



A Duchess Mistaken

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Category: Historical

Description: "Only you can stop this marriage, Your Grace..."

To get out of a doomed engagement, Agnes needs help from the most unlikely source: her betrothed's brother, the most brooding, infuriating Duke of the ton.

Duke Jonathan is willing to do anything to protect his brother. Even work with a meddling, enraging lady, who haunts his every thought...

They have ten days to put an end to this marriage. If only they could stop fighting...

and keep their hearts from wandering into the most dangerous of paths...

*If you like powerful Dukes, loving Duchesses and a marvelous depiction of the majestic Regency and Victorian era, then A Duchess Mistaken is the novel for you.

Total Pages (Source): 36

CHAPTER 1

Johnathan was going to throttle his brother.

He paced back and forth in the foyer, glancing up at the clock every few seconds. No matter how many times he looked at it, time didn't seem to be moving. All it did was anger him to know that it was this late and his blasted brother was not yet home.

Did he not realize how important this was?

Johnathan raked his hands through his hair, desperate to get out some of the anxious energy thrumming through his body. He wanted to go for a ride. Or at least work out some of his frustrations through fencing. Maybe Christopher could be his partner. Or at least his training dummy. Right now, the thought of poking a few holes in his brother sounded very satisfying.

"Perhaps he was in an accident, Your Grace," came the slightly trembling voice of his housekeeper. She hovered on the edge of the foyer, rubbing her hands together. She kept darting at the clock as well, her nervousness palpable enough to drive Johnathan further insane.

"That is not what I wish to hear right now, Mrs. Adams," Johnathan grumbled, pausing his pacing for a second to look at the clock again. It was nearing ten in the night. Where in God's name was he?

"Forgive me, Your Grace," she murmured, but her apprehension was still evident in her voice.

“It is likely that time simply got away from him,” Johnathan went on. “You know how callously he treats his responsibilities. I would not be surprised if he has not even remembered what should be happening this evening.”

“It is a good thing that the viscount and his family have not yet arrived then.”

Yes, that was a good thing, but only in that regard. The Viscount of Sutton and his family should have arrived two hours ago. They had not sent word of their delay so Johnathan could only hope they had not decided against coming. He didn’t even want to consider that thought, though. It would cause more distress.

Suddenly, the telltale sound of stones crunching under wheels came from outdoors. Johnathan stalked to the window to see one of his carriages at the front of the castle. Johnathan muttered a curse under his breath and marched out the front door.

He made it down the steps just in time to see his brother stumble out of the carriage, nearly falling to his knees. Johnathan reared to a halt in horror.

“By God, man, are you drunk?” he exclaimed.

Christopher squinted up at him, quite a feat considering it was nighttime and they were under the cover of darkness, with most of the moonlight blanketed by the clouds. The glow of the candlelight from the manor must have been enough, however, because Christopher released a sloppy grin.

“Ah, Brother, you have arrived just in time,” he slurred. He reached out a hand. “Help me walk, will you? I fear I will not make it to the door without skinning at least one knee.”

“I should be the one skinning you,” Johnathan seethed. “Do you not realize how late it is?”

Christopher blinked up at the sky. “Nighttime, is it not?”

“It is after ten at night! Have you forgotten that the Viscount of Sutton will be visiting us?”

Christopher gave him a blank look. “The Viscount...”

“Oh, for God’s sake, get inside. I would hate for them to arrive to see you out here like this.”

Johnathan ignored the hand his brother held out to him and stepped to the side, crossing his arm. Christopher heaved a heavy sigh, as if the world’s burden had been placed on his shoulders, and staggered his way into Claymore Castle. Johnathan followed closely behind, barely able to hold in his anger.

“Mrs. Adams,” Johnathan called. She rushed up to attention. “Help my brother to his chambers, please.”

“Certainly, Your Grace.” She hesitated then added, “What of the viscount’s visit?”

“I loathe to see their faces when they witness my brother’s inebriation,” Johnathan snarled. “I would not be surprised if they turned back around.”

“Don’t be so pessimistic, Brother,” Christopher sighed. He leaned heavily against the balustrade of the staircase. “They would not even know. I am quite good at pretending I am fine. See?”

He straightened, pulling on his cravat. Johnathan assumed he was attempting to straighten it but all he did was make it undone. Christopher cleared his throat, raised his chin, and then stuck out his hand.

“Good evening, my lord...”

He trailed off. Johnathan narrowed his eyes. Perhaps he might have been tempted to believe him if Christopher hadn't slurred his words and had forgotten who he was pretending to address.

“Go off to bed, Christopher,” Johnathan said, trying to contain his frustrations.

Christopher nodded and the movement threatened to throw him off- kilter. He grabbed the balustrade again to regain his balance and Mrs. Adams reached a hand out to steady him.

Johnathan watched as his brother was assisted up the stairs. The entire process took a few more seconds than it should have and it only seemed to upset him even more. He'd always known that Christopher was rather irresponsible. He supposed he could even blame himself for that to an extent. But he didn't think that Christopher would have been so thoughtless to go far in his cups on such an important day as today.

Christopher hadn't had to think about much in truth. Ever since Johnathan inherited the title of Duke of Claymore three years ago, both brothers had learned to cope with their father's sudden death in their own way. Johnathan threw himself into the role, ensuring that he took care of everything that was within his purview. Truly, all that meant was managing his funds while simultaneously pouring nearly everything they had into paying off his father's debts. Debts Johnathan hadn't even known existed until after he found his father's dead body in his study.

Christopher's way of coping with the death was indulging in every manner of debauchery he could. From drinking to rakish tendencies to even underground fights. The only thing Christopher didn't do—much to Johnathan's relief—was gambling. He knew better than to let himself fall into the same position their father apparently had.

The dowager duchess coped with the loss in a completely different manner. Irene Harken had always been a bit whimsical, with her head in the cloud and a smile quick to her lips. It was unnerving to see how quickly she'd fallen to earth and how cold she'd become because of it.

Johnathan began pacing the foyer again. This was not the ideal situation. He'd meant for him and his family to greet the viscount as a united and happy front, having come out even closer together after the sudden death of the late duke. Instead, his brother was drunk and his mother had retired early saying she was in no mood for company.

But it was better than the alternative, he supposed. If he'd forced either of them to be present, his brother would embarrass the family and his mother would not pay anyone any mind.

It was better this way, he thought at last. He could always apologize for their absence.

He glanced up at the clock again, wondering why the viscount was taking so long. Just as the thought crossed his mind, he heard the sound of another carriage pulling up.

His heart began to race. Johnathan schooled his expression as best as he could, quelling the apprehension clawing up his throat. This was one of the most important meetings of his life. It could change everything. It could pull his family out of the rut they had been in ever since he'd finished paying off his father's debt. Everything was riding on this meeting going well. It didn't matter that he didn't feel very good about it.

Steeling his resolve, Johnathan headed outdoors to greet his guests.

CHAPTER 2

Agnes was nervous. She didn't like feeling nervous.

She ran her fingers along the spine of her book, wishing she could have a candle so she could immerse herself in it once more. The fact that she was traveling in a carriage would have made that rather difficult, and most certainly would have made her ill, but she thought it was far better than thinking about what she was heading towards.

The feeling bothered her. Just this morning, as she'd prepared for the long trip, Agnes had been excited. She'd talked about the visit all morning with her lady's maid and had set out with butterflies in her stomach. But the moment the coachman announced that they were about to arrive, those butterflies went up in flames of dread.

"Have you met him, Father?" Agnes asked. She knew the answer to her question but needed some bit of conversation before her own thoughts drove her mad. "Truly met him, I mean. I know you two are acquaintances but do you know him well?"

Solomon Parsons, the Viscount Sutton, sighed softly. "I have not met him myself, Agnes. So I do not know him well."

"Then how do you know he is the right one? He could very well be a lout of a man who treats me rather unfairly."

"I have on good record that he is not that sort of person," Solomon said softly.

“On whose account? Are they credible? And you know very well that a man may present himself differently behind closed doors.”

“Why are you suddenly asking these questions, Agnes?” Mary Parsons, the Viscountess Sutton, spoke up. Agnes looked at her in surprise. She was certain her mother had been dozing for the past hour but she seemed rather alert.

Though the same could not be said about her brother. Paul Parsons was gently snoring next to Agnes. She couldn’t believe he was still sleeping. After all, he was the reason they were late to arrive at Claymore Castle. Because he could not get himself out of bed, they’d left out two hours later than they should have. To think he still needed to sleep after all of that.

Granted, they had been traveling for six hours. They had taken a rest stop at an inn nearby but had continued onward to the duke’s castle, wanting to make it there despite how late it was becoming. She supposed she could understand how such a long trip could tire anyone.

“I am merely curious,” she answered her mother. “And I do believe I have every reason to be. It concerns my future, after all.”

“It is only that you did not seem so curious before,” her mother explained. “Nor did you seem too anxious.”

“I am not anxious,” Agnes protested, looking out the window to avoid her eyes even though she saw nothing but dark blurs. “As I said, this concerns my future. It would not do to take such an important thing like an arranged marriage lightly.”

“You will like him, I’m sure,” her father consoled.

“Yes, you may even grow to love him,” her mother added.

Paul twisted in his seat and snored louder.

Agnes sent her brother a scathing glare and he scratched his cheek as if he could feel it in his sleep. Then she turned her eyes to her parents. “I do appreciate your optimism, but you must understand that an arranged marriage growing into a love match is not very common. You two are the only ones I know of.”

“If it happened for us, I am certain it could happen for you as well,” Solomon said. He reached for his wife’s hand and squeezed. The adoring look they gave each other made Agnes’ heart clench with hope.

Lord and Lady Sutton had been strangers to each other prior to their marriage. In fact, they had not even met each other until the wedding day itself, due to Mary coming down with a cold just a few weeks prior. It was as much an arranged marriage as any other one in London.

Every time Agnes heard of how their love had begun, she couldn’t believe her parents could have been so short-sighted. It was obvious that they were meant for each other. Aside from the fact that they physically looked together—both with dark hair and dark eyes and their heights complementary to the other—their personalities balanced each other out. While Solomon tended to be serious and matter-of-fact, Mary liked to tease and poke fun at others, especially her husband.

Agnes took after her father for the most part. Not only had she inherited the shade of his hair, a lighter brown than Mary’s, but she also adopted his love for knowledge, with a good eye for numbers and a keen indulgence in the sciences. And like her father, she hoped to find someone as light-hearted and jovial as her mother. Someone to balance her like her mother balanced her father. And then one day, someone to love her.

It made what was about to happen all the more nerve-wracking. This would be the

third gentleman she would try to determine a future with. Agnes wasn't sure how many she could reject before she came across the right one.

She opened her mouth to ask something else but the carriage began veering to the right. Her heart banged against her ribcage when she saw that they had arrived at Claymore Castle.

It was stunning. The entire building was lit up so brilliantly it was a wonder she had not noticed it before their arrival. Even under the cover of darkness, she could admire the stately structure. Balconies lined the upper floors, bay windows adorning nearly every inch. Trellis crept up the left side of the castle and a few trees poked up next to it. Agnes was willing to bet the path that led to the left would bring her to the gardens.

“Paul!” Solomon called sharply.

Her brother jolted away. “Huh? What?”

“We have arrived,” Mary drawled, her voice tinged with the barest hint of amusement. “Heavens with all the sleeping you have done, I doubt you will find rest tonight.”

“You know how tired long trips make me, Mother,” Paul said as he yawned. Shadows played across his face, deepening his jaw more than it actually was. For a few brief moments, he looked far older than his seven-and-ten years.

But then he sent Agnes a cheeky grin and said, “You look as if you wish to use the restroom.”

Agnes scowled. Solomon sighed. Mary hid a smile.

“And you have dried drool on your cheek,” Agnes countered, then looked away as her brother furiously began scrubbing his cheeks. They were clean of drool, but she had no intention of telling him that. If he intended to be immature, then she could very easily stoop to his level.

She hadn’t been like him at his age. Granted, she’d easily surpassed her studies by the time she was five-and-ten and had begun helping her father with the business. Agnes had a passion for such things while Paul...Paul simply liked to do anything that did not require too much energy. Their father found it endlessly frustrating and their mother hopelessly adored it.

“I hope I need not remind you of how you should conduct yourself while we are being hosted by the duke,” Solomon lectured with a stern look directed mostly at Paul. “One mistake and we may very well ruin a good relationship with an influential figure.”

“I thought you two were acquainted,” Agnes pointed out, raising her brow.

“Not enough that we cannot easily get unacquainted.”

“You’re making this vacation sound dreadfully dull, Father,” Paul sighed.

Solomon scowled and was about to say something when Mary laid a hand on his arm.

“Try not to forget that His Grace invited us to vacation with him, dear. Yes, it would be nice if we grew close during this time, but we should try to enjoy ourselves at the same time.”

Agnes saw the fight go out of her father in an instant. “You’re right, dear,” he said. And that was that.

The door opened a moment later and one of the duke's footmen reached out a hand to help her out. Agnes allowed herself to be guided out of the carriage. She didn't pay much mind to her parents and brother exiting the carriage, nor to the second carriage pulling up in the rear bearing their luggage. She wandered instead to the row of shrubbery lining the side of the driveway. Slowly, she traveled along the side of it, letting her eyes trail from the shrubs to the trees to the trellis crawling up the side of the house. She tried to decipher what the genus of the plants were, despite her limited vision.

"Agnes?" came her mother's voice.

Agnes turned to face her and her ankle instantly twisted. She let out a yelp, throwing her hands out to break her fall.

A pair of strong arms wrapped around her a second later. The scent of the person holding her assaulted her first. Musky and manly, the cologne clearly an expensive one. The muscles bunching against her minor ones was the second thing she noticed and she flushed at how safe she felt within the arms of this stranger.

At last—though it was only a second—she looked up at him, words of gratitude on the tip of her tongue.

They died the moment she locked eyes with the most handsome gentleman she had ever seen.

No words came to her mind, nothing capable of doing him justice. Black hair cropped to his face, a pair of soft lips set in a hard line, a strong jaw. His eyes were the brightest shade of blue she'd ever seen and she couldn't help but wonder how they would look in the daylight.

"Thank you," Agnes managed to say, her voice barely above a whisper.

He straightened her and then stepped away. The absence of his arms sent a chill across her body. “Are you all right?”

Wordlessly, she nodded. She couldn’t believe it. She was never without words.

“Good.”

And then he turned and walked away without another word.

Agnes blinked in bemusement. Good? Was that all there was left to say? She stared after him in utter disbelief as he made his way over to her parents. Stiffly, she followed behind just in time to hear him say, “Good evening, my lord. Welcome to Claymore Castle.”

Only then did it hit her. Agnes berated herself for not putting it together sooner, but she blamed it on his incomparable handsomeness. He was the Duke of Claymore.

CHAPTER 3

Johnathan was glad he kept his gloves on because he was certain his palms were sweating profusely. Somehow, he managed to keep his voice level as he greeted the viscount and was introduced to his family, but it didn't quell the anxiousness coursing through him as he led them indoors.

"You must forgive me, my lord," he stated the moment they were all in the foyer. "I shall be the only one to greet you tonight. I'm afraid the rest of my family has already retired to bed."

"I cannot blame you, Your Grace," Lord Sutton stated. "It is we who should apologize for arriving at such a late hour. We found ourselves rather...inconvenienced this morning."

Was it him or had Lord Sutton just shot a glare at his son? Johnathan didn't mind looking at the younger gentleman in time to see a sheepish look come over his face. He did, however, have a problem with looking at Miss Agnes.

She was utterly gorgeous. She had brown hair curled and tucked to the back of her head with a pair of dark brown eyes. She had a smattering of freckles adorning her cheeks, with a slightly cleft chin and perfect pink lips. Johnathan hated himself for noticing, just as he hated how abrupt he had been with her earlier. She hadn't said much to him by way of greeting but the way she narrowed her eyes at him made him think that he might have unknowingly put his foot in his mouth. He didn't dare look her way but he was very aware of her presence. He saw the way her head tilted as she took in the surroundings. He noticed how she paid little attention to the conversation

at hand, as if she was far more interested in the floors beneath her.

“Had it not been for the late hour,” Johnathan remembered to say, “I would have offered to give you all a tour of the castle.”

“That would have been wonderful,” Lady Sutton spoke up. She clung to her husband’s arm and neither one of them seemed intent on pulling away. “Had it not been for how tired I am, perhaps I would have insisted.”

“Be happy that she is,” Lord Sutton spoke up, a humorous glint in his eye. “She can be quite persistent when she wants something.”

Johnathan told himself to laugh. He felt so on edge that he might have forgotten.

“Then for now, allow me to show you to your chambers,” he said. “Mrs. Adams?”

Mrs. Adams, whom he knew had been lingering nearby, appeared next to him.

“Kindly show Lord and Lady Sutton to their chambers.” He turned to the viscount and viscountess. “Would you like...”

“Separate chambers?” Lady Sutton finished with a laugh. “Certainly not. One would do.”

“Perhaps one far away from everyone else’s,” Mr. Parsons spoke up. He still had the casual demeanor of a child who had not yet seen the world.

“Ignore him,” Miss Agnes stated. “He seems to forget his manners when he’s just woken up from his nap.”

Johnathan only spared her a glance. He wouldn’t allow himself any more than that.

He didn't like the way his heart skipped a beat whenever their eyes met.

He nodded but didn't miss the slight frown that touched her brows at his slight dismissal. He hadn't meant to do that. Johnathan tried not to sigh at his slip-up.

Instead, he signaled for two of the footmen, who had been carrying their luggage in, to escort Mr. Parsons and Miss Agnes to their rooms. The weight pressing on his chest grew lighter as he watched the entire family be led away from the foyer. His gaze lingered on Miss Agnes' retreating form, unable to keep himself from admiring how straight and poised she walked, clutching her skirt in her hands. He didn't take his eyes off her until she was out of sight. Even when she was gone, his eyes lingered, his mind drifting back to when he'd stopped her from falling in the driveway.

Johnathan shook his head suddenly to banish the thought. It wouldn't do to pay more attention than was necessary to the viscount's eldest daughter. She was important, certainly. But she was meant for another.

Because she was to be his brother's betrothed, Johnathan had to banish these thoughts and fast.

The room she'd been brought to was marvelous, large enough to house a small family if the space was used correctly. The entrance led directly into a living space, with a door veering off to the left for the actual bedchamber. There was yet another door within the room that housed a tub and chamber pot with an assortment of towels and sweet-smelling soaps. Despite how late it was, the tub was full of steaming hot water.

The footman had been replaced with a maid when she arrived at her chambers.

"I will not be in need of your services tonight," she told the maid.

Her eyes went wide with surprise. "But, Miss, I was instructed to assist you with

getting settled in.”

“I will be fine on my own, thank you.” Agnes offered her a consoling smile but the maid’s worried frown only deepened.

“Perhaps I should help you with your bath before I leave?” the maid suggested but Agnes was already shaking her head.

“I assure you that I will be fine. I am more than capable of doing it on my own.” Because the maid did not seem convinced, she added, “And truth be told, I wish to be alone.”

The maid thinned her lips, but at last she nodded. “I understand, Miss. Please, don’t hesitate to ring for me if you need my assistance.”

“I won’t. Goodnight.”

Agnes smiled as the maid walked away, not releasing the breath she’d been holding until she was already a few feet away. She would have felt rather guilty denying the maid her sleep just because she longed for a bath.

It wouldn’t stop her from actually having the bath, though. She stripped carefully, taking care not to tear her underclothes or tangle the strings of her dress.

She spent enough time in the tub for the water to grow cold and once she was done, she rummaged through her luggage to find her nightdress before sliding between the cool sheets of the four-poster bed.

The duke was certainly wealthy. It showed in every inch of the castle, from the intricate molding of the ceiling to the polished floors to the thick and soft bedding. It was a pity he was so rude.

She sighed, closing her eyes and relaxing. Sleep claimed her quickly but not before she thought of her brief interaction with the duke as much as ten times.

The clink of glass was what woke her the next morning. Agnes pried her heavy lids open to see the same maid from last night setting out her perfume bottles.

Agnes released a low groan as she stretched. “Good morning,” she mumbled.

“Miss!” the maid yelped, nearly dropping the bottle in her hand. She whirled to face Agnes with eyes as wide as saucers. “Did I wake you?”

“You did,” Agnes said, yawning sleepily behind her hand. “But it is fine. I am to wake anyhow.”

That only flustered her even more. She quickly set the perfume down, clasping her hands before her and bowed her head. “Forgive me, Miss Agnes. I shan’t let it happen again.”

Agnes sat up, her hair tumbling down her shoulders. The mornings always felt as if she was emerging from murky waters, her mind a fog and her eyesight blurry. She couldn’t help squinting at the maid and the other woman flinched at the look.

“What is your name?” Agnes asked her.

The maid hardly met her eyes. “Gemma, Miss.”

Thank you, Gemma, for unpacking my luggage. And I assure you, you needn’t worry about waking me in the morning. Had you not, I might not have gotten out of bed until well after midday. That would be quite rude to our hosts, I’m sure.” She said the words lightly but Gemma still hadn’t met her eyes. Agnes sighed. “Shall we get started with getting ready then?”

“Yes, Miss.”

As if grateful for something to do, Gemma got into action. Any attempt Agnes made at conversation after that was met with stuttered sentences and an averted gaze.

Was this how all the servants acted? Agnes wondered if that had anything to do with the duke.

She kept her questions to herself as she got dressed for breakfast. As she made her way down to the dining room, led by the maid, Agnes tried to keep her curiosity to a minimum. There would be enough time for exploring later, she assumed.

Everyone else was already there. There were two new people seated on one side of the table and yet Agnes hardly paid them much mind. The moment she stepped through the doors, her eyes met the duke's.

She forgot her manners. Every bit of ladylike grace vanished from her mind the moment he captured her gaze. He paused in his eating as if he too was taken by the sight before him.

How in heaven's name did he become even more handsome than last night? The duke looked away, resuming his eating. Agnes felt a chill wash over her at the slight dismissal. Perhaps to others, it did not seem like anything had happened. But the tense moment between them had not only gone noticed by her, had it?

Agnes raised her chin, approaching the unoccupied chair between her brother and her mother. “Good morning, everyone,” she greeted. “I hope I am not too late.”

“You are if you allowed me to be at the table before you,” Paul said instantly, giving her a cheeky grin.

Agnes didn't spare him a glance, primly placing her napkin on her lap as she said, "You offend yourself more with that statement than you do me," she said. "I shall give you some time to think of a better response."

Paul scowled at her but she was saved from the inevitable bickering when her mother cleared her throat slightly. "Agnes, you have not yet been introduced to Lord Christopher Harken and the Lady Claymore, the dowager duchess, have you?"

"I have not." Agnes cursed herself inwardly for having forgotten that there were two strange faces in the room.

Heavens, have I forgotten the reason I am here in the first place?

She pasted a smile onto her face as she looked at the gentleman sitting next to the dowager duchess. He was quite like his brother, the duke, though far lankier with a leaner face. Not to mention the fact that he looked as if he was about to empty his stomach at any moment.

This was the man she was supposed to marry. He was handsome enough, she supposed, though not as devastatingly so as the duke. Agnes blinked, banishing the thought as quickly as it came. She should not be comparing her intended to that of another man. Even if it felt as if that man's eyes were boring into her at that very moment.

"It is nice meeting you, Lord Christopher," she greeted politely.

Lord Christopher gave her a weak smile, then winced. He rubbed his temple in a half-hearted attempt to cover it up. "Likewise, Miss Parsons."

"And it is a pleasure meeting you, Your Grace," Agnes finished, looking at the dowager duchess.

Her beauty could not go unnoticed. Yet despite the attractive style of her hair and her pleasant features, she looked utterly without life.

“I suppose I am too,” Her Grace murmured. She stared listlessly at the table, nibbling on a piece of toast.

There was an uncomfortable beat of silence before His Grace cleared his throat. “Did you all enjoy your first night’s rest at Claymore Castle?”

“Oh, quite so, Your Grace,” Mary answered chirpily. “I must admit that it took quite a bit of effort getting out of bed this morning. You must tell me from where you procure your bed sheets.”

“I shall have my housekeeper let you know,” he said. “I’m afraid I have not paid much attention to such details.”

“Nor would I have expected you to,” Solomon spoke up. Agnes wouldn’t be surprised if he had his hand under the table holding his wife’s. They’d never been able to keep their hands off each other. “Such details do not concern men, usually.”

“I suppose so,” Mary sighed. “I shall have to add it to the list of other things I wish to ask the housekeeper about then.”

“Perhaps I could assist you with anything you would like to know?” the duke offered. “If it is in regard to the castle, I may be able to appease your curiosities. This residence has a rather rich history, after all.”

Agnes didn’t look at the duke as much as she paid attention to his words. He was rather polite and approachable this morning it seemed. Not nearly as abrupt as he had been last night. Though perhaps that had only been reserved for her.

“Brother, please,” Lord Christopher groaned, pressing the heel of his hand against his temple. “I hope you do not intend to bore our guests with such things.”

The duke’s jaw twitched. It was slight, quick, and hardly noticeable. Agnes would have missed it if she hadn’t been staring at him so intently, despite her better judgment.

“Only if they wish to hear of it,” His Grace said after a moment, long enough to make her know that he was choosing his words carefully.

“I doubt anyone would want to know of such things,” Mr. Harken grumbled. He reached for his cup and took a deep gulp of whatever was inside.

The silence that ensued afterward was strife with tension. Agnes looked from Lord Christopher’s obliviousness of his brother’s growing ire, to the way the duke clenched his jaw, to Mr. Christopher slumping his chair, to His Grace’s left eye twitching.

She watched as the duke swallowed his rise of emotions and said in an even tone, “You must forgive my brother’s crassness. He is feeling rather unwell, you see.”

“I’m sure your brother can speak for himself,” Agnes said before she could stop herself.

The duke’s thick, dark brows raised slightly in surprise. Even Lord Christopher sat up a bit straighter, clearly not expecting to hear such a thing.

“I did not mean to imply that he did not,” the duke said at last.

“If that is the case, you have failed. Though if the words were said out of care, then I suppose I can understand.”

This time, His Grace's brows dipped all the way down into a frown.

Agnes looked away from him, focusing her attention on the gentleman who deserved it. He was the reason she was here after all.

"Please, sir, you needn't force yourself to be here if you are feeling unwell. I'm sure no one will mind if you take some time to recover."

Lord Christopher glanced at his brother, then back at Agnes. "That is quite kind of you, Miss?—"

"Kind but unnecessary," the duke cut in, his voice cold. "Christopher would have remained in bed if he did not deem himself well enough to break his fast with us."

"Can you not see how close he looks to bringing up his food?" Agnes challenged, raising a brow at the duke. "He is positively green."

"Rather choice words for a gentleman who has not taken a single bite of food since he sat down."

"That alone should prove my point."

"Or rather, it proves that I know my brother far better than you do."

"Or so you would like us to believe, I am sure."

The duke was not able to keep the scowl off his face at this point. For every retort Agnes gave, his frown dipped lower. And for every response he sent back, she felt her hackles rise. She did not make it a habit of arguing with people she hardly knew. While she enjoyed friendly debates, going back and forth with a man she'd just met hardly seemed fruitful. And she was defending someone she did not know either,

even if that someone might be her future husband.

Yet she could not help herself. She glared at the duke and he glared right back at her, clenching his fist so tightly that it almost shook atop the table. No one spoke. She didn't like this at all. This was not what she had planned. He was not what she'd planned.

She would have to stay away from him, she decided. It shouldn't be that difficult, should it?

CHAPTER 4

Johnathan decided right after breakfast that he had to make amends with Miss Agnes. It should not matter that she was absolutely infuriating. What mattered was that they fostered a happy relationship with each other so that he did not jeopardize the impending marriage.

Lord Sutton had been very clear about this arrangement after all. This ‘vacation’, as they’d put it, was purely for Agnes to determine if she really wanted to be married to the brother of the duke.

He quelled the rise of guilt that never felt too far away whenever those thoughts assaulted him and entered the drawing room. There he found his mother engaging in a rather lifeless lesson on the history of the estate with the viscount and viscountess, who were being quite polite in their riveted expressions. Johnathan would not have blamed them if they’d worn looks of boredom instead.

Christopher was in his chambers, having dismissed himself earlier to sleep off the effects of his ‘unknown’ ailment—and of course, Miss Agnes was rather sympathetic to his plight—so that left Mr. Parsons and Miss Agnes.

Miss Agnes was by a window, just a few paces away from her brother. She did not slouch the way her brother did, did not take up space with her legs like him. It was easy to dismiss that as simply proper ladylike tendencies but Johnathan had a feeling that something else was at play. Miss Agnes had the countenance of a man who had seen the world and was not pleased with it.

How she managed to pull off such an impression while maintaining such ethereal beauty and poise was astounding. So much so that Johnathan could not help stalling in his steps towards her, admiring the slope of her neck when she tilted her head to the side to study something on the other side of the window.

“Is there something you would like to say, Your Grace?” she asked without turning around.

Johnathan’s heart skipped a beat and he cursed himself for being so jumpy. As if she sensed his agitation—which he hoped she could not—she turned slowly to look at him.

“Or perhaps it is not I you wish to speak with,” she added as an afterthought.

“You are quite astute, Miss Agnes,” he observed, coming up next to her. He instantly regretted it. She smelled glorious, a lovely mixture of floral and citrusy tones that urged him to step closer. “I have come to apologize to you.”

“Apology accepted.”

He blinked. “You have not given me a chance to say what for.”

“I did not have to. It is clear that you wish to apologize for your rudeness since our meeting.”

“Since our meeting?” he echoed, bemused. “I do not recall having done anything yesterday to apologize for.”

“What a shame, Your Grace,” she hummed and the disappointment in her voice irked him. “Then pray tell, why have you come to apologize?”

“For my behavior during breakfast of course.” He paused and then added after a moment, “And if you believe I should have reason to apologize for anything else, then I do for that as well.”

“I wonder if I should continue accepting such an apology,” she hummed in thought. “But very well. I accept. Now, shall I ask you a question?”

She said it so pointedly that Johnathan was instantly on edge. “Is it about my brother?”

“Now who is the astute one?” she asked. “Is he ill often?”

Johnathan tried not to sigh. He jammed his hands into his pockets, trying to keep the wry smile off his face. He knew he had to choose his words carefully. Miss Agnes seemed like the type of lady to see right through any lie.

“He is far more sprightly than he presented himself this morning,” Johnathan said at last. “He only makes...bad decisions.”

“I do not understand.”

“Perhaps you could ask him for further detail when he awakes from his nap. Though I doubt you will be very impressed with the answer.”

Miss Agnes frowned. She didn’t seem very pleased with that response. “You are rather callous when it comes to your brother’s health.”

Johnathan tried not to let those words irritate him. What did it matter that she challenged him on his opinion of his brother’s physical state? She did not know the reason he felt little sympathy for Christopher, nor did he have any intention of letting her know. If she deemed him an insensitive lout, then so be it. Just as long as she was

still determined to marry his brother. Johnathan would hate to miss out on the substantial dowry he would receive if she decided against it.

“You need not worry, Miss Agnes. My brother is a healthy man, though he oftentimes overestimates his body’s endurance. After a good night’s rest, he will be right as rain, I assure you.”

She stared at him for a moment longer. It was disconcerting to see how deep her brown eyes were, like a never-ending well. It felt as if she could see right through his skin, like she knew that his heart was beating an odd staccato at her stare and that his palms were sweating under his gloves.

Finally, she looked away and Johnathan found himself free from her hold. They settled into silence since she did not bother to respond to his last words. Johnathan didn’t know what she thought of his answer.

“Was your long trip to Claymore Castle tiring, Miss?”

“Not very,” she answered. “I rather enjoy traveling long distances. It gives me the chance to focus fully on reading, though I oftentimes find myself ill after a few hours with my head down.”

“Ah, you enjoy books then. Is that the only interest you enjoy?”

“My interests expand far past that of a library, Your Grace. I enjoy the simpler pastimes such as the pianoforte and embroidery. I do try my hand at watercolors as well but I do not think I am very good. Certainly not as good as my brother is.”

“Mr. Parsons enjoys painting?” Johnathan asked with a note of surprise. He glanced over at the younger Parsons sibling only to see that he had given up pretending he was listening to the dowager duchess and was now playing with the hem of his

waistcoat.

Miss Agnes followed Johnathan's line of sight and sighed. "Yes, he is rather skillful in that regard. I only hope that he will one day learn to apply himself aptly."

"And what do you like to apply yourself to, Miss Agnes?"

Miss Agnes looked up at him with her delicately arched brows raised in surprise. Johnathan realized a beat later that he was being inordinately interested in her. He tried to appear casually pleasant as he waited for her response.

"Why do you ask, Your Grace? Do you wish to offer me a list of interesting things to do while we vacation with you and your family?"

"It is being considered," he admitted after a beat. "I wish for you all to be happy, after all, and to enjoy your time here."

"What of parties then? Do you throw them often?"

"Often enough for a man of my stature, I suppose," Johnathan answered vaguely. He didn't need Miss Agnes to know that he was in such dire financial state that the thought of hosting another party made his stomach churn.

"I enjoy parties," she said. "Especially themed ones."

"A lady who enjoys both reading and dancing. An interesting mixture."

"I never said I enjoy dancing."

"Do you not?"

“I do.”

Johnathan frowned at her. “Then I was correct.”

“You were.” She glanced up at him and he could have sworn that the side of her lips twitched upwards. “But you should never assume anything about a lady, Your Grace.”

“I...” He trailed off, not knowing what to say in response.

She raised her brows expectantly and when she realized that he was not going to answer right away, she opened her mouth to respond. She didn’t get the chance to when the sound of a carriage pulling in came from outdoors.

Miss Agnes changed before his eyes. He didn’t realize how stiff her posture had been until she relaxed. The smile that stretched across her face knocked the wind from his chest and she whirled to face him with her brown eyes lit with happiness.

“Caroline is here!” she exclaimed.

Johnathan couldn’t force a smile on his face no matter how much he tried. Miss Caroline had finally arrived. The warmth that had come over him at Miss Agnes’ smile transformed into a deep-seated chill that stole every happy emotion from his body.

The seriousness of his face had Miss Agnes frowning in confusion. Johnathan didn’t give her the chance to question him on his sudden change of demeanor. He turned away.

She stared at him a moment longer before she faced the room instead. “Caroline is here, everyone. Let us go out to greet her.”

She raced out of the room without waiting for a response. One by one, they all rose and followed her out, the Parsons family thrumming with excitement at the newcomer. Johnathan followed them out behind his mother, feeling like a rock was lodged in his throat.

He knew this was going to happen. He had been the one to invite Miss Caroline here, after all. But now that she had arrived, Johnathan wished he could just send her back home.

CHAPTER 5

Propriety be damned, Agnes would have kicked off her heeled shoes if she could bother to stop. Instead, she grabbed ahold of her dress and raced out of the castle, flying down the steps into the driveway just as her beloved friend alighted from the carriage.

Caroline's eyes lit with happiness the moment she spotted Agnes. Agnes didn't stop, charging straight to her friend with her arms wide open this time. She expected Caroline to do as she'd always done when they greeted each other after a while of being away—throw her arms around her in a tight embrace.

Someone cleared their throat. Agnes watched as Caroline's excitement was shuttered away and her smile fell. She came to a halt in front of Caroline, letting her arms drop to her side.

"It is good to see you, Agnes," Caroline greeted in a soft voice.

Agnes frowned. This wasn't like Caroline at all. Her naturally exuberant friend would have tackled her to the ground if she thought she could get away with it.

An aged gentleman came to stand next to Caroline and Agnes immediately understood her friend's uncharacteristically reserved demeanor. The Earl of Reeds, Harold Charmain was a dreadful man with a dreadful appearance: his white and black hair receding to the crown of his head and his eyes narrowed to slits that viewed everyone with disdain. Agnes had always disliked him, though she made sure not to make that obvious out of respect for Caroline. Even so, she could not help the slight

scowl that came across her brow before she wiped it away as his eyes fell on her.

The Countess of Reeds, Prudence Charmain, came to her husband's side and didn't bother lowering the most debilitating sneer on Agnes. Her face was not as lined as her husband's, showing the remarkable difference in their ages, but the blonde hair beauty she had once been rumored to be was not so evident now. Not with that dreadful look permanently etched into her features.

"I had forgotten you would be here as well," Lady Reeds said in that high, snide tone Agnes despised.

"It is lovely to see you as well, Lady Reeds," Agnes pushed through gritted teeth, her tone making it clear that she was the last person Agnes wanted to see.

Sometimes she pitied Caroline for being under the care of her aunt and uncle. Even though they had decent wealth and prestige afforded to them by their title, Agnes could only believe how horrible they were as guardians.

Before anyone else could attempt to exchange tight words, the others caught up, the Duke of Claymore leading the charge in long and determined strides.

Agnes took a step to the side. She didn't miss the way Lord Reeds straightened as he tried to level his gaze with the duke's towering figure. Despite his best attempts, he looked like half a man next to someone as imposing as the duke.

"Good day, Your Grace," Lord Reeds greeted with a bow. "It is a pleasure finally meeting your acquaintance. Allow me to introduce you to my wife, Lady Reeds and my niece, Miss Caroline."

Lady Reeds and Caroline sank into identical curtsies. "A pleasure, Your Grace," Lady Reeds said, her voice overshadowing Caroline's "Pleased to meet you, Your

Grace.”

“The pleasure is mine,” His Grace returned with a stiff bow. He was so different from the man who had been talking with Agnes in the drawing room. So cold and standoffish.

Even when he reached for Caroline’s hand and pressed a kiss on the back of it, it felt cold and impersonal, as if he was only going through the motions. A voice in the back of her head wished the duke would show her friend a little more affection.

They were meant to be married, after all.

It was one of the reasons she had agreed to her arrangement with the duke’s brother. Caroline was Agnes’ best friend.

“Oh, Caroline, it is such a pleasure to see you,” Mary spoke up, wearing a warm smile. “And it looks like you’ve grown more beautiful than the last time I saw you. You look more like your mother every day.”

Caroline blushed, right on cue. “You flatter me, Lady Sutton.”

“Oh, come now, Caroline, there is no need for modesty,” Solomon spoke up with a smile. “Your father would be proud to see the lady you have grown into. Your Grace, you are quite a lucky man.”

Agnes silently agreed, keeping her gaze steady on the duke’s impassive expression. Agnes thought of Caroline as the sister she’d never had, especially after her parents passed away in a tragic carriage accident. If Caroline could find happiness with the duke, while Agnes found happiness with the duke’s brother, then it would be the perfect arrangement, would it not?

So that other voice in the back of her mind that felt a bit of jealousy when the duke kissed Caroline's hand was promptly ignored. It had to be because she was yet to receive any affection from her own intended. Of course, it was. There could be no other reason for such a feeling.

"Welcome to Claymore Castle," the duke went on, releasing Caroline's hand. "I shall have my men take your luggage inside. Allow me to escort you to the drawing room where you may be able to rest after your lengthy trip here."

Lord Reeds was about to respond but Agnes beat him to it. She stepped up to Caroline and slipped her arm through hers, saying, "I shall help Caroline get settled in. If you would excuse us."

Agnes began leading her friend away even as Lady Reeds hissed under her breath. "Caroline?—"

"You needn't worry, my lady," Agnes continued. "His Grace does not mind, does he?"

She looked expectantly up at the duke. He stared down at her with an impassive expression, making her wonder if she'd overestimated what his response would be. But then he nodded. "I think it is a grand idea to have Miss Caroline relax in the company of her friend."

She grinned victoriously. Agnes did not bother to spare the Lord and Lady Reeds another glance before she continued guiding Caroline towards the castle. As she went by, Caroline murmured soft greetings to Agnes' family, who greeted her warmly.

They were met by the housekeeper as they made it to the foyer. Mrs. Adams bowed slightly before saying, "Allow me to escort you to your room."

Agnes grinned at Caroline and only then did a glimmer of her friend show through with a slight smile of her own. Together, they followed Mrs. Adams up to Caroline's chambers, which was located right across from Agnes'. It was as magnificent as Agnes', though the view of her window overlooked a meadow rather than the imposing forest as it did in Agnes' room.

Mrs. Adams informed them that luncheon would be served shortly and, in the meantime, Caroline's luggage would be brought up to her chambers. Agnes stood idly by as she waited for Mrs. Adams to finish her spiel, but once she was gone, she let her grin grow wide once more.

"Oh, Caroline, I am so happy you're here!" This time, she did not hesitate to throw her arms around her friend.

Caroline's laughter was like music to her ears. She hugged her back just as tightly. "I cannot believe I am finally here! I thought we would never make it to the castle. It is rather far from London."

"Be glad you did not arrive in the dead of night like we did," Agnes told her. "It seems the duke is in a much better mood in the light of day."

Caroline's green eyes went wide. She was a gentle beauty with flushed skin, soft green eyes, and silky blond hair. She always liked to keep most of her hair down around her body but, ever since she debuted, her aunt and uncle made certain it was done atop her head at all times.

"Is he dreadful?" Caroline asked in horror.

"Oh, no not at all! On the contrary, I find him quite polite and gentlemanly. But I have only met him just last night, you see, so I cannot say I know much."

That was an understatement. Agnes didn't like how much time she'd already spent thinking about her interactions with the duke and dissecting his responses to everything she said. She didn't need to say that to Caroline, even though she told Caroline everything.

"Hm." Caroline sank into a nearby sofa and slipped her shoes off, tucking her feet underneath her. Agnes did the same. "What do you think of them? I know how observant you can be so I'm sure you have already drawn a conclusion?"

"A conclusion?" Agnes laughed. "You make me seem like a scientist specializing in human behavior."

"It is not that far from the truth, I'm sure. Have you met your intended?"

"I have." Though I was not terribly impressed with him. "He is not well. He has retired to his chambers to sleep away his ailment."

"Oh, dear. Do you think he might be..."

"Staving off a terrible megrim from a night of alcoholic indulgence?" A smile touched her lips. "I am almost certain. The duke is rather annoyed with Lord Christopher's state, though he will not say why he is the way that he is."

Caroline giggled behind her hand. "I am certain he does not know you've already deduced the reason behind his illness."

"He has not and I shan't make either one of them any wiser."

"Well, I do hope His Grace is not a lover of spirits. I have seen the way it makes my uncle and I would hate to deal with such a thing in my marital home."

“Yes, and let us hope that Lord Christopher does not indulge often either.”

Footmen were coming in and out of the room, bearing trunks of Caroline’s belongings. After the fourth trunk, Agnes raised her brows in surprise.

“Just how many dresses did you bring?” she asked.

Caroline rolled her eyes. “Enough to last me years, I’m certain. Aunt Prudence has paid a pretty penny at the modiste to ensure that I have new dresses for every day of our stay here at Claymore Castle. She is determined to impress His Grace in every manner imaginable.”

“Does she not know that you two are already betrothed?” Agnes asked in wonder.

“I do not understand it myself, nor do I wish to. The days leading up to this trip have been absolutely dreadful. If I was not being dragged to the modiste, I was forced to practice song after song on the pianoforte. I believe she thinks that my playing will let the duke fall in love with me. Or at least smitten enough to marry me tomorrow if he could.” Caroline’s eyes followed the footman carrying what Agnes assumed must be Caroline’s last trunk. “At least the dresses are lovely.”

Agnes dissolved into a fit of giggles at that last comment. “One would think you did not really mind being dragged to the modiste.”

“Having to go in order to impress a gentleman is one thing,” Caroline explained, joining in with the laughter. “Having an assortment of lovely dresses at my disposal is another thing entirely.”

This was perfect, Agnes thought as they continued joking about all the ways Lady Reeds expected Caroline to impress the duke. This visit did not feel complete without her friend here and now that she was, Agnes felt as if everything was right in the

world again.

They chatted incessantly about all manners of things, the time getting away from them. Neither one of them realized just how much time had passed until Mrs. Adams returned to inform them that luncheon had been served.

Agnes went to her room to change, donning a light blue dress, and met Caroline in the hallway. Her friend had changed as well, in a similarly styled dress, though it was greenish blue instead.

Arm in arm, they made their way down to the dining room. The moment they entered the room, with everyone but the dowager duchess and Lord Christopher present, the conversation stalled.

Agnes ignored the duke. She knew that he must be looking at Caroline. She was lovely, after all. She wouldn't be surprised if he no longer paid her any mind now that she was here.

But she couldn't ignore him for long. As she claimed the chair next to her brother, she let herself glance up at him for a brief moment. A breath hitched in her throat when she saw that he was staring at her instead.

The moment their eyes met, he blinked rapidly and looked away, paying keen attention to his meal. It left Agnes staring at him in utter awe. Surely that wasn't a hint of a blush on his cheeks?

"Sit up straighter!"

The soft hiss drew Agnes' attention away from the duke to Lord Reeds on the other side of the table. He was glaring at Caroline who withered under his eyes. Agnes felt a rush of anger at the sight.

She contemplated coming to Caroline's defense but was saved from making such a decision when another person entered the room. Lord Christopher seemed far more alive now, rubbing the back of his head with a sheepish grin.

"Forgive my tardiness, everyone. I have just woken from my nap and find myself in much better spirits than this morning. Mother sends her apologies as she has found herself rather lightheaded and took to her bed."

He claimed the chair next to his brother and introduced himself to the newcomer. Agnes admired the tousled look of his hair. Yet she couldn't help but think she preferred a more styled look like that of the duke's...

Oh, for God's sake.

Lord Christopher was her intended. Lord Christopher was the gentleman she should be trying to get to know, to determine if she truly wanted to be tied to his name. Because of that, she should take care not to let her mind wander to the duke too often.

She couldn't help but think that might be a difficult feat to accomplish.

CHAPTER 6

L uncheon passed with comfortable conversation. But as it neared to an end, Agnes prepared herself for what would happen afterward. If the duke and his brother were serious about their arrangements, it would only make sense for them to spend some time together after their meal. Perhaps a walk across the meadow near the castle.

His Grace must have heard her thoughts because, as soon as they were all done eating, he said, “Shall we all go for a walk?”

Caroline’s smile came readily to her face. “That sounds lovely, Your Grace. Doesn’t it, Agnes?”

“Only if I am free to tell Lord Christopher all about the book on botany I am reading,” Agnes responded with a huff of laughter. She turned to Lord Christopher, expecting a smile at the very least. But the duke’s brother looked rather bemused.

“Botany?” he asked. “As in flowers?”

Agnes smile grew wan. She shook her head and stood. “Never mind, my lord. Shall we?”

Lord Christopher blinked, then shook his head as if shaking away the confusion.

“We shall act as chaperones,” Lady Reed offered, shooting to her feet.

“Yes, a marvelous idea,” her husband agreed, also standing.

Agnes didn't bother hiding her look of dismay. She glanced at Caroline but her friend was far more adept at hiding her displeasure at that.

"Mother," Agnes said quickly. "Didn't you say you were looking forward to getting a bit of fresh air?"

"Did I?" Mary asked innocently, eyes wide.

"Yes, I am most certain that you did," Agnes pressed, her smile forceful.

But Mary simply tilted her head to the side. "Perhaps I did, but I am feeling a bit tired after such a heavy breakfast. I am actually looking forward to resting in my chambers."

Agnes turned to her father. "Father?—"

"Solomon, won't you join me? I may be terribly lonely without you."

If the viscount knew what his cheeky wife was up to, he made no indication. He simply said, "Of course, dear."

Mary grinned and Agnes stifled her sigh. It seemed her mother was content to leave her in the hands of Lord and Lady Reeds. Paul did not bother to state what he was doing and Agnes could only hope that he did not get himself in any trouble.

Lord Christopher offered his hand to Agnes, helping her to a stand. She smiled softly at him and tried to ignore the duke doing the same to Caroline on the other side of the table. She liked how tall Lord Christopher was, enjoyed the way she felt being tucked closely to his side as they made their way out of the castle and out into the fresh air.

"This is a lovely property," Agnes commented politely as the walk commenced. They

strolled idly, Lord and Lady Reeds maintaining a decent distance behind, much to her relief.

“Yes, it is,” Lord Christopher responded. “I grew up here, you know. Spent my entire childhood in this castle.”

“Was it a happy childhood?” Agnes asked.

He nodded, gazing out at the expanse of grass in front of them. “Quite so. I was able to indulge in a great manner of activities. As such, I could determine which of those activities I fancy the most.”

“And which would you?—”

“Horse riding was my first love, you see,” he barreled on as if Agnes had not spoken at all. “I was racing my horses across this very same meadow from the age of ten. There was a mare I loved and she gave birth to a male horse that is currently my preferred steed, now that the mare is too old to continue with the intense method of riding I enjoy.”

“I see. Perhaps?—”

“But I do enjoy other things, you see. While I do ride my horse every day, I also partake in fencing, croquet, and pall mall. I excel at any outdoor activity you can think of, in fact. It is my favorite pastime.”

Agnes paused, expecting him to say more. Lord Christopher spoke with such exuberance that he didn’t seem to realize that she was trying to respond in kind. She quelled her irritation every time he cut her off or spoke over her as if she was not talking at all.

But he seemed to be waiting to hear what she had to say about everything he'd just told her so she said, "You seem to be quite athletic."

He chuckled. "That is an understatement. I excel at every physical sport I set my eyes on. Though not always physical, I suppose. I am rather good at cards as well. But rest assured, I do not partake in betting."

Agnes shot him an odd look. Surely he wasn't talking about cards with her? He didn't notice her appalled look, his eyes trained ahead and his face full of excitement. He had such a jovial countenance about him that Agnes could not even be mad at his insistence on talking without waiting for her reply. It was clear this was a topic he was passionate about and far be it from her to berate someone for talking about such a thing.

"There is a horse that I enjoy watching in London. His name is Sprite, simply because he is always the smallest horse on the track. One would think that his shorter legs would put him at a disadvantage but he has such power and drive that..."

Agnes stopped listening. Lord Christopher didn't seem to care for her response either way. So she simply let her mind wander.

And wander it did, mostly to the couple who were walking ahead of them.

She hadn't noticed when they'd passed them but she couldn't take her eyes off them now. They made a lovely couple, she realized. Caroline's head barely peeked over the duke's shoulder and it would have been a rather adorable sight if she placed her cheek on it. The direction of Agnes' thoughts brought nothing but annoyance.

"But what of you? Certainly there must be something you take interest in? I would love to hear about the things you like to do, Miss Agnes."

Caroline was saying something and the duke seemed to be listening intently. He even nodded now and again, a clear indication that he actually cared what she was talking about. A bit of envy came to mingle with Agnes' annoyance.

"Or perhaps there is nothing? Miss Agnes?"

She shook her head slightly as if that would be enough to banish her thoughts. But her eyes fell on the duke again. His back was broad and imposing, the curl of dark hair on the nape of his neck far more endearing than it should be. Agnes wondered what it would be like to thread her fingers through them. Or at least to have those intense eyes of his focused so steadily on her, as if nothing mattered but the words pouring from her lips.

"Miss Agnes?" A hand touched her arm and Agnes jolted from her reverie. She looked up to see Lord Christopher looking down at her with a frown.

"Yes, my lord?" she asked, bemused.

"I was asking you what your interests were, but you seemed to be lost in thought. Is there something on your mind?"

She flushed, avoiding his worried look. She could not very well tell him that she had been thinking about his brother, could she?

"Forgive me, my lord, it is nothing. I enjoy reading. Mostly histories and biographies."

"Oh heavens, I cannot think of anything more dreadful," Lord Christopher said. "The last time I tried to read a book, I fell asleep only a few pages in. There is something about the entire task that bores me to no end."

Agnes quelled her irritation at that. “Yes, well, I am not surprised that?—”

“I do recall one time where I did get one chapter into a book, though I cannot for the life of me remember what it was about. I think it centered around an old king of some sort but I cannot say for certain. All I know is that one minute I was reading about his early life and the next I was waking up with the sun halfway to the horizon.”

Agnes supposed it was a good thing Lord Christopher had cut her off. What she’d almost said would have been a little rude, though she had a feeling he would not have picked up on it. She ignored him entirely and he continued talking about how boring reading was compared to the rush-inducing activities he liked to partake in.

When the walk began to draw to an end, Agnes was itching to leave. They’d looped around the meadow and had made their way back to the castle within an hour. She was tempted to march right into the castle without saying anything to her escort.

“I am really enjoying my time with you, Miss Agnes,” Lord Christopher said and it was all she could do to quell her surprise. How could he have enjoyed himself with her when he hadn’t even given her much of a chance to speak?

She gave him a tight smile, too tired to respond to him. To her left, Caroline and the duke were still speaking and Agnes tried her best not to glance curiously at them.

“Would you like to continue this in the drawing room?—”

“I am feeling quite tired, sir,” Agnes cut in, feeling little remorse after what had happened the past hour. “I only wish to retire to my chambers until dinnertime.”

A look of disappointment crossed his face and Agnes felt a twinge of regret. It felt as if she was kicking a puppy. Yes, she supposed he did ramble on about things she did not care about while paying scant attention to her own interests. But his jovial and

boyish nature made it hard to stay mad at him.

Still, she did not break, knowing very well what fate awaited her if she let him cajole her into spending more time together. There would be more than enough of that in the near future. For now, she wanted to be alone.

“If you would excuse me, sir,” she said with a curtsy before she turned and walked away, ensuring she did not look at the duke even though every bit of her wanted to.

She made her way indoors and headed straight to her bedchamber. Agnes immediately made her way to the chaise lounge tucked under the bay window and picked up the book she had left there in passing this morning. She kicked her shoes off and tucked them under her as she attempted to immerse herself in its pages and forget about the disappointing walk with the duke’s brother.

That was where Caroline found her nearly ten minutes later. Agnes thought she would have more time.

“What’s the matter?” Caroline asked, resting a hand on Agnes’ knee. “I could tell that you were trying to escape back there.”

Agnes sighed, putting her book aside. “Was it obvious?”

“Not to those who do not know you well,” Caroline assured. “Was Lord Christopher not to your liking?”

Agnes’ lips twitched. “You make him seem like a fish dinner. But no, he was not. Well...I suppose that is a bit harsh for me to say. It is too early to judge him, is it not?”

“A first impression weighs a lot,” Caroline said wisely.

“That much is true.” Agnes sighed again. “During our walk, he went on and on about his love of sports and would not give me a chance to respond. Every time I did, he would cut me off as if I wasn’t talking at all. And then when I finally got the chance to tell him that I am interested in reading, he would not stop talking about how boring he finds it. I cannot find a single common point of interest between us.”

“Oh.”

Agnes laughed, amused at the fact that was all Caroline could think to say. “He is not making much of an impression, isn’t he?”

Caroline nodded, oddly serious despite Agnes’s apparent humor. “Any other lady would find that off-putting. A lady such as yourself, who reads nearly as often as she breathes, he may as well announce that he has no intention of winning her heart.”

“At least he is handsome,” Agnes said after a moment.

“Yes, that much is a relief.”

They were silent for a moment, each contemplating the matter. Then Agnes asked, “What of you and the duke? How was your walk?”

“It was...nice.”

“Simply nice?” Agnes leaned forward. “Was he not attentive to you?”

“He was quite attentive. He was gentle and kind and he showed much interest in the things I liked to do. I think he is wonderful, if not a bit stoic.”

“Then why do you wear such an expression?”

“What expression?”

Agnes tilted her head. “You look as if you’re worried about something. Did he say something untoward to you?”

Caroline shook her head, avoiding Agnes’ eyes. “No, he didn’t.”

Agnes said nothing, studying her friend’s face. Then she stood, brushing the skirt of her dress back into place.

“Where are you going?” Caroline asked with a frown.

“To see the duke. Clearly, he has done something so horrible that you cannot even speak to me about it. I shall get it out of him myself.”

Caroline caught Agnes’ hand just as she began walking away, laughing. “Oh, heavens, you are so overprotective.”

“You are like a sister to me,” Agnes said seriously. “I will not take kindly to anyone hurting or disrespecting you.”

“The duke has not done anything, Agnes. I assure you.”

Agnes stared at her for a while longer. Something was clearly wrong. Caroline had never been very good at hiding her emotions. Even the smile on her face seemed a little forced. But whatever it was, she clearly did not want to talk about it.

So Agnes quelled her urge to get to the bottom of it and reclaimed her spot. “Very well. Just know that the duke will remain on thin ice until he has proven that he is worthy of your heart.”

Caroline's smile grew a little tighter as she nodded. "Of that, I have no doubt."

CHAPTER 7

Johnathan stared at the glass of whiskey sitting on the desk before him. He had poured the blasted thing five minutes ago and was yet to take a sip, his mind whirling with too many things at once.

He shouldn't drink it. Johnathan was not good at handling his alcohol. A few sips and his head would start to swim. Considering the fact that dinner was set to begin at any moment, Johnathan knew he would be playing with fire if he dared to indulge.

On the other hand, it would certainly calm his nerves. He had been on edge ever since this morning, ever since Miss Caroline arrived, and he'd loathed to let his agitation show during dinner. He didn't think the astute Miss Agnes would miss it. She didn't seem to miss anything.

Yet another reason he should down the drink and be done with it. He didn't want to argue with Miss Agnes like he had done this morning.

A knock came at the door. Johnathan didn't look up from the whiskey as he said, "Come."

Mrs. Adams slipped in. "Dinner is ready, Your Grace."

"I see." He didn't move, drumming his fingers against the desk. Should he? Thinking about Miss Agnes tempted him to drink the whiskey. He didn't like how often he thought of her. Perhaps before he could indulge in conversation, but now that Miss Caroline was here, it was clear where his attention should lie. Not with Miss Agnes

and her all-seeing, warm brown eyes but with the lovely Miss Caroline who was set to be his wife.

“Your Gace?”

Johnathan shot to a stand, picked up the glass, and downed it in one go.

“Your Grace!” Mrs. Adams exclaimed.

He gritted his teeth against the burn currently assaulting his throat. It pained him all the way to his stomach, bringing tears to his eyes. After a few seconds, he blinked them away and looked at his horrified housekeeper.

“The guests are in the parlor, correct?”

She nodded wordlessly, closing her slack jaw.

Johnathan nodded and rounded the desk, making his way out of his study without a word.

As Mrs. Adams said, everyone was already waiting in the parlor. Johnathan’s eyes instantly fell on Miss Agnes, who was standing next to Miss Caroline by the hearth. She glanced at him upon his entrance and he could have sworn her eyes narrowed slightly.

Dear God, help him.

Johnathan let his eyes trail over her, not lingering as long as he was tempted to. They came to rest on Lord and Lady Sutton talking with Lord and Lady Reeds. His mother had already stated that she was not intending to dine with them, which meant Johnathan would have to lie to others that she was ill.

“I cannot say the same, my lord,” Lord Sutton was saying. He had his wife on his arm. Johnathan was beginning to realize they were rarely not touching each other in some manner. “I believe that Lady Umbridge’s mourning period was well within societal standards.”

“Bah!” Lord Reeds exclaimed. “Six months is hardly proper by society’s standard! And to think that she thought to attend Lord Headley’s ball and dance two dances with him as well. She should be ashamed of herself.”

“Lady Umbridge is only two-and-twenty, my lord,” Lady Sutton said gently. “One can hardly blame her for wanting to explore her options after her husband’s death. He was quite old when they married so this comes as no surprise to anyone.”

“A year at least,” Lady Reeds said in agreement with her husband, though Johnathan had to wonder if the sneer on her face was necessary. “And then she is free to attend as many balls as she wishes. Searching for a husband, though? In such a bold-faced fashion? The nerve!”

Lord Sutton sighed and shook his head before turning his attention to the silent Johnathan. “Forgive us, Your Grace. It is rather unbecoming of us to gossip like this.”

“Not at all, my lord,” Johnathan managed graciously. The whiskey was already taking root in the base of his skull. He found words came easier to his tongue. “Though it certainly would help if I were to know who you spoke of.”

“You do not know of Lady Umbridge?” Lady Reeds asked, aghast. “The Dowager Marchioness of Umbridge?”

Johnathan gave a regrettable shake of his head. “I’m afraid my duties take me far from any news of my fellow peers. I am woefully behind.”

“That is nothing to be concerned about, Your Grace,” Lady Sutton said with a gentle smile. “It is silly London gossip, after all. Nothing you needn’t worry about. Especially not someone who bears as much responsibilities as yourself.”

“Then perhaps you could get me up to speed during dinner. Shall we make our way to the dining room?”

“Of course. I am famished!”

It was easy to match Lady Sutton’s grin and he couldn’t help but wonder how much of that was due to the whiskey swimming in his head. He turned to the rest of the room, to everyone else who seemed occupied in their own tasks.

“Let us make our way to the dining room, everyone,” he announced.

They all got into action. And despite his best attempts, Johnathan could not stop his eyes from falling on Miss Agnes.

As if she sensed the weight of his gaze, she met his stare. She frowned slightly and then glanced at Miss Caroline. Then she leaned close to her friend to whisper something in her ear.

Miss Caroline’s eyes darted up to Johnathan’s after a moment and she flushed. Johnathan didn’t bother trying to understand what had just occurred.

Instead, he took the lead, fearing what he might do if he let himself fall to the back of the group. He made his way to the dining room with his guests at his heels and promptly marched over to his chair at the head of the table. He couldn’t stop himself from watching as Miss Agnes entered, her eyes scanning the room. When Miss Caroline entered behind her, he remembered himself.

Johnathan stood and pulled out the chair next to him, indicating without a word that he wanted Miss Caroline to sit beside him. She fluttered her eyes shyly at him as she murmured her gratitude and claimed the seat.

Christopher did the same for Miss Agnes. Johnathan struggled to find pride in his brother, ignoring the odd feeling he got watching Miss Agnes smile up at him.

There was a comfortable silence in the air as the first course was served. Johnathan racked his brain for something to say to Miss Caroline. During their walk, he'd let her take the lead in conversation, stoking it with a few questions of his own. He knew it made him seem attentive but he knew deep down it was partly because he could not think of a single thing to say to her.

The silence was broken before anything came to mind.

"Has anyone been to the London races lately?" Christopher asked and Johnathan nearly sighed. When his brother started talking about horse racing, it was hard getting him to stop.

"I have not had the chance to attend in a while," Lord Sutton admitted amicably. "Have you been able to take part?"

"Oh, I most certainly have! Though it has been some time. I fear racing for competition severely cuts in the extra time I have to partake in my other interests. But I do enjoy watching the sport in my free time as well."

"I have never been able to attend," Mr. Parsons spoke up with a slightly sullen look. "It is my wish to do, but Father thinks it is not proper for me to do so."

"No, Father only thinks you should pay more attention to your studies than you currently do," Miss Agnes corrected without looking up from her soup.

Mr. Parsons scowled at her and she lifted her eyes to her brother as if she felt it, raising a single brow in challenge. Johnathan nearly smiled.

“Oh, but I do think horse racing is a rite of passage for any man,” Christopher continued.

Mr. Parsons seemed rather interested in that, eyes growing wide. “In what manner?”

“It assists with one’s discernment, of course. When you watch the horses lining up at the start line, you have to observe each and every one of them to determine which you believe will be the victor. And there are many factors that come into play.”

“I thought you did not place bets, sir,” Miss Agnes spoke up again, her tone idle.

Christopher just nodded. “I do not. Nor do I need to when the true enjoyment comes from the thrill of the race itself.”

“What sort of factors do you speak of?” Mr. Parsons asked. “The build of the horse?”

“Yes, that is one. But even the build of the riders themselves. One must also pay keen attention to the heat of the day, the terrain, the history of the horses...”

Johnathan stopped listening. In fact, it seemed everyone had stopped as well. Lord and Lady Sutton were murmuring to each other with small smiles. Lord and Lady Reeds were quiet, eating their meals while looking surreptitiously between Johnathan and Miss Caroline. Johnathan would have felt pressured to make small quiet conversation with Miss Caroline amidst Christopher and Mr. Parsons’ louder one, but he was paying keener attention to Miss Agnes.

She was looking between Christopher and her brother with a mixture of awe and horror. He watched as she sighed and shook her head. His lips twitched.

Her eyes fell on his, widening when she realized that he was already staring. Johnathan would have looked away by now, ashamed that he had been caught staring and then embarrassed that he looked away at all. But the whiskey made him bold. Bold enough for him to glance at his brother, back at her, and then roll his eyes.

Miss Agnes' lips twitched. She tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ears and tapped her ear with a stern look.

Johnathan frowned at her in mock horror and put his hand to his throat, implying he would much rather die than take part in the conversation.

She ran a finger down her cheek like a fake tear.

He couldn't hold back his chuckle. Miss Agnes giggled behind her hand.

"Does something amuse you, Your Grace?" came Miss Caroline's innocent voice.

Johnathan wiped the grin off his face and straightened, feeling like he'd gotten caught doing something he shouldn't have been doing. "I was only thinking about something, Miss Caroline," he lied. "Are you enjoying your meal?"

"It is quite tasty, Your Grace. I must thank you again for your kind hospitality."

"It is my honor, miss. Please do not hesitate to indicate any manner in which I may be able to make your stay a better one."

She gave him a small smile and returned her attention to her meal. Johnathan tried to do the same thing but his eyes wandered back to Miss Agnes unbidden.

"That is it, Father," Mr. Parsons said suddenly. "I shall become a horse racer!"

“No, you will not,” Lord Sutton and Miss Agnes said in unison.

Lady Sutton laughed. “Oh heavens, between the two of them, I cannot tell who the parent is.”

“Father is,” Mr. Parsons said pointedly, scowling at his sister. “You have no say in the matter.”

Miss Agnes’ only response to that was to look expectantly at her father. Right on cue, Lord Sutton said, “You shall inherit the title and the family business.”

“What of his paintings, dear?” Lady Sutton asked. She always spoke with such humor, as if she found every situation funny. “He is quite skilled, you know.”

“Then should he make a living painting portraits for the rest of his life?”

“It is not a bad way to live.”

Johnathan had a sneaking suspicion Lady Sutton was taunting her husband.

“Mother, please,” Mr. Parsons whined. “Haven’t you been hearing what Lord Christopher has been saying?”

“Please,” Christopher spoke up. “You all should call me Christopher.”

Mr. Parsons grinned at that. “It is clear that this is my passion.”

“Is it not interesting that you find a new passion every month?” Miss Agnes drawled.

“Yes, that’s right,” Miss Caroline exclaimed suddenly. “You did say you wanted to become a sculptor last month!”

“My,” Johnathan heard himself drawl, mirth evident in his tone. “You must be the most remarkable man in all of London to have so many talents, Mr. Parsons.”

A sudden giggle caught his attention. Miss Agnes was trying to hide her laughter behind her hand. An odd warmth spread through his chest.

“You are all poking fun at me,” Mr. Parsons pouted, his face growing red.

“I do think this is improper conversation,” Lady Reeds spoke up. She narrowed her eyes at Miss Caroline and the lovely lady shrank under her withering stare. “Let us talk of other things. Like what we may be able to do during our stay here, Your Grace.”

“Or,” Christopher spoke up. “I could tell you all about the filly my horse recently gave birth to.”

No one, not even the queen herself, would have been able to stop Christopher from going down that line of conversation. Johnathan was content to let it happen, letting his eyes drift to Miss Agnes again.

Somehow, dinner went by in a blur and all he could remember about it was the smile on her face and the sound of her laughter.

CHAPTER 8

Lord Christopher was...something. Agnes could not fathom how he had so many things to say about one topic. He didn't stop talking about his horses all throughout the three courses and by the end of it, Agnes was desperate for a reprieve.

"Ladies, shall we all retire to the drawing room?" Mary asked, already getting to her feet.

Agnes sat up straighter. "A lovely idea, Mother. And perhaps the men may seek some reprieve in the parlor?"

"A sound idea, Agnes," Solomon agreed and Agnes could barely hold back her sigh of relief. She didn't know how much more of Lord Christopher's ramblings she could take.

She managed a hasty smile, remembering manners at the last minute as she attempted to make her escape from the duke's brother. Agnes didn't wait for his response. She led the way to the drawing room with the other ladies following behind. As soon as she entered, she went right to the pianoforte.

Caroline sat next to Mary, with Prudence on the other side of the viscountess.

Deciding that she could leave Caroline in the care of her parents, who always treated Caroline as if she were one of their own, she settled down in front of the pianoforte and brushed her fingers over the keys.

“The duke is quite dashing, isn’t he?” Prudence’s sharp voice sliced through the room. “Goodness, I think we might have struck gold in having Caroline marry him.”

“Yes, he is quite charming,” Mary agreed. “Though I do think it is a bit early to decide if you have struck gold. They have only just met, after all.”

Agnes settled on a slow, somber song, letting herself fall into the music, trying not to listen to the conversation.

“Oh, heavens, there is no need to be discreet, Lady Sutton,” Prudence huffed with a flash of her hand. “It is only us ladies here.”

“I’m afraid I do not know what you mean, my lady.”

“What does it matter if they know each other well? What matters is that he is a wealthy duke and Caroline is of marriageable age. I’m sure you consider the very same things regarding Agnes.”

Agnes glanced up, not missing the look of discomfort on Caroline’s face. She continued playing, fingers flying across the keys rapidly.

“I only want what is best for my daughter,” Mary said simply.

“And what is best for her is that she marry. It is a pity it is not a duke, however.”

Mary ignored Prudence’s snide remark, turning her attention to Caroline. “What do you think of His Grace, Caroline?”

Agnes nearly hit the wrong key. She recovered easily enough, holding her breath.

“He is kind, my lady,” Caroline said at last.

“And you find him handsome, I’m sure?”

This time, Agnes did hit the wrong key. She glanced up to see that Prudence had noticed and was giving her a rather dirty look. She resisted the urge to return it.

“Yes, my lady,” Caroline said, her cheeks coloring. “But you are right. I do not know him well.”

“You will in time, my dear,” Mary said nicely, patting Caroline on the knee. “You should take your time and follow your heart.”

“Yes, my lady.”

“Such careless advice,” Prudence grumbled.

Mary shifted slightly to face the countess. “Lady Reeds, did you hear of Lady Henderson’s two month mourning period?”

Just like that, Prudence forgot about the conversation surrounding the duke, grabbing at the chance to gossip. “I did! Can you believe her?”

Agnes’ lip twitched. Her mother was as admirable as ever at diverting one’s attention from one thing to another. She released the breath she had been holding, letting herself fall into the music now that the conversation had strayed away from talk of dukes and marriage.

She was so focused on her playing that she didn’t realize when the men arrived. It was only when she heard her father’s hearty laughter did she look up from the pianoforte keys. Her heart skipped a beat when her eyes fell on the duke.

The duke was talking with Solomon. Whatever the conversation was must interest her

father greatly because he carried the brunt of it, going on and on in an animated manner. He was so deep in the conversation that he seemingly did not notice the duke's eyes wandering to her every few seconds.

Boldly, going against everything she'd been telling herself, she raised her brows at him and then jutted her chin to the pianoforte she was playing, a silent invitation.

She expected him to respond in kind. Even if he didn't make his way over, which might give off the wrong impression, she thought he might pick up on their silent method of conversing.

But he only gave her an apologetic look before he turned his attention to her father.

It surprised Agnes so much that she hit the wrong key. The sharp note rang through the room and many heads turned towards her.

"Oh for goodness' sake," Lady Reeds complained. "Caroline, why don't you play for us? Perhaps your music will help to settle our stomachs." Then she twisted to look at the duke. "She is quite skilled, you see."

"Of that, I have no doubt," His Grace stated and then turned to face the pianoforte.

Agnes held back her scowl, getting to her feet. Caroline gave her an apologetic look as she walked by but Agnes only smiled at her. It was not her fault her aunt was so pressuring.

"Lovely playing, sister," Paul teased with a grin.

"Hush or I will tell Christopher that you do not know how to shoot a shotgun very well," Agnes shot back without hesitation. When her brother paled, she gave him a wan smile. "Or would you like your new role model to remain unaware of how little

you know?”

Paul grumbled something under his breath, but she paid him no mind. It was easy to see that he looked up to Christopher. During their conversation at dinner, the admiration in his eyes had been thinly veiled. Agnes didn't mind poking fun at her brother because of it.

Her mirth quickly died when she looked at the duke again. This time his attention was on Caroline. But the way he looked at her...it was stricken with unending remorse. But what for? Agnes had assumed that he'd given her that look as a way of denying her invitation to come over to her but why would he look at Caroline the same way?

As she studied him, she began to realize that he was not so much looking at her as he was looking through her. His mind seemed miles away. What was he thinking about?

Her curiosity nagged at her, so much so that she hardly realized when Caroline's song ended.

“Play another, Caroline,” Lady Reeds urged just as Caroline came to a stand. The countess looked eagerly at the duke. “Did I mention how skilled she was? You should listen, Your Grace.”

The duke thinned his lips and nodded slightly. Lady Reeds did not seem very pleased with that response. She looked at Caroline and gestured for her to continue.

“Is something on your mind, Agnes?”

Agnes shook her head, forcing a smile on her face as she looked at her mother. She hadn't noticed when she approached. “I am just a bit tired.”

Mary raised a brow. “You do not look tired. You look as if you came across a

confounding equation that you simply must get to the bottom of.”

Her smile felt a little more genuine as she huffed a laugh. Agnes couldn’t stop her eyes from straying to the duke. He was still focusing on whatever Solomon was saying. “That may be what is tiring me.”

“Care to tell me about it? I may be able to help.”

Agnes shook her head. She couldn’t begin to explain the questions swirling in her head about the duke. “I will be fine after a long night’s rest, I’m sure. I shall retire early.” She reached out to squeeze her mother’s hand. “Goodnight, Mother.”

“Goodnight, my dear.”

“Are you leaving already, Miss Agnes?” Christopher spoke up as she turned towards the door.

In the corner of her eye, she saw the duke turn to her. Gooseflesh raced across her skin. She clasped her hands behind her, hoping her expression did not give away her suddenly racing heart. “I am.”

He pouted in disappointment. “I bid you goodnight then.”

“Goodnight, my lord,” she returned, but he’d already turned his attention back to Paul, likely to continue rambling about horses.

Agnes turned, keeping her eyes fixed on the door to keep from looking at the duke. But she could feel his eyes. She told herself it was just her imagination, that his recent actions were filling her mind with all manner of things. She held onto that notion as she bid everyone else goodnight—still not meeting the duke’s eyes—and left the drawing room.

The silence was welcoming. Agnes made her way to her chambers and went about the task of donning her nightdress with the help of the maid who had assisted her when she'd first arrived.

The entire task was done in silence but Agnes' mind was louder than it had been in days. She couldn't stop thinking about the look on the duke's face. Why had he looked that way? And why in God's name did she feel this insane urge to take his hand and tell him that everything would be all right?

The question plagued her as she crawled into bed. Agnes didn't even bother trying to resume her reading like she usually did. She knew that there was no hope of focusing on anything with the questions assaulting her mind.

She did not know the duke for long. There was no reason for him to look at her like that. And even less reason for her to entertain this insane urge to console him. Console him for what? How could she even think about doing such a thing when she hadn't a clue what it was about?

Agnes didn't know how much time passed but she did hear when the door to Caroline's chambers opened and then closed. She could only assume that everyone else had retired as well. What of the duke? Was he lying awake thinking about their every interaction like she was?

She doubted it. This was quite insane of her to do. She couldn't fathom that he would be tossing and turning with similar thoughts in his mind. If she was...well, that would certainly make her feel a little better.

What felt like ages later, Agnes finally felt the call of sleep. She let her eyes drift close, her drowsy mind lingering on confusing thoughts of the duke and sheep. Sheep with jumping fences with a number appearing above them. Sheep with the duke's face. The duke jumping fences. The duke calling numbers. Sheep giving her

apologetic looks like the duke had. Her sleep-addled thoughts only grew more confusing as she tried to fully claim the evasive unconsciousness.

The sound of a door opening jolted her out of her half-sleep.

“Caroline?” she called, her voice soft since it was the dead of night. She received no response.

Agnes stared up at the black ceiling as she listened to the door close. Perhaps Caroline could not sleep either and was heading to the kitchen for some warm milk. Agnes was tempted to join her but she didn’t want to risk telling Caroline just how long she had spent thinking about her betrothed.

She rolled out of bed instead, padding over to the window. The moon was out with full force, showering the forest in the distance with silvery light. Agnes sighed, sitting on the chaise lounge. The sight calmed her a bit. She hadn’t even noticed how agitated she’d become.

Something caught her attention. It was a ball of orange light bobbing away from the castle and disappearing into the edge of the forest. Surely that wasn’t a person she’d just seen? Who would be heading into the forest at such an ungodly hour?

She waited by the window to see if the person would reemerge. Agnes sat there for so long that her tiredness crept over her again and she decided to just return to bed. Just as she got up, the ball of orange light returned.

Agnes squinted at the moving figure but her spot on the second floor made it difficult to discern who it might be. A maid, perhaps? But what purpose did a maid have in the forest in the dead of night?

She stared at the moving figure until the light disappeared. Confounded, Agnes

returned to her bed and crawled under the covers.

After a few minutes, she heard Caroline's door open and close again. Her heart began to race. She couldn't believe it. The person going to the forest so late was Caroline ?

Agnes could not take her eyes off her friend. No matter how much she studied her, Caroline appeared perfectly rested. They were seated at the dining table with the duke, Christopher, and Paul since the married couples had opted to have breakfast in their chambers. It was nice not having parental pressure on them this morning but Agnes hardly had any time to enjoy it.

Caroline didn't look like she'd spent her night sneaking into nearby forests but Agnes was almost certain it had been her. The only thing she couldn't understand was why.

Caroline was not an impulsive person. She did not make bold decisions and almost always did what was expected of her. She was the last person Agnes expected to sneak out of her chambers to meet someone in the dead of night. And no matter how much she thought of it, that was the only conclusion Agnes could draw. Caroline had to have met someone. What other reason would she have to go to the forest so late, in a place that she was not acquainted with?

Her dear, secretive friend was oblivious to Agnes' constant glances. She was tempted to ask her what she'd been doing sneaking around last night but Agnes didn't want to put her on the spot. And she didn't know how she would feel if Caroline lied to her.

So she'd concluded that she had to be meeting someone. And if it had to be done in the dead of night in a dark and eerie forest, then it had to be someone she did not want to be seen with.

Was it the duke?

Agnes' heart sank for some reason and she didn't dare to look at the duke, who was talking with Paul about going hunting soon. If it were the duke then it would be such a bad thing, would it? They were meant to be married, after all. Even if their reason for meeting was...improper, it would not court scandal if they were caught.

Agnes tried to catch her breath at the thought, forcing herself to think straight. No, if it was the duke then why would they have reason to meet all the way in the forest? It was his castle, after all. If they did not want to be seen, surely could think of more convenient locations to meet. He must know of many discreet areas tucked within the castle. Would it have been necessary to drag Caroline to the forest?

She eagerly dismissed the thought. Caroline glanced up at her, noticing her stare, and offered a smile. Agnes quickly pasted a smile onto her face so that she wouldn't notice anything was amiss. When Caroline returned her attention to her tea, Agnes glanced at the duke, wondering why she felt such a profound sense of relief.

As if he sensed her eyes, his gaze fell on her. It was for a brief moment but he stumbled over his words nonetheless and then began scratching his chin as if he needed something to do with his hands. Agnes' lips twitch. She was beginning to sense that the duke was the nervous sort.

Back to the matter at hand, she told herself, looking away from him and at her best friend. Who did Caroline meet last night?

Her father was completely out of the question. He didn't have a single bone in his body capable of affairs.

As did Paul. Agnes studied her brother and could not fathom any reason Caroline would want to meet with him. Caroline looked at Paul like Agnes did, like a little brother—though markedly less annoyed with him at all times. Agnes could not imagine that it was him.

And Lord Reeds? Well, Agnes doubted Caroline could even stomach being alone with him, being the horrible man that he was.

The only person left was...

Christopher yawned widely next to her, putting his hand to his mouth a beat later as if the urge had taken him over before he had the chance to mind his manners.

“Are you all right, Lord Christopher?” she asked, feigning idle curiosity.

He gave her a sheepish grin. “I’m afraid I did not get much sleep last night, Miss Agnes. Forgive me if I seem rather out of it this morning.”

“Think nothing of it, sir,” she managed to say, heart racing at her discovery.

It had to be Christopher. It had to be! He had not slept much because he had spent the night waiting in the forest for Caroline. It made so much sense.

Agnes looked back up at her friend, her heart tearing in two. She had no fond emotions towards Christopher. Yes, he was nice enough, but it was clear they had no chemistry. There would be no love lost if either one of them decided to entertain someone else.

But Caroline...oh her dear friend must be stricken with guilt knowing that she had feelings for her friend’s betrothed. Agnes would not mind stepping out of the way to let their love flourish. She only wanted Caroline to be happy.

She could talk to her later, Agnes resolved. They would be able to figure out what to do together. It would be quite scandalous, perhaps, but it was a situation they would be able to navigate if they were careful.

This time, when Caroline met her eyes again and smiled, Agnes' answering smile came easier to her lips.

CHAPTER 9

“Is something wrong?”

Agnes jumped at Caroline’s question, even though she had been expecting it. She lingered at the doorway to Caroline’s chambers and had been watching her friend read for a while before Caroline noticed her.

“Nothing,” she said quickly, stepping inside and closing the door behind her. “How...are you?”

Caroline frowned, setting her book aside. “I am fine, Agnes. However, now I am beginning to think that something is actually wrong. What is it?”

“It is nothing,” Agnes lied again, coming to sit next to her friend. She had no idea how to broach the topic at all. She’d been thinking about it all throughout breakfast and still had not settled on anything proper.

Finally, she asked, “How is the relationship between you and the duke progressing?”

“Oh. Well, the duke is nice.”

“Just nice? I would hope you wouldn’t marry someone just because they are nice.”

“You should tell that to my uncle,” Caroline sighed. “His Grace could be a tyrant and he would still be desperate to marry me off to him. I should be glad that he treats me kindly since I stand no chance of backing out of this marriage if I wished to.”

“But what do you feel for him?” Agnes pressed.

Caroline sighed. “I must admit that my heart does not beat for him. Kind though he may be, it feels much like you and Lord Christopher. There is very little chemistry between us.”

Agnes’ heart broke in her chest. Before she could think to stop herself, she threw her arms around Caroline’s neck. “Oh, Caroline, I understand you completely. And I assure you that no matter how difficult it may seem, just know that I will be here to support you in any way I can.”

Caroline gently pried Agnes’ arms away from her to look at her with confusion. “What are you going on about, Agnes?”

“I know about your late-night stroll,” Agnes blurted out.

Caroline’s eyes grew wide with horror. “How?” she whispered.

“I saw when you went into the forest last night.” After a beat, she added, “I also know who you went out to meet.”

Caroline pulled fully away, staring at Agnes as if she’d just grown a second head.

“You needn’t worry,” Agnes quickly assured her. “I do not mind in the slightest. As a matter of fact, I want to help you.”

“Help me?” Caroline squeaked.

“Yes.” Agnes grasped both of Caroline’s hands. “I know you, Caroline. I know how terrified you must be to speak the truth of your heart but I am here to assist you in any manner I can.”

“I cannot believe this.” Caroline pulled away from her, coming to a stand. She appeared agitated, pacing back and forth and wringing her hands together. Agnes waited for her to come to terms with what she’d told her.

At last, Caroline whirled to face her again. “How do you know?” she asked.

“I saw you,” Agnes admitted to her. “And I heard when you returned to your chambers.”

“Oh, dear God,” Caroline breathed, sinking into the sofa again. “I cannot believe this is happening.”

“You needn’t worry, Caroline,” Agnes assured her gently. “I shan’t tell a soul. Not until you are ready to speak yourself.”

Caroline looked up at her with tears in her eyes. Agnes held her arms out and Caroline threw herself into them, sobbing against her chest.

“Oh, Agnes, I don’t know what to do! I have been holding this in for so long.”

“There, there,” Agnes consoled gently.

“I am so in love with him, Agnes. I wish I could shout it to the world but I must keep it a secret. It would be such a scandal otherwise.”

“We only need a plan,” Agnes said. “If we devise a proper one, I’m sure we will be able to help you without damaging your reputation very much.”

Caroline pulled away, tears streaming down her face without hesitation. “How?” she rasped.

Agnes didn't know how to respond to that. All she knew was her resolve, her determination never to allow Caroline cry over this matter anymore. If she loved Christopher as much as she claimed, then Agnes would do everything in her power to ensure that Caroline had her happy ending.

Something was off. Johnathan couldn't tell what just yet.

It was dinnertime and the entire table was alight with conversation. Lord and Lady Reeds were talking with Lord and Lady Sutton with far more animation than they had done the previous night, having come out of their shell a little bit. Christopher and Mr. Parsons were talking with each other as if they were the best of friends. But Miss Caroline and Miss Agnes were quiet.

Miss Caroline had been crying. It was hardly noticeable and Johnathan would have missed it had he not been studying her closely for the past few minutes trying to ascertain why she seemed so despondent. Certainly she hadn't figured out what he was doing?

With Miss Caroline, perhaps not. But when he looked at Miss Agnes, he couldn't be sure.

She seemed to be in intense thought. She hardly paid attention to her meal, staring with focus at a spot on the table with her fork limp in her hand. Miss Caroline might not have figured out Johnathan's motives but perhaps she had.

The guilt that had been nagging at him for the past few days overwhelmed him at once. This was not the way he wanted things to be. Preying on these young girls for nothing but their dowry made him feel sick on the inside. But it was the quickest way he could think of to help with his family's financial situation.

He could tell that even Christopher was growing uncomfortable with their situation.

But Miss Agnes didn't seem to mind that Christopher was not paying her much attention. Her focus was on something else entirely, though what that was, Johnathan hadn't a clue.

The thought perplexed him all throughout dinner and well into their time of relaxation in the parlor. Lord Sutton had suggested that they play cards while the ladies entertained themselves on the other side of the room but he could not focus. He lost round after round with his mind worlds away and his gaze constantly straying to Miss Agnes.

No matter how many times he looked over at her, he found her already staring at him. That same look of deep concentration remained fixed on her face, now trained on him. He had to quell the urge to cross over the room and ask her what was on her mind.

"Had we been placing bets, Your Grace, I would have won your entire wealth by now."

The jesting comment came from Lord Sutton, who was making another clean win of their game of whist.

Johnathan set his cards down with a sigh. "I'm afraid my mind keeps wandering, my lord."

"A decent excuse, if any," Lord Sutton said with a chuckle. "Are you certain you would not like to place bets?"

Johnathan fixed a grin on his face. "And lose everything I have, as you have so aptly pointed out I would?"

"We cannot know unless you try," Lord Sutton challenged.

“If I didn’t know better, my lord,” Lord Reeds spoke up, “I would think you wanted His Grace to hand over his wealth to you. Is there not enough of your own to rely on?”

Johnathan didn’t know whether that comment was meant in jest or not but he laughed all the same. “I know when I am bested. I should retire now before I suffer any more blows to my ego.”

“So soon, brother?” Christopher taunted with a grin. “You do not usually give up so easily.”

“I do when I see that the odds are stacked against me. Or in this case, luck.”

Johnathan got to his feet and looked at Mr. Parsons, who had been observing the game silently. “I will need someone to take my place.”

Mr. Parsons blinked bemusedly at him and then his eyes widened with understanding. He quickly got to his feet and said, “I shall beat every one of them.”

Johnathan’s laughter was a little more genuine this time. He patted Mr. Parsons on the shoulder saying, “I have the utmost faith in you. Good night, gentlemen.” And then louder, “Goodnight, ladies.”

Miss Agnes got to her feet as the other ladies bid him goodnight. She stared intensely at him, that frown that had been present since dinner dipping lower. Johnathan paused, wondering if there was something she wanted to say. If she would finally reveal what had been on her mind all evening.

But then she reclaimed her seat and looked away from him towards the conversation amongst the other ladies. She nodded her head but before long, her eyes shifted to him and her frown deepened again. Clearly, she wasn’t listening. Clearly, there was

something she wanted to say. And clearly, she had no intention of doing so tonight.

So he left the parlor with an uneasy feeling settling in his gut.

CHAPTER 10

Sleep eluded Johnthan during the night so the moment the sun began poking its head above the horizon, he made his way to his study to get some work done before breakfast. He was tempted to simply eat breakfast at his desk like he was wont to do before his guests arrived, but he still had a task at hand. Even if Miss Caroline and Miss Agnes had learned of his motivations, it didn't mean anything had changed. He should still play the proper host and the attentive betrothed.

He found some reprieve from this never-ending thoughts in his ledgers when there was a knock on the door. Johnathan frowned, glancing out the window. It was hardly past dawn. Mrs. Adams rarely bothered him at a time like this.

"Come," he called.

The door opened and Miss Agnes slipped in.

Johnathan went utterly still, not allowing himself to breathe. He stared at her as if he was seeing a ghost and honestly, as tired as he was, he did not rule out the possibility that she was a figment of his imagination. God knew he'd been thinking about her far more than was deemed proper.

Miss Agnes lingered by the door with her hand still on the handle as if she was prepared to leave at any moment. She seemed to be struggling with an internal battle and Johnathan saw the second she came to her conclusion. She released the door handle and came further into the room, raising her chin.

“I know that it is early,” she began.

Johnathan nodded. “Yes,” he breathed.

“And that it would be deemed quite improper for us to be alone together like this if we were caught.”

“I reckon it is rather improper without being caught,” he pointed out, still trying to restart his heart.

“Yes, that is true,” she said. Even though she met his eyes unflinchingly, the way she played with her fingers told him that she was just as nervous as he was. “I understand all of that but I decided to take the risk because what I am about to say to you is quite important.”

Johnathan leaned back in his chair and gestured to the armchair on the other side of his desk. She took the offer and claimed the chair, taking a deep breath.

“What is it, Miss Agnes?” he broached gently.

“Caroline and your brother are in love,” she blurted out before he’d gotten the question out fully. “And while I know how scandalous this might seem, I am well aware that only a select few are certain of your courtship with Caroline so it may not be as scandalous as we are assuming. And even if it were, I hope that you love your brother as much as I love Caroline and wish for him to be happy with the person he loves, rather than any mark on his reputation. So I only ask that you do not oppose their union.”

She had looked down halfway through her words but when she looked back up at him, she blinked, seemingly surprised. Johnathan didn’t blame her. As she spoke, he felt a wave of relief come over him, and then happiness. He was sure it was evident

on his face.

It seemed his fear that Miss Agnes and Miss Caroline had found out about his reason for wanting him and his brother to marry them had been ill-placed. And to learn that his brother had gone and fallen in love! Who would have thought? He'd certainly done a good job of hiding it. That would explain his disinterest in Miss Agnes. Any smart gentleman would be happy to court a lady like her and yet he'd been doing so as if a blade was pointed at his back. Now Johnathan knew it had to be because of his love for another woman.

"You do not seem unhappy," Miss Agnes pointed out.

"That is because I am not. Why would I be when I have just learned of the direction of my brother's heart? I want to do whatever I can to make him happy."

"Even if that means breaking your engagement with Caroline?" she asked with a frown.

"I have no qualms with doing such a thing. It is clear that we hold no romantic affection for each other after all. If they would be happier together, then by all means."

Miss Agnes blinked at him, coming to terms with what he was saying.

"Is it so hard to believe?" he asked her.

"No," she admitted. "I was only prepared for more of a fight. I came ready to argue with you."

"Somehow that does not surprise me," he said with an easy chuckle.

She didn't share in his amusement, her brows dipping. "What do you propose to mean by that?"

"Only that you are rather opinionated, Miss Agnes," he told her without qualms. "Nothing more than that."

"Hm."

He wasn't bothered by her wariness. In fact, it endeared him. His breath caught in his throat when she began to approach, sinking into the armchair across his desk. Despite the distance, her scent wafted over to him and brought gooseflesh to his skin.

"It is good that you share the same opinion on this as I do, Your Grace," Miss Agnes said, folding her hands in her lap. "It will make the next step far easier to manage."

"The next step?" he probed, raising his brow.

"Well, Caroline is very...hesitant. She seems intent on keeping her love a secret and judging from the fact that you knew nothing of this yourself, I presume your brother does as well. And we cannot forget that the four of us are not the only ones involved in these arrangements. My parents and Caroline's aunt and uncle will have much to say if any changes are made."

"You have given this much thought, haven't you?"

"I have," she confirmed with a nod, leveling her gaze on him. "I could not stop thinking about it all of last night into this morning."

"Ah, I see. So that is why you seemed that way."

She frowned again. Johnathan instantly regretted the words. "And what do you mean

by that way ?”

“It is nothing to be offended by, Miss?—”

“I think I should be the judge of that.”

He sighed. “I only meant that I noticed how absentminded you appeared during dinner last night.”

Miss Agnes’ frown did not lift, as if she didn’t dare to give him the impression that he was constantly being judged. However, her eyes did lighten to curiosity as she tilted her head to the side. “How odd that you noticed such a thing, Your Grace.”

All of a sudden, Johnathan was having a hard time meeting her eyes. He stood, walking over to the sideboard though he had no intention of drinking so early in the morning. He simply needed something to do with his hands. “I am an observant man.”

“As am I,” she hummed thoughtfully. He could feel her gaze boring into him.

Johnathan didn’t dare turn to face her. He busied himself by pouring a glass of wine, having every intention of letting the wine sit untouched. He didn’t know what it was about Miss Agnes that turned him into a bumbling fool who constantly put his foot in his mouth. She was a beautiful, intelligent and well-spoken lady, that was certain. Perhaps a tad intimidating. But he was a duke, for God’s sake. He’d gone up against men twice her size with scowls far more terrifying.

Yet his heart continued to do somersaults in his chest as he made his way back to his desk and sat.

“Oh, forgive me,” he said suddenly. “I must have forgotten my manners. Would you

like a glass of wine?”

Miss Agnes blinked at him, saying nothing. And then she giggled. The sound brought equal waves of pleasure and embarrassment washing over him.

“Wine?” she breathed between her laughter. “Surely you did not just offer me a glass of wine when it is barely dawn, Your Grace?”

“Not very astute of me, is it?” he asked sheepishly.

“I cannot tell if I should be touched by your eagerness to mind your manners or horrified by your thoughtlessness.”

“Charmed by my kindness?” he offered and was thrilled when she laughed again.

“A manageable compromise, if I have ever heard any.” Then she sobered and he tensed again. “But back to the matter at hand, Your Grace. We do not have much time.”

Johnathan quelled his disappointment, nodding. “Yes, go ahead.”

“I believe our biggest obstacle will be Lord and Lady Reeds. They are very set on the marriage.”

“Of that, I have no doubt,” he agreed with a grim nod. “They will be difficult to convince. I am not particularly sure how I will manage such a task since I have all but assured them that I shall be marrying their niece.”

“Everyone can be convinced if the right things are said,” she said with such easy confidence that Johnathan’s admiration of her went through the roof.

“Do you have a plan in mind?” he asked.

“A plan?” She shook her head. “Not yet. Not with regards to Lord and Lady Reeds, that is. Regarding Caroline and Lord Christopher? Perhaps. But I will need your help.”

“What do you need me to do?”

“We shall put them in each other’s company as often as we can. And we can start this afternoon! After breakfast, I shall suggest that we all go for a walk, but this time, you should offer to show me something and take me away, forcing them to walk together. Perhaps we may go to the lake Her Grace said was nearby.” She nodded, eyes adopting that faraway look of determination. “It will be far easier if neither Lord Reeds nor Lady Reeds chaperones so it may be best to have Mrs. Adams or a maid chaperone us instead. That way, we won’t feel the pressure they will inevitably place on us if we are not paired to their liking.”

“A simple plan,” Johnathan said, nodding as he took it all in. “But rather effective for the short term. I shall have to deal with Lord Reeds myself, I reckon?”

“Wise man, you are,” she said. Her light, teasing tone should have made him roll his eyes and yet he preened quietly, his heart skipping a beat. Johnathan didn’t dare let his face betray his emotions.

“I will have to give this much thought, then. He is not an easily deterred man.”

“I am certain you will be able to handle it. You are a wealthy, influential duke, after all.”

He looked away, suddenly filled with the urge to down his glass of wine. Instead, he tried changing the topic from his apparent wealth. “You must care deeply for Miss

Caroline to go to this length.”

“She is like a sister to me. I would do anything for her. And I am sure she would do the same for me.”

“That is rather admirable. She is lucky to have a friend like you.”

“I am sure Lord Christopher shares the same sentiment for you, Your Grace.”

Johnathan shrugged, eyes straying away from the curtains to her deep brown eyes that felt as if they were seeing right through him. “I think he is rather tired of me and my overbearing tendencies.”

“Overbearing? You, Your Grace?” Miss Agnes tilted her head to the side, eyes wide. “I find that rather hard to believe.”

His lips twitched. “Is that sarcasm I detect in your tone?”

“Of course not, Your Grace. I would never.”

“Your lips are twitching. You are most certainly poking fun at me.”

“Am I?” she sang, giving him an innocent look. “That would be quite bold of me to do to your face.”

“And yet I do not doubt that you would for a second.”

“I shall take that as a compliment then.”

“I assure you that it was not meant as such.”

Now she shrugged. “It matters not to me.”

This time, Johnathan couldn’t hold back her chuckle. She joined in with her own soft laughter, the sound like the sweet song of birds in the morning.

He opened his mouth to speak, to continue the lovely banter they had fallen into. A knock on the door disrupted his thoughts.

Both their heads turned to the noise. And then to each other, eyes wide. Miss Agnes broke eye contact first, looking to the window, and then Johnathan followed suit.

The sun was already high in the sky. He hadn’t noticed so much time had passed.

“Your Grace?” came an unfamiliar male voice from the other side of the door. “May I?”

Miss Agnes was already on her feet, panic in her eyes. Johnathan shot up as well. They couldn’t get caught in here together, not even by a servant. The rumors that would spark, the scandal that would cause...

He could tell the same thoughts were racing through her head as the person on the other side of the door knocked again. “Your Grace?”

Miss Agnes looked around frantically. Johnathan rounded the desk, taking her gently yet quickly by the arm. When she looked up at him, mouth parting in surprise, he nearly forgot what he’d intended to say.

His mind came back a moment later and he raised a finger to his lips then pointed to the window. She looked where he pointed with understanding dawning in her eyes. Miss Agnes nodded.

Johnathan crossed over to the door, keeping a hand on the knob in case the footman—because he assumed it had to be one—lost his mind and entered without permission. He waited until Miss Agnes had tucked herself behind the thick curtains and was safely out of sight before he opened it.

“Yes?” he answered, sounding a little irritated.

The footman’s eyes widened. “F-forgive the intrusion, Your Grace. Your guests are almost finished with breakfast.”

“Very well, thank you.”

The footman bowed and hurried away. Johnathan watched him walk away for a few seconds before he closed the door, letting out a pent-up breath of relief.

His eyes instantly fell on the brown-haired lady peeking out behind the curtains. They caught each other’s gazes for a second and then burst out laughing.

“All that commotion for a conversation that lasted less than five seconds,” she laughed with a shake of her head. She emerged from the curtains, making her way towards him.

“It is better to be safe than sorry,” he told her, approaching as well.

They met in the center of the room, far closer than he’d intended them to be. His smile slid away. Hers did as well. Johnathan was suddenly struck with the urge to look away, unnerved by the bold manner she looked at him. This was not a lady with demure tendencies and blushing cheeks. One heavy-lidded gaze from her and he was the one with flip-flopping insides.

“I should leave,” she murmured, taking a step back. She was blinking rapidly.

Johnathan could suddenly breathe again. “Or else someone is going to notice that I am missing.”

“Yes, that may be best. But we shall commence your plan this afternoon, as you suggested.”

Miss Agnes nodded. She did not meet his eyes again this time, oddly enough. Instead, she pointed at his desk, lips twitching.

“Your wine is growing tepid.”

With that she left, slipping through the door as quietly as she came, leaving him speechless. Johnathan found himself staring at the door for a long while, a stupid smile fixed on his face.

Something told him that conspiring with Miss Agnes might not be a good idea. And yet he couldn't remember the last time he'd ever felt this excited about anything.

CHAPTER 11

It felt as if her heart was about to beat right out of her chest. Agnes couldn't believe what she'd just done. Sneaking out of her chambers to read in the library at midnight was one thing. Sneaking out of her chambers near dawn to visit a gentleman in his study was something entirely different. Especially when that gentleman was devilishly handsome with a gaze capable of reducing her to a mess.

It was only a natural and scientific reaction to a gentleman like the duke, she told herself as she slipped into her bedchamber. Agnes pressed her hand against her chest, feeling the off-rhythm staccato of her heartbeat. It was nothing. She was a lady and he a gentleman. A woman and a man. She was nothing but a slave to her animalistic reactions and that was all her beating heart and flushed skin meant.

Agnes marched over to her vanity table, taking a good look at herself. She looked no different than normal. Despite the chaos raging in her mind, no one would know where she was coming from. That was all that mattered now.

So she tucked a few curls back into place, grabbed her parasol, and left her chambers. Rather than go down to the dining room or the drawing room, she headed to a side door she knew would take her out to the gardens, one she had spotted during the dowager duchess' tour of the manor. She headed around to the front of the manor and breathed a sigh of relief when she spotted the butler.

"Oh, it is a good thing you're here," she breathed, closing the parasol. "I seem to have forgotten my way around. I have not been here long enough, it seems."

The butler seemed surprised by her sudden appearance but he hid it a moment later, bowing. “Good morning, miss.”

“Good morning,” she greeted with a bright smile. “I am simply famished! Could you escort me to where the others are having breakfast?”

“Certainly, miss. Just this way.”

Agnes gave him a grateful smile and followed him in through the front door. As she suspected, everyone else was having breakfast in one of the drawing rooms. Agnes waited until the butler opened the door for her before she spoke again.

“Thank you,” she breathed, sweeping into the room. She made sure she was fully within sight before she handed her parasol to the butler. “It was truly appreciated. And I would also appreciate if you could take this to my room for me.”

“Of course, miss,” the butler said instantly, unaware of her ploy.

She offered him another smile of gratitude before she turned to face the others. Her eyes instantly fell on the duke, who was sitting next to Caroline. At least there was one person who knew what she was doing.

He gave her an impressed look and it took all her strength not to preen happily under his approval. Instead, Agnes made her way to where her brother sat. Her parents were seated with Lord and Lady Reeds by the window and they gave her a small smile which she returned. The dowager duchess was, unsurprisingly, absent.

“Good morning, everyone,” she greeted loudly. “Forgive me for being late.”

“Agnes, I was just asking His Grace if he has seen you,” Caroline said with a happy smile. “I went to your chambers but you were not there.”

“I decided to go for an early walk and lost track of time amongst the rose bushes,” she lied. She ignored the pang of guilt. She didn’t like lying to Caroline, mostly because Caroline’s softheartedness often gave way to naivete.

“A walk?” Paul probed, wrinkling his nose. “And here I was telling everyone that you were probably holed up in the library with towers of books stacked around you just waiting to come tumbling down.”

Agnes rolled her eyes at him. “Your imagination knows no bounds, dear brother. Perhaps it would be better served elsewhere.”

“I enjoy terrorizing you,” Paul said with a grin, popping a grape into his mouth.

“And I would so kindly like to see you pick up a book now and again.”

“No can do, sister,” he said easily. “I shall be going horse riding with Lord Christopher—I mean, Christopher—this afternoon.”

“I shall be teaching him a few of my tricks,” Christopher spoke up at last. Agnes held back her smile. How expected of him to join in when the conversation turned to horses.

“Tricks?” Caroline echoed, frowning worriedly. “Won’t that be dangerous?”

“Not as dangerous as you may think, Miss Caroline,” Christopher said easily. He set his mug down and turned to her, giving her his full attention. “The horse is oftentimes seen as a fickle creature that is ruled by their personalities, but every horse can be trained, if given the right attention. And I know just what do to make a horse easily trained.”

“Oh?” To Agnes’ pleasure, Caroline seemed interested by that. “What sort of tactics

do you use?”

“If I were to say them all, Miss, I may never stop,” Christopher said with a laugh.

“Perhaps you could show them to her,” the duke said.

Everyone looked at him. Everyone except Agnes. She poured herself a cup of tea and took a sip to hide her smile.

“After breakfast,” His Grace went on. “We could all get horses from the stables and we could make our way to the lake. That is a perfect place for you to show us these tricks you speak about.”

“A marvelous idea, Your Grace,” Agnes agreed.

Paul frowned at her. “You do not like horses,” he pointed out. “How odd of you to be interested in such a thing.”

“I do like the thought of lounging next to a lake, however,” Agnes countered with ease. “Perhaps we could even make a picnic out of it. What do you think, Caroline?”

Caroline nodded with a smile, just as Agnes expected her to. “It sounds like a wonderful idea.”

“I shall have Mrs. Adams prepare the picnic then,” His Grace said with a decisive nod.

“And perhaps we could have one of the maids act as chaperone? I think we should give the others some time to relax without worrying about us.”

“I do not think they will be?—”

“A sound idea, Miss Agnes,” the duke interjected, cutting into Paul’s confused protest. “I shall look about it.”

Agnes felt a wave of pleasure wash through her. With the duke’s help, this was going to be far easier than she’d predicted.

Without thinking, she met his eye. He hid his smile behind his cup but there was no mistaking it in his eyes. For a moment, Agnes forgot about the others. As Christopher began telling Paul about the tricks he intended on showing him, Agnes’s mind wandered to this morning and how wonderfully risky it had been. One wrong move and they could have gotten caught. Everything they had planned could have gone horribly wrong. She didn’t like acting in ways that might bring more risk than reward.

But that smile they shared, the moment of understanding that passed between them as their plans were solidified, made it all worth it.

She tried to contain her excitement as the morning gave way to afternoon. Agnes tucked herself into the library and buried her nose into a book about astrology, but she barely read a thing. The only thing she could think about was the horse ride and picnic that was set to happen in a few hours. And when the time came for her to get ready, there was only one thing on her mind.

The duke.

Agnes told herself that the only reason she donned one of her prettiest dresses was because she had to at least pretend she still cared about being courted by Christopher. She told herself that the reason her heart was stuttering in her chest was because she was expected to lie to her friend again and act as if she wasn’t scheming to ensure Caroline and Christopher found their happy ending. But as she made her way down to the stables where the others waited, Agnes was beginning to wonder just how much of that feeling was true.

“Ah, she finally arrives.”

The smile that touched her lips came with no hesitation. Agnes tried to calm it as she tilted her head to the side, approaching the duke who stood alone at the entrance of the stables. “What an odd way of greeting someone, Your Grace? Were you waiting long?”

The duke nodded, crossing his arms. Despite the stern look he tried to give her, she saw the mirth shining in his eyes. “Yes, we have all been waiting ages for you to arrive. I was beginning to wonder if I should go in search of you myself.”

The sudden thought of the duke knocking on the door of her chambers sent a thrill through her body. “Forgive me, Your Grace. It takes some time to put myself together, you see.”

“I do see.” His eyes ran down the length of her. “And I certainly am not complaining.”

Agnes’ smile slipped, her heart skipping her beat. The duke met her gaze again and blinked as if he hadn’t meant to say such a thing. He scratched the back of his head. “We should join them,” he told her.

Agnes still hadn’t thought of a proper response to that so she only nodded. The moment he turned away, she took a discreet breath, hoping it would chase the heat from her cheeks. She didn’t need Caroline noticing the blush on her cheeks and bringing attention to it.

Together, they made their way inside the stables where Paul, Christopher, Caroline, and a maid bearing the picnic food and items stood. Four horses had been saddled.

“Finally!” Paul exclaimed the moment he laid eyes on them. “I thought you would

never show.”

“Patience is a virtue, Paul,” Agnes drawled.

“A virtue I do not need since I possess so many others,” he countered as he swung himself onto one of the steeds. “Let us go, shall we? I do not want to waste any more precious time.”

He revealed an excited grin before he trotted out of the stables. Agnes noticed that Christopher seemed just as eager to do the same. But he turned to her instead.

“Did you not say you were afraid of horses, Miss Agnes?” the duke spoke up before Christopher could get a word in.

Agnes shook her head, ignoring the duke’s brother to the best of her ability. “I did not say I was afraid. I said I did not like them. There is a clear difference.”

“A difference that I shall have to see to believe,” the duke told her. “Allow me.”

He held out his hand. Agnes looked at it for a moment. She knew he was putting on a show, ensuring that they were together to force Caroline and Christopher to ride together instead. Despite that, she couldn’t stop her stomach from flipping when she slid her hand into his.

“Your chivalry is unbecoming, Your Grace,” Agnes drawled, partially because she did not want to make the others believe they were interested in each other and partially to keep herself sane.

“It can be no such thing, Miss Agnes,” he countered with ease. His strong fingers were joined by a hand at her elbow as he guided her to the horse.

“Miss Agnes, perhaps we could?—”

“I fear I will not be an enjoyable partner during your ride, Christopher,” she said, cutting into his attempt. “I am not very fond of horses, you see. Perhaps it would be best if you rode with Caroline. She adores them and would be far less likely to screech in your ear if we go too fast.”

Christopher frowned at that and she thought for a moment that he would insist. But then he nodded and turned to Caroline, who was watching the entire interaction in surprised silence.

“Allow me, Miss Caroline,” he said politely, taking her by the hand.

Caroline, ever proper, gave him a small smile as she took his hand. He guided her to one of the horses before helping her onto its back. Agnes felt a bite of pride at how well that went.

“Up you go.”

She let out a gasp as she was suddenly plucked up and put atop the horse’s hind. The duke swung in front of her with ease, as if putting her side-saddle had taken no energy at all. The lingering touch on her waist seemed to burn.

“We shall go on ahead,” Christopher said to them. “I think Paul is waiting rather impatiently for us.”

Agnes could only manage a nod and a smile at Caroline before the two of them trotted off.

“You won’t screech in my ear, will you?” the duke asked her, turning his head slightly to the side.

All of a sudden, Agnes was glad to be behind him. She would hate for him to see the horrifying blush currently creeping up her neck. “I only said that to convince Christopher to let Caroline ride with him,” she said softly so that the maid, lingering behind on the last horse, did not hear them.

Agnes caught the end of the duke’s grin. “If you say so.”

She wasn’t given much of a chance to argue as he squeezed his legs together and the horse took off.

She clung to his waist, the wind whipping through the meticulously done hairdo that had taken her far too long, undoing it in seconds.

“Your Grace!” she screamed as he tore the horse past the others. Agnes thought she might have heard Christopher or Paul call out to them but she couldn’t be sure. Not with the rush of wind in her ears.

Suddenly, the duke slowed. He glanced back at her with a look of innocence. “Oh pardon me. Was that too fast for you?”

Agnes tried scowling at him in between catching her breath. “I will ensure that you regret doing that,” she grumbled.

“How will you do that?”

“You needn’t know the details, Your Grace. Only be aware that I will not forget your transgressions for as long as I live.”

To her annoyance, he chuckled. “Now I wonder if it was worth it at all.”

“It was not,” she grumbled.

He said nothing as the others caught up to them. Agnes tried to pretend her heart still wasn't in her throat but it was difficult, especially since most of her hair was not teasing the nape of her neck.

"Are you all right, Agnes?" Caroline asked in genuine alarm.

Agnes nodded, still a little breathless. "I am fine...surprisingly."

"Good," Christopher said with a grin. "Because the pace we're going will have us arriving at the lake closer to sundown. We should pick it up a bit. Are you ready?"

Everyone was looking at her. Agnes steeled her nerves, knowing she was going to regret her next words. "I'm ready."

Christopher nodded at that and wasted no time sending his horse into a full race across the meadow, Paul right on his heels. Agnes couldn't help but cling to the duke a bit tighter, bracing for when he would do the same.

"Any tighter and I might prevent your lungs from working, Your Grace," she murmured in the hopes that jesting might help settled her nerves.

"I do not think it is the tightness of your grip that is causing it, Miss Agnes."

She frowned, trying to look at him. "What do you?—"

He was off, the rest of her words surging back down her throat and a scream threatening to rear its head instead.

CHAPTER 12

Johnathan felt as light as a feather. He credited it to the feeling of the horse he rode upon and the wide, open meadow stretched out before him. The wind racing through his hair, bringing tears to his cheeks, sent a rush of exhilaration through his body.

Yet all throughout the ride, Johnathan's focus was on one thing.

Miss Agnes clung to him as if her life depended on it. He could feel her cheek pressed against his back, her fingers folded into his waistcoat with an impressive grip. He began to wonder if she truly did not fear horses the way she'd expressed because the scream she'd let out when they'd taken off said otherwise.

"Are you all right?" Johnathan shouted over the roaring in his ears, turning his head to the side for her to hear.

"I hate you!" Miss Agnes shouted back.

Johnathan barked a laugh. He caught a glimpse of her face and laughed harder when he saw her eyes squeezed shut.

"We're almost there," he shouted back to her. The only response he received was her arms tightening further.

The others had gone ahead of them, almost dots in the distance. Johnathan knew that they would be arriving within a matter of minutes so he began to slow. It wasn't proper, he knew, for them to be alone. The maid had stayed with the others and was

almost to the lake as well, meaning that Johnathan should be doing what he could to ensure they were in the company of others.

He brought the horse to a trot instead. Miss Agnes' arms grew slack.

"Have we arrived?" she asked breathlessly at his ear and he was barely able to contain the spark that went through his body.

"Not yet. We are almost there, however."

"Why did you slow down then?"

"You are quite frightened. I thought to calm your nerves a bit."

Johnathan didn't look back at her but he could almost hear the indignant scowl in her voice when she said, "I do not need your pity, Your Grace. We should try to catch up with the others. It would not do for us to fall behind."

"Why?"

"Why?" she echoed. This time, he glanced back at her and she was frowning at him as if he'd said something outrageous.

"Why do you need to catch up with them? Was it not the plan for us to give Miss Caroline and my brother some time alone with each other? If we are there, Christopher will feel obligated to pay you mind and I shall feel the same with Miss Caroline."

Miss Agnes was quiet for a moment. A moment he spent closing his eyes and breathing in the flowery scent of her hair perfume.

“I hadn’t thought of it that way,” she admitted at last. “I suppose it was a good thing that I thought to recruit you into my plans.”

“A good thing indeed. Otherwise, you would be sitting behind Christopher right now and heavens knows your fear of horses will not override his love for them.”

“I do not fear horses!” she defended hotly.

Johnathan grinned. “Forgive me. Your wariness, then.”

“I get the sense that you are teasing me, Your Grace. Which is rather odd.”

“Why is that odd?”

“I did not expect you to be the type to tease.”

“What did you expect then?”

She was quiet for a moment, contemplating. “You do not seem like you enjoy many things in your life.”

Johnathan didn’t know what to make of that. “Is that your way of telling me that you find me dreadfully dull?”

A breathy laugh sounded behind him, warming him from the inside. “Well, perhaps not dreadfully…”

The lake came into view, followed by a sharp stab of dread and disappointment that their banter would soon come to an end. Johnathan tried to ignore it, tried to ignore the others who were already dismounting by the bank.

“I have a new goal then, Miss Agnes,” Johnathan told her. “I do not wish for you to find me dull so I shall do whatever I can to change your mind.”

“Alongside your already overwhelming quest to bring your brother happiness?” she asked, her voice light with humor. “You are rather ambitious, Your Grace.”

“It is necessary in the role that I am in, you see.”

“Ah, I see, of course.”

Johnathan chuckled, pleased to hear her join in with her laughter. But the joy was quickly coming to an end. They were close enough to the others to be overheard so they both fell quiet. But he longed for the conversation once more, suddenly craving the sound of her laughter. And the feel of her hands on his waist, the simple touch that set him ablaze, filled his mind with things he could not understand.

The thought overwhelmed him. So much so that the moment he arrived at the lake, he dismounted, moving with such fervency that Miss Agnes gasped in surprise.

He turned back to face her, holding out a hand. She stared down at him in bemusement and confusion. He could all but hear the questions racing through her mind.

Johnathan hoped she wouldn't voice them. He couldn't understand them himself so he knew he stood little chance at explaining why he was acting so oddly all of a sudden.

To his relief, she said nothing. She only took his hand and allowed him to help her off the horse. Johnathan didn't let go of her hand right away. Her eyes lifted to his, questions shining behind her enchanting dark brown eyes.

“What are you two waiting on?” Mr. Parsons called impatiently.

Miss Agnes swiftly pulled her hand away, tucking it behind her. Johnathan could not recover as quickly as she could. He was left blinking at the spot she was standing in as she walked away.

“What did I say about patience, Paul?” she drawled back.

Johnathan watched her go for a beat, drawing in a breath. What was coming over him? It felt as if he was being pulled out of a trance that he hadn’t noticed he’d fallen into. Every step she took away from Johnathan felt as if he could breathe a little better.

“Your Grace?”

Miss Caroline’s voice broke him from his reverie. He’d been so lost in thought that he hadn’t noticed when she’d approached.

“Are you all right?” she asked, concerned.

Johnathan nodded. “I am fine. It’s just been some time since I’ve last visited the lake. My duties keep me away from the things I previously enjoyed, you see.”

She stood by his side, facing the glistening, dark blue lake as well. Christopher and Paul were already engaged with their horses, getting to the meat of why they’d come out here in the first place. But Johnathan’s gaze was immediately drawn to Miss Agnes, who was now helping the maid set up the picnic.

“It is beautiful,” Miss Caroline sighed, once again pulling him from the thoughts he’d been quickly falling back into. “I always feel quite a peace near the water.”

“Have you seen the sea?”

She shook her head, smiling ruefully. “It is my wish to visit Bath with Agnes and her family. Though I believe she will be spending more time on the shore than in the water with me.”

“Is she afraid of the sea as well?”

Miss Caroline laughed at that. “She will never admit it but I do sense much apprehension when the topic is brought up.”

Johnathan felt a smile of his own tug on his lips, his eyes drawn back to the lady in question. She had her back turned to them, pointing at several spots on the blanket as if ordering the maid on what to do.

“How...intriguing,” he managed at last.

“Agnes? Quite so. I do not think there is a single person in England like her.”

The pride of which she spoke told of the friendship they shared. When Johnathan looked at Miss Caroline, he noticed the prideful smile on her lips.

“Oh, she’s looking at us. Smile and wave, Your Grace.”

Miss Caroline grinned broadly and waved at her friend. Johnathan, feeling impish, did the same.

Miss Agnes’ response was to scowl and narrow her eyes suspiciously. And then she picked up her skirt and began making her way over to them.

“I think we may have poked the beast a little too hard,” Johnathan commented,

inspiring laughter from the lady at his side.

Miss Caroline wasn't given a chance to respond, however, because Miss Agnes was upon them.

"May I inquire as to why you two are grinning at me like conspirators?" she asked, raising a brow.

"You'll find no conspiracies here, Agnes," Miss Caroline told her. "I was only telling His Grace how beautiful the lake is."

Miss Agnes tilted her head to the side as she regarded her friend. With the ladies' attentions on each other, Johnathan was left with a few seconds free to admire the manner in which Miss Agnes was capable of stripping someone bare with only one look.

Then that all-knowing gaze was on him. "Any longer with you, Your Grace, and my sweet friend will make a habit of lying to me."

"Don't pay her any mind, Your Grace," Miss Caroline responded with ease, waving her hand. "Agnes likes to pretend she knows it all."

"Because I do know it all," Miss Agnes said simply. "Caroline, are you not interested in the tricks Lord Christopher is teaching Paul?"

Miss Caroline looked in the direction of the two men as if she had forgotten that they were there.

"Not entirely," she admitted after a moment.

"Well, I am." Miss Agnes stepped between him and Miss Caroline tucking her arm

through her friend's. "Join me while I watch, won't you? Perhaps we may even learn something."

Johnathan watched as Miss Agnes led Miss Caroline towards Christopher and Mr. Parsons. She glanced over her shoulder at him for a brief moment, too quick for him to take stock of the emotion in her eyes. The effect, however, was immediate.

He stayed where he was, watching ladies. Anyone looking his way may assume he was staring at his bride-to-be, but the sharp lady by her side was the only person he could see. He wondered for a moment what it would be like to have her on his arm like that.

Focus, Johnathan! Your attention should be on your brother and the lady he loves.

But what did it matter anymore? It was obvious now that he and Miss Caroline would be married, even if only he and Miss Agnes knew that truth. So what did it matter if his eyes strayed to someone else? Especially if that someone was as enchanting as Miss Agnes, a lady who could not be ignored. Both in beauty and brains, she was a visionary.

Johnathan shook his head, banishing the thought once more. He only had one goal today. Later, he could think of his own future after securing that of his brother's. And maybe by the end of it, he would not have to worry about paying his father's debts after all.

CHAPTER 13

A day spent outdoors was always a day well spent. Yet this particular afternoon felt far more exhilarating than Agnes could have imagined. They ate, they laughed, and they stood by and watched as Christopher and Paul worked hard to get Paul's steed to follow his commands. By the time it was time to leave, Agnes had almost forgotten her initial plan to make Christopher and Caroline spend time together.

She returned to the manor on the back of the duke's horse again, this time in silence. There was not much to be said and yet her mind swam with ways to break the quiet. He'd returned to being the brooding duke that rarely smiled unless he was expected to do so politely and she found herself missing the playful gentleman who had sent her heart to her throat with the race across the meadow.

They arrived at the stables in record time, just as the sun began its descent.

"This was a wonderful day, Your Grace," said Caroline as soon as they were all dismounted. Ever the polite one, she was. She took every opportunity she could to put herself in the expected position by the duke's side, engaging him even though Agnes could tell that her heart was not in it.

"It is my brother you should thank," the duke responded. "He was the one who regaled us with his skill."

"But it was you who suggested that we make this into a picnic," Caroline went on. "I do hope we could do it again."

The duke glanced at Agnes. It was brief, so quick that she would have missed it if she hadn't been staring at him. But it was enough to send her breathing hitching in her throat, her heart thudding painfully in her chest. She couldn't tell if it was the look or what she saw in his eyes that flustered her so.

Agnes stepped away. She didn't want to hear his response. She didn't even spare Christopher a cursory glance before she turned and headed out of the stables without a word. Caroline was sure to question her about it later. Perhaps she would even say that she was rude. Right now, the only thing Agnes cared about was getting herself under control.

She put a hand to her racing heart as she quickly left the stables and headed into the manor. She was so focused on getting to the safety of her chambers—perhaps to calm herself before Caroline inevitably found her—that she didn't notice that was someone was in her path until she was nearly upon them.

“Oh!” she gasped, looking up to see her mother staring her down. “Mother, I didn't see you there.”

“I can see that.” Mary tilted her head to the side, regarding Agnes evenly. “Why the hurry, Agnes? Did something happen?”

“Oh, nothing at all,” Agnes said a little too quickly. “I am just a bit tired so I am hoping to get some rest before it becomes time to prepare for dinner.”

Mary only narrowed her eyes. “I can tell when you are not telling me the truth, young lady.”

Agnes could have laughed at the irony of those words if she hadn't known better than to laugh in her mother's face. “I assure you, nothing is wrong, Mother. What of you? How was your day?”

Agnes slipped her arm through her mother's in an amicable manner, hoping that would be enough to distract her from her line of questioning. It worked.

"Quite peaceful, I must say," Mary replied after a moment. "When we were informed of your outing with the duke and his brother, we took the opportunity to have tea in the gardens with Her Grace and Lord and Lady Reeds."

"Sounds positively riveting, Mother," Agnes said.

"It was rather interesting. Lord and Lady Reeds have made it no secret how happy they are to have secured such a match for their niece."

Agnes kept her face as still as she could, knowing how well her mother could read her expressions. "Anyone would be happy to secure a match with a wealthy duke. But it is Caroline's happiness that matters, is it not?"

"Yes, well in this case it is one and the same. She seems quite pleased to be courted by the duke."

Yes, but that is because Caroline has grown rather good at pretending her feelings do not matter.

The thought brought on a wave of sadness. Suddenly, Agnes wished she could confide in her mother. She wished she could tell her all about Caroline's love for Christopher and that there would be no wedding between her and the duke. But that would also mean telling her that there would be no wedding between Agnes and Christopher. And she didn't know how her parents were going to react to that just yet...

No, she couldn't say anything. She had to bide her time and wait until the moment was right. Once the others saw what a lovely match Caroline and Christopher made,

and how happy they made each other, they would have no choice but to agree with the match.

She hoped.

“Her Grace seems rather odd, however,” Mary continued in a hush whisper.

Agnes tucked her straying thoughts aside as she tilted her head closer to her mother. She was not one for gossip, but she had been thinking the same thing when she’d arrived. “Odd in what manner?” she asked softly.

Mary touched Agnes on her hand as she murmured, “She seems rather...despondent. As if she is hardly present. During tea she could only respond with ‘hm’ and ‘quite so’.”

“Perhaps she is tired?”

“Tired since the moment we arrived?” Mary shook her head, a frown touching her brows. “I do not think so. I believe it may have something to do with the rumors surrounding the late duke’s death.”

Agnes matched her mother’s frown. She hadn’t thought much about the duke’s death. She’d assumed that he passed away like many other aged gentlemen in England—from old age or sickness.

Before she could ask, Mary shook her head and said, “Oh, would you listen to me? I should not be gossiping about our hostess in such an ungrateful manner. It is none of my business.”

“I suppose,” Agnes agreed reluctantly but her mind lingered on her mother’s words. Was that the reason why the duke acted the way that he did? He was always so

serious, as if the world was on his shoulders. Did it have anything to do with his late father's death and his mother's state of mind?

All of a sudden, the duke was the only thing she could think about. And that conundrum was what she had been escaping to her chambers for in the first place.

Thankfully, Mary turned the conversation to simpler matters that helped to distract Agnes the rest of the way to her chambers. But the moment she was alone again, the duke came racing back to the forefront of her mind.

She thought of the way it felt riding behind him, her ear pressed against his back as the wind raced through her hair. She'd blamed the racing of her heart on the thrilling ride but now that she was alone, Agnes knew better. It had far more to do with the fact that she had her arms around the duke like a lover's embrace.

You are silly for thinking that it has anything to do with the duke himself, she chastised herself, walking over to the window to cool her flushed cheeks. You are simply reacting to your environment. That is all.

Agnes barely had a chance to come to terms with her explanation before the door burst open and Caroline came rushing in. Her friend paused at the threshold for a second, scanning the room, and the moment her eyes landed on Agnes she raced over.

"Agnes!" she gushed, coming to her side. "Are you all right?"

Fixing a smile on her face, Agnes said, "You needn't hurry over, Caroline. I am quite fine."

Caroline stared at her for a moment, then frowned stubbornly. "I've known you all my life, Agnes. I know when you are quite fine. You raced out of the stables without so much as a goodbye to the duke and Lord Christopher so you are not fine."

Agnes tried not to sigh. She loved how well Caroline knew her. Right now, it was a bit of a bother. “All right, I...I simply grew a bit flustered.”

Caroline’s frown deepened. “Flustered? You?”

“Yes, is that so hard to believe?”

“Yes,” she answered without hesitation.

Agnes couldn’t help but laugh. “Well, I had spent half the day atop a horse trying to pretend I wasn’t terrified so I think I should be given this instance.”

“Well...I suppose that’s true.” Her frown gave way to a bright smile. “Wasn’t this afternoon fun, though?”

“Fun, yes,” Agnes agreed with a sigh. “Tiring, as well.”

“There’s no doubt about that. Do you think we have time for a nap before dinner?”

“We shall have to make time,” Agnes stated. She made her way over to the bed, Caroline on her heels. Together, they collapsed on top, curling into the pillows. Now that she was lying down, Agnes could already feel exhaustion pulling at the back of her eyes.

“Agnes?” Caroline called, pulling Agnes from the call of sleep.

“Hm?” she murmured, her eyes closed.

Caroline paused long enough for Agnes to open one eye and look at her. Her friend was staring up at the ceiling. At last, she said, “Do you think we stand a chance of being happy in our marriages?”

The melancholy in her voice tore at Agnes' heart. Without thinking, she reached out to take her hand. "I shall make sure of it."

Caroline said nothing. And Agnes fell asleep thinking about all the ways she could ensure that Caroline never had to ask her that question again.

Johnathan lost himself in his work. It was the only thing he could do to keep his mind off everything that happened during the afternoon. The intention had been clear of course. Do whatever he could to push Miss Caroline and Christopher closer together. But halfway through, those intentions grew muddled with other wants he didn't want to give himself time to think about.

Luckily there was a lot of work to be done in the little time he had before dinner. By the time Johnathan looked at his grandfather clock, he realized he'd been going at it for far too long. He had to freshen up before making his way to the dining room.

The moment he stepped away from his desk, the worries and pressures that came along with managing his ledgers disappeared and Miss Agnes was all that filled his mind. Even as he donned cleaner clothes and restyled his hair, it was Miss Agnes he thought about.

Her screech in his ear. Her scent when she was close. The way she narrowed her eyes at him in immediate distrust. Her laughter.

Goodness, he was not at all focused, was he?

Johnathan made his way to the drawing room, surprised to see that his mother was the only one present. She hardly glanced up at his entrance.

"Mother," he greeted.

She said nothing. She sipped on tea, though why she was doing such a thing at this hour was odd enough. Johnathan scratched the back of his head, uncomfortable.

He hated seeing her like this. All he could see was a shell of the lady she'd once been, someone who wore the title of Duchess of Claymore with pride. But after his father died...

The duchess disappeared. Irene disappeared. His mother disappeared.

Johnathan claimed the seat across from her, studying her. She paid him no mind.

"It has been some time since we've been alone, has it not?" he asked amiably. "I do not think we've talked in some time."

"Hm."

"How was your day? Mrs. Adams informed me that you had tea with our guests. Did you enjoy it?"

"Quite so."

Johnathan thinned his lips. She wouldn't even look at him! His frustration was mounting by the second. "Mother, if you are not feeling up to dinner, perhaps it would be best if you retired to your chambers."

At last, Irene's eyes flickered to him. "Am I not to eat like everyone else?"

"Certainly. But you do not seem to be in the mood for company."

"I am fine."

“You are not,” he insisted. “You have not been fine for some time now. Not since?—”

“Don’t you dare speak his name!” Irene hissed, her eyes flashing with fury.

Johnathan felt that same anger rise up to choke him. “He was my father. I have every right to speak his name.”

Irene glared at him. And then her bottom lip began to wobble right before tears filled her eyes. Johnathan felt the rage rush right out of him.

“Mother, I didn’t mean?—”

She shot to her feet. “Perhaps you are right. Perhaps I should have my dinner in my chambers.”

Johnathan stood as she began making her way to the door. “Mother, please, have dinner with us.”

But she didn’t respond. She only picked up her skirt and hurried to the door as if she could not get out of the room fast enough.

The door opened just before she could get out. Miss Agnes and Miss Caroline appeared, both looking startled at the sight of the dowager duchess.

“Pardon me, Your Grace,” Miss Agnes said, stepping out of Irene’s way.

Irene gave her no response. She ducked her head and hurried out the door, leaving the two ladies gaping after her.

Miss Caroline was the first to recover, clearly assuming that they were being rude by

staring. She turned to Johnathan with a smile. “Good evening, Your Grace,” she greeted.

“Good evening,” he managed to say despite the lump rapidly forming in his throat. He couldn’t even look at Miss Agnes. He didn’t want to see how quickly she’d deduced what might have happened moments before she arrived.

An uncomfortable silence stretched across the room. Johnathan did what he always did best whenever he didn’t know what to do or say in a situation. He removed himself altogether.

He made his way over to the sideboard, suddenly needing a drink to get through the rest of the night. Behind him, he heard the ladies whispering to each other. He loathed to think what they might be saying about his mother’s odd behavior.

To his relief, Lord and Lady Sutton arrived moments later, with Mr. Parsons right behind them. He poured himself a glass of whiskey and sipped the harsh liquor as he listened to the murmurs of conversation behind him. It was rude not to acknowledge the entrance of his guests. He knew that. But he also knew that he stood no chance of entertaining a proper conversation with anyone when the pain of his past was rearing its ugly head again.

Lord and Lady Reeds arrived soon after, then Christopher. Johnathan still couldn’t bring himself to face them. The embarrassment at being caught in such a sensitive situation was one thing, lingering in the back of his mind. The shame at the reality of his situation was something else entirely.

“At this rate, Your Grace, you will be quite in your cups by the time the first course is served.”

His heartbeat tripled in his chest. Johnathan took every measure he could to steel

himself, to prepare for the beautiful pair of brown eyes that were no doubt stripping him bare by the second.

“Is something the matter?” she asked softly, so close that her scent swam around him.

Johnathan waited until he’d got his breathing under control before he turned to her. He’d already braced himself for his reaction to her steady gaze. But he was wholly unprepared for the intensity of it, like a punch to the gut that knocked the wind from his lungs.

“Nothing is the matter,” he mumbled, forcing himself to look away. The other guests had gathered together—Lord and Lady Reeds talking with Lord and Lady Sutton, Mr. Parsons, Christopher, Caroline on the other end of the room.

“I am good at detecting lies, Your Grace,” she responded simply. “And you are not very good at telling them.”

“If I am lying then perhaps that should be enough indication that it is a matter I do not wish to speak with you about.”

The words came out a little more sharply than he expected. He released a slow breath, fighting the wave of shame he felt at how he addressed her.

“Forgive me?—”

“There’s no need for apologies, Your Grace,” she responded easily. “You are right. It does not concern me.”

“That is not what I meant?—”

“What does concern me, however, is Caroline’s wellbeing.” She clasped her hands

before her, turning her steady gaze to the side of the room where Miss Caroline stood. “And I do believe I have thought of a way to convince everyone that they should be a match.”

Johnathan hesitated. He didn’t miss the hint of cold distance in her tone. But he supposed that was what he deserved after he’d so plainly pushed her away.

“What is that?” he asked at last.

She opened her mouth to respond but was interrupted by the butler appearing at the door.

“Dinner is served,” the butler announced before sliding back out.

Miss Agnes looked up at him. “Shall we?”

All he could do was nod and follow her lead out the room.

CHAPTER 14

Dinner passed in discomfort. Agnes tried to ignore it as best as she could. Which meant she tried to ignore the duke as best as she could. But she quickly found that feat to be almost impossible.

The tension was palpable. It was all she could think about throughout dinner. And she was sure that the duke felt the same way if the constant glances her way was any indication. Every time their eyes met, she saw the question simmering in his blue eyes.

Was I out of line?

Agnes didn't like her silent answer to his unspoken question so she only looked away every time she spotted it. She knew the truth. He had not been out of line. In fact, he'd reminded her of where they stood with each other and where her focus should lie.

She knew she shouldn't feel like this. This was a completely irrational sensation and yet the only thing simmering in the center of her chest was pure and utter embarrassment.

It serves me right for prying into someone else's life.

Agnes pushed the peas around her plate, unable to stop herself from glancing up at the duke again. Conversation swirled about their heads. Christopher was silent, also pushing his food about his plate as if he couldn't find his appetite. Paul was

desperately trying to keep up with the conversation between Lord Reeds and Solomon. Caroline was saying something to the duke that Agnes could not hear, publicly falling back into the role she was meant to play.

The duke wasn't listening, however. Agnes knew that. Every time their eyes met, she knew that his mind was worlds away.

"It was a marvelous dinner, Your Grace," Lady Reeds said once the dessert course was being cleared away. Only then did Agnes realize that she'd hardly eaten a thing. She was still hungry.

"Thank you, my lady," the duke responded gruffly, clearing his throat. "I should pass along your compliments to our cook."

"If you so wish, Your Grace," Lady Reeds responded with a tight smile. "Shall we retire to the parlor? Caroline could play for us once more. Isn't that right, Caroline?"

"Yes, Aunt," Caroline answered with a smile that didn't quite touch her eyes.

"Then perhaps Agnes could pair the playing with her singing," Solomon interjected. "She has a beautiful voice, though she hardly uses it."

"And that is for a reason, Father," Agnes murmured.

Solomon was quick to wave her off. "Nonsense, my dear. I'm sure Lord Christopher would love to hear you sing."

Christopher's only response to that was a small smile.

Agnes felt a pang of pity for the gentleman. It was clear putting up a front of interest for another lady was beginning to wear down on him. But she saw her chance,

nonetheless.

“Very well,” Agnes conceded with a heavy sigh. “But only if Caroline agrees to sing with me as well.”

“Ah, a lady of many talents, is she not, brother?” the duke joined in.

Agnes tried not to look at him. She felt his gaze boring into the side of her face, heating her from her core, but she held on to the last bit of willpower she had left.

“It sounds like we have made our decision then,” Lord Reeds stated, rather impatiently getting to his feet. “Let us make for the parlor.”

He was the first to leave the room, Lady Reeds on his heels. Agnes felt her breath quicken when the duke stood and made his way over to her.

“Miss,” he said, holding out his hand.

She couldn’t fight the urge to look at him any longer. Agnes met his eyes, her heart skipping a beat at the intensity of them. She was well aware of the others looking as she slid her hand into his, but they could have been as inconsequential as statues at that moment. It was only her and the duke.

His eyes said many things and nothing at all at the same time. She struggled to decipher what he was trying to say to her without words but, with the audience, she made sure to look away instead.

“Thank you, Your Grace,” Agnes remembered to say after a long moment of silence.

He gave her a curt nod, gaze steady. She turned away on unsteady legs and left the room.

Agnes knew that the reason he helped her to a stand was to give Christopher the chance to do so with Caroline. It only made sense. But she couldn't erase the thrill that still trembled through her body when their fingers met. Even now as she made her way to the parlor, hearing the others fall in step behind her, Agnes struggled to chase that feeling away.

Lord and Lady Reeds were already seated within the parlor, murmuring to each other when she entered. Agnes ignored them and made her way over to the pianoforte. Caroline entered a moment after and Agnes noticed only a moment of hesitation from her friend before she too made her way over.

"If you wish not to do this, I am more than willing to cause a scene so that we may both retreat," Agnes murmured to her, partially serious, partially in jest.

Thankfully, Caroline's lips twitched. "There's no need. I am quite looking forward to it, actually. It has been some time since we have performed together."

"Yes, I suppose you're right."

The others got settled in, waiting. Unwittingly, Agnes looked at the duke again, heart skipping a beat. She forced herself to look away.

Caroline began playing as perfectly as she always did. Agnes hesitated. It had been a while since she'd sang for others and those other times had never involved singing for a duke who would not take his eyes off her. It took every effort to ensure her voice didn't crack from her nerves.

Caroline's beautiful playing eased her into it. Agnes closed her eyes and allowed herself to fall into the song. It carried her away and she forgot about everything else. Her pending wedding that would stop at nothing to help fail. Caroline's future. Convincing her parents. The duke.

She forgot it all as she lost herself in the music.

It came to an end as quickly as it began. To her surprise, Agnes felt a pang of loss now that she was finished. She clasped Caroline's hand and, together, they curtsied for their applauding audience.

She decided it was her turn. She was playing the coward, Agnes knew. Her lingering embarrassment at how cold the duke had been to her would not allow her to sit in his presence and pretend she wasn't still bothered by it. So she took the cowardly approach and kept her distance by playing the pianoforte until some time had passed.

Then, unable to take it any longer, she claimed she was feeling tired and escaped.

Agnes hurried to her chambers before Caroline could think to come after her. With the help of the maid, she changed into her nightdress and was under the covers by the time Caroline came knocking on the door. Agnes felt a pang of guilt when she didn't respond, hoping Caroline would take the hint and leave. After a moment, Agnes got her wish.

But she couldn't sleep. No matter how hard she tried, she laid awake until the manor fell utterly quiet, sleep evaded her. And there was only one thing—or rather, one person—on her mind.

“Oh, for God's sake,” she muttered, getting out of bed.

This wasn't like her. She wasn't the type to stay up at nights overthinking an uncomfortable interaction. She wasn't the type to labor on a matter for this long, unless it was a difficult mathematical equation she was having trouble figuring out. And even then, it did not keep her from her sleep.

Agnes fetched her robe and left her room, intending to make her way to the kitchen

for a glass of milk. She hardly made it to the end of the hallway before she noticed a shadow lingering at the end.

“Caroline?” she called. As soon as the question was out of her mouth, she knew she was wrong. Caroline was not nearly so tall, nor did she stand so still.

Her heart skipped a beat as the shadow came forward.

“Your Grace,” she breathed. “What are you doing out here?”

“I was going for a walk,” he said gruffly.

Agnes frowned. “Through the manor?”

“Is that so odd?”

“I...suppose not.” Agnes stepped to the side, intending to walk by him despite the fact that her legs were suddenly unsteady. “Well, enjoy your walk.”

Agnes brushed past him, moving a little slower than she should be. She held her breath, a part of her wanting him to stop her.

“Miss Agnes,” came his voice and she was quick to turn around.

“Yes?” she asked, mentally cursing herself for how eager she sounded.

The duke’s face was impassive, but his eyes flashed with far too many emotions for her to name. “I should apologize for how curt I was with you earlier.”

“There is no need to, Your Grace. You had every right to say what you did.”

“Perhaps I had the right to, but it does not mean that I should have. Nor should I have been so cold in my manner of speech. It is quite unbecoming of a duke. And I cannot blame you for being curious about what you’d walked in on.”

Agnes hesitated. It wasn’t lost on her that they were alone together in the middle of the night, not very far from her chambers. Propriety dictated that they go their separate ways as quickly as possible, lest they were caught.

Right now, Agnes didn’t care about propriety. Satisfying her curiosity came first, as it always did.

“Was Her Grace not feeling well tonight?” she asked softly.

The duke sighed softly. He meandered over to the wall, leaning against it as he tucked his hands into his pockets. Agnes had never seen him so...of-guard.

“Mother has not been well for quite some time now.”

“What does your physician say?”

He shook his head. “I do not think a physician will be able to help her. She has not been the same since Father’s passing.”

“Oh.” She hesitated. An air of sadness had descended upon the duke so rapidly that Agnes had been wholly unprepared for it. She didn’t know how to console someone she barely knew.

As if he sensed her uncertainty, he straightened, pulling his shoulders back. In a second, the duke had returned.

“I do not mean to burden you with my family matters,” he said. “I only wished to

relieve my guilt by apologizing. I do not think I would have been able to sleep tonight had I not.”

Agnes was tempted to continue their conversation. Even though she wasn’t sure how to comfort him and didn’t know the right words to say to him, she wanted to know more. She wanted to understand why it suddenly seemed as if he was carrying a deep sadness that he could not be rid of.

But the moment had passed and she had no idea how to get it back.

So she nodded. “Believe it or not, Your Grace, that very same reason is why I left my chambers in the first place. I thought to fetch a glass of milk so that I may finally get some rest.”

“Guilt?” he asked, but then shook his head. “I find that hard to believe. You have nothing to be guilty for. Perhaps?—”

“I do,” she interjected. “Prying is a rather unbecoming habit of mine, you see.”

“Ah, I do see. So I shall add that to the list of things to understand about you, Miss Agnes. You are terrified of horses and you love prying into others’ lives.”

Had it not been for the twinge of humor she detected in his voice, Agnes might have felt offended at that. Instead, she thinned her lips to keep her smile at bay.

“Will I not be able to convince you that I am not terrified of horses?”

“Your scream still echoes in my ear, Miss Agnes. I do not think that is a feat you will be capable of.”

“I am capable of many, many things you could not even fathom, Your Grace.”

“Oh?”

“And one of those things, is convincing others to do or think what I wish. You should take care not to forget that.”

The duke tilted his head to the side, his smile a warm and welcoming smile. “Will I even be able to detect it happening?”

“If you are astute enough.”

“Something tells me you do not think that I am.”

“Only time will tell.”

The duke chuckled and Agnes finally gave in to the urge to laugh as well. But as silence fell over them moments later, she remembered what a precarious position they were putting themselves in. Yes, it was late at night but who was to say Caroline or someone else might not come wandering by because they too could not sleep?

“I think it is best that I return to my chambers, Your Grace,” Agnes said, surprised at the reluctance in her voice.

“Without your milk?”

“I will be fine, I’m sure.”

The duke nodded. “I bid you goodnight then.”

“Goodnight, Your Grace.”

She turned away, her joints aching with reluctance. Agnes took a few steps before she

looked over her shoulder again.

“Why don’t we play pall mall tomorrow, Your Grace?” she asked him.

The duke straightened. She could have sworn she saw a flashing...longing, perhaps? But then it was gone, followed by intrigued. “Pall mall?”

“It is an entertaining way of passing the afternoon, I think,” she went on. “And it would be quite convenient if Lord Christopher and Caroline ended up on the same side.”

He matched her conspiratorial grin. “Quite convenient indeed.”

“I shall look forward to it then.” She turned away, then faced him again. “Do not give up on her, Your Grace. She may only need time. And your constant presence may be the only thing keeping her afloat.”

With nothing left to say, she turned and continued making her way back to her chambers. She didn’t dare turn around but she felt as if she could feel the duke’s gaze boring into her all the way. As soon as she was behind the doors of her room, Agnes put a hand to her racing heart, grinning foolishly to herself.

And as she got into bed, she couldn’t stop thinking about one fact. If Caroline and Christopher shared sides, then where did that leave her and the duke?

CHAPTER 15

Johnathan hardly slept during the night. And because his guilt had been assuaged, he could not blame it on anything but the exhilarating, risky, comfortable chat he'd had with Miss Agnes in the hallway. It was all he could think about as he got into bed, all he could think about before sleep claimed him, and the first thing on his mind when he woke up.

"Good morning, everyone," he greeted as he swept into the drawing room where everyone was already having breakfast. Including Miss Agnes, whom he instantly realized was sitting by one of the bay windows with Miss Caroline, sipping her tea. Their eyes met from across the room.

Johnathan saw his chance and he took it. He made his way over to the ladies, aware that the married couples in the room were surreptitiously watching.

"Good morning, ladies," he greeted, sinking into the chair across from them both. "I trust you both slept well?"

"Indeed, Your Grace," Miss Caroline responded with a kind and proper smile. Johnathan flashed a polite smile at her. Unable to hold back any longer, he looked at Miss Agnes.

She was always the very picture of grace, poise, and beauty. When she met his gaze over the rim of her teacup, Johnathan felt a shiver race through his body, flushed and cold all at once.

“A marvelous idea, Your Grace,” Miss Agnes said. “I have not played that game in quite some time. Shall we involve my parents and Lord and Lady Reeds as well?”

“If they wish to participate, then I do not see why they cannot. Shall we choose our partners now?”

“Antsy, aren’t you, Your Grace,” Miss Agnes asked lightly, a tease in her tone.

“Excited is a more appropriate description. I do enjoy besting my brother at the game and I have a feeling I will enjoy besting you as well.”

“Oh? Presumptuous of you to assume that you stand a chance at besting me at all, Your Grace.”

“You underestimate my prowess at the game, Miss Agnes.”

“As much as you underestimate mine, I’m sure.”

Johnathan grinned at her. He realized a moment later that Miss Caroline was watching the both of them with wide eyes. Miss Agnes must have noticed as well because she quickly said, “Is that not right, Caroline? I am quite good at the game, aren’t I?”

“Oh, yes,” Caroline responded with a nod. “But you are good at almost everything you put your mind to, Agnes. You are quite talented.”

“You flatter me, Caroline,” Agnes said with a wave of her hand. “And such compliments should be reserved for you.”

Caroline shook her head. “Not at all. You are intelligent, athletic, and you possess a boldness I had always envy. You always go after the things you want, no matter what

stands in your way. I wish I could do the same.”

Johnathan didn't miss the note of sadness in Miss Caroline's voice. She lowered her gaze to her teacup, as if she needed a moment to gather herself, before she visibly brightened.

“But yes,” she said. “It should be fun.”

Johnathan looked to the left of him where Christopher and Mr. Parsons sat talking with each other as if they were the best of friends. He couldn't help but wonder if his brother possessed the same sad longing he sensed in Miss Caroline. If that were the case, how could he have missed it? Had he been so caught up in helping his family out of their crisis that he hadn't stopped to pay his brother any mind?

Shame washed over him. He'd let his mother's mind slip away after his father's death. He couldn't stand back and let the same thing happen to his brother because he was too focused on other matters to help him.

“I shall tell the others then,” he informed the ladies before standing and making his way over to where Mr. Parsons and Christopher were sitting.

“Pall mall,” he said, sinking in the armchair next to them. “In the afternoon. Christopher, you shall be paired with Miss Caroline and I shall be paired with Miss Agnes.”

Christopher's frown was deep and swift. “Why? Would it not make more sense for me to be paired with Miss Agnes?”

“Mind your words, Christopher,” Mr. Parsons drawled in that constantly bored tone of voice Johnathan had grown accustomed to hearing from him. “You are quite lucky not to be on the same side as my sister. She is rather competitive and will not hesitate

to take out her frustrations on her own teammates.”

“I’m sure she is not as bad as you say,” Johnathan said without thinking. “And to answer your question, Christopher, I think it would be quite nice to play against our betrothed. That would be a far better way of getting to know them than any other manner, I believe.”

Christopher still did not look convinced. “It is quite uneven if you include Paul.”

“Yes, where shall I go?” Mr. Parsons interjected again. “Perhaps I should join your team, Chris.”

“I shall ask the others if they wish to join then,” Johnathan conceded.

“And if they do, then it will still be uneven. Perhaps we should...”

He trailed off, not bothering to finish the suggestion. Johnathan already knew where he was going with it.

“I shall ask her,” Johnathan responded, knowing that he was about to embark on a fruitless mission. His mother hardly cared to have breakfast with them and their guests. Why would she do something as sociable as playing pall mall?

But he supposed it wouldn’t hurt to ask. It had been one of her favorite games once upon a time.

Johnathan got to his feet, heading to the married couples who sat near the hearth. Lord and Lady Reeds immediately declined the invitation to play with them but Lord and Lady Sutton happily accepted, which meant he was still left with no choice but to ask his mother if she would like to join.

Dread coiled in the pit of his stomach as he made his way out of the drawing room and up to the dowager duchess' chambers. With every step he took to her room, he felt like a hand was reaching around his hear. He knew that a single interaction with her would have that had squeezing with no remorse, leaving him raw and bleeding.

Hope was what propelled him forward. Johnathan came to a stop at her chambers, raising his hand to knock. Before he could, the door opened and his mother's maid gasped at the sight of him.

"Forgive me, Your Grace," she said quickly. "Her Grace is within."

"Thank you."

The maid hurried away, bearing a tray under her arm. Johnathan slipped into the quiet room. He instantly spotted his mother sitting on the terrace, untouched food in front of her.

"Good morning, Mother," he greeted, coming forward.

She didn't respond. She only stared ahead of her. At least she was dressed, he thought glumly.

Johnathan came closer. "I have come to ask you something that you may deem a bit odd."

Again, there was no response. Johnathan didn't know why he bothered pausing.

"Would you like to play pall mall with our guests?"

Silence.

Johnathan nodded. It was what he'd expected and he was happy that he'd asked, but he couldn't escape the sharp stab of disappointment lancing him at her quiet rejection.

"Very well. I shall inform the others that you are feeling unwell."

He turned away, tucking away the familiar tug of sadness he always felt after interacting with his mother.

"I shall play."

He thought he might have imagined the words at first. Johnathan paused, heart thudding in his chest. He turned to look back at his mother but she was still sitting as still as stone.

"Very well," he breathed. "I shall inform the others then. They...they will be happy to see you."

She didn't say anything to that, but Johnathan didn't mind half as much. His mother had agreed. That was a feat in and of itself.

Agnes couldn't believe she was doing this again. She looked twice down the hallway before she knocked and waited for the duke's response.

"Come," came his voice on the other end of the door.

Agnes steeled her nerves, slipping inside his study. It was very much the same as the last time she'd snuck here. Despite that, she looked around the room as if it were the first time seeing everything, not yet ready to face the gentleman sitting behind the desk.

"Miss Agnes." He sounded genuinely surprised. She couldn't blame him. She was

surprised at herself for coming here at all. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

Agnes finally turned to face him, hoping that she looked as normal as she was trying to be. “It is almost time for our game, Your Grace. I came to fetch you.”

She couldn’t take her eyes off him. He reached for the pair of spectacles perched on the bridge of his nose and lowered it to the desk as he squinted at the clock across the room. She watched as his brows shot to his hairline in surprise then those sky-colored eyes turned to her.

“Forgive me,” he said hastily, running his hand over his face. “I was so lost in my work that I did not even realize how much time had passed.”

Agnes nodded. She knew that it would be best for her to leave, not wanting to risk them getting caught alone together, but she went against her better judgment and approached the desk instead.

“What are you working on?” she asked him.

The duke seemed surprised by the question. “I doubt it is anything you will find interest in.”

Agnes raised a brow at that and he chuckled.

“Well, perhaps it might. God knows it would not be the only thing that surprises me about you.”

Agnes couldn’t help smiling at that. She came closer still, close enough for him to tilt his head up in order to maintain eye contact. There was something about the way he looked at her, as if wholly interested in whatever she planned on saying next, that made her heart flip in her chest.

“As a child, I had always been interested in numbers,” she said. “And my father thought to foster my interest by teaching me everything he knew about running a business. That came with managing ledgers quite like the ones on your desk right now.”

“Quite an unusual interest of a lady of your stature,” the duke commented, his eyes glittering. “Do you not wonder what society might think?”

“I do not. Do you?”

The direct response and question seemed to take him off guard. Then he chuckled. “I do what is expected of a man in my position.”

“A man in your position as what?” she questioned. “As duke? As a brother? As a son? Do all those positions work in tandem or will there come a time where those roles oppose each other?”

The duke tilted his head to the side as he regarded her. Agnes felt an embarrassing flush of heat touch her cheeks. She couldn’t help looking away.

“Forgive me,” she murmured. “Philosophy is another interest of mine. I have a terrible habit of reading deeper into situations that do not need it.”

“Terrible is not how I would describe it,” the duke said amicably. “But I cannot say that I have the response to that question just yet.”

He stood, rounding the desk to stand in front of her. They were suddenly so close that she didn’t know what to do. Her mind told her to take a step back, to put distance between them. Or rather walk out of the room altogether. But her feet remained rooted to the spot.

“I have good news,” the duke told her with a soft smile touching his lips.

His eyes shone with something she’d never seen in them before. Genuine happiness.

“What is it, Your Grace?”

“Mother has agreed to play with us this afternoon.”

Agnes felt an answering smile tug at her lips. She still didn’t quite understand the depth of the dowager duchess’ situation but the duke’s happiness was infectious.

“Is she feeling better then?” she asked.

“Only time will tell. But this is a step in the right direction. And I have you to thank.”

“Me? What have I done?”

“Our talk last night gave me some perspective. I am a bit ashamed to admit but I had almost given up on her. Had I not spoken with you, I would not have even asked her anything in the first place. So, thank you.”

Agnes reached out to take his hand without thinking. “I am only happy that things appear to be looking up for you.”

He squeezed her fingers. Heat raced through her body the moment she realized what she was doing. But she didn’t pull away. And as the duke’s smile slowly slipped, his joy fading into an emotion she could not name, Agnes realized that she’d taken a step over the line she had been skirting for these past few days.

Something shifted between them. It had been shifting for some time, she knew. At least on her end. She studied his eyes, wanting to understand what that look meant,

wanting to know why he did not release her hand now that the moment had long since passed. Was it because...

Before she could draw a conclusion, the duke released her hand and took a step back.

“I shall go to fetch her and make my way to the gardens,” he said, not looking at her.

Agnes was struck dumb. She couldn't do anything but stand there and watch as he left her alone in the room. Slowly, she released a long, low breath, hoping it would calm her racing heart and her flushed cheeks.

All it did was solidify the realization that she was smitten with the duke.

CHAPTER 16

“A n outrageous pairing!”

“Yes, quite so. These two should be on the same side.”

To her annoyance, Agnes had not expected this to happen.

She said nothing, watching as the duke raised his hands in a placating gesture that would do nothing to calm the Earl and Countess of Reeds. They all stood out in the duke’s marvelous gardens with a footman on hand, ready and waiting to hand out the pall mall sticks. They would have begun the game some time ago had it not been for Lord Reeds’ objections.

“I assure you that you have no need to worry,” the duke said to the earl, a lie that rolled off his tongue with such ease it impressed Agnes. “Miss Caroline is quite fine with being on opposing sides with me. And you should look on the benefit of such an arrangement?—”

“What benefit could there be?” Lady Reeds hissed behind her husband. Agnes tried not to roll her eyes. She couldn't believe they were really arguing about such a trivial matter.

“Being on opposing sides will help us understand each other much better.”

Lord Reeds stared at the duke as if he was the maddest gentleman in all of England. He grew red in his anger, his shoulders tensing as if readying himself to explode.

“Uncle, it really isn’t any trouble,” Caroline dared to step in, her voice soft but pleading.

“Truly, I do not see the point in all this back and forth,” Agnes cut in before Lord Reeds could turn his indignation upon his niece. She was more than happy to be the object of the earl’s anger. “It is only a game.”

“Perhaps it would have been fine had the duke and Caroline spent more time together,” Lady Reeds stated with her chin jutting out. “But we hardly see any interaction between the two!”

“That is because you are not paying attention, my lady,” Agnes told her. She went over to the footman and took one of the sticks. “If you’d like, you could join us in a game and you could see how well they bond.”

Lady Reeds looked as if she was about to explode herself. Agnes wondered if it was her words or the fact that she was the one currently opposing them that bothered them the most. She knew very well that the earl and countess were not fond of her and she had no qualms with showing them the same lack of grace they showed her.

The duke was still trying to be the peacemaker. “There is no need to be upset,” he began.

“Yes, let us just begin,” Mary stepped in. She joined Agnes and took her own stick. “This heat is dizzying enough for us to be standing around shouting at each other.”

Lord and Lady Reeds were quickly overwhelmed when everyone else made haste for their sticks, including the duke. With that, their objections fell on deaf ears.

Caroline, however, still seemed uncertain. She approached her aunt and uncle like she would a lion. “I shall do my best,” she assured them.

Lady Reeds huffed in annoyance but said no more, dragging her husband away before he could say anything else.

“Now that that is over with,” Agnes said to the others, turning her back to the annoying couple. “Shall we?”

They all nodded. Caroline, Paul, Christopher and Mary were on one side while Agnes, the duke, Solomon and the dowager duchess occupied the other. Agnes still couldn't believe that the dowager duchess had agreed to play. She was quiet but she held on tightly to her stick and her eyes did not seem as lifeless as they usually were.

Caroline's team began first. The game began with ease, the tension and discomfort that came from Lord and Lady Reeds' protests dissipated as a cloud drifted in front of the sun and the game came into full swing. Mary and Solomon seemed more focused on besting each other than anything else, her mother taking to taunting her husband and Solomon getting quite flustered every time she did. Christopher and Paul were devising strategies on how best to play, opting to use the tactic of knocking the opposing team's balls out of the way rather than go for the goal themselves. Caroline didn't seem very happy with that plan but she was willing to go along with it for the sake of everyone else.

Agnes was happy watching it all. After a while, she forgot the truth purpose of this game and began enjoying herself instead.

“It does not surprise me that you are quite competitive, Your Grace,” she said to the duke as they began their trek to their balls. She'd been a little nervous approaching him after what happened in his study and her sudden realization but whatever tension that had persisted between them was now gone.

“It comes with being a Harken,” the duke replied. Though he didn't smile, his eyes shone. “As you might be able to tell, we tend to get very invested in these games.”

“I can see that.” Agnes laughed as Christopher threatened to break his stick when he made a bad shot. The dowager duchess was up next. She’d remained quiet this entire time but she too played as if she intended to win.

“And I see that I must bring my best game if I play with you,” the duke went on.

Agnes didn’t dare look at him this time, her heart skipping a beat. “We are on the same side, Your Grace. You needn’t worry.”

“Your tone implies that I would have to had it been the other way around.”

“Oh, of no doubt, of course,” she said easily and felt a ball of pleasure in her chest when he laughed.

“It seems our plan is working nonetheless,” he commented.

Agnes followed his gaze. It was Caroline’s turn and her ball was stuck in a particularly difficult position. Agnes’ brows rose when Christopher came to her side to help her take the shot.

“Far better than I thought it would,” she confessed with surprise. “Though we will have to tread lightly seeing that you are being watched rather closely by Lord and Lady Reeds.”

“I cannot understand why they are so upset. I have already agreed to marry Miss Caroline. It should not matter if I spend time with her or not.”

Agnes looked at him with a frown. “Was us spending time here not with the intention of you getting to know your betrothed and Lord Christopher his? If that is how you think about such things, then why bother?”

The duke must have realized he'd put his foot in his mouth a moment too late. "That wasn't what I meant..."

"Then what did you mean?"

"Of course, I think it is best if we grow fond of each other before we make the final preparations. But I had already stated my intentions to Lord and Lady Reeds. They should have trust in my honor."

"Need I remind you, Your Grace, that such honor means nothing now that you have no intention of marrying Caroline any longer."

"Yes, but they do not know that."

Agnes' lips twitched. "It is quite cumbersome, don't you think?"

"What is?"

"Referring to each other in such a formal manner. In the eyes of others, we will be family when we are both married. It would not be odd if I refer to you as Johnathan. Or perhaps John, for short."

He didn't respond right away. Agnes held her breath. Had she been too forward?

"I cannot think of a proper way of shortening your name, Agnes," he said at last and she released her breath, butterflies flooding her stomach at the sound of her name on his lips.

"It is the curse of the name I have," she lamented with a sigh, watching as Paul lined up his shot.

“A beautiful name for a beautiful lady, nonetheless.”

Agnes' breath hitched in her throat. She knew she should respond, should thank him that demure manner English gentlemen loved so much. But she'd lost her ability to speak.

Thankfully, the duke said, “It looks like it's my turn.” And then he walked off, saving her from having to think of what to say.

This was getting out of hand, she thought. At this rate, she was bound to have heart failure just by standing next to him! Her eyes followed him to his ball, admiring the muscular cut of his shoulders as he bent slightly to line up his shot. With a quick whack, he sent his ball to the goal. Agnes' lips twitched when he clenched his hand in victory.

“I think we may have really upset my aunt and uncle.”

Agnes tore her eyes away from Johnathan as if she had been caught doing something she shouldn't be doing. Luckily, Caroline didn't seem to notice.

“Don't worry about them,” Agnes tried to assure her. “I'm sure they will come around in time.”

Caroline didn't look convinced. She wore that worried frown Agnes hated to see. It only made her want to do whatever she could to ease her mind.

“Perhaps I should have been paired with His Grace,” Caroline told her. “It would do for us to spend more time together. I do not think we have been doing that as of late.”

“We have time, Caroline. There's no need to rush it.”

“I know but...do you think the duke no longer has any interest in me? Oh heavens, I shudder to think what my uncle would think about that.”

“Worry not about your uncle,” Agnes insisted. “Your heart does not lie with the duke, if you recall.”

“Agnes!” Caroline gasped, looking anxiously around herself. But no one seemed to be paying them any mind. No one except Johanthan, who Agnes couldn’t help but notice kept glancing their way even though he was now standing with Christopher and Paul.

“Oh, no one is around to hear me,” Agnes assured her. “And so what if they did?”

“So what?” Caroline echoed. That question seemed to cause an unending amount of stress. Agnes immediately regretted asking her. “You know it can never be. It will only be opposed. My uncle will never allow it.”

“If others see how in love you two are, perhaps that will not be the case.”

“Oh, I wish I could think that way but I know better than to let myself dream about could never be. My future has already been set with me. I can only try to be happy with the short time we have left with each other.”

“If you two love each other as much as I’m sure you do, then everything will work out. I’m sure of it.”

Caroline gave her a curious look. “How odd to hear you speak of love in such a manner. You have never been much of a romantic.”

Agnes avoided her eyes, shrugging nonchalantly. “I have begun to see things in a different light.”

“Agnes.” Caroline took her hand, all but forcing Agnes’ eyes to her. “Are you in love with Lord Christopher?”

“Of course not!” she exclaimed so loudly that the others paused to look at them. Agnes thinned her lips, waiting for them to go back to what they were doing before she murmured under her breath. “You shouldn't think that for a second, Caroline!”

“Why not?” Caroline asked, sounding genuinely surprised.

“Because...because...” Agnes couldn’t help herself. She glanced at where Johnathan was standing, her stomach flipping when she saw that he was already looking at her. “Because I simply am not,” she said at last.

Agnes could tell that Caroline had more to say but she was saved from having to endure another word of his conversation when she saw that it was her turn. She squeezed Caroline’s hand and made haste to her ball, horrified by the flush creeping up her cheeks. Any longer in that conversation and she might have confessed her growing feelings for the duke. Feelings that Agnes was still trying to maneuver herself. She could hardly come to terms with how she felt about it just yet, let alone explain it to another person.

As she lined up her shot, she glanced at Johnathan again. How was it that every time she looked at him, he was already looking at her? Did his eyes follow her everywhere she went? Goodness, why did that thought aim to set her on fire?

Johnathan gave her an encouraging nod. Agnes couldn’t bring herself to respond. She was too busy trying to calm her racing heart that was already giving way to trembling hands. Her shot was a shoddy one as a result, but Agnes hardly cared.

She only turned and made her way back to Caroline, engaging her in simple conversation that had nothing to do with gentlemen or marriages. She needed a

reprieve, needed to take her mind off such things for a while. But it was a feat easier said than done with those azure blue eyes watching her from a distance.

CHAPTER 17

“What do you think? Quite impressive, is it not?”

Johnathan nodded as he admired Lord Sutton’s pocket watch and matching snuff box, which he kept empty. Apparently, Lady Sutton did not like tobacco and Lord Sutton respected his wife too much to do what she did not like.

“A splendid make, my lord,” Johnathan admitted, awed by the craftsmanship. He held up the snuffbox to the chandelier of the parlor they were standing in. As customary as it had become, they had all retired to the parlor after a particularly lively dinner earlier. The only difference was that this time, Lady Sutton was the one playing the pianoforte, claiming it had been a while since she’d played for others and ‘wanted to see if she was still as perfect as she was once was’.

And there was no denying that she was. Her beautifully crafted music relaxed Johnathan as he studied the snuff box.

“A relic from India,” the viscount told him. “There are very few of them still in existence. I was lucky enough to have procured not only the box but the matching pocket watch as well. So don’t bother asking me to name a price, Your Grace,”

Johnathan chuckled alongside him, not bothering to inform the viscount that he was nothing but a penniless duke and could hardly afford to keep the roof over their heads. “And just like that, I have been thwarted.”

“Have you been to India, Your Grace? Or rather, do you have any plans of returning

in the future?”

“I have, during my travels before I assumed the dukedom, my lord. As for plans to return, I have not considered any.”

“Good,” Lord Sutton responded with a nod. “I was half afraid that you would consider taking our dear Caroline to India for your honeymoon. I should tell you right now that she will much prefer a far more romantic destination. Like the British Isles or Scotland.”

Johnathan hadn’t even considered having an expensive honeymoon. He was a bit relieved that he didn’t have to think about that any longer now that he was determined to pair Miss Caroline with his brother.

“You seem to be quite close with Miss Caroline,” he commented.

“She is like a daughter to us. I hope for a good match for her as I do Agnes. This situation seems to be the best case to have found ourselves in.”

Johnathan considered testing the waters. After all, he hadn’t forgotten that he had been the one to arrange the match between Agnes and his brother. Which meant the onus was on him to convince the viscount that such a match was no longer in the best interest of the affected parties.

“Father, are you boring His Grace with your tales from India?”

Right on cue, his heart stopped in his chest. Johnathan had to hold himself incredibly still to keep from whirling upon Agnes’ approach. She’d been by Miss Caroline’s side ever since they returned from their pall mall game and even though they had been engaged in conversation during dinner, they hadn’t had much direct conversation since.

“You are the only one who finds them boring, Agnes,” her father quipped without a moment’s hesitation.

“That is because I cannot yet relate to them.” Catching Johnathan’s eye, she added, “I have always wanted to go to India, you see. Perhaps for my honeymoon.”

“Your honeymoon?” he echoed dumbly. “I would have thought you’d prefer a far more romantic destination.”

“Romantics have never been of much interest to me,” she said dismissively. “But if not for my honeymoon, perhaps I shall find some other opportunity to visit. If only to see the merchants Father likes to go on about.”

“Do not let her fool you, Your Grace,” the viscount said. “She loves my stories from my travels.”

Agnes grinned at that but said no word of protest. Johnathan filed that tidbit of information away with the other little things he’d learned about her since they’d met. Things that were only piling up, only making him want to know more.

“Well, I did not come to interrupt your conversation for long,” Agnes went on. “I only came to make a suggestion to His Grace.”

“A suggestion about what?” he asked.

“About what we should do tomorrow. Caroline and I would love to see the village. Wouldn’t it be nice if we could all make an outing out of it early tomorrow morning?”

“You would like to see the village?” Christopher jumped in. Johnathan hadn’t even noticed his approach.

Agnes nodded at him and Christopher grinned.

“A wonderful suggestion, Miss Agnes! It has been some time since I’ve gone out into the village myself. I would love to act as a guide.”

“Are there many things to do?” Agnes asked.

“Quite so. As a matter of fact, it may be best for us to leave directly after breakfast if we wish to take advantage of the time.”

“Then I leave it in your hands, Lord Christopher.”

“Just Christopher,” he corrected with a wink. Johnathan felt a surge of something dark at the sight. Even when Agnes gave him a polite smile in response and watched him walk away, Johnathan could not be rid of the feeling.

His brother was likely putting on a front for his sake and the sake of Lord Sutton, Johnathan knew. That was the only rational thought coursing through his mind. The other, more pressing, thoughts were consumed with white-hot jealousy that gripped him by the throat and refused to let go.

“Let me go and congratulate my beautiful wife on her wonderful playing,” he heard the viscount say and Lord Sutton was all too happy to head Lady Sutton’s way. But Johnathan was still thinking about the little smile Agnes had given Christopher.

“Johnathan?”

Agnes’ voice brought him back to the present. He looked at her. “Pardon me,” he murmured.

“You seemed to have disappeared for a moment,” she commented, still studying him.

“Are you all right?”

“Quite so.”

“Does the idea of going to the village not interest you then?” she asked. “I thought it would be good for Caroline and Christopher to spend time with each other, you see.”

Johnathan gritted his teeth, annoyed with himself for the irrational jealousy still coursing through his body. “May I ask you a question, Agnes?”

“Go right ahead,” she said amicably.

“What do you want for your future?” She tilted his head at him so he clarified. “You are forgoing your future for that of your friend’s. An admirable decision, I do admit, but I cannot help but wonder if you have given any thought to what you will do after everything is said and done.”

“I have not given it any thought, no.”

Her response was so swift that Johnathan couldn’t help gaping at her. Agnes caught his look and laughed.

“It sounds mad, does it not?” she sighed. “But I do not mind. What matters right now is that Caroline is happy and no longer has to sneak around to enjoy her love. It should be enjoyed out loud and in the open. I’m sure you feel the same way regarding your brother or you would not have been so willing to help me in my quest.”

“Yes, but our circumstances are different.”

“Different in what way? Because you are a duke and I am nothing but the daughter of a viscount?”

“I would not have worded it in that manner but essentially, yes.”

To his relief, she didn't take offense to that, laughing instead. “It may be far easier for you to find another wife than it would be for me to find another potential husband. Especially since I am quite picky as it is.”

“Picky? In what manner?”

“Well certainly you do not think that Christopher was my first option, do you?”

Johnathan was suddenly crossed between intrigue and dread. He wanted to know more, as he did with anything regarding Agnes but had a feeling he wasn't going to like what he was about to hear.

So he focused on the others in the room. Lord and Lady Sutton murmuring and giggling to each other like two young people in love, the others sitting in the center of the room talking about God knew what. Christopher carried the conversation, Paul interjecting now and again. Miss Caroline seemed content to simply listen while Lord and Lady Reeds struggled to seem interested in the conversation. Of course, the dowager duchess had opted out of dining with them but Johnathan didn't mind so much this evening.

Everyone was caught up in their own things, paying scant attention to him and Agnes. Johnathan decided that they should take full advantage of their situation.

“So you have been betrothed before,” he said at last.

Agnes shook his head but Johnathan didn't let himself feel relieved. “Betrothed? No. It had never gotten that far. But I have been courted by a number of gentlemen who have made it no secret that they wished to ask for my hand in marriage.”

“Pray tell what had caused so many gentlemen to fail your scrutiny.”

“Well, Lord Johnson was dreadfully dull. Lord Rutledge was quite banal. I did not like the manner in which Lord Kenton licked his lips after every sentence.”

Johnathan couldn't stop the chuckle that escaped his lips. “When you said you were picky, I did not think you were serious.”

“I am always serious, John,” she told him despite the smile playing around her lips.

“But I must admit that my pickiness is what landed me here in the first place.”

“Ah, so you were out of options.”

“Not so much out of options as I was reminded that I do not have all the time in the world. Any longer and I would have become a spinster.”

“Why am I already under the impression that you would not have minded that fate very much?”

“On the contrary, John, I do wish to be married and have a family of my own. I simply want to be smart about it.”

“So tell me, would you have gone ahead and married my brother had Miss Caroline not harbored feelings for him?”

She studied Christopher for a moment. Long enough to make Johnathan regret asking the question in the first place.

“That I cannot say,” she said at last.

It was the best response he could have hoped to hear. Johnathan chided himself for

having voiced the question in the first place. It shouldn't bother him if she'd said yes. After all, only a short while ago, that was what he'd wanted, wasn't it? For both him and his brother to secure fortuitous matches that would allow them to finally poke their heads above the water their father had left behind for them to drown in. Jonathan would have felt nothing but dismay if Agnes had opted out of the marriage.

But now, he felt something akin to delight. Something he should not allow himself to feel. Something that made his heart constrict and his breathing grow shallow at the thought of Agnes walking down the aisle to meet Christopher.

"You've disappeared again," she said softly, pulling him from the dark corner he was quickly sequestering himself within.

Jonathan blinked, forcing a smile onto his face. "Pardon me. I was only imagining the look on those poor gentlemen's faces when they learned that you would not share in their affections."

Agnes laughed again, the sound easily clearing the dark cloud that had settled over Johnathan's mind. "I assure you, it did not affect them as much as you might think."

"I find that hard to believe."

"Oh?" She shifted slightly, giving him her full attention. "Why do you say that?"

"You are not an easily forgettable lady," he confessed.

Agnes tilted her head, blinking in bemusement. "At the risk of sounding incredibly inane, I'm afraid I do not understand. What is it about me that is so unforgettable?"

Jonathan's heart fluttered. The others still weren't paying them much mind which meant he was free to speak as he wished. Free to tell her exactly what was on his

mind.

“I may sound like a man stating the obvious, Agnes, but you are a vision. Standing in your presence alone, next to such an ethereal beauty, would be enough to make any gentleman feel as if they are on top of the world. Not to mention your sharp wit and endearing humor, I would be hard pressed to leave your side if I were courting you. And, if you were to reject me, I cannot imagine how I could ever recover.”

A beat of silence followed his words. Jonathan avoided looking at Agnes, feigning a nonchalance that he did not feel. He already regretted saying so much. He shouldn't have revealed what was hidden in his heart, things he'd hardly had time to process for himself.

“But,” he began again, already sweating under her lack of response. “I am not courting you and would never find myself in such a position. I only speak as if I would.”

The silence persisted. Uncomfortable with all that he'd said, he glanced anxiously at her. She was staring at him as if she could not quite figure out what to make of what he'd said.

He couldn't blame her. Johnathan could not remember the last time he'd spoken his mind so freely. Choosing his words and minding his manners had been his default ever since he became the duke.

“I hadn't noticed it had gotten so late,” he said suddenly. “It has been quite an interesting day, to be sure. But I am quite exhausted. I believe it is time for me to retire to bed. Goodnight, Agnes.”

Johnathan stepped away from her, not sparing her another look. If he did, he knew whatever look she was giving him would only make him want to bury himself

further. God, if there was ever a time not to put his foot in his mouth, it was now.

He quickly bid everyone else goodnight, ignoring the odd look his brother was giving him as he made his hasty farewell. Johnathan didn't allow himself to breathe until he was well on his way to his chambers. And only when he was securely on the other end did he think back on all that he'd revealed to her.

He was developing feelings for her. There was no denying it now. Not to himself and, he feared, not to Agnes either. He'd all but given her a love confession!

Johnathan raked his fingers through his hair in frustration, embarrassed that he'd let himself say so much. How could he ever intend to face her tomorrow?

CHAPTER 18

Agnes awoke the next day at six in the morning. Or rather, she opened her eyes and realized that dawn had approached and she'd barely slept at all during the night.

She got dressed in silence, left her chambers half an hour later, and made her way to the duke's study.

Then she stood there and wondered if she should enter.

It would be far too daring at this point. To sneak into the duke's study so early in the morning without a chaperone? They'd almost gotten caught once, so why would she take that risk again? Just to satisfy her own curiosity?

Agnes began to pace. She gnawed on the end of her nail, falling into that terrible habit she thought she'd rid of years ago. There was a question she needed to ask Johnathan, burning a hole into the side of her mind and holding her captive from her sleep. The only problem was, she hadn't a clue how to word it, let alone how she would muster up the courage to say it aloud.

"Agnes?"

She gasped, whirling to face Caroline. Her friend looked as perfectly put together as she always did, a feat that Agnes couldn't help but admire time and time again.

"What are you doing outside the duke's study?" Caroline asked with a confused frown, drawing closer. "Is something the matter?"

“The duke’s study?” Agnes got out, her heart racing against her chest. “Oh, is this the duke’s study, you say? I hadn’t noticed. I do not pay much attention to where the duke likes to study. Or read, I suppose. Or rather, do his work. I do believe that is what dukes tend to do in their study.”

Caroline’s frown only grew deeper. “You’re worrying me. It is not like you to ramble.”

“Am I rambling?” Agnes let out a shaky laugh. She turned away, hoping to avoid her friend’s gaze. “I do not think that I am. Perhaps it is simply the early hour. I am so often filled with thoughts during the dead of night and am always eager to release them to any willing ear. Which just so happens to be you, thankfully enough.”

Oh, dear God, she was rambling.

Agnes cleared her throat, hoping she far less frazzled than she felt. “What of you, Caroline? What brings you down this side of the manor?”

“I was hoping to go for a stroll through the gardens,” Caroline told her, her curious look deepening. “Though I think I might have taken a wrong turn and made my trip to the gardens far longer than it needed to be.”

“How fortuitous that you did and happened upon me,” Agnes said with an odd laugh. “Standing outside the duke’s study, as you said. Though I did not know it was the duke’s study.”

Caroline was staring at her as if she could not believe what she was seeing. She opened her mouth to respond—and Agnes braced herself for more probing—but was interrupted by the door of the study in question opening.

Her heart stopped in her chest. Even as she’d paced outside the door, she hadn’t

considered the thought that he might actually be inside!

Johnathan poked his head through the door, frowning in confusion at the two of them.

“I thought I heard voices,” he said. “Am I needed?”

“Not at all, Your Grace!” Agnes hurriedly said. “We only happened to meet by chance outside your study, is all. Isn’t that right, Caroline?”

Caroline looked at Johnathan, then Agnes, then back to Johnathan with a slow nod.

“That is right, Your Grace.”

“But we shan’t disturb you any longer,” Agnes went on. “Caroline and I shall be making our way to the gardens for a stroll before breakfast.”

“Allow me to join you,” he said.

She was finding it increasingly difficult meeting his eyes. Even more so catching her breath. Why did it suddenly feel as if the walls were closing in on her?

“Join us?” Agnes repeated dumbly.

Johnathan was already stepping out of the room, closing the door behind him.

“That would be lovely, Your Grace,” Caroline was saying, completely unaware of how dizzy Agnes was becoming at her side.

Johnathan flashed a brief smile at her. “I shall ring for a maid then.”

Then his eyes fell on her. Agnes willed herself to look away. She didn’t need him seeing her in such a stressed state, unable to make heads nor tails of her conflicting thoughts. But his words last night echoed through her mind as their eyes met and, for

a brief moment, she allowed herself to consider the possibility that he might have truly meant them.

The moment went far too quickly. He looked away and then gestured with an arm for them to walk ahead of him. Agnes managed to do so on leaden feet, Caroline taking her side.

“This is good,” Caroline whispered to her. “I do not think I have spent much time with His Grace since my arrival. Perhaps this will allow us to get to know each other a bit more.”

Agnes didn’t like the way her throat tightened at those words. She cast a surreptitious glance behind her, noting that there were a few paces between them and Johnathan. No doubt meant to maintain propriety. The relief she felt at his distance was quite conflicting considering the fact that she’d been considering going to see him alone.

“Is that what you truly want, Caroline?” she whispered back.

Caroline sighed softly. “It is not so much what I wish for, Agnes, but what must happen. You know that, do you not? My uncle has been quite cross with me lately because he does not think I am doing enough to impress the duke.”

“Why do you need to impress him if a match between you two has already been secured? I do think Lord Reeds is being rather unfair.”

“He wants me off his hands. But it is not enough to marry me off to anyone who asks. My aunt and uncle want the prestige attached to the Claymore title and will stop at nothing to get it. There is nothing to be done but accept my fate.”

The sadness in her voice was enough to rid Agnes of her personal ailments. She squeezed Caroline’s hand. “It does not have to be so if you do not wish it to be.”

“A lovely sentiment,” Caroline said with a sad smile. “But it is useless.”

“It is not like you to be so pessimistic.”

“Can you not already hear the wedding bells, Agnes? I suppose I should be happy that I am to be married to a handsome and kind gentleman who will take care of me, even if I do not reserve any feelings for him.”

Agnes could only pat her hand. She resisted the urge to tell her of her plans to ensure Caroline’s happiness. The success of that plan depended greatly on Caroline’s ignorance, after all.

Caroline straightened her shoulders, visibly brightening. “But enough talk about me. I want to know about you.”

Agnes frowned at her. Again, she glanced back at the duke. Their eyes met, her heart skipped a beat, and she quickly looked away, cheeks growing warm.

“What is there to say?”

“What do you think about Lord Christopher? He is quite handsome. Do you think?—”

“I assure you that I feel absolutely nothing for Lord Christopher and I am certain that the sentiment is mutual!”

Her outburst was so sudden that Caroline jolted to a halt, eyes growing wide. This time, Agnes’ entire face grew hot. She didn’t dare to look behind her.

“If I had it my way, Caroline,” she assured her friend in a far softer tone this time. “Lord Christopher and I will not be married. I assure you.”

“You...assure me?”

“I do,” she stated firmly. Suddenly feeling quite unlike herself and embarrassed because of it, she took a step back, unable to meet her friend’s eyes this time. “Now if you’d pardon me, I do not think I am quite up for a stroll. I think I shall return to my chambers until it is time for breakfast instead.”

She hurried away before Caroline could respond. To her dismay and delight, heading to her chambers meant she would have to go past Johnathan, which she did without sparing a glance at him, her head down. She didn’t miss the way he stepped back to make her go by, didn’t miss the hand that he’d reach out before dropping to his side.

But she didn’t dare to think anything of it, racing away instead in the hopes that she found herself by the time they were to depart for the village.

“She is quite lovely, is she not?”

Johnathan straightened, tearing his eyes away from Agnes who stood by the drawing room window next to Caroline. They were deep in conversation with Agnes’ back turned to the room as if she did not care to pay it any mind. He wondered if that was on purpose.

He looked at his brother, then back at the two ladies. Though he was certain that Christopher was talking about Miss Caroline, he nodded, eyes falling again on Agnes’ beautiful frame. “Yes,” he breathed. “Yes, she is.”

Christopher sighed, crossing his arms. “I must say that I am looking forward to our outing to the village. It has been some time since I’ve visited and I am keen to show Miss Agnes around.”

Johnathan looked sharply at him. “Why would you care to do such a thing?”

Christopher seemed confused by the question. “Well, we are to be married. I thought that was what you would want.”

That was right, Johnathan remembered. That was what he should want. Christopher didn’t know that Johnathan was aware of his secret tryst. And he supposed it would be better if it stayed that way. At least until Johnathan was able to let the other, more important pieces fall into place.

Like convincing Lord Reeds to abandon the idea of the marriage, a feat Johnathan was not certain he would be able to accomplish. He had made a promise to the earl, after all. A promise he doubted Lord Reeds would allow him to break without receiving something else in return. Johnathan was still trying to figure out how to go about it.

Lord and Lady Reeds were still absent, which was why everyone was waiting in the drawing room. Lord and Lady Sutton chose to sit with each other on the settee with their son, while the ladies occupied one end of the room and Johnathan and Christopher occupied the other. The dowager duchess had decided she wanted nothing to do with this outing, not to Johnathan’s surprise.

“I want what is best for our family,” Johnathan said at last. “Whatever that may be.”

“What is best for us is to secure their dowries so that we may pay our father’s debts and live a comfortable life,” Christopher said morosely. “Though I cannot help but feel bad that we are taking advantage of these ladies.”

That familiar pinch of guilt assaulted Johnathan even as he said, “It is not uncommon for marriages to take advantage of a lady’s dowry.”

“Yes but for a duke and the duke’s brother, one would expect them to put said dowry in trust for their wives and children, rather than paying shameful debts left behind by

their father.”

“Enough, Christopher. What happened has already been done and there is nothing we can do about it now.”

Christopher drew in a deep breath, letting it out through his nose. “You’re right. There is no use lamenting about it now. It is a decision I have already decided to take.”

Johnathan cast a pitying look his brother’s way. “Perhaps not a decision that needs to be taken in the end.”

“What do you mean?”

Johnathan was saved from having to respond by the arrival of the earl and countess. At that, Agnes turned, finally gracing Johnathan with a view of her face.

She’d looked lovely earlier this morning, as she always did. How was it that in a matter of hours, she managed to look even more radiant? She seemed to glow under the shaft of sunlight beaming through the windowpane. She was unaware of his perusal and her lowered guard only made her far more endearing.

He’d been meaning to ask her about her sudden departure this morning. All throughout breakfast, the question plagued him. He’d only jumped at the chance to take a stroll with them just to share in her company, after all. So what had possessed her to leave in the end?

He would have asked had he not still been ashamed by all that he’d said last night. It was the only thing he could think of when he looked at her.

As if she felt the weight of his gaze, her eyes shifted to him. Johnathan felt his heart

trip over itself and he quickly looked away, cursing himself a second later for being so foolish. She'd clearly seen him looking and now she would think him a dolt for fearing eye contact. Agnes Parsons was not the kind of lady who would grow affection for a weak man, after all. Johnathan didn't think himself to be one and yet he found himself faltering and fumbling when under her scrutiny.

"Shall we depart then?" Lord Sutton asked, coming to a stand. He guided his wife to her feet as well, as if she could not possibly stand on her own without his helping hand. "We do not want the day to get away from us."

"Yes, let us," Johnathan agreed and took the lead. It was a welcoming distraction from the pair of brown eyes boring into him.

He led the way out the drawing room out and out onto the courtyard where two carriages were already waiting. Before he could say a word, Agnes swept up to his side, carrying with her the enticing smell of her perfume. It was all he could focus on for a moment.

"Shall we ride together, Your Grace?" she asked. "There were a few things I wanted to ask you about your travels."

"I'm sure those questions can wait until we have arrived at our destination," Lady Reeds poked in with a false smile on her teeth.

Johnathan knew what Agnes was trying to do. But he could admit to himself that his next words had less to do with her motivations than they had to with his. "On the contrary, my lady, I do think it would be a fine time for Miss Agnes to voice such questions so that the rest of our morning can be dedicated to the group activities."

"It would not do for two unmarried ladies to ride with two unmarried gentlemen," Lady Sutton pointed out. "Betrothed or not."

“I do not see the problem, Mother,” Agnes stated simply. “You and Father should ride with Caroline, Christopher and Paul.”

Lady Sutton seemed surprised by that. Johnathan was as well. He thought Agnes would have much preferred the company of her parents to that of Lord and Lady Reeds.

“Come now,” she quickly went on. “Any more time deliberating our seating arrangements and night will begin falling.”

“What an exaggeration,” Lady Sutton commented.

“I believe she learned it from you,” Lord Sutton murmured.

“Are you certain, Agnes?” Caroline spoke up, her own uncertainty with what was about to happen apparent. She glanced anxiously at her uncle. “Perhaps it would be best if?—”

“There’s no need to worry, Caroline,” Agnes assured her. “Lord Christopher has assured me that it is not a long trip to the village so it really does not matter who rides with whom, does it?”

“I pointedly disagree with you,” said Lord Reeds, his disapproval clear in the scowl he wore. “We shall ride with Lord Christopher and Caroline.”

“What was that, my lord?” Agnes asked as she turned away. She caught Johnathan by the arm, her sudden touch sending a thrill through his body. “I cannot hear you. Perhaps you could repeat it when we are in the carriage.”

“Oh dear,” Lady Sutton sighed. Johnathan could have sworn he heard humor in her voice. “Then we should make haste to our carriage, shouldn’t we, Caroline?”

“Am I the only one who does not understand what is happening?” Mr. Parsons spoke up, markedly bemused.

Johnathan didn’t get to hear anything more. Agnes pulled him all the way to the carriage, putting enough distance between them and the others, which allowed him to ask, “Why would you want to ride with Lord and Lady Reeds and not your parents? I thought you were not fond of them.”

“I am not,” she whispered to him. “But Caroline will not feel comfortable enough to relax and show her affection to your brother if her aunt and uncle are there watching her every move.”

“And you believe that will not be the same for your parents?”

“They are far more understanding. They treat Caroline like a daughter. And it will give them a chance to see how lovely they are as a match, which will make it easier for them to let go of the idea of him marrying me.”

Johnathan helped her into the carriage, unable to keep the marvel off his face. “You are absolutely fascinating.”

To his surprise, she blushed. “I must thank you for playing along.”

“I trust your judgment, Agnes. I doubt you could ever steer me wrong.”

Her lips parted in surprise. Johnathan, realizing he might have said too much once more, cleared his throat, grateful for the distraction Lord and Lady Reeds’ approach gave him. He entered the carriage, allowing the married couple to slide in on the other side.

Neither one of them bothered hiding their discontentment at the arrangement.

Johnathan would have felt far more amusement at their faces had it not been for the veritable fact that their disapproval was bound to cause more discomfort than anything else.

“What a dreadful start to this trip,” Lady Reeds began as the carriage set off behind the other. “Caroline should be the one sitting there.”

She jerked her chin unceremoniously at Agnes, who sat across from her. To her credit, Agnes didn’t seem to mind the hostility being aimed her way.

“I am certain that Caroline is quite content where she is,” Agnes stated without a care in the world.

“It matters not whether she is content,” Lord Reeds interjected, his voice rumbling with annoyance. “She should be by the side of her future husband.”

“On that, my lord, I must agree.”

Lord Reeds’ scowl only deepened the tension in the carriage. While Agnes clearly didn’t care that she was upsetting the earl, Johnathan would much rather the trip to the village pass without incident.

“It is a good thing that this carriage ride is a short one,” he attempted to assure them. “I’m sure I will have more than enough opportunities to share in Miss Caroline’s company when we arrive.”

“I would hope so,” Lord Reeds sniffed. “And while we are on the topic of your match with Caroline, Your Grace, we must discuss the wedding.”

Johnathan felt the blood drain from his face. “Must we?”

“We have not been given the chance to do so before. Why not now? It would be a much more suitable topic of conversation than tales of your travels.”

“I beg to differ, my lord,” Agnes murmured.

Lord Reeds glared only seemed to bounce off Agnes’ skin because she clearly couldn’t care less.

To save her from another argument—though Johnathan was of the view that she would welcome it—he asked, “What exactly did you want to say about the wedding, Lord Reeds?”

“Anything at all! I have not heard your thoughts on the matter, which I do find rather odd.”

“Oh, come now, dear,” Lady Reeds spoke up, touching her husband lightly on the arm. “You know gentlemen do not pay much mind to the organization of such things. It is the job of the bride and her family.”

“I do not intend to talk of flowers and decorations,” Lord Reeds corrected. “My only suggestion is that the wedding be a grand one and that it happens as quickly as possible.”

Johnathan shifted uncomfortably. Agnes did as well, though her face was turned towards the window. “It may not be a good idea to rush the wedding, my lord.”

“There is no rush,” Lord Reeds insisted. “We have already come to an agreement, after all. It is now only a matter of making good on each side of the arrangement.”

To Johnathan’s relief, Lady Reeds spoke next. “Don’t you think it would be better if they waited until the end of the season? It would be a far more impactful wedding, to

be certain. And that will certainly give us enough time to plan a grand one.”

Lord Reeds seemed to be considering those words. “I do see the merit in your point. But I cannot help but think that we are wasting time.”

“It is not a waste, my lord,” Johnathan quickly tried to satisfy him. “Like Lady Reeds said, it will allow us more time to plan a grand wedding, one that will make a wonderful union.”

“Then we should at least make the announcement now,” Lord Reeds said. “That way, everyone will know that Caroline is betrothed to the Duke of Claymore.”

Agnes shifted again. It seemed she was trying to face the window even further.

“The season ends in a short few months,” Lady Reeds mused. “Perhaps that is not a bad idea.”

“Then we shall?—”

“Have we already arrived?” Agnes spoke up suddenly, cutting into the earl’s words.

Johnathan was all too eager to lean towards the window to see. He heard her draw in a sharp breath at his sudden closeness and he tried not to turn to look at her. His face was already close enough to hers and if he did...

“Yes, we have arrived,” he confirmed, grateful that his voice did not betray the racing of his heart. He straightened. “Lord and Lady Reeds, perhaps we could continue this conversation another time.”

“I shall make sure of it, Your Grace,” Lord Reeds said stiffly.

Johnathan didn't doubt it. He nodded, accepting the fact that he would have to speak with the earl about Miss Caroline and Christopher earlier than he'd wanted to.

For now, he should only focus on one thing. Ensuring that everyone saw their underlying love for each other. Nothing else mattered but that.

Especially not navigating the company of the beautiful and sagacious lady sitting next to him.

CHAPTER 19

The village located close to Claymore Estate was far more sizable than Agnes had imagined. What she'd expected to be small and quaint, with rough, dirt roads and sparse buildings, she found a thriving community with an electrifying atmosphere. As a lady who had spent most of her life living in London, she was in awe of the lovely mixture of countryside simplicity and town-like hubbub.

She strolled arm in arm with Caroline as they made their way to what Christopher described as the shopping district. As they drew closer, it seemed to be a long winding road lined with shops and open carts, vendors standing at attention ready to sell their wares.

"This is wonderful, is it not?" she marveled aloud.

"Yes, I must admit that I am happy we decided to do this," Caroline agreed, wearing the brightest smile Agnes had seen from her in days. "Perhaps I may be able to purchase a new shawl or a new comb."

"You may have anything your heart desires, Miss Caroline," Christopher interjected. He strolled behind them, with Johnathan on one side of him and his newest best friend, Paul, on the other. Agnes made a concerted effort not to look at the tall duke.

"Anything?" Caroline repeated, her eyes glittering with excitement. "You overexaggerate, my lord."

"That I do not," Christopher said with a grin. "This village may not be as large as

other towns but what it lacks in size, it makes up for in commerce. Many oftentimes travel a great length to purchase wares from these shops.”

“I cannot imagine what could be possessed here that cannot be possessed elsewhere,” Agnes spoke up.

Christopher grinned and he walked a little quicker, stopping by Caroline’s side. Paul did the same, coming to Christopher’s side and so that left Johnathan, who of course chose to walk next to Agnes. In the line they created, they cut quite the sight, drawing more attention to them. Though Agnes was sure that had more to do with the handsome duke in their midst.

“Where else would you be able to find a mirror blessed by a soothsayer?” Christopher asked Agnes, raising a brow.

Agnes stifled her laughter. “I was not aware that soothsayers were capable of giving blessings.”

“It may be a new skill we do not know of,” Caroline laughed.

“Soothsayers can see into the future,” said Paul with all the wisdom of a young man who thought he knew it all. “So why wouldn’t they be able to bless an inanimate object?”

“You are far too naive, brother,” Agnes sighed. “If that soothsayer gets you in their clutches, you will turn us penniless.”

“I am sure you will be there to wring my ear if I dare spend too much.”

Agnes gave her brother a saccharine smile. “You know me too well.”

Christopher released a loud and dramatic sigh. “I do not think they are taking me seriously, John.”

“Good,” Johnathan spoke at last. “I do not think that they should.”

Agnes couldn’t help the laughter that bubbled up her throat at that. Johnathan grinned down at her.

“Lord Christopher, I would love to hear about this soothsayer of yours,” Caroline said, ever the nice one. “Are they truly as marvelous as you say?”

Christopher gave her devilish wag of his eyebrows. “Would you like to know for yourself? I could take you to see her.”

“Could you?” She sounded eager. Admittedly, Agnes was a little intrigued at the prospect herself.

“Of course,” Christopher stated with a nod. “Her shop is not too far from where we are. We may make a detour from finding you a new shawl to pay her a visit.”

“Lead the way then!” Paul said far too eagerly.

Christopher seemed inspired by his enthusiasm and did just that, taking charge of the group. Paul was right on his heels and Caroline let out a small giggle as she hurried to keep up.

The others were trailing behind, engrossed in their own conversations to pay any mind to what the unmarried lot was talking about. Agnes realized a beat too late that she and Johnathan had fallen in between the two groups.

“You do not seem very impressed by the feats of this soothsayer,” Johnathan

commented after a moment of silence between them.

Agnes watched the excited group of three ahead of them with amusement. “I am a lady of fact, John. I do not pay heed to such mystifying ideas.”

“Then perhaps I should not admit to you that this soothsayer is indeed as wondrous as Christopher says.”

Agnes raised her brows at him. “What a surprise. I did not expect you to care about such things, let alone believe in them.”

“I am a man of varying interests,” he admitted with a shrug.

“Then have you used the services of his soothsayer before?”

Johnathan nodded.

Agnes, intrigued, couldn’t help walking a little closer to him, peering closely to see if he was telling the truth or not. To his credit, he kept his face quite still. “And what did they say of your future?”

“That one day I shall find myself at the mercy of a badgering lady who does not know when she is being made fun of.”

Agnes gasped. Letting out a horrified laugh, she slapped Johnathan lightly on the arm as he chuckled. “I do not know whether to be cross or impressed.”

“Both, perhaps? It is not every day that one manages to outwit a lady such as yourself.”

“Count yourself lucky then because it shan’t happen again.”

“On the contrary, I believe that I have many opportunities to do so in the future.”

“Quite confident of you to say. An admirable trait, I suppose, if not a foolish one.”

“I’ll choose to focus on the fact that you find me admirable.”

He rested his hand on his chest as if he was touched by her words. Agnes rolled her eyes, ignoring the flutter of her heart at how wide and full his grin was. It was her first time seeing him let his guard down so fully, with childish abandon that brought out a different side of her. She adored that smile, adored the way his eyes grew brighter as they crinkled in humor. She adored the manner in which one side of his smile tilted up before the other, the way his entire body seemed to relax with that one simple act. Agnes hadn’t noticed how tense he was before.

“We have arrived,” Johnathan announced, pulling her from her thoughts.

She looked ahead to see the others ducking into a small, nondescript store that bore the words “Madame Hendrix” on the front and nothing else.

“Madame Hendrix must have a name that speaks for itself,” Agnes commented. She lingered, looking back at her parents and Lord and Lady Reeds. “Will you be joining us?” she asked them.

Solomon waved her inside. “Your mother insists that I purchase that reticule we saw a while back.”

“And by insist,” Mary spoke up. “I only said that it was rather nice and would match a few of my dresses.”

“I know what that means,” Agnes said and Solomon nodded as if he too understood the implications of such simple words.

She didn't bother sparing the earl and countess a look, not caring what they did. As long as they didn't bother them with talk of wedding and marriages, they could have been nonexistent for all Agnes cared. She didn't wait for their response, simply turning and ducking into the shop.

The space was sparsely decorated save for a table with two chairs sitting on either side of it. Paul was already seated in one of them, facing a dark-haired woman on the other end. The woman didn't look up at their entrance. She held both of Paul's hands in hers, his palms facing the ceiling, and she studied them with a look of concentration.

There was a hush in the room. Agnes was tempted to comment on the sight, eager to lean to the duke and whisper about how fantastical this all was. Something stopped her from doing anything.

Maybe it had something to do with the utter seriousness of everything else, a stark difference to the playfulness they'd been victim to just moments before. Or the somber atmosphere of the sparsely decorated room. Whatever it was, Agnes simply bit her tongue and watched.

At last, the woman Agnes assumed was Madame Hendrix released Paul's hands.

"What did you see?" Paul breathed, leaning forward in his chair.

Madame Hendrix met his eyes. "You have a very rare fortune, Mr. Parsons."

Caroline gasped. Frowning, Agnes leaned towards to whisper, "What is it?"

"He hadn't told her who he was," she whispered back, not taking her eyes off the woman.

Agnes tried not to scoff. “Then she must have heard of the duke’s visitors. You know how quickly gossip spreads.”

Caroline didn’t seem inclined to believe such an obvious notion, enraptured as she was in what the soothsayer was saying.

“I see nothing but good fortune for you. You shall suffer no heartache, no sickness, no pain, no dismay. You shall remain in good spirits, of strong heart and mind, for as long as you live. You shall marry a woman you love, one who loves you equally as much, and shall live the rest of your days in peace.”

Paul relaxed visibly. “You frightened me, you know. I thought you were going to tell me that I only had a few more days to live.”

Madame Hendrix’s face did not move as she said, “Your future would have been quite different if it had not been you who sat in my chair first.”

Paul shuddered. Agnes rolled her eyes.

Her brother got up from the chair, looking a little shaken from the soothsayer’s next words. Madame Hendrix finally looked up at them. At her.

She pointed a bony finger at Agnes. “You’re next.”

Everyone looked at Agnes as Agnes met the woman’s eyes, raising a brow. “Next for what? To meet an untimely demise or to be happy for the rest of my life?”

Madame Hendrix did not seem perturbed by Agnes’ sarcasm. She gestured to the chair. “Sit, Miss Agnes.”

The way she said her name sent a chill down Agnes’ spine. It didn’t help that

Caroline gasped again.

“You don’t have to if you don’t want to,” Johnathan said by her side.

Agnes only shot him a glance. “Then that means I have to, don’t I?”

She strode forward, ignoring the prickly sensation at the base of her neck as she claimed the chair across from the soothsayer. Agnes stared at her for a long moment, wondering if she was really going to let this happen. Deciding after a while that it wasn’t going to hurt, she offered both her hands.

Madame Hendrix shook her head. “I do not need to read your palms. Your future is all but marked on your forehead.”

“Is that so?”

“You are headed down a dangerous path,” Madame Hendrix went on. “One that will lead to ruin if you are not careful.”

Caroline’s audible gasp nearly had Agnes rolling her eyes again. “Do you mean that she’s...”

“I do not mean death, no,” Madame Hendrix clarified without looking away from Agnes. “She will live a long, healthy life. Your heart, however, will suffer greatly if you are not careful. The path you trod now will only lead you to pain and sadness. But there is a chance that all will be well if you allow yourself to let go.”

“Let go?” Agnes echoed. “Do you not think yourself a bit too vague to be offering advice?”

“It is the only advice I can give. Anything else may alter the future.”

Agnes let out a breath of frustration. “Well, that was incredibly disappointing. I cannot imagine what or who could cause me any amount of pain or sadness in the future.”

Madame Hendrix looked over Agnes' shoulder. Agnes stiffened. Slowly, the soothsayer's eyes drifted back to Agnes and suddenly, she realized that she knew. How this stranger knew was a mystery to her, but it was clear in those deep, dark eyes. It was clear in the way she'd looked at Johnathan over Agnes' shoulder. It was clear in the things she was saying while saying nothing much at all.

God, she couldn't believe she was beginning to consider the words of a self-proclaimed seer.

“Speak to each other,” Madame Hendrix said. “And the truth will be revealed.”

“That's enough.” Agnes shot out of the chair. She was frazzled but she didn't dare to show it. “Someone else may go ahead.”

Despite how unusual she felt, she went straight to the side of the man who partially caused it. Could he tell? She was afraid to look at him, afraid he might read into Madame Hendrix's words and realize the truth of how Agnes felt about him. A truth that she hadn't even been able to come to terms with herself.

Pain and sadness awaited her, huh? Agnes thought of the duke's smile and couldn't imagine a world where such a smile could ever cause her any amount of pain.

CHAPTER 20

The morning was progressing rather nicely. So nicely in fact that Johnathan had almost forgotten what he had resolved to do just this morning, which was to ensure that Christopher and Miss Caroline spent as much time together as was possible.

Although, it appeared his interference would not be needed. Christopher was in a grand mood, pulling their small party along to every shop that caught his fancy. And Miss Caroline seemed to be in the best spirits he'd ever witnessed since meeting her. Her smile was bright and full of wild abandon, and she displayed a playful side of her that Johnathan never knew existed. Between her, Paul, and Christopher, they were like three children let loose in a confectionary shop.

Much to Johnathan's pleasure, Lord and Lady Reeds did not bother him again about the wedding as the morning wore on into the afternoon. As a matter of fact, they were quite scarce. They seemed engrossed in their own devices, trailing far behind the rest which included the happily married couple that strolled along as if they were still courting.

Which left Johnathan mostly in the company of Agnes. An uncommonly quiet Agnes.

"Is something bothering you?" he asked at last. They were making their way through the market, forgoing the produce vendors for those that sold accessories.

Agnes looked up from the array of ribbons she had been staring at, her mind clearly elsewhere. "Hm? Oh, no I am fine."

“You do not seem fine,” Jonathan pointed out. “As a matter of fact, you have been rather quiet ever since we left the soothsayer’s shop. Don’t tell me you are still thinking about what she said? I thought you did not pay such things any mind.”

Agnes scoffed, rolling her eyes at his prodding. “Bold of you to assume what is going through my mind, John. Surely you do not think I am so easy to read?”

“You are far easier than you believe you are, Agnes,” he contested, purely to get her a little riled up. Anything to pull her out of her own mind. “And after spending so much time in your company, I do think I know you quite well.”

“You do, do you?” Agnes’ eyes flashed with a challenge and Johnathan steeled himself for what she was going to say next. “What are my interests then?”

“An easy challenge. You enjoy reading. Philosophical and scientific books to be specific. Since you are very technical minded, you do not pay much attention to creative hobbies though you do ensure your skill in the pianoforte surpasses what is deemed expected of a lady of your stature.”

“Hm. Surprisingly, you are correct. Though I do suppose it is expected that you would know such insignificant aspects of my personality.”

“I do not find them insignificant,” Johnathan said. He stuck his hands in his pockets as a way of fighting the urge to tuck that strand of hair away from her face. It tickled the side of her cheek and she wiggled her nose in response.

“A kind sentiment then, John, but it is standard to know such things.”

“Is it standard to know that you much prefer chicken to fish, seeing that you clean your plate every time there is a chicken meal but pick at your fish and pause between bites as if you are reminding yourself that it is good for you? Or is it standard to

notice the manner in which you approach every conversation as if you always hold on to the hope that there is something new you may glean from what is being said, even if it is a topic as banal as the weather? You do like flowers well enough but in the manner of a horticulturist rather than a lady who simply admires its color and smell. And you always pause to study every infrastructure you come upon, your eyes picking apart every detail of its architecture as if you wish to figure out what sets it apart from the rest. I can always tell when you draw your conclusion from the small smile you wear. When I think of your peculiarities, for lack of a better word, in such a manner, I do not think it standard.”

His lengthy response clearly surprised her. Agnes frowned a little, turning back to the ribbons she had been studying. As if she noticed that the vendor was watching them, she quickly picked up a few pink ones, passed over the coins, and walked away.

“Am I wrong?” Johnathan asked at last, impatient.

“No, you are not wrong. I am simply taken aback at how correct you were. In such detail too.”

“As I said, I know you quite well. I pay keen attention to you.”

“Why?”

He hadn’t realized what he’d said until she asked the question. She even turned to look at him, piercing him with that beautiful gaze of hers and making his throat clog up in the process.

Johnathan couldn't meet her eyes. So he looked around the markets, eyes falling on Christopher who was busy showing Miss Caroline a vendor who sold live fish.

It should have pleased him to see his brother and his brother’s love having such a

wonderful time together. But all Johnathan could think about was Agnes and the way she looked at him, as if she could not quite understand him and was desperate to know more. It felt like her eyes were stripping him raw, peeling back the layers he had spent so much time building on top of the other. Eventually, he feared she would meet the center and find out that he was nothing but a pained, aching gentleman wearing the mask of a duke and pretending he had everything together.

“I cannot help it,” he answered her at last. “You are not an easy lady to ignore.”

“Should I take that as a compliment?”

“I do not mean it as an insult,” he assured her.

She didn’t look away from him. In fact, she shifted, stepping directly in his line of sight, which forced him to look down at her.

Agnes wore a small frown, looking absolutely frustrated. It wasn’t the expression he’d expected to see.

“Have I upset you?” he asked, afraid that he might have said the wrong thing again.

“No, not at all,” she said with a shake of her head, still frowning at him. Johnathan fought the urge to gaze down at the slight pout of her lips, willing away the tremor of heat that coursed through him. “It is only that I now realize that I know very little about you.”

“There is nothing to know about me,” he said but she was already shaking her head.

“I shan’t accept that as an answer. You speak about me as if we have known each other for years and yet I cannot even tell you what your favorite color is. I would not be surprised if you knew mine.”

“I surmise it may be either purple or pink.”

“Oh, good heavens, this is what I mean!” she exclaimed, her cheeks coloring in frustration. “Oh, I am so ashamed of myself.”

“Ashamed?” Johnathan frowned at her in alarm. “You have no reason to be! It is I who should not have said so much.”

“But you have and I am unable to forget it.” She thinned her lips. “I have been so focused on Caroline and Christopher that I...” She trailed off, then caught his arm suddenly, sending his heart racing through his chest. “Tell me who you are, Johnathan. Let us start with your favorite color.”

Despite the chaos her touch was causing on his insides, Johnathan laughed. “I do not have a favorite color.”

She scowled. “Everyone has a favorite color.”

“I do not. Is that odd?”

“I suppose it is not,” she conceded after a moment. She removed her hand and he suddenly felt cold without her touch. “Tell me what you like to do then, when you are not holed up in your office at the crack of dawn.”

Johnathan raised his brows. “How do you know the time I go to my office?”

She blinked as if just realizing what she’d said. Then her cheeks turned an adorable shade of pink. “You are not the only observant one, you know.”

A grin tugged at his lips. He had every intention of teasing her about that, mostly because he wanted to avoid having to talk about himself, but then someone called out

to him.

They both paused, looking to the left to see a portly man standing at the door of a shop. The man lowered his head in reverence before meeting Johnathan's eyes. "Forgive me for interrupting, Your Grace. My wife and I were hoping to speak with you for a moment."

Johnathan recognized the man, though he could not quickly recall his name. He was the village metalsmith who had been seeking a meeting with Johnathan for some time now. Had it not been for his guests, Johnathan would have already gone to see him.

The look on the man's face told him that it would not be easy turning him down. So Johnathan nodded at him, then turned to Agnes. He placed a hand on the small of her back, murmuring, "Pardon me a moment."

She sucked in a breath, her eyes growing wide before nodding. He didn't get the chance to question her on her reaction. He simply headed into the shop and prayed that whatever conversation he was about to have would not be a difficult one.

With his father's debts and his dwindling wealth, Johnathan didn't have much hope.

Agnes waited for Johnathan to return. She tried not to peek in the windows, fighting the curiosity that threatened to overtake her. Thankfully, the others lingered about as well, so engrossed in their own little adventures to pay much mind to the fact that she was standing outside the door of a metal shop waiting for the duke.

At long last, Johnathan emerged, the portly man and his—surprisingly equally—portly wife exiting behind him. The couple bore happy smiles, giving enthusiastic farewells to Johnathan as he bid them goodbye. Agnes couldn't help the curious stare as Johnathan made his way back to her.

“They seemed to be in high spirits,” she commented before he had a chance to say anything.

“Yes, well...” Johnathan tucked his hands into his pockets again and they continued their stroll. Only Agnes had very little interest in the surroundings and far more in the gentleman by her side. “They requested some more time in paying their rent since business has been a little difficult lately.”

“Did you grant it?”

Johnathan looked at her as if he couldn’t believe she would ask. “Of course I did. I am not a monster.”

Agnes fought her smile. “Many dukes would not do the same. I do not think anyone would deem you a monster because of it. A little heartless, perhaps, but that is necessary at times.”

“Are you saying you think I should have rejected their plea?”

“No, I’m saying you are a kind and generous man. I’m sure you are well-liked by these people.”

“It is not enough for me to be liked. I should be doing more.”

“More? My, I did assume you to be addicted to your work but it is quite admirable to see it in action. I’m sure your father would have been proud.”

Johnathan made an odd sound in the back of his throat. “My father is the reason I am forced to try so hard.”

Agnes looked up at him, noticing the darkness in his tone. It shone on his face too, his

jaw ticking as if he was grinding his teeth. She'd never witnessed such hardness in his gaze before. A part of her felt a little trepidant asking her next question and it was only her never ending thirst to know more that drove it from her lips.

“Was he a hard man?” she asked gently.

“Hard?” Johnathan repeated, all but spitting the word out. “No, he was not hard. Not to me, at least, nor to my brother. While my father was alive, we knew nothing but his love and guidance. Following his death, however, we realized the dark secrets he had been keeping from us.”

“Dark secrets?” she probed, her voice hardly above a whisper.

Johnathan was somewhere else entirely. Though he continued along with ease, his eyes stared out as if witnessing something from the past, flashes of pain and anger darkening those blue pools.

“I’ve spent years trying to rebuild the reputation between the people and the dukedom, having not realized the damage my father had done to it. He left a terrible legacy behind, one that I am forced to repair so that I do not pass it along to my heir.”

She wanted to take his hand. She wanted to pull him close and hold his head to her chest so that she could stroke the back of it and tell him that everything would be fine. Agnes could not take her eyes off him, wanting to throw herself between him and the painful memories she could see were assaulting him that very moment.

“How did he die?” she whispered instead, afraid that she might be overstepping but unable to stop herself anyway.

Johnathan paused in his tracks. Slowly, he turned tortured eyes to her. “I believe he shot himself.”

Agnes gasped, hand flying to her mouth. She couldn't help it.

A wry smile touched Johnathan's lips before falling away. "I wish it were not true. It is not what I wish to remember about the man I had once looked up to. But when the constables observed the scene and interviewed the servants, they learned that no one had snuck in and done the deed. My father, he..." Johnathan trailed off, shaking his head. "These are not proper words to be heard by a delicate lady."

"It is a good thing I am not delicate then." She couldn't resist a moment longer. Agnes touched his arm. She hoped in the smile he could feel how sorry she felt.

She could almost see the tension seep out of his shoulders at the touch.

"It is in the past now," he said, the darkness clearing from his eyes. "And far be it from me to ruin this wonderful afternoon with such somber memories. Especially since it seems our goal is almost within reach."

He jerked his chin at something behind her. Agnes turned to see Christopher and Caroline standing with each other at a florist, seemingly having a conversation over bouquets of tulips.

Agnes smiled. It was always satisfying seeing her plans come to fruition, but she found it hard focusing on it when every fiber of being was honed in on the gentleman standing next to her.

She turned back to look at him. She studied the slope of his jaw, the curvature of his eyes, the slight slant of his lips. Agnes admired the way his eyes lit with pleasure, how easily she could read his emotions when he let his guard down. She didn't know when it happened. All she knew was that she was staring at a completely different gentleman from the aloof duke she'd met when she'd first arrived. The shields he'd put up had shattered and she could see who he truly was.

And she loved him for it.

The startling fact left her speechless, unable to do anything but simply look at him. How could she love a man she claimed she hardly knew just minutes ago?

But it was the same man who had recited things about her that only those closest to her could have possibly known. A man who had put aside his own quest for marriage without a moment's hesitation if it meant his brother would be happy. A man who was not intimidated by her but could make her feel both cherished and seen without having to do anything but share a conversation.

Agnes couldn't believe she hadn't realized this sooner.

"Everyone, come!" Paul called out suddenly, drawing all their attention. All except Agnes' who was slow to turn, still so shaken by her revelation that she could hardly focus on anything else.

"I found a pub where we can have our luncheon," Paul went on excitedly, waving an arm. He clearly had no plans on waiting to show them the way, already hurrying back the way he came.

Johnathan looked at her, eyes glittering with humor. "Shall we?"

Agnes' smile was slow to come. When it did, she felt the pleasure all the way to the tip of her toes as she nodded. "Lead the way."

And I shall follow you anywhere.

CHAPTER 21

“I am not setting foot in an establishment like this.”

Agnes fought the groan that trembled up her throat, turning to the Countess of Reeds instead. She didn't bother masking the overly patient look she gave the countess, who sneered in response.

“Perhaps you would much rather return to the manor, my lady,” Agnes said in a sweet tone. “We wouldn't dare to make you uncomfortable.”

“You would enjoy watching me leave, wouldn't you?” Lady Reeds hissed, her upper lip curling in disdain.

Agnes wasn't perturbed by the animosity. She was used to the countess' manner of speaking towards her by now and had actually grown to enjoy taunting the older woman. “I would not dream of keeping you,” Agnes responded sweetly.

“Agnes, please,” Caroline stepped in. She came to Agnes' side, laying a hand on her arm. The look of distress on her face calmed Agnes immediately.

She released a sigh. They were all standing outside the pub Paul had told them about—all except Paul himself. Her brother hadn't bothered waiting on them, stating that he would go in and secure their seats by the time they caught up.

Agnes wasn't entirely surprised to know that Lady Reeds was protesting eating at the pub. The establishment was teeming with other villagers, a rustic look infrastructure

that was the last place someone as haughty as the countess would set foot in. Agnes was surprised the earl hadn't voice his complaints as well.

As if he sensed her thoughts, Lord Reeds spoke up. "Surely there must be some other place we may eat. Or better yet, let us all return to the manor. We have been out for long enough, I believe."

"I have told our cook that we shan't be returning for lunch, my lord," Johnathan spoke up. "I'm afraid it will be heavily delayed if we were to do so without prior warning."

"A delayed lunch would be far better to eating here." Lord Reeds slid his judgmental gaze over the pub, lip curling with disgust.

"On the contrary, my lord," Solomon spoke up, holding the arm of his dear wife. "I'm afraid I may perish if I delay eating much longer. Our outing has worked up an appetite."

"And he is rather crabby when he is hungry," Mary jumped in, eyes twinkling with humor.

"As am I," Agnes said before her father had the chance to counter that statement. "And standing around like this is only making me hungrier. I'm sure Paul is waiting for us."

She didn't give them any more time to argue. She picked up her skirts and headed into the pub without another word. To her pleasure, Johnathan was right on her heels.

The pub was rather small on the inside but the smell of spiced meat tinged the air and sent her stomach into an uproar. Agnes spied Paul on the other end of the dining space at the only table large enough to seat all of them.

The pub's owner came hurrying over, sinking into a bow. "Y-your Grace! I had not expected you. If I knew you were coming, I would have closed the pub to the public to allow you your privacy."

"Then it is a good thing I did not send word," Johnathan responded, clapping a hand on the man's shoulders. "I do not want to prevent anyone from having their meals here. Please, pretend that I am not here."

"I do not think that will be that simple," Agnes commented softly.

Johnathan noted her words with a nod. "Then pretend I am just another patron," he told the pub owner. The pub owner nodded but did not seem very confident.

Still, he led the way over to where Paul was sitting. Agnes felt a wave of pleasure, a smile touching her lips when Johnathan pulled the chair out for her. Only a moment later did she notice that Caroline was hovering too, clearly expecting Johnathan to do the same for her.

"Sit here, Miss Caroline," Johnathan said to her, offering her the chair on the other side of him. She gave him a soft, graceful smile. "And you brother, sit here."

Johnathan all but shoved Christopher into the chair. Christopher and Caroline exchanged looks of confusion. Agnes pretended not to notice what was happening.

"What took you all so long?" Paul asked, still bouncing in his chair in excitement. "I have been waiting for ages."

"There was a lively debate outdoors on whether we should dine here or not," Mary told him.

Paul's eyes widened, seeming utterly confused. "Why wouldn't we? This is a lovely

place, is it not? And do you smell that? A heavenly scent. I'm sure the meal I am about to have will have me longing for more for the rest of my life."

Lord and Lady Reeds seemed very irritated with those words, grumbling to each other. Agnes ignored them.

"Do you know what is on the menu?" Agnes asked her brother.

"Not yet," he said, then he looked up at the pub owner who was still anxiously hovering over them. "Tell me, good sir, what is the best meal offered at this fine establishment?"

The pub owner flushed at the mention of his pub as a 'fine establishment.' He cleared his throat. "Well, I would recommend the lamb roast and meat pie."

Agnes perked up the same time Christopher's head swiveled towards the man. "Meat pie?" they both said in unison.

Agnes looked at the duke's brother in surprise. "Do you like meat pie as well?"

"Like?" he echoed. "I adore it! I cannot imagine a single thing on this earth I enjoy more than a good meat pie. I reckon I may be able to eat it every day for the rest of my life."

"As could I!" Agnes agreed heartily. "When I was younger, I would always try to convince our cook to serve meat pie every day. It worked, sometimes."

"How did you do that?" Christopher asked. He leaned forward with interest. "Tell me your secrets so that I may apply the same practice to our cook at Claymore Castle."

She mimicked him with a wicked gleam in her eyes. "I took to bribing him."

“Did it work?” Mary interjected in an idle tone.

“Nice try, Mother, but Cook would never accept it. If he did give in to my pleas, it was only out of pity or exhaustion, but never because I offered him anything worth taking.”

“Bribing,” Christopher said, testing the word on his tongue. “Why did that not cross my mind?”

“You will not attempt to bribe our cook,” Johnathan spoke up. Though his words were serious, his tone was light with humor.

“No, no, brother, of course not. I would not dream of it.” He winked at Agnes and she laughed.

Johnathan chuckled. He seemed to be the only one who remembered that the pub owner was still waiting because he turned to him and said, “Bring me several servings of each dish.”

“Yes, Your Grace.” And the pub owner was off.

Agnes realized suddenly that Caroline was quiet, observing the banter between her and Christopher with slight interest. This was her chance. Everyone was together at the table, spirits were high—save for the dour couple still sulking on the other end—and both Caroline and Christopher seemed to have dropped their guards. What better time to show everyone what a splendid match they would make than now?

“Did you know, Christopher,” Agnes began, “that Caroline is quite a natural cook?”

Christopher’s brows raised just as Caroline’s eyes widened. “Is she now?” he said with surprise.

“An unusual skill for a genteel lady, yes, but she so adores baking and cooking. And I have had the pleasure of sampling her meat pie. It was quite lovely.”

“Agnes,” Caroline murmured. She glanced nervously at her uncle. “What are you doing?”

“Nothing,” Agnes said innocently. “I am only boasting about my dear friend, something I do not believe I will grow tired of.”

She kicked Johnathan discreetly under the table. Without hesitation, he said, “I can only imagine how lovely it would be to return home from a ride to such a hearty meal made with love. Wouldn’t that be nice, Christopher?”

“Why, yes, I do believe so,” Christopher responded bemusedly.

“Is that not odd?” Agnes said. “Sometimes I wonder if you two would make a much better match.”

She laughed, kicking Johnathan lightly again. It might not have been as light as she attempted it to be because he winced before saying, “I am beginning to wonder the same thing myself.”

Caroline’s only response to that was to frown at Agnes as if she was trying to figure her out. Agnes only gave her a small smile.

“Enough talk about matches,” Paul spoke up. “I want to know what happens during the summer festival in the village. I have heard tales about such activities in London but I have never gotten the chance to attend one myself.”

“For good reason,” Agnes said. “Letting you loose in such a place would be nothing but chaos.”

“Oh, do not tease your brother, Agnes,” Mary cajoled lightly. “You know he blushes easily.”

Right on cue, Paul turned a bright shade of red. He looked between his sister and mother, who were both fighting their smiles, and then helplessly at his father. Solomon only shrugged as if there was nothing to be done about it.

Christopher chuckled at the display then said, “The summer festival here may very well live up to what you have heard. Perhaps you will be able to attend it with us this year. After the ball, I’m sure.”

“The ball?” Caroline asked.

“Yes, I have asked Mrs. Adams to plan a ball for us in a few days. A joint engagement ball.”

No one commented on how unusual it was that the housekeeper was the one planning the ball and not the dowager duchess. She was clearly in no state to do such a thing.

“Oh, that sounds splendid,” Mary sighed. “I am already looking forward to it.”

“Yes, yes, but about the summer festival,” Paul said impatiently.

Christopher laughed at his urgency and went on to tell him all about the annual summer festival that occurred in the village. It lasted well after they received their meals and was halfway through it. Agnes made several attempts to turn the conversation back to how lovely Caroline and Christopher were together but eventually decided to give it a rest, not wanting to risk the wrath of Lord Reeds if he were to pick up on what she was doing.

They ate their fill, paid the pub owner handsomely, and all deemed themselves too

tired to continue their traipsing through the village. So they made their way back to the carriages.

When they were almost there, Caroline sidled up to Agnes and whispered, “When we return to Claymore Castle, I wish to speak with you.”

“About what?” Agnes whispered back.

“You shall know then.”

“Caroline, you know—” Caroline didn’t wait to hear the rest of Agnes’ response. She hurried ahead, climbing into the carriage with Christopher’s help.

Agnes resisted the urge to go after her. Caroline must have known what she’d just done. She knew there was no better way to torture Agnes than to dangle information just out reach of her. But she supposed she would simply have to be patient and wait until they returned to the manor. The short trip might not be as torturous as she thought, especially since she would be doing it with Johnathan.

If only Lord and Lady Reeds could up and disappear, that would make it perfect. Agnes understood the ramifications of being alone with a gentleman. She knew it was something she should never allow herself to consider. But as she climbed into the carriage, her hand lingering in the one he had offered to her before pulling away, Agnes decided she didn’t care about propriety. Not when the only thing she wanted to do was curl into his arms and find out if his lips were as soft as they looked.

“That was absolutely dreadful,” Lord Reeds spat the moment the carriages set off.

He is so good at ruining one’s mood, Agnes thought with irritation. She tried to quell it as best as she could, deciding it would be best not to respond lest she upset the man any further. God knew she’d done enough to taunt both him and his wife.

Johnathan apparently decided that the earl's comment could not go without acknowledgement. "Did you not enjoy your meal, my lord?" he asked.

"The meal was decent enough for a backwater establishment," the earl grumbled. "It is this entire outing that bothers me. Not to mention the fact that you are, yet again, sitting in this carriage instead of with my niece."

"Would you like for me to stop the carriages and switch seats, my lord?" Johnathan drawled.

Agnes looked at him in surprise. Was that a hint of derision in his tone? She didn't think he had it in him. He was always so polite when interacting with the earl but it seemed even he had reached his wit's end.

Lord Reeds must have noticed it as well because he narrowed his eyes. "Pardon me, Your Grace?"

"You are pardoned, my lord," Johnathan responded. Then he looked at Agnes. "Say, didn't you say you had a few questions about my travels? Now seems like the perfect time to voice them."

She fought her grin. "Indeed it does, Your Grace. I wanted to know what Europe was like. I have never been to Paris and always wished to visit."

"Ah, a beautiful city like no other..."

They spoke about Paris all the way to the manor, not giving the earl or countess a chance to interject with any talk of weddings, despite their best attempts. Agnes knew it was only delaying the inevitable. They'd made it very obvious that securing the match between Caroline and Johnathan was the only thing cared about. It was only a matter of time before they grew frustrated with the lack of development in that

regard. Johnathan hardly spent any time with Caroline, after all. And Agnes was always finding crafty ways to push her friend in the company of the duke's brother. Lord Reeds was not a patient man and what little he had was wearing down.

Still, she managed to ward off the dreaded conversation until they made it to the manor. As soon as they exited the carriage, however, Lord Reeds clipped, "Your Grace, I would like to speak with you in private," then walked away without giving him a chance to respond.

Agnes and Johnathan exchanged looks. They said nothing to each other, not with the others approaching, but they didn't have to. Agnes knew what that meant and she was sure Johnathan did as well. So she gave him a nod of encouragement and he nodded back.

"What was that about?" Paul asked, looking between them.

"Nothing," Agnes stated. "You're seeing things." She didn't wait for him to respond either. She simply picked up her skirts and made her way to the front door behind her duke.

CHAPTER 22

Lord Reeds was strutting with angry, anxious energy. He led the way to Johnathan's office, his steps long and hurried, the sound of his heels clipping in the hallway. Johnathan strolled leisurely behind him, keeping up easily despite the earl's attempts to move quickly.

He stalked into the office and sank into one of the armchairs in a huff. Johnathan didn't spare him a glance. He made his way over to the sideboard. "Would you like a drink, my lord?"

"A glass of whiskey would do fine," Lord Reeds grumbled, not one to turn away liquor.

Johnathan poured himself a glass as well, knowing he was going to need it to get through the conversation he was going to have. Granted, he'd been planning to speak with the earl before the day's end. He'd just hoped to do so on his terms, not when Lord Reeds was so obviously frustrated. It was bound to make what needed to be said to him far more difficult than it needed to be.

Johnathan handed the earl his drink and then claimed a seat on the sofa across from him. He draped an arm along the spine of the furniture crossed his legs and took a sip of the whiskey.

"It is a sipping spirit, my lord," Johnathan told him, watching as Lord Reeds downed nearly half the glass at once.

The earl grimaced. Johnathan couldn't tell if it was at the burn of the whiskey or at his comment. "I know very well the sort of spirit it is, Your Grace. Do not try to insult me."

"I would not dream of it, my lord."

His casual response clearly wasn't what Lord Reeds was looking for him. He seemed to be making a concerted effort to mask his scowl. "I need an answer, Your Grace. When do you intend to have the wedding?"

Johnathan gave himself a moment to decide how to respond. He could be direct, telling him that there would be no wedding between him and Caroline. Or he could beat around the bush, laying out subtle suggestions that may change the earl's mind before he even realized what was happening. Because Johnathan doubted either plan would work, he decided for a mixture of the two.

"Miss Caroline may have her wedding by the end of the season or next week, my lord. Whichever you deem fit."

Lord Reeds was clearly a more perceptive man than Johnathan gave him credit for, because he narrowed his eyes. "Her wedding? Do you seek to exclude yourself from this arrangement?"

Johnathan, again, paused to answer. He sipped his whiskey and decided it would be best to come straight out with it. "I intend to end my courtship with Miss Caroline."

"What?"

"It is not so dreadful a matter, my lord," Johnathan assured him. "I have my reasons, one of which is that Miss Caroline's affections clearly lay elsewhere."

“If I gave a damn about her affections, Your Grace, I would be having this conversation with her.” Lord Reeds paused, frowning. “Do you mean to tell me that she has been compromised?”

“Certainly not, my lord, no!” Johnathan was honestly shocked the earl could have suggested such a thing. “She has been the very picture of ladylike perfection and you have every reason to be both proud of her with no concern for her future. I assure you, however, that Miss Caroline is in good hands. Rather than seeking a marriage with me, I think it may be best if she were to marry my brother instead.”

Lord Reeds blinked at Johnathan, slowly. “Your brother?”

“It is a love match, my lord. Far be it from me to stand in the way of brother’s happiness.”

The earl seemed too shocked to respond. Johnathan sipped his whiskey and waited for the words to sink in.

He only laughed. The sound was harsh and mirthless, grating Johnathan’s ears and bringing a slight grimace to his lips.

“A love match?” Lord Reeds said again. “Do you take me for a fool, Your Grace?”

“I do not, my lord. I take you for a man who respects his niece’s decision and wants what is best for her.”

“Which is the same thing as a fool! How dare you suggest that we break our agreement because you want to see your brother happy? Have you forgotten that Caroline had her pick of more distinguished and prestigious gentlemen before you?”

“My lord,” Johnathan said in a low warning tone. “You forget yourself.”

“No, it is you who forgets himself!” The earl shot to his feet, trembling in anger. “I shan’t hand over such a hefty dowry to the brother of a duke who will give me nothing in return! If I were you, Your Grace, I would not forget the position I am in. You are nothing but a penniless duke. If I were to tell others of your position, what little legacy you have left to your name would be gone forever. Not to mention the scandal surrounding your father and how he passed.”

Johnathan slowly rose to his feet. He set his whiskey down, not trusting himself not to throw it against the wall in his rage. He quelled it as best as he could, not trembling from the force of it the way the earl before him did. But he knew it shone in his eyes as he stepped forward.

“Threaten me again, my lord, and you shall live to regret it.”

The rage in the earl’s face banked, making way for a sliver of fear. But he quickly put it aside as if it never happened.

“Then do not give me a reason to threaten you, Your Grace,” he growled. “You shall marry Caroline and that is that.”

“With all due respect, Lord Reeds, I do not take orders from men like you. Remember your place.”

The earl’s face reddened in anger. He stood there for a few seconds, clearly trying to think of something else to say. But then he gave up and stepped away, taking brisk steps to the door as if he could not get out fast enough. Johnathan only watched him go, fury clogging his throat. He did not take kindly to being intimidated but he knew the earl was right. Johnathan had no power here. He was a penniless duke and the only reason he was able to show his face in society was because the circumstances surrounding his father’s death were largely unknown. Everyone viewed him with pity and admiration that he could so quickly take up the mantle after his father’s sad and

untimely death. No one actually knew that his death had been caused by his father's own hands. If they did, if they found out that his father had taken his own life after racking up debt after debt, the blight on the dukedom would be irreparable.

He had considered it all when he thought about breaking the engagement with Caroline. But he'd hoped that Lord Reeds was a reasonable man, a man he could negotiate with. Marrying the brother of a duke was not the terrible option Lord Reeds made it seem like. Agnes had been more than willing to do so before she'd learned of his brother's affections, hadn't she?

Johnathan sank into the sofa, reaching for the whiskey. Agnes was going to be disappointed. Both in him and in the outcome of the discussion. A part of him didn't want to tell her. He wanted to fix this matter all on his own. But ever since she came to enlist his help, they'd worked like partners. As much as he didn't want to tell her about his failure, Johnathan knew that he had to.

He only hoped she took the earl's words with as much calmness as he had.

Agnes' first order of business was to get Caroline alone and demand to know what she wanted to talk to her about. She would have succeeded in her plan—or at least the commencement of it—had Caroline not disappeared almost as soon as they went inside the manor. Agnes had been so preoccupied with watching Johnathan trail after Lord Reeds that she hadn't noticed her slipping away.

The others disbursed to their chambers rather quickly, clearly as tired as Agnes felt so she decided to do the same. There was no use chasing after Caroline. She would come to Agnes when she was good and ready. Agnes would simply have to quell her unending curiosity until then. Perhaps a nap could be in order. Heaven knew after the day they'd had, it was quite overdue.

She all but dragged herself up the staircase, quickly looking forward to the moment

she could collapse in her bed. Agnes didn't make it halfway there before she was approached by the dowager duchess, who seemed to materialize out of nowhere. Agnes certainly hadn't seen her approaching. Though she supposed she was so tired that simply must not have noticed.

"Your Grace," Agnes greeted politely. She was unable to manage anything more than a simple dip and hoped it passed as a curtsy. "You were missed this morning."

"I can assure you that I was not," the dowager duchess responded. Her voice was far clearer than Agnes had ever heard it. Did that mean she was in better spirits? She certainly didn't look like it but the fact that she was roaming the hallways rather than locked up in her bedchamber must count for something.

Agnes let the uncomfortable quiet fall over them, unsure of how to proceed. At last, she asked, "Did you wish to speak with me, Your Grace?"

The dowager duchess nodded. The motion resembled the manner in which Johnathan did it as well, curt and simple, as if the answer to the question they were nodding to should have been obvious. It was such a subtle similarity and yet Agnes couldn't imagine how she hadn't noticed it sooner.

"Walk with me," the dowager duchess said, then set off without giving Agnes the chance to say anything to respond. She had no choice but to quickly take Her Grace's side.

The silence persisted. Agnes, not one to let uncomfortable silences bother her, couldn't help glancing anxiously at the dowager duchess. Finally, she let herself ask the question at the forefront of her mind. "What is on your mind, Your Grace?"

"My sons," she sighed softly.

That surprised Agnes. “I must imagine that is what it means to be a mother.”

“It is. My sons are always on my mind, even when I pretend as if they are not. I worry about them as if they are still children and in need of my guidance.”

“Sons and daughters are always in need of guidance,” Agnes said softly. “Whether they be ten, twenty, or thirty years old.”

The dowager duchess clasped her hands before her. They were strolling at such a painstakingly slow pace that Agnes felt like her joints were beginning to ache. She didn’t dare voice a complaint, however. It was evident that the dowager duchess sought her out for something important, though she couldn’t imagine why.

“Do you know what it is like to feel helpless, Miss Agnes?”

Agnes nodded. “In some ways, I do. As a lady, one cannot avoid such a feeling once or twice in their lifetimes, considering what a patriarchal society we have formed amongst ourselves.”

To Agnes’ surprise, the dowager duchess’ lips twitched. “I did not ask the question expecting a philosophical response. Though I suppose it is my fault for not making my intention clearer.”

“And what, Your Grace, is your intention? So that I may provide a more suitable response.”

“It is only a precursor to what I truly wish to say. There is something weighing on my heart and I chose you to unburden it on. I hope you will forgive me.”

She sounded genuinely apologetic. “There is no need to apologize, Your Grace. By all means, go ahead.

“My sons,” the older woman began again. “They are the only reason I exist, my purpose. But once, it was to serve my entire family, including my husband. Have you heard what happened to him?”

“Yes, Your Grace,” Agnes responded softly.

“The truth?” the dowager duchess probed.

Wordlessly, Agnes nodded.

A sad smile touched the dowager’s lips. “I thought as much. I have watched you with Johnathan so I assumed it was only a matter of time before he revealed the truth to you.”

“Does that upset you, Your Grace?”

“Not at all. The truth is a good thing. Hiding it will only do more harm than good.”

Agnes couldn’t say she agreed fully but she wasn’t about to voice it aloud. Thankfully, the dowager duchess wasn’t waiting for a response.

“It is why I must face my own truth. I have failed my sons just as my husband failed me. I am afraid that my inability to reconcile the man I knew with the man he became in his death has turned me into something of a recluse.” She paused, then added, “I’m certain there is a far better word to describe my ailment but I am too ashamed to use anything but that. A recluse who has abandoned my family because my mind is weak.”

“It is not your mind that is weak, Your Grace, but your heart that is filled with such overwhelming emotion that it may have felt crippling at times. I cannot blame you for it nor do I think anyone else does.”

Agnes glanced at the dowager duchess just in time to see her lips twitch into something that might have been a smile, but it was gone half a second later.

“Are you speaking of Johnathan?” the dowager asked. “Do you mean to tell me that you do not think he blames me for who I have become?”

“Is that not the reason you have sought me out, Your Grace?” Agnes asked. She was a little uncertain, not knowing how best to proceed. She’d had very limited interactions with the dowager duchess, though she’d spent much time discreetly observing her whenever the dowager duchess deigned to grace them with her presence. From the start of the conversation, she’d been trying to understand why Her Grace would want to come to her. A stranger, no less. Would it not be better to speak such words to family than an outsider?

Her sudden closeness to Johnathan was the only thing Agnes could think of. She imagined that the dowager duchess might be feeling regret for her reclusion as of late and hadn’t a clue how to approach her sons about it. Agnes couldn’t blame her.

To her surprise, the dowager duchess bobbed her head again. “You are quite astute.”

“Thank you, Your Grace. Father says it is one of my redeeming qualities.”

“Of which you have many, I am sure. You will make your husband a lucky man when it is time.”

Agnes frowned at that. Why did Her Grace say ‘your husband’ as if she was not referring to Christopher?

“But to answer your question, yes,” the dowager went on. “I cannot allow my mind to continuously slip away while life passes me by. My husband died that day and a part of me went with him. I owe it to Johnathan and Christopher to give them all of

whatever I have left. I owe them an apology for being absent since their father died. But I do not know how to approach it. Which brings me to the real reason I wished to speak with you. Perhaps you could provide me with guidance.”

“I cannot imagine what guidance I could provide, Your Grace, considering the fact that I have only known His Grace and Lord Christopher a short while.”

The dowager duchess was shaking her head before Agnes could finish speaking. “I watched you during the pall mall game. You have known them a short while, but you’ve already come to know them well. Especially Johnathan.”

Agnes stared ahead of her. She hoped the duchess wasn’t looking because she could feel her betraying body heating up at the slight suggestion in her tone. Her cheeks felt far too warm for comfort.

“So tell me, Miss Agnes,” Her Grace continued. “What should I say to him?”

Pity washed Agnes at the tinge of desperation in Her Grace’s voice. She could only imagine how difficult this must be for her. After all, Agnes had only been at Claymore Castle a short while, arriving as a stranger, and she could feel the dowager duchess’ absence every time they gathered together. She could only imagine how deeply Johnathan and Christopher felt it as their sons.

“Direct honesty may be the best course of action, Your Grace,” she answered softly. “I repeat that I have not known them well, but I am positive that your sons love and respect you now as they did before the death of the late duke. I’m sure they will be more than happy to welcome you.”

The dowager duchess heaved a great sigh that seemed to shake the walls. She paused in her maddeningly slow stroll, turning to face Agnes. To Agnes’ surprise, she reached out to take Agnes’ hand.

“Thank you, Miss Agnes.” The dowager’s eyes filled with tears, her grip light but firm. “You have given me the confidence to face my sons.”

Agnes placed a hand over hers. “I only wish I could do more.”

“I can tell that you mean that. Do not trouble yourself any longer with our family matters. It was rude of me to include you in the first place.”

“By all means, Your Grace, I do not mind. I have grown rather fond of your family.”

“Yes, I can tell.” Despite the tear strolling down her cheek, the dowager duchess smiled softly. “Johnathan is quite fortunate.”

Agnes reeled in surprise. “You mean, Christopher?”

“I know what I said.” The dowager duchess squeezed Agnes’ hand, then pulled away. “From what I have heard, you’ve had a rather long day. You should go on ahead. I do not wish to keep you for much longer.”

Agnes nodded slowly, not knowing what to say. She should deny the implication the dowager duchess was making. At least until it was the right time to tell everyone that she had no intentions of marrying Christopher. But her tongue failed her as her mind filled with the traitorous thought of her walking down the aisle of a church with a bouquet in her hand. A smile on her face. Surrounded by her friends and family while the gentleman waiting at the altar...

Johnathan’s face. Johnathan’s smile. Johnathan’s hand reaching out to take hers as they stood before a priest.

Johnathan’s lips on hers to claim her as his wife.

It felt as if her entire body went up in flames. Agnes couldn't bring herself to speak, her mind racing and yet utterly still, focused on one thing alone. The dowager duchess smiled knowingly as if she'd had every intention of turning Agnes into such a mess. She patted Agnes' hand again and then turned to leave.

Agnes numbly turned the other way, heading towards her chambers. All she could think was one thing. Johnathan's hand. Johnathan's touch. Johnathan's kiss.

By the time she made it to her bedchamber, she'd strengthened her resolve. She couldn't keep this all in, not any longer.

She had to tell him how she felt.

CHAPTER 23

“Agnes! What took you so long?”

Agnes sucked in a breath of fright and pressed herself against the doorframe to avoid the blond-haired lady charging towards her. Caroline seemed exceedingly frustrated, scowling at Agnes as if she had just done her some great wrong.

“Caroline, do not frighten me so,” Agnes admonished. She released the breath growing stale in her lungs and let herself relax. “Were you waiting on the other end of the door to accost me?”

“Not at first, no. But when I realized how long it was taking you to arrive at your chambers, I considered it. What took you so long?”

Agnes closed the door behind her, suddenly so tired that she couldn’t imagine staying on her feet a moment longer. She lumbered towards her bed, sitting on the edge even though the only thing she wanted to do was crawl under the sheets.

“I met Her Grace in the hallway,” Agnes informed her friend.

The scowl on Caroline’s face smoothed away as her brows lifted in surprise. “And you conversed with her?”

“She sought me out, in truth,” Agnes told her. Now that it was over, it felt like it had all been a dream. She could hardly remember the dowager duchess speaking more than a few words at time before and she’d had an entire intense conversation with her.

Her response only served to deepen Caroline's confusion. "For what reason would she do that?"

Agnes hesitated. She faked a small yawn to stall for time as she decided whether it would be a good idea telling Caroline what her and the dowager duchess had spoken about. She never kept a secret from Caroline. But at the same time, it felt like a betrayal of the dowager duchess' trust to reveal what she must have told Agnes in confidence.

"She was a little lonely," Agnes lied casually. "It is nothing of serious concern, I assure you."

Caroline didn't look convinced. Before she could question Agnes further, Agnes quickly changed the topic.

"Why were you waiting for me, Caroline? Was it to speak about what you had alluded to earlier?"

"Yes." Caroline sat next to Agnes on the bed, crossing her arms as she faced her. The serious look on her face was both adorable and concerning. "What is going on, Agnes?"

"I'm afraid I do not know what you mean."

"I'm sure that you do."

Agnes couldn't help laughing at that. "I assure you that I do not, and I am far too tired right now to attempt to figure it out. Pray tell, what do you speak of this time?"

A frustrated look passed across Caroline's face. She seemed to gather herself, then fixed Agnes with another determined look.

“Who do you think I snuck out to see that night, Agnes?”

Agnes frowned. “Who else could it be but Christopher?”

Without warning, Caroline collapsed back on the bed. She put her hands over her face, sighing dramatically. “Oh, heavens, I knew it!”

“Knew what?” Agnes asked in alarm. “Caroline, what are you going on about? Is it not obvious that your beloved is the duke’s brother?”

“No, Agnes, it is not obvious at all because it is simply not true!”

Caroline shot to her feet and began pacing back and forth, a clear sign that she was agitated. Agnes stared at her in shock.

“What do you mean it is not true?” Agnes repeated. “How couldn’t it be true? I was so certain...”

“Believe it or not, Agnes, you are not always right. I cannot imagine what could have possessed you to think that I was in love with Lord Christopher.”

“Well, it could not be the duke,” Agnes protested, her mind running at a rapid pace. “If it were, you would have no reason to sneak all the way to the woods. I could not imagine that it could be Paul because...” Agnes’ eyes widened in horror. “Is it Paul?”

“Heavens, no!”

“Then the only other option had to be Christopher!”

Caroline shook her head, letting out a small, delirious laugh. “Goodness, Agnes, you

must have put a great deal of thought into this?—”

“I have.”

“—but Paul is a brother to me and far too young for me to see him romantically. And while I do enjoy Lord Christopher’s company, I reserve no affection for him.”

“Then who could it be, Caroline?” Agnes asked desperately. “Tell me before I am forced to make more assumptions.”

She laughed again, this time sounding a little more like herself. “He does not reside in the castle, but in the village, which is why we must meet in the woods.”

Agnes could tell that Caroline was stalling. Perhaps had this been a different matter, she would have entertained her, but she had no patience for it now.

“Caroline, who is he?”

Caroline began wringing her fingers together, pacing back and forth. “His name is George. I met him at my uncle’s estate.”

“How?” Agnes probed, fearing that she already knew the answer.

“He works there,” Caroline answered. “He is a stable boy and I have known him since I was ten-and-three and he ten-and-four. It began as a friendship but as time went on, it developed into more.” Caroline finally stopped her pacing to look at Agnes, eyes swimming with love. “He treats me like a princess, Agnes. Despite the fact that he is a commoner, he provides me with all the love and care I require. I cannot imagine my life without him.”

For the first time in her life, Agnes didn’t know what to say. That was the last thing

she'd expected to hear.

But why was she? Caroline was the most kind-hearted, loving person she knew. She was not the kind of lady to pay mind to silly things like titles and status. And this was the kind of love that had followed her to the countryside, that stayed by her side despite the fact that she was here to marry someone else. Agnes could see the adoration in Caroline's eyes. There was no hiding such affection.

"Are you terribly disappointed?" Caroline asked as she resumed her anxious pacing. "I know this is not what you expected. But though he is not a titled man, Agnes, I promise you that he treats me very kindly."

"Caroline, I..." She was still at a loss for words.

That was clearly sending Caroline's anxiety through the ceiling. "I know that it was a risk having him follow me here but he insisted and well...I could not fathom going through this entire ordeal without his presence. It is killing us both that I must do this but to be able to see him at nights is the only thing that brings me peace during the day. I hope you can understand."

Agnes opened her mouth to respond but nothing came out. At last, Caroline stopped her pacing to face her fully.

"Agnes, please say something!"

She shot to her feet, clasping both of Caroline's hands and pulling her into a sudden embrace. "I have never felt prouder of you," she murmured.

"Proud?" Caroline repeated. Her arms hesitantly wrapped around Agnes. "You are proud and not disappointed?"

“I would never feel disappointed in you, Caroline. I do not even think that is an emotion you are capable of making me feel.” Agnes pulled away, smiling. “To know that you are so devoted to the one you love, right to what you believe may be the end, is nothing short of inspirational. I am proud of you, Caroline. And I am so, so ecstatic that you have found someone to love you the way you deserve to be loved.”

With a sudden quickness, Caroline’s eyes were filled with tears and on the verge of overflowing. “Oh, Agnes, you don’t know how happy I am to hear you say that.”

“Well...I might have lied. I am a tad disappointed in you.”

Caroline’s face fell. “Why?” she whispered.

Agnes couldn’t help her cheeky grin. “I’m disappointed that you thought it fit to wait so long to tell me about it. Haven’t I been your dearest friend for as long as we can both remember? And you have been keeping this secret from me all along?”

Caroline blurted out a laugh amidst her crying. “Agnes, I knew the scandal it would cause. And because of it, I was afraid you would try to talk me out of it. I could not take the risk.”

“I know better than to do such a thing. But perhaps you are right. It will cause quite the scandal, even more so now that you are out in society and expected to marry the duke by the end of the season.”

“Oh, what am I to do?”

Agnes held Caroline by the shoulders, leading her back onto the bed. “What would you like to do, Caroline? Will you truly go ahead with the wedding as planned?”

“I have no choice,” Caroline sobbed. The tears now rolled down her flushed cheeks

without hindrance. “My uncle will allow no less. He has been working fervently to have me married off to any gentleman he believes may strengthen his social standing, all of which have been three times my age! I have managed to make myself undesirable to them thus far but he continued his pursuit to have me married up until he met the duke.”

She wiped her tears but they were quickly replaced. Agnes didn’t dare let go of her. She was a little afraid that Caroline would fall apart entirely if she did.

“I resigned myself to accepting the duke’s proposal since he was much closer to me in age. And when I met him, I found that he was rather kind. I thought it would be the best and, perhaps my only, option.”

“It is not your only option,” Agnes assured softly. “Your George followed you all the way here to show you that it was not.”

A rueful smile touched Caroline’s lips. “I was much resolved in my decision until he arrived. Now I do not know what to do. My uncle will stop at nothing to have me marry the duke when the only name I wish to take is George’s.”

“Are you truly willing to take his name?” Agnes asked carefully.

Caroline nodded without a moment of hesitation. “I would willingly give up everything I have for a lifetime with George.”

That was all Agnes needed to hear. “Then that is what must happen.”

Caroline’s tear-filled eyes widened. “Agnes...”

“It is enough for me that you love him, Caroline. So I shall endeavor to do anything in my power to make you happy.”

“But what can you do? Since my parents' death, my uncle controls all that I do. I cannot defy him.”

Agnes understood that perfectly. Lord and Lady Reeds were the only obstacles standing between Caroline and her happiness, perhaps the biggest difficulties Agnes would ever have to face. She doubted Lord Reeds would be open to considering anything other than a marriage between Caroline and the duke. As Caroline said, he was hungry for a rise in his social status.

She wondered how things were going between Johnathan and the earl at this very moment. Lord Reeds had certainly looked frustrated when they'd returned to the manor and she could only imagine how much of that was caused by Agnes' meddling.

Agnes didn't know the answer right now but that wasn't the right thing to say now. Caroline needed hope for the future, not a dismal feeling that her fate was sealed.

“We will find a way,” Agnes assured her, squeezing her hand. She wiped away the tears still streaming down Caroline's face. “I assure you.”

Caroline smiled hopefully. Before she could say anything in response, there was a knock on the door.

Agnes couldn't imagine who that could be. She stood, hesitant to release Caroline. In such a fragile state, she was afraid Caroline would fall apart if left alone for too long. She was half tempted to bring Caroline to the door with her.

As if Caroline knew what was going through Agnes' mind, she wiped her face and pulled her shoulders back as she put on a brave smile. “You should see who that is.”

Agnes nodded, unable to fight the curiosity any longer. She left Caroline on the bed,

making her way to the door. Before she could open it, she noticed a slip of white paper right by the threshold.

Agnes picked it up with a frown, pausing to read.

Meet me by the hedge labyrinth at the back of the gardens. - J

“J?”

Agnes jumped at Caroline’s voice over her shoulder. She hadn't heard her approach.

“J?” Caroline repeated. “As in Johnathan Harken? Is that note from the duke?”

Agnes was afraid to answer. To give herself time to think, she turned to open the door even though she was fairly certain that no one would be on the other end. Sure enough, the hallway was empty.

Agnes closed the door and turned to face her friend’s look of question. “Yes, it is from the duke,” Agnes answered at last.

“Oh. I see.”

“You see? What do you see exactly?”

Caroline smiled cheekily. “I have noticed how close you have grown to His Grace. I’m sure everyone has noticed it, in fact.”

“It is not that we have grown close,” Agnes protested. She was having a hard time meeting Caroline’s eyes. “I simply asked for his help in pairing you with Christopher, when I believed that you two were in love, and in order to do so, we were often in each other’s company, that’s all.”

“Why do I find it difficult to believe that that’s all?” Caroline asked with an arched brow.

“I’m sure the reason he wishes to see me has something to do with your dilemma.”

“I’m sure.”

“You do not sound as if you believe me.”

“That is because I do not,” Caroline confessed with a smile. “At least, not completely. You have not looked at me once since you received your note.”

Agnes made it a point to look Caroline directly in the eye. “It is nothing. Now, if you will excuse me, I shall see about informing the duke that you are not, in fact, in love with his brother and that we must change our course of action.”

“Perhaps you could confess your affection for him while you are there,” Caroline sang happily.

Thankfully, Agnes was already halfway out the door, saving her from having to respond.

CHAPTER 24

At the rate Johnathan was going, he was likely to pace a hole into the ground. He couldn't help himself, however. The lingering effects of his agitation and fury were begging for a release and he hadn't a clue how best to let it all out.

The earl's words echoed over and over again in his mind. A part of Johnathan wanted to seek him out and make him regret ever blackmailing him. The mere attempt was a mark on Johnathan's honor. On his manhood! He'd invited the earl into his home and this was the treatment he received?

Yes, he had promised to marry his niece. And yes, he supposed Lord Reeds had every right to be upset that Johnathan was going back on that promise. But insulting his brother and threatening their lives was not to be tolerated. Johnathan only wished that he had the ammunition to fight back.

"John?"

Agnes' soft voice tore through the fury clouding his mind. He whirled to face her, noticing that she was lingering just a few feet away under an arched hedge.

The look on his face must have alarmed her because she quickly came to his side. "What happened?" she asked worriedly.

Johnathan couldn't respond. He could do nothing but stare at her. He flexed his hands at his side in an attempt to fight the urge to pull her into his arms and bury his face into her hair.

“Did something happen?” she asked him. “You look as if you wish to send your fist flying into the nearest thing.” She paused, her eyes twinging with humor. “Perhaps I should not be standing so close to you.”

“I would never hurt you,” Johnathan rasped with far more intensity than was required. The humor fled from her eyes, replaced with something eerily familiar to what he felt at that moment.

For a moment, they simply stared at each other. Johnathan knew the risk they were taking by being alone during the day like this. He could only hope that she’d been careful in coming. A scandal was the very last thing he needed on his hands right now.

At the same time, he hadn’t realized how much he wanted her to be here until she’d arrived. Her presence alone had a manner of calming him, distracting him. He wasn’t thinking about the earl’s insolence so much as he was considering pulling her into his arms and finally letting their lips meet.

“There must have been a reason you called me out here,” Agnes said at last, breaking the tension that had steadily crawled over them. “And I can tell that something happened.”

Johnathan nodded. He took a step back to give his mind a chance to think clearly. It didn’t work half as well as he’d hoped.

“I spoke with Lord Reeds and told him that I intend to end my courtship with Miss Caroline.”

“Already?” she gasped.

“I was given little choice. Granted, it was my intention to do so sooner rather than

later, but Lord Reeds has been growing impatient so I thought it would be best to tell him the truth.”

“How did he take it?”

Johnathan grimaced. Agnes mimicked the expression.

“That badly?” she prodded.

Johnathan nodded. “He has threatened me, in fact. He grew so upset that I even dared to suggest breaking our arrangement that he said he would reveal to the ton the truth of my father’s death. What little honor I have left will vanish.”

The frustration was sudden, surging through his body with such force that he did not trust himself to stand next to Agnes. He didn’t think he would hurt her but he certainly didn’t want to frighten her when the feeling grew out of control.

So he stalked away, raking his fingers through his hair like he had been doing ever since he left his office. Agnes was right. He wanted to punch something, but doubted the hedge walls surrounding them would give him any satisfaction.

“So he knows then,” Agnes said, sounding as if she was choosing her words carefully. “About your father’s death?”

“Sadly, he does.”

“But...how?”

Johnathan wanted to avoid her eyes. He knew the truth was coming and was afraid of the anger or betrayal—or worse, both—he would see in Agnes’ eyes. But he respected her too much to act like a coward, no matter how much he wanted to.

“My father had a dark secret that was only revealed to us upon his death,” Johnathan began. “He had an issue with gambling. Apparently, he accrued such massive debts that he stood no hope of paying them off in his lifetime. I do not know if it was his cowardice, or his fear of being found out, or his shame that led to his decision to take his own life. I have long since given up on trying to understand what his motivations were because the only legacy I was left with were debts that did nothing but deplete our funds.”

He couldn't look at her anymore. She didn't take her eyes off him for a second and being under her scrutiny made him feel as if he was being flayed alive. He looked away, staring at the hedge wall to his left as his mind sunk further into the past.

“We are penniless, barely able to keep the roof over our heads. Mother disappeared into herself and Christopher coped by drinking himself into a stupor night after night. My only option was to work tirelessly to provide for my family and do whatever I could to restore the legacy of our dukedom. All the while keeping the truth away from the ton .”

“So how did Lord Reeds find out?” Agnes asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

“That I do not know,” Johnathan confessed and was unable to quell the deep-seated shame he felt at that fact. “He was the one who approached me, dangling Miss Caroline's hefty dowry before me as bait to accept an engagement between the two of us. I agreed with very little hesitation, not knowing that he was aware of the extent of my situation. After that, I thought to take advantage of my brother's unmarried state and secure a second dowry. One may be enough to release us from the debts but the other could help restore us to our former glory.”

Agnes was standing incredibly still, her expression impassive. Johnathan felt something twist inside him at the sight. Fear, he realized. Fear that she would hate him for what he was about to say next but knowing it was too late to stop it.

“My marriage to Miss Caroline and Christopher’s marriage to you was only meant to be a means to an end. It bothered me that I was taking advantage of you and Miss Caroline but I thought myself out of options. Forgive me, Agnes. I regret ever having used deceit in the first place.”

Johnathan expected her to get upset, to scold him and stalk away in anger. But she only shook her head.

“I cannot blame you for a decision made out of desperation,” she said softly. “People marry for varying reasons all the time. Saving their family from destitution is amongst the most honorable of them all.”

Johnathan could not believe what he was hearing. “You do not resent me for what I’ve done?”

“What you almost did,” she corrected with a soft smile. “And no, I do not. Honestly, I am a little offended that you thought I would. I was well aware that I had not secured a love match and I am certain Caroline did as well. There was no harm done.”

Johnathan had to take another step back because all he wanted to do was pull her into his arms and kiss her senseless. God, the urge was getting out of hand at this point.

“Lord Reeds will stop at nothing to ensure that Miss Caroline and I are married,” Johnathan went on. “All the work I have done over the years to rebuild my people’s confidence in the dukedom will be destroyed if word was to get out. And he knows that I need Miss Caroline’s dowry. He knows that it is my only key to saving my family.”

“Then marry me.”

Johnathan reeled in shock, eyes growing wide. “What?”

Agnes boldly met his eyes even though her cheeks turned a bright pink. “The only thing you require is a dowry, is it not? You have no attachment to Caroline. If we were to get married, Lord Reeds will have nothing to hold over you.”

“His threat still holds,” he murmured rather dumbly.

“It will not have much credit if you have the wealth to show for it,” she assured. “And my father is well-connected. He will be able to counter any rumors Lord Reeds might attempt to make.” This time, it seemed like she was having a hard time meeting his eyes. “Though I suppose it is a big decision agreeing to marry someone. If you do not wish to do it, then I understand. We could think of a better solution.”

Agnes began turning away. Johnathan moved without thinking. In two large steps, he was upon her, grabbing her by the wrist. She gasped as she whirled back to face him, her head tilted slightly as she met his gaze with wide eyes.

“John...”

“Why do you offer yourself?” he asked, searching her eyes. He was so close he could feel her breath on his skin. So close he could feel the quick rise and fall of her bosom, lightly kissing his chest. It was all he could do to keep his eyes on her face. He needed to know her response.

“I...I thought that...”

“If you are suggesting that we marry only as a solution for my problems, Agnes, then I would rather die starving than see you reduced to that.” The intensity of his words had her eyes widening but Johnathan couldn’t help it. “Now that I have come to know you, Agnes, I respect you far too much to let yourself do such a thing. Now that I have come to care for you.”

He didn't think she was breathing. Or perhaps that was him? The air did seem incredibly still.

"But if there is something else that motivates you," he continued in a softer tone. "Something that may suggest your heart's true intention, then I would love nothing more than your hand in marriage."

"Johnathan..."

"Tell me, Agnes," he whispered to her, desperation lacing his words. He pressed her hand against his chest and her eyes widened at the rapid pace of its beating. "Tell me that I am not the only one who feels like this. Tell me that I am not alone in my torture."

"Johnathan, I..." She trailed off, eyes falling to his lips. The last thread of control he'd been valiantly holding on to snapped.

Johnathan did the same, heat curling through his body when she licked her lips. He doubted she knew how tempting she was, how that single act turned him into a starving man who had just witnessed food being set before him. His entire body shook as he forced himself to be slow, gentle. He left the question in the air as he lowered his lips to hers, waiting for her to make the wise decision and push him away.

She must have been as desperate as he was because she reached up on her toes to meet him.

Johnathan could not hold back any longer. Days of dreaming of this very moment had not prepared him for how perfect it was. Her lips molded effortlessly against his, the flush of her body against his chest akin to a key sliding into a lock. It was as if they were made for each other, made for this moment exactly.

He placed a hand on the side of her face, letting it trail its way up to her hair. Johnathan felt the feather-like touches of her fingers against his back as if she was uncertain of where to put them. But her lips moved against his as if she'd been born to do this, as if she needed it as much as he did.

It took every bit of his willpower to pull away. Agnes was left gasping, staring up at him with clouded eyes.

“Does this mean you accept?” she whispered.

Johnathan shook his head. He still held her and was not very eager to let go of her for now. “I shan’t accept your proposal, Agnes.”

Her brows dipped. “But I thought?—”

“It feels like a mark upon my honor as a gentleman. It is I who should be asking you if you wish to become my wife.”

Agnes’ confusion cleared as her face lit with a bright smile. “What shall you do if I say no?”

Johnathan didn’t think twice about kissing her again. When he pulled away this time, she laughed in surprise. “How about now?” he asked.

Her laughter was like music to his ears. “It would be an honor, Your Grace.”

He wanted to kiss her again so he did. Long and slow, despite how improper it was for them to do so. If the gardener was to happen upon them...

It wouldn’t matter now. Not now that they were to be married. Not now that he knew she shared his feelings and was willing to hold his hand to the very end. They’d

begun as partners and would end as partners in every sense of the word. Right now, that was all that mattered to him.

CHAPTER 25

Agnes didn't know how she made it back to the manor. Her legs remained unsteady and shaky as she headed out of the hedge maze. Much to Johnathan's glee, of course, because it gave him a reason to hold her closer. It was all under the guise of helping her, but Agnes knew better. And she couldn't be more thrilled.

By the time they made it to the manor, the last wisps of sunset were drifting away, casting a shadow across the estate. It only meant that they had to be more discreet so Agnes took the lead, hurrying into the manor and towards her chambers before they could be discovered. But not before sneaking a bold kiss on Johnathan's lips and feeling that poignant sense of satisfaction at the surprise in his eyes.

Her heart raced as she hurried to her chambers. The butterflies still swarming her stomach did not seem intent on giving her much relief any time soon and she could not fight the smile stretching across her face no matter how hard she tried. Bridget came to a halt in front of her door, her hand posed over the door knob. Should she tell Caroline about this?

There was nothing she wanted more than to divulge all the salacious details of what had happened...but perhaps she shouldn't. She wanted to savor the moment on her own before sharing it with anyone else.

"You look awfully happy."

Bridget's blood ran cold. The shrill, snide voice was enough to give the heartiest warriors nightmares, she reckoned. But as she turned to the speaker, she wondered if

the sneer on the countess' face would do far more damage to one's peace of mind.

Thankfully, she was made of stuff strong enough to face whatever Lady Reeds was about to throw at her with her back held straight.

"Are you lost, my lady?" Agnes asked in a tightly polite tone. "I do not think your chamber is down this hallway."

"Not that it is any of your business but I am here to see my niece." Lady Reeds approached slowly, clasping her hands before her. Agnes thought herself immune to the judgmental once-over Lady Reeds was known for giving, but this particular one irritated her instantly.

"Then I do not know why you have approached me since I am, obviously, not your niece."

Lady Reeds' eyes narrowed. "You should mind that tongue of yours, girl. It has stood in your way in securing a husband for you many times before, so don't think it won't do the same thing this time."

Agnes thought of the way James had kissed her in the hedge maze just a few minutes before and could not help the sly smile that stretched across her face. "I'm certain that whomever I marry will enjoy this smart mouth of mine."

"I can never understand why Caroline enjoys your friendship. The first thing I intend to do when she is married to the duke is ensure that she severs all ties with you."

"The first thing you will do?" Agnes echoed, raising her brows. "And why do you think you will have any say in what she does after marriage?"

The side of Lady Reeds' upper lip curled disdainfully. "Because I am her

guardian?—”

“Lord Reeds is her guardian.”

“—and she will be nothing without my guidance.”

“I assure you, Caroline will be far better off without your guidance.”

“Why, you?—!”

Agnes took a sharp step backwards, missing the hand that had been flying towards her face. Icy anger turned her blood cold as she leveled Lady Reeds with an even look.

“You are not as intelligent or as astute as you believe you are, my lady,” Agnes said as calmly as she could manage. The stunned, angered eyes of the countess was enough to spur her on. “You think us fools and naive as you and your husband plots to damage the happiness of your niece. You two are her closest living relatives and yet she must turn to those who are not blood to find any warmth. Do you not understand how easily this will turn against you in the future?”

Lady Reeds looked as if she was crossed between attempting to slap her again or dissect her words. “What are you going on about?”

Agnes smiled wanly. “You will know soon enough.”

“Insolent girl! You will learn to watch your tongue!”

“Make another attempt to slap me and I promise that you will regret it.”

The quiet threat was enough to frighten the countess, which was exactly what Agnes

had been hoping for. She watched with acute satisfaction as Lady Reeds lowered her fist to her side, then turned with a sniff and stalked off. She watched her go with her own anger still chilling her to her bones.

Beside her, on the other side of the hallway, Agnes heard a door open. She turned to see Caroline standing there, tears in her eyes.

“Caroline,” Agnes said in surprise. “Did you hear any of that?”

She didn’t answer, but the tears gave the answer away easily enough. Agnes opened her mouth to apologize. She always tried to hold back much of her venom so as not to upset Caroline, the pacifist that she was, but before she could get the words out, Caroline rushed forward and wrapped her arms around her.

“You are the dearest person in the world to me,” Caroline pushed out between sobs, her arms wound so tightly around Agnes that Agnes had to catch her breath.

“As you are to me.” Agnes returned the embrace with almost as much strength. “Though any more time like this and I may begin to question you love for me, since you seem determined to stop my breath.”

“Oh, forgive me!” Caroline pulled away quickly. “And I did not mean to eavesdrop. I thought I heard your footsteps and I was planning on coming to ask you about your meeting with the duke when I heard my aunt’s voice and...well, I suppose it will come as no surprise that I did not want to leave my room.”

“Understandable.” Agnes patted Caroline’s hand. “But now that it’s over, you may go back inside. Dinner will be served soon, I’m sure, and I would hate for us to be late.”

“Wait!” Caroline seized Agnes’ hand before she could make her escape. “Won’t you tell me what happened?”

“What happened?” Agnes echoed. “What happened about what?”

“You’re being vague,” Caroline accused, pouting.

“I am. Because I could not possibly tell you.” At the way Caroline’s face fell, Agnes quickly added, “At least not without being behind closed doors.”

She caught Caroline’s hand and dragged her into the room. As soon as the door was closed behind them, she said, “He kissed me.”

“Agnes!”

The squeal was enough to return the excitement that had been doused by the arrival of the countess. “And we intend to be married.”

“Oh! Oh goodness, that’s...wonderful!”

Her sudden change in demeanor surprised Agnes. And alarmed her. “What is it?”

“I’m happy for you,” Caroline tried to assure her. It failed when her smile slipped away as quickly as it came. “It is quite a lovely match, to be certain. And I’m sure you will receive the full support of your parents. Not to mention the fact that it will be viewed favorably by everyone you know.”

Caroline’s tears were back with a quick force, streaming down her face as she held back a sob. Agnes instantly wrapped her in her arms.

“No, I shouldn’t be doing this,” Caroline murmured, her face buried in Agnes’ shoulder. “I am truly happy for you, Agnes.”

“And I do not doubt it for a moment, Caroline. I know you would sooner give up

your own happiness if it means that I will have a chance at it. Which is exactly how I feel about you. I shan't allow your story to end in anything else but happiness."

"Uncle will never?—"

"I do not care what your uncle thinks. And as you can see, I do not care what your aunt thinks either. What matter is you. What you want. The person you are dreaming of. And whether he is a pauper or prince is inconsequential if he makes you happy."

Caroline pulled away, wiping her tears. She forced a smile onto her face. "I feel like a fool crying about this. Even more so of a fool for not being able to stand up for myself."

"Come now, Caroline. Every princess has a white knight who will do anything to protect her. Consider me your knight."

"And I suppose I should consider the duke yours. Certainly not a bad option if I do say so myself."

Agnes couldn't help the heat that rushed to her cheeks. "Yes, well, I do not know when that happened, though I am certainly happy that it did."

"As am I. You deserve to be happy more than anyone else I know." Caroline squeezed her hand. "I shall get dressed for dinner. And perhaps don what little armor I have. I have a feeling it will be a rather strained affair this evening."

"Especially if Lady Reeds has anything to say about it, I'm sure," Agnes agreed.

Caroline flashed her another smile, this one touching her eyes, before she turned to leave. As soon as she was gone, Agnes made her way over to the bed and flopped over on top, a grin spreading across her face. She was so deliriously happy that she

couldn't think straight. Yes, there were far many other things to take care of, Lord and Lady Reeds being at the top of that list. But she couldn't allow herself to think about them right now. Her thoughts constantly strayed back to the handsome duke and the way he claimed her lips as if he'd been dying to do so for as long as he could remember. The yearning she felt trembling in his bones ricocheted in tune with hers. She loved him. And he loved her. Together, she knew they would be an unstoppable force.

Agnes shot upright in bed, gasping. She'd forgotten to tell him the one thing he didn't know.

Being an unstoppable force required him to know about Caroline's peasant lover, after all.

Dinner was a strained affair but Johnathan truly didn't mind. Seeing Lord Reeds did instill some of his previous frustration but Agnes' overwhelming comforting presence soothed much of that. He was able to ignore the earl's scathing looks throughout the entirety of dinner, focusing instead on his bright and hopeful future. With Agnes. Once he had her in his life, he had nothing to fear.

Suffice it to say, there was no retirement to the drawing room once dinner drew to a close. Lord and Lady Reeds claimed tiredness the moment the dessert course was cleared. Lord and Lady Sutton read the room and decide to retire as well. Miss Caroline, who had remained quiet throughout the entirety of the dinner, finally broke her silence to murmur 'goodnight' before trailing after the others.

Johnathan's eyes wandered to Agnes, as it always done. A smile crept across his face when he saw that she was already looking his way.

"I believe it is farewell for tonight, Your Grace," she said, paying her brother and Christopher no mind.

Johnathan did the same. He only had eyes for her. “Yes, I believe that is right. Goodnight, Miss Agnes.”

“Goodnight, Your Grace.”

She stood, eyes glowing. Then she looked over at Paul who was watching the exchange with a look of confusion. “Brother, walk with me to my chamber, won’t you?”

“Can’t you make the trip by yourself?”

Agnes gave him a stern look. “I shan’t ask again.”

Paul groaned loudly and dragged himself to a stand. “Goodnight, Your Grace, my lord.”

With obvious reluctance, he offered his arm to his sister who took it with the satisfaction that could only be afforded to that of an older sibling. Johnathan watched the pair leave with a pang of envy. He would have loved to be the one on Agnes’ arm, just so that he may bask in her presence a while longer.

“How odd.”

“Hm?” Johnathan didn’t look away from the door at Christopher’s comment. “What’s odd?”

“Miss Agnes hardly paid me any mind as she left. As if she only had eyes for you.”

“Well, I am the host.”

“And I am her betrothed.”

Johnathan opened his mouth to respond, then closed it just as quickly. He'd forgotten about that fact, in truth.

Thankfully, Christopher didn't look very put out. In fact, he seemed more curious than anything else.

"Is there something you would like to tell me, brother?"

Johnathan swiveled in his chair to face him. He waved a hand over his shoulder, silently dismissing the footmen still hovering in the corner of the dining room. Once they were alone, Johnathan said, "I believe that is a question I should have directed at you a long time ago."

"Me?" Christopher's brows dipped. "Do you think I have something to hide?"

"I know you have something to hide. And I think that it is time you confess, before it is too late."

Christopher just stared blankly at him, blinking a few times.

Johnathan sighed impatiently. "You and I both know you do not want to be married to Miss Agnes."

"She is a nice enough lady. Quite attractive as well. I admit I had my doubts before meeting her, as you should be well aware, but after spending some time in her presence, I do not think I will be unhappy in our marriage."

"You do not? Even though your heart belongs to another?"

Christopher's frown deepened. "What in God's name are you going on about?"

“I speak of Miss Caroline, Christopher.”

To Johnathan’s surprise, Christopher’s face didn’t light with understanding. If anything, he seemed more confused. “You think my heart belongs to Miss Caroline? Whatever would have given you that idea?”

“You mean to tell me that you are not in love with Miss Caroline?”

“Love?” Christopher exclaimed. “Johnathan, I assure you that while I do find Miss Caroline to be a lovely lady, I have never had a single significant moment with her, let alone to be in love! Where did you get such an idea?”

Now it was Johnathan’s turn to be confused. He’d been so sure. Agnes had been so sure. All this time, they’d both been wrong about everything?

“Now that I think about it,” Christopher went on. “I did find it rather odd that you were always spending so much time with Miss Agnes. I was beginning to think that you were growing to fancy her but now I wonder if it was only to push me towards Miss Caroline.”

“It was,” Johnathan confessed. “Only because we thought that was what the two of you would have wanted.”

“Johnathan, you could not have been more wrong. I am not in love with Miss Caroline. I am not in love with anyone.”

Johnathan sighed, raking his hands through his hair. Surely they hadn’t been wrong about everything? If Christopher wasn’t the one Miss Caroline was in love with, then who was?

“Now tell me, brother,” Christopher went on, eyes gleaming with interest. “What is

going on between you and Miss Agnes? And do not pretend as if it is nothing because I can tell that is not the case.”

For a moment, Johnathan considered lying to him. It felt like something that should be kept a secret. But why? He was desperately in love with Agnes. If he could crawl atop his manor and shout it from the rafters, he would. Telling his brother in confidence should not matter.

“I am in love with her,” Johnathan confessed. He watched Christopher’s face fall and suddenly felt the need to explain himself. “It wasn’t something I had anticipated, nor do I think she expected the same to happen. Though I suppose after spending so much time conspiring with each other, it was only bound to occur. There is much time a gentleman may spend in the company of a lady like Agnes without falling hopelessly in love with her. But I assure you, it was not my intention to steal your betrothed away.”

“You needn’t assure me of anything, brother,” Christopher quickly said. “As I said before, I was not very keen on getting married in the first place, as lovely a lady Miss Agnes is. If this means that I will be free to enjoy my bachelor lifestyle a while longer, then you have my gratitude.”

Johnathan narrowed his eyes at his younger brother, even as a playful smirk touched his lips. “I have a good mind to arrange another marriage for you.”

“Don’t even think about it. You should pay keener attention to your own happiness. Heaven knows you deserve it more than anyone else.” Christopher reached over to pat Johnathan on the shoulder. “I’m happy for you, brother.”

A warm sensation spread through Johnathan’s chest. He took in the genuine happiness in his brother’s eyes, letting it melt away the icy anxiousness he’d been holding on to without knowing.

“Thank you, brother.”

“Now, if you will excuse me,” Christopher announced as he stood. “I shall make my way to the parlor to enjoy a celebratory drink in both our honors. For you, who has found love. And for me, who has regained his freedom.”

Johnathan chuckled. “Shall I join you then?”

“It would be an honor,” Christopher said with a grin.

As they made their way to the door, Johnathan felt inclined to say, “It may be wise to keep our knowledge of this a secret until I have gotten the chance to sort everything out.”

“Not to worry, brother. I leave it in your capable hands.”

They made their way to the parlor to enjoy a few bottles of Johnathan’s finest brandy, bottles that had belonged to their father far before his death. The memory attached to the bottles, however, did not mar his happiness. In spite of it all, Johnathan could laugh and drink and jest with his brother as if he hadn’t a care in the world. As if he did not have to deal with Lord Reeds demands and secure an approval from Lord Sutton. As if he still did not know who this mysterious man who had stolen Miss Caroline’s heart was.

Tonight, he did not care.

CHAPTER 26

The last thing Agnes wanted to do was sit in the same room as the Countess of Reeds and pretend to be cordial. Especially not after their last encounter. But her mother had insisted that they needed the help of all the ladies—especially the ladies whose honor the ball would be in—for the planning. Considering the fact that the engagement ball was set to happen in three days, Agnes supposed it would be far easier for everyone if she lent her help.

She tried and failed to ignore Lady Reeds scathing glares. She sipped her tea, not missing the way Caroline shifted uncomfortably next to her. No doubt she also noticed her aunt's glares. Agnes would have been content to ignore it or face it how she wished, but she knew she had to temper her reaction so as not to upset her friend.

“What do you think, girls?” Mary asked, holding up to two flowers in either hand. “Lilies or peonies?”

“Peonies,” Agnes and Caroline said at the same time.

“Lilies,” Lady Reeds said despite the fact that no one had been addressing her.

Agnes set her tea down, not sparing the countess a glance because she knew the look she was bound to give her would be far from ladylike. “So peonies it is. Let us move on, shall we?”

“That is a dull choice,” Lady Reeds protested with a sniff. “Perhaps you two should leave the preparations to us, who already know what we are doing.”

“Now, Lady Reeds,” Mary began but Agnes beat her to it.

“Is it not important for us to learn such things, especially since one of us will be a duchess in due time?”

“You’re right,” Lady Reeds agreed, though the sneer on her face did not seem very encouraging in the slightest. “You may leave then, Miss Agnes. Caroline will have to learn such skills for her role as duchess.”

“It is true that Caroline could stand to learn from this,” Agnes said in a calm tone of voice. “So peonies it is. I’m happy we are in agreement.”

“Your insolence knows no bounds, does it?” Lady Reeds hissed.

“Not, it seems, when I am simply returning it in kind.”

“Do you mean to say that I am the one being rude to you ? You do not know how to respect your elders!”

“I respect my mother and the dowager duchess a great deal,” Agnes stated simply. She looked at her mother, not missing the mixture of resignation and amusement shining in her eyes.

Lady Reeds shot to her feet. She curled her hands into fists at her sides, shaking in her anger. To Agnes’ surprise, the next voice she heard was not the shrill hiss of the countess but Caroline’s soft yet firm one.

“Aunt, please, we have much to do,” she said. “We have decided on peonies and there is no need to go back and forth about it.”

Silence met her words. Stunned silence. Even the dowager duchess, who had been

quietly sipping her tea on the other end of the drawing room, looked over at Caroline.

Caroline flushed now that she was the subject of everyone's attention. She tried busying herself with her tea with shaky hands, avoiding everyone's eyes.

Agnes felt pride stretch through her body. Caroline had never stood up to her aunt before. Even though it wasn't with any force, the mere fact that she did was enough to make Agnes wonder if she was finally developing the strength to stand up for herself.

And if she could do so with flowers, then perhaps she would be able to do so with the man she loved.

"I am inclined to agree," Mary interjected, smiling softly at Caroline. "Prudence, let us move on, shall we? There is so much we need to get done in so little time."

Lady Reeds sank back into her seat with a huff. "Why we need to have this ball on such short notice, I will never understand. I doubt anyone will even be able to attend."

"Well perhaps not many people we know in London," Mary agreed. "Though we have received word from a number of my close friends and families that they will begin making their way."

"Then what is the point? This would be much better if it were organized for later in the season when everyone has time to prepare themselves. Us, included."

For once, Agnes was inclined to agree with the countess. Though she would much rather stick a bar of soap down her throat than admit it out loud.

"I do not know understand it myself," said Mary. "I only know that His Grace

approached me about it early this morning and asked if it was possible.”

“And of course, you said yes,” Agnes surmised with a smile.

Mary returned it with a wink. “What else was I to say? Anything else would cause His Grace to doubt my party-planning skills. And we cannot have that, now can we?”

“He approached you?” Lady Reeds pressed. “Why would he approach you and not me? He is to marry Caroline, after all, so I would assume he’d approach the lady who will be giving her away on her wedding day.”

“I believe Uncle will be giving me away,” Caroline murmured. It was soft but everyone heard it. While everyone else—save for the dowager duchess who had gone back to ignoring them—smiled, Lady Reeds scowled.

“You know what I mean!” she snapped. “I think it is quite odd and rather rude that His Grace did not think to ask me to attend to the engagement party.”

“Why don’t you take it up with the duke then?” Agnes challenged.

Lady Reeds narrowed her eyes at Agnes as if she couldn’t quite tell what her aim was. At last, she said, “Perhaps I shall. I shall let him know my exact thoughts on this. The duke should make sure that?”

“That what?”

Right on cue, Agnes’ heart went to her throat. It took every ounce of her strength not to shoot to her feet and run into Johnathan’s arms as he strode into the room with long strides.

Lady Reeds faltered. “Oh, that I, well I thought that...”

“My aunt thought it rather odd that you did not ask her to plan the engagement wedding.”

Agnes was growing more and more impressed by Caroline every time she spoke. She caught Caroline’s pleased smile, partially hidden behind the rim of her teacup, and knew that Caroline was only growing more confident in herself.

“Oh?” was all Johnathan said as he sank into the vacant spot next to Agnes. Tingles rushed through her body at his nearness. He didn’t touch her, didn’t even make any indication that his choice to sit next to her had been a deliberate one. But the fact that he chose to do so rather than choosing the spot next to Caroline was very telling.

“It was just a passing thought, Your Grace,” Lady Reeds said quickly. “It is nothing that needs to be paid any attention to.”

“Very well then,” Johnathan said, reaching for a scone. “I shall take your word for it.”

Agnes could see the laughter in his eyes. She hid her own smile in much the same way as Caroline had.

“Do you happen to know where your brother and my son are, Your Grace?” Mary asked.

“I believe they have gone riding together. Or perhaps it was racing. I cannot be too sure because I decided to stop listening as soon as they mentioned horses.”

“Racing?” Caroline gasped, sounding distressed. “Is that not dangerous? I do not think Paul is that accomplished of a rider, is he?”

“He is foolhardy enough to think that he is,” Agnes sighed. “Perhaps it would have

been best if you'd joined them, Your Grace."

"I thought about it but before I could offer my company, Lord Sutton beat me to it."

"My husband?" Mary asked in surprise. "Now that must be quite a sight. He does not enjoy riding very much."

"He does not?" Agnes could feel Johnathan's eyes on her as he said, "I wonder why that sounds so familiar."

Mary obviously caught the look because she laughed. "Oh, there is quite a difference between the two, Your Grace. You see, while my husband does not enjoy riding horses, he is rather skilled and will make do when he has to. While Agnes is absolutely terrified."

"I am not terrified!" Agnes protested, her cheeks growing hot.

"Yes, you are," Mary and Caroline said at the same time. They looked at each other and burst into a fit of giggles, clearly not perturbed by the glares Agnes was giving them both of them.

To her irritation, Johnathan joined in with the laughter. "The first step of overcoming your fears, Miss Agnes, is admitting that you have them in the first place."

"Which shall never happen because there is simply nothing to admit."

"Well, it seems she will be afflicted with this fear of hers for as long as she is stubborn," he said to Mary.

"Which may very well be for the rest of her life," Mary agreed with a laugh.

Agnes set her cup down a little more forcefully than necessary. “Shall we move on to more important things? Like planning this very hasty engagement party, for example?”

“Ah, yes,” Mary agreed, though Agnes could tell she would have much rather spend the rest of her afternoon poking fun at Agnes’ expense. “We should decide the menu for the night. I would like to pass it on to the cook before the day ends.”

“Then that is my cue to take my leave,” Johnathan said, getting to a stand. Agnes instantly regretted being the serious one. If it meant keeping Johnathan around for a while longer, she surely wouldn’t mind being on the end of every joke.

“I shall bring details of the party to you later this afternoon, Your Grace,” Mary promised, somber once again.

“I will look forward to it.” He brushed crumbs from his fingers, then then his waistcoat though there was none there to be found. He was stalling, Agnes knew, and when no one else seemed to be looking, he caught her eye and jerked his head to the door.

She knew what that meant. He wanted to talk to her. But then he mouthed, “Later,” and she nodded discreetly. It would be a little too obvious if she was to leave right after he did, especially since it was clear she had nothing else to do.

Agnes tried not to pay him much mind as he took his leave, focusing instead on her mother and the menu she was attempting to draft. But the tips of her fingers tingled with anticipation, her heart thudding lowly in her chest at the thought of sneaking away to see him again.

Not to her surprise, talk of whether they should have chicken or fish afterward did not have very much luster.

Johnathan stayed in his office. For one, he wanted to avoid interacting with anyone else. He gave strict instructions to his butler that he was hard at work and should not be interrupted. His ledgers still needed balancing and there were a number of correspondences to his tenants that needed to be mailed out by the end of the day.

The other, perhaps more important reason, was because he wanted to ensure that Agnes was able to find him when she came to see him later. He was certain she'd gotten the gist of what he'd been trying to tell her before in the drawing room, so it was only a matter of time before she appeared.

Time that stretched on for far too long. Early morning drifted into late afternoon, just a couple hours away from dinner, before there finally came a knock on the door.

Johnathan straightened. No one bothered to interrupt him during his work but he didn't want to ask that they come in on the chance that it might be anyone other than Agnes. Thankfully, she didn't attempt to knock again. She simply slipped inside, closing the door behind her and resting against it.

She kept her hands on the doorknob, her eyes intent on him. "We must stop meeting like this," she murmured, loud enough for him to hear her.

Johnathan leaned back in his chair, regarding her evenly. Then slowly, he stood. He didn't take his eyes off her as he approached. Her heavy-lidded gaze lifted slightly the closer he came, until she was gazing up at him.

For two tense seconds, they only stared at each other.

Johnathan lunged first.

He couldn't help himself. It was all he could think about. From the moment he tasted the sweet gentle swell of her lips, he craved more, needing to feel her between his

arms. And as if Agnes was victim to the same longing that plagued him, she met him halfway.

Her fingers quickly found his hair as their lips met. Johnathan braced her against the door, forcing himself to be gentle and treat her with the respect she deserved. She did not seem very inclined to do so and she moved her lips against his hungrily, taking more and more.

And felt like ages before they both came up for air. Agnes still had her arms wrapped around his neck as she grinned up at him.

“Surely this is not the reason you wanted to see me?” she asked softly.

Johnathan couldn’t bring himself to smile just yet. An overwhelming wave of relief washed over him by simply gazing into her eyes. He’d been struggling for so long, hiding a deep seated pain he’d never been able to come to terms with. Being here with Agnes, holding her in his arms, made him feel so at peace.

“I love you,” he breathed. He wanted to lean into her, pull her closer still. But he stared into her eyes instead as he waited for his words to sink in.

Her smile only widened. She didn’t look the least bit surprised, only happy. “It took you long enough to say it.”

“Does that mean you love me as well?” he asked, resting his forehead against hers.

“What do you think?” she challenged.

Johnathan huffed a laugh. “Must you be difficult all the time?”

“I would not be me if I did not.” Somehow, she managed to find enough space behind

her head to pull away from him, catching his eyes once more. “I love you too, Johnathan.”

He sealed their confessions with a kiss. When he pulled away, she sighed and said again, “Surely this is not the reason you wanted to see me.”

“Would it not be fine if I did?”

“If you wish to court scandal, Johnathan, then you should do so on your own time.”

Agnes gently pushed him away and made her way to the sofas arranged on one end of the study. Johnathan watched her go. “Well, you aren’t any fun anymore.”

“One of us has to remain levelheaded,” she said with a shrug. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a folded piece of paper, holding it out to him. It gave him the opportunity to approach her again but she must have seen the devilish glint in his eye because she slipped by him before he could pull her into his arms once more.

“What’s this?” he asked, not bothering to mask his disappointment.

“The details surrounding the engagement party. Mother asked me to pass it on to you. Or rather, I subtly suggested it and she took me up on the offer.”

“Smart of you. Though if you are missing for long, the others may come to me seeking your whereabouts.”

“I know.” She gave him a sweet smile. “We should not remain in each other’s company alone for too long.”

While he should agree with her, Johnathan couldn’t help showing his disappointment in that regard. “Any more of that and one would think you do not like spending time

with me, Agnes.”

“There’s nothing I want more than to spend time with you,” she assured softly. “But if we are to go about this in the proper way, the last thing I want is for others to assume anything before we are able to clear the air. And I’m sure you were thinking the same thing, hence the reason you are having this engagement party so soon.”

“Oh?”

She sank into one of the sofas and waited until he claimed the one across from her before she went on. “I gave it some thought and that is the only reason I could think of. Any longer and Lord Reeds will grow more insistent. And while I’m sure you are as eager to announce our engagement as much as I am, it may not be very wise to do so when tension is so high.”

“Tension will remain high for as long as Lord Reeds does not get what he wants.”

“That is true,” she admitted with a nod. “Which means a public announcement may be the only way to go. Lord Reeds will not be able to dispute you in front of so many people. And he will be thoroughly embarrassed as well.”

“We seem to share one mind, Agnes,” Johnathan said, impressed. “I had intended to explain my line of thinking to you but you have beaten me to it.”

“That is because we are partners,” she said, though the smile that came to her face was one of complete pride. “After spending so much time working alongside you with the same aim, I do understand your motivations. But you must know that it will not be enough to deter him. Lord Reeds will only demand that you end our engagement and perhaps that you even secure a special license to marry Caroline as soon as possible. Or worse...”

“Worse?” he probed with a raise of his brows.

Agnes drew in a deep breath. “He might take your announcement as his chance to reveal the truth of your father’s death. Lord Reeds is not one to think twice about low blows and he will want to hurt and embarrass you as much as you have done to him.”

“That is a risk I will have to take,” Johnathan said with a sigh. “Fighting against a man as vindictive as the earl opens me up to attacks I never would have considered with anyone else.”

“That much is true. But anything he attempts to do, we will do our utmost to thwart it.”

“We?”

“My family and I.”

“Have you told them about us?” Johnathan asked with a raise of his brows.

Agnes shook his head. “I have not. Not yet. I do not yet know how best to tell them.”

“Christopher has figured it out.”

“Well, that must be a relief for him. I know he was not very keen on being married.” She paused, then added, “Caroline has figured it out as well.”

Johnathan raised his brows in surprise. “Has she? That reminds me, there is something I have been meaning to ask you?—”

The rest of his sentence went unsaid because the door opened and his mother walked in. Johnathan shot to his feet, his heart pounding. Agnes was slower to rise but the

look on her face spoke of her own fear.

“Mother...” He didn’t know what to say. His words failed him so many times before but he never cursed his inability to think quickly on his feet as he did this time.

Irene looked between the two of them, her expression impassive yet her gaze direct. She took a few steps closer, hands clasped before her.

“Am I interrupting something?” she asked.

“Not at all, Your Grace,” Agnes said quickly, though she seemed far more in control than Johnathan felt. “I had only stopped by to give His Grace the details of the party. Mother asked me to pass it along to him. I was about to take my leave.”

She made haste for the door, but stopped for a brief moment as if she intended to say something else. Whatever it might have been, Agnes clearly thought against it because she simply hurried out the door instead.

An uncomfortable silence settled into the room. Johnathan didn’t know what to do with himself, so he made for the sideboard, throwing over his shoulder, “Would you like a drink, Mother?”

“A glass of sherry would do nicely,” she responded, making for the same sofa Agnes had vacated.

That surprised him. His mother had once been a lover of a nice bottle of port, indulging as much as her position would allow. But that was before everything happened.

He poured her a glass and himself a glass of whiskey he had no intention of touching and made his way over to them. Handing her her sherry, Johnathan sat across from

her and tried not to seem too anxious.

“Mother, about what you just saw...”

“She is a lovely girl, isn’t she?” Irene sipped her wine, regarding her son with little expression in her eyes.

Once upon a time, his mother had been the easiest person to read. She wore her every thought on her face and her heart on her sleeve. It made her vulnerable yet so beautifully open that one couldn’t help but love her within minutes of meeting her.

Johnathan couldn’t tell what she was thinking now. He couldn’t tell when it had happened, though he knew it had to be because of the late duke’s death. She had changed so thoroughly but had shut herself away so that no one could witness it.

It felt as if he was sitting before a person he had known a long time ago, a person who was now a stranger. So many memories existed between them and yet it felt as if he no longer knew who she was.

“Yes,” he said at last. “Miss Agnes is a lovely lady.”

“Any man would be lucky to be married to her,” Irene went on.

“I am inclined to agree,” Johnathan responded noncommittally. He couldn’t tell what his mother thought about him being alone with an unmarried woman. Had Agnes been in his arms—or perched on his lap the way he had been fantasizing about—her opinion on the matter would have been obvious. No well-bred lady would ever let such a scandal happen before her eyes without taking the proper action of insisting on a marriage. But since Irene had walked in when they’d only been talking, and sitting across from each other, it may be innocent enough for Irene to ignore it.

He braced himself, waiting for his mother to make the next move. But Irene remained quiet, content it seemed to enjoy her wine.

“Mother,” Johnathan spoke at last. “Is there a reason you came to see me?”

“At first, no,” she answered. “I only wanted to spend some time with you. Even if it would be done in silence.”

“Oh.” Again, he was at a loss for words. He certainly hadn’t expected that.

“But now that I am here, I find my mind filled with so many things I want to tell you. Things I should be saying to both you and Christopher.”

“Do you want me to send for him?” Johnathan asked, already standing to make his way to the bell pull.

“No, don’t,” Irene said quickly. She’d fully drained her glass and set it on the table next to the sofa. “I want to speak with you alone, for now.”

Johnathan slowly lowered to a seat, waiting silently.

Irene drew in a deep breath. When she raised her eyes to meet his, they were filled with tortured pain, already swimming with tears. Johnathan felt his heart break in his chest.

“All I can think to say is that I am sorry, Johnathan.”

“Mother...”

“There is much to apologize for,” she went on, her voice soft and wavering. “For my withdrawal from the family after your father’s death. For the weight I put on you

when you assumed the dukedom. For worrying you. For failing to console you and be there for you when you truly needed it. My sins are a mile long.”

“Mother, you don’t have to do this.”

“But I do. I will not be able to move on until I right my wrongs. And a wise young lady gave me the confidence to approach you, even though I am afraid that you will turn me away. God knows that I would deserve it.”

Johnathan had a feeling he knew who that wise young lady was.

“Mother, you were only trying to cope in the only way you know how. You need not ask me for my forgiveness because it has always been yours.”

The tears finally overflowed. Before Johnathan knew what was happening, his mother had launched himself at him, throwing her arms around his neck.

Johnathan could not remember the last time they’d embraced. As soon as her arms wrapped around him, he lost control of his own emotions. Tears pricked his eyes, his throat swelling, as he hugged her back.

He couldn’t say anything and it seemed neither could she. As they held each other and cried, words no longer seemed important.

CHAPTER 27

“Agnes?”

Agnes turned at the sound of Caroline’s hesitant voice. Her friend was standing behind her, getting dressed with the help of the maids while Agnes was still getting her hair coiled.

“Yes?”

The worry written across Caroline’s face could not be faked. She never seemed capable of getting rid of it as the night of the engagement ball grew nearer. Agnes could only imagine the anxiety Caroline must be feeling at the thought of her impending marriage to the Duke of Claymore. Anyone in her position must feel as if the noose tightening around her neck would finally cut off her breath.

“What do you think will happen this evening?” Caroline asked vaguely but Agnes knew what she meant.

She turned back to face her mirror, allowing the maid to continue coiling and tucking tufts of her hair away. She wasn’t going to come out and tell Caroline that she planned on announcing her betrothal to the duke. Under pressure, Caroline was not one to keep a secret. Besides, the last thing Agnes wanted to do was give Caroline any false hope if things were to go south, which she hoped wouldn’t happen.

“I’m sure we’re going to have a splendid time,” Agnes answered at last. “And everyone is going to leave happy.”

“Do you truly believe that?” Caroline asked doubtfully.

Agnes considered her own words and then shook her head slightly. “Well, perhaps not everyone. Not all can be pleased in the same manner, you know.”

Caroline sighed as if the entire world was resting on her shoulders. Right now, Agnes could imagine that it felt like it did.

“Do you think His Grace will be terribly upset if I do not attend?” Caroline asked after a while. Agnes met her eyes in the mirror and she caught the flash of regret that passed over Caroline’s face. “Oh, what am I saying? I couldn’t possibly not attend when this is meant to be in our honor. It would be dreadfully rude, would it not be?”

The anxiousness in her voice was palpable. Agnes didn’t miss the way the maids glanced at each other.

She gently touched the hand of the maid styling her hair and said, “Give us a moment, please.”

The maid nodded and she left the room, the other following closely behind her. As soon as they were alone, Agnes turned to face Caroline, her heart splintering when she saw that her friend was already on the verge of tears.

“I’m afraid,” Caroline confessed softly. “I’m afraid of how my uncle will react.”

Agnes quickly made her way to her side, embracing her. “Everything will be fine,” she assured, forcing far more confidence in her voice than she felt. “I won’t allow anything to happen to you.”

“What of you and the duke, Agnes? I know now that your heart has gone towards him? What if my uncle insists that I still marry him?”

Agnes simply stroked her back, letting her cry on her shoulder. Agnes truly didn't know how well this evening was going to play out and, between preparing for the ball and everything else in between, she hadn't been able to talk to Johnathan about it. Worse, she hadn't gotten the chance to tell him that she had been wrong about who Caroline loved. Agnes didn't want to risk being found alone with him again—though the dowager duchess had not said anything about what she'd walked in on—and that line of conversation was hardly one they could have amongst the others.

She planned on telling him at this evening's ball, before he made his announcement. But whether she did or not, Agnes was sure of one thing.

"I won't let your uncle force you to do anything you wish not to do anymore," she stated firmly.

Caroline laughed through her tears, pulling away to look at Agnes. "Sometimes I wish I could be as confident as you are."

"Some may call me foolish, you know."

"I would be rather silly of me to be amongst such people," Caroline said with a smile. "That look in your eye tells me you have a plan."

"Something of the sort," Agnes told her. "But nothing will happen if we stay in our chambers, will it? We should continue getting ready."

Caroline nodded, but she made no move to call for the maids to return. "I wish George could see me like this. I wish I could dance with him at a ball."

Agnes took her hand. Dancing with Johnathan was one of the things she was looking forward to the most this evening. Forgetting everything and everyone around them as they swirled about lost in their own world. She wanted the same for Caroline.

“Bigger miracles have happened,” Agnes told her, hoping it would give her enough hope to lift her spirits. But it was not likely, that much she was certain of. A stable hand would not be allowed within ten feet of the ballroom.

Caroline’s smile didn’t quite touch her eyes this time and Agnes had a feeling she was thinking the same thing. Still, she said, “I can only hope.”

Then she stepped away and made her way to the bell pull. The maids returned within a matter of seconds and they quickly recommenced the preparations for the ball. Agnes could already hear the quartet tuning their instruments downstairs, the lovely sound seeping through the floorboards. She hummed along in an effort to rid herself of her own anxiety towards what may happen this evening.

Lord Reeds would not go down without a fight. Of that, Agnes was certain. But she couldn’t help but pray that Johnathan’s announcement would be enough to knock the fight out of him.

There were too many uncertainties and already doubt was creeping into her mind, weeding out the faith she had that everything would work out. She could tell that Caroline was trying to her best to remain upbeat. A forced smile and strained laughter went a long way in make one feel better, but Agnes knew better than to think that her friend was not also worried sick about what may happen this evening.

When it came time for them to make their way down to the ballroom, they were late. Fashionably so, in Mary’s opinion, but Agnes knew her father was not inclined to agree. Even so, they made their way to the ballroom arm-in-arm, head held high, the music growing louder as they grew nearer. Caroline was shaking by the time they made it to the door but when they were announced and it was time for them to enter, the smile on her face dispelled any notion of her nervousness.

Agnes felt pride swell in her chest.

“Do you see him?” Caroline whispered to her as they made their way through the throng of guests who had already arrived. An admirable feat, Agnes thought, that they made the trip in time but she supposed not many would miss the opportunity to attend a ball thrown by the Duke of Claymore.

“See who?” Agnes asked.

“His Grace,” Caroline whispered. “I’m sure you are eager to go to him.”

“I am not so eager to leave your side,” Agnes told her but Caroline laughed, the sound far more genuine.

“You need not worry about me, Agnes,” Caroline assured her. “I will be fine on my own.”

Agnes was not so convinced but she was not going to say that aloud. Before she had the chance to think of anything to say at all, they were approached by Mary and Solomon.

“Oh, my darlings!” Mary gushed, reaching out to embrace them both. “You two look absolutely beautiful! Was it your intention to match?”

Agnes looked at Caroline’s aquamarine gown and her forest green one. Though the colors were different, the style of both resembled greatly.

“It was not our intention but rather a happy coincidence,” Agnes told her.

“Well, you two are certainly the belles of the ball. Aren’t they, Solomon?”

“Quite so,” her father responded noncommittally. His eyes were scanning the ballroom, his brows furrowed.

“What are you looking for, Father?” Agnes couldn’t help but ask.

“Hm?” He seemed absentminded, answering Agnes as if her words were taking a while to sink in. “Oh, I am just looking for the duke.”

“Why are you looking for him?”

“Lord Reeds said something rather odd to me not too long ago,” he said, eyes still roving through the crowd of guests. “He said he has to keep an eye on the duke because it seems he is trying to back out of something. Usually, I would ignore such comments but there was something about the way he said it that makes me wonder if I should issue a warning to the duke.”

“A warning?” Mary echoed in confusion. “You do not seem to know what you are even warning him about. And I do think that if the duke does not wish to honor an agreement between him and the earl, that is not any of your concern.”

“Oh?” Solomon abandoned his perusal of the ballroom to look at his wife with a raised brow of surprise. “Since when have you ever cared about limiting your meddling?”

“It is not my meddling, but yours.”

“Ah.” Solomon’s lips twitched. “A sound distinction, if any.”

“I would think so,” Mary said, sounding rather pleased with herself. “And at any rate, I believe that—Goodness, Caroline, are you all right?”

Agnes looked sharply at Caroline to see that her face was as white as a sheet, her eyes round as saucers.

“Caroline?” Agnes asked gently.

Caroline blinked rapidly and forced a smile onto her face with considerable effort. “Did my uncle say anything else?” she asked Solomon, ignoring Agnes who had taken her by the hand.

Solomon looked worried. Mary even more so. But he said, “He would not say any more, but it was clear that he is rather irritated. Even more so than I have seen him before, which is why I thought to inform the duke about it.”

“What of my aunt?” Caroline looked around for a brief moment, eyes shadowed with fear. “Has she said anything?”

“What is there to say?” Mary pressed. Agnes knew that there was little hope of her letting Caroline out of her sight now. “Caroline, is something wrong? What is the matter?”

“It’s nothing,” Caroline said quickly. She shook her head, averting her gaze, but if she wanted to seem fine she failed miserably. “I only need some fresh air.”

She disappeared before Mary could get the chance to say anything else, moving swiftly through the crowd. Agnes watched her go with a dull ache in her chest. She hated to see Caroline despairing.

Her attention remained so focused on Caroline that it took her a while to realize that her parents were staring at her. Agnes looked between Solomon and Mary, raising her brows.

“What is it?”

“Has something happened?” Solomon demanded to know.

“Why is Caroline so upset?”

“She is feeling a little tired, that’s all,” Agnes lied smoothly. “I’m sure she will be fine after she gets the fresh air she seeks.”

They didn’t believe her. That much was obvious from the dubious looks on their faces. But before they could say anything else, Johnathan appeared. And suddenly, little else mattered.

CHAPTER 28

Johnathan noticed Agnes' arrival from the moment she walked through the doors. He would have gone straight to her side had it not been for the village vicar's incessant talking. To fill the guest list at such short notice, Lady Sutton had suggested they invite a few persons from the village and Johnathan had happily agreed. He would not have done so had he known he would be subjected to such a fate.

"Of course, it would be nice to see you this Sunday, Your Grace," the vicar went on. His cheeks were tinged pink and his words ran straight into the other enough times for Johnathan to wonder if he had already overindulged. An odd thing to assume about a man of God and yet...

"Perhaps I shall be in attendance in the near future."

"Oh, I truly do hope so!" the vicar exclaimed. "This upcoming sermon will be a wonderful one, I assure you. Many attend my sermons and leave feeling invigorated so I am most confident that it would be the same in your case, Your Grace. Of course, I do understand if you are not able to attend as you must be a rather busy man but to think that?—"

"I shall attend," Johnathan cut in. He tore his eyes away from where Agnes stood next to her parents, after Miss Caroline had just hastily taken her leave, to look at the vicar. "Pardon me, sir."

He didn't wait for the vicar to respond. With quick steps, Johnathan made his way over to the love of his life, his heart swelling with happiness the nearer he came.

It was alarming to see how quickly he'd changed in such little time. How easily a smile came to his lips, how excited he became at the notion of speaking to one particular person. As he approached, Johnathan had to fight the urge to slip his arm around her waist and pull her to his chest, planting a kiss on her cheek. Or her lips. Wherever his own lips might find themselves.

As if Agnes sensed his wayward thoughts, she took a discreet step away from him as if to warn him not to give in to them. Johnathan shook his head in disappointment. How could she have so little faith? She only smiled.

"Your Grace," said Lord Sutton, reminding Johnathan that they were indeed not alone. "I have been looking for you."

"Here I am, my lord," Johnathan responded. He bowed respectfully to Lady Sutton who returned it with a curtsy and a smile. "Is there something you wished to speak with me about?"

"I do, but perhaps it would be best for us to do so in private."

"Oh, heavens, Solomon," Lady Sutton admonished, slapping her husband lightly on the chest. "You act as if you hold a great and grand secret. He only wishes to tell you that Lord Reeds seems to be acting rather oddly."

"Mary," Lord Sutton sighed, sounding irritated. Johnathan had spent enough time around the loving couple to know that the viscount felt anything but.

Johnathan caught Agnes' look before frowning at the viscount. "Oddly? In what matter?"

"I do not know how to explain it, Your Grace," Lord Sutton went on. "One would think that he would be pleased on an occasion such as this, since his dreams are

finally coming true.”

“Lord knows he has been vying for a respectable match for Caroline since the moment she came of age,” Mary agreed. “And to have landed a duke? More than respectable I would say. So it does seem quite odd that he would be in such a dour mood. Have you done something to upset him, Your Grace?”

“Mary, you’re meddling again,” Lord Sutton said tiredly but Lady Sutton only rolled her eyes.

“Oh, you act as if you do not want to know about it as well,” she said. Then she turned her attention back to Johnathan, smiling prettily. “We will be family soon enough, so I’m sure you do not mind talking to us, do you?”

“Mother,” Agnes spoke at last. She too sounded weary, like a parent preparing to scold her troublesome children yet again. “I do not think it is any of our concern.”

“But you saw how upset Caroline seemed!” Lady Sutton protested. “I do not think she is tired or needs fresh air like you’ve said. I think there is far more to what’s happening here.”

“And what,” Johnathan asked carefully, “do you think is happening here, my lady?”

Lady Sutton thinned her lips in thought, then shook her head. “I do not yet know. But I shall find out by the end of this evening, I assure you.”

“You’ve gone and done it now, Your Grace,” said Lord Sutton. “Once she sets her mind to something, you would be hard-pressed to change it.”

“My husband knows me quite well, you know. You should listen to him.”

Johnathan found it within him to laugh. Honestly, the anticipation for what was going to happen this evening filled him with unease. He had been avoiding Lord Reeds because of it, wanting to wait until the right moment to break the news to those of the ton who had made it. The timing had to be perfect, the delivery flawless. The pressure of it all had been growing since he'd devised the plan but it had not been so overwhelming as it had been today.

Agnes' presence soothed him. And, though he should not be so surprised by it, so did that of her parents.

"I shall leave the mystery in your hands to uncover, my lady," Johnathan said, playing along. "In the meantime, I hope you will not mind me stealing your daughter away for the first dance?"

"I do not think it would matter if we did, Your Grace," Lord Sutton said wisely, his eyes sparkling with mischief. "Agnes tends to what she wants."

"At least you are aware of it, Father," Agnes said with a smile. She held out her dance card, allowing Johnathan to write his name. He was pleased to see that he was the first to ask her to dance but he was not so foolish as to think that her dance card would not be full in a matter of minutes.

"Now before you take her," Lady Sutton said, slipping her arm through Agnes'. "I require her assistance in finding her brother. God only knows what sort of mischief he will get up to if we are not keeping an eye on him."

"The work of an older sister is never finished, I'm afraid," Agnes murmured as she passed, making him grin.

He wanted so badly to protest, to insist that she remain by his side until the dancing had commenced. The past few days had been nothing but simple interactions as they

pretended nothing more existed between them. To Johnathan, it was torture. He wanted to shout his love from the rooftops, not hide it when before their loved ones. But he knew that it was important to bide their time and, because of that, he waited. Impatiently, but waited nonetheless.

“Pardon me, Your Grace,” Lord Sutton spoke up, breaking into Johnathan’s wayward thoughts. “But I notice someone approaching and I’m afraid I do not want to engage with them right now.”

He gave Johnathan an apologetic look before he turned and briskly walked away. A moment later, a shrill voice sounded behind them, “Your Grace, how convenient that I have caught you alone!”

Johnathan fought the groan creeping up his throat as he turned to face Lady Reeds. She wore that terribly fake smile as usual, already accommodating the spot Lord Sutton had just vacated.

Johnathan reminded himself that it was the gentlemanly thing to be polite. “Good evening, Lady Reeds.”

“You are certainly a difficult man to get alone, Your Grace,” Lady Reeds said, sighing dramatically. “I thought we could talk about the upcoming wedding before you made your announcement this evening.”

“Upcoming wedding?” Johnathan couldn’t help but parrot.

“Yes, and I must insist that we have it in the fall. In London, of course. With the guest list I have in mind, I think it would be best to have it at St. James. Of course, I would need time to speak with the vicar but I’m sure it will be no issue.”

Johnathan couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Hadn’t Lord Reeds informed his

wife of Johnathan's intention to end his courtship with Caroline or was she simply being in denial?

"St. James is truly a lovely place to have a wedding, my lady," Johnathan said carefully. "Though I do not think I will be in need of it."

"Oh? Do you have somewhere else in mind?"

"I do not. And it does not matter if I do. There will be no wedding."

Lady Reeds looked stunned. "What do you mean by that?"

"Perhaps you should ask your husband, my lady."

Confusion and horror warred on her face as she stared wide-eyed at Johnathan. Johnathan immediately regretted his words. There was no telling how Lady Reeds was going to react.

She opened her mouth and he braced himself. But then, she seemed to catch herself at the very last minute, clearly remembering that they were in a rather full ballroom. It was easy to make a scene.

"Pardon me then, Your Grace. I believe I should have a word with my husband."

With a sniff and her chin jutting upwards, she swiveled on her heels and marched in the opposite direction. Johnathan watched her go with equal parts relief and dread. Something told him that he might have made matters worse before he got the chance to make them better. But Lady Reeds' departure could not be viewed in any manner but favorable.

But the evening was still young. He knew very well that there could be much more in

store for him.

CHAPTER 29

Paul was, unsurprisingly, next to Christopher. And, equally unsurprisingly, they were engaged in a deep conversation about horses.

“Paul, there you are!” Mary exclaimed as they approached. “I had wondered if you were off somewhere causing trouble.”

Agnes held back her smile at her brother’s pout. “Mother, you needn’t coddle me.”

“I do not think she is coddling you, Paul,” Agnes drawled. “I think she is keeping you on a leash. Much like an unruly dog.”

“Then what would make you?” Paul shot back. “A loyal one to be following her around?”

Agnes raised her brows in surprise. She wasn’t offended really. She knew her brother didn’t mean it any more than she meant her words. But she was surprised at the ease and swiftness of his retort.

“I concede,” she told him and nearly burst out laughing at the stunned look on his face.

“You do?” he asked in disbelief. A broad smile steadily stretched across his face as he looked excitedly at Christopher, who seemed to be quite amused by the exchange. “Did you hear that? I have bested her at her own game!”

“Yes, quite an admirable feat indeed,” Christopher agreed with a laugh.

“Now, now, none of that,” Mary scolded, but her eyes sparkled with mirth. “I need you to be on your best behavior for this evening, Paul.”

Paul’s good humor fled the moment those words left her mouth. “Why?” he asked warily.

“Because, Miss Rosemarie and her family are in attendance and it is about time that we greeted them.”

Paul’s shoulder slumped and Agnes could hear the whine in his voice before he even opened his mouth. “Mother, please!”

“Oh come now, you two are friends, are you not? And I am friends with Miss Rosemarie’s mother. It would not do for us to wait so long to greet them. I promise that you may return to your riveting conversation about horses when we are finished.”

“Which I reckon will be ages!”

“Perhaps so. Perhaps not. It all depends on how swimmingly the conversation is going, don’t you think?” Mary expertly attached Paul to her side, giving him little chance to escape. “Do you see her? She is in a lovely primrose gown.”

Agnes couldn’t help her amused smile as she watched her brother skim the area before him before he said, “Yes, I see her.”

“Doesn’t she look lovely?”

“She always looks lovely,” Paul responded easily. His words were met with a beat of silence and he noticed a little too late what he had said. “Not that I mean anything by

it! I am only speaking objectively!”

“Yes, I’m sure that you are,” Mary mused, her smile in her voice. “Come now, let us make haste before they are approached by someone else.”

Agnes finally released her laughter as she watched her mother cart her brother off to Miss Rosemarie and her family. She knew what her mother was trying to do. Mary made every attempt to push Paul and Miss Rosemarie together once they were in the same vicinity. It would not have been so obvious had it not being for the clear fact that Paul fancied Miss Rosemarie more than he let on. Or perhaps he was not aware of it himself. Agnes could only imagine what was going through the mind of a ten-and-seven year old boy.

“May I ask about this lovely Miss Rosemarie your mother speaks of?” spoke Christopher, sounding just as amused at what he’d witnessed as Agnes felt.

“She is a friend of Paul’s,” Agnes explained. “Not yet out in society. Mother seems to think that she will make a wonderful future wife for Paul when she comes of age and, despite his efforts to prove otherwise, it is clear that Paul fancies her.”

“Ah, I see.” They watched as Mary and Paul approached Miss Rosemarie and her family for a moment. “I think it is quite an honor to be viewed so favorably by the viscountess.”

“Yes, well, Mother is very welcoming in that regard,” Agnes agreed. “And she fancies herself a matchmaker as well. She did make her attempts during my debut.”

“I do not doubt that your beauty and splendid personality made her job rather easy,” Christopher said smoothly. “No doubt your drawing room was always filled with suitors.”

Agnes smiled up at him. "I'm sure you know now that flattery will get you nowhere, my lord."

"Christopher," he reminded her yet again. "We are to be family soon enough after all."

Agnes didn't respond to that, but she didn't bother hiding her happy smile.

"Am I to believe that you also thought I was in love with Miss Caroline?" Christopher asked her.

Agnes met his eyes, flushing slightly. "Now that I think about it, I might have been rather foolish in my assumption."

Christopher only chuckled. "I am curious about why that notion ever came to be. I did not think I treated Miss Caroline with any exceptional care to present the idea that I reserved affection for her."

"It is..." Agnes thought of the length Caroline had gone to see her actual love. She didn't want to break her trust by revealing it to the false one. "I suppose I was just eager to see Caroline happy and in love."

Christopher nodded in understanding. "I feel the same way about Johnathan. And I am certain he will be able to find that happiness with you. After all he's been through, he deserves it."

"You have been through the very same thing," she reminded him.

"Not to the extent Johnathan did. Our father was Johnathan's idol. He admired everything about him and aspired to be the duke we had all thought he was. After his death, and after we learned of the truth surrounding it, Johnathan did not cope with it

the way I did. He threw himself into his work to be far better than our father had ever done. Because of that, I do not think he gave himself the chance to grieve properly. I do not even think he entertained the idea of love and happiness for himself.”

Tears were already pricking her eyes. It was hard to imagine Johnathan going through such a thing without it happening.

“I did not mean to upset you,” Christopher said quickly, realizing that Agnes was on the verge of crying.

“No, you didn’t,” she said hastily. She blinked the tears away and was relieved when they didn’t overflow. “But I do understand you. I feel very similarly towards Caroline. She lost her parents and was forced to live with guardians who do not care about anything but using her for their own gain. I only want her to be happy.”

Christopher nodded again. “Where is Miss Caroline?”

“She went outdoors to get some fresh air. As it happens,” Agnes added on an afterthought. “I think it is time I go and find her.”

“I shall come with you.”

Agnes smiled gratefully and headed towards the terrace doors on the other end of the ballroom. She found Caroline tucked into the dark corner of the terrace, her hands folded tightly across her chest.

“Caroline,” Agnes began gently. “Are you feeling better?”

Caroline raised sad eyes to Agnes. But when Christopher came into view, she straightened, wiping the look away. “My lord,” she greeted hastily.

Agnes resisted the urge to sigh. Perhaps it hadn't been a good idea to bring Christopher along. Caroline was not bound to admit her feelings if he was hovering over them.

"Miss Caroline, I have been looking all over for you," Christopher said before Agnes got a chance to speak again.

Caroline blinked in surprise. "You have?"

"Yes, this ball is rather dreadful without your company, I'm afraid." He slid a glance towards Agnes. "Present company excluded, of course."

"Of course," Agnes agreed with a smile.

"Would you like to accompany me to the refreshment table for some lemonade, Miss Caroline?" Christopher asked. He was already offering her his arm.

"I do not want to impose," Caroline said tentatively.

"It would not be an imposition if I am the one suggesting it," Christopher assured. "Besides, is that not what we should do as two people in love?"

Now it seemed as Caroline's eyes were about to take over her face. She seemed too stunned for words, looking at Agnes for help. But Agnes didn't know whether or not to laugh at what Christopher had said. So she stepped back and watched as Caroline gingerly took Christopher's arm, saying nothing as he led her back into the ballroom. He bent slightly to say something to Caroline and Agnes caught the end of Caroline's answering smile.

Agnes smiled at the sight. Maybe it had been a good idea to bring him along, after all.

The first set was about to commence and Johnathan couldn't find Agnes anywhere. Of course, he'd noticed when she'd slipped away from the ballroom, likely to go in search of Miss Caroline. But then he'd been approached by several gentlemen he hadn't spoken to in years—at least not since his father's death—and didn't notice when she came back in. After slipping away from the men, who seemed hellbent on talking his ear off for the foreseeable future, he headed out to the terrace and saw neither hide nor hair of Agnes.

“My lord, a word.”

Johnathan stilled. He'd just reentered the ballroom and was preparing to make his rounds through the ballroom to find his dance partner. But Lord Reeds seemed to have other plans.

He schooled his expression as best as he could before turning to face the earl. Clearly, judging by the slight sneer on the earl's face, he didn't care to do the same.

“What is it, Lord Reeds?” Johnathan responded in the most monotonous tone he could muster. It wasn't difficult. The man he was not was not a far cry from the aloof gentleman he'd presented as before Agnes came into his life.

Lord Reeds glanced around him for a few seconds, then jerked his head towards the terrace doors Johnathan had just come through. “Perhaps it would be best for us to speak in private.”

Johnathan tried not to sigh. In truth, he'd expected this. On such a momentous occasion, Lord Reeds was certain to make every attempt to reestablish his control over the situation. Control he no longer had, control Johnathan had every intention of ensuring he did not regain.

But, for the sake of peace for as long as it could last, Johnathan nodded and turned

towards the doors. In silence, they both delved onto the moonlit terrace and out into the gardens stretched out before them. They didn't go very far before Lord Reeds stopped to face him.

"I assume you have decided to come to your senses," Lord Reeds began.

The derision in his tone deepened Johnathan's already rising annoyance. It took all the strength he had not to show it. Instead, he calmly nodded and said, "I have, my lord. Though I do not think we agree on what constitutes me coming to my senses."

Lord Reeds' expression darkened. "You know very well what I mean. Surely you have not put on this engagement party to announce that you will not be marrying my niece?"

"Oh, an engagement will be announced, for certain."

"I care not for your brother and that smart-mouth woman?—"

"I do hope for your sake, my lord," Johnathan stated in a cold tone, "that your next words will be complimentary ones."

Ice coated his words. Even though Lord Reeds tried to maintain his irate expression, terror flashed in his eyes for a brief moment. He swallowed harshly, taking a step back.

"My wife thinks that you may be backing out of this engagement," he started again.

"You know my stance on that matter, my lord, and it has not changed since our last conversation."

"You cannot!" It was crossed between a hiss and a whine. Johnathan hadn't realized

just how desperate the earl was becoming until that moment. Desperate wasn't good. A desperate man like the earl would only utilize whatever was at his disposal to get what he wanted.

But Johnathan wasn't going to let him cow him. "I can, my lord, and I shall. Nothing you say or do will change that."

"You will regret it. I assure you that you will regret this!"

"I assure you, Lord Reeds, that there is nothing I want more than to do the very thing you are against. I will not regret a thing."

There was nothing left to say. Lord Reeds would only continue his incessant threats that were quickly becoming empty. Johnathan would simply grow more and more frustrated with the conversation and he didn't want to end up saying or doing something he shouldn't. Walking away was the best bet. For now. Lord Reeds was sure to find him later. If not him, then the countess would make her presence known.

For now, the only thing he wanted to do was sweep Agnes into his arms and dance with her. Ever since he wrote his name on her dance card that was the only thing he could think of. And after he made his announcement, perhaps they could even dance more than once. Betrothed couples do not have to adhere to the strict guidelines of the ton, after all, though that was only to an extent.

"Was there a problem, Your Grace?" asked Lord Sutton as he approached Johnathan the moment he entered the ballroom. "I saw that you stepped away to speak with Lord Reeds and I must say, you do not seem very happy."

Johnathan sighed softly and tried to soften his features. He walked away from the terrace doors, not wanting the earl to walk by when he said his next words.

“You were right, my lord. Lord Reeds is rather distressed.”

“Ah.” Lord Sutton nodded in understanding. “I take it that the conversation did not go very well then.”

“Why do you say that?”

“You look irritated, Your Grace.” When Johnathan raised his brows at that, the viscount laughed and added, “You have never been very good at hiding what you’re thinking, Your Grace. At least, not to me.”

“I didn’t know that I was such an open book.”

“It would be too much to say that you are. You simply seem like someone trying their hardest not to show the world how they feel, which only allows the opposite to occur.”

Johnathan thought that sounded vaguely familiar. “Agnes is quite like you. I believe she said the same thing to me once.”

Lord Sutton chuckled, pride shining in his eyes. “Agnes takes after me in many ways. She is intelligent, witty, and strong-willed. And because of her confidence, she has never allowed herself to get close to anyone whom she does not see a future with. Which is why I do find it a bit odd that she has not already decided to call off this wedding.”

“Odd, my lord?” Johnathan echoed, surprised by the viscount’s candor.

“Yes, odd,” Lord Sutton confirmed. He rocked back on his heels, tucking his hands into his pockets. Johnathan had to wonder if he’d already had a few drinks and that was what accounted for his loose tongue, but he seemed very much in his right mind.

“Take no offense, Your Grace, but Agnes and Lord Christopher have no chemistry.”

“One does not need chemistry to be married,” Johnathan couldn’t help but point out.

“That much is true. God knows half of England’s marriages exist on that basis alone. But...I suppose I have always expected her to follow in my footsteps right until the very end. My marriage was a love match and I only assumed that hers would be as well. I understand the differences between the opposite genders and the limitations imposed on both, of course, so I do not suppose it is a bad thing for a lady of her age to marry a kind gentleman who will take care of her. Even if she does not love him.”

“How do you know she does not love him, Your Grace?”

Lord Sutton huffed a soft laugh. His gaze was trained on something across the room. Johnathan followed it and realized he was looking at Agnes, who had found her mother’s side once more.

As if she felt the weight of his eyes, Agnes’ wandering gaze came to rest on Johnathan. He could almost see her shoulder relaxing, her eyes sparkling from the distance. She slowly tilted her head to the side and raised her brows in question, a smile touching her lips.

“She does not love him, Your Grace,” Lord Sutton murmured.

Johnathan couldn’t take his eyes off her. He couldn’t even smile back. Her only smile began to dip as the question in her eyes deepened and suddenly, his legs were moving on their own.

“Pardon me, my lord,” he muttered hastily over his shoulder before making his way over to her.

Whatever Lady Sutton was saying came to a drawling end as he approached but Johnathan didn't spare the viscountess a glance. Now, Agnes looked a little worried, no doubt at the intensity of his look.

There was so much he wanted to say. Despite the audience he had, with Lady Sutton staring between them and Lord Sutton walking up from behind, Johnathan wanted to tell her all the things smoldering in his heart.

Agnes laid a gloved hand atop his arm, stopping him just as he opened his mouth. "Perhaps we should have the conversation in private, Johnathan," she suggested.

"What conversation?" Lady Sutton asked, still looking between them.

Agnes didn't look at her. "With everyone," she said to Johnathan.

He understood her immediately. And even though that wasn't what he'd intended to speak about, he knew why she was suggesting it. Emotions were already too high for this to be made an announcement. Besides, Miss Caroline was already fragile enough as it was.

So he nodded and walked off, intending to gather all the others. It was about time they laid everything to rest.

CHAPTER 30

The moment they all gathered in the parlor next to the ballroom, Agnes flocked to Caroline's side. She slipped her arm through her friend's and found her shaking with fear in her eyes. She knew what was going to happen.

That was the main reason Agnes thought it best that they do this reveal in private. An announcement to the ton was likely to risk the wrath of the earl and public embarrassment to Caroline, which Agnes didn't think she would be able to withstand right now.

Though the look of utter rage and shame on the earl and countess' faces might have made it a little worth it.

Agnes didn't say anything to Caroline. She guided her over to one of the chaise lounges and they both sat. Agnes grasped Caroline's hand tightly in hers to lend her strength. Caroline gripped Agnes' hand so tightly it felt as if it might make her hand go numb.

The others arrived in twos. Paul and Christopher found each other on the way and entered together. Christopher looked a little apprehensive while Paul simply seemed bemused. Behind them was Mary and Solomon, who made it no secret that they hadn't a clue why they were being asked to step away from the ball on such short notice. Mary tried peppering Agnes with questions but Agnes refused to answer any of them.

Lord and Lady Reeds arrived five minutes after, both clearly irritated. Lady Reeds

huffed her way to the sofa while Lord Reeds stood behind her with his arms crossed and a deep scowl on his face.

The last to arrive were Johnathan and the dowager duchess. Agnes hadn't even been aware that the dowager duchess had arrived at the ball. She was dressed rather elegantly in a cream-colored gown, dripping in jewelry. She looked more alive than Agnes had ever seen her. Even as she made her way over to sit next to Christopher, she moved with far more vigor.

Agnes met eyes with Johnathan as he made his way to the hearth. It was brief, but told her everything she needed to know. He was ready to lay it all out in the open.

"I'm sure you are all wondering why I have asked to meet with you on such short notice," Johnathan began, his voice low but commanding. Even with the hum of music coming from the other room, he could easily be heard. "There is something important I wish to tell you all."

"This had better not be what I think it is," Lord Reeds growled from his spot behind the sofa.

Johnathan met his heated glare unflinchingly. "It is, Lord Reeds. I did tell you of my intentions beforehand and I have no reason to go back on my word now."

"You cannot!" Lady Reeds screeched, shooting to her feet. "What will happen to her if you do?"

"Nothing," Johnathan pressed. "I am certain she will be just fine."

"Could someone explain what is going on here?" Solomon spoke up, sounding just a tad irritated.

Johnathan nodded, drawing in a deep breath as if he was trying to center himself. “I shall be blunt then. I will not be marrying Miss Caroline. And my brother will not be marrying Miss Agnes.”

“What?” Mary gasped.

“Like hell you aren’t!” Lord Reeds bellowed. He rounded the sofa, marching to Johnathan in quick, angry strides. Without thinking, Agnes shot to her feet, heart in her throat. But before she could take another step, Christopher was already slipping in between Johnathan and Lord Reeds, putting a hand on the earl’s chest to ward him off.

“Now, my lord,” Christopher said calmly, his voice laced with ice. “There is no need for curses in front of the ladies. Nor is there any need for violence.”

“Out of my way!” Lord Reeds barked, knocking Christopher’s hand aside. “I shan’t let this insult stand! We had an agreement!”

“That we did,” Johnathan responded. To his credit, he sounded calm, unperturbed. Meanwhile, Agnes was trembling with the urge to march right up to the earl and knock him down a peg. “And for breaking that agreement, my lord, I do apologize. Sincerely. It is not honorable of me to go back on my word.”

“If you know you have done such a wrong then you know precisely what you must do to correct it,” Lady Reeds spoke up. She shot to her feet as well, as if she had half a mind to join her husband in the incoming fray.

Johnathan met her eyes and shook his head. “I had every intention of marrying Miss Caroline. But that was before I fell in love with someone else.”

Silence met his words. Only the music of the ballroom wafted in to disturb the quiet.

Agnes watched as everyone turned their attentions to her and she met their eyes one by one with her chin raised. Perhaps she should have wondered why everyone so quickly assumed that it was her but she didn't question it in the moment.

"And I love him," she told them. "We intend to get married."

"What?" Mary gasped, jumping to her feet. Agnes couldn't tell if she was upset or simply shocked. "How could I not have seen this? Oh, but it all makes sense now! You two were always next to each other even though it should have been Lord Christopher with Agnes and His Grace with Caroline. I had only assumed that you two had formed a friendship but...oh dear, how could I have been so blind? I will have to sharpen my skills if I am to make a match with Paul and Miss Rosemarie."

"Mother, please," Paul whined, pinching the bridge of his nose. "I do not see what she and I have anything to do with this situation."

"You two have everything to do with this situation," Mary protested. "I did not notice that my only daughter was falling in love with someone else when it was happening right under my nose. And we were about to let her marry someone else. Oh!" She whirled to Christopher. "My lord, do you..."

Christopher raised both hands, shaking his head. "I am relieved, to be honest. I was not quite ready to be married."

To Agnes' surprise—and everyone else's it seemed—the dowager duchess spoke next. "This is good. You all seem to be in agreement with this arrangement." She looked over at the seething earl and countess and added, "Well, almost everyone."

"I do not care who claims to be in love with whom," Lord Reeds stated vehemently to Johnathan. "You shall marry Caroline and that is the end of that."

“You cannot very well force her down the aisle,” Agnes said. She reclaimed her spot on the chaise lounge next to Caroline, taking her hand again. Caroline was as white as a sheet, but the trembling had stopped.

Lord Reeds turned his blazing eyes to Agnes. “She is my ward. I can do whatever I damn well please.”

Agnes glared at him but the retort that had rushed to the tip of her tongue didn’t take flight when Johnathan said, “I ask you again, Lord Reeds, that you remain civil.”

“Civil?” Lord Reeds bellowed. “You ask me to remain civil when you have made my niece a veritable spinster?”

“She has more than enough chances to be married,” Agnes spoke up again. She couldn’t help herself. Not when Caroline was the topic at hand. “As a matter of fact, there is someone who will be willing to marry her tomorrow if given the chance.”

“Ha!” Lady Reeds laughed coldly. “And who could that be? Another duke?”

Caroline squeezed Agnes’ hand, shaking her head slightly. “Agnes...”

Agnes wanted to say. God knew the urge to reveal the full truth was mounting inside her. But it was not her truth to tell.

Lord Reeds gave her the cut direct, turning his attention back to Johnathan. Agnes tensed when he advanced on Johnathan yet again, even though Christopher was there to put a hand to his chest and ward him off. Lord Reeds batted his hand away but he didn’t try to come any closer. He only said, “You know what will happen if you do this, Your Grace.”

“I know what you will attempt to make happen, Lord Reeds,” Johnathan said. “I have

no intention of allowing it.”

“Oh? And how do you intend to stop me when I march out there and tell everyone the truth of what really happened to the late duke?”

Someone gasped. The dowager duchess swayed on her feet. Thankfully, Paul was standing closely enough to catch her before she fell to the floor.

Everyone’s attention swiveled between the earl and the dowager duchess but Johnathan did not look away from him once. And Agnes did not look away from Johnathan.

This time, Johnathan decided to advance on him. “If you dare to threaten my family one more time, Lord Reeds, I shall ensure that you live to regret it for the rest of your miserable life on this earth. I shan’t dare you to make such a foolish misstep because you and I both know that you are idiotic enough to attempt it so let me make this clear to you. You are not in control here.”

Lord Reeds swallowed. Agnes felt a pang of satisfaction at the way he cowered for a moment before visibly gathering whatever strength he had. His lips thinned, his nostrils flared, his hands clenched and opened at his side. He seemed to be at war with himself and the silence that stretched on following Johnathan’s words only made it more intense.

Instead of saying anything else, he simply turned and began marching towards the door. For a moment, no one stopped him and panic set into Agnes’ heart. Even though she knew that Johnathan meant what he’d said, the earl was still capable of spreading rumors. Rumors that would take time in debunking, that would live in the shadows for the rest of their lives. Agnes knew Johnathan. She knew he wanted to preserve his father’s memory as best as he could.

But she didn't get the chance to stand or stop him because Caroline beat her to it.

"Uncle, wait," she called. "You cannot do this."

Lord Reeds stopped, but only to turn and look at Caroline as if she'd just said the most foolish thing possible. "And why can't I?"

"Because it will not end the way you want it to," Caroline managed to say. "I shan't marry the duke nor the duke's brother. Nor anyone else you match me with."

"You insolent girl," Lady Reeds hissed. "Do you even know what you're saying?"

"I do," Caroline stated, her voice a little stronger. "And I do not care. I cannot marry someone I do not love."

"I have heard enough of this." Lord Reeds turned and continued on his way to the door. Caroline took a small step towards him, squeaking in horror.

But as soon as he opened the door, he drew to a halt. Someone was already on the other end with his hand poised to knock. A man wearing brown tweed breeches and a simple cotton shirt with sensible shoes. A man Agnes recognized instantly despite having never met him before.

This was George, the stable boy.

CHAPTER 31

For some reason, Johnathan's attention was on Agnes. In any other situation it might not have been so odd. Her presence was a beacon in the room. Even though he spoke to others and did not look her way, he was always aware of what she was doing. Of the way she held on to her friend as if she knew that Caroline could not handle the intense situation they were in. Of how quickly she'd jumped to her feet when Lord Reeds stalked over to him as if she'd been more than willing to jump into battle in his defense. Focusing on her throughout his impromptu reveal was one thing but when the mysterious stranger appeared at the door, he didn't expect his attention to remain solely on her rather than him.

Her surprise was what drew him further in. The way she reacted, eyes widening like she'd seen a ghost before sliding to Caroline in apparent worry. Slowly, Johnathan shifted his attention to Caroline and realization hit him like a ton of bricks.

This was the man Caroline was in love with.

In all his scheming, Johnathan had forgotten to ask Agnes about it tonight. He looked back at the man at the door and realized with a start that this was not a well-bred man. No gentleman of society would dare attend a ball wearing such ratty and simple clothing. Nor was his hair properly styled, the brown tresses curling well past his ear in unruly waves. He looked a little out of his element, staring wide-eyed at everyone in the room before he swallowed visibly and straightened his shoulders.

Johnathan looked back at Caroline. She looked just about ready to pass out.

The man spoke at last. “Please pardon the intrusion, my lords and ladies.”

Yes, certainly not a gentleman of society. If his attire hadn’t made that obvious, the way he spoke certainly did.

In the corner of his eye, Johnathan noticed Agnes reaching to take Caroline’s hand once more.

“Who are you?” Lord Reeds demanded, disgust apparent in his voice. He looked over his shoulder at Johnathan. “Is this the sort of company you keep, Your Grace? Your fall from grace surely knows no bounds.”

“There is no need to resort to insults, Lord Reeds,” Lord Sutton admonished sharply. “Clearly this young man has come here to say something.”

Attention returned to the man in question, who was still hovering in the doorway. As if he just noticed that himself, he cleared his throat and stepped into the room, giving Lord Reeds a wide berth as he went by him. His eyes flicked to Caroline and something flashed within them.

“What are you doing here?” To Johnathan’s surprise, it was Caroline who spoke, her voice breathy with fear.

“I could not wait any longer,” the man said. “I could not let this evening pass knowing what was bound to happen.”

“George, you cannot—” Caroline broke off, eyes darting fearfully to Lord Reeds.

But George wasn’t listening. He marched over to her in quick and long strides, taking Caroline’s free hand. “Caroline, I am tired of hiding my true feelings for you. My love for you should be shouted from the rooftops, not hiding away from the eyes of

others. I no longer want us to hide in the shadows.”

“What are you saying?” she murmured softly, eyes wide.

“Caroline, marry me.”

“Are you out of your mind?”

Johnathan tensed, preparing himself to jump in between Lord Reeds and this George person at Lord Reeds’ bark. But the earl didn’t move from where he was. He seemed too taken by his rage to do anything but clench his fists and glare at the two of them.

Lady Reeds appeared more horrified than angry. “Caroline, tell me you have not been involving yourself with this lowborn.”

“Is this the reason you suddenly have the strength to defy me?” Lord Reeds demanded to know. “Because you have allowed yourself to be seduced by a commoner?”

“You do not know him!” Caroline snapped. For a brief moment, her eyes flashed with venom unlike anything Johnathan had ever thought possible for her.

“Oh dear,” Lady Reeds sighed, shaking her head sadly. “I thought you were better than this, Caroline. I thought you were smarter.”

Caroline thinned her lips. For a moment, it looked as if she was about to break down in tears. As if she thought the same thing, Agnes stepped forward, no doubt ready and willing to go toe to toe with Lady Reeds but Caroline stopped her.

She looked directly at her aunt as she said, “You do not know anything about me. In all my years as your ward, you have never once cared to sit and have a conversation

with me. You do not know the things I enjoy, you do not care to listen to my wants and needs. You see me as an opportunity to increase your social standing and because of that, you are willing to pawn me off to anyone with enough prestige and riches to suit your high standards.”

Lady Reeds raised her nose to the air, crossing her arms. “And what is wrong with that?”

“Nothing would have been wrong with it if you were talking to someone that holds the same superficial ideals as you do. But I do not. I do not care to marry someone for riches or security. I do not care about prestige. I care about love.”

“Love?” Lord Reeds laughed humorlessly. “What do you know about love?”

“More than you will ever know!” Caroline stated vehemently. Tears were streaming down her cheeks but her voice did not waver once. “More than you will ever understand. And because of that...because of that I...”

She swallowed and let go of Agnes’ hand to reach for George’s other one. The man looked just about on the verge of tears himself.

“Because of that, I’ve decided that I do not care about the consequences of what I am about to say next,” Caroline said softly. “I love you too, George. And I would be more than happy to become your wife.”

“As if I would allow such a thing!” Lord Reeds bellowed.

He moved quickly, too quickly for Johnathan or Christopher to get to him. Before they knew it, he was upon Caroline and George, yanking George away from Caroline and grabbing him by the collar. He raised a fist and would have sent it straight into George’s face, despite Caroline’s scream for him to stop, had Johnathan not made it

to them in time. Johnathan caught his raised arm to stop the incoming blow.

To his credit, George did not flinch. He faced Lord Reeds' fury with his own.

"Do you expect me to be afraid of you?" George spat. "I could never fear a murderer like you."

Shock slackened Lord Reeds' grip, giving George the chance to push him away.

"Murderer?" Lady Sutton gasped.

"That is a very serious accusation," Lord Sutton pointed out in a rather stern tone of voice.

George looked grimly at him and nodded. "Yes, my lord. And it is not one I would ever make lightly. I had my suspicions for some time but because I was under Lord Reeds' employ, I did not let myself look any further into it. That was before I fell in love with Caroline. Before she told me about the circumstances surrounding her parents death."

This time, it was Agnes who audibly gasped. "Surely you are not suggesting..."

"That Lord Reeds is responsible for the death of Caroline's parents? That is exactly what I am saying."

"Lies!" Lord Reeds exclaimed. "Nothing but slanderous lies!"

"If you have any evidence to support your claim, sir," Christopher spoke up, sounding rather serious, "I think now is the time for you to state them."

"Nothing he says should be taken seriously—" Lady Reeds began hastily but George

spoke over her.

“The first thing of note was what happened before the accident,” he said. “I had been finishing up my work in the stables rather late, far after many of the other servants had retired. I was on my way to my quarters when I noticed someone leaving the house. A rather unsavory character that I have never seen around before. He was being shown out by Lord Reeds himself but they did not seem to be parting on good terms. It seemed Lord Reeds was upset that the man had the gall to show himself at his home while the man was upset with the fact that he had not yet been paid. I did not stay to hear the rest of the conversation, afraid that I would be found, but I did wonder what business Lord Reeds could have with a man of such shady character.”

“That proves nothing,” Lord Reeds protested angrily. Had Johnathan not been standing between them, he didn’t doubt that the earl would attempt lunging at George again to shut him up.

“Admittedly, that does not give us any reason to believe that what you are accusing the earl of may be true,” Lord Sutton stated.

George looked at him and nodded. “I thought the same thing. Even when Caroline arrived a few weeks later, and I heard of the rumors of her parents’ death, I did not think that there was any correlation at first. But then I grew close with Caroline. It was not my intention to. Not at first. I was well aware that a man like me should never make his presence known before a lady like her. But I found myself falling for her before we even exchanged words and when she showed interest in me, I could not get myself to stop. But as we grew closer and she began to confide in me about her parents’ death, the memory of that night came back to me. So I looked around, did a bit of digging, and found the man from that night. I approached him at a pub and got him drunk enough that he did not think twice about boasting about the money he made from causing the death of two nobles. I did not have to ask him who they were. I doubt he even knew. From then on, I knew that the earl had to be the person behind

the accident.”

“Lies!” the earl protested. “Nothing but fabricated lies.”

“I would never lie about something like this!” George barked back. “I could not say a word until I was certain about this, fearing what it may do to Caroline.”

What it was doing to Caroline was no small thing, Johnathan noticed. She was devoid of color, standing so still he wasn’t sure she was breathing. The tears in her eyes ran unhindered, replacing whatever dripped down her chin.

“Uncle, how could you?” she murmured.

“How could you believe anything this man says?” Lord Reeds demanded to know.

“He is clearly trying to turn us against each other.”

“I do not think she needs any help with that,” Paul muttered from his spot by the wall, still holding on to Irene as if he was afraid she would sway again.

Lord Reeds looked helplessly around, his expression moving from angry to defeated. Everyone believed George’s words. It was clear in the silence that followed, the heavy weight that hung in the air. Johnathan just waited for him to crack under the pressure.

“What I did does not matter!” he screeched at last. “They were old anyway! They would have died of consumption or typhoid within the years. I only saved them, and you, Caroline, from the inevitable pain.”

“You killed my parents!” Caroline cried. “Why?”

“She could have none of her own!” Lord Reeds pointed an accusing finger at Lady

Reeds. “You were our only option. And it happened years ago! Surely you cannot be upset about people you have only known half your life.”

“You are horrible!” Agnes gasped.

“Oh, more horrible than your duke?” Lord Reeds asked in a taunting voice. “Has he told you about the things he’d done to cover up his truth?”

“I promise you, Lord Reeds, that I do not care about whatever you plan on saying next.”

Agnes had quite a knack for making the earl grow red with anger. “Then perhaps everyone else would be interested to know. Or perhaps I should march right out into that ballroom and tell everyone that the late duke killed himself because he could not handle all the debt he was in!”

Lord Reeds laughed victoriously, clearly expecting everyone to rally behind him in alarm and disgust at the late duke’s actions. But if they were surprised, they did not show it. At least, Johnathan was not any more aware of it than he was his own simmering rage.

Lord Reeds faltered at the silence that met his words. “Did you not hear me? I said that the late duke?—”

“We heard you, Lord Reeds,” Paul spoke up, his voice cold. “Do you expect us to applaud you for telling us such a thing?”

Johnathan was having a hard time hearing what was being said. Blood roared in his ears, his heart racing with rage. He glared at Lord Reeds, contemplating the consequences of grabbing him by the collar and planting his fist in his cheek.

Irene brushed by him. The sight of her surprised Johnathan enough for him to forget his rage for a moment. Eyes watched her walk by, her stride slow, her hands clenched at her side. She simply approached Lord Reeds without a word.

The resounding sound of her hand across his face sent gasps through the room. Lord Reeds' head snapped to the side, eyes wide with shock. Lady Reeds came running up behind him.

“How dare you!” she screeched.

“How dare you ,” Irene hissed. “You and your husband are nothing but blights on society. I would tell you to leave my home had I not been afraid of the fact that you would abscond from the law after what you’ve done.”

Lord Reeds slowly turned his head to look at Irene. His cheek was rapidly growing redder by the second. “You little?—!”

This time, Johnathan didn't let himself think twice about what he did. He simply acted. His arm cocked backwards and he was upon Lord Reeds before he could get the rest of his inevitably insulting sentence out. It felt incredibly satisfying to feel his knuckles connect against Lord Reeds' flabby jaw. Lady Reeds screamed, flying to her husband's side as he crumpled to the floor.

“Well, it's about time,” Johnathan heard Agnes murmur behind him. He didn't turn, but did smile a little.

“I think we speak for everyone, my lord,” Johnathan said, not taking his eyes off Lord Reeds and his bruising jaw, “when I say that your crimes and misdeeds will not go unpunished tonight. You should be glad we decided to do this privately or else you would have found yourself carted out of here in front of the ton .”

Lord Reeds seemed incapable of speaking. Perhaps the weight of what was about to happen had sunken in. Perhaps it was simply in too much pain. He could only stare up at Johnathan in stunned silence. Meanwhile, Lady Reeds was sobbing as if she'd just been sentenced to the gallows.

“Caroline.”

Johnathan turned to see George taking Caroline's hands once more.

“This is now how I wanted you to find out,” he said, sounding genuinely apologetic.

Caroline was already shaking her head. She sniffled prettily. “It is not your fault. None of this. Had it not been for you, I never would have known, in fact.” She threw her arms around him, stunning Johnathan. “I love you, George. And I'm so sorry I've been so afraid to show it. I love you and I cannot wait to be married to you.”

George picked her up, twirling her around as he laughed happily. It was a rather sweet ending to the horrible ordeal just now.

Johnathan's eyes fell on Agnes once more. He watched as she smiled happily at the couple, then slipped away from them, her eyes lifting to him. Without a word, she made her way to his side.

Her lips parted to speak but the next voice Johnathan heard was not hers.

“It seems we have a lot to discuss, Your Grace,” said Lord Sutton.

Lady Sutton slipped up to his side, sliding her arm around his waist. “But we could wait until after the ball. I did not do all that planning for nothing.”

“I shall be a part of that meeting,” Paul stated, approaching them. He crossed his

arms, looking far more mature than Johnathan had ever witnessed.

“Why would you want to do that?” Agnes asked, sounding surprised.

“You are my sister,” Paul said as if that was reason enough.

Agnes smiled. Johnathan couldn’t help but grin. “I shall have it no other way,” Johnathan said.

“You all should go ahead,” Christopher said. He went to stand next to Lord and Lady Reeds, who had gotten up and made their way over to the closest couch. Lady Reeds was trying to help her husband but Lord Reeds kept hissing at her so that she couldn’t touch him. Christopher gave them a disdainful look.

“You’ve all been through quite a lot,” Christopher went on. “Someone should stay here and ensure that these two do not leave before the constable gets here.”

“If you all do not mind,” Caroline spoke up. She’d wiped her face free of tears and was smiling for the first time that night. “I won’t be returning to the ballroom. For obvious reasons.” She gazed lovingly at George, who gazed lovingly back at her.

“I shall have a maid sent to chaperone then,” Johnathan told her. “A walk through the gardens should be lovely during this time of night.”

Caroline’s smile widened gratefully. “Thank you, Your Grace.”

Finally, he turned to Agnes, taking her hand and tucking it into the crook of his arm. “I think it is about time you allow me that dance you promised me.”

“I would promise you a dozen dances if I thought we could get away with it,” Agnes murmured, a smile on her lips.

“It is my home, Agnes,” Johnathan said to her. They were alone right now for all that it mattered to him. He only had eyes for her. “I can do whatever I want.”

Agnes’ eyes sparkled. “Let us put that to the test then, shall we?”

That was all he needed to hear. Johnathan didn’t spare Lord and Lady Reeds any more of his attention as he went by them. He no longer cared. Now that the truth was out and their sins revealed, Johnathan only wanted to focus on one thing.

Seeing how many dances he could have with Agnes before the ton caught on to the fact that he was hopelessly in love with her. His guess was one, but he was more than willing to test the limits.

EPILOGUE

“I still think you could have tried the blue one but you do look absolutely beautiful.”

Laughter burst from Agnes’ lips without thought. It was decided. The Dowager Duchess of Claymore was one of the funniest people she’d ever had the privilege of knowing.

It was a beautiful thing watching Irene slowly become less and less withdrawn as the days stretched on into weeks. She talked more, laughed more, and proved herself to have rather impish tendencies. Of course, that meant that she and Mary were quick to become friends while everyone else was at the mercy of their incessant teasing.

For the most part, Irene mostly teased Johnathan and Christopher and took every chance she was given to talk about embarrassing moments in their childhood. But recently, beginning first when Irene accompanied Agnes, Mary, and Caroline to the modiste for a dress fitting, she’d begun to turn her teasing to Agnes. Agnes considered that a hallmark in their budding relationship.

And my, was she funny.

“I do not jest,” Irene sighed dramatically, lounging at the chaise lounge by the window. But her eyes sparkled with humor. “Perhaps I shall purchase that dress for you still. As a wedding present. You look far too beautiful in it for us to simply forget it.”

“I fear she will be talking about that dress until you are old and gray.” Mary’s sigh

was laden with fake burden. Agnes saw right through it. Even though the two women had only known each other a short while, they interacted like sisters.

“And what of it?” Irene countered. “Am I wrong in saying that she is absolutely darling in the dress?”

“Certainly not,” Mary agreed with a nod. “But she is even more darling in the one she is wearing now. Is she not, Caroline?”

Caroline, who had been watching the back and forth with a mildly amused expression on Agnes’ bed, straightened in alarm. “I would much rather not get involved,” she said hastily.

“Coward,” Agnes murmured, though loud enough for Caroline to hear and was rewarded with a glare.

Neither Irene nor Mary heard Agne’s comment and seemed content to accept Caroline’s wishes not to be involved. They quickly went back to bickering about the dress. Even the maid styling Agnes’ hair could not hold back her small smile.

Soon enough, Agnes decided to stop listening. Her mind began to wander back over the past few weeks after everything had happened. The night of the engagement ball had been one she would not be able to forget any time soon, she knew. The night had begun strife with tension and had ended with a weight lifted from everyone’s shoulders. And, to give the people what they’d come for, Johnathan had announced their betrothal the moment they re-entered the ballroom that night.

The fact that today they were finally going to be married felt like a dream.

Of course, her parents had not been as upset at being kept in the dark about everything as they wanted them to believe. Solomon did try his best to be the stern

father, trying and failing to intimidate Johnathan.

“If you so much as make her cry, I shall make you regret it,” he’d said during breakfast the morning after the ball.

“Agnes is far more sensitive than she likes to make others think,” he had told Johnathan the same afternoon while they played chess. “So you must take care to watch her moods and her reactions.”

“I cannot believe that she did not tell me,” he’d sighed in disbelief later that night after dinner. “You will be the one taking care of her, Your Grace. I hope you know what a privilege that was.”

Agnes smiled softly at the memory. Her father would be a mess today she knew, as much as he’d prefer the alternative.

Not to Agnes’ surprise, Mary was more excited than dreading. She happily flitted about for the wedding preparations, taking every opportunity she could to state how much she hoped Paul would find a love match as well, much to Paul’s annoyance. Agnes could not remember the last time her family had been this spirited. Even Paul took many opportunities over the past few weeks to bond with Johnathan, mentioning now and again how happy he was to have a brother but how quickly he will denounce that relationship if he hurt Agnes. Who knew Paul could be so overprotective?

“I must say, Mary,” Irene was saying, breaking into Agnes’ reminiscing. “I am happy you decided to host the wedding breakfast. It has been some time since I have hosted anything in society and I was a little daunted by the thought.”

“You need not thank me for it, Irene,” Mary said gently. They were no longer bickering, it seemed. “I am always more than happy to host an event. Not to mention all your help with the wedding preparations made this quite easy for me.”

“Has it? I’m afraid I may not get the chance to do so for some time, since Christopher clearly has no plans of settling down for now.”

“Oh, I’m sure he will find his match soon enough.”

Agnes doubted it, but she was content to remain quiet. She’d never seen Christopher as happy as he was now that he did not have to marry her. She supposed he was planning on enjoying his bachelorhood for a long time still.

“You are more positive than I,” Irene sighed. “But there is always Caroline’s.” She paused, glancing uncertainly at Caroline. “If she would accept my help, that is.”

“I would be honor, Your Grace,” Caroline said quickly.

Irene laughed. “You can call me Irene, my dear. I do think it is about time after everything we have been through.”

Caroline’s smile was bright enough to warm all of England. Agnes was delighted to see it. After learning of what her uncle had done, Caroline had been rightfully upset, even after she’d spent what she’d described as the most romantic stroll through the gardens. It was a lot to handle, Agnes knew. The very same people who had taken her in, people who Caroline had felt a mixture of gratitude and resentment towards, had proven to be the reason she’d become an orphan in the first place. Honestly, Agnes couldn’t believe it herself and yet she was not surprised. She could only imagine how it weighed on Caroline.

Which was why everyone did all they could to make her feel better, in subtle ways. Mary, Irene, and Agnes never left her side. Johnathan was always offering her distractions, whether that may be hearing her play the pianoforte to playing chess. Paul talked incessantly about useless things and, being the polite person Caroline was, she didn’t dare tune him out.

As the weeks went by, Agnes watched Caroline shed the weight of her pain. It helped to know that Lord and Lady Reeds had been sentenced for conspiracy to murder. Mary had swooped in to take Caroline as her ward, since Caroline had no more relatives willing to take her.

George remained by Caroline's side, of course. A constant presence who had followed them to London and received a position from Mary at their London townhouse so that they could remain close. They couldn't be married. Not yet. Not until they worked out how they would be able to do it without too much scrutiny.

But the support they received was unmatched. Even now, Caroline's eyes swam with happy tears.

"Oh, don't cry," Agnes admonished lightly, smiling. "I do not want to see any tears on my wedding day."

"Oh dear." Caroline hastily tried wiping them away, making them all laugh.

"I doubt there will be a dry eye present when the vows are exchanged," Mary said. "Your father may shed a few himself."

"Father?" Agnes repeated incredulously. "I doubt that."

"Would you like to place a bet on it?"

"Mother, that is quite improper of a lady to do."

"Who cares? It is just us, is it not?"

Agnes sighed, stifling her laughter as she stood. Now that the maid was done with her hair, she was finally ready for her wedding.

“Let us not tarry any longer,” she said. “I’m sure everyone is getting impatient waiting for us downstairs.”

“They shall have to wait for as long as they need to for you to be perfect. Let me see you.” Mary stood and made her way over to Agnes. She held her by the shoulders, sweeping her gaze from Agnes’ hair to her feet. “You look absolutely beautiful, my dear.”

“Thank you, Mother. Shall we?”

“Aren’t you nervous?” Caroline asked as they all filed out of the room.

Agnes shook her head. “I thought that I would be, but I am not to my surprise.”

“That’s great,” Caroline said as they linked arms. Behind them, Mary and Irene did the same. “I do not think I will be nervous when George and I are married either.”

“Judging by the way you two look at each other, I am surprised you are patient enough to wait until talk surrounding your aunt and uncle dies down.”

“Oh, I am not,” Caroline assured her with a laugh. “I am hardly keeping it together. But I know that everything will end well so I am holding my tongue about it.” Caroline paused, then added, “I do not think I have properly thanked you for everything you’ve done for me, Agnes.”

“It’s nothing,” Agnes began but Caroline firmly shook her head.

“You did everything you could to help me, before I even realized what you were doing. When you thought I was in love with Christopher, you did everything in your power to ensure we spent time together. When you learned of George, you did not judge me or try to convince me to find someone others might find more suitable. You

simply supported me in any way you could. Had it not been for you, I do not think I would have mustered up the strength to stand up to my uncle and announce my love for George.”

“As I said, Caroline, I did nothing,” Agnes gently told her. “I always knew you had it in you. It was only a matter of time before you realized it yourself. But I shall accept your gratitude all the same.”

“Good, because you deserve it. And you deserve to be happy with the duke. I have no doubt that you will be.”

Agnes didn’t doubt it either. She wasn’t nervous or apprehensive as she drew closer to the gardens, a section of which had been decorated for the small wedding, her heart began tripping over itself in its excitement. They lapsed into silence the closer they came, music already filling the air. The scent of roses was at its strongest this time of the year and served as one of the reasons Mary thought it best that they have the wedding during the fall. Now that the day had come, Agnes was grateful for her mother’s foresight.

At last, the small clearing came into view. Agnes supposed she should have paid keener attention to the decorations, knowing her mother had poured sharp detail into it, but the moment Johnathan appeared, she was all he could see. He straightened when their eyes met, his conversation with the priest ending quickly. Agnes watched his jaw grow slack, watched his gaze run down the length of her. He swallowed, ran his hand down his face, and straightened his shoulders. She might not be nervous but he certainly was.

Solomon appeared at her side as Caroline slipped away to the side. “Are you ready?” he asked her.

Agnes looked up at her father, blinking in surprise. His eyes were rimmed red as if he

had been crying.

“Do not start,” Solomon warned her, facing ahead.

Agnes hid her smile and nodded. “I’m ready.”

He took her arm, clearing his throat. Agnes was tempted to tease him but as they began the walk to where Johnathan and the priest stood, her mind empty.

And she could focus on nothing but him.

She couldn’t believe that she was finally here. A part of her she would never address thought she would never find the love her parents had, that she would never find her match. But as she stood there, gazing into the eyes of a man who had walked through a storm willing and ready to dedicate his life and love to her, Agnes knew she was one of the lucky ones.

When they arrived, Solomon did not move right away. He held on to her, eyes boring into Johnathan. Johnathan met them without a word. For a few seconds, the men only stood there staring at each other, clearly communicating something that could not be understood by anything else. Then Solomon kissed Agnes on the temples before stepping away to join his wife.

“Should I ask?” Agnes murmured to Johnathan, raising a brow.

“Perhaps later,” he suggested. “You look...” He seemed to be at a loss for words, swallowing harshly. Finally, he settled on, “Radiant.”

Agnes’s cheeks warmed as she smiled. “You look rather dashing yourself.”

He took his hand, threading their fingers together before they faced the priest. The

priest glanced down at their hands but said nothing before he began.

“We have gathered here today...”

Agnes wanted it short and sweet. She knew he would recite from the Book of Common Prayers, that a wedding was not a short affair. But now that she was here, she wanted nothing more than for it to be over. For her to become the new Duchess of Claymore and kiss her husband like she had been wont to do for weeks. She itched with urge, mentally urging the priest to speak faster. When she glanced up at Johnathan, he was looking back at her as if he could tell exactly what she was thinking and he wanted the same thing.

“Repeat your vows after me,” the priest said at last.

Agnes felt her heart pounding against her chest as she faced Johnathan. Gazing into her eyes calmed her. He recited the vows with conviction, like every word he spoke was felt in the depth of his soul.

Then it was her turn and she did the same, needing him to understand just how much she planned to love and cherish him for the rest of her life.

When the priest asked Johnathan if he took Agnes to be his wife, he answered before the priest could get the rest of his sentence out. The onlookers laughed. Agnes hardly heard them.

“Do you, Miss Caroline Agnes Parsons, take Johnathan Harken to love and to hold, in sickness and in death, until death do you part?”

She felt tears prick her eyes, her throat constricting, her heart palpitating as she poured every ounce of love in her body into her next two words.

“I do.”

The End?

PROLOGUE

“ S hh, quiet,” Lilian whispered as she and her brother, Matthew, padded across the forest floor. “Or do you want them to check on us already?”

He glanced back at the tree line shading them from their parents’ line of sight. “I can’t imagine they can hear us from here!”

“But they could. I don’t know how you feel, but I’d rather not risk it.”

He rolled his eyes but didn’t say anything as they finally made it to the water. It was a small, clear stream filled with smooth rocks and small fish darting around. The pair shared a last grin and then raced into the cool water.

Matthew went in until the water was almost up to his knees. His shirt sleeves were rolled up to his elbows while he searched the riverbed for interesting rocks.

Lilian was a few feet downstream. She held her skirts above the water, feet sliding along the smooth stones on the bottom of the riverbed. When she made it to the center of the stream, she sighed, wiggling her toes into the mud. Closing her eyes, she turned her face towards the sun and just drank it all in.

As nice as this was, she was looking forward to finally going to London. Every year when they headed to London for the Season, she would watch Rachel get dressed in glamorous gowns before heading with Solomon to lavish balls where she just knew they danced and laughed the whole night through.

And this year, finally, she would get to join them.

Excitement thundered through her at the thought.

Suddenly, something smacked against her back, sending her towards the water. Her eyes flew open, a squeak of surprise slipping from her lips.

Just before the water rushed up to meet her, Matthew caught her by the shoulders, stopping her fall.

“Everything all right over there?” Their mother’s voice came from the small table where she and Solomon, the Viscount Cooke, sat.

They were seated at the table they’d had set up just for the occasion. They were far closer together than would have been publicly acceptable, but in the privacy of their own home, they couldn’t be bothered to worry about propriety. The pair seemed to radiate love and devotion even after decades together.

“Don’t worry, Mother!” Lilian called. “I simply tripped on a root. You know how clumsy I can be.”

She glared as Matthew turned red, narrowly holding back his laughter.

“Well, whatever you’re doing, finish it up and come back over here. We should eat before it gets too much later.”

“We’ll be right there!”

Matthew helped steady her on her feet as they walked back to their shoes. “I’m sorry, I just couldn’t resist!”

“You don’t need to worry. I’m not mad at all.” A grin creased her face. “We both know I’ll get you back soon enough.”

He laughed. “I look forward to seeing you try, Sister dear.”

“Enjoy your pride while you can,” she muttered to herself.

Once she’d laced back up her soft leather shoes, the pair made their way back to the table just as the food was being laid out.

They took their seats across from their parents and started getting their plates ready. Normally, they would have been served by members of staff, but Rachel wanted a quiet day with just the family. As they ate, they talked about what was to come.

“Do you feel ready to meet the ton, Lilian?” Rachel asked, sipping her tea.

“I think so, Mother. I’ve spent so long preparing for this.”

“I know you have. You have nothing to worry about. You will do amazing.”

“Enough serious talk,” Solomon cut in with a bright smile. “Why don’t you tell us some of the things you are most excited about?”

“All of it!” Lilian breathed, eyes shining at the very thought. “I want to meet everyone and make social calls. I want to promenade and of course, go to balls.”

“Your first one is in a few weeks.”

“I know! I simply can’t wait! I have the perfect gown picked out!” she gushed, unable to keep the excitement out of her voice.

“Oh, do you? Which one is it?” Rachel asked.

“The white silk one with the pink and gold embroidery.”

Rachel hummed. “I would have thought the blue one. Perhaps with some silver jewelry and accessories.”

“That one is very nice, but white is very fashionable right now. It is imperative I make a good impression at my first ball. After all, it could be the first time I meet the man I will someday marry.”

“That dress sounds like a lovely choice. You have nothing to worry about. I just know you will positively dazzle them all,” Solomon said with a proud smile.

“Thank you, Father! I hope I’ll make you all proud.”

“Oh, my daughter, you already have. Just find someone who makes you as happy as your mother has made me.”

Lilian smiled behind her tea.

Rachel took this as an opportunity to go on about everyone she was going to introduce Lilian to. With how social and outgoing the woman was, Lilian wouldn’t be surprised if her dance card was full before they even finished lacing her into her gown for that first ball.

“Father,” Matthew said. “When we’re done eating, can we go for a walk?”

“I see no reason why—” His father’s words were abruptly cut off, his face twisting into a mask of pain.

“Darling.” Rachel pressed a hand to his arm. “Darling, what’s wrong?”

He met her eyes and then fell onto the table.

Her scream pierced the air.

Lilian sprang into action. “Matthew, I’m going to go get the physician!”

Heart pounding, she raced from the garden down to the stables. She threw a saddle onto their fastest mare and rode as fast as her hooves could take them.

She raced down the cobblestone streets, the wind whipping her cinnamon hair out of the confines of the bun that held it back from her face.

Finally, she made it to the doctor’s house. Hopping off the horse, she ran up to the door, pounding her knuckles against it hard enough to bruise.

A servant girl swung it open. “Miss Cooke! What are you doing here in such a state?”

“It’s my father. I don’t know what happened, but he needs help, fast.”

“I’ll go get Mr. Smyth. Come in, catch your breath.”

She shook her head. “Please, just get the physician. I need to get back to my father as soon as possible.”

“All right, I’ll go get him.”

The journey back was a blur. It felt like no time at all but also weeks before Lilian found herself pacing outside her parents’ bedroom door. Her father and mother were inside with the physician while Matthew sat on a chair he’d pulled against the wall,

his knee bouncing.

“It feels like they’ve been in there for a long time. Do you think he’s all right?” she asked, chewing on her lip.

Before Matthew could reply, the door opened, and Rachel stepped out. “Your father has suffered from an apoplexy, but he’s all right now. He’s asking to see you. Come inside, you two.”

The pair came inside, standing beside the bed. Solomon was tucked in bed, awake, looking exhausted and drawn.

“Is Father going to be all right?” Lilian asked, voice shaking.

“I’m going to be fine, my sweet girl.” He forced a smile. “But I’m going to need some rest. I’m sorry, my dear, but I think it would be best if we pushed back your debut.”

“Of course, Father. Whatever you need.”

“I’m sorry. I know you must be disappointed. We’ll make sure your debut is everything you deserve when the time comes.”

She shook her head. “How could I even think of it at a time like this? All I care about is your well-being.”

He waved her off. “You’re young. You deserve to have your fun. It’s important you find someone who can make you happy.”

“I fail to see how waiting a year changes any of that.”

“You’re a good girl, Lilian.”

Rachel smiled. “Why don’t you and Matthew let your father rest? Don’t worry, I’ll stay with him.”

They said their goodbyes and headed back into the hall.

Matthew chewed on his lip. “Do you think Father will be all right?”

Lilian forced a smile for her younger brother. “I know he will. The doctor won’t let anything happen to him.”

“Sorry about your debut,” he muttered as they walked down the hall.

She shook her head. “I meant what I said. I don’t care about that. All that matters right now is Father’s health.”

He nodded. “All right.”

Lilian forced a yawn. “I’m rather tired from my ride into town. I think I’m going to go lie down for a while.”

“Of course.” They stopped outside her door. “I’ll see you at dinner?”

Lilian nodded then slipped inside. Only once the door was closed behind her did she let her tears fall.

Emotions crashed over her in a turbulent storm. Her knees buckled, sending her crashing to the ground.

Her father could have died.

Her eyes burned, molten hot tears falling fast down her cheeks. Visions of him cold and still in a coffin flashed through her mind unbidden.

He was alive. He was safe. Her mother was beside him, and Lilian knew she wouldn't let anything happen to him.

Then the selfish disappointment crept in.

She'd been looking forward to her debut her whole life. She would finally be recognized by everyone around her as an adult. It was supposed to be her chance to find a love like the one her parents shared.

She'd spent so long preparing every gown, reticule, shoe, glove, fan, and hairpiece. Who knew if any of it would still fit or be fashionable by next year?

Then came the guilt.

Like a bucket of ice water dumped down her back, it was all she could feel. How could she think about that when her father was ill?

How selfish could she be to be upset about needing to wait a year to wear pretty dresses and go to parties? What kind of daughter would dare to think such a thing?

No, she didn't want it. She didn't want anything that would put more stress on him. She could be patient. She would wait as long as he needed her to.

CHAPTER 1

TWO YEARS LATER

“Did you see what Miss Brighton was wearing to Lady Steel’s ball last night?”

“How could I not!” One of them gave a cruel smile. “A gown like that positively demands attention.”

Lilian tried to keep her expression as natural as she could manage as she forced herself to listen to the women around her prattle on. It was another of the Duchess of Stark’s garden parties, which meant another day spent sitting at the single ladies’ table, gossiping about whatever happened at last night’s ball.

Actually, that wasn’t quite right. It never even got to the point where they would talk about what happened. Usually, they just talked about what everyone was wearing.

This in and of itself wasn’t a problem. Lilian had a deep love of fashion and clothing. If all they wanted was to talk about the latest in fabrics and lace designs, then she would have been happy to partake.

But of course, that was never how this seemed to go.

As she sipped her fragrant tea, Lilian marveled that she ever dreamed about this.

Even though it was only her second Season, she couldn’t wait for it to be over.

“It was absolutely atrocious!” one of them who was long into her third Season, Lady Beatrice Stark, gasped in exaggerated horror.

The only daughter of their host, she had a wide circle of acquaintances in the ton and seemed to represent everything about this place that Lilian longed to escape. She was a tall, slender woman with curly red hair and dark brown eyes. If she had a kinder temperament, she could have been a beautiful woman, but the second someone could have thought so, she opened her mouth.

“Goodness, that yellow! What was she thinking!”

“It seems rather obvious that she wasn’t thinking. Otherwise, why would she ever set foot outside the house!” one of the others eagerly agreed with her.

It didn’t seem to matter what she said, at least three people would agree with her, and this was no exception.

“Not only was it unsightly, but it looked so...” She paused searching for the right word. “Well, we all know she doesn’t have the best sewing skills, but I never would have expected her to try and make her own dress.”

Her horde of sycophants laughed as though she’d said something profoundly funny or clever rather than simply mean-spirited.

Lilian couldn’t help herself. Taking a deep breath, she spoke, “I quite liked the neckline of her dress. I thought the embroidery was lovely.”

Everyone at the table fell silent, eyes flicking between Lilian and Beatrice. After a moment, the red-haired woman laughed.

“Very amusing, Miss Cooke, but we all know you have far better taste than that.

After all, your gowns are always some of the loveliest in the room.”

“That’s kind of you, but I am completely serious. I think Miss Brighton’s dress was charming. She clearly put a lot of time and care into what she wore.”

“Then I fear to see what she would come up with in a rush.”

They erupted in laughter.

Taking a deep breath, Lilian pushed away from the table. “Please excuse me for a moment. I need to stretch my legs.”

“Come now, we’re among friends. You don’t need to worry about what you say here. Give us your honest opinions.”

She got to her feet, holding Lady Beatrice’s gaze. “I have. I think Miss Brighton looked lovely. I, for one, would love to get the name of her dressmaker.”

She spun on her heels, stomping over to the hedge maze. Once she was hidden among its walls, she let out a breath, her smile falling from her face. The hedges were tall, close to seven feet. Most of them were simple greenery, but some had small bursts of flowers nestled among them. There were a handful of benches scattered about where people could sit for private talks, but the whole thing seemed blessedly deserted.

She couldn’t believe this was the life she couldn’t wait for. In less than a year, it was all too clear that everything she’d hoped for was just a fairytale. Even the dream of true love at first sight that she’d once had felt so far away.

As she walked, her thoughts inevitably turned to her father. Solomon wasn’t doing well. He was stable for the moment, but who knew how long it would last?

The doctor cautioned against potential stress and upsets, but here she was now, well into her second Season and still unmarried.

She didn't even have a suitor.

She didn't even have someone she wished was a suitor.

She couldn't remember the last time she felt even a passing interest in any of the men she'd met. The more time crept by, the more her wedding and its accompanying happily ever after seemed less like her future and more like something from a child's storybook.

Lilian was so consumed by her own thoughts that she didn't see anyone coming until she rounded the corner and slammed into a broad male chest.

"Oh, goodness! I'm so sorry," she stammered, quickly fixing her polite smile back on her face and smoothing out her long pale blue skirt. "My apologies. I should have been paying more attention."

He just grunted in response, a deep sound that Lilian felt in her own chest.

That was the last straw. She whipped her head up, but barbs and demands died on her lips when she saw his face.

He was incredibly tall, her head barely coming up to his broad shoulders. He was dressed in a simple dark green jacket with shining gold buttons holding it shut over a white undershirt. The ends of his cravat were held in place by a small gold pin. Dark hair framed a face that would have been pleasant if it wasn't for his expression.

His light blue eyes were hard and narrowed, mouth twisted into a deep scowl. For a moment, she was too stunned to speak, but after a second, she found her voice.

“Excuse me, but I apologized. The polite thing to do would be to accept it then to let me pass!”

He rolled his eyes, cocking his head. “Would it? How odd. I thought the polite thing would be to avoid running into someone in the first place.”

Lilian felt her face flush. “Well, it isn’t as if I did it on purpose!”

“No? Are you sure about that?”

“Why would I want to crash into you?”

The man shrugged. “How should I know? Perhaps you incorrectly thought it would be a good way to strike up a conversation.”

She clenched her hands at her sides. “I fail to see why anyone would want to talk to you!”

“Is that right?”

“It is!”

He stepped closer.

Lilian narrowly resisted the urge to step back.

Leaning in, he whispered, “Then why are you still here?”

“I-I don’t want to be. In fact, I’m about to walk away right now.”

“Then do it.” He stepped away.

Lilian was about to turn to go, but she couldn't stand the smug look on his face. "Why do I need to be the one to go?"

"What?"

"When you think about it, you crashed into me as much as I bumped into you. I apologized, but you've made no acknowledgment of your role in any of this."

"Because I haven't done anything. You said your peace, so why don't you just run along?"

He tried to wave her off, but Lilian crossed her arms. "No!" Her mouth set in a stubborn line. She took a seat on a nearby stone bench. "I don't think I'll be going anywhere, but you are more than welcome to leave if you'd like."

He studied her for a moment before he shrugged, moving to sit beside her.

She hopped to her feet. "What are you doing?"

"I was on my way to sit here when you crashed into me. I see no reason to let you derail my plans."

For a moment, Lilian just stood there, outrage building inside her. Without another word, she spun on her heels and stomped out of the garden.

She could hear the man laughing behind her.

She made her way over to the table where her mother was chatting with some of her friends.

When Rachel saw her face, her smile faltered. "Lilian, is everything all right?"

“I’m afraid I’m getting a bit of a headache. I think I’d like to go home. Perhaps lie down for a bit?”

“But you’ve only just arrived!” the Duchess of Stark frowned.

Rachel turned to her with a dazzling smile. “If Lilian isn’t feeling well, it can’t be helped. I do hate to slip out early. I’ll stop by tomorrow, and we can catch up.” She turned back to her daughter. “Why don’t you head over to the carriage? I’ll be along in a moment.”

Lilian sighed. “Of course. Please try not to take too long.”

She made her way to the front of the house, where the carriage would pull up as soon as her mother started walking over.

It wasn’t that bad. She only kept her waiting for another few minutes.

Once they were on the road, her mother spoke again. “Did something happen?”

Lilian shook her head. “I just have a headache, honest.”

“If this is about your father, he’s doing much better. You don’t need to worry so much.”

“It really is just a headache this time.”

Rachel studied her for a moment then sat back with a sigh. “If you say so, but you should enjoy yourself more. You put too much pressure on yourself.”

“I’ll try to relax more, but I am enjoying myself.” Lilian forced a smile. “You don’t need to worry about me.”

Rachel studied her for a moment then sighed. “Very well. Have you thought about what you’d like to wear tomorrow night?”

“Not yet.”

“Your new dress should be in. Why don’t you wear that? You can even borrow one of my necklaces if you like.”

Lilian forced a smile. “That sounds lovely.”

“Wonderful! I have a few ideas already!”

Lilian found herself nodding along as her mother gushed about what she could wear and who she would dance with. She let herself drift on the pleasant sound of her voice. Her eyes drifted to the window, where she watched the people bustle along the streets.

She couldn’t help but wish she was out there with them.

CHAPTER 2

The second the carriage pulled in front of the stone walls of the Cookes' London home, Lilian almost let out a sigh of relief. The sight of the dark brown stone felt like a balm to her soul.

She gave her mother a tight smile. "Mother, I must admit, my head is still bothering me quite a bit."

Rachel sighed. "You poor dear. Why don't you go lie down for a bit? I'll have someone bring a tray to your room for dinner. That way, you can get some rest."

"Father won't be disappointed to miss me at dinner?"

"I'll let him know you feel unwell. If you're worried, you can make it up to him by spending some time with him tomorrow morning."

Lilian smiled. "Thank you, Mother."

She all but ran to her room. The second the door was shut behind her, she let out a shaky breath.

As she paced around the small space, furnished in pale wood and baby blue furnishings, Lilian found herself wondering how much longer she could manage to keep this up. She paused by her birch wood writing desk. She wished she had a friend she could reach out to, someone she could talk to. Surely, she couldn't be the only lady to feel this way?

None of this was how she thought her life would go. She sat on the small stool with its silk cushion at her writing desk with a sigh.

None of this felt like the fairytale she'd been expecting.

Lilian found herself drawn back to the tales her mother always told her about her own Season.

When Lilian and Matthew were young, their parents would often tell the story as the family sat together in the parlor. She couldn't have been more than ten at the time. Matthew had just turned seven.

Solomon and Rachel were sitting on a small dark red sofa. The pair was so close that the skirt of Rachel's dress draped over his thigh. Lilian and Matthew sat at their feet. Matthew had a few blocks he was toying with, but Lilian looked up at them. Her attention was fixed on every word falling from her mother's lips.

"I was in my first Season when I met your father." Rachel gave a dreamy smile as the memories crept in. "It was my first ball, actually. I never would have dreamed I'd meet the man who would become my husband so fast."

"I can still picture the way you looked the moment you stepped into the ballroom in that emerald green dress." Solomon took her hand. "You were more dazzling than the diamonds around your neck, my darling. The second you stepped into the room, every eye was drawn to you. No one had ever seen a more beautiful sight."

She giggled. "You are too sweet, my sweet."

"I saw her from across the hall and was immediately taken with her. I asked around until I found someone who could make the appropriate introductions. It seemed like I had to ask everyone I knew, but finally, I got her name. Rachel. So, I asked her for a

dance.”

“Unfortunately, my mother had ensured I’d have a full dance card for my first ball.”

“But I wasn’t discouraged. Every time she stepped off the dance floor, I swooped in. If we couldn’t dance, we could at least talk.”

“And that was more than enough. By the time I went home that night, I was utterly besotted.”

“As was I.”

“Then what happened?” Lilian bounced. She knew the answer. She’d heard it before, but it always just made her so excited.

“I went to call on her the next day.” Solomon leaned closer to his daughter. “And I danced with her as often as was appropriate. I was on her dance card every night, sometimes multiple times a night when appropriate. A few months later, I asked for her hand.”

Lilian gasped.

Rachel chuckled. “We had a short engagement. We were both just so in love that we couldn’t wait to start our lives together. My mother was disappointed that she didn’t even have a month to plan, but it was the best decision I ever made.”

“I couldn’t agree more, darling.”

“Daisy,” Rachel called out to the children’s governess.

The woman came forward in her simple back dress. “Yes, My Lady?”

“Can you take the children to the nursery for the evening? Lord Cooke and I are going to go into the gardens for a walk.”

“Yes, My Lady. Come on, children.”

Daisy took their hands, and Lilian and Matthew were taken back to their nursery. Lilian couldn't help the way she chattered as they walked along.

“I can't wait until I get to go to balls!” she gushed to her governess. “I just know I'm going to have a great love story of my own.”

“I'm glad you are so excited, but there's no need to rush. You'll be there before you know it, so you should enjoy your childhood.”

“What's there to enjoy?” She pouted. “All I do is wait around until I'm old enough to make my debut. That's when my life will really begin!”

“Of course.”

“Why else would they make a point to tell us their story every month? It will be the most important time of my life.”

“I'm sure you will be very beautiful when the time comes, but for now, try and get some sleep.”

“How am I supposed to sleep after this?”

“I'm sure you will manage.”

As she lay there, Lilian couldn't help but imagine herself in beautiful gowns, swirling around the dance floor with a myriad of gentlemen as she searched for her true love.

Now, it seemed more and more likely that it simply was never going to happen for her.

Maybe it didn't happen for anyone.

Maybe what her parents got was simply a fluke.

A stroke of luck or strike of lightning.

And they do say lightning never strikes the same spot twice, so why would love bless the same family two generations in a row?

She spent a few hours wallowing, slumped on her bed. At some point, a maid knocked on the door.

Lilian let her in.

"Lady Cooke asked me to bring you dinner," the maid said, setting a tray in front of her with simple food. "She also asked me to see if you needed any medicine or herbs."

Lilian shook her head. "I'll be all right. I simply need rest, but thank you."

"The cook made roast potatoes. She said they are always a favorite of yours."

Lilian smiled. "They are. Please thank her for me."

"Of course, Ma'am." The maid bobbed a quick curtsy and then left her alone.

Lilian sighed, perching on the edge of her bed. She picked at the thick slice of bread, and even managed a few small pieces of chicken, but she found she didn't have an

appetite.

She sighed.

If she was honest, she knew what she truly wanted—no, needed to feel better.

Once the sun was starting to set, she knew she needed to get out of there. Getting to her feet, she slipped down the hall. Every now and then, she glanced around to make sure no one had seen her. Finally, she found herself knocking on her brother's door.

After a moment, Matthew answered the door. When he saw her face, he frowned, crossed his arms, and rolled his eyes. “Not tonight,” he huffed out.

“Oh, come on! Why not?”

He scoffed. “Didn’t you have a headache you needed to nurse? You didn’t seem to be in a fit state when you came home. Heavens, you even missed dinner. And we had roasted potatoes! That simply isn’t like you, Sister dear.”

“Yes, I was feeling quite poorly when we initially returned, but I assure you, I am feeling much better now! In fact, I think the only thing I need to feel back to normal is a little bit of fresh air. What do you say?”

He crossed his arms with a deep sigh before shaking his head. “I already told you. The answer is no.”

“Come now,” she groaned. “You can’t pretend you don’t want to.”

“I don’t.”

“Well, I don’t believe you!”

“You don’t have to. Good night, Lilian.” He turned and went to shut the door.

“Wait!” Her hands shot out to grab the door, only for it to shut on her thumb.

He groaned, jerking the door open as he turned back to her. “Why would you do that? Is your hand all right?”

“My hand is fine, and I did it so you wouldn’t be able to shut the door on me! I wasn’t done trying to convince you.”

“You won’t be able to convince me. Just drop it and go to bed before you hurt yourself again.”

“Come on Matthew,” she pleaded, trying to wiggle her way into his room even as he blocked her easily with his body. “Just for a little while? If you must, consider it returning the favor for covering for your breaking the vase?—”

“You swore to never speak of that!”

A grin spread across her face. “Did I? Then you’d better buy my silence before I change my mind.”

He groaned. “Very well, you harpy! You win!”

She grinned from ear to ear as he stormed back inside his room. Matthew knelt down in front of a large wooden chest, rifling through it for a moment. Finally, he tossed a bundle at Lilian.

“There you are! Are you satisfied?”

“Positively delighted.”

“Be ready in ten minutes!” he said before shutting his door.

Lilian grinned. Holding the bundle to her chest, she couldn’t help but do a little wiggle before making her way down the hall. She all but ran back to her room. Locking the door behind her, she carefully unwrapped the bundle in her arms. The dress inside was far simpler than what she wore on a daily basis, made of dark gray cotton.

Perfect to wear if one was trying to blend in.

Pulling it on felt in some ways like putting on a costume but also like shedding the skin she had no choice but to wear as she moved through the ton. She could never wear it in her real life, but she felt more herself in the dress than she ever did in a silk ballgown.

Once she had changed, she slipped out her bedroom window. As quietly as she could, she climbed down the vines outside her window.

Matthew was waiting for her, a wide grin on his face, dressed in his own simple disguise. With bright eyes, they made their way out of Mayfair until the houses got simpler and the air lighter.

As they walked through the city streets, Matthew spoke, “So do you want to tell me why you were so desperate to get out today?”

Lilian shrugged. “I just needed some time away from it all.”

“You’re really going to stand there and tell me nothing happened? You think I’m going to believe that?”

She sighed. “It was nothing that doesn’t happen every day. I suppose I should be

more used to things by now.”

“Ah, yes,” he groaned. “That explains everything. I’m so glad you felt comfortable enough to open up to me.”

Lilian crossed her arms. “I’d rather not talk about this. We come out here to get away from it all. I’d rather not do this at the moment.”

“Fine, I’ll leave it be, but you should talk to someone about whatever is going on. Maybe you could talk to Mother. She surely must have been where you are. I know she was only out for a Season before she got married, but she was still out.”

Lilian shook her head. She didn’t understand what he was missing. She couldn’t say anything because nothing was wrong.

Well, that wasn’t quite true. She was what was wrong. She didn’t belong among the other women of the ton; no matter how hard she tried, she just didn’t fit.

She had tried for well over a year and a half to fit what they wanted. She changed her hair. Talked less about her hobbies. She even changed the subjects of her embroidery from animals and fish to more typical and mundane things like flowers, only indulging in the occasional bird.

She was so consumed by her thoughts that she hadn’t realized she was drifting away from Matthew until it was too late.

CHAPTER 3

Lilian's heart pounded in her chest as she walked along the streets. The darkness of the night was creeping in, and the streets were starting to empty. The air grew cold and heavy as she rushed along the streets.

She needed to find Matthew.

They needed to get back.

If they didn't hurry, someone could notice they were gone.

Their mother would be so upset. Their poor father, his heart. The stress he would be under if he knew they weren't home, safe in their beds.

Alone and lost, the houses and buildings soon gave way to the open air of the docks. Ships sat in the bay, ready to ship out their cargo.

She could feel eyes on her as she moved. Her heart pounded with each step. She didn't feel safe here. She needed to find Matthew. She needed to get home.

Taking a deep breath, she pushed on.

When she rounded the corner, what she saw made her freeze, blood turning to ice in her veins.

A group of men were gathered around another smaller man. Most of them had

weapons, and one of them, standing just behind the line of men, had a thick scarf pulled up to cover his face.

She should run. She should get out of there before they noticed her.

But she couldn't move. Terror locked every muscle of her body in place. All she could do was watch the scene unfold before her.

"You brought this on yourself, Jacob," the man with the scarf spoke. He sighed, tapping a metal rod against his gloved palm. "You should have just given me the money when I asked nicely."

"Please, I-I'll get you your money. I just need more time!"

The man sighed, shaking his head. "It's too late, Jacob. I needed my money last week. I've given you an extension before, and it wasn't enough time. Why would this time be any different? I need to think about the future."

"Next week, I promise!"

He clicked his tongue. "Sounds like you should have thought more about your own future too."

Then, before Lilian could be sure what she was seeing, the man they were surrounding launched himself at the leader. To her shock, he made contact with the man, and for a moment his scarf slipped down.

Despite the situation, or maybe even because of it, the man wore a cruel smirk. His piercing blue eyes seemed to glow in the fading light. It couldn't have been longer than a second. No sooner had she gotten a glimpse of his face than he grabbed the scarf, pulling it back into place as he let out a dark laugh.

“Take him away, boys. I’ll deal with him later.”

“No! No, please,” the man begged, but his pleas fell on dead ears.

One of the men hit him over the head with something, and the man fell to the ground.

Lilian watched in horror as his limp body was carried off. Hands shaking, she backed down an ally.

She felt sick. Her stomach roiled. Gasping for air, she kept moving deeper into the ally, eyes still locked on the opening and the danger mere feet away.

Suddenly, her back connected with a firm chest.

She opened her mouth to scream, only to be silenced when a hand clamped over her mouth.

“You’re safe. It’s only me. Now, be quiet. You don’t want any of them to hear you, do you?”

At the sound of the familiar voice, her fear drained away, only to be replaced by annoyance. Taking a deep breath, she shook her head.

“I’m going to uncover your mouth now. I need you to stay calm.”

The second he released her, Lilian whirled around to come face to face with that awful man from the garden party. “What on earth are you doing here?” she whispered, crossing her arms.

“Me?” he scoffed. “I should be asking you this. I thought you were a proper lady, and yet here you are, skulking about in a back alley near the docks.”

“Skulking! I wasn’t skulking!”

“Then what were you doing?”

“I—I—” Her voice broke.

He sighed, dragging a hand down his face. “I suppose it doesn’t matter either way. Let’s just get you home. Follow me, I’ll help you find your way back.”

“What makes you think I’m lost?”

He snorted. “Because I have eyes.”

She flushed, looking away. “Fine, let’s say I am, why would you want to help me anyway?”

“I don’t.”

“What!?”

He continued before she could say anything else. “That doesn’t mean I want to leave you here to get hurt. And if we stay here, it’s only a matter of time before one of b—one of his men finds you.”

Her hands clenched into fists.

“Besides, and be honest, if I don’t help you, would you be able to find your way back on your own?”

She wanted to scream. She wanted to tell him she didn’t need his help. That she would find her way back on her own, thank you very much.

But as much as she hated to admit it, he was right.

“That’s what I thought. Come on.” He started walking.

“You don’t even know where I live.” She pouted.

“I have an idea what part of town it’s in.”

She huffed and allowed them to lapse into silence.

It didn’t last long, however.

Her arms crossed over her chest, she grumbled, “And what should I call my gallant savior?”

“I fail to see why you need to call me anything,” he said as they left the docks and returned to town.

She glared, chasing after him. “Perhaps because it’s polite, or so we can talk while we make our way back.”

“We don’t need to talk.”

“You really won’t even tell me your name?”

“Why would I? You don’t need it.”

“Perhaps not, but I would like it.”

He didn’t respond.

“You didn’t ask for my name either.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“That’s rather rude. You should.”

“I’d rather not.”

“So, you don’t want my name, you don’t want to talk, and you won’t even tell me yours.” She pouted. “I don’t understand why you’re being so rude.”

He sighed. “If I tell you my name, will you be quiet?”

Lilian hummed. “I suppose I’ll consider it.

“Fine, I am Frederic Lockhart.”

“And I am Lilian Cooke.”

“How nice for you.”

“It is.”

Finally, her surroundings became familiar once more. She let out a sigh of relief when her house could be seen in the distance.

“I can make my way back on my own from here.”

He hesitated. “Are you sure? I can walk you to the door.”

“No!” she said a bit too loudly. She couldn’t come in through the front door. Her mother might see them. “I-I mean I think it would be best if I walked alone from here, but thank you for walking me back. That was very kind of you, Frederic Lockhart.”

He grimaced. “There’s no need to thank me.”

“I’m inclined to disagree.”

“If you want to show your gratitude, then do everyone a favor and stay far away from the docks in the future.”

“Honestly! It wasn’t as if I intended to end up there!” She crossed her arms.

Frederic blinked at her in shock. “That makes it worse. So much worse. You see how that’s worse, don’t you?”

She grimaced, looking away. “Well, thank you for walking me back. I’d say you were lovely company, but it feels wrong to deceive you.”

“That’s rather funny. I was about to say the same thing.”

“Well then, I won’t say I hope to see you again either. I hope you have a mediocre evening.”

She spun on her heels and stomped the remaining distance home. In the yard, Matthew raced up to her with a relieved sigh.

“Thank God you made it back safely! When we got separated, I tried to find you, but I couldn’t. Where did you go?”

“It doesn’t matter. I made my way back. Let’s just get inside before they notice we are gone.”