had never before thought much about how a husband might provide such feelings of security. She had never particularly thought that she might need or want a husband. Her only interest in marrying had been that she needed to wed to satisfy the ton. William had changed her perspective on everything, though.

“Do you believe my gowns to be unworthy?” she asked instead.

“Not at all,” William said. “I simply thought that you deserved a gift for being such a wonderful duchess.”

“How kind of you,” Catherine said. “Do you have a usual modiste who comes and makes gowns for the girls?”

“I do,” he replied, “but if you have a favored modiste, you are—of course—welcome to invite her to the estate. I will spare no expense to ensure that you look your best at this ball.”

Catherine nodded, considering the possibility of having new gowns. Although she had never had any particularly strong interest in gowns, she liked to look her best. “The girls should have some new gowns, too.”

“Indeed.”

They continued along the path, as Catherine contemplated dyes and colors. “I have heard that there is a new shade of green,” she said, “from Germany.”

“You would look lovely in green.”

They halted on the far side of the lake. Through the flowers, bushes, and past the tall and strong oak tree, Catherine could still see Hester and Hannah. The pair had halted several feet away and watched with rapt attention as the cardinals flitted over the ground and on top of the hedges.

“They adore you,” William said, seeming to know where Catherine’s thoughts had gone. “I had not anticipated that, but it pleases me. And you care for them.”

“They are very loving girls,” Catherine replied loyally. “I cannot imagine how any man or woman would not love them.”

William tilted his head and placed a quick and gentle kiss upon her cheek. “I feel similarly about you.”

A fluttering sensation spread through Catherine’s chest, and they continued along the path.

CHAPTER 25

The garden smelled of flowers, of roses, primroses, and foxgloves. Those sweet scents filled his senses, along with the bell-like chirps of birds and his sisters' hushed whispers, as they tried not to frighten the cardinals. And Catherine still held her gentle hand at the crook of his elbow. His mind drifted to all the work that there was to do. Being a duke was no small feat, for the work never ended. There was always some small crisis demanding to be fixed.

But, despite all the nagging doubts and concerns that he ought to return to his work, he found difficulty in forcing himself to care about what he ought to be doing. How could any man possibly return to his dark and silent study when faced with such a bucolic garden and a beautiful wife?

"I am glad that you find me to be a satisfactory duchess," Catherine said. "I will admit that I feared you would find me lacking in some manner."

William sighed. They reached the end of the path, and he lowered himself onto the stone bench. Catherine seated herself beside him and turned her body towards his, so their knees touched. "I cannot fault you for that," he said. "I did fear that you might be lacking in some manner."

"I had given you many reasons to be afraid," Catherine said, furrowing her brow. "Sometimes, I suspect I did it on purpose. I may have even delighted in vexing you, for I felt like you were trying to change me. You seemed impossible to please."

"Do I still?"

“Less so,” Catherine said. “Perhaps, I have taught you a lesson or two.”

He laughed. “Maybe.” He took her hand in his and traced his thumb over her knuckles. “Yes, I think you have. You seem rather proud of the fact.”

“It is not every woman who can teach her husband a thing or two,” Catherine said. “Who knows what else you may learn during the course of our marriage?”

“As much as you, perhaps.”

“Perhaps.”

“I am glad that you chose to be my bride,” William said. “I find myself wanting to learn more about you. Each day is like a mystery to be solved.”

“And am I to assume that you enjoy mysteries?”

“Immensely. But I think most men do.”

Catherine hummed. “Tell me about this garden. I can tell that it has been here for a long time.”

“Indeed. Two-hundred years, at least,” William replied. “It was a favorite haunt of my mother’s.”

A lump rose in his throat as the memories flickered before him. He remembered climbing the tree by the lake and leaping into the water as an adolescent, something which his mother had always reacted to with utter horror. And there had been nights when they had come into the garden and watched the stars together. For all his fears that Hester or Hannah might hurt themselves, William had his own memories of running through the garden and of a handful of childhood injuries.

“Once,” he said, “I fell on the path and hurt my knee. There was a great deal of blood, and I thought my father might faint at the sight of it. His face became as pale as death, and it was rather—well—even though I was hurt, I found it rather humorous. My mother had no reservations at all, and he was stumbling about, looking as though he had seen a ghost.”

“Were you badly hurt?” Catherine asked.

“No, not terribly,” William replied. “It was just entertaining that my mother was so calm and composed, while my father was so distraught over such a small injury. That was not often the case. My mother was an anxious woman, who worried overly, and in that moment, it was as if they had swapped their personalities.”

Catherine hummed. “I had the odd childhood injury myself.”

“That does not remotely surprise me,” William said. “I would wager that you had more than your share, as wild as you are.”

“Not as many as Elias,” she said in good humor. “When he was an adolescent, he was a terribly gawky thing. He did not always seem to have control of his limbs.”

William furrowed his brow, slowly nodding. “I do seem to have a vague recollection of that.”

“Were you equally as awkward?” Catherine asked.

“I do not think so,” William said, “but perhaps, I am inclined to remember myself more fondly than is accurate.”

“Not you !” Catherine exclaimed, her voice heavy with mock surprise.

“There is no need to say it like that!” William retorted, laughing. “I swear you make me sound like the most wretched of men sometimes.”

“I do not mean to.”

“I know you do not truly mean it,” William assured her.

“Mmm. Did you ever climb trees in your youth?” Catherine asked, her eyes sweeping to the oak tree. “That one looks like it would be good for that.”

“I did,” he replied. “Many times.”

“Have you done so recently?” she asked slyly.

“No,” he replied, “because I am a respectable man.”

She laughed. “I do not believe that. You have done many things to me that prove you are not respectable,” Catherine whispered. “Shall I list them for you?”

“That is wholly unnecessary.”

Catherine rose and dusted her skirts. Mischief gleamed in her eyes, and that sent a fissure of worry tracing along the path of his spine. “Catherine,” he said warningly.

“I may be myself in private,” she replied. “That was our agreement, and a respectable man would not go back on his word.”

William inhaled deeply and shook his head. He had to admit that she could argue well when she felt so inclined. If she was a man, she very well might make a fine solicitor. “Remember that the children are watching,” William said. “I do not want you to do anything which they might seek to replicate at their peril.”

“You just said that you climbed trees frequently in your youth, and you appear to be whole and hale,” Catherine said smugly. “Why do you assume that something catastrophic would happen if we also chose to climb a tree? Women’s bones are no weaker than men’s are.”

“As far as you know,” William said. “Are you a surgeon?”

“Are you ?”

Hester and Hannah had left their place by the hedges and instead wandered to the lake. They began their own circuit around the path, just as Catherine and William had before them. William glanced at his sisters over his shoulder. While he and Catherine had set a slow, meandering pace walking around the lake, Hannah and Hester did not walk constantly. Every few feet, they would halt and pause to gaze at a bird or a butterfly or some blooming flower.

“I am going to climb the tree,” Catherine declared, her face set in determination.

“In that gown?” William asked, casting a doubtful glance at her attire.

“Of course. I can hardly climb the tree without clothes,” she said, “and you have already graciously offered to purchase new gowns for me. If this one is damaged beyond repair, it will be easily replaced.”

Catherine grinned and jauntily skipped over the path. As she approached the tree, William’s heartbeat quickened. He knew that Catherine was right. There was no particular reason to worry about her, but he found that he did. He considered demanding that she not climb and asserting his rights as her husband, but with a sigh, William forced himself to remain silent.

He stood slowly and joined her at the tree. Catherine considered the large oak, balling

up the skirts of her gown in her hands. It was terribly unseemly, and William found that his loins stirred at the sight of her slender, white thighs that were exposed. He ached to take her by the waist with one hand and to trace his fingers along the inside of her thighs with his other hand. William's breath hitched.

Catherine had managed to hitch her skirts up and held them with one hand. With the other, she grasped a low-hanging branch.

"Careful," William said, his chest tightening.

"I will be," she replied, amused. "You need not worry about me."

He did , though. How could he not when Catherine was so stubborn?

She placed a slipper-clad foot against the bark of the tree and carefully heaved herself up. Catherine pressed herself tightly against the trunk of the tree, managing to use the oak to keep her skirts pulled up. She reached out and, in a quick, fluid motion, pulled herself up and onto the lowest branch of the tree. Seated primly there, Catherine grinned at him.

"See?" she asked. "No harm done."

William smiled grimly. "What about my poor heart?"

"It seems as though it is still beating," Catherine replied. "You cannot be wounded too terribly."

William leaned against the tree and tipped his head up, his gaze sweeping over her. Catherine had not quite fixed her skirts, and they gathered awkwardly about her thighs. Chips of bark and leaf-litter dotted the hem of her skirts, and William spied a green stain by her thigh. The gown was not ruined beyond repair, but he suspected

that the laundress might be terribly displeased.

“Fine,” he said. “It was only a minor injury, and I am pleased to see that you are not wounded at all.”

She grinned brightly. “I thought I might have forgotten how to climb, but it seems that my fears were for naught.”

“Indeed.”

She shifted further along the branch and glanced about her. After a heartbeat, she carefully edged herself up. William’s pulse jumped once again. “Careful,” he growled.

“I am being careful,” she said.

She wrapped her arms over the next branch and pulled herself up. The two branches had been rather close together, and the climb had not been especially dangerous. Still, he feared that she might make some error and fall. William was nearby. He told himself that he would catch her. It would not be difficult.

Catherine sat on the branch, and William let out a puff of air. “You are conspiring to kill me,” he said.

“You caught me,” Catherine replied, laughing. “I wish to be a wealthy and successful widow.”

“That is good to know,” William said. “I think I want an annulment.”

“After you went through so much effort to marry me?” she asked. “I think not, my lord. That would reflect terribly on you and ruin your reputation, which I know you

care very strongly about.”

“Regrettably, you are right,” William said. “I do care too much.”

Hester and Hannah joined them beneath the tree.

“Oh!” Hester exclaimed. “Look at you! Can I try climbing?”

“No,” William replied. “Certainly not.”

“What will it hurt?” Catherine asked, hooking her leg around the branch and idly kicking the air. “I climbed trees often in my youth, as did you.”

“No,” William said, crossing his arms. “Do not argue with me about this.”

“Why would you want to climb?” Hannah asked. “You would ruin your pretty, white gown.”

“It can be washed,” Hester replied, gazing longingly upwards. “Besides, Catherine has done it.”

“Catherine is older than you,” William pointed out. “She is less likely to be harmed by a fall.”

“Indeed,” Catherine replied. “But look—let me climb down, Hester. It is unfair for me to be up here, while you are on the ground.”

William sighed in relief, partly because Catherine would no longer be in the tree and partly because he suspected her compliance would appease Hester. Catherine gathered her skirts, and William turned to face his sisters. “I do not want to see either of you climbing trees,” he said. “Do you understand me?”

Catherine yelled, and William whirled around. Everything happened so quickly that he scarcely understood what had happened. One moment, Catherine was climbing down from the tree. In the next, she was lying on the ground and held a hand to the back of her head.

“Catherine!” he shouted.

She groaned lowly, tears brimming in her eyes. Ice plunged into William’s veins as he beheld his bride wounded on the ground.

CHAPTER 26

Once, Catherine had heard a story about the goddess Athena. Zeus had experienced a terrible headache, and when he could endure the pain no longer, he asked the god Hephaestus to take his axe and cleave his head in two. Once Hephaestus had, the goddess Athena sprang forth in full armor.

As she lay on the grass, black spots dotting her vision, Catherine understood what had driven Zeus to ask for his skull to be cut apart. She winced and hissed through her teeth, and a sharp pain spread through her head. Catherine lifted herself just a little and placed a hand at the back of her head, certain there must be blood. But her hand came away white and pristine.

“Do not sit up!” William snapped.

His pinched face came into focus. Behind him, she saw Hester and Hannah clinging to one another, watching her with twinned expressions of worry. Catherine’s breath caught in her chest and made her body shudder. “I am fine,” she rasped.

“You are not,” William retorted. “You need to stay there for a while! Once you have recovered, I will carry you to the house, and?—”

“Carry me?” she cried. “I am not that badly injured! There is not even any blood!”

Catherine slowly became aware that her back ached, but there was no warmth or wetness. However, that pain was manageable when compared to the pounding in her skull. Bile rose in her throat. She felt as though she might vomit, and the garden tilted

alarmingly around her. A low groan tumbled from her throat, and William tensed.

“You are badly hurt,” he said.

“I am not!” she argued. “I just need a moment.”

William shook his head and raked a hand through his hair. The man began actually pacing, and if his face had not been so distressed at the sight of her, Catherine might have laughed. She tried to prop herself up on her forearms, and he fixed her with a stern look. “Stop moving,” he said. “You struck your head!”

“I am aware,” she said sluggishly. “How could I not be?”

“Are you going to be all right?” Hannah asked hesitantly.

“Of course,” Catherine replied. “Sometimes, accidents happen. That is all. If I have a moment to gain my bearings, I am certain that I will be fine.”

“If you say so,” Hester said, biting her lip. “I have heard that head wounds can be very troublesome and unpredictable.”

“Where did you hear that ?” William asked, sounding horrified.

Hester wrinkled her nose. “I do not recall.”

“Young ladies should not learn about head wounds ,” William said. “That is entirely inappropriate.”

“William,” Catherine said tiredly. “Please. I promise that I will be fine. While I do appreciate your concern, you do not need to worry about me.”

Catherine's vision blurred, and she laid back down. William's expression became even more anxious, something which she had previously thought impossible. She took a deep breath, trying to manage the pain before, but the pain was so intense that her eyes burned with tears.

"Should we send for help?" Hannah asked tentatively.

William looked at his sister as though he was surprised to find her still standing there. His gaze snapped back to Catherine.

Concerned that William might summon the entire household to tend to what she was certain was a minor, albeit painful, injury, Catherine forced herself back onto her elbows. The pain in her skull intensified, and she lowered her head, blinking back tears.

Deep breaths. Slow breaths.

"Be careful," William said. "No—lie back down."

Catherine inhaled deeply and slowly sat up. Pain traced along her spine. It was a dull and pulsing sensation. She wondered if it was her own heartbeat that she felt, pulsing in time to her pain.

"Catherine," William growled.

"I am fine!" she snapped. "Give me a moment. I want to sit upright."

Hannah hurried to her side and sat, staring at Catherine with wide eyes. She forced a smile for the little girl, hoping to reassure her. "Your brother worries too much," Catherine said. "See? It is just a little thing."

Hot tears fell down Catherine's face, from where she had been unable to hold back her tears.

"It does not look like a little thing," Hester said, wringing her hands in the skirts of her gown.

"Nonsense," Catherine said.

Taking a deep breath, Catherine shakily climbed to her feet. The world swayed beneath her feet, and she stumbled about a few steps. William wrapped an arm around his waist and, with a practiced motion, lifted her into his arms. Catherine's world went black for a moment, and her head?—

Her head hurt . Being in William's arms usually made her feel wanted and secure, but at the moment, she just felt disoriented. Catherine began to regret her decision to stand. Her breath came in haphazard pants of air, and acid burned in her throat.

"We are taking you back to the house," William said sternly. "For once in your life, do as I say and do not fight me on this."

Although Catherine would have normally felt the impulse to argue, the pain in her head destroyed any thoughts of arguing with William. She did not move, and William carried her effortlessly through the garden and into the maze.

Catherine closed her eyes, hoping it might aid the disorientation coursing through her. It did not help. If anything, it only made her more acutely aware of how hurt she was.

"How long will it take the physician to arrive?" Hester asked.

"An hour," William replied.

Catherine shook her head, which was a dreadful lapse of judgment. She swallowed hard, forcing down the taste of vomit. "I do not need a physician." Her voice sounded as though it came from far away, as if she was someone else entirely. "I told you that."

"And given that you just fell on your head, I have decided that your judgment is not to be trusted," William said.

That was, admittedly, a valid argument. Catherine sighed. Silence fell between them. She kept her eyes closed and tried to distract herself by identifying all the sounds around her. Birds chirped cheerfully, oblivious to anything being amiss. Gravel crunched beneath William's hessian boots and beneath his sisters' slippers. They must be approaching the house.

She jostled a little, and William's gait changed. Her guess was that he was climbing the stairs at the entrance of the house. Catherine opened her eyes just a little and hissed between her teeth. Bright light filled her vision, and she wanted nothing more than to climb into bed, pull the linens and counterpane over her head, and just sleep for about a week.

"We are nearly there," William said, his voice wavering just the smallest amount.

"I know," Catherine murmured.

"I will put you to bed and send for the physician."

It was pointless arguing with him, so Catherine remained silent and limp in his arms. He carried her up the stairs and into her bedchamber. After a while, he bent over. Catherine opened her eyes and reached behind her as he brought her down. She shifted beneath the linens and winced.

William hovered over her, his face lined with anxiety. Hannah and Hester stood at the foot of the bed, watching her with wide eyes. “Please, remain in bed,” William said, sounding as though he was the one who was wounded. “For your own good.”

Catherine laughed, a little breathless. “You are worrying too much. I have told you again and again that there is no need to bother the man.”

“And I do not believe you,” he said.

Catherine grinned despite the pain. “You care about me,” she teased, “a great deal.”

William crossed his arms. “Of course, I do.”

“You know I am not made of glass.”

“Clearly, or you would have broken,” William replied. “I am going to fetch the physician.”

Before she could argue any longer, he turned on his heels and stormed from the room. Catherine sighed and let herself slump against the mattress and pillow. Her vision blurred a little at the edges, but the pain finally seemed to lessen a little. Or perhaps, she was growing more accustomed to it.

“Would you like us to leave?” Hannah asked.

“No,” Catherine said. “You do not have to leave—unless you would like to.”

Hester wrinkled her nose and considered Catherine for a heartbeat. Then, she hesitantly climbed into the bed and sidled up to Catherine, pressing against her. Hannah followed suit and sat near Catherine’s waist. She smoothed her skirts around her and eyed Catherine anxiously. Even the air seemed fraught with tension, as if the

entire world had noticed her injury and was responding to it.

“I want to make certain that you are all right,” Hannah said softly.

“I know,” Catherine said. “I am deeply humbled by how much you all love me.”

“You have been very good to us,” Hester said, “and you have made our brother happy. His Grace leaves his study now. He eats meals and plays with us in the gardens.”

“Will he keep doing that?” Hannah asked. “Since you got hurt?”

“Of course, he will,” Catherine replied. “I will ensure that William keeps doing all those things for you. Accidents just happen sometimes.”

Hannah slowly nodded. “I suppose they do, but yours was frightening.”

“I am sorry for worrying everyone,” Catherine said gently. “I shall try to be more careful in the future.”

“Please,” Hannah mumbled. “But I am glad that you are not hurt.”

“We do not know if she if she is unhurt until the physician arrives,” Hester argued. “We is the only one who will know.”

“We shall see,” Catherine replied. “I suspect that your brother will insist on me remaining close to my bed for a few days, just to be certain.”

That sounded dreadful, actually. Catherine could think of little worse than being forced to remain in bed for days on end with little to no stimulation, but she would not share that vexation with the girls, of course. She had given them a fright, and it

seemed only fair for there to be some manner of penance for causing everyone to worry.

Catherine bit the inside of her cheek, thinking. Remaining in bed might soothe Hester and Hannah's worries. She supposed that was the silver lining to a terrible situation. "If I am in bed, I imagine that I shall be terribly bored," Catherine said. "Would the both of you be willing to read to me?"

"Of course!" Hannah exclaimed. "Why, I just learned of the most intriguing novel. It is called *Sense and Sensibility*. I would love to read it with someone, but Hester refuses to even touch it."

Hester shook her head. "I am sorry, but I simply do not delight in lady's novels. I would much rather spend my time learning about something worthwhile."

"Reading lady's novels involves learning something worthwhile!" Hannah argued, sounding aghast. "You agree! Right, Your Grace?"

Catherine winced, for Hannah's high-pitched voice cut through her like a knife. "Well," Catherine said delicately, "I find that both are equally important. If the physician or William decide that I need to remain in bed for a few days, maybe you should both read to me. I do not imagine that one of you could read to me all day, so you could take turns. Both of you read your favorite books to me."

Hannah nodded, obviously satisfied with the answer. "And then, you can tell us who chose the better books!"

"I can try," Catherine said, already knowing that she would declare that all the books were equally good. "However, I cannot promise that I will be able to decide which books are best. I am afraid that my knowledge of literature is not particularly expansive."

“That seems fair,” Hester said, her eyes alight with excitement. “ I will make certain that I give you my favorite books—the very best that His Grace has in his library!”

“Perhaps, avoid the ones about head wounds,” Hannah said.

“Ha!” Hester exclaimed, crossing her arms. “I think it is important that young ladies know how the human body works. We are human beings, too. How will we keep ourselves healthy if we do not know about ourselves?”

The bedchamber’s door opened, and William entered. “Hannah, Hester, leave her be. Catherine needs her rest.”

Catherine gave the girls a sympathetic expression as they hurried from the bed.

“Rest well!” Hannah declared as she left.

“We will make certain that you have the best books!” Hester declared.

As they left, William pulled a chair beside Catherine’s bed and collapsed into it. He let his forearms rest over his thighs and heaved a deep sigh. “Why did they mention books?”

“Because they are going to read to me tomorrow,” Catherine said, tipping her head back and sinking into the soft comfort of her pillow.

William’s jaw clenched. “You do not need to tax yourself given your current condition.”

“William, I struck my head,” Catherine replied, “but it is not some mortal wound.”

He grimaced. “It does not hurt to be careful.”

“Right.”

She sighed and closed her eyes. “I will rest, if that will set your mind at ease.”

“Good.”

Catherine curled her fingers into the counterpane and listened to the sound of her own breathing. “Unless the physician says that I do not need rest,” Catherine said. “Then, I expect you to stop treating me like this. I am not fragile. You knew that when you married me.”

He did not answer. When Catherine chanced a look at him, she found that he had lowered his head. His expression was hidden from her, and Catherine’s chest ached. She almost felt guilty for arguing and teasing so much, for it was obvious that he was genuinely concerned about her.

He cared for her. Very deeply.

Catherine’s breath quickened. Was it the pain in her skull and the disorientation sweeping over her that made her thoughts all scattered, or was it something else? She felt suddenly that she loved him.

Truly and deeply loved him, despite everything.

CHAPTER 27

“H er Grace seems fine to me,” the physician said. “I do anticipate that there will be some pain for a day or so, and I suppose it would not hurt if she was to remain in bed or refrain from anything particularly strenuous for the next few days.”

“I see,” William said, a wave of relief sweeping over him.

Catherine was fine. He looked at Catherine, lying in her bed across the room. She was fine. The physician had said so.

William cleared his throat. “I suppose that I may have reacted a little too strongly to her fall.”

The physician chuckled. “Just a little. However, I understand your concern, Your Grace. No man would blame you for being overly concerned about the welfare of your wife. Indeed, I would venture to say that your devotion to her is quite exemplary. Admirable.”

“Yes. Well, thank you for your time.”

The man bowed and departed, leaving William with his grinning wife. “See?” she asked. “I am fine .”

He did not answer. A lump had risen in his throat, and his chest grew tight. She seemed happy . Cheerful, even. Unaffected.

And to William, it seemed as though he had just endured his mother's death all over again. There were not enough words in the world to describe the terror that had seized him when he looked at Catherine's fallen body. He thought that he might be sick.

He cared about her. He might even love her. William's feet were as heavy as lead. He could not move, despite all his senses screaming at him to run very far away from this young and reckless woman. She was supposed to just be a wife. He was not supposed to care for her this much.

Catherine was not even meant for him . She was supposed to be for his sisters to ensure they grew into proper ladies.

"Say something," Catherine said, her voice softening. "Please."

"You are not to climb any more trees," William said, his words strained. "I will not tolerate such behavior from my duchess, regardless of if we are alone."

"I understand."

"Say that I will not have any more of that from you."

Catherine sighed. She rubbed the heels of her hands into her eyes. "Fine," she said, tipping her head back. "I will not climb any more trees. And I apologize for worrying you."

"Good. You should," he said.

She turned her head to him. "William?—"

"I will leave you to your rest," William said, turning abruptly. "In a few hours, I will send a maid to ensure that you are managing well."

He practically ran from the room, as that tight feeling in his chest returned. A part of William wanted to stay and remain at her side, to grasp her hand and whisper how worried he had been and how much he loved her, but he could not. If he expressed how he really felt to Catherine, he would grow more deeply in love with her.

He did not need to love her. If anything, he needed to forget how to love her. William clenched his hands into fists, his nails digging into his palms so that they hurt. He darted up the stairs, heading to the study. That had always been his refuge. William tore open the door and ripped it shut behind him.

The maid who was cleaning his study started at his appearance. “Your Grace,” she greeted, bobbing a practiced curtsy.

“Get out!” he snapped.

She jolted as if he had struck her and hurried from the room. William felt a twinge of guilt for snapping at the innocent maid. She was, after all, not the source of his vexation; however, it was not as though he could yell at Catherine. He wanted to. How could she be so careless?

It was his fault. If he had not let himself be seduced by her, enthralled by her sly smiles and clever witticisms, she would have never done something so foolish. Hands shaking, William seized the decanter and poured himself a generous glass of brandy. He took a swallow and flung himself into the chair behind his desk.

“Confound it, Catherine!” he snapped. “How could you do something so ridiculous?”

He raked his hands through his hair and tipped his head back, gazing at the ceiling. William drank the brandy with a sort of vindictive impatience. His worry for Catherine flowered into anger at himself for being so weak. How could he have let himself care so much about her?

Had the loss in his life taught him nothing? Had he not realized that fewer attachments were best? If he cared about Catherine, he was giving her the power to hurt him. How would he manage if she left him?

“You fool,” William muttered to himself.

He finished his brandy and considered pouring another glass. William could not decide if he would rather remain in his study and drink enough brandy to make him forget his feelings for Catherine, or if he would prefer to take a horse to Hamilton’s estate. His friend would provide him with a supportive ear.

There was a knock on the door. “Enter!” he snapped.

Geoffrey opened the door and bowed deeply. “Your Grace,” he said.

Unfortunately, his butler was unlikely to provide him with a sympathetic ear. The man was infuriatingly sharp and forward at times.

“Geoffrey,” he said, pouring another glass of brandy. “What do you want?”

“I saw Mr. Sweeney back to his house,” Geoffrey said.

William furrowed his brow. “Who?”

“The physician,” Geoffrey replied.

William scowled, frustrated that he had not recalled the physician’s name himself. There were a few who lived close to the estate, many of them second sons who visited their family when they were in the country. William had admittedly not paid much mind to physicians, but he still felt a little embarrassed at not remembering.

“It is understandable that you would not recall,” Geoffrey continued. “We all know that you are deeply concerned about Her Grace. The staff will do everything we can to make her comfortable and ensure that she makes a swift recovery.”

“I know,” William said, sighing.

It seemed as though Geoffrey had become the unwitting volunteer for receiving William’s furious thoughts. “Make certain that Hannah and Hester do not vex her overly. My sisters adore Catherine, but they are affectionate in the same manner that cats are. I fear that they will climb and clamber all over the duchess and keep her from getting even an ounce of rest.”

“Indeed, Your Grace.”

William took a sip of brandy. Geoffrey remained standing in the center of the room with his hands clasped behind his book. It was unclear to William if the man was waiting for a formal dismissal or if he had anticipated William’s desire to talk.

“After she recovers, I want one of the maids to follow Cath—” He needed to force himself to love her less.

William needed to remember that old formality, which he had once handled her with. Yes, if he distanced himself from Catherine, he could make himself care less. He could not love her if he avoided her entirely. It would be painful, for certain, but he would force himself to love her no longer.

“—Her Grace,” he concluded. “It is apparent to me that she should be watched as if she is a child, who has not yet learned proper behavior.”

He ignored the small voice inside himself that insisted that Catherine had been injured when he was in her presence. Her injury was his fault. If he had not loved her,

he would not have allowed her to climb the tree, and she would not have been hurt. Once he no longer loved her, it would be simpler to be her masterful husband, as a duke ought to be.

“As you wish, Your Grace. Might I suggest a lady’s companion?” Geoffrey asked. “A maid can certainly fulfill the role for some time, but I fear that Her Grace might grow bored with her companion if she is not of a similar status.”

“Her Grace could do with less excitement and a little more boredom in her life,” William said dryly. “A maid will do perfectly fine.”

If he was very fortunate, maybe Catherine would become so bored with the accompanying maid that she would learn to improve in the hopes of being rid of the poor, hapless servant.

“As you wish, Your Grace.”

William finished the second glass of brandy. “I will also not be joining my sisters at dinner or ever again.”

If he did not join his sisters for meals, he would also not be joining Catherine—Her Grace, his wife—at meals.

“Shall I assume that you will take your meals in your study, then?”

William could not decide if he caught a note of disapproval in the butler’s voice or if his own guilty conscience was to blame. “Yes,” he said.

“Very good, Your Grace.”

“That will be all.”

Geoffrey bowed stiffly and walked to the door. William's heart clenched. He stood. "Geoffrey!"

The butler halted at once. "Yes, Your Grace?"

William clenched his jaw, his blood roaring in his ears. He could tell Geoffrey to ignore his instructions. He could pretend that he had only spoken out of fear for Catherine. He could even try to reconcile his love for her with his fear of losing her. That was what a brave man would do.

"I..." he trailed off.

"Yes, Your Grace?"

A lump rose in William's throat. Geoffrey watched him with endless patience, as if he had anticipated William having some powerful moral dilemma right before him.

William was not a brave man. He poured a third glass of brandy, even though his fingertips were beginning to feel a little numb. Soon, he imagined that his thoughts would grow soft and unfocused.

"Nothing," William replied. "Do as I have asked."

"I shall, Your Grace."

William slumped into his chair. It seemed to him as though Geoffrey hesitated for just a moment at the door. If the butler was waiting for William to change his mind, Geoffrey would stand there forever. After a heartbeat, Geoffrey left and closed the door behind him.

The urge to scream rose inside William. What a mess this was! Marrying Catherine

had been the worst decision of his life. He drank another large swallow of the brandy and eyed the mostly empty decanter. William sighed. He felt suddenly old, and exhaustion pulled at his body, threatening to drag him down into a sea of fatigue.

“I wonder how many men need to fall out of love their wives,” William murmured.

If he had not been so disturbed by the day’s events, he might have laughed at the situation in which he had found himself. There was a terrible irony in falling in love with a woman whom he had resolved never to care about. William finished the rest of the brandy and closed his eyes, silently praying for sleep to come.

Instead, he saw Catherine on the ground, tears in her eyes and her hair disheveled and flecked with grass and broken leaves.

The physician said that she is fine. He would know far more than I would.

Was it possible that the man might have made an error? Maybe William ought to ask another physician for his professional opinion. That would irritate Catherine, but given her behavior, maybe an endless litany of visits from physicians would teach her a lesson that his corrections had not.

He sat there for a long time, his mind awirl with a scattering of plans. Every time he thought of drawing away from Catherine, his chest ached in dread of hurting her and himself. She had only been herself, and he had allowed that! It was his fault.

But no?—

For his sake, as well as hers, it was best that he retreated from her and learned not to love her. Only then could he be the stern and distant husband, the duke who was supposed to be obeyed. Only then would he have the resolve to treat Catherine as the wife of convenience that she was meant to be.

CHAPTER 28

Catherine emerged from her injury uninjured. She had spent just two days in bed, recovering from her injury. But as Catherine entered the ballroom, her hand at the crook of William's arm, she wondered if her fall had somehow wounded him. Her husband seemed to have grown a heart of ice since that fateful day. He had not come to see her as she recovered, and Catherine had assumed that was only a temporary detachment.

She had been incorrect in that assumption. When she sought him out, William was conspicuously always busy or absent. He did not join her at meals. Once she had met him at the door, preparing to leave for the ball, she had heard the audible catch of his breath and had thought that he might have thawed just a little.

He had not. Even at the ball, he stood stiffly beside her. She might as well have been accompanied by a marble statue. Catherine cleared her throat. "Are you going to give me a lecture?" she asked, trying for a light tone.

"No," he replied. "I assume that you know how to behave."

"I see."

William began walking to the dance floor, where a new song was beginning. Lords and ladies, laughing and smiling, hurried to find partners and begin a waltz.

"We will dance," William said.

“Demanding,” she murmured.

He cast her a vicious look. “I do not imagine that you have any reason to complain about dancing at a ball,” William said. “Do not be a child, my lady.”

“I am not the one who is behaving like a child,” she said tersely. “What about your own behavior? You have avoided me as if I had the plague ever since I fell. I was unhurt. Are you upset by my continued survival?”

He clenched his jaw and all but pulled her into the circle of dancers. William put his hand on her waist and took her hand with the other. He kept her close, but Catherine suspected that was because of the dance rather than any real desire to be beside her. Her chest ached, and her body seemed to come alive with the memory of better times, when he had touched her like he wanted to be close to her.

The first notes of the song began, and although William’s eyes remained fixed on hers, there was nothing friendly in his expression. Music swirled around them, its lively notes at odds with the frigidity that crept between the two of them.

“Why are you upset with me?” Catherine asked, as they went through the first steps of the dance. “I have done nothing wrong.”

William grimaced. “We do not need to speak about this.”

“I think we do,” she argued. “I am being your perfect duchess tonight, as per our agreement. I think I am owed an explanation as to why my husband is treating me like a stranger.”

“Keep your voice lowered!” he hissed.

They kept dancing, and out of the corner of her eye, Catherine spied ladies with

bright smiles and glowing cheeks. Some spoke softly to their partners as they performed the waltz. Their colorful skirts whirled about them. It was like a dagger to her heart. Had she and William not been close to happy? Why had falling from a tree, just a little accident, ruined everything?

“You knew what I was when you agreed to marry me,” she said, heat creeping to her face. “You persuaded me to offer myself to you in my sister’s stead, so it is unfair of you to now find fault in me for being precisely who I always was.”

“I do not find fault in you,” William said. “Rather, it is obvious that the fault lies with me.”

That caught her off guard. She stared uncomprehendingly at him, as he twirled her around. “What do you mean?” she asked.

“I mean that I took leave of my senses,” he said. “I forgot that this was merely a marriage of convenience, and I foolishly convinced myself that it could be something more than it was.”

A gasp tore from Catherine’s lips. Her body shivered, as if she had been cast into an ice-filled lake. “What?”

She scarcely dared to breathe. He could not mean it. Their marriage had been pleasant. Enjoyable! She had liked him, more than liked him! He could not possibly mean that it was all just—just a mistake ! Catherine felt, rather than saw, all the blood drain from her face.

“I am sorry that I have given you the wrong impression, but a marriage of convenience is all that this arrangement will ever be. You should abandon any thoughts you harbored about this marriage being anything else, while it is still early,” William said. “That is what is best for the both of us.”

Desperation rose inside her. Catherine's throat felt heavy and thick, and she was struck by the sudden, unfamiliar urge to beg him to take back the words. She would have given anything for him to laugh and insist that he was only playing a cruel jest upon her.

"You cannot mean that," Catherine said. "You are not amusing, William."

"Your Grace," he corrected.

Catherine fell silent, her mind racing as they went through the dance. He said nothing either, and when she searched his face for even the smallest scrap of kindness, she found only a cold, impenetrable mask. He was serious. What was she to do?

Catherine shook her head. "No."

"This is not your decision to make," William replied.

The song ended. He dropped his hands and bowed formally. Unmoored, Catherine looked at him for a long moment. She was beginning to understand. He was serious. He did mean it.

"All because I fell from a tree?" she asked, forcing back the accursed tears that threatened to overflow. "I have already promised not to do that again. I will not even climb."

"This is not about the tree," William said. "This is about a realization that I have recently had."

Her breath hitched. "Because I fell from the tree."

William seized her arm and pulled her away from the other couples, as the next dance

began. Catherine let him pull her along without even raising a complaint. He halted by the wall and leaned so near to her that his breath swept over her right cheek. “Do not cry,” he said. “That is unseemly.”

“You have only yourself to blame,” she said, her lips quivering. “Why would you say something so awful to me? Have I not tried to be everything that you wanted me to be?”

William nodded. “You have tried,” he said. “The fault is not with you but with me. It is best that we do not love one another.”

The words were like a blow to her heart. Even if he had struck her, Catherine did not think that she would have been so wounded. He wanted this to be a marriage of convenience only. William wanted to tear down everything that they had become.

“William—”

“Your Grace,” he interrupted, “or my lord. William is far too informal for a marriage of convenience.”

“What of your sisters, Your Grace?” she asked through gritted teeth. “You have not been joining us for meals, and your sisters have noticed your absences. I promised them that you would still continue to eat with them, and you have made me a liar.”

“No,” he argued. “You made a foolish choice and expect me to pay for your errors.”

“I see.”

Catherine roughly wiped her eyes, staining her gloves with her own tears. She sniffled. Something else curled inside her, something that was harsh and jagged and nothing at all like the waves of despair that rose within her, threatening to consume

her.

“Well,” Catherine said, straightening her spine. “I see that you will not be dissuaded from your selfishness.”

William smiled thinly. “It is far more selfish to ask for more than I have offered you.”

“I understand,” she said. “Thank you for telling me, Your Grace . Am I correct in assuming that I have your leave to return to the estate? I trust that my appearance tonight has been sufficient enough to satisfy you.”

“Your appearance tonight has been entirely appropriate until now.”

“Excellent,” Catherine replied. “I am suddenly feeling quite ill, and I wish to retire.”

“That does not surprise me.”

It should not.

Catherine bit back a sharp retort. She was barely managing to remain remotely civil. A very vindictive part of her wanted to show him precisely how wild she could be. Catherine wanted to scream and rage at him. She wanted to give the ton something to talk about.

But she would not. She was better than that. Worse, she knew that she would have felt guilty if she had humiliated her husband before all those people. She could not bear to hurt him as he had her. Catherine’s poor, weak heart still loved him despite everything.

“May I return to the estate?” she asked. “Your Grace?”

“As you wish,” he replied. “I shall tell the ton that you have fallen ill. I shall remain here.”

“Very well.”

“Have a good night, my lady,” William said.

When he bowed, she saw that even her husband’s bows were different. They were stiff and formal, as if he was bidding farewell to a distant acquaintance. “The same to you, Your Grace,” Catherine said, curtsying. “I hope that you enjoy the remainder of the ball. It promises to be a memorable event, indeed.”

She did not wait for him to reply. Instead, Catherine balled her hands into the skirts of her gown and stormed across the ballroom. She slipped away from the crowd, her blood pumping through her veins so quickly that she began to feel a little faint. At last, the sounds of the ton faded into nothingness. She pressed her back against the wall and took great, heaving gulps of air.

How could he do this to her? She stifled a cry of despair, which threatened to rise from her throat. Catherine squeezed her eyes shut and tried to force her breaths steady. Instead, she gasped for air, making small and feeble sounds.

He had betrayed her, or she had betrayed him. Catherine could not decide which, but she knew that everything hurt. She had never felt such pain in her life. Catherine sobbed, her body shaking with the force of her despair. How could he have done this? How could she have done this?

“My lady?”

She jumped at the unexpected voice. Her head snapped to the side, landing on a gentleman partially obscured by the shadows.

“Are you well?” he asked, taking a step towards her. “Is there anything that I might do to help you?”

“No,” she replied, her voice shaking. “No thank you, my lord.”

Catherine swept away from the wall, quickening her pace. Her ears strained, concern that he might follow mounting within her. She heard nothing until she reached the entryway, where the butler smartly snapped to attention. “Your Grace!” he exclaimed, sounding scandalized.

“I am unwell,” she said shakily. “I wish for a coach at once to return me to my husband’s estate.”

“Of course,” he replied, bowing. “I shall prepare one at once.”

Catherine nodded and stepped through the doors. The night air was bracing and damp, and it seemed to sink all the way down into her bones. It was steadying. She rubbed her eyes and nose and waited for the coach to arrive.

She was certain that it did not take long at all for a coach to be brought to the front of the house for her, but Catherine nonetheless felt as though it took an eternity. Her head was unfocused, and her thoughts scattered. Every time that she thought about William, the tears threatened to flow anew.

“My lady!” A footman hastened to open the door to the coach for her. “Please, allow me to assist you.”

She waved him off as he offered his arm. “No, I am fine,” she said, her words emerging in a mangled string. “Please, take me back to my estate.”

“Of course. Where is it?”

“I shall give him directions, Your Grace,” the butler said, approaching them.

Catherine cast him a watery smile before lowering herself onto the cushions. The door to the coach closed behind her, and her composure, which had already been fraying and thinning, snapped entirely. She screamed and cried into the cushions. Her body was hot with her rage and despair. Tears scalded the sides of her face.

She was in a marriage of convenience again, and it felt like her world was ending. Catherine cried until her throat was raw and her eyes were sore. William did not love her, and Catherine—who had never thought that she would love a man—felt the first heartbreak of her life. Worse, she would still be expected to be a proper lady. She would be expected to attend events with her husband, the duke, and pretend that there was nothing awry.

It was the worst thing that she could have ever imagined—a prison of her own making.

CHAPTER 29

William set the coffee aside and rearranged the papers on his desk. The ball had been a success, even if his duchess had left early. Some of the ton had noticed and inquired as to Catherine's well-being, but they had readily accepted his explanations that she had experienced a sudden migraine.

She fell a week or so ago and hurt her head, and this is the first time she has exerted herself since then. The physician insists that she is fine, but it does seem as though she may be experiencing some lingering symptoms.

His explanation had received sympathetic nods and murmurs, and the rest of the ball had passed uneventfully. He had returned home to a quiet house and enjoyed a quiet breakfast the next morning. And if he felt an inkling of regret that he could not delight in Catherine's company, no one needed to know about that.

There was a knock on his door. "Come in!"

When the door opened, his breath caught in his throat. It was Catherine, dressed in a white gown that swept gently over every curve of her perfect body. She had been just as beautiful the night before in her new, sky blue gown. He wished that he had told her that.

"Your Grace," she said. "Do you have a moment to speak with me?"

"Of course. How is your morning?"

“Fine,” she said. “You would know that if you had joined me at breakfast.”

“I did not believe that was necessary,” he replied. “I ate breakfast in my study, as I often do, and read over some papers. I will not bore you with the details.”

“Of course, you would not.”

“What do you need?” William asked. “I have time to speak to you, but it cannot be a conversation which lasts all morning, my lady. I have much business to attend to.”

Catherine crossed the room, her movements so elegant and measured that she nearly glided across the floor. He forced his face into an impassive mask, trying not to betray how the very sight of her made his pulse quicken and his body stir with interest.

“I have been considering our conversation at the ball last night,” Catherine said, “and after some thought, I have decided that I need some time to process the new reality that you have laid out for me.”

William frowned. He had the sinking suspicion that an argument was brewing. “Do you? Have you come here to convince me otherwise?”

“No,” she said. “I believe that I need to return to Elias’s estate and live with my family for a little while. I need some time to clear my head and to decide how best to behave as your wife from this point forward.”

He inhaled sharply. This could have been worse. She could have argued and screamed at him. She might have insulted him or impugned his honor. Somehow, the fact that she had so quickly agreed to accept his decision was more unnerving than any refusal she might have offered.

“What of Hester and Hannah?” he asked. “Who is to be their guardian, while you are away?”

“You are,” she replied. “They survived a long time without having a feminine presence in their lives, and I am certain that they can survive without me for a little while. They are quite resilient.”

“How long do you intend on being away?” William asked.

“I was thinking that I would spend a couple of weeks with my family,” Catherine replied. “Perhaps longer. I do not intend to return indefinitely to my brother’s house if that is your concern.”

“You cannot simply abandon your responsibilities here,” William said. “My sisters will be distraught in your absence, and I will be forced to make arrangements to accommodate for your absence.”

Pink rose to Catherine’s face, and her hands curled over the back of the chair in front of her. “So you will not let me go?” she asked. “Is that it?”

“I am only asking you to account for the consequences of your actions,” William said. “You agree to?—”

“You keep changing the agreement!” she snapped. “I know what I agreed to, and I would have been happy to honor that agreement! But you keep changing the terms, and I am sick of it! I am ill from trying to always do what you want when you cannot even decide what you want from me!”

William was becoming sorely tired of feeling guilty. She was like a phoenix, incandescent with fury, and he slumped against the cushioned back of her chair. “Then, you should be pleased that I wish to return to our original agreement,”

William said. "I am correcting our course."

The defense sounded paltry even to his own ears.

Catherine laughed harshly. "Oh no! You—I told you from the start that I am not your plaything."

"I remember."

"You do not get to touch me and treat me kindly and be good to me and then—then, just cast me aside! I cannot live here any longer!"

"You have no choice," William said, rising. "You are my wife, and I will not have the ton gossiping about us because my own wife refuses to live with me."

She swept around the chair and slammed her palms against his desk. "Then, I suggest that you agree to my request to spend a couple of weeks living on my brother's estate," Catherine said. "Otherwise, I may just choose not to return."

"I would not allow that," he said in a strangled voice.

"Do you believe that you could stop me?" she asked incredulously. "Do you believe that I would obey you?"

"That was?—"

"Our wedding vows, I know!" she snapped. "You have reminded me of them often enough, but I can assure you that I intend to see my family, regardless of whether you like it or not. If you refuse me, I will slip away when you least expect it and in the most embarrassing way possible."

He clenched his jaw and thought of the newly filled decanter of brandy. Maybe it was foolish of him to have expected that Catherine would leave him at peace in his study. William should have anticipated her eventually invading his refuge. Where could he go now that she had?

“You cannot expect me to simply exist here and accept all this without complaint,” Catherine said. “I need more time, and whether you like it or not, I have a right to that. I am a human being, and I have feelings.”

Her words were nothing special coming from the woman who argued with him so often and so eagerly, but for some reason, they struck him as a bolt of lightning might have. She was a person and a woman of refined and delicate sensibilities.

William raked his hands through his hair and looked at her. She was so beautiful, standing before him in all her glorious anger. Catherine’s flushed face and bright, glittering eyes only made her look more beautiful. She had loved him, and he had ruined everything. Had her love turned to hatred, rather than mere indifference? It was impossible to say from her face.

He had been avoiding her since the accident, and he had wrapped his heart in armor to ward away any of her blows. Perhaps, it was for the best that she left for a while. Maybe her absence would make it easier for him to learn not to love her any longer.

William slowly nodded. “You should go,” he said, finding his voice at last. “If that is the way you feel, spending a couple of weeks with your siblings would probably be for the best.”

“I am glad you can see reason,” she replied tartly.

A wretched feeling swept over him. If he was a better man, he might have fought for her. He might have insisted that he did love her. He might have even groveled in an

attempt to persuade her that he was good for her.

But he could not do that. A hollowness settled inside him. It was as though he no longer had anything inside himself. Catherine had taken everything from him.

“It is settled, then,” she said. “I will make arrangements to leave at once.”

“Good.”

“Farewell, my husband.”

She swept to the door, and that hollow feeling threatened to crush him. William’s eyes swept over her familiar, slight form. She was a good woman, far better than he deserved, and he had made more mistakes with her than any husband ever ought to make. “Catherine!”

She halted with her hand on the door. With his eyes, he traced the lines of tension in her shoulder and her arms. At last, she turned to face him. The color in her cheeks had brightened, so her face was now flushed with scarlet. “Yes?”

William’s heart thundered against his ribs. He ought to apologize for everything. I am sorry . It was only three words, four syllables. A lump rose in his throat, clogging him from breathing or forming the words. Still, he tried. He worked his jaw and smiled awkwardly.

Catherine took a step toward him, her expression slowly becoming one of tentative hopefulness. If he apologized, Catherine might forgive him. He stood, pushing his chair out. “Catherine,” he said again.

“Are you attempting to delay me?” she asked, crossing her arms. “If you are, that is childish of you. You realize that, right?”

There was a beat of silence. She fidgeted with her skirts; he planted his palms on his desk, just as she had moments before, in a vain attempt to steady himself.

“I am not attempting to delay you,” he said at last.

“Good. Because I will not be persuaded.”

“I know,” he said. “I just wanted to say that you—you should...”

Her brow furrowed, and he sensed her growing impatience. In her position, he would have been irritated, too. William cleared his throat and squared his shoulders, trying to exude the cool confidence that had once been so familiar to him. “I hope you enjoy your stay with your siblings.”

“Thank you.”

“Take your time.”

Her jaw clenched, and she smiled thinly. The expression was sharp and venomous. “I shall do just that.”

In a swirl of skirts and fury, Catherine tore open the door of the study and vanished through it. She slammed the door behind her, the sound so loud that it shook the room.

After she left, there was nothing but silence. William lowered himself into his chair and stared at the door through which she had just disappeared. Catherine was leaving him. She would not be gone forever, but still for longer than he wanted. William sighed deeply and sank into his chair. What would he do if Catherine left and refused to come back?

No, she would not do that. Would she?

William clasped the arms of the chair, as though his life depended on him clinging to the polished rosewood. “Catherine, what have you done to me?” he murmured. “You are the most vexing woman I have ever met in my life.”

If she would not come back, he would make her return to him. It was as simple as that.

CHAPTER 30

As she had planned her trip, Catherine had decided to journey to her family's London townhouse, rather than their country estate. Her siblings would be in the country, and although Catherine wanted nothing more than to see Dorothy, Elias, and Bridget, she found that she did not wish to tell them of her marital woes.

They would want to be angry and indignant on her behalf, and Catherine did not want anyone else to be angry on her behalf. Instead, she had gone to her family's London townhouse, assuming that the place would be abandoned save for the staff. And the staff would be easily persuaded to keep her presence a secret.

There was just one problem with her plan, and Catherine realized that problem the moment she was escorted into Elias's study, and her brother was there, swirling a glass of Tokay and reading a book of poetry. "Catherine!" he exclaimed, leaping to his feet.

He cast the book aside and abandoned his wineglass on the nearest table. Catherine forced a smile. She thought she might be able to keep her feelings from spilling over, and she might have succeeded, except that he pulled her into a tight embrace. She sniffed and hugged him tightly.

The tears broke free, and she sobbed into his shoulder. Her breath caught, and she pressed her forehead into his shoulder.

"Oh, my sweet sister," he murmured, pulling her close. "Has someone hurt you, kitty cat?"

She dug her fingers into the back of his jacket and clung to him as though her life depended on it. Her brother's familiar cologne, the scent of lavender and orange blossoms, filled her senses. Catherine sobbed. He was so familiar, and she felt so safe in his arms.

"Oh, poor cat," he murmured, stroking her hair.

A small laugh bubbled from her. "You are g—going to ruin my hair!" she cried.

"Do not worry about that," he replied. "We are the only ones here, and I do not care if your hair is ruined."

He held her for a long time, as she sobbed into his shoulder. Elias murmured soft words of comfort into her ear and stroked her hair until all her tears were gone. Then, she lifted her head. Her brother gazed softly at her.

"Have a drink with me," he said gently. "I know that you have always enjoyed sweet wines."

Elias smiled gently and stepped away. He produced another glass and filled it with the wine. Catherine sank trembling into a nearby chair. She rubbed her eyes, and Elias chivalrously produced a handkerchief. Catherine took it and gently dabbed at her eyes. Once she was finished, her brother returned the handkerchief to her pocket and offered her the glass. The wine was the color of sunlight.

Elias seated himself beside her and leaned back. He grinned rakishly at her, and Catherine felt herself warm beneath his affectionate gaze. "I missed you," she said. "So much."

"I know," he replied. "I have missed you, too."

They drank for a few moments in companionable silence, and Catherine's nerves slowly settled. She no longer felt as though she would break apart if her brother touched her.

After some time, Elias sighed. "What has upset you, kitty cat?" he asked. "You know that you can tell me anything."

Of course, she could. But being able to talk to her brother and being ready to were two entirely different things.

"I do not want to talk about it," she said. "It hurts too much."

Elias leaned forward, his glass held loosely in one hand. "Is it the Duke of Sarsen? Has he done something to harm you?"

She sniffed, and Elias's expression hardened. "N—no," Catherine said. "No, it is only that I...I am tired from my journey, and because I have traveled so far, my nerves are shattered."

Elias shook his head. "Catherine," he said warningly. "I know that is not true. You have nerves as strong as any man. I know that something is troubling you, and given your hesitancy, I suspect that it involves your husband. What has he done? Has he hurt you?"

Catherine shook her head. "No, no...it is only a small marital dispute. I needed some time away from His Grace to think about our marriage. That is all."

"I have a difficult time believing that is all," Elias said. "If it was only a small dispute, you would not be nearly this upset about it."

Catherine took a sip of her wine, favoring the sweet taste of it. She had always

delighted in Tokay, ever since taking her first sip. Her brother's gaze remained on her. He intently watched her face, as if determined to craft meaning from even the smallest expression. Catherine felt a jolt of wry concern, for her brother knew her better than anyone. She could not even hope to lie to him.

"I love you," she said.

"I know that."

"And I know you want me to be happy," Catherine said.

"Happy and safe ," he said. "You have come all the way to London without your husband, and you just broke down weeping. I have not seen you cry since our parents died, and I am concerned. Any man would be, kitty cat."

"I know that, but I am asking you not to ask any more questions. I will tell you about the matter when I am ready. At the moment, I am not," she said. "I am sorry."

Elias sighed deeply and took a sip of his Tokay. He slowly nodded. "As you wish," he said, "but are you certain that you are well? You know that if he has hurt you, I will protect you. No matter what, my dearest."

"I know. But I do not want to speak of it," she said. "Please, Elias. Talk to me about anything else."

He hummed and tipped his head back. "Are you certain?"

"Entirely."

Elias ran a hand through his hair. "I am in London on business," he said. "Dorothy and Bridget have remained in the countryside, as you have likely surmised. I almost

wish I was with them. I am having to argue with solicitors, and that is not an enjoyable pastime.”

“William has often said that I remind him of a solicitor,” she said, “because I argue with him so often.”

A bittersweet feeling twisted inside her. She wished that she did not have to think of him, and she feared that if she contemplated her husband much longer, she might cry again. That would be terribly distressing.

Elias laughed. “You do remind me a little of one,” he conceded. “However, I must admit that I enjoy your witticisms far more than that of my solicitor. I imagine Sarsen would say the same. He ought to, at any rate.”

“What else are you doing?” Catherine asked.

Elias took a sip of wine. “Besides speaking with my solicitor, I have been attending meetings with the Abolitionist Society. I have spent some time with Isadora.”

“Isadora?”

“Ah, Lady Mathers.”

Catherine arched an eyebrow. Lady Isadora Mathers, the Dowager Countess of Mathers, was a beautiful, sharp-tongued widow. Half the ton wanted to marry her; the other half envied her. Despite many suitors vying for her hand, however, Lady Mathers refused to wed. It would not be to her advantage. As a widow, Lady Mathers had inherited her husband’s vast fortune, and if she married, she would lose it.

“And why have you been spending so much time with Lady Mathers?” Catherine asked.

“I have been communicating with her about founding a seminary for young ladies,” Elias replied, grinning. “Isadora wishes to create a place where orphaned young women can go and learn a trade.”

“And you generously agreed to help with such an endeavor,” Catherine said a little dubiously. “Just out of the generosity of your heart?”

Elias laughed. “Dear sister, why else do you imagine that I would aid the lady’s efforts?” His eyes sparkled with mirth. “I am certain I do not know what you are implying.”

Catherine laughed. It was quite obvious why her brother might be suddenly so devoted to the lady, and it had less to do with her desire to found a seminary and more to do with having an amorous congress with such a lovely lady.

“My attraction to Isadora is purely intellectual,” Elias said, winking. “I assure you.”

“Somehow, I do not find myself inclined to believe you,” Catherine replied.

Elias heaved a deep, melodramatic sigh. “Woe is me! I cannot help but despair. My own sister refuses to believe that I have only pure intentions. How terrible it is to have such a dreadful shrew of a sibling!”

Catherine downed the rest of her wine, and Elias climbed to his feet. He took the bottle and filled the glass once more. “What do you say we finish this bottle and reminisce?”

“I am certain that you have work to finish,” Catherine said, sipping appreciatively from the glass. “It is no small business managing everything as a duke. My husband has taught me that.”

Elias chuckled and emptied the rest of the wine into his glass. “I do not doubt that. Does the man ever even leave his desk?”

“No,” she said.

He had once, until she had ruined everything. Catherine took another sip of wine, hoping to hide how her face fell. William had begun leaving his desk, and Catherine had somehow ruined everything by falling out of a tree. It sounded ridiculous, even to her.

Elias shook his head. “Is that...why you are?—”

“I do not want to talk about it,” Catherine said firmly. “Stop trying to force me to speak of the matter. Please, Elias.”

“Apologies,” he replied, raising his wine in a mock toast. “I promise that I shall stop trying to coax the answer from you. What were we discussing?”

“Lady Mathers’s seminary.”

“Ah, yes. She is a fine woman,” Elias said. “I understand why she does not wish to marry again, but that is a loss to all the bachelors of the ton, for I am certain that she would make a splendid wife.”

Catherine wondered if Lady Mathers would make a splendid wife because she was experienced in the joys of the bedroom. Certainly, Catherine suspected that was why her brother delighted so much in the lady’s company. Before marriage, she had not understood why her brother was such a rake, but having experienced the joys of the bedroom, she knew the reason why.

“A splendid wife for you?” Catherine asked. “Do you think you could persuade her to

wed you?”

Elias laughed so hard that his glass shook, and droplets of wine spilled onto his sleeve. “My dear sister, she would be a fool to marry any man, much less one as rakish as me! Why, if she did decide to become my wife, I suspect that I would lose all interest in her. Isadora’s brilliance is part of why I love her so much.”

Catherine hummed, considering her brother for a moment. “Do you know—I think that is the first time you have ever expressed any admiration for a woman’s intelligence? Usually, you talk about their beauty. Sometimes, their conversation. But never intelligence.”

“She is a woman beyond compare,” Elias said. “I mean that truly. I might even venture to say that I love her. How ironic is that? I learn to love a woman who refuses to marry.”

“You deserve to have a wife who loves you,” Catherine said softly.

She thought of her own husband, who no longer loved her. When Catherine thought of her dear brother trapped in a loveless marriage, her heart ached.

“Promise me,” she said.

“Promise you?”

“That you will marry for love,” Catherine clarified. “Promise me that you will find a love-match, and you will not settle for a marriage of convenience. That is all I want for you.”

Elias’s face softened. For a heartbeat, Catherine thought that she might have said too much. He might have guessed what exactly it was that distressed her so terribly. If he

did, however, he respected her wishes enough not to mention it.

“I promise that I will do just that, kitty cat,” he said. “If it will make you happy.”

“It will make the both of us happy,” Catherine replied.

Elias finished his wine and stood. “Do you want to do something this evening, kitty cat? We might watch a show at the theater. Or perhaps, an opera.”

Catherine smiled and nodded. “I would like that,” she said.

“Good,” he said. “I have just a little work to finish today. Your room should be ready for you. Take a rest, my sister, for your journey has been very long. I will wake you once I am finished with my papers, and we will go to the theater. We will watch a show. That is certain to revive your spirits, and you can forget all about what has upset you so.”

She raised her glass to him and smiled gently. “Thank you, Elias. To you.”

He winked and raised his glass, too. “And to you, my sweet sister.”

CHAPTER 31

William began counting his days. It had been seven days since he had last seen Catherine. Eight days since she had last been in his study. Nine days since their last dance. As he entered the dining hall, he gazed mournfully at the place where his wife usually sat. She was always there at his right, his sisters seated further down.

Now, the place was empty. After his mother had died, William had often felt as though she haunted him still. Her presence was everywhere in the house. Now, it was Catherine, whose spirit seemed to occupy every corner, every piece of furniture, and every slice of sunlight that drifted through the windows and cast light upon the floors.

At his approach, Hannah and Hester straightened in their chairs and turned to him with eager eyes. "Are you going to join us for breakfast?" Hannah asked.

"I am," he replied, taking his seat.

"It is good to have you eat with us," Hester said.

William forced a smile. His mind wandered to Catherine, who had started their shared meals. Hannah and Hester doubtlessly knew that Catherine had left, but he did not know if his sisters were aware of why she had gone. Had Catherine even bid them farewell?

He took a sip of coffee, hoping that the strong drink would cut through the fog of his thoughts, which had descended upon him after Catherine left. William ate a spoonful of eggs next. He ate only because he knew that he must; he barely tasted the food at

all.

“May we...ask a question?” Hannah asked hesitantly.

A sense of foreboding twisted in William’s gut. This question was not going to be a welcome one. “Of course,” he said. “What do you want to know?”

Hannah and Hester exchanged anxious glances, as if trying to silently determine who would be the one to make their query. After a heartbeat, Hannah took a deep breath and tipped her chin up. It was a gesture clearly mimicking Catherine’s mannerisms, and his heart clenched seeing it.

“We were wondering why Her Grace left,” Hannah said. “Hester and I have been talking about it, and we wondered if...if she might have left because...”

“Because of us!” Hester blurted out.

Horror swept over William and chilled him to the bone. “No, no! It is not your fault, not even a little bit! I made a mistake, and that is why Catherine had to leave.”

“What mistake?” Hannah asked.

“Can it be fixed?” Hester inquired.

“No,” William said. “I made the mistake of becoming close to Catherine. I cannot do that, so I had to put everything right. In doing so, I hurt Catherine. She needs some time away from the estate to think about everything.”

Hester furrowed her brow, and Hannah bit her lip. “Why can you not make it right?” Hannah asked.

“Why can you not love Her Grace?” Hester asked. “She is so beautiful and kind and gracious!”

“We are fond of her,” Hannah said. “We are close to her. Is that bad?”

“No,” William replied. “It is not bad that you like Catherine. Not at all!”

“Well, that is good,” Hester said, sounding uncertain.

Hannah nodded. “I...I miss her greatly. I have not felt close to anyone since Mother died. Not besides Catherine.”

Hester sniffed and delicately dabbed at her eyes. “And you,” she said. “I have felt closer to you since Her Grace came into our lives.”

William laughed, at a loss for words. The guilt might eat him alive. He stood slowly and leaned over the table, so he could ruffle his sisters’ hair. “You are both wonderful sisters. No man could possibly ask for better.”

He had never ruffled their hair before, and he delighted in how his sisters’ faces brightened. William took a deep breath and tried to force himself to be steady.

He needed Catherine. She had brought a light into this place, and now, that light was gone.

“Will she be back?” Hannah asked.

“Yes,” William said. “Catherine will not be away forever. She is staying with her family for just a few weeks. Then, she will return to us.”

“That is good,” Hester replied, sighing in relief.

“Yes,” William said.

A tremor of doubt shot like lightning through him. Take your time was what he had said to Catherine as she left. What if she did choose to take her time? What if she never returned at all?

“Are you certain that you cannot be close to her?” Hannah asked.

“Yes!” Hester exclaimed. “Why can we be close to her, but you cannot?”

William shook his head. “It is difficult to explain,” he said. “It is a matter between two married people and something that you will both understand when you are much older.”

“We can understand now!” Hester exclaimed, her eyes widening. “Please, tell us!”

“No,” William said. “But someday, I will tell you. I promise.”

“That is not fair,” Hannah huffed, crossing her arms.

“Nevertheless, it is a personal affair between a husband and wife,” William said, not wishing to burden his sisters with the truth. “Such a thing is not suitable for young ladies to hear. Now, I hope you both enjoy your breakfast. I fear that I have work to finish.”

“Will you join us for supper?” Hannah asked.

“Yes,” he replied. “And tea and dinner.”

Hester grinned. “We will expect you to be here. If we must always be proper ladies, you must be a proper gentleman, and everyone knows that a gentleman always keeps

his word.”

“Of course.”

William smiled until he left the dining hall. Then, he hurried up the stairs, taking them two at a time. He was going to his study, once again. It was still his refuge, and he found that he missed Catherine’s unexpected appearances. An ache throbbed in his chest. Somehow, he had to convince her to come back to him.

He could not have even the smallest inkling of affection for Catherine. He could not endure losing another person. That was an undeniable truth. But...

Had he not lost her already? Catherine was no longer in his life. She was alive, but she was still gone. If he did not act, that distance between them would only grow, and she would become even further away from him. He had always resolved not to have any affection for anyone else, but did he not already bear some affection for her?

It was not love. William did not believe himself really capable of that. He did not even know if he would recognize love. But he knew that he cared greatly for her, and in the weeks following her absence, William had come no closer to making himself have any less affection for her.

He sighed and ran his hands through his hair. Catherine’s absence was driving him mad, and if he did not do something soon, he was going to scream. Somehow, he must persuade her to return.

For his sake and for that of his sisters.

CHAPTER 32

Catherine strongly suspected that Elias had rearranged his entire life around her sudden appearance in London. She knew that he must be quite busy to have left Dorothy and Bridget in the country and to have come to London alone, but Elias acted as though he had no obligations at all outside of being her companion in London.

They went to the theater and the opera. He took her to the shops on St. James and Bond Street. When she mentioned offhandedly how lovely the weather was, he immediately suggested a promenade.

Couples milled about on the path, enjoying the sunshine and warm air. Catherine found that she observed them more than she previously had. Since marrying William, it seemed as if she had learned to watch people more closely and to behave more like a proper lady.

“I am surprised that you did not ask Lady Mathers to join us,” Catherine said slyly. “I am certain that she would have been delightful company.”

Elias cast her a sideways glance. “You seem far too invested in my fondness of Lady Mathers.”

“I find it interesting how much you admire her,” Catherine replied. “You are so sentimental.”

“I am not sentimental,” Elias said.

Catherine shook her head. "I believe that you conspired to keep the young lady away from me, for fear of what I might tell her about you. Did you worry that we might gossip overly? I could tell Lady Mathers some very interesting stories."

"Perhaps, you ought to spend more time thinking about your own romantic prospects," Elias said.

"I have no romantic prospects!" she exclaimed with a laugh. "I am a married woman!"

Elias hummed. He halted abruptly, forcing Catherine to stop with him. Grinning roguishly, he gestured around the bend in the road. "I think you do have romantic prospects."

Catherine inhaled sharply. Time seemed to halt around her, for her own husband William stepped from beneath a sprawling weeping willow. Her eyes eagerly searched over his handsome form, taking in his broad shoulders down to his waist and his legs. William's blue jacket and trousers emphasized his masculine form and heated her blood.

He was there. Catherine could not even determine all the precise thoughts that flew through her head as she beheld him. Why was he in London? How had he even known that she had gone to London? In the next second, Catherine realized that his staff must have told him, but still, she had not anticipated him coming to London.

"Why is he here?" Catherine murmured, clinging to her brother. "He did not inform me that he would be here."

"There is only one reason why," Elias said. "You."

William approached them, his manner casual. Catherine moved nearer to her brother.

She was not afraid of her husband, but the threat of this confrontation filled her with a deep-seated dread. What if William had come to tell her he wished their marriage to be annulled?

Maybe he was not coming to suggest that their marriage be annulled but instead to express how much he missed her. Catherine's pulse jumped. Did he want her still?

"Catherine," he said. "My dear Catherine."

"Oh, am I Catherine , Your Grace?" she asked.

And did that mean he was once again William , rather than Your Grace ? Catherine curled her fingers into her skirts and inhaled deeply, trying to force her scattered thoughts into some order. She had long since learned that if something seemed too good to be true, it often was. But oh , she wanted this to be true!

She wanted William to come with an apology and a declaration of love. Catherine bit the inside of her cheek. William was near enough to touch, and her fingertips twitched with the desire to trace the plains of his chest.

"Yes," William replied, his brow furrowed. "Yes, Catherine. I am so sorry for how I have treated you."

" Oh ," Elias said slyly. "This will be interesting. Am I to learn what has distressed you, after all?"

"This does not involve you," Catherine said.

"If it involves your happiness, it does involve me," he pointed out. "You are my beloved sister."

Catherine shot him a venomous glare, which only received a smirk. She untangled her arm from her brother's and took a tentative step toward her husband. They were only a hairsbreadth apart, and Catherine had to crane her head up to see him.

"I was a coward when I told you to stay away. I was such a fool, Catherine."

Her heart seemed to skip a beat. Catherine did not know if she believed him, but everything inside her ached with the need to believe him. "And what are you now?" she asked.

He chuckled and gave her a helpless look. "A lovesick fool," he replied. "Catherine, I have thought of nothing else, except for you. I have gone mad since you left."

She gasped and put a hand over her mouth, scarcely able to believe those words. "Do you really mean it?"

"Yes," he said. "Yes, I want you. I love you, all of you and nothing less."

Tears formed in Catherine's eyes, hot and stinging. "What changed your mind?" she asked.

"I never changed my mind," he replied. "I have loved you for a long time. It is only that I was afraid to admit it. I have lost so many people in my life, and I could not bear to lose you, also. But I lost you for just a moment when you left, and I realized that I never want to lose you again."

Unthinking, she launched herself into his arms, and he drew her in for a deep kiss. Dimly, she noticed that other couples in the park were staring at them. She suspected that Elias was one of them, but Catherine found that she did not care.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him until her lungs burned from a

lack of air. And he kissed her back with equal fervor, as though he was determined to let that one long kiss make up for all the time that they had lost.

When they broke their kiss, they remained standing close to one another, their chests heaving as heat surged through their bodies. “I love you, too,” Catherine said.

“You have made me the happiest man in the world,” William said.

She smiled. So much happiness filled her that she felt as if she might burst. “Quite a feat, indeed.”

“While I understand your desire to stay with your family, I wondered if I might persuade you to return home with me,” William said.

“I might be persuaded,” Catherine replied, her face warming. “I have missed you, after all.”

William kissed her again. “That makes me happier than you can possibly know.”

Catherine looked over her shoulder and grinned at her brother, whose eyes shone with mischief. “Am I to assume that the matter is resolved?”

“You may,” Catherine said. “I believe that I will be returning home, Elias.”

CHAPTER 33

William could not stop looking at his wife, who reclined across the seat of the coach. He sat opposite her, taking in the sight of her slender throat and trailing slowly down to her full breasts. William shifted forward to the edge of the seat and placed his hands on her hips. Catherine's breath hitched. "William..."

"I had thought to wait until we returned to the estate," he said, his throat choked up with all the emotions surging within him. "But I am unsure if I can wait that long."

Her eyes widened, and color bloomed across her face. Catherine shifted forward and then went onto her knees before him. She traced the plains of his chest with her small hands, her movements smooth despite the bumping and jostling of the carriage along the rough road. "I feel the same way," she murmured, placing a kiss on his collarbone.

He kissed her on the lips. It was not the hard, passionate kiss that they had shared in the park, but instead a gentle and fleeting one that foretold of pleasant things yet to come. "Get on the seat," he murmured.

Catherine eyed him curiously, but she did as he had asked. He grinned. "Spread your legs and let your heels rest on the edge of the seat."

"Oh!" Catherine exclaimed.

She pressed herself back and spread her legs. Without being asked, Catherine heaved up her skirts, exposing herself from the waist down. She shivered, and William's

hungry eyes took in the sight of her pale, slender thighs and the tightly wound brown curls that hid her center.

“Beautiful,” he murmured.

She tilted her head to look at him. “You will have to be creative,” she said. “I do not think you can lay astride me here.”

“No,” he agreed.

William went on his knees before her and traced his fingertips along her thighs, his touch so light that he was certain Catherine only felt the merest pressure from his fingertips. Gooseflesh rose along her skin, and she shifted impatiently. He chuckled against her thigh.

William leaned forward and pressed kisses along her inner thighs, following the same path that he had made with his caresses. He spent an eternity just kissing and petting her thighs, and Catherine shifted beneath his ministrations. She tipped her head back and groaned.

“You are taking forever!” she exclaimed.

“I am building the anticipation,” he said.

Catherine bucked her hips, and William leaned forward. With his tongue, he pressed against that familiar place that made Catherine come undone. She made a rather unseemly shrieking sound and bucked once more against him.

“Oh!” she exclaimed. “Oh! William!”

Her legs shook, and her hips moved wildly. She was wet against his tongue, and with

a cry, Catherine found her release. The proof of her arousal moistened the inside of her thighs, and she gasped for air. As always, Catherine's face was flushed and her eyes bright.

"You always look so wonderfully disheveled when I am finished with you," he said, unfastening his trousers with one hand.

She laughed and shook her head, her lips twitching into a bright smile. Catherine looked at him with mock dismay, as though she could not believe his antics. He took his manhood in hand and slowly ran his hand over it, a low moan tearing from his throat. William traced his thumb over his tip, spurred onward by Catherine's quickening breath.

He was hard, his body begging for release. When he could bear it no longer, he carefully lined himself up to Catherine's entrance and gently pushed past her walls. She groaned lowly. Her nails dug into the cushions, as he pushed himself into her with agonizing slowness.

"Oh, yes..." she breathed shakily. "Oh, please! I want all of you!"

"I know," he murmured.

"Oh, please..."

He sheathed himself firmly inside her and gazed into her face, which was blissfully happy. "I love you," he said, leaning down for a kiss.

She returned his kiss and curled her fingers in his hair, drawing him nearer to her. They kissed again and again, until his member ached. He drew back and pulled himself out. Then, in. William's thighs quivered, and his knees ached. He kept his pace slow and gently, as Catherine's inner walls pressed tightly against him.

“That is so good!” she gasped, tossing an arm over her face. “So very good.”

In and out. William fell into a gentle rhythm, and Catherine’s body warmed. She pressed against them, and together they moved, climbing nearer and nearer to the pinnacle of pleasure. Catherine’s muscles pressed wildly against him, and she found that petit mort once again, crying out in pleasure. A heartbeat later, William found his as well. He spent himself inside her and withdrew, gasping for his own breath.

Catherine gazed at him with a dazed expression. “You were marvelous,” she said. “That was...that is not what you usually do.”

“I thought I should try something different,” he said.

William drew her into his arms, and her head lulled back against his shoulder. He held her and stroked her hair, as the coach rocked beneath them both. Catherine’s eyelashes fluttered. “I believe that you have made me overly tired,” she said. “Now, I shall wish to sleep for the rest of the journey.”

“No one is stopping you,” he murmured, kissing her temple. “I promise that I shall be here when you wake.”

The flush that spread across her face had also spread to her breasts. He fondled them in his hands, and Catherine hummed in pleasure. “Beautiful,” he said again. “My perfect duchess.”

“I am glad you came back for me,” Catherine said, sounding sleepy. “I was so worried that you might hate me.”

“I could never hate you,” William said.

He caressed her waist and traced the lines of her hips. His hands swept over her ribs

and up once more to her breasts. He kissed her cheek and her neck, while she remained pliant in his arms. William decided that this was his favorite version of Catherine, where she was pleased and dazed from his amorous attentions.

“I love you more than anyone,” he said.

“And I love you.” She paused. “What happens next?”

He laughed. “I suppose we learn what it really means to be married, Catherine.”

“We do not already know that?”

“I am not certain if we do or not,” William replied. “I thought I understood what marriage is, but the longer I am wed to you, the less certain I am that I understand.”

“I suppose I feel similarly,” Catherine replied.

He held her through the rest of the journey. Only once they neared the estate did William reluctantly relinquish her. She climbed back into her seat and smoothed over the wrinkles of her dress, smiling mischievously at him. “I hope no one heard us,” she said.

“I doubt it,” he replied, “over the sound of the horses and the road. But if anyone did, I promise that my footman would have chosen to ignore it.”

“How generous of him.”

“Generous, indeed.”

William kissed her once again and squeezed her hand. His throat was tight, and his body surged with joy. He was with Catherine once again. He had admitted that he

loved her, and even better, she loved him.

Everything was just perfect.

EPILOGUE

“It is well past time for us to retire,” Elias said, gesturing for a hug.

Catherine grinned and embraced her brother. His familiar Albany cologne mingled with the scent of Negus and pine.

“Good night,” Catherine said.

“Good night.”

Dorothy, clad in a beautiful white gown embellished with embroidered leaves of holly and red ribbons, hugged her next. “Good night, kitty cat,” she said. “Merry Christmas.”

Catherine hugged her sister tightly. “Merry Christmas.”

It was the first holiday event she had hosted on the estate with William, an intimate Christmas party that would last three days. Her family had arrived on the first day, and it had been a marvelous time. There was joy, games, and laughter. It was almost like the old days, when it had just been her and her siblings. This was better, though. William and the girls had been welcome additions.

It was also very tiring, and as the clock neared midnight, Catherine was grateful to see that her siblings were ready to retire for the night. Hannah and Hester had already fallen asleep, and Bridget had looked tired for the past hour. Catherine had worried that Elias and his seemingly inexhaustible energy might never find sleep, though.

“I love you,” Dorothy said.

“I love you, too.”

Catherine smiled as the butler escorted her brother and sister to their rooms. The space, once cold and forbidding, had been transformed in anticipation of guests. The entire house was decked with holly and ivy in honor of the season.

A pair of arms wrapped around her from behind, and Catherine laughed. She sank back into William’s warm embrace. Her back pressed against his broad, muscular chest. “Tired?” William asked.

“What makes you think that?” Catherine inquired.

“You keep yawning,” William replied, placing a light kiss at the base of her neck.

“I am not too terribly tired,” she said. “Just a little. Having my family here is quite different from how the house usually is.”

“Indeed,” William agreed. “Tell me, dearest. How good do you believe your family’s hearing is?”

Catherine laughed. “Behave yourself,” she said.

William’s chuckle reverberated through his chest. His lips brushed against the shell of her ear. “I can be quiet if you will be,” he murmured. “ You are the loud one, after all.”

She shivered in delight, and her toes curled in her slippers. Heat coiled in her core, as she tried to decide how tired she truly was. Her mind said that she needed to retire to bed, but her body seemed to have other thoughts on the matter. Catherine bent her

knees suddenly, freeing herself of William's embrace. She ducked beneath his arms and turned around, flashing a brilliant smile at him.

"Well, that was something!" he exclaimed with a cheerful laugh.

She grinned. "I appear to have escaped you."

"So you have."

Catherine winked. Then, she turned and ran, her slippers the faintest whisper against the stairs. He thundered behind her and swept her into his arms once again. She gasped and muffled a squeak of surprise as he lifted her off her feet.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed her cheek against his shoulder. "Am I to assume that I will be retiring in your bedchamber tonight?"

"I think that is a safe assumption."

Catherine pressed a kiss to his cheek, as William climbed the stairs. She marveled at his strength, for he never once faltered. Once they reached the top of the stairs, he opened the door to his bedchamber. He crossed the room and placed her on the bed. Her pulse quickened, and she shifted back over the bed. William went to the door and closed it behind him. Then, he returned to her.

Catherine grinned and stretched her arms above her head, something which she knew lifted her breasts and showed her chest off to its best effect. "I will do my best to be quiet," Catherine said.

William's eyes lit up with eagerness. "If you are not, I will have to gag you."

The suggestion sent her blood racing. "Oh!" she gasped.

Maybe she ought to have been horrified, for she had never before heard of such a thing, but instead, a tingle of anticipation spread through her. William climbed into the bed and sat astride her waist. She saw already that his manhood was hard within his trousers. Catherine reached for him and stroked him through the fabric. He tipped his head back and groaned, and Catherine smiled. “Could I make you find pleasure just like that?” she asked.

“Yes,” he replied, catching her hand. “But I prefer to find my pleasure inside of you.”

She grinned, and he kissed her throat. Next, her chin. Finally, he found her lips. Catherine curled her fingers in his hair and kissed him, aware of the sounds they were causing. She did not think that her family would hear, but it was best to proceed with caution.

“I am glad that we will be sharing a bed tonight,” she said between kissing William.

“And why is that?”

“Because it is terribly cold outside.”

He chuckled and kissed her collarbone. “I will warm you up soon enough.”

And he did. They spent their night and much of the morning in bed together, kissing and caressing and pleasuring one another. When the sun rose, Catherine was still awake. She lay with her cheek pressed against William’s chest, while he stroked her hair with gentle and steady strokes.

“I love you,” she mumbled against his chest.

“I love you, too.”

“I want to wake up like this with you every morning,” Catherine said.

“You can.”

He kissed her forehead, and Catherine’s eyes grew heavy. Slowly, she closed them and rubbed her cheek against his chest. Everything was just perfect.

The End?

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:41 am

Catherine Leedway's life was in tatters, like a ship tossed in a violent tempest, and it seemed somehow insensitive—unjust even—that the world around her continued as though nothing was amiss. As she gazed at her parents' freshly dug graves, she thought the sky ought to be overcast and gray. There ought to be rain or hail, even cold and unfeeling snow. But London's sky was defiantly blue and filled with sunlight.

She wrapped her arms around herself, as if that simple gesture might warm the cold that sank like ice into her veins and in her heart. The grief was not constant. It came in uneven waves, crashing over her without warning. She had prepared herself for the funeral, had imagined herself transforming into a girl made of iron.

In four years, she would be introduced to society. She was not a child. Catherine told herself she would face her parents' funeral with composure and dignity. She would not cry like Dorothy, who wept openly and sniffled beside her.

Despite her efforts, Catherine's resolve cracked, and her eyes burned with barely contained tears.

Their older brother Elias Leedway cleared his throat. "I suppose we ought to say our farewells."

Catherine looked askance at him. Elias was only a man of twenty years, but the past few days seemed to have aged him a lifetime. Dark circles lingered beneath his blue eyes, and his shoulders remained slumped. The tiredness in his face and the contrast of his dark hair with his pale skin made him look ill.

The youngest Leedway sibling, Bridget, held his hand. She had seen only eight years, and this was her first experience with death. Her face was red, and her lashes wet with tears.

“Are they really gone forever?” Bridget asked, her voice very small.

“Yes,” Dorothy replied, dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief.

“Who will care for us, then?” Bridget asked.

“I will,” Elias replied, drawing himself up a little. “It will be difficult for a very long time. It will hurt for a very long time. Eventually, it will hurt less, though. We will survive and make our parents proud. I will be the Duke of Reeds, and when you are all of age, I will ensure that you receive suitable marriages. Nothing has to—to change. Those are all the things that our father and mother would have wanted for us.”

“Everything has changed!” Catherine argued. “You cannot claim otherwise!”

Elias looked taken aback, likely startled by her change in temperament. Catherine had remained quiet during the journey to the graves, and when all the ton arrived to offer their condolences and respects. She had scarcely spoken at all since hearing of her parents’ accident. All the while, she boiled with a deep-seated fury that threatened to tear her to pieces. She swallowed hard as her brother’s expression softened. Why could he not look angry or reproachful?

“Catherine,” Dorothy said. “Elias is only trying to comfort us.”

“But he is wrong!” Catherine snapped. “We shall mourn them forever, and nothing will ever be the same again! It is—it is unfair! Our parents were good and kind! Why should we lose them so suddenly? How is that—how is that possible?”

Heat rose to her face. She could not have said whether it was anger at her brother—or maybe her parents for dying—or if it was frustration with herself for not being as unflustered as she wanted.

Her mother had always emphasized the importance of maintaining one's composure. Catherine was the daughter of the Duke and Duchess of Reeds, after all, and she would someday be a lady. She would need to embody the same grace and elegance she had seen in her own mother.

Elias sighed deeply. "Sometimes, Cat, the world is simply unjust. There need not be any particular reason for misfortune."

Catherine shook her head. "I cannot believe that. I will not believe that. There must be some cosmic justice in the world. Otherwise, why does it matter if one is good at all if misfortune may strike without cause or warning?"

"I am sorry that I cannot provide you with a better answer. Man has tried to answer that question for centuries," Elias said. "We may never know for certain."

Catherine shook her head, still wishing to believe that this was all some terrible nightmare from which she would soon awaken, despite all evidence to the contrary. "It is not fair," she repeated.

"I know," Elias said.

"We can do nothing but manage with what life has given us," Dorothy said, as she placed a soothing hand on Catherine's shoulder. "That is what our mother and father would wish for us to do."

Catherine shook her head. She knew that her siblings were only endeavoring to provide some measure of comfort, but she did not believe them. Their words were

heartfelt, but their impact was like a new sprout in the face of winter, doomed to wither and die.

“I am frightened,” Bridget said.

“All will be well.” As Dorothy spoke, she cast Catherine a pleading look.

Do not say such dour things before Bridget, she was saying. If you are going to be so dark and angry, be so within the confines of your own bedchamber.

Catherine grimaced. She did not wish to be cruel to her sister, but it seemed unfair that sorrow was evidently the only appropriate response to grief. What was she to do with her fiery anger? She had not asked for it. Nor had she invited it, but it swept over her like a plague, demanding to be freed and acknowledged.

“Yes,” Catherine said between her gritted teeth. “All will be well in time.”

“We should leave soon,” Elias said. “It is surprisingly cold.”

It was. Catherine bit the inside of her cheek, her gaze fixed upon the graves. She had a wild thought of flinging herself onto the ground and screaming her grief into the world, of beating the earth with her fists, and of cursing God for allowing this to happen. Catherine swallowed past the lump in her throat.

She had sworn to be composed and elegant and good. It would not do to draw the attention of any passersby and embarrass her family in such a manner.

“We should,” Dorothy said. “Besides, we have left poor Mr. Davies and John tarrying for too long.”

Mr. Davies was their father’s solicitor—now Elias’s solicitor—who had come to pay

his respects and to ensure that Elias was prepared to accept the mantle of the Duke of Reeds. John was the coachman, who had only been in their employ for two years. Both men had agreed to wait by the carriage while the Leedway siblings said their last farewells.

“And the horses,” Bridget said.

“Yes,” Elias agreed. “They must be quite chilled by now.”

Dorothy placed her hand on Elias’s arm and pressed her cheek briefly against his shoulder in a small gesture of comfort. “Come, Catherine,” Dorothy said. “When we return to the townhouse, we can ask Cook to make us something warm and filling.”

Catherine swallowed. “May I have just a moment to myself with them?”

Dorothy’s brow furrowed in a familiar gesture of concern. She glanced at Elias, as if seeking guidance, but at last, she sighed. “Yes, Cat. Do not wait too long, though. You do not want to become ill from the cold.”

“I will not,” Catherine said.

“We shall wait for you in the carriage,” Elias said.

“Thank you.”

Catherine watched as her siblings returned to the black carriage. Their black garments and dark hair stood in stark contrast against the too-cheerful. They were like a murder of ravens. After a heartbeat, she returned her gaze to the graves. She took a shuddering breath, bringing with it the scent of wet earth and winter’s decaying plants.

“So,” Catherine said.

That single syllable lingered in the air like a challenge. She could not have said who she was challenging, though. Perhaps, her parents. Perhaps, herself.

“I cannot believe that you are gone,” Catherine said. “I will not believe it.”

How could she? How could she even conceive of a future where her mother was not there to walk through the gardens with her or to fill the estate with her melodic laughter? How could she imagine a world wherein her father did not give her that soft, understanding smile when Catherine behaved in a way people politely called high-spirited? How could she imagine a Season without her parents? A life where her parents no longer descended the grand staircase at Reeds House as the duke and duchess?

“But,” Catherine continued, refusing to fight her tears any longer. “I know that these are your graves. I know that you are dead, and nothing will change that. I only wish that you’d had more time. That I’d had more time.”

Bitterly, Catherine realized that everyone who had lost a loved one probably wished for more time. She rubbed her eyes roughly. It was unfair. All of it was unfair.

“I love you,” she said, her voice shaking. “I love you so much. I always will. I promise that I will try to make you proud. I will try to be a good lady when I am of age.”

Even as she spoke, Catherine felt a tremor of doubt in her soul. Although she was quite young, she already had the inkling that her soul was not that of a proper lady.

“That is...everything,” Catherine said. “I promise that I shall try my very best to be everything that you always wanted me to be.”

She rubbed her eyes once again, dampening her sleeve. At last, she turned away from the graves. Elias waited for her outside the carriage, his hands clasped behind his back. He stood formally and proudly, as though he was already trying to embody all the cold formality expected of his title. Catherine took a steadying breath and followed the short path to the carriage.

John approached to assist her, but Elias dismissed the coachman with a wave. Instead, Catherine's brother opened the carriage door himself and offered her a hand. She took it and climbed the steps into the carriage, seating herself beside Bridget.

Elias entered after her, taking the space beside Dorothy. John closed the door behind him.

Silence fell between the siblings, as heavy as a funeral shroud. At last, Dorothy, who could never bear silence for long, sighed. The sound was small and furtive, as though she had not meant for the others to hear it.

"It will be nice to return to the countryside for a while," Elias said. "It is quieter there. Peaceful."

It was, especially since their world in the past few days had become a seemingly endless parade of condolences and sorrow. To Catherine, it seemed as though all of London had descended upon their townhouse to discuss her parents' deaths, and although she knew that the lords and ladies meant well, Catherine still found herself wishing that they would all leave and never darken Reeds House again.

"Yes," Dorothy said. "I think we will all enjoy some peace. If we are fortunate, maybe the lake will have frozen, and we can skate. What do you think, Bridget?"

The girl's expression brightened. "Oh, I hope so!"

Catherine wanted to do nothing but lie in bed and pretend that none of this was real, but as angry as she was, she did not have the heart to be spiteful towards her youngest sister. She remained silent, as the carriage went over London's old roads, taking the Leedway siblings—Elias, Dorothy, Catherine, and Bridget—far away from London and their parents' freshly dug graves.

CHAPTER 1

“O i, where ye goin’ then, little birdie? Care to come over here for a chat, eh?”

After hearing over a dozen halfhearted calls from the men gathered in pockets here and there in the various doorways and alleys of Whitechapel, Persephone Lovell supposed she ought to have been more accustomed to the crudeness, the implication. At the very least, she should have become a bit more used to the nicknames.

Shady characters, it transpired, were endlessly creative with nicknames.

She picked up the pace of her steps.

“Ah, don’ be like that, chickadee!” the man called, his voice growing more distant with each step. As she hurried out of sight, she heard his friends begin to tease him, their laughter made loud by their intoxication, about how he’d been rejected by “such a fine piece of skirt.”

And here she’d worn her most muted skirt for this little errand.

Once the men’s voices had entirely disappeared into the layered noise of the neighborhood, Persephone debated slowing her steps. She wanted to look inconspicuous, her too-fancy skirt notwithstanding. But she also wanted this, ah, misadventure of hers to come to a swift—and successful— conclusion.

It had to. This had to work.

She wouldn't have done this if she'd had any other choices, after all—or at least not any she could see. She had so little power in this life, something that had become increasingly, brutally obvious to her in the past several months.

This was the only thing she could think of. She could not even let herself consider what she would do if it didn't work.

“Y’a’right there, girlie?”

This was a woman's voice, far gentler than any of the men's had been when they called out to Persephone. She paused, looked around, and nearly jumped out of her skin when she saw a woman lounging in a doorway, gown draped such that it was more suggestion than actual clothing. The entirety of her leg was exposed. Persephone hadn't ever seen a thigh that wasn't her own, and now, she could see...all of one.

She was speaking to a lady of the evening! The idea was a touch thrilling.

“Oh, I beg your pardon,” Persephone said. Her words, like her clothing, likely made it obvious that she was not a native of his neighborhood. And if that hadn't done it, her accent would have given her away.

Barons' daughters might be on the lower end of Society in Mayfair, but she was likely the most gently-bred lady to traverse these streets in the past year.

Gentlemen were another question entirely which was what brought Persephone here in the first place.

The woman frowned at her.

“Cor, miss, this ain't no place for ya,” the woman said. She moved a step forward,

into the light, and Persephone caught a glimpse of tired eyes accentuated by heavy kohl and rouge. “How’d ya get y’self so lost that y’ended up down these parts?”

“Oh, I’m not lost,” Persephone said hastily. Best to make herself seem confident, even if she was plagued with little more than doubts knit together with determination—and desperation.

“No?”

“No,” she said firmly, only to realize...yes, actually. She was a tiny bit lost. “But,” she said, raising her chin, “if you would point me in the direction of the club Underworld, I would be much obliged.”

Even in the dim light, she saw the woman’s eyes go wide.

“Naw, miss, that place ain’t for the likes of you,” she said, accentuating her words with a sharp jerk of her head that made it clear that her ringlets were a wig, not her own locks. “You don’ wan’ to be goin’ over there. T’is a right rough place, miss. Right rough.”

Persephone fought the urge to wince.

“Right rough” was very likely the most common descriptor for Underworld, one of the most notorious gambling clubs in London. It was the kind of place discussed in whispers, even among the more daring gentlemen of the ton , all of whom both desired to see and be seen at the gaming hell...even as they feared the hit to their reputations if they were too frequently associated with the place.

In some ways, the idea made Persephone smile. It was nice to think that gentlemen could fret about their reputations for once, instead of leaving those woes as the exclusive purview of ladies.

Or, it might have made her smile, if not for her current errand.

“Just so, madam,” she said to the woman. Being polite never hurt. “Do you know where I can find the establishment from here?”

The woman did not seem reassured. “I’ve a daughter meself,” she said, wringing her hands. “And she’s no highborn lassie, I need not tell ya that.” Her self-deprecating laugh was tinged with just a hint of bitterness. “But I’d not send my own girl to Underworld, mark my words. Makes me think I’d best not be sending you, either, well-bred as ya seem to be.”

In better circumstances, Persephone might have decided to get a little more high-minded about this. It was as though low-born girls deserved any less protection than high-born ones after all. But time really was of the essence, and what Persephone needed at the moment was instructions, not a philosophical debate.

“Madam,” she repeated. “Please. I—I have business with the owner.”

The woman’s mouth dropped open. “Business? With the owner of Underground? ”

She sounded approximately as incredulous as Persephone felt about the whole thing, and she’d had weeks to accustom herself to the idea.

“I’m afraid so,” she said.

The woman gnawed at a lip, smearing her cheap rouge.

“Please,” Persephone said softly. She knew she sounded desperate, and maybe that revealed more than she ought, but she didn’t care. She couldn’t afford to care. She needed to get to Underworld, needed to set her proposal to the proprietor...

Or else everything would be lost.

And perhaps this woman spoke that language. Persephone could imagine that she did, given the roughness of her profession in such a brutal neighborhood.

Because the woman sighed then looked askance, as if deliberating. It was almost impossible to wait, but Persephone did, terrified that any action on her part would put the woman off her purpose.

“Fine,” she said at last. “I can’t say that I like it, miss, but...fine.” She pointed out of the alley toward a larger road. “If ya take this route down thataways, you’ll down to a big cross street. Go down to the left a ways, and you’ll see it. Can’t miss it. Jes’ look for the place with all the high-nosed gents hanging about, tryin’ to act as though they belong here any more’n you do.”

Persephone could not say she was thrilled by the vagueness of “thataways,” nor the non-specificity of the distances she was meant to travel, but she did like the sound of something she would be unable to miss.

“Thank you,” she said fervently. “Thank you.” She scrabbled for the hidden pockets inside her skirt where she’d tucked some of the little coins she had left from her pin money. She pulled out a few, and offered them to the woman.

She hesitated.

“I feel I ought not take from ya if ye’re in as dire straits as all that,” the woman said though she did ultimately reach to take the coins from Persephone’s hand. “But I’m not one to turn down coin freely given.”

Persephone didn’t have anything to say that wouldn’t sound insulting, so she merely reiterated her appreciation.

“I thank you,” she said again. She turned to head in the direction that the lightskirt had indicated.

“There’s still time to change yer mind!” the woman called after her.

Persephone didn’t let these words stop her.

Because it was far, far too late for her to change her mind. It didn’t matter how foolish this was, didn’t matter that she was scared half out of her wits.

She had to get into Underworld. There was simply no other choice.

CHAPTER 2

“I did not expect to see you out here this evening, Your Grace.”

Hugh Blackwood, the Duke of Nighthall and the unfortunate proprietor of this den of iniquity, winced upon hearing his title. He always did when he was at Underworld. It always served to remind him that no matter how hard he tried to keep his two worlds separate, they would inevitably eventually collide.

Hugh didn't know if Martin O'Connell, his right-hand man at Underworld these past years, insisted upon using Hugh's title to remind him of this dreaded eventuality or if he did so just to be a pain in Hugh's arse. Knowing the clever, contrarian Irishman, it could go either way.

Despite the formal invocation of Hugh's ancestral title, Martin was not shy about taking a place next to Hugh on the small balcony that overlooked the main gambling floor of Underworld. It was a tucked-away little nook outside the owner's office, one where a man could see without being seen—or at least not witnessed overmuch. Hugh preferred to maintain a low profile. Martin was the visible presence of the club, not Hugh.

“Hm, one of the dealers told me there might be trouble,” Hugh said, not taking his eyes from the bustling crowd below.

Immediately, any hint of playfulness vanished from Martin's expression.

“What kind of trouble?” he asked.

Hugh had never gotten the details of what had made Martin leave Ireland for London—he'd never asked—but he had the sense that the man had found himself on the wrong end of some kind of trouble. But some instinct had told Hugh to trust Martin from the start, and he'd never had reason to regret that decision. Whatever problems Martin had seen in his home country, they had made him a damn good club manager which was all Hugh needed to know until Martin decided to tell him otherwise.

God knew a man was entitled to his secrets. Sometimes, Hugh felt every part of his life was secret from someone or other.

Still, Martin's intensity wasn't needed at the moment, so Hugh waved a hand.

"Just the usual kind," he said. "Rowdy men who don't like to hear that they've lost, let alone that they have to pay their debts."

Martin hummed thoughtfully then rapped his knuckles against the hardwood railing which was, as always, polished to a smooth shine.

"Well, we'll keep an eye out," he said, "and if we need to send one of the boys to throw someone out on his arse, that's what we'll do."

Hugh started to nod—it was standard procedure, and it worked extremely well; gentlemen feared being embarrassed in front of their peers above all others—but, as if on cue, one of the men he paid well to keep a keen eye came up to the balcony. The owner's balcony wasn't forbidden to staff by any means, but nobody except Martin ever came up here unless they were compelled to do so.

The men respected Martin and feared him a little...but they outright feared Hugh.

Most people did.

“Beggin’ yer pardon, Mr. O’Connell, My Lord,” said the man in a thick Irish accent. Martin handled the hiring and brought in many of his countrymen. Indeed, Hugh had so little to do with the day-to-day workings of the staff that most of them did not know his true name or title—though they all recognized that he was a member of the aristocracy.

“What is it, McCreedy?” Martin asked.

“Trouble,” the lad said succinctly. “Down at the table in the west quarter. Two gents are gettin’ into it with a third. Same two as were hasslin’ one of the girls, earlier.”

Hugh’s mouth set into a grim line. He might not like that working women came to Underworld, but he had barely opened the club before he realized that there was no way to avoid their presence entirely. If he didn’t permit them in the club, they would loiter outside, waiting for the wealthy patrons of the club to exit.

Out there, he had no power. In here, at least, he could deliver a swift kick to anyone who thought they could take liberties as they wished just because those women sold their attentions.

“Who was the lass?” Martin asked, standing upright in a way that promised violence.

“Bessie—but she’s a’right,” McCreedy hastened to add. “More mad than shook up even.”

Martin nodded sharply, but nothing about him relaxed. He pushed away from the banister, only stalling his movements when Hugh put a quelling hand on his arm.

“I’ll handle this one, Martin,” he said. “I’m here. I may as well.”

His casual words did nothing to hide the ice in his tone. Trouble was an unavoidable

part of this sordid business, but he still couldn't help but resent whenever someone—usually a drunk, entitled someone—brought extra disruption into the gaming hell.

Martin gave him an understanding nod then turned back to the balcony. Hugh understood the meaning behind the subtle movement. Martin would have his back whenever he needed it.

“Right,” McCreedy said, a touch of nerves in his voice. “Just this way, then, M’Lord.”

Hugh heard the trouble before he saw it—two upper crust accents, slurred with liquor, arguing about a hand of cards. It wasn't serious—he could already tell by the way the dealer was looking bored and annoyed, not upset or concerned—but it was a disruption.

“Gentlemen,” he said icily, approaching them until they had to look up at his considerable height. “What seems to be the problem?”

There was only one correct answer to this. The men, were they possessing anything like good sense, should immediately deny any problem whatsoever and then remove themselves from his club posthaste.

They were either too drunk or too stupid to realize this—or perhaps both.

Immediately, both men launched into protests and accusations.

“He cheated?—”

“He's a liar?—”

“Gentlemen,” Hugh said again, a little bit more loudly and a little bit more forcefully. “Before you continue, please allow me to reacquaint you with one of the rules of our establishment. Did you know that anyone who is accused of cheating on the premises will be removed and will have his membership revoked. That said, allow me to ask you once more. What seems to be the problem?”

For a blink, he thought the men were going to get it. He thought they were going to do the smart thing.

Instead, they looked at one another and bristled in unison.

“Who the hell do you think you are?” one demanded.

“Do you know who we are?” sputtered the other.

Hugh smiled broadly at them. One of them had the good sense to look concerned at this.

Sometimes, Hugh really enjoyed having that kind of effect on people.

“I cannot say that I do,” he said, bitingly pleasant. “But I think you will find that it does not highly matter who you are. What matters is who I am. And I am the man who controls whether or not you are permitted to frequent this establishment. And, beyond that, I am the man who pays the wages of the fellows behind you?”

The concerned one, the one who had half a lick of sense, whipped his head around with comical speed. Hugh found he was still not in a laughing mood, however, not even when one of the waiting toughs he employed gave the fancy cove a jaunty little salute.

That hire had Martin written all over him. They had the same impish sense about

them at the worst bloody moments.

“—which means,” Hugh went on, “that I am the man who is going to have you escorted from this club. Now, if you wish to tell me who you are after all, I’m sure I can make a note on your membership files, but...”

“No, no,” the smarter one said. “No, we’ll leave.”

He tugged on his companion’s arm. The second man looked like he considered putting up more of a fight, but when one of the toughs grabbed onto his other arm, he went easily enough toward the door.

Hugh trusted his employees to take things from there.

When he turned, however, he saw that his show had garnered an audience. There were perhaps a dozen pairs of curious eyes staring at him.

Hugh gave another smile, this one just as razor-tipped as the last.

“And that is why,” he said with a mocking lilt, “ you don’t challenge the man who controls the drinks. And, on that note, why don’t we raise a glass on the house, eh, gentlemen?”

This offer was met with a raucous cheer from the assembled patrons and a bustle of motion from the staff as they hurried to make good on Hugh’s offer.

The sounds of the club quickly returned to normal, the gasps of victors and the groans of losers. There was laughter and bickering, yes, but nothing that spoke of true animosity. Hugh was sure things weren’t settled for the night, however. As the hours wore toward morning and the players fell deeper into their cups, conflict was inevitable.

But for now, all was well.

Hugh returned to his place on the balcony where Martin was doing a weak job of attempting to hide his smile.

“You do like your drama, don’t you, Your Grace?” he asked. “You sure set them to scrambling; it was fun to watch.”

“I can still sack you, you know,” Hugh muttered without any real heat—nor without the ice he preferred when dealing with unruly patrons.

“Oh, aye, sure,” Martin said, outright chuckling now. “And then you can manage all the staff and order the drinks and order new decks of cards. Oh, plus the daytime staff, don’t forget them?—”

“Oh, shut your mouth, you smart Irish bastard,” Hugh said. “You’ve made your point; you can’t be replaced. Don’t be smug about it.”

Martin did fall silent, but he did so with a distinctly smug air.

“Nobody would fault you for finding a bit of entertainment yourself,” Martin said after a few beats. “You know?—”

“Enough,” Hugh said wearily. It was a well-worn argument between them. Martin seemed to labor under the delusion that Hugh’s social life was lacking in some way—which was bloody rich, indeed, coming from a man who practically lived at the club.

Hugh might be busy, but he was still a duke living in London, a town packed to the rafters with widows and actresses. He wasn’t celibate for Christ’s sake.

Though Martin was not entirely without a point, Hugh supposed. It had been...not a short time since he'd last had a lover.

Hugh was certain that his friend had a retort to this, and indeed Martin opened his mouth to say something that never made it past his lips. Instead, his gaze caught on something below so sharply that Hugh followed the glance on instinct.

At first, he didn't see it. And then, all of a sudden, he did.

Well, she didn't belong here, now did she?

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 10:41 am

This place was...

Well, Persephone was seeing too many things at once to properly focus on any one of them.

There were men, dozens of men, far more than she'd ever seen in any ballroom. And they were acting brashly, laughing loudly, shoving one another playfully. These were gentlemen, and they were behaving like farm boys playing an illicit game of mob football when they were meant to be tending to their chores.

And that was just the men themselves. There were also women, some of whom were dressed in such a way that they made Persephone's aide in the alley look like she was recently from the convent.

Plus the money . The players were all using tokens, of course—Underworld's allure was that it put an upper-crust veneer on the, well, underworld where these illicit acts took place. It was the threat of the sordid without its reality. It was a place that aristocrats could come to play at being a common man without any of the...unpleasantness that came along with poverty.

Persephone was no thief—would that she were; it would solve a lot of her problems—but watching all that money be thrown away over something as stupid as a hand of cards made her fingers itch to turn to a life of crime.

“Excuse me, miss. Can I help you?”

Persephone turned at the sound of a polite voice with an Irish lilt to see a tall, thin

man looking down at her with a curious air, one tinged with impatience.

Persephone resisted the urge to turn tail and run. She'd come this far. She wouldn't falter now. She couldn't.

So she raised her chin and looked him square in the eye.

"Good evening, sir," she said. "I need to speak with the owner of this establishment."

The man before her looked unimpressed.

"Miss," he said, "I don't think that's possible. In fact, I don't think anything is possible here for you tonight. You should leave. Shall I call you a carriage?"

Part of her wanted, with a desperation that bordered on compulsion, to stomp her foot in irritation. The only thing that spared her was the desire to not look like a petulant child.

But, goodness. Did everyone have to stand in her way this evening? She hadn't even reached her greatest hurdle yet. Could someone not just be the tiniest bit agreeable?

"Sir," she said in the same tone he'd used when saying miss, "I must insist. In fact, I plan to stay directly in this spot—" She pointed at her feet for emphasis. "—until I speak to the man who owns this establishment."

She knew who he was, this mysterious owner, for all that he carefully shrouded himself in secrecy. She would reveal this knowledge if she needed to, but she preferred to maintain discretion—if only because it might buy her a tiny bit of goodwill.

Lord only knew she could use every ounce of the stuff she could get.

“Miss,” the man repeated, this time with a stronger hint of warning in his voice.

“You shall have to forcibly remove me,” she said, hoping she wasn’t giving him ideas. Most gentlemen would rather eat their own hats than lay hands upon a lady in such a manner, particularly in the eye of so many witnesses, but Persephone couldn’t necessarily say that this man was a gentleman.

Nor that gentlemanly behavior could be generally expected in a place like this one, regardless of the birth of the man she addressed.

Still, she held his gaze, trying to show more bravery than she felt.

Just when she began to worry that she could not stand strong any longer, the man dropped his chin, giving his head a rueful shake.

“Fine,” he said. “You want to go see the owner? I shall take you to him.”

Though Persephone knew she should be grateful that she was getting what she wanted, she balked at this, if only a little bit. It was one thing to go to an uncertain location when it was under her own direction. She didn’t like the idea of being led to a place not of her choosing.

“He cannot see me here?” she tried.

The Irishman gave her a look that said she was really stretching her luck.

“He cannot,” he said dryly. “He rarely comes down to the gaming floor while the club is open. You can see him in his study or not at all.”

Drat.

“And his study is...on the premises?” she clarified.

Was she flattering herself that the man seemed impressed with her cheek? She probably was, but it gave her a boost of confidence, so she decided to keep up with the self-deception.

“It is,” the man said.

Persephone did not like this. She really very well and truly did not like this. She suddenly felt all the echoes and warnings she’d received—from herself then from the woman from the alley and even from this man—echoing in her head.

What had she been thinking? She was going to end up... Oh, she probably was too naive to even know what kind of problems girls like her got into in places like these. Did people get stabbed at gaming hells? There was probably a stabbing every evening, wasn’t there? Or she’d be robbed! She didn’t have anything to steal, but that would probably enrage the thieves, hence the stabbing!

She’d have nobody to blame but herself when she ended up robbed and stabbed. Herself and her father, she supposed.

The wry Irishman was looking at her expectantly. And Persephone was stubborn beyond comprehension, it turned out.

No doubt they’d put that on her tombstone after this all went wrong.

“Very well,” she said. “Take me to him.”

The man turned, mumbling something under his breath that sounded like the words just as dramatic . Persephone decided not to ask.

She kept her wits about her as she followed the man off the main casino floor and toward a staircase that wound around the large, high-ceiling room. Once they reached the second floor, the carpeting grew lusher and springier beneath her feet. The

interior, fine down below, grew...not necessarily nicer, but less clearly disturbed by hundreds of passersby each evening.

When they came upon a large oak door, ornately carved and its brass handles polished to a perfect shine, Persephone amended this assessment.

This place wasn't elegant. It was terrifying .

And this man—whose name she hadn't even asked , which now seemed like a grievous oversight—didn't even hesitate before opening the door and letting himself in. Persephone took a steadying breath, smoothed her skirts hastily, and then followed him inside, coming face to face with?—

Nobody.

She drew up short.

She thought the man might have snickered at her. Rude, that.

“Please, miss,” he said, sounding distinctly amused. Truly very rude! “Wait here. His Grace will be with you soon.”

Persephone nodded, trying not to grimace.

“Good, thank you,” she said.

The man turned from her then slipped out the door, quick and silent as a wisp of smoke.

Leaving Persephone there to await her fate.

“There's a lady in your study.”

For the second time that night, Hugh found himself approached by Martin on the balcony.

This time, however, he was far more confused by his second in command's arrival.

"Well, get her out," he said, wondering why Martin hadn't already done so. "The girls know they're not allowed in my study."

Some of the workers at the club had tried to get his attention before of course. They might not know precisely that he was the Duke of Nighthall, but women who made their money by men's favor knew how to detect a fat purse and were willing to take risks to try to earn some of that coin for themselves.

Hugh didn't blame women for selling one commodity that couldn't be taken from them. He knew well that most of them had been driven to desperate circumstances and that they hadn't taken to the world's oldest profession by choice.

But he didn't pay for company, and he certainly didn't do so at his place of business. There were some lines a man could not cross, and taking advantage of a vulnerable woman in that way was one that Hugh would not stomach.

Martin gave him a disgusted look, the one that Hugh received whenever he underestimated his second in command.

"Give me some credit," Martin drawled. He never had been one to leave it unsaid when Hugh made an error. It was annoying in its own way, but after a lifetime of people kowtowing to his rank, it was also refreshing. "It's not one of the working girls. It's a lady."

This caught Hugh's attention.

"A... lady lady?"

Martin's look was even more disgusted now. "Is there another kind?"

Well, no, Hugh, suppose not.

"What's she doing there?" he demanded.

Martin shrugged, his look shifting to one of delight.

"I didn't ask," he said. "I tried to send her on her way, and she very stubbornly insisted that she needed to speak to the owner of this establishment."

"You didn't ask," Hugh echoed flatly.

"Thought I'd leave that treat for Your Grace's pleasure," Martin said with a sweeping bow.

The cheeky bugger.

And yet...

Yet, Hugh could not deny that his curiosity was piqued, just a little bit.

"Fine," he said. "But if she causes a problem, I'm leaving it for you to clean up."

"That's less a threat than you think, considering it's my whole job," Martin returned grandly.

Well, at least someone was enjoying himself.

He entered his study on quiet feet, the well-oiled hinge on the secret back door opening soundlessly. No lawman was likely to raid a gambling club owned by a duke, but it was always better to be prepared, just in case.

And sometimes secret entrances came in handy for matters like observing sweetly curved redheads from behind.

She was staring intently at the main door, her posture rigid and her hands balled into fists. She was dressed modestly, in dark, unassuming colors, but her clothes were too fine a quality to mistake her for any of the usual classes of women who frequented the Underworld.

So it was true, then. There was a lady in his club.

Hugh let a little smirk tease about his lips. Perhaps Martin wasn't the only one who would enjoy this evening after all.

* * *

"You will be more comfortable if you sit, you know." The voice came from behind her—from too close behind her.

She jumped so violently that she feared, for a split second, that she was about to topple over. Bad enough that she'd been taken by surprise; she didn't need to meet the fearsome Duke of Nighthall, the dreaded owner of the Underworld, from a crumpled heap on the floor. When she turned to face him, balance regained, she fixed a look on her face that she hoped looked fierce rather than startled.

"You snuck up on me!" she accused. She could not afford to be on the back foot.

Even though it was...tough not to feel that way, given the whole, ah, overall, erm, look of him.

Oh, fine. She admitted it. He was handsome as could be. He was tall, dark, and forbidding, and he had an air of absolute authority. He had broad shoulders and heavy brows and dark, dark eyes. And dark, thick hair, and—and what had happened to her

vocabulary? Certainly she had, at some point in her life, known a word other than dark .

For all his intimidating looks, the man made no move to menace her as he entered through a space that she had previously assumed to be a tapestry.

What kind of gothic novel nonsense was this? Dark, brooding heroes and secret passageways?

Oh, dear. Did this mean she was the naïve heroine who ended up losing everything because she was taken away by her passions? No, no, she was entirely without passions. She would be fine, surely. She just had to stay focused.

In pursuit of this focus, she gazed a few inches past his shoulder. Hm, that was a nice painting he'd hung over there. Very soothing. It probably provided a nice counterpart to all the hubbub she'd witnessed downstairs.

"I came in through the door," he commented mildly. "I can't say it's my fault you were looking at the wrong door."

She glowered. This, tragically, led her to the mistake of meeting his eye.

Still dark. Still fathomless.

Alas.

"Would you like to sit?" he asked, gesturing to the twin chairs across from his desk.

She looked quickly between both doors then glanced over at the chairs. They were inopportunistically placed to keep an eye on the entrances, something she could only assume was intentional. But she was no fool—she was not a tragic heroine, no matter her environs. She shook her head and repositioned herself. This time, both entrances

were in her eyeline.

Was she deluding herself when she thought she saw a flicker of approval cross his face?

The Duke sunk into his own chair, minimizing his height. Well, that was helpful. She no longer felt like she was speaking to a leviathan. Or not as much at least.

A beat. Then another.

And... Persephone found she didn't have the right words. Belatedly, she realized that she hadn't actually expected to make it this far.

"I hear you needed to speak with me," he said when she didn't do anything besides fidget anxiously.

"I...yes." She cleared her throat, fidgeted some more, and only then looked him in the eyes. They really were the most intriguingly deep color. She took a deep breath. "My name is Persephone Lovell. My father is Baron Fielton."

She saw the moment he understood. He didn't move, not an inch, but she could practically see tallies and sums running through his mind. None of them looked good, not to her, not to him. That much, she knew.

"Your father owes a great deal of money to this establishment," he said without inflection.

Her eyes flickered away, embarrassed but then returned to him. She'd made it into this office. She would not flinch now.

"Yes," she said. There was no excuse to be made, so she would not try to manufacture one. Her father had gambled far past what was reasonable, far past what

was imaginable . He'd lost a fortune and then kept losing.

And he hadn't repaid any of it.

"I had to terminate his membership for dereliction of payment," Hugh added.

"Yes," she said again. "And...thank you for that."

Hugh arched an eyebrow. "I didn't do it for your sake, Miss Lovell. I did it because this is a business. Your father failed to pay. I am not going to lose further funds just to satisfy a man's desire to waste a fortune on a roll of dice."

"Right," she muttered, fidgeting again. That was...extremely reasonable. Of course, it hadn't been to protect her father. "Right, of course. Well, I have come here tonight, Your Grace—" An eyebrow quirked as she realized that she knew his identity, something she knew was not precisely a secret but which wasn't public knowledge, either. "—to...ask for leniency."

Hugh grimaced. "Your father sent you here in hopes that a pretty face would compel me to forgive his debts?"

She felt her eyes grow wide as saucers. He couldn't really think?—

"I—no! No!" She shook her head hard enough that one of her curls dropped free from her pins. "No, my father doesn't know I'm here."

Goodness, she could only imagine. She didn't know what was worse, the idea that her father would have stopped her from coming here, thereby dooming her family, or the thought that he might have encouraged her to come—despite the danger, despite the risk to her reputation. She feared that this last confirmation that he didn't care for her a whit would crush her.

“I just wanted to ask...if we could have more time,” she stammered. “Or if there is some new way of payment. Something. Anything that I can do that will help.”

She didn’t have that many skills, but maybe she could offer something . Dukes didn’t need lessons in French or anything of the sort, but he wasn’t married. Maybe he would like help...hosting an event? Planning menus? She didn’t have any good ideas, but maybe he did.

“Miss,” he said sternly, “you cannot make that kind of offer in this kind of establishment. Another man might take it the wrong way.”

Briefly, her brow furrowed in confusion, then she blanched. Oh, Lord. Oh, Lord . He’d thought she was trying to—that she meant to...

That she meant to trade her person for his payment. And, yes, the woman that Persephone had met in the alley had been perfectly lovely, had been far more caring of a stranger than she’d needed to be. But that didn’t mean that Persephone intended to follow the woman’s career path! That she meant to make a lightskirt of herself.

She nearly choked on her own surprise.

“I—no! That’s not what I meant at all,” she said. “I just thought...”

He sighed. “You thought I might be driven to pity. You thought I might be driven to forgive the debt—never mind that collecting these debts is the entire basis of my business—just because you asked? You thought you were, what? More important than the people who work here—more important than their families? Their livelihoods?”

“No, I?—”

“You thought that I might be swayed by your foolishness in showing up here? In

letting yourself into such a dangerous place, into making such a dangerous world?”

“That’s not what?—”

“Or maybe you wanted a taste of the darkness yourself,” he mused. “Maybe your father’s desires have rubbed off on you more than you want to admit. Maybe you?—”

“Would you let me answer!” she snapped. “Or are you so enamored of the sound of your own voice that you prefer to hold conversations without a partner!”

The Duke didn’t reply, and the silence after her retort was cavernous. It took scant seconds for her ferocity to fade into horror at her outburst.

“I—I beg your pardon, Your Grace,” she said.

The pause after her apology was endless. He looked her up and down, his gaze appraising and deliberate. She fought, with every iota of her being, not to twitch under that probing glare. She would have given all the money to her name—which was not much but still—to know what he was thinking.

He stood. He towered over Persephone in this position, even with the desk between them. Persephone wasn’t necessarily diminutive, but she wasn’t tall either.

Next to the Duke, she felt positively tiny.

Even so, she didn’t falter. She couldn’t. She just pressed her lips tight and clenched her hands into fists again. The pinch of her nails against the meat of her palm oriented her.

“You have come here,” he said slowly, thoughtfully, “to ask to find a new way to repay your father’s debts.”

“Yes,” she agreed cautiously. There was something highly dangerous about the look in his eye. She didn’t have to be an expert in men to know that much. “I mean...not the way you implied—” She could feel the burning brightness of her blush. “—but yes.”

“And you will do so in any way in your power—except of course,” he added mockingly, “for the way that I implied.”

She paused, looking as though she were hunting for any hidden meaning in his words. And she probably deserved the little jibe. The whole situation was... It was madness.

“Yes,” she said after a moment. “If it will help my family...then yes.”

The gleam of triumph in his eyes made her acutely nervous.

“In that case,” he said, “there is something you can do.”

“Yes?” she asked, wide-eyed and breathless.

“Yes,” he said. “You can marry me.”