



# A Duchess Worth Ruining (Saved by Scandal #1)

**Author:** *Arabella Wells*

**Category:** Historical

**Description:** "Do you even know what it means to be ruined, my lady?"

Evelyn has no interest in marriage. Not after her sister ran off with her betrothed. So, when her meddling mother tries to force her into one, she claims to have already been ruined.

By a dead man...

Except, Duke Robert is very much alive, and utterly furious to have his name dragged through the mud. But Evelyn proves to be the key to finding who is responsible for his parents' death.

So he marries her, only to be consumed by thoughts of his wife, and how to make her blush next.

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

**Total Pages (Source):** 36

## Chapter One

“O h, for heaven’s sake, six children?” Evelyn did not so much as glance up from the reticule she was embroidering, her needle slipping smoothly through the velvet like a knife through butter. “Surely you jest, Mama.”

Lady Brimwood did not jest.

She stood in the middle of the drawing room with her cheeks flushed and her bonnet utterly askew. Her gloves were still dangling from one hand as though she had burst through the front door and never quite finished the task of undressing.

“Evelyn, I am serious. Lord Wimberly is a most respectable gentleman. Wealthy, industrious, God-fearing, and yes, a widower but with an excellent reputation and even more excellent prospects still ahead of him. Your father has entered into a new investment with him. This union would solidify a most favorable alliance.”

“I have no desire to wed an alliance,” Evelyn said calmly, carefully tying off a pale gold thread. “Least of all one that requires me to memorize the names and dietary peculiarities of six children. Do they all reside in one nursery, or have they colonized the west wing?”

Her mother wrung her gloves. “You cannot keep refusing every sensible match. You are not getting any younger, and this... this is not just any proposal. Lord Wimberly is a solution, Evelyn.”

“A solution to what, exactly, Mama?” Evelyn raised a brow at her hoop. “The terrible

scandal of an unmarried daughter who reads Pamela without shame and wears last year's silk slippers? Shall I hang myself in the orangery and be done with it?"

"Evelyn!"

"Well, you must admit," she paused, tilting her head to examine her stitching, "it would be easier to manage than six children and Lord Wimberly's nightly prayers."

Lady Brimwood began to pace, her voice rising with each step. "He is kind. And generous! And he would make room for you in his household. You would have your own rooms. You would never want for anything—servants, respectability, a place in society again. You must be practical about this."

"I am practical," Evelyn said with a smile that did not reach her eyes.

"That is why I know precisely what I would become in that marriage. An ornament. A governess with embroidery privileges. A warm shoulder for Lord Wimberly to weep upon when he remembers his late wife and the horror of trying to keep young boys from setting fire to the stables."

"You would have a home."

"I already have a home." She returned to her needle, voice maddeningly light. "A tolerable one though the mornings are rather noisy when Papa yells at the butler."

Her mother's face crumpled, the fight bleeding out of her.

"You think you are untouchable, Evelyn. But you are alone. And you may think it amusing now to reject every gentleman who does not sparkle with poetry and grand declarations, but when the years pass, when beauty fades, when all the friends you have are married?—"

“Oh, Mama.” Evelyn sighed. “Do stop. You’ll frighten the footman.”

“I will arrange for Lord Wimberly to call on Tuesday,” her mother stated with her voice full of injured dignity. “I expect you to at least be presentable.”

“I shall wear mourning,” Evelyn said sweetly. “For my liberty.”

Slowly, like a woman surrendering something heavy, her mother crossed the room and sat across from her daughter. Her skirts whispered as she settled into the chair, and the silence between them stretched taut.

Evelyn felt it, a shift in the air. She looked up, needle paused mid-stitch. Her mother was staring at her, not with frustration nor the usual exasperated concern but something quieter, something that was worn and worn-through.

“I was eighteen when I married your father,” Lady Brimwood divulged. “I did not know him. I had spoken to him three times before the banns were read.”

Evelyn blinked. “You always said it was a perfectly respectable match.”

“It was,” her mother said with a tight smile. “He was the eldest son, and I was pretty enough, and my dowry was large enough, and that was enough.” She looked down at her gloves, twisting them slowly in her lap. “But I never loved him. Not truly. Not the way a girl dreams of loving.”

Evelyn felt her heart catch, but she knew that this was all a charade. It was not a tender moment between a mother and a daughter but rather an attempt to get her to do what was expected of her.

“And yet I gave him everything. My youth. My body. My children. I made a life with him because I had to. Because my father arranged it, and my mother wept with relief.

Because it was what we did, Evelyn. We were not asked what we wanted. We did what was necessary.”

She looked up now. “You think I am cruel for urging you toward Lord Wimberly. I know you do. But I look at you, my clever, difficult girl, and I wonder if you understand how quickly time moves when no one calls you beautiful anymore. When people stop caring what you read or what you think or whether you’ve eaten breakfast. When the rooms get quiet. ”

Evelyn listened. Her fingers stopped working.

“I want you safe,” her mother whispered.

“I want you cared for. Not dependent on your brother’s charity when your father is gone or shunted into some relative’s attic like an old chair no one knows what to do with.

I know Lord Wimberly is not a fairytale, but he is a man who will give you a household, a name, a place in the world. You will never be left behind.”

“I’m not you,” Evelyn said softly. “And I don’t think I’m strong enough to live like you did. To make do with enough. I want something more.”

Her mother gave a laugh that sounded almost like a sob. “Then you’d better marry a poet, darling. Or a fool. Because men who love like that are rare, and they don’t always stay.”

Evelyn smiled. “Oh, but I have the perfect solution to that. I do not wish to marry. At all.”

For a moment, her mother only stared. Then, with a gasp, she shot to her feet as if

stung. “Do not be absurd!”

Evelyn arched a brow. “I’m never absurd before tea.”

“Do not jest with me!” Her mother’s voice cracked, and she began to pace as her skirts rustled furiously. “You cannot mean it. You cannot truly... I mean, Evelyn, it is unnatural. What would people say? What would become of you?”

“I should think,” Evelyn said, returning to her embroidery hoop with infuriating composure, “that people will say I am a spinster and be done with it. They are already saying it, no doubt, in much less charming words.”

“Spinster?” Lady Brimwood repeated the word like it were an illness. “You would choose such a thing? To grow old alone, without a husband’s name or children of your own? To live in the margins of other people’s households like some... some governess or maiden aunt?”

“Better an honest maiden aunt than a wife with an aching soul,” Evelyn said lightly, adjusting a stitch. “And who says I’ll be anyone’s charity case? I have my own plans.”

“Plans?” Her mother’s eyes flashed. “Embroidery and stubbornness are not plans!”

Evelyn laughed, and it nearly drove her mother to collapse onto the nearest ottoman.

“Mama, I adore you, but truly, listen to yourself. You speak as if unmarried women vanish into fog the moment they reach five-and-twenty. I am not declaring myself a nun. I shall have friends, and a garden and a room with good light. I shall read what I like, write what I like, and if I’m very lucky, scandalize at least two neighbors a year. Doesn’t that sound lovely?”

“It sounds mad,” Lady Brimwood cried. “You are still young, Evelyn! You could have so much... you could still marry well!”

“Well, I could also still fall into the duck pond and catch influenza, but we don’t plan around maybes , do we?”

Lady Brimwood made a sound between a sigh and a growl. “Do not make sport of this, Evelyn. You are twenty years old. The season has come and gone twice since?—”

“Yes, yes,” Evelyn interrupted, snipping a thread with delicate precision. “Since my sister’s dramatic departure from civility and my own ruinous encounter with the Viscount of Forth. I remember it perfectly, thank you. A shining chapter in the Ellory family ledger.”

Lady Brimwood stared at her daughter across the drawing room, breathing hard. Her hands trembled in her lap until, all at once, they stilled.

And then, her voice came, very quietly. “Do you know why I want this marriage for you, Evelyn?”

Evelyn didn’t look up. She was carefully threading a new needle, her lips pursed in concentration, too calm by half.

Her mother’s voice didn’t only rise, it sharpened. “Because I have not seen your sister since the day she ran off to Gretna Green.”

Eleanor’s needle paused mid-air.

“She writes,” Lady Brimwood went on louder now, each word spat as though it burned her tongue. “But she will not come home. She will not visit. She will not so

much as pass through London for fear of your scorn and your silence. Because you made it clear you would not forgive her.”

Evelyn looked up slowly. Her hands lowered. Her face had gone pale, the color draining from her so fast it left only steel behind.

“That is not my doing,” she replied in a voice flat and cold. “She ran off with the man who was courting me . And you would now have me clap and curtsy and call it love?”

“She does love him!” Lady Brimwood cried. “And you... what did you have with him, truly? A few weeks of compliments and dances? He never asked for your hand. He never even wrote.”

Evelyn stood abruptly, the embroidery hoop slipping from her lap and landing on the rug with a dull thud .

“He never wrote,” she echoed, and her voice cracked just for a moment before she caught it again. “No. He never wrote because he was too busy stealing my sister in the dead of night.”

“She was the one with no prospects,” her mother shouted. “She was the one fading in the drawing room, season after season, while you basked in attention and suitors and admiration. And now you have the audacity to act as if you were the one betrayed.”

“I was betrayed,” Evelyn said.

There was a horrible silence.

Lady Brimwood was still trembling when she found her words. “Well, it is time you put your feelings aside. The world does not revolve around your heartbreak, Evelyn.”



Evelyn frowned. “You mistake my heartbreak with leftover affection for the Viscount, but it has never been about him, Mama. The sole cause of my heartbreak is Matilda’s doing.”

“But she is your sister. And two years are long enough to nurse a grudge.”

Evelyn bent slowly, retrieving her embroidery with steady fingers. She smoothed the fabric with delicate care, like a woman preparing to leave a wake.

“I see,” her mother said. “You will regret this, you know. Now, you have your youth, your beauty and your virtue.”

“Oh, but that is exactly the point, Mama. I don’t.

” She paused just for a moment, relishing the look of surprise on her mother’s face.

“I have already been ruined by the Duke of Aberon. And if you continue to force my hand, I shall inform every man in the ton that a dead man, who will never be able to make it right, stole my virtue. So, I shall remain forever ruined.”

## Page 2

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### Chapter Two

“ G od save me from ribbons and fools,” muttered Robert Firming, the Duke of Aberon.

He was just reining in his black stallion at the top of the gravel path with his boots speckled with mud and his coat collar turned high against the wind.

He sat astride the beast like a storm on the verge of breaking, broad-shouldered, black-clad, and glaring murderously down the drive at the source of his sudden, specific loathing.

A carriage.

A very pink carriage.

No... worse. A confection of a thing. Gilded trim, white lacquered wheels, a flourish of swan-feather plumes rising absurdly from the crest, and more lace stuffed in the windows than belonged in a respectable linen press.

It was the sort of vehicle that looked less like it belonged on the road and more like it ought to be served at tea with a sugar spoon and lemon.

It sat there, all smug and floral at the front of his estate, sullyng the drive like a stray bonnet left on a hunting field.

Robert narrowed his eyes. He had been out riding since dawn, inspecting the fences

in the south fields, noting a patch of rot in the mill shed. His morning had been quiet. More importantly, it was peaceful. He had spoken to no one but his horse, and his horse, blessedly, never answered back.

And now this .

He clicked his tongue and urged the stallion forward, gravel crunching beneath hooves, wind stirring the black edges of his coat. His jaw clenched tighter with every yard he drew closer to the offending monstrosity.

There was a crest on the door. It was horrifyingly dainty, overwrought, floral, and as the horse passed beside it, he caught a glimpse of lace-gloved fingers adjusting the curtains from within.

“Hellfire and hens’ teeth,” Robert growled under his breath.

A lady . Of course.

He had just handed the reins of his horse to a stable boy when the carriage door burst open. What stepped down was not a lace- swaddled debutante or a breathless socialite... No. It was a fire storm.

A woman in her middle years, richly dressed in violet silk and diamonds far too fine for a country confrontation, hit the gravel with the fury of divine reckoning. Her feathers bobbed, her curls trembled with indignation, and her mouth opened with all the righteous rage of a theatre tragedy.

“How dare you!” she cried loudly, as though she had just caught him personally setting fire to Westminster Abbey. “How dare you!”

Robert blinked once.

She advanced like a frigate in full sail, lace flying, parasol clutched in one white-gloved hand like a sabre. “You think you can do as you please because of your title? Because you live in this grim fortress with your sullen horse and your even sulkier disposition?”

His brow arched slightly. He had not spoken a word. What’s more, he had absolutely no idea what she was ranting about. Yet, she was not done. In fact, she was far from it.

“My daughter is ruined — ruined ! And do you think we’ve not heard of you hiding away here, making everyone believe you have long departed? Do you think the world is so very blind to your brooding silences and your midnight habits and your—your disregard for common decency?”

Robert stared at her.

“I ought to call down every decent father and brother in Christendom to beat your wretched hide bloody for what you’ve done,” she went on, pacing and utterly incensed. “To have taken everything from her, her reputation, her very future! For shame!”

He felt the corner of his eye twitch in reaction to the woman waving her parasol like a judge’s gavel as her voice reached its full operatic peak.

“Do you think your name protects you? That your mourning cloak excuses your behavior? You may be a duke, sir, but you are not above honor!”

He had been rooted, stunned even, and completely too taken aback by the whirlwind of silks and rage to interrupt. But now, finally, comprehension dawned.

That was when a shadow passed across his face. It was not confusion, nor guilt. It

was mere annoyance.

He lifted one gloved hand.

And miraculously, like some primal command too old for words, the effect was immediate. The woman's tirade caught in her throat like a bird hitting glass.

He had already realized that he did not recognize her face. Beyond a vague recollection of lace, pearls, and shrill laughter from some long-ago gathering, she could have been any lady from any place he accidentally happened to frequent. And he most certainly did not know her daughter.

Ruined? He had not so much as spoken to a young lady in... years. Not willingly at any rate. His brow creased slightly, as if the lines of her outrage had to be translated into a language he had no wish to learn.

Still, he straightened. Politeness, after all, cost less than scandal.

"You, dear lady, have arrived uninvited to my estate, hurling accusations with the force of a cavalry charge, and I am now left to stand here and piece together what crime I am meant to have committed."

Her mouth opened again, but something had shifted in her eyes. A flicker of hesitation.

Ah, there it was.

She had just remembered that she was not speaking to some penniless rake or minor baron's son but to a duke in his own drive, nonetheless, with the full height of Aberon Hall behind him and a stable full of servants at his back.

Robert let the silence stretch.

Then, with a faint, cold incline of his head, he added, “Mrs. Hargrave will show you to the drawing room. I shall join you... momentarily.”

The woman pressed her lips together. The fire in her cheeks had not faded, but the blaze had dimmed into something more tightly controlled, almost more calculating. She gave a sharp, stiff nod, gathered what remained of her dignity, and swept into the house without another word.

The wind stirred his coat again as the door shut behind her.

Robert remained where he was, gloved hands resting behind his back.

A low, irritated sigh escaped him as he turned his gaze out over the long gravel path.

He had meant only to inspect the fencing.

Ride the south edge. Return for breakfast and silence and a few blessed hours with no one expecting anything of him.

Instead, a pink carriage, a shrieking matron, and now some imagined scandal involving a daughter he could not name.

He scowled, deeply. “What in the devil’s name ,” he muttered to himself, “happened to my peaceful bloody day?”

Several minutes later, his boots made no sound as he entered the drawing room.

The air inside was thick with rose perfume and agitation.

The woman was not seated. Instead, she was shifting from foot to foot like a woman trying to decide whether to faint or take command of a cavalry regiment.

She had removed her gloves but not her bonnet.

It seemed to be an unspoken signal of battle-readiness, and Robert noted it with dry amusement.

Still, he said nothing.

Instead, he walked slowly to the sideboard, his coat brushing faintly against the carved edge of the walnut cabinet. The decanter stood waiting.

Thank God for Mrs. Hargrave.

He uncorked it with an ease that suggested this was not the first morning to go sideways before luncheon. The liquid sloshed gently into the glass. It was of amber color, a Highland single malt, certainly older than the girl he was apparently meant to have ruined.

He took a sip in silence. The lady cleared her throat, but he did not turn.

He took another sip, and only then, finally, he pivoted to face her.

He had one hand in his pocket and the glass held lightly in the other.

He was, as always, calm. Annoyed, yes, but not surprised.

That would have implied he still expected the world to behave sensibly.

“Now,” he said, voice low and measured, “would you mind telling me what

happened?”

The woman’s lips twitched. The fire in her eyes had not returned, but the anxiety was back, prickling beneath her skin.

“My daughter,” she said, lifting her chin, “has said... certain things.”

His brow rose, just slightly.

She fumbled. “She told me that—that something occurred. That she... gave herself to you. And that afterward, you were gone. There were rumors that you had died, and I—I came to see if it were true because if you are not dead, then by all rights, Your Grace, you ought to?”

“Enough.”

His hand rose again. Not harsh nor cruel but final. It cut her off more cleanly than a blade. The other hand set his glass down.

“And your daughter is...?”

She hesitated. “Miss Evelyn Ellory. Daughter of the Viscount of Brimwood.”

He blinked once. That was all.

“I do not remember a Miss Evelyn Ellory,” he said plainly. “Though I assure you, Lady Brimwood, I am not in the habit of ruining young ladies.”

“But she?”

“I believe,” he interrupted, “I should remember if I had compromised a viscount’s



daughter.”

A pause. The room seemed to exhale. Robert’s gaze stayed fixed on the window. He didn’t look at her when he spoke next.

“Even if I had compromised anyone, Lady Brimwood, which I have not, I assure you, I do not respond well to being told what I ought to do.”

His voice was quiet, almost conversational, but it carried the chill of stone beneath a winter frost. If he had turned then, he would have found the woman flushed to the roots of her powdered curls.

She shifted again, fussed with her gloves, and gave a strained little laugh.

But he still remained with his back turned to her.

“No, no, of course not, Your Grace. I—I never meant to imply...” She trailed off, clutching her reticule in both hands like a lifeline. “This must have all been some... misunderstanding.”

Robert still said nothing.

She began speaking again, but now, it was more to herself than to him, her eyes darting about the drawing room as though searching for some ally among the draperies.

“I suppose Evelyn lied to me. To avoid...” She shook her head, lips tightening. “I should have known she might do something so mad. Always with her sharp tongue and grand principles. I told her... I told her more than once that a lady with too many opinions soon finds herself very alone.”

Robert remained still. He had learned a long time ago that people had a tendency to reveal themselves on their very own. One did not even need to ask any questions but only listen.

The woman pressed on. “She really ought to take better care. It’s not as though proposals rain from the heavens.

She’s had plenty, and what has she done but reject every single one?

And now she’s gone and made herself quite unmanageable—again.

Well. Let her. She’s lucky Lord Wimberly still wants her. ”

That made him turn... slowly.

He faced her with a precision that felt too exact to be casual. “Pardon?”

She blinked, confused by the sudden shift. “I said, she’s lucky Lord Wimberly is still happy to marry her.”

He stepped toward her, just once. Not threatening but focused.

“Who,” he said softly, “is Lord Wimberly to you?”

The woman, visibly unnerved now, tried to recover her usual briskness. “Why—he is my husband’s business partner. Wimberly is a widower, you know, terribly wealthy. In need of a mother for his children. Evelyn may put on airs, but I know she’ll come to her senses in time.”

Robert felt as if someone punched him in the gut, but he knew better than to show a reaction to that name. Fortunately, a life marred by tragedy had taught him how to

hide his emotions well.

“I see,” he said at last. “Thank you, Lady Brimwood. That will be all.”

She hesitated, mouth parting slightly as though to ask something, but his tone had left no room for dialogue. Whatever curiosity sparked behind her eyes was promptly smothered by his stare.

She clutched her reticule tighter and nodded stiffly. “Very good. Good day, Your Grace.”

He said nothing. He listened to the sound of her steps echoing sharply against the marble. One hand passed over his jaw, slow and thoughtful, and then dropped to his side. His eyes lifted.

The family portrait loomed above the hearth as it always had.

A stately thing, done in somber tones as was expected: greys, navy, plum.

His father sat stiff in a red velvet chair, his eyes hard as iron.

His mother stood beside him, not smiling but still soft, still gentle.

She had always worn sorrow like jewelry, quiet and dignified.

His brother, Thomas, stood at their father’s right hand, proud and sure. And then Robert, younger by seven years, perched uncomfortably on a carved stool. His coat was too large, his posture too guarded, like a boy already preparing for battle.

He stepped toward it now. The fire crackled behind him, casting shifting shadows across the painted canvas. He reached up, slowly, and touched his fingertips to the

image of his mother's face.

There it was. Just there, in the corner of her eye. The faint, almost imperceptible crinkle that had only visibly appeared when she laughed. He had forgotten that. His fingers paused, and he exhaled, long and quiet.

“I swore I would never allow that world to pull me back into its filth. That I would not dance to their songs nor speak in their riddles nor pretend that honor still existed where it had been sold for titles.”

He swallowed. His hand dropped.

“I made that vow to you .”

His gaze moved slowly across each painted face. His brother. His father. His mother.

And then, more quietly now, barely louder than the fire's hiss, he continued, “But if I am ever to deserve this title... if I am ever to be what you believed I could be...”

A pause. His jaw tightened.

“Then I must break it.”

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:15 am*

### Chapter Three

Evelyn was smiling. No, she was smirking with the quiet confidence of a woman who had just won a private war. She wasn't going to marry. Not Lord Wimberly, not anyone. And she had never felt freer.

She was enjoying herself. The silk of her gown whispered against the polished floor as she shifted her weight, the music rising in a swirl of violins and laughter.

Candlelight glittered off the chandelier overhead, casting warm reflections into the champagne flutes and onto the sequins stitched into her sleeves.

She stood near the punch table, fanning herself with more flair than heat, surrounded by the familiar hum of her friends, but before she could even reach for her glass, a gentleman approached her. Mr. Bartlesworth or maybe Barneswell, she could never remember which.

"Miss Ellory," the aforementioned gentleman said in a hushed tone of voice, "would you honor me with this next dance?"

Evelyn's smile faltered. Not again.

Her mind flicked through possible excuses: twisted ankle, faint headache, sudden desire to study scripture.

Truly any of them would do, but she was too slow because that was the moment the music wavered. It did not stop completely, however. It merely faltered, as if the

violinist's bow had trembled mid-note.

A hush swept the ballroom like a cold breeze sneaking through the drapes.

Fans slowed.

Conversations died on painted lips.

The soft rustle of skirts and the clink of glasses stilled.

“What is going on?”

Evelyn turned, confused, following the line of every widened eye and whispered gasp.

A man stood in the entryway. But evidently, not just any man.

He was tall, broad-shouldered, wrapped in the kind of stark black that no gentleman dared wear to a ball.

His coat was sleek, severe even. There was something ancient in his bearing, something that pulled the air around him taut.

The very gold on the chandeliers seemed to dim beside the sheer, wintry gravity of his presence.

Evelyn's fan stilled at the sight of him. She had never seen him before. Surely, she would have remembered. Every instinct in her body, the ones buried deep, passed down through generations of women who had survived, screamed at her to flee. To hide. To vanish.

And then he looked at her. His eyes were the color of a storm-torn sea and were now locked on hers. Everything in her went very still.

The gentleman beside her cleared his throat awkwardly. “I—Miss Ellory, you haven’t yet answered?—”

The stranger’s eyes, still locked on hers, narrowed before he moved.

He crossed the room without hurry but with a purpose that parted crowds like a knife through silk. No announcement had been made, but everyone seemed to know precisely who he was. Nobility rolled off him like smoke, thick, dark, and impossible to ignore.

Shockingly, he stopped directly before her. Evelyn’s heart thudded against her ribs.

“Leave,” the man said to Mr. Bartlesworth—or Barneswell—in a tone that did not rise but brooked no argument.

The poor young man stammered a confused, “Y-yes, of course,” and vanished into the crowd.

The stranger turned to her, his expression utterly composed.

“You are Miss Ellory,” he said.

It was not a question.

She could not speak as he extended his hand. He was waiting, and he seemed the kind not to wait too long for anything.

She stared at it then at him then back again, every nerve in her arm screaming in

confusion. Something inside her, something proud and private, told her to refuse. But the rest of her? The rest of her couldn't move.

Her hand lifted before she gave it leave. It hovered there for a breath too long. And then, with maddening gentleness, he closed his fingers over hers and led her silently to the floor, just as the music returned with a single pluck of a string.

The waltz began in a low, haunting swell of strings, rising around them like mist curling off the river at dawn. Her hand, still enclosed in his, felt hot despite the chill of his gloves.

He was taller than most dance partners. She had to tilt her chin to meet his gaze, and she hated that. She hated how aware she was of his nearness. The precision of his steps. The steadiness of his hand on her waist.

Evelyn narrowed her eyes with her smile taut and furious. She kept her voice low and clipped as she leaned in just enough to be heard.

“How dare you.”

His eyes glinted grey-blue, like steel wrapped in fog.

“Good evening to you, too, Miss Ellory.”

“What makes you think you can act this way?” she hissed, keeping her expression passably composed for the watching crowd. “You walked in like a storm and dismissed my partner like a valet.”

“I thought he looked uncomfortable,” he said mildly. “And dull.”

“You are uncomfortable,” she snapped.



“Only slightly.” His hand shifted infinitesimally at her back. “And only because you keep glaring at me like you intend to stab me with your hairpin.”

She gritted her teeth. “I just might.”

He almost smiled. Almost.

“Has anyone told you,” he said smoothly, “that you are very much like your mother?”

Evelyn drew back a half inch, looking utterly scandalized. “You presume to know Lady Brimwood?”

“I presume nothing,” he corrected her in an even tone of voice. “I merely observe and make conclusions. You must get your fire from her.”

Evelyn inhaled sharply. “You are insufferably rude.”

“And yet here we are,” he said, guiding her into a graceful turn. “You haven’t left the dance floor.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Because it would cause a scene.”

“Oh,” he murmured, lowering his head slightly, “and heaven forbid you cause a scene.”

Her lips parted in outrage. “You don’t know me.”

“I’m learning.”

“And I find your arrogance appalling.”

“I’ve been told worse.”

“I can only imagine.”

He didn’t respond, but the corner of his mouth twitched. Barely. Evelyn saw it and hated that it sparked something like satisfaction in her chest. She’d danced with viscounts and barons, with marquesses and heirs. Not a single one had ever made her feel this furious.

Or this alive .

Still, she wasn’t about to let him know that.

“You’ve still not introduced yourself,” she said archly, lifting her chin. “Or is that a custom among the terribly rich and terribly rude?”

He leaned in again, close enough for her breath to catch.

“No,” he replied. “But I find it more entertaining when a lady discovers my name after she’s threatened me with blunt embroidery tools.”

Evelyn’s glare could have cracked crystal.

The final notes of the waltz drifted into stillness, the last lingering chord ringing like a held breath through the ballroom.

Evelyn stepped back, instinctively letting her hand fall from his though he retained her other at his elbow, leading her with practiced ease toward the edge of the floor.

She opened her mouth to demand his name at last, and this time, she was adamant not to let him deflect, but an interruption arrived in the form of her parents.

“Evelyn,” her mother breathed with concern, “darling, are you quite well? You look rather flushed.”

Her father squinted at the stranger beside her. “And who is this?”

Evelyn turned with her lips parting and her indignation ready to leap forth, but the man beside her spoke first. His words flowed as calmly and smoothly as a blade slipping through silk.

“I merely wished to become acquainted with my betrothed,” he said, “before the ceremony.”

Silence slammed into her like a falling chandelier.

Her spine straightened. “Your... pardon?”

Her mother clasped her hands with an expression of self-satisfied delight. “Aha! So this is the mysterious duke you told me about! Oh, I suspected it might be; what a marvelous surprise!”

The stranger—no, the Duke of Aberon—inclined his head, completely unbothered, as his gaze locked entirely on Evelyn. And now, everything made a sick, staggering sort of sense.

Her mother’s panic. The sudden end to her lectures. The disappearance of any mention of Lord Wimberly in the past two days. And that ridiculous visit to some distant relative’s estate which clearly had nothing to do with distant relatives at all.

Evelyn’s mouth was dry. This man was the one she had named in jest, in defiance. The one she claimed had ruined her.

He hadn't said a word about it. In fact, he hadn't even looked surprised.

She stepped back. "Excuse me. I need a moment... air."

"Evelyn—" her mother began, but Evelyn was already moving, her slippers near silent across the marble.

She pushed open the balcony doors and slipped out into the cold night. The air hit her like water over a fire.

She gripped the stone railing, her knuckles white, trying to breathe around the storm swelling behind her ribs.

Her corset felt tighter than ever. Of all the names.

Of all the games she could have played. She had chosen a ghost, and now, the ghost was very much alive and staring at her like he'd already won.

Betrothed.

She bit down a scream, and that was when the door behind her opened. She didn't need to turn around to know it was him. He didn't speak at first. She imagined him just staring at her back, silent and waiting.

She turned slowly, glaring daggers. "You might have warned me."

"You weren't exactly interested in introductions," he said coolly.

"You tricked me."

"I escorted you through a waltz. You seemed to manage."

She took a step forward, chin lifted. “I named you to get out of a marriage. It wasn’t real.”

“Now, it is,” he replied, maddeningly calm. “Congratulations.”

“You arrogant, impossible man!”

“You should be more careful with lies,” he said in an almost seductive whisper. “They have a habit of becoming inconvenient truths.”

She stared at him. He stood composed, not a hair out of place, as though not a single thing could ever rattle him. There was a quiet anger beneath his coolness, though. A deep, settled thing. He didn’t raise his voice a single time. He didn’t need to.

If she were quite honest, he frightened her. Not because he was cruel but because she couldn’t read a single thing that formed inside his mind.

“Why would you agree to this?” she asked, voice softening only slightly.

“Because you made it necessary.”

Her breath caught.

“Because,” he continued, “you threw my name to the wolves and left me no choice but to step out of the shadows I was quite content in.”

“I’ll undo it,” she pleaded quickly, her pride clawing at the edges of panic. “I’ll tell them it was all a lie?—”

He stepped closer. Just one step.

“No,” he said. “You won’t.”

She trembled. “Why not?”

His eyes, colder than the wind, studied her face. “Because then you’ll be ruined for nothing .”

The wind pulled at her skirts and the pale gold ribbons at her waist, but Evelyn hardly felt the cold. She was burning. She was humiliated, trapped, and furious in equal measure.

“I only chose your name because I thought you were dead! ” she snapped, her voice a low, vicious whisper.

His expression did not change. He regarded her steadily as the shadow of a smirk ghosted across his mouth.

“But I am not.”

Her hands clenched into fists. That cool, infuriating tone again. As though he were commenting on the weather.

“You can’t... this cannot happen. I will not let it happen,” she hissed. “I’ll find a way. I’ll make certain we never walk the aisle together.”

He tilted his head, thoughtful, almost amused. “What will you do? Claim another dead duke as your virtue’s ruiner? Shall we go down the peerage alphabetically?”

“You are vile.”

“No, I’m inconvenient. There’s a difference.”

“You think you’ve caught me in some net?—”

“I think,” he said, cutting across her, “that you’ve tangled yourself in your own threads, and now, you’re looking for someone else to blame.”

“Only my mother knows of the lie,” she said quickly, desperately. “No one else. I can still undo this.”

He stepped forward. “What lie is that, exactly?”

Her breath caught. The chill air was nothing now compared to the sensation of him near her... close... too close.

“Do you even know,” he asked, his voice much lower now and meant just for her, “what it means to be ruined, Miss Ellory?”

Her lips parted, but nothing came out. Her cheeks went crimson.

He saw it. Worse yet, he savored it.

And then, for heavens sake, he moved even closer.

His gloved hand lifted, and with maddening gentleness, he tucked a wind-blown curl behind her ear. The tips of his fingers brushed the shell of it, warm and deliberate.

Evelyn swayed, despite herself. Her chest rose and fell too quickly. Her throat felt dry. And that smile, that half-formed, mocking, knowing smile, still danced in his eyes.

“I—” she began, but she forgot what she meant to say.

She should have stepped away, but she didn't.

His gaze dropped to her mouth. She felt it. Oh, God, how she felt it, like a touch. And her lashes fluttered. Her chin lifted, instinct betraying her resolve. Her lips parted.

He leaned in, and her breath caught. Then, just a single inch from her lips, he stopped. She could feel his breath now, spilling all over her lips. She thought her heart might tear out of her chest.

But he didn't kiss her. Instead, he whispered so quietly that she nearly thought she imagined it. "I am going to enjoy being married to you, Evelyn."

She barely registered the shock before he pulled back, slow and unhurried. And with one last unreadable look, he turned, stepped through the balcony doors, and disappeared back into the ballroom, leaving her breathless and absolutely seething.

She knew she could not marry this man, for she also knew what was waiting for her.



## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:15 am*

### Chapter Four

“That scoundrel!” Evelyn wailed. “How dare he send me flowers!”

The silk ribbon snapped between Evelyn’s fingers, fluttering to the floor like a fallen petal. Her voice rang through the sitting room with such vehemence that her friend, Hazel Thorne, nearly dropped her embroidery needle.

“Pardon?” Hazel blinked, entirely bewildered. “Who dares to?—?”

“Why, the Duke of Aberon of course,” Evelyn snarled, flinging the bouquet of perfect white peonies onto the tea table as though they might bite. “Imagine the audacity. The sheer insufferable gall of the man. As though I were some simpering debutante, won over by petals and scent.”

Hazel, who had not yet been told precisely what had happened between her friend and the aforementioned duke, eyed the flowers with caution. “They are very lovely, though.”

“They reek of manipulation.”

“They smell like peonies.”

“I should like to see them set aflame.”

“Evelyn,” Hazel said gently, “have you had breakfast?”

Before Evelyn could respond with something cutting and undoubtedly melodramatic, the door flew open and their other close friend, Cordelia Brookes burst in, with her cheeks flushed from the cold and her arms laden with parcels.

“Forgive me, forgive me! I had to detour by Gunter’s, or I feared you would both mutiny.

” She deposited a wrapped box of ices and a tin of biscuits onto the tea table, nearly toppling the vase of offending flowers.

“Now, what are the news? Has someone died? Been caught in a scandal? Been proposed to by a terrifying duke?”

“Yes,” Evelyn replied flatly.

Cordelia blinked. “Yes to which part?”

“Yes to all of it, emotionally speaking,” Hazel muttered, and Cordelia turned a wide-eyed gaze from her to Evelyn.

“Evelyn. Start talking.”

Evelyn sat down with all the regal command of a general about to outline a siege. “I need your help to dissuade the Duke of Aberon from marrying me.”

Cordelia’s gasp was immediate and dramatic. “You’re betrothed?”

“Not willingly.”

“Even better!” Cordelia teased, clapping her hands in delight.

Evelyn tried to shorten the tale as much as possible while still providing her friends with all the details necessary for them to agree with her.

Hazel frowned, clearly the lone voice of reason. “I’m still not entirely certain this is the tragedy you seem to think it is, Evelyn. He is a duke and wealthy and... well, from what you’ve shared, striking. If one likes the brooding sort.”

“He is a walking threat, Hazel,” Evelyn pouted.

“He sent you flowers.”

“I don’t care if he sent me a throne carved of sapphires. He’s manipulative, controlling, arrogant?—”

“So are most titled men,” Cordelia pointed out brightly, unwrapping a biscuit.

Hazel tilted her head, hesitant. “Is this... is this about Lord Ashworth?”

Evelyn went still. That silence stretched like a wire.

When she finally spoke, her voice was low and hard. “The only way in which he matters is this: because of him, I know what a selfish man looks like. And what a selfish man is willing to do to get what he wants.”

Cordelia’s biscuit paused halfway to her mouth upon hearing those words. Hazel’s face softened, but her chin lifted with resolve.

“Well,” Cordelia said briskly after a moment, “in that case, we’ll help you. Obviously.”

“Of course, we will,” Hazel added, squeezing Evelyn’s hand.

“Now,” Cordelia said, eyes gleaming, “we need a plan. How does one frighten off a brooding, powerful, intimidating duke?”

“Poison?” Hazel offered half-heartedly.

“I was thinking of something with fewer potential gallows.”

“Bore him?” Evelyn suggested. “Talk endlessly about bonnet trims and the comparative merits of lawn and muslin.”

“Or become suddenly obsessed with beetles?” Cordelia mused. “Talk about nothing but insects. Preferably dead ones.”

“I could take up writing sentimental poetry about our imaginary future children,” Hazel suggested with a straight face.

“That might terrify me ,” Cordelia laughed.

Evelyn’s lips twitched despite herself. “I could fake a wasting illness.”

“You are too healthy and ruddy. No one would believe it,” Cordelia declared.

“What if I take to weeping at the sight of him?” Evelyn mused.

“He might think you’re in love with him.”

They all shuddered.

Hazel leaned forward. “What about asking outrageous questions about his finances? Men hate that.”

“Oh yes,” Cordelia agreed. “Ask how many bedrooms he has and how many wives he’s buried in them.”

They erupted into laughter which was that sharp, bright, helpless laughter that bounced off the wallpaper and curled like smoke into the room’s corners.

Evelyn wiped a tear from the corner of her eye.

For the first time in days, she felt like she could breathe.

He might have been a duke. He might have been a storm in a tailored coat. But she was not alone.

“I suppose,” Evelyn mused with mock seriousness, “I could challenge him to a game of cards. Let him suffer the indignity of losing to me in front of a crowd.”

“Ooh,” Cordelia agreed with her eyes gleaming, “humiliation. Delightful. Make him cry over spilled dice and lost coin.”

“I could flirt with other men too,” she added airily, adjusting a lock of hair. “The Duke seems so very confident. A touch of jealousy might be instructive.”

“That ,” said a smooth, rich voice from the doorway, “would be highly inadvisable.”

The three women froze.

Evelyn turned slowly, feeling her heart sinking and racing all at once.

Robert Firming, the Duke of Aberon, stood just inside the doorway, clad in slate-gray with darker leather gloves, as if he’d stepped from a portrait commissioned by a gothic imagination.

His dark hair, unruly from the breeze, framed a face too sharp, too striking to ever be called gentle.

His eyes, cold and impossibly focused, settled on her with the weight of gravity.

Worst of all, he appeared to be far too amused.

“I had no idea I occupied your thoughts to such an extent, Miss Ellory,” he continued, folding his gloved hands behind his back.

“But I confess, the image of you plotting my defeat is... intriguing to say the least. I doubt my pride would suffer much from losing to you though I am open to finding out.”

Evelyn’s breath caught somewhere between indignation and something far more dangerous.

“And as for flirting with other men,” he added with casual menace, “I would urge you against it. I’m not in the mood to duel some poor idiot who mistakes you for a woman in need of rescuing.”

She shot to her feet with an entire storm in her eyes. “What has given you the right to walk in here, uninvited, eavesdropping like a highwayman?”

“I knocked,” he said simply. “Do you often plan covert campaigns within earshot of your enemy?”

Cordelia and Hazel had tactfully faded toward the farthest tea tray, whispering with wide eyes in an effort to look invisible.

Evelyn walked up to him, trying to keep at least a semblance of control. “What are

you doing here?”

“I came to speak with your father,” he said smoothly. “We arranged the time earlier this week. You may remember, it’s when you were too busy throwing flowers into the fire.”

“He is not here,” she lied.

“Curious.” His dark brows lifted, and he took one slow step forward. “Then it is strange that his valet took my coat not five minutes ago and mentioned that the Viscount would join me shortly.”

Evelyn’s mouth opened. Then, closed. No witty reply came to her.

His grin was subtle and wicked. “Ah. Speechless. That is... a first.”

Before she could summon a retort, he took her hand gently in his, turned it palm-down, and pressed a warm kiss just above her knuckles. His breath brushed her skin.

“Until we speak again, my dear fiancée.”

With that, he turned on his heel and strode from the room like a man who knew she would follow eventually, whether to throttle him or something else entirely.

She watched him go, furious, but then, her eyes caught on the subtle twitch of his hand at his side. It was the faintest, frustrated flex of fingers into a fist, having happened just before he disappeared around the corner. And for some maddening reason, it made her feel the tiniest bit triumphant.

The moment the Duke vanished from view, Evelyn slammed the door with such force the windows rattled. Her cheeks were burning. In fact, they were absolutely aflame,

and it had nothing to do with exertion.

The nerve of the man. The smugness. The insolence. The way his lips had brushed her hand as if she were some swooning debutante eager to be ravished. And worst of all, the way her pulse had betrayed her, racing like a silly schoolgirl's at the brush of his fingers.

Cordelia cleared her throat delicately. "Well, I must say... if that's what being ruined looks like, I'd like to schedule my own scandal at once."

Hazel stifled a laugh behind her teacup though her eyes sparkled wickedly. "Do you suppose he practices that voice in the mirror? It's very... effective."

Evelyn turned on them both with a glare. "Don't start."

"Oh, we've already started," Cordelia said, flopping dramatically onto the chaise and fanning herself with a biscuit. "I feel faint. Positively overwhelmed. That man said fiancée like it was a threat and a promise."

"I hate him," Evelyn growled, marching over to retrieve her forgotten embroidery hoop, jabbing the needle into the fabric like it had personally offended her.

"Is that why your cheeks are crimson and your hand is shaking?" Hazel asked sweetly. "Just wondering."

"I am furious," she declared.

"You're flustered," Cordelia corrected.

"I am infuriated by the Duke of Aberon's arrogance, his presumption, his complete disregard for civility, and?—"



“—his face?” Cordelia offered helpfully.

Evelyn glared at her.

“Oh, come now,” Hazel said gently. “It’s not a crime to admit he’s... well, rather beautifully carved from brimstone.”

“He is rude, he is cold, and he is determined to control me like some prized mare in a breeding program,” Evelyn snapped, stabbing the embroidery again. “And I will not be handled.”

“No, you’re clearly handling him,” Cordelia said lightly. “With sharp words and a fire in your eyes.”

“I will find a way out of this,” Evelyn muttered, more to herself than to them. “He may think he has won, but I am not going to be anyone’s duchess. Especially not his.”

Hazel exchanged a knowing look with Cordelia then patted Evelyn’s hand.

“We believe you,” she said solemnly. “But perhaps... just in case... you should keep wearing that color. It made your eyes shine quite nicely when you were threatening him.”

Evelyn let out a strangled sound and threw a cushion at both of them.

That only made them laugh harder.

### Chapter Five

The Viscount of Brimwood was a man of firm opinions and very little imagination. That much Robert had gathered within the first five minutes of being seated in the old gentleman's study, a room that smelled faintly of dust, pipe smoke, and masculine self-importance.

"She's an odd one, my Evelyn," Lord Brimwood said, pouring himself a brandy and neglecting to offer one to his guest. "Headstrong, too clever for her own good. Always asking questions, always arguing. Not at all what one expects from a girl of her breeding."

Robert sat, composed as ever, with one leg crossed over the other, and his gloved hands folded over his knee. He said nothing.

Lord Brimwood continued, as if in confession to a comrade. "She holds a grudge, you know. Like a terrier with a rat. Once she has it in her teeth, there's no letting go. But that's the folly of youth. She'll settle once she's wed. A firm hand and proper guidance are all she needs."

Robert's jaw twitched, just barely. He watched the firelight flicker along the carved edge of the hearth and made no reply.

Lord Brimwood cleared his throat and looked pleased. "It's a good match. The name, the title... God knows she needs it. You'll find her strong-willed but not untrainable. In time, you'll mold her into a fine wife."

Robert's gaze shifted.

"I am not in the habit of training wives, My Lord."

Brimwood blinked, laughed as though it were a jest, and clapped his hands on his knees. "You'll do what's needed, I'm sure. A woman needs a man who can lead her."

Robert didn't reply. He merely inclined his head in the barest acknowledgment.

"I do believe the announcement at the end of the month will suffice," Lord Brimwood continued. "It allows the ton just enough time to speculate without growing tiresome."

Robert nodded again, just once. "As you wish."

"And the contract," the man added. "I'll have my solicitor prepare a draft. You shall receive it by week's end if not sooner."

Robert refrained from shrugging. These formalities did not matter to him. The date. The contract. The damn ceremony. It was all ceremony. Paper and ink and obligations. Nothing of substance, at least not yet.

"Of course," Lord Brimwood went on, his voice lowering slightly as if preparing to shift into a more personal register. "Your father... he'd be glad to see you settled..." He stopped, realizing he had crossed the line.

Robert's eyes lifted slowly, and though his face betrayed nothing, there was something in his gaze that made Lord Brimwood hesitate.

"Yes, well," the man said with a vague clearing of the throat, "families are delicate things, aren't they?"

Robert said nothing. He had already had enough, but politeness bade him stay.

“Now then,” Lord Brimwood rushed on, “about the wedding itself. We were thinking in two months with the summer only commencing. It will lend a certain... golden charm to the occasion. Very tasteful, very classic. Of course, we’ll want to keep it respectable, no unnecessary opulence. I trust you agree?”

“I do not require a spectacle,” Robert replied indifferently. “Whatever pleases Miss Ellory].”

“Yes, yes,” the man offered with a thin smile. “And she will, in time, come to see what a privilege this is. As I’ve said, Evelyn can be... particular. But with firmness and guidance, she will learn her place in a household.”

Robert’s jaw tightened slightly, but his tone remained even. “She seems intelligent enough.”

“Oh, she is,” Lord Brimwood agreed with a scoff, missing the warning in Robert’s voice.

Robert stood then, his movement graceful but deliberate. “Then I trust she’s in the best of hands.”

Lord Brimwood rose as well, all smiles and satisfied self-importance. “Indeed, indeed. You’re a man of fine judgment, Your Grace. It’s a comfort to know my daughter will be... shall we say, well-tended to.”

Robert offered only the briefest incline of his head then turned toward the door.

“Good day, Viscount,” he greeted upon departure.

A footman stood ready to escort him out, and he allowed the motion to carry him forward. As he stepped into the corridor, the air felt cleaner, as if he'd left something stagnant behind.

As Robert followed the footman through the long corridor and out the main doors of Brimwood Estate, he found himself, against better judgment, scanning the shadows, the windows, the balcony above.

But there was no sign of her. No flash of blonde curls, no sharp voice, no flushed cheeks and narrowed eyes ready to strike him with some defiant witticism.

Just silence.

He climbed into his carriage with a faint frown, one gloved hand flexing slightly on his knee. And as the door closed behind him, the thought came, unwelcome and unbidden.

She is not at all what I expected.

And he wasn't entirely certain whether that disturbed him or intrigued him more.

Evelyn was still fuming, if only internally, when her mother appeared at the edge of the garden terrace.

Her hands were folded primly before her, and there was the faintest smugness on her otherwise serene face.

The golden light of the late afternoon caught in the folds of her lavender gown, lending her a saintly glow that felt entirely undeserved.

"Girls," Lady Brimwood said, her tone far too pleasant.

Evelyn straightened, dropping her embroidery hoop into her lap, a pastime she and her friends had moved from the drawing room out into the garden. Cordelia and Hazel glanced between them with thinly veiled anticipation.

“It is done,” her mother declared with a self-satisfied smile. “The arrangements have been made. Your father and His Grace are in agreement. The Duke of Aberon will marry you, Evelyn. Congratulations, dearest.”

For a moment, Evelyn couldn’t move. Her blood surged, hot and furious, but she kept her spine straight and her expression fixed in something dangerously close to polite indifference. She had already learned, albeit painfully, that resistance only fueled the fire.

“Thank you, Mama,” she said evenly though the words tasted like ash.

Her mother beamed as though she’d just handed her a crown and not a collar. She stepped forward and gathered Evelyn into her arms without waiting for invitation. The scent of jasmine clung to her skin, familiar and cloying.

“I knew you’d come to your senses eventually,” her mother whispered, smoothing a hand over Evelyn’s hair. “He will make a fine husband. Powerful. Respected. And perhaps, in time, even kind.”

Evelyn said nothing. Her jaw was locked too tightly to allow for speech.

Her mother pulled back, cupping her cheek. “You’re doing the right thing, darling. You’ve always been so... spirited. But even spirits must anchor somewhere.”

And with that, she turned, content in the illusion of harmony, and disappeared back into the house. A brittle silence hung between the three friends until Cordelia let out a dramatic sigh and collapsed onto the bench beside Evelyn.

“Well,” she said, “this is a tragedy with remarkably good posture.”

Hazel leaned forward, watching Evelyn closely. “Are you all right?”

Evelyn exhaled slowly, the air burning on its way out. “I am,” she said. Then, more quietly, “Because I’ve decided I shall be.”

She sat back in her chair, lifted the embroidery hoop again, and stabbed the needle through the fabric with admirable precision.

“But that doesn’t mean I’ll make it easy for him.”

Cordelia grinned. “I should hope not.”

Hazel leaned closer. “You still want our help?”

Evelyn’s mouth curved into something sly. Almost regal. Almost... wicked.

“Now more than ever.”

Evelyn twisted the embroidery thread around her finger, eyes narrowing in thought. “First,” she said slowly, “I need time. Time to think. Time to... plan.”

Cordelia perked up. “You mean delay the wedding?”

Hazel tilted her head. “But how? Your mother looked ready to summon the church bells herself.”

Evelyn pursed her lips as her gaze fixed on a budding rose nearby. “I shall make it appear as though I cannot, absolutely cannot, settle on the right gown.”

Cordelia blinked. “Your gown?”

“Yes,” Evelyn said, sitting up straighter, her mind beginning to race. “I will insist I want to look my absolute best. That no fabric feels quite right, no shade of ivory matches my complexion, no lace delicate enough to please me. I shall try on a hundred and still not be certain.”

Hazel’s brow furrowed then lifted. “That... might actually work.”

Cordelia let out a short, delighted laugh. “It’s perfect. Everyone knows the importance of a bride’s gown. No one can fault you for being... discerning.”

Evelyn allowed herself a small, satisfied smile. “Exactly. And while I parade through bolts of tulle and endless fittings, I’ll have time to devise something better. Something that might give me a way out entirely.”

Cordelia leaned forward with conspiratorial glee. “Something scandalous?”

Evelyn shrugged, her expression unbothered, even amused. “Perhaps. Or something clever. Either will do.”

Hazel looked from one friend to the other, worry still faint on her brow but now, edged with admiration. “You really don’t want to marry him.”

Evelyn’s smile faltered, albeit just slightly. “It’s not about wanting. It’s about choice. I will not be bound to a man simply because society deems it convenient or because he finds it amusing to corner me in ballrooms and issue commands as if I were a servant to his will.”

Cordelia’s eyes sparkled. “Then we shall find you the ugliest lace in London.”



Evelyn laughed. This time, it was a real laugh, short and sharp. And then, she leaned back in her chair. “You are both terrible influences.”

“And proud of it,” Hazel agreed, finally grinning.

As they resumed their tea, the breeze lifting the edges of their skirts and laughter trickling into the flowerbeds, Evelyn allowed herself a moment of lightness. She had bought herself time. And with time, came strategy. And with strategy... victory.

She would not lose her freedom without a war.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:15 am*

### Chapter Six

Robert sat behind his writing table with a quill pen in his hand, signing off some documents. The scratching of the quill stilled when a firm knock interrupted the quiet. A moment later, Havers, his ever-composed butler, stepped into the room.

“Your Grace,” he spoke as a faint edge of hesitation appeared in his voice, which was a rare thing. “You have a visitor. Miss Ellory.”

Robert looked up slowly, blinking once.

“Miss Ellory?” he repeated, as though the name might change upon second hearing.

“Yes, Your Grace. Shall I show her in?”

For a fleeting second, Robert felt the faintest flicker of... something. Surprise, perhaps. Or curiosity.

He stood and set his pen aside. “Show her in.”

Havers disappeared, and Robert moved from behind the desk to stand near the fireplace with one hand resting lightly on the carved mantle. When the door opened again, she entered.

She wore a pale lilac walking dress that brought out the steel-blue edge of her eyes. She moved with her usual grace and stubborn pride though her chin was set a little higher than usual, as though she was daring herself not to turn around and walk back

out.

“Miss Ellory,” he said smoothly. “How unexpected. Have you come to apologize for throwing my flowers away?”

He caught the sharp intake of breath, the flash in her eyes. She wanted to retort, he could all but see the words forming inside that wonderfully odd mind of hers, but she swallowed them with visible effort.

“No,” she said with forced composure. “I came to speak with you about the wedding.”

“Ah.” He folded his arms across his chest, leaning a shoulder against the mantle. “Do go on.”

“I’ve been looking at gowns,” she explained, glancing briefly around the room as though she might draw courage from the brooding bookshelves.

“And I can’t decide which one to choose.

It is simply impossible, I swear. I’m afraid that I must ask for a bit more time to make my choice. It is possible, isn’t it?”

Robert had to admit that now, he was even more amused. “Is that so?” He paused for a moment then added, “And which ones did you like the best?”

She blinked, visibly thrown. “I beg your pardon?”

He smiled faintly. “You’ve clearly given it a great deal of thought. I’d like to hear which gowns you’re considering.”

She stood in his study like a flame refusing to flicker, stiff-backed, hands clasped, too proud for nerves. And yet he saw it in the way her fingers twitched when he looked at her too long and the way her breath hitched before she spoke.

“There’s one from Madame Vernisse,” she decided, her tone clipped, rehearsed. “Ivory silk. The bodice is covered in lace, and the sleeves are sheer. It has a modest train, and pearls stitched into the hem.”

He gave a slow nod, watching her rather than picturing the gown. “Refined.”

She hesitated then continued. “And the other is from Mrs. Aldermere. Champagne satin with gold embroidery along the hem and sides. The neckline is...” she paused, catching the hint of a smirk threatening his lips, “a touch daring.”

“I see,” he replied, biting down the smile before it could take form. “Pearls or gold thread. A serious dilemma.”

But then, as if she feared he might see through her, see that this little visit was nothing but a performance, she thought of adding more. “There are two others I’ve considered.”

Robert didn’t move, but his eyes remained trained on her, amused. “By all means.”

She lifted her chin. “Madame Vernisse has another in dove grey tulle. It’s layered, quite airy, with silver thread at the bodice and a sash at the waist that can be dyed to match whatever color I choose for the flowers.

” She said it as though reciting from a catalogue, trying much too hard to sound nonchalant.

“Practical,” he murmured.

“And Mrs. Aldermere has a rose-pink gown. It is very pale, nearly blush, with a square neckline and embroidered roses along the sleeves. She claims it flatters nearly every complexion.”

“A dress that flatters every woman,” he said with a soft inclination of the head. “A miracle indeed. Perhaps you ought to choose that one.”

She blinked. “I’m not certain. That’s the entire point of the dilemma.”

He hummed in mock sympathy. “A crisis of true gravity.”

Her nostrils flared, just slightly. “Yes, well, if you’re expecting a bride who chooses her gown with haste and without care, I’m afraid you’ll be disappointed.”

He smiled faintly. “Disappointment isn’t quite what I feel when I look at you, Miss Ellory.”

There. That blush again, lovely and immediate, blooming over her cheekbones.

She turned from him under the pretense of inspecting some trinket on his desk, muttering, “You’re impossible.”

“Only mildly,” he murmured, watching the way her back stiffened.

He had to admire it all: her defiance, her desperate grip on control. It made the game all the more interesting. And if he wasn’t mistaken, the lady enjoyed it too, no matter how much she protested.

She then turned to him with an air of feigned innocence that nearly made him laugh outright. “So then,” she said carefully, “may I take more time to think about it?”

His dark eyes didn't leave her face as he replied smoothly. "Of course. What sort of husband would I be if I rushed my wife into anything?"

The corners of her lips twitched in what was almost a smile though she fought to keep it subdued and hidden. But he saw the flicker of relief in her expression, the silent victory she thought she'd claimed.

She gave him a short curtsy, all too formal and entirely unnecessary. "Thank you, Your Grace."

He inclined his head in reply, watching her turn and head toward the door. She believed she had won. That with enough cleverness and an arsenal of dress fabrics and indecision, she might slowly unravel the engagement she herself had orchestrated.

Robert almost chuckled but managed to stifle the sound. His mouth twitched as the door shut quietly behind her.

Let her stall. Let her drag her heels and try every excuse in the book. She could summon twenty gowns, a hundred designers, and he would nod and agree because none of it mattered.

He had his own plans. And erroneously, she thought she would stand in the way of them, in the way of him claiming justice. But the truth was that Evelyn Ellory was the path that would allow him to achieve exactly that.

"I spoke to the Duke yesterday," Evelyn announced, smoothing the folds of her gown as she sank into the settee beside the parlor window where the sun filtered through lace curtains. "I brought up the matter of my indecision regarding wedding gowns... and he agreed."

Cordelia's head snapped up from the plum she had been peeling, her eyes wide with disbelief. "He agreed? Just like that?"

Hazel, who had been stitching a length of ribbon onto her glove, paused mid-thread. "You must be joking."

"I most certainly am not," Evelyn replied, lifting her chin with a measure of pride. "He said, and I quote, 'What sort of husband would I be if I rushed my wife into anything?'" Her voice dipped low in imitation, earning a snort from Cordelia.

"Well," Cordelia said, tossing the plum peel into the small dish beside her, "either he is a great fool, or you are the most talented actress the ton has ever produced."

Evelyn allowed herself a small, smug smile. "He is no fool, I think. But he believes he is humoring me."

Hazel gave her a look of cautious admiration. "That sounds rather dangerous, Evelyn. What if he's simply waiting you out?"

"Then he shall wait," Evelyn said with sudden steel in her voice. "For as long as I can make him."

"But he agreed, truly?" Hazel pressed. "He did not argue or ask why you were hesitant?"

"No. He only asked which gowns I preferred. I gave him four options. Very detailed ones." She waved a hand. "Names, silks, threads, embroidery. I daresay he looked faintly amused by the end though he tried to conceal it."

Cordelia clapped her hands together. "Then it's working! You've bought yourself time. Now, we simply need to think of what you shall do with it and how to prolong it

indefinitely.”

Suddenly, a sharp knock on the parlor door interrupted them.

Evelyn turned, her brows knitting together. “Yes?”

The door creaked open, and their aging butler stepped in, his expression composed as ever. “Pardon the interruption, Miss Ellory, but you have parcels arriving for you. Several, in fact.”

“Parcels?” Evelyn repeated, her frown deepening. She rose slowly. “That cannot be right. I haven’t ordered anything.”

Cordelia gasped. “It must be another present from him, a bribe to hasten your decision!”

The butler cleared his throat delicately. “They are... rather sizeable parcels, miss. I have invited the delivery men to bring them in directly if that is agreeable.”

Before Evelyn could protest, two footmen appeared, red-cheeked from exertion, each bearing towering stacks of elegantly wrapped boxes. They placed them with great care at the center of the room. Then, they bowed and departed without a word.

The three girls stared at the pile in speechless awe.

Cordelia blinked. “It looks like a royal dowry.”

Hazel leaned in. “What is all this?”

Evelyn took a hesitant step forward, then another, until she caught sight of the ivory-and-gold insignia on one of the labels. Her eyes widened in dawning horror.



“No,” she whispered. “No, no, no...”

She reached for the topmost parcel with trembling fingers, tearing it open.

There, nestled in layers of tissue and silk, was the gown she had described from Madame Vernisse, the ivory muslin with the intricate lace along the bodice.

Beneath it, folded with near ceremonial reverence, lay the champagne silk with the embroidered hem.

Cordelia let out a delighted shriek. “He bought them all?”

Evelyn didn’t answer—she had already begun tearing into the next box. Out came the satin with pearl beading from Mrs. Aldermere. Then the dusky rose with the empire waist she had only mentioned in passing.

“And these,” she breathed, undoing the ribbon of yet another parcel, “I never even described...”

Hazel leaned in to inspect a note nestled among the tissue. “There’s something here.”

Evelyn snatched the envelope and opened it with wary fingers. The writing inside was infuriatingly elegant, and the words were scrawled with clear, deliberate mockery:

My dear Miss Ellory,

Since you were so uncertain, I thought it only fair to relieve you of the burden of choice. I trust these may assist you in making a timely decision. Though, between us, I suspect you will look rather dangerous in the champagne silk.

R.

Evelyn's cheeks flamed. "He's mocking me!"

Cordelia clutched her sides with laughter. "He may be, but he's doing it with exquisite taste."

Hazel bit her lip. "Evelyn... you must admit, it's rather romantic."

Evelyn spun around. "It's infuriating! This was supposed to buy me time, not add to his ridiculous charm campaign!"

"And yet," Cordelia said, grinning like a cat, "he's winning."

Evelyn exhaled, glaring down at the pile of silks and lace as if they had betrayed her personally.

"Not for long," she muttered. "He may have bested me today... but the game is not over."

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:15 am*

### Chapter Seven

Robert entered the Ellory parlor with his usual composed step, offering a bow first to Lady Brimwood, who received him as though he were the Prince Regent himself.

“My dear Duke,” she said, rising with delight. “What a pleasant surprise! Do sit. Evelyn, dear, come, don’t be shy.”

Evelyn was seated by the window with her arms crossed and her lips pursed into a sullen little line. She rose with visible reluctance, curtsied, all perfectly, of course, and then, resumed her seat with all the grace of a martyr awaiting execution.

“I hope I am not intruding,” Robert said pleasantly as he sat, glancing once toward the lady in question.

“Not in the least,” Lady Brimwood said at once. “We were simply taking tea. Evelyn, won’t you pour for His Grace?”

“If he wishes,” Evelyn muttered, reaching for the teapot.

“I only came for conversation,” Robert replied smoothly, waving away the offer. “Because I do have a question pressing upon me.”

Evelyn stiffened. He waited a moment then asked with deliberate calm. “Have you at last selected a gown, or am I to expect a six-month engagement while the matter is debated in Parliament?”

That got her attention. She turned her eyes upon him—those beautiful, sharp eyes which now sparkled with indignation.

“Actually,” she retorted, “now that they are all mine, the decision has become significantly more difficult.”

Robert very nearly laughed aloud but managed only the faintest quirk of a brow. “Ah. A natural consequence of generosity, I suppose. My apologies.”

Evelyn said nothing, merely looked as though she’d like to hurl a gown or two at him.

“I did not come empty-handed,” he added, and drew a small parcel from his coat. “No flowers this time. I feared they’d end up in the fireplace again.”

She blinked, caught off guard as he held the slim, leather-bound book toward her. “This is from my personal library. I thought it might suit your tastes.”

“Thank you,” she said warily, taking it. “But I rarely have time to read these days.”

Lady Brimwood turned her head sharply. “What are you talking about, dear child? You love reading. Why, you spend entire mornings with your nose in novels!”

Robert looked at Evelyn, who was now avoiding both their gazes with studied indifference. He bit back a grin.

“Ah,” he said softly, “I see.”

Evelyn shot him a look of pure warning.

“I wonder,” he mused aloud, “if you might do me the honor of a walk through the gardens, Miss Ellory. We would, of course, remain within eyesight. A little air might

refresh the senses. Perhaps even aid in your most burdensome gown deliberations.”

Before she could offer the sharp refusal he saw rising in her eyes, Lady Brimwood placed a firm hand on her daughter’s arm.

“What a lovely idea,” she said brightly. “Go on, Evelyn. It would be rude to decline.”

There was a long pause. Robert waited patiently. Finally, Evelyn gave a short, elegant nod, set the book down a little too carefully, and rose with the dignity of a wronged queen.

He offered her his arm, which she accepted with visible reluctance, and they stepped into the hall together as the sound of Lady Brimwood’s delighted humming followed behind them.

Robert glanced side long at her once they reached the corridor. “You’ll be pleased to know,” he said, “that I didn’t bring a bridal veil. I feared it might tip you over the edge.”

Evelyn gave him a cold, brilliant smile. “A pity. I might have used it to strangle you.”

Robert could barely refrain himself from laughing loudly. He truly couldn’t remember the last time someone had the nerve to speak to him so boldly, so unapologetically, offering the first thing that came to mind. It was so utterly refreshing, he could barely hide his amusement.

They had scarcely reached the rose path before Robert asked about the book he had just gifted her.

Evelyn glanced at him sideways. “I glanced at the title.”

“And?”

She seized the moment and pulled her hand away from his arm, only to fold her arms.

“I don’t know the author.”

He slowed a step. “You don’t know the author?” he repeated, genuinely surprised.

“No,” she said with a shrug. “Should I?”

“Miss Ellory,” he replied, half incredulous, “that was St. John Grantham. He’s one of the most celebrated essayists of the last decade.”

“Ah,” she said lightly. “Well. I suppose I was too busy doing embroidery.”

Robert looked at her more closely. She wasn’t teasing. At least, not entirely. Her tone was cool and unbothered, but something defensive lingered in the tilt of her chin.

“I must confess, your ignorance is... surprising.”

“I told you,” she said, stopping by a flowering arch, “I don’t really read.”

“But your mother?—”

“She lies,” Evelyn said crisply. “Or rather, she embellishes when she believes it makes me appear more accomplished. It’s a habit of hers.”

A beat of silence exploded between them.

Robert studied her carefully as they resumed their slow walk through the garden, with his hands clasped behind his back.

“If not reading, then what do you occupy yourself with all day?”

She considered a moment. “Needlework.”

“Needlework,” he repeated, trying and utterly failing not to sound disappointed.

“Yes. Samplers, mostly.” She glanced at him with a blank expression that almost seemed designed to provoke. “Oh, and I sort my ribbons.”

He blinked. “You... sort them?”

“By color. And width. It helps me think.”

Robert turned to her slightly, unsure whether she was mocking him. Her tone was utterly even. “And what else?”

She looked up at the sky. “I water my plants though I do believe most of them are dying. I take tea. I walk in circles around our garden path. Sometimes I help my mother fold linens. If I’m feeling particularly adventurous, I alphabetize our pantry.”

Robert stared at her. “You must be the most thrilling woman in all of England.”

She gave a single, exaggerated nod. “I am. Positively scandalous.”

A slow smirk tugged at his mouth. “You are either lying to provoke me or deeply unwell.”

“I wouldn’t waste a lie on something so tedious,” she replied, feigning offence. “I’m merely giving you what you asked for.”

His amusement deepened. “And here I was, foolishly imagining you spent your days

riding across meadows and breaking hearts.”

She gave a delicate sniff. “I haven’t broken anything recently. Except one of my mother’s porcelain vases last week. It was an accident, I assure you.”

Robert let out a quiet, surprised laugh before he could help it. There was something in the way she recited her bland itinerary with such severe poise that he couldn’t quite tell whether she was amusing herself at his expense or if this truly was the life she led. Either way, he was intrigued.

“Perhaps,” he considered slowly, “I’ll send you another gown, one suitable for alphabetizing preserves.”

“Please don’t,” she replied quickly. “I’d have to invent a new cupboard to justify it.”

Their eyes met again, and though her lips were pursed and her posture impeccably correct, he could see the sparkle of mischief lurking just beneath the surface.

Yes, he thought, this one will keep me on my toes.

Evelyn clasped her hands primly before her as they strolled beneath the trimmed hedgerows.

She was rather proud of herself. The bit about sorting ribbons?

Inspired. The pantry alphabetization? Absolute genius.

It had taken every ounce of restraint not to smirk when he’d asked if she was unwell.

No man, surely, would want to marry a woman who sorted starches and sugars for entertainment.



Yes, it was working splendidly. She could almost see it now: the haughty, impossible Duke Aberon, riding off in dramatic dismay, drafting a letter to dissolve the engagement, citing a tragic lack of intellectual compatibility or terminal dullness . And who could blame him? She was utterly tiresome.

She dared a glance up at him as they walked. He was quiet, thoughtful. Likely already composing the very letter in his mind.

Victory, she thought. Sweet, sweet ? —

“I wonder,” he said suddenly, cutting through her thoughts, “if you alphabetize your pantry in French or English.”

She stumbled a step. “Pardon?”

“Well, you strike me as a woman of taste,” he observed mildly. “And surely you keep your imported goods separate.”

“I...” Her eyes narrowed. “Naturally, I do.”

He smiled as if this confirmed something. She could not tell whether he was mocking her or playing along.

“Have you always been so... orderly?” he asked after a moment, with false innocence.

“Yes,” she replied quickly. “Even as a child, I preferred a broom to a doll.”

“Fascinating. And did your ribbons behave, or were they difficult to discipline?”

She turned to him fully now, stopping in the path. “Are you making fun of me, Your

Grace?”

His smile remained, infuriatingly unreadable. “Not at all. I’m simply getting to know my future duchess.”

She bristled at that. “You may find I’m not quite duchess material after all.”

He stepped a fraction closer, voice lowering. “On the contrary, I find you... rather singular.”

The look in his eyes sent an unexpected flutter down her spine.

Blast him.

Why was he smiling like that, as if he knew exactly what she was doing?

She turned sharply and resumed walking. “Well, I’m afraid I’m not very interesting. I like things plain and simple and... predictable.”

“Indeed.” He fell in step beside her once more. “And you’ve no desire at all for adventure?”

She scoffed. “Certainly not.”

“Or for conversation with a man who might actually listen?”

She flinched at that, inwardly, but she did not show it. “I’ve never found a man who listens to be particularly useful.”

His laugh was soft, genuine this time. “You wound me.”

She fought the urge to smile.

Yes, she thought, eyes forward. Very soon, he'll come to his senses.

No man as proud and powerful as Robert Firming could tolerate marrying a woman as dreadfully unremarkable as the one she was pretending to be.

“And tell me, Miss Ellory, in your vast expertise on preserves,” he enquired, “what do the French call gooseberries? Surely you know, since I imagine you label them en francais .”

She arched a brow. “Groseilles à maquereau .”

He smiled smugly. “No, no, I believe it's groseilles rouges . Red currants.”

She stopped walking.

“No,” she said coolly. “Groseilles rouges are red currants. Gooseberries are groseilles à maquereau. You'll find they're quite distinct. A gooseberry has a tart, herbaceous note. A red currant is sharper, brighter. Entirely different texture, too.”

He turned to her with maddening calm, as if she'd only proven some private hypothesis.

“Astonishing,” he murmured. “A woman who claims she's too dull for books, too simple for anything beyond pantry organization, yet speaks fluent French and probably knows the difference between every last fruit in God's orchard.”

Evelyn's breath caught.

Blast. Blast and botheration.

She'd walked right into it.

"I read a menu once," she said stiffly. "In Calais. It left an impression."

"A menu that included gooseberries?"

"They were in the dessert," she lied flatly.

He tilted his head, smiling faintly, like a cat toying with its dinner. "Of course."

They stood in a stillness made sharper by the scent of lavender in the warm air. Somewhere in the distance, a bird trilled. Evelyn's spine straightened as she lifted her chin.

"If you wish to insult me, Your Grace, there are far less roundabout ways to do it."

"I've no desire to insult you," he said, stepping just a little nearer. "But if you mean to trick me, Miss Ellory, might I suggest you pick a better disguise than pretending to be dim-witted and tragically devoted to ribbon spools?"

Her fingers curled at her sides.

"I never claimed to be dim-witted," she snapped before she could stop herself.

He merely raised an eyebrow.

Drat.

"I meant to say..." She huffed, grasping at dignity. "I only wish to keep things simple."

“Well, I do apologize, Miss Ellory,” he said with his voice full of mock-regret, “but there is absolutely nothing simple about you.”

Her face burned. She turned away from him abruptly and began to walk again, barely minding her pace. She hated the way her heart had leapt at those last words. No doubt he meant to unnerve her. No doubt he was enjoying himself far too much.

And worst of all? She had enjoyed correcting him.

He had seen straight through her charade, and now, she’d have to think of something even better. Something truly uninspired. Something utterly boring. Dreadful, even.

She squared her shoulders in an effort to regain control of whatever she could.

“Next time,” she said aloud, “I shall speak only of mildew and potatoes.”

She didn’t look at him, but she could hear the amusement in his reply.

“I await the conversation eagerly.”

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:15 am*

### Chapter Eight

Robert had scarcely handed his gloves to the butler and dismissed his hat when he noticed something peculiar.

The door to his study was open. And from within, he could clearly hear the unmistakable clink of glass.

His brows furrowed. He moved swiftly down the hall, ready to admonish a careless footman or intruding guest, only to halt at the threshold. The man stood with his back to him, sun-browned and broad-shouldered, nursing a tumbler of brandy as though it belonged to him.

Robert's disbelief faded into a crooked smile.

"Mason."

The man turned with a grin that split his tanned face, but his eyes were bright with mischief and warmth. "You always did walk like a soldier, even when sneaking into your own study."

Before Robert could reply, Mason crossed the room and embraced him in a brotherly, one-armed hug.

"I thought my ears were deceiving me when I heard the news," Mason said, stepping back to survey him. "You. Engaged. I nearly had to ask the ship to turn around and return me to sanity."

Robert let out a dry laugh. “And yet here you are, returned in full health and still just as obnoxious.”

Mason clapped him on the shoulder. “You have no idea how glad I am to see you alive and well. And with a fiancée, no less. Tell me, who is this miracle of a woman who has you trading solitude for soirées?”

Robert strode to the decanter and poured himself a drink before answering. “Her name is Evelyn Ellory. You’d like her. Or perhaps not. Most people don’t know what to do with her.”

“And yet you’re marrying her.”

“Yes.”

Mason raised a brow, clearly expecting more. “So? What happened? Did lightning strike? Did she save you from a duel? Did you, God forbid, fall in love?”

Robert scoffed into his glass. “There is no love.”

Mason blinked. “Then why, in God’s name, are you marrying the girl?”

The question hung in the air a moment. Robert felt the old weight of trust between them, the kind formed in blood and fire and sleepless nights.

He wanted, more than anything, to tell Mason everything, every dark corner of his plan, every vow he meant to break, but Mason might try to dissuade him from all of it, thinking it would be the right thing to do.

Robert took a slow sip, his eyes fixed on the amber swirl in his glass.

“I’m tired, Mason. Tired of silence. Tired of walking through this life with no one beside me. If not love, then perhaps... companionship.”

The word usually made him shudder. It was foreign, unnecessary to his way of life. Yet now, it slipped from his mind as naturally as a drop of rain from a cloud. Exactly at the right time, exactly where it needed to be.

Mason’s expression softened, surprise fading into something more earnest. “Well. That’s more honest than most men ever get before the altar.”

He raised his glass in toast. “To companionship, then.”

Robert clinked his glass against his friend’s. Then, Mason settled into the armchair across from Robert, stretching out with all the comfort of a man who hadn’t been welcome in many drawing rooms and didn’t care a whit about it.

“So, tell me more about her,” he said, swirling the last of his brandy. “This Evelyn Ellory. Is she truly the sort to turn a duke’s life upside down, or is that just you being dramatic?”

Robert chuckled low under his breath. “She’s chaos wrapped in silk. Sharp as a blade and twice as stubborn. She lies poorly but with such conviction, you almost admire her for it.”

Mason’s grin widened. “Sounds entertaining.”

“It is,” Robert admitted. “Infuriatingly so.”

A brief pause followed, filled only by the faint tick of the longcase clock in the corner. Mason’s gaze dropped thoughtfully to the rug before he spoke again.



“You know,” he added, more gently, “it sounds like your mother would have liked her.”

Robert’s smile faltered. His fingers tightened slightly around his glass.

Mason looked up quickly, wincing. “Damn it. I didn’t mean to?”

“No,” Robert said quietly, setting his drink aside. “You’re right.”

He leaned back in his chair, eyes on the ceiling as though the memory of her lingered there. “My mother would have adored her. She always said she liked women with fire in their blood. Claimed they made the best wives and the most terrifying opponents.”

Mason gave a soft laugh, and Robert allowed himself a small smile.

“It still hurts,” Mason pointed out thoughtfully.

“It does,” Robert replied, his tone steady. “And it always will. But you’re right. My mother would’ve looked at Evelyn and said, ‘That one. That’s the one who’ll keep you honest, whether you like it or not.’”

Mason nodded slowly, the weight of shared loss between them unspoken but understood.

“And your father?” Mason asked, testing.

Robert’s expression darkened, but his voice remained calm. “My father would’ve tried to crush her spirit before the ink on the contract was dry. Even if he were here, I would never let that happen.”

Mason studied him for a long moment, then leaned forward with a grin. “So, not in

love, you say?"

Robert raised a brow. "Absolutely not."

"Mm-hmm," Mason said, leaning back with infuriating satisfaction. "Well, let me know when you've convinced yourself of that."

Robert shook his head, smiling despite himself. That was when Mason glanced toward the window as the sky softened into the golden hush of the afternoon.

"Come," he said suddenly, rising to his feet and brushing imaginary dust from his sleeves. "Let's take a walk. Clear the air. Maybe stretch those brooding muscles you're always using."

Robert gave him a dry look. "I don't brood."

"You do, actually. Brood, sulk, glower... it's practically your profession. Now, get up."

Robert sighed but stood, reaching for his coat.

Mason's tone shifted, quieter now. "We could walk up the hill."

Robert stilled, his fingers pausing at the button of his coat.

"To the graves?" Mason added gently.

Robert looked away for a long moment, jaw tightening. He hadn't been up there in months.

"Yes," he said softly. "Yes, I think... I'd like that."

Mason didn't speak again. He only offered a nod and opened the door for him. They stepped out into the brisk air with the wind tugging faintly at their coats as they moved down the gravel path in silence.

There was something sacred in the way neither of them needed to speak. Mason had always known when to fill the silence and when to simply walk beside him. After all, Mason Cunningham, the Viscount of Huntley, had been his friend since childhood. Mason knew him better than he knew himself.

As they crested the familiar slope, the hill greeted them with wind and wildflowers, and in the distance, a small plot of white stone markers waited, nestled under the boughs of two old ash trees.

Robert's pace slowed. It never stopped hurting, but somehow, today, with Mason at his side, it felt a little less impossible.

"Thank you," he murmured.

Mason only nodded. "Always."

The grass beneath their boots softened as they reached the quiet hilltop where wind rustled through the tall reeds and the boughs of the ash trees murmured like a lullaby for the dead.

Three simple headstones stood in a row, their edges worn by time but clean, lovingly tended. Robert stopped before them.

He let his eyes linger on each name.

Her Grace The Duchess of Aberon, born Cecily Mulligan.

Bernard Firming, 5<sup>th</sup> Duke of Aberon.

Julian Firming, the Marquess of Belvedere.

His mother. His father. His brother.

The stillness settled around him, like a silent, heavy embrace. Mason stood a few paces back, letting him have the moment to himself. Robert's breath left him slowly, as if his lungs refused to fill too deeply in this place.

It had been so long ago, but time had done little to soften the blade of memory. Nine years old. That was all he had been. Just a boy with a scraped knee and a head full of stories about noble men and valiant heroes. Until the world taught him how fiction bled at the edges of reality.

The carriage had creaked beneath them as they turned off the main road. They had been returning from a summer visit to his grandmother's estate. His mother was humming a lullaby softly under her breath. And then, shouts. Hooves. Chaos.

Then, his mother's hand pressed on his shoulder, her voice calm but urgent. "Under the seat, Robby. Now. Don't speak. Don't come out, no matter what."

He had obeyed. He always obeyed her.

He remembered the click of the hidden latch, the dusty velvet beneath him as he curled into a space barely big enough to fit him. He heard the carriage door thrown open. Voices. Angry, laughing, foreign. His mother's scream. His father's defiance. Julian's terrified cry.

Then, silence.

Blood.

The end of everything .

And he had done nothing .

He had stayed silent until long after the horses had gone, until the dusk had stretched long and violet and cold.

He had crept out, trembling, and found their bodies.

His mother lay slumped against the carriage wall, her shawl stained red.

His father was collapsed in the grass, a pistol still in his hand.

Julian's eyes were wide and unblinking toward the stars.

He could never forget the sound of his own screams.

That night, he buried something in himself. The child. The fear. The softness.

In its place, he planted a vow.

Never again.

Never again would he be powerless. Never again would he freeze. Never again would he lose the people he loved and stand by like a coward. He trained. He studied. He hardened.

And still... the guilt never left him.

“I should’ve done something,” he murmured now, so quietly Mason almost didn’t hear.

His friend’s voice came low. “You were a child.”

Robert shook his head. “I was a Firming.”

He crouched beside the grave, fingers brushing the cold stone of his mother’s name. He’d worn her locket for years beneath his collar, unseen. A charm, a burden, a tether.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I have to break my promise to you.”

He stood, brushing the soil from his hands. He turned to Mason, his voice steadier now. “Let’s go.”

Although his friend was by his side, Robert didn’t feel any lighter. Not when he knew the path that still lay ahead of him.

### Chapter Nine

“I daresay, the man is insufferable,” Evelyn huffed, crossing her arms as the carriage jolted gently over the country road. “Who sends six gowns to confuse a lady further? It’s positively conniving.”

Hazel, seated opposite her with one gloved hand resting on the window ledge, hid a grin behind her fingers. “Or perhaps,” she said sweetly, “he merely wished to be helpful. That is what considerate suitors do, is it not?”

Cordelia snorted. “Oh yes, terribly helpful. Buying every gown she so carefully described just to make her indecision worse. I find it all very romantic.”

Evelyn rolled her eyes with great force. “You would.”

Cordelia slowly leaned forward, her eyes gleaming with mischief. “Admit it, Evelyn. You like him.”

“I do not!”

Hazel raised an inquisitive brow. “You do.”

“I shall tell you precisely what I dislike about him,” Evelyn declared, her chin high as the carriage jostled gently onward. “Since you both seem to think my irritation is some hidden form of affection which it most certainly is not.”

Cordelia and Hazel leaned forward in unison, their eyes bright with anticipation.

Evelyn held up a gloved finger. “First of all, he always speaks as though he’s in on some joke the rest of the world is too dull to grasp.”

Hazel nodded solemnly. “A terrible trait.”

“And he has this insufferable habit,” Evelyn continued, warming to her subject, “of pausing just before he replies, as if weighing every word, as if his conversation is some rare commodity to be dispensed in measured drops.”

“How vile,” murmured Cordelia, hiding her smile behind her hand.

“He walks too quietly. Why, one moment, you believe yourself alone, and the next, there he is, behind you like some... some shadow in perfectly tailored boots!”

“Unforgivable,” Hazel said gravely.

“And, and!” Evelyn added with a sharp nod. “He always smells faintly of cedarwood and something else, something I can’t place. It is quite infuriating.”

There was silence then Cordelia asked, “You’ve noticed how he smells?”

“I... well, he stands very close when he’s being aggravating.”

“Ah,” Hazel said, fighting a grin. “Naturally.”

“And he smiles as though he knows exactly how irritating he is, and he dares to enjoy it. It is not a kind smile. It is a victorious one. As though he’s just bested me in some battle I wasn’t even aware I was fighting.”

Cordelia and Hazel exchanged a long look.



“What now?” Evelyn demanded, folding her arms.

Cordelia gave her a fond, maddening smile. “I only hope my future husband irritates me so thoroughly.”

Hazel leaned toward Evelyn, her voice light. “Darling, do you realize that all the things you loathe about him are minute details? The way he smells. The way he smiles. The silence before he speaks.”

“You have studied him,” Cordelia added with a mock gasp. “You are practically writing a dissertation.”

“I have not! ” Evelyn cried though color was rapidly rising in her cheeks. “I am merely attentive to my surroundings.”

“And to your Duke,” Hazel said, sweetly relentless.

“He is not my — ” Evelyn broke off with a groan and flopped back against the seat. “You both make me want to leap from the carriage.”

“You’d probably land in his arms,” Cordelia pointed out playfully. “He walks quietly, remember?”

Evelyn gave them both a look of utmost betrayal. “You are both mad.”

Cordelia made a thoughtful noise. “Is that so? Then why is it you always speak of him with such... fervor? No other gentleman has inspired so much conversation from you. Certainly not Lord Painswick, and he wrote you poetry.”

“Poetry riddled with spelling errors,” Evelyn muttered, shuddering at the thought.

“Ah, and yet not a single mention of it since. But the Duke... oh, we hear about him constantly.” Hazel’s eyes twinkled. “His arrogance, his flowers, his books, his voice?—”

“Stop it at once!” Evelyn covered her ears, laughing despite herself. “You twist my words.”

“Do we?” Cordelia asked innocently. “Because the way you ranted about his handwriting the other day, what was it? So precise it’s infuriating? That sounded rather like admiration to me.”

“It was not!” Evelyn insisted, trying to maintain her scowl. “It was... a general observation.”

“Mhm,” Hazel said, exchanging a knowing glance with Cordelia. “And when he kissed your hand at the manor, your face was red as a rose.”

“I had a chill,” Evelyn objected at once. “It was draughty. And I don’t see how this is relevant.”

“It’s relevant because,” Cordelia said with a teasing grin, “you are absolutely smitten.”

Evelyn groaned, dropping her head against the velvet carriage wall. “You two are impossible.”

“But delightful,” Hazel teased, tossing her curls. “And entirely correct.”

Evelyn opened one eye to glare at them. “I do not like him. I loathe him. Even the way he breathes infuriates me, let alone that way he smiles as though he knows every secret I’ve ever had?—”

“Oh dear,” Cordelia murmured. “That sounds dangerously like infatuation.”

“It is not,” Evelyn said, sitting up primly. “And if you continue this nonsense, I shall ride the rest of the way with my mother.”

Hazel looked positively wicked. “Your mother, who is undoubtedly dreaming up the wedding breakfast as we speak?”

“Precisely,” Cordelia added. “And trying to choose a nursery color.”

“You are both monsters,” Evelyn declared though she could not quite keep the laughter from her voice.

The worst part, of course, was not their teasing. It was that they weren’t entirely wrong.

But she would never, ever , admit that aloud.

The carriage wheels crunched over the gravel drive, and Evelyn felt the familiar jolt as they slowed to a stop. Before the footman could fully lower the step, Cordelia had leaned toward the window with a soft gasp.

“Oh,” she breathed silently to herself. “It’s magnificent.”

The door was opened, and the three young women descended into sunlight and wind, which was brisk and cool and touched faintly by pine and heather. Evelyn’s slippers met the gravel as her eyes lifted at once to the estate before her.

She could not help it. Her breath caught.

The Duke’s estate, set like a crown jewel atop the northern hills, rose with an

elegance that was both regal and ancient. It was not gaudy nor newly built with fashionable excess. No, it stood with the quiet power of something that had endured.

It boasted grey stone walls veined with ivy, soaring gables, arched windows glinting like eyes. There were turrets and chimneys, and high above, carved cornices and sweeping iron balconies. It should have felt severe, but it did not. It was... breathtaking.

There was something fairy-tale-like about it all but not the sort of tale filled with bright gowns and tinkling laughter.

No, this was the realm of tangled woods and whispered secrets, of old magic and deep-rooted sorrow.

There was a kind of darkness to it, subtle and compelling, like the final chord of a melancholy sonata.

And yet, everywhere she looked there were signs of care, of devotion, even.

The hedges were trimmed to perfection, the rose garden bursting with color even this early in the season, and the path winding toward the house was lined with young trees which were now rustling gently in the breeze. The land had not simply been maintained... it had been loved .

Evelyn tilted her chin and scanned the grounds with narrowing eyes.

Of course, he would be the sort of man who saw to the health of every hedge and seedling.

That was exactly the sort of infuriating contradiction he embodied: commanding and cavalier in conversation, but with a secret, steadfast tenderness that was visible only

when one wasn't meant to be looking.

Evelyn felt it like a jolt. It was sharp and sudden, rising from somewhere in her chest. An idea, full and gleaming, taking root in an instant. Yes. That was it. That was exactly how she would end this charade once and for all.

She straightened, lips parting to share it, then stopped.

Hazel and Cordelia were no longer looking at her. Their expressions had shifted, their gazes pinned beyond her shoulder. Cordelia's smile had faltered, a glimmer of something uncertain dancing across her features. Hazel's brows had drawn together. Evelyn turned slowly... and froze.

At the base of the steps, in conversation with a liveried steward, stood the Duke. He was as tall and composed as ever, one hand gloved, the other gesturing as he spoke. But she barely saw him.

Everything else vanished.

There were two figures beside him. One of them a woman in soft blue silk, honey-blond hair swept into a perfect chignon, the very image of composure. The other... him .

Evelyn couldn't move, couldn't think. Even the breeze seemed to shift. Distantly, she heard the Duke speak.

"Your sister and her husband arrived a bit earlier than expected," he explained. "So, it appears we are all here now."

The sound was muffled in her ears. All she could hear, truly hear, was the pulse pounding in her skull.

He was exactly as she remembered. No. He was worse . Somehow more smug. More assured. The cut of his coat, the ease of his posture, the tilt of his chin as his dark, demonic eyes met hers.

He smiled. A slow, knowing, arrogant smile.

Her hands clenched at her sides before she knew they'd moved. She could feel her nails pressing into her palms. She could feel the heat crawling up her neck. Her mouth was dry.

She couldn't look at her sister. She wouldn't. Not yet.

The man spoke to the Duke again, laughing at something. Evelyn's vision tunneled. There was the faintest lift of his brow when he glanced back at her, as if to say, Look at everything I took from you and how well I wear it.

She wanted to slap him. Hard. And then again, just to be certain.

Cordelia's hand brushed hers. Hazel shifted closer.

Evelyn's breath came sharp and quick, like cold air slicing down her throat. The sting behind her eyes was unwelcome. More importantly, it was unacceptable.

She turned sharply toward the Duke as fury simmered just beneath her skin. "What are they doing here?" she demanded. "What sort of twisted, manipulative turn is this?"

The Duke, who had just turned in polite acknowledgement of her presence, blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

She laughed, bitterly. "Don't insult my intelligence by pretending you don't know."

He took a measured step closer, his brow furrowing. “Miss Ellory, I assure you, I?—”

“No,” she snapped. “I don’t want to hear your assurances. You have made yourself quite clear.”

“I haven’t the faintest idea what you’re talking about?—”

“And you never will.” Her hands were trembling now, but she held herself as tall as she could. “Enjoy your grand little gathering, Your Grace. I will be in my appointed room. There’s no need to escort me—your butler will suffice. I’m sure he’s used to guiding guests through estates full of ghosts.”

With that, she turned, skirts swishing violently around her ankles as she stormed past the rest of the stunned party.

She didn’t look at her sister.

She couldn’t.

Each step toward the grand front door felt heavier than the last, with her boots striking against the stone as if she were trying to crush the memories rising with every heartbeat.

Her chest was tight. Her vision swam. The house loomed like something from a fever dream, elegant and ancient and vast, and all she could think was get away, get away, get away.

By the time she reached the entrance hall, her composure was a brittle shell, ready to crack. She stopped the first footman she saw and urged with a voice that somehow remained steady, “Please show me to my chambers.”

And as she followed him up the staircase, her hands clenching hard at her sides, she thought she might scream or shatter.



### Chapter Ten

It was only several minutes later that Robert found himself sitting in the high-backed leather chair in his study, still as a statue. Across from him, Lady Cordelia shifted in her seat. Lady Hazel did not.

He had offered them the larger settee, but they seemed too tense to notice the gesture. Cordelia's eyes flitted to the clock on the mantle and then to the door, as though expecting Evelyn herself to appear and end the interrogation. Hazel met his gaze squarely. He respected her for it.

"I will ask only once more," Robert said, endeavoring to keep his voice as calm and measured as he could, without menace though it often read as such. "What on earth is going on here?"

Cordelia looked toward Hazel, silently begging for a reprieve. Hazel gave her none.

Robert waited. He did not fidget. He did not pace. He simply was the way a thundercloud was : quiet, vast, heavy with the threat of something more.

Still, there was no answer. He exhaled, controlled but not weary, not at all annoyed, and made himself ease back an inch in the chair.

It was a slight concession. He knew he probably frightened them though he had never raised his voice in their presence nor anyone else's in recent memory.

It was not in his nature to soothe, but for Evelyn's sake, he would try.

“I do not seek to unearth gossip,” he said with his tone unchanging, “nor to cast blame. I ask only because I wish to understand what Evelyn is enduring. It seems—” he paused, searching for the word, “—that I have erred. We had begun to speak plainly with one another, or so I believed. But now, she will barely look at me after what I have unknowingly done.”

Cordelia pressed a hand to her mouth then dropped it quickly as though realizing the gesture would betray something. Hazel’s expression remained even.

Robert’s gaze moved between them. “I understand now that I was misled. Her mother was emphatic. She said Evelyn misses her sister terribly and would be moved by a surprise visit. She begged me to extend the invitation to the Viscount of Forth and his wife.”

At the mention of Evelyn’s sister, Cordelia winced. Hazel drew in a long, quiet breath.

“She lied,” Hazel said finally. “Lady Brimwood lied.”

“I had surmised as much.”

“It wasn’t a lie of confusion,” Cordelia added, her voice quieter, more brittle. “It was intentional. Malicious even.”

Hazel cut in before Cordelia’s rising emotion could take root.

“We will tell you what we know, Your Grace, not for Lady Ashworth nor for curiosity’s reward but because we care for Evelyn.

Deeply. And because, frankly, much of what we are about to say is no secret among the ton .

If you were more frequently among society, you might know it already. ”

“I avoid society intentionally,” Robert replied. “I find it excels at saying much and meaning little.”

Cordelia gave a startled laugh then covered her mouth again. Hazel’s mouth twitched in what might have been agreement.

Robert said nothing to acknowledge the amusement. He simply waited.

The ladies exchanged another glance. Hazel’s brow lifted as if to ask silently: Shall I? Cordelia gave a small nod, but her fingers twisted tightly in her lap.

Robert observed it all.

Hazel began, her voice even. “You must understand something, Your Grace. Evelyn’s family... well, it’s not so simple as appearances might suggest. She and Matilda were very close once. But this closeness... it didn’t survive what happened.”

Cordelia broke in, her voice tight. “Their father arranged a match for Evelyn. A good one. Lord Laurence Ashworth, the Viscount of Forth. Evelyn was... radiant that year. She’d just come out, and he took notice.”

“She was excited,” Hazel said with a rare flicker of emotion. “She told us in confidence that she thought herself in love. Believed she had been chosen.”

Robert’s brow furrowed, just slightly. “They courted?”

“For a few weeks,” Cordelia answered, “but quietly. They weren’t to announce anything until the banns were read. Lord Brimwood wanted it done properly with ceremony. But before the first Sunday came?—”

“They were gone,” Hazel said flatly. “Matilda and the Viscount. Gone to Gretna Green. Married before anyone knew what had happened.”

Robert was silent for a moment. Then, the weight of what he had just heard hit him. “She ran off with her sister’s betrothed.”

“Yes,” Hazel confirmed. “Her older sister. Who had never shown any interest in him until Evelyn did.”

Robert leaned forward slightly, his tone unchanged but his words clipped. “Did Evelyn know? That Matilda...?”

Cordelia shook her head quickly. “No. Never. She trusted Matilda with her life.”

“And her parents?”

“They claimed shock,” Hazel said with a trace of dry disdain. “Though Lady Brimwood took Matilda’s side within a fortnight. She said Evelyn must have misunderstood Lord Ashworth’s intentions. That Matilda simply acted boldly in love.”

Cordelia let out a bitter breath. “It broke Evelyn—not that she ever said so—but she stopped speaking about the future. She refused other suitors, I think, not because they weren’t worthy but because she didn’t trust herself to believe anyone again.”

Robert’s hands tightened where they rested on the arms of the chair. Not enough to betray anger but enough that Hazel noticed.

“She has spoken none of this to me,” he said. He also understood why.

“She wouldn’t,” Hazel replied. “You’re a man. And she’s spent the last two years

being told she's foolish for still being hurt."

"She is not foolish."

Cordelia gave a tight smile. "You can tell her that. Tell her it isn't weakness to bleed where she was cut."

Robert's eyes met Hazel's. "And you are certain she bears no feelings for Lord Ashworth still?"

Hazel's mouth thinned. "None. She hates him. But she hates herself more for ever having wanted him."

Cordelia nodded. "She doesn't speak to them. She hasn't written, hasn't responded. She merely retreated."

"As I've seen," Robert said, almost to himself.

Cordelia looked at him carefully, like one examining a map for the safest path. "She may never trust easily again. But if there's any chance at all, it would be with someone who sees her as she is now, not what she once hoped to be."

Robert rose then, slowly and deliberately. "That man will not set foot across my threshold. And if her mother has objections, she may direct them to me."

Hazel nodded once, approving.

Robert looked toward the window with his hands clasped behind his back and his voice as flat and grave as always.

"I do not concern myself with society's whims, but I will not allow Evelyn to suffer

in silence for the sake of decorum.

If I am to be her husband, she will know peace within these walls, or I will tear them down until she does. ”

Cordelia blinked. “That’s... oddly romantic.”

“It’s not meant to be,” he replied.

She smiled faintly. “All the better.”

Robert closed the study door behind Lady Hazel and Lady Cordelia with a finality that seemed to echo down the corridor. His hand remained on the latch for a moment longer than necessary. Then he turned and walked briskly toward the east wing where Evelyn had retreated an hour ago.

He did not knock gently. His fist struck the door just once but sharply. No answer.

He opened it.

Empty.

The room was neat... too neat. There were no signs of her. There was no book abandoned on the chair, no shawl cast aside. Her presence had been here once, but it was long since vanished. His jaw tightened.

That was when he heard voices. They came from below, muffled by wood and plaster. A woman’s lilting tone was too sweet. A younger woman’s reply was quiet. And there was a third voice, low, masculine, and unwelcome.

Robert was moving before he registered it, footsteps soundless but swift across the

upper landing. As he reached the stairs, Lady Brimwood's voice lifted, clear and coaxing.

"You must see reason, Evelyn. They are your family."

No, he thought. They are vipers.

He didn't pause at the threshold of the drawing room. He walked straight through it, swinging the door open with such force that it bounced once against the wall. The room fell into silence at once.

Evelyn was sitting stiffly on the edge of the settee, pale and with her fingers clenched tightly in her lap. Her mother and father were seated opposite her, showing which sides of the matter they were on.

"Oh, Your Grace," she said smoothly, regaining composure momentarily. "We were just discussing the remodeling of this room." She turned to her daughter. "Right, dear?"

Evelyn, without lifting her eyes, agreed. "Yes. Perhaps we might repaint the molding in cream. Or replace the rug with something... more welcoming."

Robert looked at her. He really looked, not failing to notice the hollow behind her voice and the rigidity in her posture. She was lying. She was playing a part to protect herself.

His voice came low. "I have no time for such games."

Lady Brimwood blinked. "Pardon?"

He didn't look at her. "I need a word with Evelyn."

Evelyn's head lifted slightly. Her eyes met his, steady but dulled. "I'm in no mood for more serious conversations."

He stepped forward. "Unfortunate."

And without another word, he reached down, gripped her waist, and lifted her off the settee in one fluid movement. She let out a soft gasp of outrage as he hoisted her over his shoulder like a sack of flour.

"Robert!" she snapped, twisting in protest, referring to him by his given name for the first time ever. If he hadn't been so blinded by rage, he would actually have realized how much he liked it. "What on earth are you doing?"

"Removing you from a poisonous atmosphere," he replied coolly.

"Put me down! This is completely improper!"

He didn't. He kept walking, measured and unfazed, through the drawing room, out into the hallway, and toward the library. Behind them was shocked silence.

Then Lady Brimwood's voice rose in a scandalized pitch. "Well, I never!"

Evelyn thumped his back with a closed fist. "You absolute brute! Unhand me this instant!"

He ignored her. His pace never changed.

"People can see us!"

"Good. Perhaps they'll ask why."



She went still. Not entirely but the kind of stillness that came from confusion, not submission. Her voice dropped slightly. “Why are you doing this?”

He reached the library, opened the door, stepped inside, and closed it with a firm, final click. Only then did he lower her, not gently but not unkindly, onto the nearest chaise. She immediately stood up, glaring at him.

“You have utterly lost your mind!”

### Chapter Eleven

Evelyn was fuming.

She stood in the middle of the library with her arms crossed, her jaw tight, and her breath short with utter indignation. Her hair was slightly mussed from being hauled—hauled! —across the manor like a sack of potatoes.

“This,” she said, pacing nervously, “was utterly scandalous. You have just handed my mother enough ammunition to murder me socially, and she will do it, I assure you.”

Robert didn’t speak.

“And furthermore,” she continued, gesturing with one flailing hand, “you kidnapped me! In front of witnesses! Who, I might add, have very active mouths and very little else to do.”

Still, he said nothing.

“And this,” she spun on her heel, pointing to the chaise where he’d deposited her like forgotten luggage, “was not romantic. Not in the slightest. It was brutish and uncivilized, and you should be?”

He stepped forward and pressed a single finger against her lips. She froze.

“Evelyn,” he said, very quietly, “you are to become my duchess in less than twenty-four hours.”

She narrowed her eyes at him with her mouth still lightly pressed shut under his touch.

He arched a brow. “This is my castle. Your parents already suspect I’ve ruined you. It seems there is very little more damage I can do.”

She slapped his hand away. “You’re insufferable.”

“I’ve been called worse.”

“You will be again.” Her eyes burned into his.

“I don’t doubt it.”

She crossed her arms again. “You still shouldn’t have carried me.”

“No,” he agreed. “But I would do it again.”

He said it like a promise. Or a warning. Her heart gave a traitorous flutter at the thought of it being either of the two.

Robert’s gaze sharpened, and the faintest shift in his expression made her stomach twist. “I know about your sister,” he said, “and the Viscount.”

Her body tensed up as if he’d struck her, but she forced her tone into something dry and sharp. “Ah. That would explain the thundering entrance. And the abduction. And the brooding glower you’ve perfected.”

He didn’t smile. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

She let out a low breath, turning from him. “Because it’s old pain, and old pain is

boring. No one likes hearing about heartbreaks that occurred two years ago. They start wondering why you're not over it, as if grief and betrayal obey calendars."

"Is that why you refused every other offer?"

She turned back, her eyes flashing at him. "Do you think I'm still in love with him?"

He didn't flinch. "I'm asking."

She scoffed. Loudly. "God above, no. Don't flatter that man on my behalf."

Robert blinked, just once. She saw it, that flicker of tension leaving his shoulders, and in it, something else... Could it have been relief?

She blinked then narrowed her eyes. "Wait... Were you jealous?"

"No."

"You were."

"I was not. I was... concerned."

"For my emotional well-being?"

"For my sanity," he muttered.

She grinned, despite herself. "Well. That is almost flattering."

He gave her a look. "The truth. Please."

She sighed, tilting her head to study the lines of the floorboards.

“It wasn’t love. Not even close. It was...

infatuation. The kind you read about in silly novels.

He told me, very seriously, I might add, that he had royal blood.

That his great-aunt was cousin to the King’s second mistress or some nonsense.

I was sixteen when I first met him, and I thought, Oh, how noble. How tragic. How dashing. ”

Robert looked as though he might actually groan.

“I know,” she said quickly. “You don’t have to say anything. I cringe just remembering it. But it wasn’t real. I never even knew him. I just wanted to be wanted. And he made it seem like I was special.”

Robert was silent again, but this time it wasn’t cold. It was a weighted silence, and all she could do was wonder what he was thinking.

Robert watched her closely.

There was something about the way Evelyn stood now that he couldn’t stop thinking about. Her posture was straight but brittle at the edges, like a porcelain figure set too close to the edge of a table. He could see the effort it took her to keep from folding in on herself.

She hesitated, and then, with a visible breath, she let caution slip away.

“I had lost faith in marriage,” she said in a low and tired tone of voice. “And in men. In promises. In all those pretty, useless ideas girls are raised on. I don’t believe in

happily ever afters. I don't want to tie my happiness to a man, least of all one who doesn't care about me."

The words struck something in his chest. It was not guilt, not quite, but it was something heavier, older—perhaps an echo of understanding that hadn't existed before. Robert said nothing at first, not because he was angry but because she was right.

He had pursued this union with unrelenting precision as he did all things that mattered.

Evelyn had been a piece in a puzzle, a thread in a tapestry whose image only he understood.

She was the key to her father, and her father was the key to answers .

And in that pursuit, he hadn't once paused to consider that she was more than a means to an end.

He had never allowed himself the luxury of such consideration... until now.

"I didn't understand before," he said at last, his voice quieter than usual. "But I do now."

She blinked at him, looking utterly surprised. Maybe even disarmed.

"If that is your wish, I shall throw them out of my home with a dramatic flair that would rival the bard himself," he tried to jest.

A flicker of a smile graced her beautiful lips, but her answer surprised him.

“No,” she told him with fiery determination.

“That will make them think that I am afraid. Or worse yet, that I still harbor feeling for that wretch of a man. No,” she added again, shaking her head.

“They shall attend our wedding as Mama has planned.”

He studied her, the set of her mouth, the weariness behind her eyes, the thin thread of color rising to her cheeks. She looked tired in a way that had nothing to do with rest and everything to do with having to be strong for far too long.

“Then, the wedding will proceed,” he agreed, simply because it had to happen, “but I do not wish for you to be unhappy in the marriage.”

Her eyes widened slightly as she took in the weight of his words. That, too, seemed to surprise her.

“So,” he continued, more gently than before, “tell me what you would want out of it.”

They were standing very close now. He hadn’t noticed when the distance between them had shrunk. He could see the gold flecks in her green eyes, so unusual and sharp, like sunlight against moss. And her blush, it was rising steadily, painting her cheeks and the bridge of her nose in soft color.

Odd that he hadn’t truly noticed that before. Or perhaps he hadn’t let himself.

Evelyn tilted her head slightly as her eyes searched his.

“I want to be able to make decisions for myself,” she said, asking for what was the most natural thing for any person to desire. “I don’t want you giving me orders or treating me like some piece of property you acquired. I want freedom. I want

respect.”

He nodded just once. “Done.”

Her lips parted slightly, as if she hadn’t expected him to agree so easily. Or at all.

“I don’t expect affection,” she added quickly, as if protecting herself from his agreement. “Or love. That’s not the sort of marriage I want. I would prefer if we led separate lives.”

Robert was silent again but not because he opposed the idea. He was thinking.

“I agree,” he said finally. “With one caveat.”

She raised a brow. “Which is?”

He stepped closer. She didn’t move away. “For the sake of appearances, I require that we spend the first month together. Publicly. Among the ton. As a married couple.”

She crossed her arms slowly. “You mean for the sake of your reputation?”

“No,” he said. “For the sake of protecting us both.”

That gave her pause.

“I see,” she said after a heartbeat. “And after that month?”

“You may do as you wish.”

She exhaled slowly, as if she were only just allowing herself to breathe. Her shoulders no longer sat so high, her tone had shifted from defensive to steady, and



there was even the faint curve of amusement at the corners of her mouth. That, in itself, was progress.

But then she paused, mid-thought, as if some unpleasant memory had struck her square in the chest. He saw it clearly, that flicker of worry behind her eyes, the way her fingers curled slightly, as if bracing for impact.

She cleared her throat. “There’s something else.”

He waited quietly and watched her expression carefully.

Evelyn didn’t look at him as she asked, “Do you… require an heir?”

There it was: the hesitation. The suspicion beneath it. He could hear the subtext clearly, even if she hadn’t spoken it aloud.

Was this marriage another cage? Another obligation? Was she signing herself away just to become a vessel for someone else’s legacy?

Robert allowed himself a pause, long enough to make her fidget. He could have easily dissuaded her of that with his usual tone of voice, but he chose a different path.

“Are you propositioning me?” he inquired, unable to control his amusement.

Her head snapped toward him so fast it was a miracle she didn’t sprain something. “What… no! Of course not! I didn’t mean… it wasn’t… I just thought…”

He took a slow step forward. She stepped back. Another step. Another retreat.

“I was simply asking,” she stammered, “if that was an expectation, not that I—I mean I’m not… propositioning…”

“You’re blushing,” he observed.

She sputtered. “You’re insufferable .”

“I’m merely clarifying.”

He was in front of her now, and her back hit the edge of the library shelves. She looked up at him with wide eyes, green with storm and defiance and something very near panic which he found endlessly charming.

“Just to be perfectly clear,” he said and leaned in.

His mouth grazed the edge of her jaw. It was barely a touch. Featherlight. But she froze.

Then, his breath warm against her ear, he whispered. “I didn’t choose to marry you because I wanted heirs.”

She made a small noise, which was something between a squeak and a gasp, and stepped sideways with surprising speed, putting a good three feet of distance between them.

“You are a cad ,” she hissed, pointing an accusatory finger at him though the color in her cheeks betrayed any hope of real menace.

“And you’re running away.”

“Because you are scandalous, and I will not stand for it!”

He raised a brow.

She turned, flustered beyond speech now, and practically ran from the library. He stood there for a moment, the silence thick around him, and then reached up to touch his lips. They still held the faint, sweet warmth of her skin.

Robert exhaled through his nose and let a rare smirk curl at the corner of his mouth.

He had known this before, of course. From the moment she called him arrogant with that glint in her eyes, from the way she insulted his manners without flinching, from the way she'd looked at him tonight with half fear, half curiosity.

But now it was a certainty. His wife was going to be trouble.

And God help him, he didn't mind it one bit.

### Chapter Twelve

He agreed, she thought bitterly. He agreed to let me live my own life. That was what I wanted. Wasn't it?

Then why did it feel like some invisible thread had snapped between them, leaving a hollow space behind?

Evelyn was still burning with indignation and something far more dangerous that she refused to name as she rounded the corner at too sharp a pace and collided hard with another figure.

Evelyn recoiled instantly. Her heart slammed against her ribs.

And then she saw her .

Matilda.

Her sister.

The sister who had stolen a man, a future, a world Evelyn had once allowed herself to believe in. For a moment, Evelyn could only stare.

Matilda looked thinner than she remembered. Also, tired. But her eyes were wide and soft, just as they used to be when they were girls, whispering secrets in bed long after the candles were snuffed out.

“Evelyn,” Matilda breathed, reaching for her hand. “Please, just a moment. Let me explain. I never meant for things to happen the way they did?—”

Evelyn stepped back so quickly she nearly tripped on her own hem.

“No.” Her voice came out low and sharp, the kind of tone she had trained herself to master, the kind that masked everything trembling underneath.

“I just... please,” Matilda tried again, her hand trembling now. “I’ve written. I’ve tried?—”

“I burned your letters,” Evelyn snapped, her chin lifting. “Unopened.”

Matilda flinched. “I know I don’t deserve forgiveness, but I’ve missed you every day.”

Evelyn’s throat burned, and her eyes stung suddenly, traitorously.

She had missed her. Desperately so. And not just the way one missed a childhood companion but with that deep, ragged ache that came from being betrayed by the one person she’d trusted without question.

“You don’t get to say that,” Evelyn said, her voice barely steady. “You lost the right to miss me the day you ran off to Gretna Green with him . You knew how I felt. You knew .”

Matilda’s eyes filled with tears. “He chose me. I didn’t mean to hurt you. I never?—”

“But you did.” Evelyn’s voice cracked, but she didn’t let it show. “You destroyed what we had of our sisterhood. And now, you think you can come back and simply explain it all away?”

She turned, stiffening her spine like steel.

“You should consider yourselves fortunate,” she said coldly, her voice rising to the precise tone of a lady hosting guests she despised, “that His Grace and I have permitted your presence here for the ceremony. But once it concludes, you and Lord Ashworth are no longer welcome in this house.”

“Evelyn, please?—”

But Evelyn was already gone, storming down the corridor with a forced calmness that shattered the moment she reached her chamber.

She shoved the door closed behind herself and bolted it fast, pressing her back to the wood as if expecting Matilda, or worse yet, her own feelings, to come bursting through.

She stood there, trembling, jaw clenched, the pain she’d swallowed for two years threatening to rise up and drown her.

What hurt the most wasn’t just the betrayal. It was that after all this time, there was a part of her still wanting to forgive.

And she didn’t know if that made her foolish... or simply still human.

About an hour later, Evelyn sat before her vanity, not touching the tea or the lemon biscuits Cordelia had tried to tempt her with.

Hazel stood near the fireplace with her arms crossed in that calm but ever-watchful manner of hers.

Cordelia paced, nervously twisting her fingers in the silk ribbon of her sleeve.

“We shouldn’t have said anything,” Cordelia finally burst out, her voice thick with remorse. “We only meant to help him understand. You were so angry, Evelyn, and he looked... well, like a man who didn’t know which way was up.”

Hazel didn’t speak right away. She just watched Evelyn with that quiet, measured gaze of hers, the kind that always saw more than it should.

“We were wrong to speak on your behalf,” Hazel said at last. “Even if we meant well. I am sorry.”

Evelyn blinked then looked up at them both in the mirror. Her eyes, though tired, were clear.

“I’m not angry with you,” she said simply.

Cordelia blinked. “You’re not?”

“No.” Evelyn turned on the cushioned stool to face them directly. “You acted out of loyalty. That much I know. And truthfully, there’s little you said that he could not have eventually discovered for himself.”

Cordelia’s brows knit. “Then who are you angry with?”

Evelyn’s gaze darkened, her lips pressing into a thin line.

“My mother.”

The words came out with a weight that seemed to fill the room. She stood, walking slowly to the window, her hands brushing the delicate curtain aside as she looked down at the side gardens. Her voice was even but cold.

“She knew. She’s always known. And instead of standing with me, she begged him to invite them . Invited them under the pretense that I missed them.” Her fingers curled into the drapery. “As if she could rewrite the past by shoving it back into my face and calling it reconciliation.”

“She always cared about appearances more than people,” Hazel said quietly.

Cordelia looked stricken. “What will you do?”

Evelyn was silent for a moment. The scent of lavender and warmed sugar from the tea tray drifted through the air, nauseatingly sweet.

“Nothing,” she said at last, turning back to them.

“Nothing?” Cordelia echoed, as if she’d misheard.

“I will walk down that aisle tomorrow,” Evelyn said.

“I will smile. I will play my part to perfection. And then, once the vows are spoken and the doors are closed, I will be alone. With him .” She hesitated only briefly before continuing, “And far away from the people who were supposed to protect me but instead sold me off, lied to me, and betrayed me.”

Cordelia’s eyes shone with unshed tears. Hazel seemed apprehensive.

“I used to think that family was a kind of shield,” Evelyn murmured. “A refuge. But now I know better. Family can be a cage too. A very polite finely decorated one.”

She moved back to her vanity and picked up her brush with careful precision, drawing it through her curls with slow, methodical strokes.



“I may not trust the Duke,” she added, “but at least with him, I know where I stand. He never pretends to be anything but what he is.”

Hazel spoke gently. “And what is he to you?”

Evelyn paused, staring into her own reflection.

“A man I’ll have to learn to survive.”

There was a silence after that. Even Cordelia didn’t have a quip to lighten the air.

Hazel stepped forward and rested a hand lightly on Evelyn’s shoulder.

“You’re not alone,” she said.

Evelyn gave a faint smile in the mirror. “I know. But thank you for saying it anyway.”

And then, with the grace of a woman raised to be unshakable, she set the brush down, straightened her spine, and looked ahead.

“Tomorrow, I will marry a stranger,” she told them, “but at least I will no longer belong to people who wore love like a mask for convenience.”

Her friends were both silent for a while, but then Cordelia decided it was high time they stopped being focused on the negative.

“You know,” Cordelia said, perching herself dramatically on the edge of Evelyn’s bed, “being married to the Duke of Aberon might not be as dreadful as you think.”

Hazel gave a dry little hum of agreement, folding her hands over her waist. “He may

not smile often, but at least he doesn't drool or ogle footmen like Lord Wexley."

Cordelia shuddered. "Or reek of onions like Sir Prattlington. The man once proposed to me over a bowl of stewed parsnips."

Evelyn snorted before she could stop herself. "You two are impossible."

"But you're smiling," Cordelia pointed out triumphantly.

"I'm trying not to scream," Evelyn muttered, standing to walk to her wardrobe under the pretense of adjusting a gown that didn't need adjusting.

"Oh, come now," Cordelia said with a sly grin. "Surely it hasn't escaped your notice how the Duke looks at you."

Hazel raised a brow. "It's very... intense."

Evelyn paused, her hand hovering over a pale blue hem.

"That is simply how he looks at everyone," she said too quickly and a little too precisely. "Like he's trying to decide whether they are a threat or a nuisance."

Cordelia giggled. "Perhaps. But he stares at you like he's found both. And likes it."

"I think he just likes to brood," Evelyn argued primly. "Brooding is a requirement for dukes, isn't it?"

Hazel's lips twitched. "Be honest. Does it not unsettle you at least a little... how he sees you?"

Evelyn turned back to them with a carefully schooled expression. "I don't concern

myself with how he sees me. This marriage isn't about feelings or... or chemistry. It's a convenience. An arrangement."

Cordelia tilted her head, unconvinced. "You're avoiding the question."

"I'm not avoiding anything."

"You do flush when he's near," Hazel remarked gently.

"I do not."

"You do," Cordelia echoed cheerfully. "And it's very charming."

"I also flush when I'm angry. Or too warm," Evelyn countered, crossing her arms.

"Is that what it was when he leaned close to whisper in your ear?" Cordelia asked with faux innocence. "A bout of sudden heatstroke?"

Evelyn threw a pillow at her.

Cordelia caught it mid-air and laughed as Hazel shook her head fondly.

"I cannot pretend," Evelyn admitted at last, her voice quieter now, "that I'm entirely unaffected."

She hated saying it aloud. The fact that his gaze lingered longer than it should and that she felt it like a brand on her skin. That when he teased her, which was a rare but devastating occasion, it left her completely disarmed. That he seemed to look through her, not just at her.

It was maddening. Unfair. Most of all, dangerous.

“But it doesn’t matter,” she said, more firmly now, “because this isn’t a real marriage, and I intend to keep it that way.”

Hazel nodded slowly. “Even if it starts to feel real?”

Evelyn gave a tight smile. “Then I’ll remind myself that it’s not. That I chose this. That I need the distance more than the dream.”

The room fell quiet again, but it wasn’t heavy now. It was full of understanding. It was the kind of silence shared only by those who had seen her heart cracked open and loved her anyway.

Cordelia walked over and squeezed her hand. “Well, if nothing else, at least he’s very nice to look at.”

Evelyn rolled her eyes. “You’re both incorrigible.”

But her fingers curled faintly around Cordelia’s.

And she didn’t deny it.

### Chapter Thirteen

The house was silent, wrapped in the kind of silence that pressed down over the skin like velvet, soft but suffocating.

Evelyn stirred awake, her eyes blinking into the moonlit shadows that crept along her chamber walls. A knock on the door came again. She sat upright, heart lurching.

The Duke.

The thought surged unbidden, absurd and impossible, and yet?—

She was out of bed before she could reason with herself, smoothing down her nightdress and tousling her hair just enough to feign a sleep-disheveled grace. Her bare feet padded across the cold floor as she reached the door and hesitated for half a breath before unlatching it.

She opened it.

And every breath in her lungs turned to ice, because it wasn't the Duke standing there. It was Lord Ashworth.

She moved to shut the door at once, but his boot slid between it and the frame before it could close.

“You will remove your foot,” she hissed, her fingers white on the edge of the door, “or I will scream.”

His grin widened, but he was maddeningly calm. “Do. I rather think I’d enjoy it. But you and I both know I’d be gone before anyone comes, and all you’ll have left is a ruined night and some very curious questions.”

Her blood ran hot with fury, but she did not scream. Not yet.

“What do you want?” she asked, jaw clenched.

“To speak with you,” he said smoothly. “I have something you ought to hear.”

“There is nothing I want to hear from you. Go. Away.” Her voice was shaking now, not with fear but with the effort of containing it.

“I’ll go,” he said, “once I’ve said my piece.”

She shoved harder against the door, but it barely moved. He had always been stronger than he looked, yet another of his weapons.

His eyes drifted down her form, pausing just long enough to make her skin crawl. “You’ve grown into quite the woman, Evelyn. You always had potential, but I see now what your future husband sees.”

“Don’t you dare speak of him.” Her voice was ice now, brittle and sharp.

“Touchy subject,” he murmured. “Does he know? That you once wanted me? That you would have married me with such eagerness?”

She straightened, feeling her rage simmering beneath her skin like flame beneath glass. “He knows enough to know I wouldn’t dirty his name by dragging it through your filth.”

That finally wiped the smirk from his face, if only for a moment. His mouth twisted, and something darker flickered in those eyes, the sort of malice that only revealed itself after the damage had already been done.

“You’ve grown spiteful,” he said, feigning injury. “Unbecoming, really.”

“And you’ve grown bolder, sneaking through corridors like a fox in a henhouse.” Her tone dropped to a near growl. “But I am not the girl you left behind.”

He leaned in slightly, enough to make her flinch before she caught herself.

“No,” he said, voice low. “You’re not. Which is why I came to you tonight.”

Evelyn stood frozen with one hand still on the door’s latch. She was shaking her head, unable to say anything. She had expected threats, veiled barbs, perhaps more of his usual sickening flirtation, but not this madness.

The Viscount had not moved. He stood there in the corridor, eyes glinting with something darkly hopeful.

“I made a mistake, Evelyn,” he said in what she could only understand as his best effort at tenderness, as though softening the blow might undo its weight. “When I saw you again... standing here like this, looking at me with such fire... I realized the truth.”

Evelyn didn’t answer. She couldn’t. And that was how he mistook her silence for consideration.

“I never truly loved Matilda.” He gave a bitter smile, as if confessing something noble. “It was always you. Even when I ran with her, it was you I imagined beside me.”

Her stomach turned.

“I wasn’t thinking. I was stupid. And she... well, you know how she is. She was willing. Eager. But I see it now, Evelyn. I chose wrong.” He stepped closer again. “And I’ve paid for it every day since.”

Her mouth opened, but no sound came. Her body remained tense, coiled, like a wire pulled too tight.

He took another step. “Come with me,” he invited, with a devilish sense of urgency creeping into his voice.

“To the colonies. We’ll vanish. Start over.

No titles. No families. No ghosts between us.

Just you and me. I’ll marry you under any name you choose.

Evelyn Ashworth if you like. Or something new. We’ll make a new life. Together.”

The absurdity of it shattered her stillness.

Together? After everything?

Her hand moved faster than thought. The sharp crack of her palm against his cheek echoed through the corridor like a pistol shot. He staggered back a step, a red bloom already darkening along his skin. He stared at her in stunned silence.

Evelyn stood with her hand still raised, shaking with rage.

“You dare ,” she whispered, her voice trembling with fury. “You dare come here,



after stealing my sister's future—and mine —and now tell me you were the one who suffered?"

His face twisted, not with shame but with something almost offended.

"You don't deserve her," Evelyn spat, every word laced with poison. "You never did. She was too good for you, and so was I."

The slap had given her just enough space, just enough time. She shoved the door fully closed and slammed the lock shut, leaning her full weight against it.

"Stay away from me," she hissed through the wood, her voice on the verge of breaking now as her rage turned to something dangerously fragile. "If you ever come near me again, I will not be so polite."

There was silence on the other side then footsteps. At first slow but then receding. She didn't move until the hallway was completely quiet.

Her knees buckled as the adrenaline ebbed, and she slid down to the floor with her back still pressed to the door. Her breath came fast and shallow, and her nightdress clung to her damp back. The fear she hadn't allowed herself to feel earlier flooded her now. It was ice cold and nauseating.

She wrapped her arms around herself, rocking slightly. This was supposed to be over.

She had locked that chapter away, buried it under indifference and anger, but he had brought it back. The shame, the betrayal, the humiliation.

And now, the vile, twisting suggestion that none of it had even meant anything to him. That she had simply been interchangeable with her sister. That he could toss aside one woman and lay claim to the other as if they were possessions to be

exchanged.

She squeezed her eyes shut.

No more.

Let him rot in whatever marriage he had ruined. Let him chase phantoms to the ends of the earth. She would not run. She would not fall.

She was Evelyn Ellory, daughter of a house that may not have protected her, but now, she was also a duchess-to-be who would carve out her own place in the world.

She wiped her cheeks, not even realizing when the tears had started.

Let tomorrow come.

Let the wedding bells ring.

But heaven help anyone who tried to harm her ever again.

It was already morning although Evelyn could barely tell from the lack of sleep. She was to be a duchess by sundown.

Cordelia burst in first, dramatically flourishing a silk shawl as if entering the stage of a grand theatre. Hazel followed, more composed but smiling nonetheless, carrying a box of pins with a calm sort of determination that always made Evelyn feel just a bit steadier.

“We brought reinforcements,” Cordelia declared, plopping onto the edge of the chaise. “Hair, gown, accessories, and moral support in case you decide to faint. Or flee.”

Hazel gave a patient sigh. “Don’t encourage her.”

Evelyn managed a soft smile, her voice dry. “I’m not fainting. Or fleeing.”

But her friends were watching her too closely to be fooled. Hazel tilted her head. Cordelia narrowed her eyes.

“What happened?” Hazel asked quietly.

Evelyn hesitated. Her shoulders tensed. “He came to my room. Last night.”

Both girls stiffened.

“That man ?” Cordelia asked, voice rising.

“Yes,” Evelyn replied, keeping her tone measured. She didn’t want it to crack. “The Viscount. He... said things. Nothing worth repeating.”

She looked away, toward the dressing table where her wedding gown hung like a specter of fate.

“I won’t let him cloud today,” she added, more to herself than to them. “Not after everything.”

Cordelia’s brows drew together with a protective rage that made her look like a furious cherub. “Just say the word, Evelyn. Truly. I have a tailor’s outfit I could throw on, and we’ll be off to Gretna before anyone notices. I’ll even forge the documents myself.”

Despite everything, despite the nausea in her stomach and the pounding weight in her chest, Evelyn laughed.

It wasn't much, but it was real.

"Thank you," she said softly. "But I'm not running. Not anymore. He isn't... Robert isn't like him. "

That admission hung in the air for a moment, suspended in its weight. The first time she had spoken the Duke's name without bitterness, without defiance.

Hazel tilted her head. "Did something happen? Between you and the Duke?"

Evelyn nodded slowly. "We reached an understanding. Of sorts. After yesterday... I told him the truth. About why I didn't want to marry. And he listened. He didn't dismiss me or get angry. He just asked what I wanted out of it."

Cordelia and Hazel exchanged glances.

"I told him I wanted independence. That we should lead separate lives," she added. "He agreed. But he asked for a month where we would be together before going our own ways. For appearances."

Hazel considered this, folding her arms. "That seems... considerate. For a man like him."

"A good man," Cordelia murmured. "If a brooding, intense, slightly terrifying one."

Evelyn looked down at her hands. They were steady, despite the turmoil inside her.

"He is all of those things," she agreed. "But he's also kind in his own way. Honest, at least. I think..." she hesitated, surprising herself. "I think I trust him."

Hazel stepped forward and reached for the gown. "Well, then. Let's get you ready to

be the most formidable duchess this house has ever seen.”

With practiced hands, they set to work pinning curls, fastening tiny buttons, smoothing lace and silk with gentle reverence. Cordelia couldn't help but fuss over the veil and tried two tiaras before Hazel made her choose.

Finally, Evelyn stood in front of the tall mirror, the one gilded in silver and framed by ivy carvings, and looked at herself.

Angelic.

That was the word that came to her though it felt strange.

She had never thought of herself that way.

But the woman staring back at her with pale ivory silk cascading to the floor, green eyes wide and luminous, and a blush blooming high on her cheeks...

she looked like a bride in a painting. Like someone she barely recognized.

“You're radiant,” Cordelia whispered, awestruck.

“You look exactly how you're meant to,” Hazel added firmly. “Strong. Elegant. Unshakable.”

Evelyn stared at her reflection.

“I hope I feel like her soon,” she murmured.

They stood behind her now, like sentinels, one on each side, ready to carry her through the fire if they had to.

### Chapter Fourteen

She was walking toward him.

Robert's breath caught. Not that he let it show. His jaw remained firm, his hands clasped behind his back, and his spine like iron. But inside, something raw and feral surged to life.

The chapel was quiet, reverent. The morning sun had dared to pour its light through the high stained-glass windows, catching in the shimmer of her gown.

She had chosen the pearl-toned silk which molded to her like liquid moonlight.

It clung to her waist, whispering against the floor as she walked.

Her veil trailed behind her like a ghost of light.

Her hair, pinned just so, gleamed like a dark halo.

And those eyes, green as spring moss after rain, clearer than he had ever seen them, were fixed on him.

He gripped his hands tighter behind his back. He did not smile, but he desperately wanted to.

She was... breathtaking. Hers was the kind of beauty that did not announce itself but commanded; the kind of beauty that struck like a sudden wind and left a man

wondering if he'd ever been steady to begin with.

Evelyn stopped before him, her hand sliding into his, and he nearly forgot where they were. That they were not alone. That they stood before God and clergy and bloodthirsty relatives.

He leaned down, his lips brushing her ear. "I'm glad you chose the pearl," he murmured. "It brings out the green in your eyes."

She didn't answer, but he felt her shiver. A small, contained movement.

He turned her hand over and pressed his lips against her knuckles.

"Though I doubt I could disapprove of any gown on someone as beautiful as you."

He felt her pulse skip beneath his lips. That pleased him far more than it should have.

The ceremony began. Words were spoken. Vows were exchanged. Hands clasped, rings slid on fingers. A prayer echoed off the vaulted ceiling.

He heard none of it.

Everything beyond the woman at his side dissolved into fog. Her scent, jasmine, warm linen, and something distinctly her, was in his lungs, anchoring him and unmooring him all at once. He was supposed to think of what this union meant. Of strategy. Of access. Of leverage and vengeance and legacy.

But all he could think of was her. The way her lashes lowered when he looked at her too intently. The way she stood tall despite every storm hurled at her. The soft flush on her cheeks when he touched her hand. She was everything he didn't know he needed. Everything he told himself he didn't want.

The moment ended too soon. One blink, one breath, and the chapel emptied.

Now, he stood in his study. The heavy door closed behind him with a quiet click.

Mason, ever precise, stood by the hearth. There were two glasses of dark liquor waiting on the table and next to them, a bottle of old Irish whiskey Mason had brought as a celebration gift. A soft crackle from the fireplace filled the silence. For a long moment, Robert said nothing.

“She wore the pearl,” he muttered, more to himself than to his friend.

Robert downed the drink in one swallow. It did nothing to ease the ache in his chest or the hunger twisting inside him.

He was a married man now. He was bound to a woman who both challenged and intrigued him, a woman who had survived betrayal and still stood proud. Finally, a woman who had not wanted him, not truly, and yet had come to him anyway.

Mason didn’t ask. He merely poured his friend another drink, and Robert downed it again.

The liquor slid down his throat like smoke in a biting but efficient flow of heat.

Robert stood still for a moment, feeling the burn settle in his chest. It did not dull his mind.

It only slowed the current enough to think clearly.

“She’s in her chambers?” Robert asked, voice low.

“I believe so. Lady Hazel accompanied her back not long ago.”



Robert said nothing to that, only nodded once and turned to the fire. The flames were low, tamed by the iron grate, but alive. They were contained, like him.

The silence stretched, easy between them. Mason had been with him long enough to know which silences to fill and which to leave be.

After a moment, Robert spoke again.

“I’m closer than I’ve ever been. To the truth.”

Mason didn’t ask which truth. He didn’t have to.

Robert’s fingers flexed at his side, the crystal glass still in his hand. “Everything my father left behind... it wasn’t for nothing.”

A muscle ticked in his jaw, a habit that showed only when he was battling the more dangerous kind of thoughts.

“They thought it would disappear. Buried under time, power, and titles. But they left threads. And now, piece by piece—” His voice quieted, sharpened, “I’m pulling them loose.”

Mason inclined his head. “You’ve never stopped.”

“I couldn’t.” His voice wasn’t angry. If anything, it was detached. Hollow, somehow. “You know that.”

“I do,” Mason said simply. “And you know I’ll follow it to the end with you.”

Robert’s eyes flicked to him.

“It ends soon.” He said it like a prophecy.

Mason stepped forward slightly, enough for the firelight to hit the edge of his face. “And your wife?”

Robert turned his gaze back to the flames then to the untouched second glass on the table.

“She doesn’t know. And she won’t.” He paused. “Not until I’m sure of who I can protect... and who I’ll have to destroy.”

There was silence again. Mason did not speak. The fire cracked faintly. Robert reached for the third drink, not because he needed it but because it grounded him.

And then, almost as an afterthought, he murmured, “She looked like a goddess today.”

It was the only unguarded thing he had said in days.

Mason didn’t respond, but his small smile said more than words could. Robert let the liquor roll on his tongue this time before swallowing. The taste of oak and smoke dulled none of his awareness.

The day still wasn’t over. Even when the night sunk deep into the halls of his estate, it would not end then either. The shadows were always there, omnipresent... shadows of ghosts that refused to stay buried.

The laughter and clinking of glasses from the parlor were muffled the moment Evelyn stepped into the hallway.

The soft tapping of her satin slippers echoed against the polished floors, and for once,

she welcomed the silence.

The evening had been long, filled with congratulatory smiles, rehearsed pleasantries, and the weight of a hundred eyes studying her every movement.

She needed air. She needed stillness.

The nearest powder room was just around the corner, and she reached it with a quick, graceful step. The door creaked slightly as she pushed it open.

At first, she thought the room was empty, until the scent of rose powder hit her, a little too heavily applied. And then she saw her .

Matilda stood by the mirror with her back slightly turned and her sleeves pushed halfway up her forearms. She was delicately brushing powder along her left wrist.

Evelyn froze. She felt as if someone had gripped her by the heart. She could barely look away.

The bruises were unmistakable. It was a sickly palette of purple and yellow, as if painted by violence itself. Even under the layer of makeup and lace, they were vivid.

Matilda jumped at the sound of the door closing, hurriedly tugging her sleeve down and giving a smile that didn't reach her wide, frightened eyes.

“Evelyn,” she said quickly, with her breath catching. “I... I didn't think anyone was in need of the room?—”

“What happened to your wrist?” Evelyn asked, her voice a whisper but firm. Her own reflection looked pale in the mirror behind her sister.

Matilda's smile faltered. Her lips trembled.

"I tripped," she said too quickly. "On the stair. You know how I can be, clumsy as ever?—"

Evelyn stepped closer. "Matilda."

Her sister faltered. Her hand went to her wrist protectively, as though shielding it from further exposure. And then, the door burst open with a sudden force that didn't belong in a woman's powder room. In fact, his very presence did not belong in a woman's powder room, and both women felt it.

"Ah," said the Viscount, stepping into the room as if he owned it. His face was all polite concern, but there was something in his eyes that turned Evelyn's blood to ice. "Forgive me for the intrusion, ladies. I was told my wife had been gone for some time. I feared she might be unwell."

His gaze moved between them, calculating the situation and his odds against it. "You know how delicate Matilda can be."

Evelyn said nothing. Her fingers curled into the folds of her gown.

At her side, Matilda had gone very still. "I—I was just powdering my face," she said quickly. Her voice was unusually high, airy, and small. "I didn't mean to worry you, Laurence."

Laurence. The name fell from her lips like an apology.

His smile widened by a fraction. "Good girl."

Evelyn saw it. The way her sister's shoulders slumped in subtle surrender. The way

her eyes dropped to the floor. Gone was the laughing, clever sister of her childhood. What stood before her now was a shell, taught to shrink, to obey, to fear.

Evelyn's spine straightened with the quiet authority of a queen stepping into her court.

"I will remind you, Viscount," she said coolly, her voice cutting through the thick tension in the room, "that this is the ladies' powder room.

And if you were any kind of gentleman, you would not barge into it, especially seeing that this is the powder room of my own home.

As a duchess, I believe I outrank you here. "

Laurence turned his head slowly toward her. His smile didn't waver, but it chilled her just the same. It was the kind of grin meant to put women in their place, to humiliate, not to disarm.

"Forgive me," he said, mock-apologetic. "I hadn't realized that rank extended to bathrooms as well as ballrooms."

Evelyn stepped forward as fury threaded through her voice. "It extends to any room under this roof. And I would suggest you show more respect?—"

"I'm all right, Evie," Matilda's voice came, soft and thin, only a breath that barely reached Evelyn's ears. "He was only worried about me. That's all. That's how he shows he cares."

Evelyn turned sharply to her sister. Matilda wouldn't meet her eyes. Her hand, still held at her side, was trembling ever so slightly. Her face was pale, lips pinched, but she had plastered on a faint smile that screamed of rehearsed compliance.

Laurence's smile widened in triumph.

"There, you see?" he said, offering his arm to his wife with the air of a conquering knight. "My darling knows my heart."

Matilda hesitated, just a fraction of a second, then slipped her hand into the crook of his elbow.

"Let's not keep the guests waiting," he added, already steering her toward the door.

Evelyn stood frozen, her heart thudding painfully in her chest. She wanted to stop them, to scream, to reach out and pull her sister back into the light, away from that sickening shadow that clung to the Viscount like a second skin.

But Matilda was already at the door, and then they were gone.

Evelyn remained rooted to the tiled floor, staring at the space they had just occupied.

Something was wrong. Deeply, terribly wrong.

Not just the bruises. Not just the fear she had seen flicker behind her sister's eyes.

It was the way Matilda had defended him. The way she had spoken with such brittle conviction, like a script she'd memorized out of necessity, not belief.

The rage Evelyn had carried for two years over her sister's betrayal suddenly paled beside this chilling dread. Because now, it wasn't just betrayal. It was danger.

And she knew that she needed her husband's help.

### Chapter Fifteen

“... and of course,” the Viscount of Firth drawled, swirling the wine in his glass with theatrical flair, “while my family’s title may only be viscountcy, our bloodline is unquestionably royal. My grandmother was third cousin to the Queen herself, on her mother’s side, naturally.”

Robert didn’t look up from his glass. “Naturally.”

A quiet chuckle rippled from one of the lesser lords seated down the table, but it died swiftly under Robert’s gaze.

Ashworth seemed unbothered. If anything, he took the silence as admiration.

“It’s a shame, really. Had my father not been driven to an early grave by certain...

unfortunate financial strains, I might have been groomed for a position at court, but alas...

I vowed to make something of myself. For his sake.”

Robert raised an eyebrow. It was the first outward reaction he’d allowed all evening in that man’s presence. He could, in a different life, have respected that sentiment. A son chasing shadows to restore a dead father’s name, it was familiar enough to taste bitter. But this man...

He hated him.

Not loudly or with passion but in the cold, silent way that mattered most. Ashworth was the sort of man who twisted tragedy into narrative, who wielded charm like a knife and expected the world to bleed for him.

“I’m sure he would be proud,” Robert said evenly.

Across the table, Lord Brimwood shifted in his seat. His jaw was tight, and his wine untouched. He had not once addressed his son-in-law. Not even when Ashworth directly referred to him.

Robert noticed. Everyone noticed.

Brimwood’s deliberate distance from the man he had once been forced to accept as a son-in-law was...

pointed. Understandable, of course. If Robert had been in his position, if his daughter had been stolen away in the dark by a smirking narcissist who wrapped betrayal in roses, he’d likely have done the same... or worse.

But Robert said nothing.

Instead, he let the Viscount talk. Ashworth liked the sound of his own voice too much to stop. Bragging came as naturally to him as breathing.

“I suppose not all men are meant to rise on merit,” the Viscount said, grinning over the rim of his goblet. “Some of us are born for better things.”

Robert’s lips curved, almost imperceptibly.

He took a long, quiet sip of his drink, but he didn’t get to finish it as the dining hall doors opened without warning.



Everyone's gazes shifted in that direction, only to find Evelyn standing framed in the doorway.

The soft light from the corridor behind her cast a faint glow, making her appear almost ethereal.

She looked startled to find herself the center of so much male attention but only for a moment. Her chin tilted upward, the faintest flush dusting her cheeks, and when her eyes found Robert's, something unspoken passed between them.

She smiled with a silent breath of relief.

It wasn't the practiced smile of a duchess hosting her wedding dinner. It was smaller and slightly tremulous but meant for him alone. She walked forward with measured steps. Robert stood up before he even realized he had moved. That was when a trembling hand came to rest on his elbow.

"My Lords," she said gently, "I've just come from the parlor. The ladies were wondering..." She paused, glancing around at the assembled men, then met Robert's eyes again. "They would be delighted if the dancing were to begin early."

Robert opened his mouth to respond, but Mason, quick as ever, pushed his chair back and rose with a theatrical groan. "Heavens, yes. I've been sitting far too long. If I stay any longer, I might turn to stone."

A few of the other men chuckled. But Robert caught the edge in Mason's voice. He knew, just as Robert did, that Evelyn had not come merely to extend a social courtesy. No lady would interrupt the gentlemen's dinner without cause.

Something was wrong.

Robert's hand found hers, curling around her fingers, and though her composure held, he felt how she trembled, ever so slightly.

He glanced toward Ashworth, who remained seated, watching Evelyn with veiled amusement and a faint smirk.

Robert tamped down the urge to break his wineglass across the man's face.

Instead, he remained calm and composed. Even the corners of his lips curled a bit.

"Well," he announced, "you've all heard the lady of the house." He looked around the table, his hand still firmly holding Evelyn's. "And as is the case in every house, we must obey."

A ripple of laughter followed, but Robert was already guiding Evelyn away, her hand tucked tightly into the crook of his arm.

She didn't speak, and neither did he, but as they entered the corridor that would lead to the ballroom, he slowed his pace just enough so that they walked side by side, no rush and no pressure. Her fingers tightened around his.

He said nothing about the way her lips pressed into a tight line. She said nothing about the warmth in his palm. But in that silence, a thousand things passed between them.

Several minutes later, the music began, and soft strings started rising from the corner of the ballroom.

Robert took Evelyn in his arms, steadying his gloved hand on her waist as they moved into the waltz.

She felt light in his hold but tense. Her frame was controlled, elegant, and poised as always, but he could feel it in the way her shoulders held too straight, the way her fingers twitched against his.

He looked down at her and found her gaze fixed somewhere past his shoulder.

“You’re not all right,” he said quietly.

Her eyes snapped to his, but he continued before she could protest.

“I mean...” He exhaled slowly, adjusting their turn to avoid another couple. “I know you can’t possibly be all right while the Viscount is still under this roof, but I had to ask.”

That startled look in her eyes softened. Her lips parted then curved faintly. It was an expression somewhere between gratitude and resignation.

“You’re right,” she said. “It is exactly that man I wish to speak to you about.”

Robert’s jaw flexed, the rhythm of his steps slowing for just a fraction of a beat.

Of course, it was.

He didn’t trust himself to speak for a moment. His mind leapt to the worst possibilities. Had the bastard done something? Said something? Had she come to him not merely to escape discomfort but danger?

He forced himself to breathe, to guide her into the next turn with practiced ease.

“Would you like to speak privately?” he asked at last, his voice lower now, gentler beneath the swell of the music.

She shook her head. “No. This will be all right.”

Her gaze lifted to meet his again, steadier now, the hint of vulnerability tempered by something else, something akin to determination.

They danced in silence for a few moments more as the soft strains of music wrapped around them like a comforting embrace, but Robert’s mind was no longer on the steps or the tempo or the eyes watching them from every corner of the ballroom. It was on her and on what she was about to say.

She was quiet for a moment, her gaze on his shoulder rather than his face. Robert said nothing, letting her gather her thoughts in the small pocket of space between them though it was filled with music and murmured voices and the sweep of silk across polished floors.

“I know I asked that we lead separate lives,” she said at last, almost cautiously, “but I need your help.”

He blinked, surprised. It wasn’t the words themselves. Rather, it was the hesitation behind them, the rare note of vulnerability in her voice.

“You can speak freely to me,” he assured, dipping his head lower, keeping his tone quiet. “You must know that by now.”

She nodded slowly, then met his eyes. “I think... I think my brother-in-law is hurting my sister.”

For a second, Robert stopped breathing. The floor still moved beneath them.

His feet continued to step and turn out of sheer discipline.

But inside, something scorched and unraveled.

He pulled slightly away from her, his muscles coiling and his teeth clenched.

The intent was clear in his blazing eyes.

“I’ll put him through the damned window?—”

“No.” She gripped his coat, tightening her hold before he could take another step.

“No, you can’t. Not while she’s still in danger.”

His fists curled at his sides, but he forced himself to still. Her hand remained pressed to his chest, the only thing tethering him to reason.

He nodded, just once. “All right,” he replied. “All right. You’re right.”

She drew in a shaky breath, glancing down again. “I was so determined to hate her forever, to never forgive what she did,” she admitted. “But then I saw the bruises. And the way she looked at him like a cornered thing. How could I still hold that grudge after that?”

“You couldn’t,” he agreed quietly. “And it’s the right thing, Evelyn. To protect her now, despite everything.”

She looked up at him then, clearly moved by his words. He, on the other hand, studied her face, his gaze resting on the subtle cracks in her composure, on the sheen in her green eyes.

“I’ll help,” he said without hesitation. “In every way I can. But I hope,” he added in a voice soft but charged with something far heavier, “that I can count on you to do the same.”

She blinked, looking startled. “What do you mean?”

He leaned in, lowering his lips to the shell of her ear. His breath was warm, and his words were spoken with clear conviction.

“I want you to get me into your father’s study,” he whispered. “Because I suspect he is the man who killed my parents.”

### Chapter Sixteen

The music slowed and faded as the final notes of the waltz hovered like a sigh between the chandeliers. Robert's hand lingered at her waist, warm and grounding, and Evelyn turned toward him, her lips parting to speak, but before she could do so, a voice interrupted them.

"Your Grace," her father appeared with a polite smile that didn't quite reach his eyes.

"A few of us were discussing the matter of land assessments and estate boundaries near the Kent border. There's a dispute between the Huntingford and Beresford lines, and it appears we need a neutral opinion to break the tie.

As the only duke among us, your word would go a long way. "

Robert glanced at Evelyn, his brows knitting briefly. She shook her head just slightly in a silent reassurance: go. He gave her a subtle nod, squeezed her hand once, and turned to follow her father through the crowd of dinner jackets and polished boots.

Evelyn was left standing alone at the edge of the ballroom, her breath catching in her chest. Her skin still tingled from the closeness of him, from the things he'd said, and the confession he'd whispered.

She didn't move until Cordelia's voice broke into her thoughts.

"There you are, Duchess," her friend said with a grin, looping an arm through hers. "You've been entirely too serious tonight. Surely, you're not already regretting

marrying a handsome, brooding duke?”

Hazel joined her on the other side. “Married mere hours and already pining. It’s all so dreadfully romantic.”

“I’m not—” Evelyn began, but her voice lacked its usual crispness.

Her friends noticed. They exchanged a glance over her head.

“You’re quiet,” Hazel said gently. “You’ve not been yourself.”

Evelyn sighed, allowing them to lead her toward the refreshment table where glasses of punch and wine glistened under candlelight. “I’m sorry. I’m just... preoccupied.”

Cordelia narrowed her eyes, half-serious. “Does this preoccupation wear breeches and a haunted expression?”

Evelyn almost smiled, but it flickered too quickly. “No. Well... yes. But not in the way you think.”

They fell quiet for a moment, giving her space.

At last, Evelyn turned to them, her voice low and solemn. “There’s something I need to speak to my husband about. I can’t tell you yet, not until I understand what’s truly going on. But once I do, I promise, I’ll tell you everything.”

Cordelia and Hazel didn’t press. They simply nodded, their hands brushing hers, in a small act of loyalty and understanding between best friends.

And still, the night stretched ahead, painfully slow. The laughter around her felt like a distant thing. Evelyn moved through the rest of the gathering as if underwater. She



was smiling, nodding, enduring, but her thoughts spun in a dizzying loop: her sister, the bruises, Robert's words.

She needed answers, and there was only one man who might provide them for her.

That was why she didn't wait to be invited into the Duke's chambers that evening, after all the guests had retired.

She found herself standing before the heavy oak door for a full ten seconds with her hand hovering just above it. She couldn't stop trembling.

Just knock, she urged herself, but that was easier said than done as her nerves sparked like firecrackers beneath her skin.

Then, she finally knocked. Just once, but firmly.

The door opened almost instantly, and her breath left her body in a startled whoosh.

Robert stood before her barefoot, his dark hair slightly damp, tousled as if he had run a hand through it too many times.

His shirt was nowhere to be seen, leaving his chest bare to the warm candlelight as the lean strength of him was thrown into sharp relief by the flickering glow.

Evelyn's mouth went dry. Her thoughts disbanded like startled birds. She forgot entirely why she had come.

"I..." she began then shook herself. "Could you... put on a shirt?"

He blinked then grinned. "Why?"

Her eyes widened as her hands gestured at him. “Because I can’t speak to you like that.”

He leaned against the doorframe, so at ease it nearly drove her mad. “Is my lack of clothing distracting you from what I am saying?”

She stiffened, her face heating painfully. “Your arrogance is staggering.”

And then, to her horror, he laughed, utterly freely and deeply. Not a smug chuckle or a practiced smirk but something genuine and boyish and infuriatingly handsome. Dimples carved into his cheeks as if they had been waiting for this precise moment to appear.

Evelyn turned her face slightly, struggling to keep her expression neutral. Not the time. Not the place.

“I am quite serious,” she huffed.

“So am I,” he said, still grinning. Then, he stepped to the side. “Do you plan on lingering in the doorway all night, or would you like to come inside and tell me why you are here.” He obviously couldn’t resist adding, playfully, “I promise not to bite, Duchess.”

The nickname shouldn’t have made her stomach flip, but it did.

She entered the room cautiously, her eyes trained firmly on the floor, as though it might leap up and bite her should she glance anywhere else. Behind her, she heard the soft click of the door closing.

“I assume this is not a social call,” he said casually.

That vile, infuriating man.

“No. It isn’t,” she replied tightly.

Evelyn’s eyes narrowed the moment she noticed.

Robert had slipped into a pale linen shirt, a gesture that might’ve seemed courteous had he not deliberately left it hanging open, revealing the smooth expanse of his chest, bronzed and dusted lightly with dark hair.

The fabric hung loose over his frame, clinging slightly from the warmth of the fire, highlighting muscles he was clearly all too aware of.

And he was watching her.

Her breath hitched.

“Are you still not dressed properly?” she asked, trying her best to sound scolding rather than breathless.

Robert smirked and, to her absolute horror, rolled one shoulder slowly, as if testing the tension in it. The muscle flexed beneath his skin. Then the other.

“Does this displease you?” he asked innocently. “I thought we were making progress.”

“You—!” She clamped her mouth shut, eyes darting back to the fireplace to avoid his grin.

He stretched like a cat, just to be infuriating. “You should see your face, darling wife. You’re blushing again.”

“Oh, you cad,” she snapped, whirling around and nearly tripping over the edge of the rug. “Stop it at once!”

His laughter rumbled in the low, amused way that made her want to throw something at him and also, against her better judgment, smile.

“This is far too fun,” he said, settling into the chair with maddening ease. “You storm in here like a duchess on a mission, and yet, here you are, utterly undone by an unbuttoned shirt.”

“Because you’re doing it on purpose. ”

“Guilty,” he agreed with a wicked glint in his eyes. “But if it puts your noble mind at ease, I shall behave.” He raised his hands in mock surrender.

With a sigh that was more or a growl, she fully looked up at him again and instantly regretted it. The light from the fire had shifted, casting golden shadows along the hard lines of his torso. The open shirt was worse than no shirt at all; it was an invitation, a temptation.

Her breath caught again before she could stop it. He noticed. But this time, he said nothing.

That was when she sat down without being invited, and her skirt settled around her like a pale cloud. She clasped her hands tightly in her lap. She needed to focus on what she had come to say or better yet, to ask.

“I came,” she began, forcing her voice to be steady, “because I want to understand. Earlier... when we danced... you said something about my father.” She looked up at him, eyes searching. “I want you to explain what you meant.”

Robert's entire posture changed. The muscles of his chest, previously displayed with such shameless ease, now tensed as if bracing for a blow. His face lost every trace of humor. The light in his eyes dimmed. He didn't answer. He didn't even look at her.

Silence bloomed between them suddenly, thick and suffocating.

Evelyn's voice softened. "I know this isn't easy, but I'm your wife now. You can trust me. Whatever you tell me, it will stay between us."

He finally met her eyes. There was something old and raw in his expression, grief so deep it had calcified into silence over the years. Her heart clenched.

Robert stood, walked to the hearth, and braced his arm against the mantel, staring into the fire like it might burn the words into clarity. When he spoke, his voice was low, almost hollow.

"I was nine," he said. "We were traveling back to Harland from a visit to my grandmother's estate. It was supposed to be routine, just a few days' ride."

He swallowed hard.

"My mother had been unwell, so she was wrapped in furs, seated beside me. My father sat across from us with my older brother, Julian. We were laughing about something, I don't even remember what. Then the carriage stopped." His jaw clenched. "Too suddenly. No call from the driver. Just... silence."

Evelyn barely breathed.

"They came out of nowhere. Men. Three of them. Faces covered. They killed the driver first. Then the footman. I remember my father standing, telling my mother to hide Julian and her..." Robert's voice cracked.

“Her hands on me, pushing me down. There was a compartment under the seat. No one knew about it but us. A small space. Cramped. I couldn’t see much, but I heard everything.”

Evelyn’s hands flew to her mouth, horrified.

He didn’t stop.

“My mother... she wouldn’t beg. She tried to reason with them. That made them angrier. They killed her first.”

A second passed.

“Then my father. Julian. And then... silence again.”

He turned toward her finally. His eyes were glassy but dry, distant and haunted. “I waited. I don’t know how long. Hours, maybe. When I finally climbed out... they were just lying there. Still. The blood had soaked through everything. I touched her hand, thinking maybe she would wake up.”

He looked away again, jaw rigid.

“I didn’t cry. Not once. All I felt was anger. White-hot rage. I wanted to find the men who did it and make them pay.”

Evelyn was frozen. Her throat burned with unshed tears, and her heart ached as if the grief were her own. She rose slowly, walked over to him, but didn’t reach for him. She didn’t know if he’d want her to.

“Robert...” she whispered.

He exhaled shakily, as if the very act of saying it aloud had winded him.

“For years, I’ve investigated in secret.

Looking into every lead, every face, every carriage robbery reported during that time.

” His gaze flicked to her. “Your father’s name came up in a ledger that had been brought to my attention recently.

His seal has been used on several documents, proving illegal conduct on his part.

One of those documents was addressed to one of the two men who had been caught and sentenced for the death of my family.

But even with their dying breath, they refused to say who hired them.

They claimed it was merely a robbery gone wrong.

” He paused there. “That letter, with your father’s seal, was addressed to one of those two men.

It doesn’t mention my family or any wrongdoing, and I don’t know what it means yet, but I intend to find out. ”

Evelyn stepped closer.

She didn’t speak. She couldn’t. But she reached for his hand tentatively, and when he didn’t pull away, she laced her fingers with his.

And in that moment, she understood: the man the world called cold and calculated, the Duke she’d feared and fought, was just a boy who had once hidden in a box,

listening to his world being destroyed. He had never stopped listening since.

Robert's hand stayed in hers though his grip had slackened. His eyes were dark as the night outside and were no longer haunted but sharp.

"I can't go to your father without something solid," he said quietly.

"Not yet. I need to be sure, absolutely sure, before I confront him." His eyes narrowed, as if the thought alone was a weight he'd carried far too long.

"I had nearly forgotten him, truthfully. Until your mother mentioned the name Wimberly when she came to see me the first time. That was another name I saw in the ledger, someone connected to the man I suspect arranged the attack."

Evelyn felt her breath hitch. Lord Wimberly... her father's old business associate. And also, the man she almost married.

"My father..." she began, shaking her head, "he's no saint, that I know. He's proud, short-tempered, and cares more for status than for sentiment. But murder?" She met Robert's gaze firmly. "He could never do something so unspeakable."

Robert's expression didn't soften, but he listened. And when she spoke again, her voice held a strange blend of loyalty and resolve.

"If there's something to be found, proof one way or the other, then I'll help you. If only to prove his innocence."

He nodded slowly, eyes sweeping over her as if truly seeing her for the first time.

"You'd truly do that?" he asked.



Evelyn held his gaze. “Yes. Because you need answers. And because if you’re wrong, if there is nothing to find, then you’ll know. And if you’re right...”

She trailed off, unable to finish. The truth was too horrifying.

He let go of her hand, not unkindly, and walked to his desk, resting a hand there as he stared into the fire again.

“I’ve spent most of my life imagining what I would do when I finally got the name. But now that I might have it...” He drew in a breath through his nose. “I’m wondering if that has been the only thing keeping me alive.”

Evelyn stepped closer, drawn by something deeper than sympathy.

“Then let’s find the truth first,” she said gently. “After that... you’ll know what to do.”

He locked eyes with her. “You truly are unlike anyone I’ve ever met,” he murmured.

And for the first time since she entered his room, Evelyn didn’t blush. She simply met his gaze with quiet steel.

“Good,” she said. “Because I intend to be.”

### Chapter Seventeen

Several days had passed since the ceremony, and Evelyn was beginning to understand a new, unexpected kind of misery: boredom.

At first, the sprawling estate, the crisp mountain air, and the ever-silent halls had felt like a balm. But now, the absence of Cordelia and Hazel, of whispers and laughter, of shared secrets and mischief, gnawed at her like an itch just out of reach.

Unable to take another hour of sitting still in the library pretending to read, she marched down the corridor, lifted her fist, and knocked firmly on the heavy oak door to Robert's study.

It opened after a moment, revealing him in his shirtsleeves with a stack of papers spread out before him.

"I hope I'm not interrupting anything important," she said, tilting her head in an effort to look innocent.

"Just the estate ledgers. Which are, depending on your temperament, either riveting or coma-inducing." He leaned back in his chair, arching an eyebrow. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

She stepped inside with her arms crossed. "I've come to ask you how on earth you've survived all these years hidden away from society. Truly. What does one do out here to avoid going mad?"

Robert chuckled low in his throat, setting his pen down. “Going mad sounds like a very personal experience. Perhaps Your Grace simply lacks imagination.”

She gave him a playful glare. “Don’t mock me.”

“I can’t help it.” His smile lingered. “In any case, when I’m not working, I ride. I hunt. Swim. Hike through the woods or the mountains. There’s always something to do if you look for it.”

Her eyes lit up. “I like that idea. The exploring.”

“Good.” He rose from his chair, towering over her in that way he always did without effort, and moved to the window. “The weather will hold for another day or two. What say you to a ride into town tomorrow?”

She blinked, pleasantly surprised. “Truly?”

“We could even stay the night at an inn,” he added, glancing back at her, gauging her reaction. “Give you a chance to see the place properly. You are the Duchess now after all.”

A ridiculous amount of excitement bloomed in her chest. “I’d love that.”

Something about the softness of her voice made him pause. Then he nodded. “Well, then it’s settled. I’ll have the horses prepared for tomorrow.”

Evelyn lingered in the doorway, already picturing the small town in the valley below, the promise of bustle and color and voices that didn’t echo off stone walls. But more than that, she was stunned by how effortlessly Robert had offered her a piece of his world and made her feel welcome in it.

“Thank you,” she said before slipping out.

She allowed the rest of the day to pass in daydreaming and anticipation, and when the following morning arrived all dressed in gold and mist, Evelyn was ready.

She found herself standing at the entrance to the stables, her riding cloak drawn tightly around her.

The air was brisk, nipping at her cheeks and making her breath visible.

She turned as she heard footsteps approach. It was, of course, Robert, looking devastatingly at ease in his riding clothes, dark hair tousled from the wind and boots already dusted with straw.

“I thought you’d make me wait,” he said, a slight smile playing at his lips.

“I considered it,” she said playfully, “but I didn’t want to be responsible for the brooding silence you’d descend into if I delayed the great Duke’s itinerary.”

He chuckled, low and genuine. “You’re in fine form this morning.”

“Perhaps I simply enjoy the idea of escape.”

“Temporary escape,” he corrected. “You’ll still be expected back for supper tomorrow evening.”

She followed him into the stables where a row of well-groomed horses awaited. The scent of hay and leather filled the air, warm and earthy. Robert gestured toward the row.

“Choose whichever you’d like. They’re all well-trained.”

Evelyn stepped forward as her eyes traveled from one animal to the next one.

Most of them lifted their heads with interest, for they were strong, alert creatures accustomed to activity.

But near the end of the row, she paused before a mare whose head was lowered and whose eyes were partially hidden beneath her forelock.

“This one,” she said softly, reaching a hand out. The mare shifted but didn’t shy away. “She looks... shy.”

Robert came up beside her and to her surprise, didn’t dismiss the choice.

“That’s Storm,” he said, glancing at the horse affectionately. “Quiet at first glance, but she’s a storm underneath: fierce, relentless, and faster than most. Good choice.”

Evelyn turned to look at him, raising a brow. “Is that your way of saying I have excellent instincts?”

“It’s my way of saying you’ve got a taste for trouble.”

She smirked. “And here I thought you preferred docility.”

“I never said that.”

There was a look in his eyes, half teasing, half unreadable, that made her heart do something entirely irrational in her chest.

Moments later, they were mounting their horses, with Evelyn adjusting in the saddle while Robert swung onto his with practiced ease. He gave a short whistle, and the stable doors were opened by a young groom. Sunlight poured in and with it, the

promise of something new.

They rode side by side down the winding path that led away from the estate.

The wind tugged at her hair, and the rhythm of hooves on damp earth became its own kind of music.

Evelyn hadn't realized how tightly wound she'd been until she began to laugh, the sound escaping her freely as Storm surged forward.

"Careful," Robert called over the wind. "You're going to start enjoying yourself!"

"Too late!" she called back, her cheeks flushed and eyes bright.

She didn't know what the town would bring or what truth lay ahead in Robert's past, but now, with the morning sun caressing her face, Evelyn felt, if only for a fleeting moment, a sense of freedom.

The ride had started under a sky smeared with lazy clouds, harmless and slow-moving. But as they passed the wooded rise above the southern meadows, the wind shifted and the first patter of rain struck Robert's shoulder.

He tilted his head up, squinting at the thickening sky. "We should take cover. That oak there," he pointed off the road, "will do until it passes."

He turned in the saddle to find Evelyn had already drawn her eyes to the same sky, the corners of her lips curling upward, only not in concern but rather with mischief.

"Oh, come now," she said, spurring her horse forward. "You're not going to melt, Your Grace."

Before he could protest, she was gone, laughing over her shoulder as her horse galloped past him.

“Evelyn!” he exclaimed, but her name was lost in the wind.

He should have called her back. He should have reminded her that her boots were thin, that she’d catch a cold, that they were too far from shelter for foolishness. But he didn’t. He couldn’t.

She rode with reckless joy, the kind born of rare freedom.

Her loose chignon had come undone in the wind and rain, strands of hair escaping like wild ivy.

Water soaked through the thin material of her cloak, clinging to her frame.

She was drenched, radiant, untamed and utterly beyond his reach in that moment.

A wood nymph, he thought, utterly enchanted, chasing some mythic joy he hadn’t believed in for years.

He urged his horse after her, rain slicking his shoulders, stinging his face. The road curved downward toward the town where the shape of the inn came into view like a promise on the horizon.

By the time they reached the inn’s modest stables, they were both soaked through, their horses lathered and snorting. Evelyn slid off her mare with an exhilarated laugh, her cheeks flushed, and raindrops clinging to her lashes.

“You’re mad,” he observed, dismounting beside her.

She looked up at him, eyes shining. “Yes, but admit it, you needed it.”

He wanted to kiss her then. It was a wish not born from desire but from something deeper, something unspoken, something fragile that stirred in his chest like a whisper of what he’d once called hope. Instead, he offered his hand, and she took it without hesitation.

They must have looked like a pair of strays, all soaked through, cloaks dripping, boots muddied, and faces flushed from wind and rain. The innkeeper, a round-bellied man with a face like a weathered apple and kind eyes, blinked at them as they stepped into the warm, firelit entryway.

“Bit of a storm to be caught in, eh?” he said cheerfully. “You two look half-drowned.”

Before Evelyn could open her mouth and announce their titles, Robert saw the instinct rising in her, like the duchess she was. He stepped forward, brushing a wet curl from her cheek and offering the innkeeper a polite, sheepish smile.

“Yes, we seem to have lost our way,” he said simply. “Didn’t mean to ride so far in this weather.”

The innkeeper nodded in understanding. “Happens more than you’d think.” He handed over a heavy brass key. “Simple room, top of the stairs. We’ve only got one left, I’m afraid.”

“Oh, that’s quite all right,” Evelyn chimed in. “We’re married.”

She looked at him with a faint blush, and Robert couldn’t help but feel a pang deep down where his heart used to be.



“All right then,” the innkeeper grinned. “If you two are hungry, the missus makes a heavenly soup. It is said to bring back the dead.”

“Oh my,” Evelyn chuckled. “Then we must try it, indeed.”

“And if you two are in the mood for some music later on, a few of the lads here will be playin’ a tune or two in a tavern just down the road,” the innkeeper added. “While it is no Duke’s ball, I guarantee you it’s fun.”

This time, Robert was the one to agree. “Perhaps we shall try that, too. Thank you.”

As they climbed the narrow wooden staircase, he could hear the fire crackling below and smell something earthy and warm wafting from the kitchen: onions and herbs, the scent of roasted meat.

He looked at Evelyn’s hand where it clutched her skirts, her knuckles pale from cold.

She was shivering though she tried to hide it.

They entered the room. It was warm and cozy. Still, he had to admit that he didn’t foresee the rain. Now, they were both soaking wet and most certainly about to catch a dreadful cold. A part of him wondered if all this was a good idea.

But then, a knock on the door reminded him that sometimes, fate had everything covered.

### Chapter Eighteen

A knock startled Evelyn just as she was wringing out the ends of her damp hair by the hearth. She turned, glancing at Robert, who leaned lazily against the wall near the bed, looking far too comfortable for someone so recently drenched. Another knock came, gentle but insistent.

“I’ll get it,” she said quickly, smoothing her skirts as she crossed the room.

She opened the door to find the innkeeper’s wife standing there with a bundle of neatly folded clothes in her arms. The woman’s round cheeks were flushed from the heat of the kitchens, and her gray-streaked hair was pinned beneath a simple linen cap.

“I hope I’m not interrupting,” the woman said kindly.

“My husband told me you two were caught in that sudden rain. Said you’d gotten lost.” She smiled in a way that made her eyes twinkle.

“I thought you might get cold, so I brought you some dry clothes. They’re my son’s and daughter’s, grown and gone now, but I kept a few things just in case someone passing through might need them. I hope they’ll fit.”

Evelyn blinked, momentarily speechless.

Such simple, uncalculated kindness was rare.

It hit her somewhere deep and raw. Her throat tightened unexpectedly, and for a moment, she had the insane urge to throw her arms around the woman and hug her.

But she stopped herself. This wasn't London, but still, such a gesture might be wildly inappropriate.

Instead, Evelyn reached out and gently squeezed the woman's hand.

"Thank you," she said sincerely. "This... is incredibly kind of you."

The woman's smile softened. "No trouble at all, dear." She handed over the bundle. "Do come downstairs when you've changed. The soup's hot and hearty; it'll warm your bones."

Evelyn nodded, still touched. "We will. And thank you again."

The woman nodded and bustled off down the corridor. Evelyn closed the door quietly behind her and turned to Robert, who had straightened up and was watching her with something unreadable in his expression.

"She brought us clothes," Evelyn said, almost in awe, holding them up. "Just... out of kindness."

Robert smiled. "You look like you're about to cry."

"I am not," she huffed, turning away to hide the prickling in her eyes. "It's just... nice. No motives, no pretense. Just decent, genuine people. I wasn't prepared for that."

"You'd better change, then," he said, his voice unusually soft. "Before you go hugging the entire inn."

That made her laugh, and the heaviness in her chest eased a little more.

Evelyn placed the bundle of clothes on the edge of the bed and gave Robert a long look, her brow arching as she asked. “How exactly are we supposed to change?”

He tilted his head, already smirking. “Well... in this room, I presume.”

She crossed her arms and pouted though her eyes gleamed with mirth. “You know what I mean.”

That earned a chuckle from him, low and amused this time, the kind that made his shoulders shake slightly. “Of course, I do.”

He pushed away from the wall, making a show of glancing around the small room. “I could step out if you’d prefer,” he offered.

But she hesitated.

“It’s... it’s all right. You don’t have to leave,” she told him softly, almost too quietly. Then, quickly, before he got the wrong idea, she added with haste, “So long as you turn your back.”

His grin widened, and there was a devilish flicker in his eyes. “Ah. Rules. I see.”

“Yes,” she said firmly, ignoring the flutter in her chest. “We turn our backs. We change. The first one finished calls out. We don’t turn around until we’re both dressed. Understood?”

He gave an exaggerated bow. “Perfectly, Your Grace.”

She rolled her eyes, suppressing a smile, and turned toward the window while he

turned toward the fireplace.

Her fingers moved quickly, undoing the buttons of her wet bodice and stepping carefully out of her soaked gown.

The innkeeper's wife had brought her a soft cotton dress and a shawl, which were plain but warm.

She slipped it over her chemise, shivering as the dry fabric touched her skin.

"Not fair," Robert muttered aloud behind her.

Evelyn froze mid-movement. "What isn't?"

"You saw me shirtless," he replied, clearly pouting, "and I didn't get the same privilege."

She gasped in mock shock, clutching the shawl at her chest. "Your Grace! How scandalous!"

"I think it's perfectly reasonable," he argued, and she could hear the smile in his voice. "Turnabout is fair play, after all."

"You are absolutely incorrigible," she said, barely keeping the laughter from bubbling up. "It's a miracle your estate has not burned to the ground from sheer lack of supervision."

He sighed dramatically. "It would've if not for my tragically underpaid staff. All saints, each of them."

She was chuckling now, slipping on the dry stockings and smoothing her skirts. "I'm

done,” she called over her shoulder.

“Same here.”

They turned around at the same time.

He wore a loose white shirt, which was thankfully buttoned this time, and a pair of dark trousers that didn’t quite match but suited him far too well regardless. His dark hair was still damp, pushed back from his forehead, and his eyes found her with quiet intensity.

She smoothed the skirt again, suddenly self-conscious. “Do I look ridiculous?”

His gaze lingered. “No,” he said slowly. “You look...”

He didn’t finish, but he didn’t need to. Her cheeks warmed again, and she looked away, clutching the shawl more tightly around her shoulders.

“Let’s go down before the soup gets cold,” she suggested quickly, moving toward the door.

Robert followed, his eyes never leaving hers, not even for a second.

Robert leaned back in his chair, one arm casually slung over the side while the other brought the warm, hearty soup to his mouth.

The inn was lively, to say the least. It was filled with the hum of chatter, the clinking of mugs, the scent of roasted meat, and rain-soaked travelers drying off by the hearth.

And for once, he wasn’t the Duke of Aberon. He was just a man beside a woman, enjoying a simple meal.

Evelyn sat across from him, her damp hair now curling gently near her jaw. Her cheeks were still flushed from the ride or maybe from the fire. She looked utterly at ease, spooning the soup with quiet delight, and a pleased little sigh escaped her lips with each bite.

“If I’d known soup could earn that sort of praise, I’d have insisted Cook serve it every evening,” Robert said, tilting his head with amusement.

She raised a brow. “You’re not nearly as funny as you think you are, Your Grace.”

He narrowed his eyes playfully. “We’re lost travelers, remember? No titles tonight.”

She considered him for a beat, a teasing smile tugging at her lips. “Very well... Robert.”

His name from her lips... it nearly made him forget the spoon halfway to his mouth.

He took a breath, letting the warmth of it settle in his chest. “Much better,” he murmured.

They sat like that for a moment until Evelyn leaned back slightly and made a comment that seemed to have been plaguing her for a while. “I dislike the lack of control that comes with a side-saddle.”

His brows lifted. “Do you now?”

“I was thinking about it on the ride over. There’s something very... frustrating about being at the mercy of the horse’s movements and not being able to steer properly. It’s a bit humiliating to be honest.”

Robert leaned forward, intrigued. “I once heard about a rather unconventional

design,” he said, swirling his spoon lazily. “A skirt that, with the clever use of hidden buttons, transforms into trousers. Looks modest enough on first glance but underneath, absolute freedom.”

She gasped. “You’re joking.”

“Would I lie about such a noble invention?”

“That’s... brilliant!” she said, her eyes shining. “And why have I never heard of such a thing before?”

“Likely because it would terrify half the aristocracy,” he replied dryly. “Imagine the scandal: women wearing trousers.”

“Imagine the convenience,” she shot back.

He chuckled and then, more sincerely added. “If that’s something you’d like, I’ll see what can be done. I’m sure someone in town could fashion you a few riding habits like that. Discreetly, of course.”

She looked at him for a moment, touched. “Thank you.”

He waved it off with a faint smile, but her gaze lingered just a little too long, just enough to make him feel it everywhere. Then she returned to her soup, taking another bite with a soft hum of appreciation.

Robert sat back, with his spoon forgotten, more satisfied in that moment than he had been in years. The rain still tapped against the windowpanes, the fire still crackled, but he only saw her, laughing in the firelight, daring to be free, surprising him again and again.



He watched as her gaze flicked to the lively crowd around them, the unaware people, uninterested in who they were, and then back to him. Her lips parted, hesitating before she finally spoke.

“I’ve never felt this free,” she confessed softly. “No one watching, no expectations, no titles. Just... me.” She bit her lower lip gently, her teeth catching on the pink curve in a way that made Robert’s pulse hammer in his ears. “I don’t want it to end. Not yet.”

The way she looked at him did something to him.

Desire pulled tight across his chest, heat rising low and slow in his stomach. He wanted her. God, he wanted her. To kiss her, to pull her into his arms, to bury his hands in her still-damp hair and taste every word she’d just said. But he held himself in check, barely.

He leaned in with his elbow on the table. “Do you really want that?” he asked.

She nodded once, quickly, following it with the barest flicker of a smile at the corners of her mouth.

He exhaled slowly, offering her a smile that was both reassuring and unmistakably something more. “Then tonight,” he said, his voice a mere murmur between them, “is all about fulfilling your wishes.”

Her eyes widened slightly, and he saw it, that spark. Not surprise, not fear but anticipation.

He stood and offered her his hand.

“Come,” he urged. “Let’s see where your freedom takes us next.”

### Chapter Nineteen

It was chaotic and utterly foreign.

She adored it.

The tavern door creaked open, and Evelyn stepped inside, her hand still warm in Robert's.

The scent of roasted meat and woodsmoke enveloped her immediately, mingling with the distant tang of ale and the crisp freshness of the rain still clinging to their clothes.

Her eyes widened as she took it all in: the long wooden tables crowded with lively patrons, tankards raised in cheer, laughter bursting in every corner, and in one area, musicians beginning to tune their instruments with easy camaraderie.

A wide smile bloomed on her lips, unfiltered and bright, and when she turned to glance at Robert, he gave her hand a light tug and guided her to a corner table.

"Stay here," he urged. "I'll get us drinks."

Evelyn nodded, still drinking in the scene.

Her fingers trailed along the worn wood of the table, the imperfections telling a hundred stories of evenings spent just like this.

When Robert returned, two mugs in hand, the music had begun: a fiddle, a flute, and

a tambourine blending into a light-hearted country reel that made the floor practically bounce underfoot.

A handful of patrons had already sprung to their feet, forming messy lines and circles, clapping along with the beat. The steps were fast, joyous, and completely unfamiliar to her. Evelyn's eyes sparkled with wonder. She couldn't look away.

"It looks like such fun," she murmured.

Robert raised an eyebrow. "Shall we, then?"

She blinked at him in alarm, already shaking her head. "No, no, I wouldn't know the steps. I'd ruin the whole dance!"

"Nonsense," he said, his grin slow and devilish.

Before she could protest again, he had grabbed her hand and tugged her to her feet.

"Robert!" she laughed, half-scolding, but she followed him all the same, her cheeks already flushed.

They were swept into the swirl of the crowd, laughter and clapping all around them. He gave her a quick nod, eyes gleaming, and mimicked the steps just once.

"Follow my lead."

And she did.

At first, she stumbled, once, then twice, but his steady hands guided her, his low chuckle never unkind, always encouraging. Soon, she found the rhythm, and the joy that bubbled up in her chest was impossible to suppress.

They moved in time with the music, spinning, turning, clapping.

Her laughter joined the others'. And somehow, without realizing it, their hands found each other again between steps.

His fingers brushed the small of her back during a turn.

Her arm grazed his shoulder as they spun around.

It wasn't a waltz. It wasn't refined. It was real .

And it brought them closer than any formal ball ever could have.

By the time the tune ended, they were breathless and laughing, flushed from exertion and something far more dangerous. She glanced up at him, still breathing heavily.

"You did wonderfully," he complimented.

She smiled, glowing. "So did you, Your Grace ."

He raised a brow. "Robert."

"Robert," she whispered, and for a moment, the noisy tavern disappeared.

Just him. Just her. And the space between them growing smaller with every breath.

They danced for what felt like hours as one merry reel followed another, and the tavern seemed to come alive with stomping boots, laughter, and the warmth of strangers.

Evelyn's cheeks hurt from smiling, her ribs ached from laughing, and her legs were

sore in a way that reminded her she had lived today. Really lived.

By the time they stepped out of the tavern, the village lay in hushed darkness. The air was cool and damp, and the earlier rain had left the cobblestone streets glistening under the faint moonlight. A distant owl hooted somewhere above, and a dog barked lazily in the distance.

Evelyn wrapped her arms around herself with a soft shiver. Before she could take another step, Robert was at her side again, offering his arm. She took it gratefully, nestling close to him, and they began walking back toward the inn.

“Are you afraid of the dark?” he asked gently, his voice low beside her ear.

She smiled into the night with her eyes fixed ahead. “There are more dangerous things to be afraid of.”

His arm tightened around her shoulders in silent agreement. “You’re right,” he murmured, his voice quieter now and warmer.

And just like that, she allowed herself the comfort of his nearness, the soft scent of him, the quiet strength.

She reminded herself that this was a special night.

An exception. A moment suspended outside of reality.

She was allowed to enjoy it because there would be no repercussions.

They had an arrangement. A clear understanding.

This was just the sort of memory she’d hold onto when everything returned to

normal.

They climbed the narrow stairs of the little inn, creaking wood echoing under their feet.

Her fingers brushed the banister, her thoughts swirling as they reached their door.

She paused just a moment before stepping inside, and when he opened it for her, she crossed the threshold slowly then stopped.

The room was exactly as they had left it. Simple. Warm. The fire in the hearth had died down, leaving just embers and a dim golden glow. And just one bed.

Of course.

The realization hit her more strongly now with the door closed behind them. Her fingers hesitated at the ties of her borrowed dress. She turned slightly, unsure how to proceed.

Robert didn't miss a beat. "If you like," he said, voice laced with amusement, "I could turn my back again, and we can go through our little routine. Or I could step outside, sleep in the stables with the horses. I'll even wrestle a goat for a blanket."

She gave him a look over her shoulder, laughing despite herself. "No need to be dramatic. I'm sure the goat would win."

He placed a hand over his chest, mock-affronted. "That hurts."

She gave a quiet snort of amusement. "I meant... you don't have to sleep on the floor."

He raised a brow, just slightly. “Are you sure?”

“I’m not cruel,” she said with a half-smile, fiddling with the edge of her sleeve. “And we’re both adults. We’ve survived worse.”

His gaze softened. “You have my word, Evelyn. Whatever you want, I’ll respect it. Every moment, every requirement, every wish.”

She didn’t say anything to that. She just nodded and turned away again with her heart beating a little too fast, and not just from the cold.

Tomorrow, she would be the Duchess again. Tonight, she would simply be Evelyn, in bed with a man who, against every plan she’d made, was becoming more than just her husband in name.

They both turned around, chuckling softly to themselves as they resumed the now-familiar ritual of undressing back-to-back.

Robert unfastened his shirt and stepped out of his trousers with practiced ease, folding them over the small wooden chair near the wall.

He could hear Evelyn’s huffs behind him, quiet at first then more frustrated as fabric rustled with her efforts.

He turned his head slightly. “What’s the matter?”

A growl of impatience. “It’s the blasted button,” she grumbled. “The one in the back. It’s stuck, and I can’t reach it properly.”

He allowed himself a crooked smile. “Do you need help?”

“No,” she said at once then added a mutter under her breath. “I mean, maybe.”

Another pause. A soft sigh. “Yes. I do.”

He turned around slowly, careful to keep his expression neutral despite the hammering of his heart.

She stood with her back to him, her hands gripping the stubborn fabric near her shoulder blades.

The fine shift she wore underneath was already visible beneath the parting gown, and as he stepped toward her, he was very aware of how close they were.

His fingers brushed the fabric first then her skin, and a jolt of heat ran through him. She was soft and warm, and the scent of her hair, still a little damp from the rain, was maddening.

Focus. Just help her.

He worked the button gently, using the pad of his thumb and a quiet curse when it snagged again. She stood very still beneath his touch, her breath almost held.

“There,” he said softly, the button finally slipping free. He stepped back, willing the tension in his body to ease. “All done.”

“Thank you,” she murmured.

He turned away again, carefully this time, as if any sudden move would cause something to snap between them. He heard the quiet swish of her dress falling to the floor, and when she finally spoke again, her voice was small.



“You may join me now.”

Robert turned around, and his heart clenched. She lay in bed, the blankets pulled to her chest, her long undershirt visible beneath, loose hair spread like silk across the pillow. Her eyes met his... vulnerable, trusting.

He crossed the room and slid into bed beside her slowly, the mattress dipping under his weight. They were close. Closer than they'd ever been, face to face, sharing the same air.

For a long moment, neither of them said a word. Her eyes searched his face. His hand twitched on the blanket between them.

He wanted to kiss her. More than that, he wanted to hold her, to tell her she was safe, to confess the truth about everything that had begun to grow in his chest without his permission.

But he didn't. Not yet.

Instead, he whispered. “Are you warm enough?”

“Yes,” she nodded and whispered back.

Evelyn's face was turned slightly toward him on the pillow. Her lashes fluttered faintly as she blinked, not quite ready to sleep. And that was when he saw them.

Freckles . Scattered lightly across her cheeks and the bridge of her nose, like a constellation only visible up close.

He hadn't noticed them before, not in the candlelight of their wedding night, not under the layers of powder and paint she wore at balls and formal gatherings.

But here, in this modest inn, stripped of pretense and finery, they were undeniable.

Without thinking, he lifted his hand and brushed the backs of his fingers lightly against her cheek.

She blinked in surprise. “What are you doing?”

“You have freckles,” he murmured, almost in awe. “I hadn’t noticed before.”

She let out a small, embarrassed grumble, turning her face partially into the pillow. “Yes, well... it’s all the sun in the countryside. They’ve gotten worse since we married. I’ve been outdoors more than I ever was before. Blasted things.”

He smiled. “I like them.”

She glanced at him through narrowed eyes. “You do?”

“They make you look very... cute,” he said, the last word coming out in a tone of slight disbelief, almost as if it had escaped him without warning.

She looked at him in a surprised manner and then laughed softly. “Well, in that case, I suppose I’ll keep them.”

He studied her, basking in the quiet comfort that settled between them. Her laughter always did something strange to his chest.

Then her eyes narrowed with curiosity. “You know, you have something too.”

“Oh?”

She reached out, brushing her knuckles just along his jaw. “A scar. Right here.” Her

touch was light, barely there. “I hadn’t noticed it before.”

He shifted slightly under her gaze. “I was thrown from a horse as a boy. Landed on a fencepost. It split my cheek.”

“Does it hurt?” she asked, her voice quieter now.

“Not anymore.” He held her gaze. “Most things don’t once they scar.”

She nodded slowly and tucked herself a little deeper beneath the blanket. He mirrored her, their bodies close enough to feel the warmth radiating between them but not yet touching.

And somewhere in the hush, amidst the fading firelight and the gentle sound of rain tapping on the windows, their breaths slowed in unison. Neither of them could say exactly when it happened, but sleep found them like that... side by side, peaceful.

And just a little closer than before.

### Chapter Twenty

“Surely, you do not mean to remain cloistered in that dreadful old townhouse all Season, Evelyn?” Her mother’s voice was lined with sweet lavender and reproach, her perfectly arched brow lifting like a well-aimed dart.

Evelyn speared a boiled potato with all the delicacy of a knife to the ribs.

“Dreadful old townhouse or not, Mama, it has character, and we cannot wait for the renovations to be brought to an end,” Evelyn smiled. “The upholsterers were simply scandalized by the dust. And you know how I detest sneezing in mixed company.”

“Since when do you care for mixed company?” her father asked dryly.

She offered him a radiant smile. “Since I married a man who finds them even more intolerable than I do.”

Robert lifted his glass in ironic toast. “Your wine is excellent, My Lord.”

Her father grunted but was pleased with the comment. “As it should be, Your Grace. I do not serve vinegar to my guests.”

“Oh, you do. Just not in a bottle,” Evelyn murmured into her drink.

Robert choked into his. If she had heard it, her mother would gasp.

But Evelyn didn’t wish to accentuate the polite savagery of familial interaction but

rather to dress it in silks and etiquette.

After all, she had promised him . She promised she would help him find the truth.

And Brimwood House, namely its immaculate study, its secret drawers, its heavy oak desk under which she'd once hidden with a stolen tart, might hold the key to it all.

She glanced at Robert then, catching the line of his jaw, the unreadable depth of his eyes. He looked as he always did: like a man who'd walked through fire and refused to be burned. She wondered if he felt the tremble in the air the way she did.

"Evelyn, darling," her mother said with the piercing sweetness of a stiletto made of spun sugar, "I spoke with Matilda yesterday."

And there it was. The shift. The sudden stillness in the marrow.

Evelyn stiffened. Her fingers curled against the damask napkin in her lap. "How nice."

Lady Brimwood's lips thinned. "You still haven't spoken with her."

Evelyn's wine turned sour on her tongue. "No, I haven't."

"She is still your sister."

"She is many things," Evelyn said matter-of-factly.

Lady Brimwood's gaze flickered to Robert, who had returned to the careful dissection of his roast duck as though family betrayal were merely a culinary matter. Evelyn knew he was listening. He always was.

“She is unhappy, Evelyn,” her mother said quietly. “You might consider the possibility that she regrets?—”

“I regret this conversation,” Evelyn cut in, dabbing at the corner of her mouth. “And I have no wish to sully the pudding course with talk of Matilda.”

“She gets that from your side,” her father muttered.

Her mother sniffed. “She gets her temper from you and her recklessness from me, but she gets her charm from somewhere entirely unknown.”

Evelyn offered a bright smile, all teeth and no mercy. “That must be why everyone’s so afraid of me.”

“No,” said Robert calmly, still not looking up. “It’s because you tell the truth.”

The room fell quiet. Evelyn turned her head toward him, startled, though she schooled her expression before anyone else could notice.

Only her husband ever dared to toss her those brutal little gems, truths wrapped in darkness, like uncut stones, and she treasured them more than any jewel the ton could offer.

“Well,” she said airily, and rose from her chair with a rustle of skirts, “since we’ve all had our fill of duck and drama, I believe I’ll retire.”

“Already?” her mother asked, reaching out as if she might grasp Evelyn with nothing but a glance.

“I’ve a headache.” Evelyn leaned in to kiss her mother’s cheek and whispered low, “We’ll talk about Matilda another time. I promise.”

Her mother's hand tightened, but she let her go.

Robert stood as well, formal and silent, a dark shadow cast by candlelight and grief.

He nodded once to her parents then followed Evelyn from the dining room without a word.

The corridor beyond was cold, quiet, and lined with ancestral faces who looked far too judgmental for people who'd been dead two centuries.

"You'll want us to sneak into the study tonight, I expect," Evelyn said softly, leading him through the hallway with the confidence of someone who had once raced these corridors barefoot at midnight.

Robert's voice was low and iron-edged. "If we wait too long, he might move anything of worth."

"He's careful," she said. "He is my father but always believed himself untouchable regarding any wrongdoing."

"He was untouchable," Robert murmured. "Until you married me."

Evelyn paused at the foot of the staircase, turned to look up at him. "Regretting it already, Your Grace?"

He took the final step down and looked at her fully. "Not yet."

Then he offered her his arm. It seemed mocking and too formal, but still warm beneath the fabric. She took it, and together, they walked up the stairs like the dutiful daughter and her solemn husband.

Only the shadows knew their secret. Only the darkness knew what they planned.

The clock in the east corridor struck one.

A low, deliberate chime echoed through Brimwood House like a whisper with teeth.

Robert was standing outside Evelyn's door, one hand resting against the cool wood, the other closed into a fist at his side.

He did not knock immediately. Instead, he listened, as still as a hunter.

There were no footsteps, no creaking boards. Only the hush of sleeping wealth.

Then, two gentle taps and the door opened without a sound.

Evelyn stood there in her night robe made of pale blue silk which fell down her body like water. Her hair was loosed from its elaborate braids, tumbling down her back in thick chestnut waves. She looked up at him, her eyes bright with mischief and the thrill of conspiracy. She was barefoot.

"Your Grace," she whispered, the corner of her mouth twitching.

Robert arched a brow. "You're enjoying this far too much."

"I thought you liked that about me."

He didn't answer.. couldn't. Because yes was not a thing he was willing to say, not here, not now, not when the very air between them felt like the space before a storm, humming with something dangerous. Instead, he turned, and she followed, silent and swift as shadow.



The corridor stretched before them, long and dark and lined with the ghosts of Brimwood's past. Moonlight filtered through tall windows, pooling on the marble floors like spilled silver.

When they reached the door to the study, he paused. He didn't need to try the doorknob, but he did. Locked.

Of course, it was.

He glanced back at her.

Evelyn leaned against the wall, her arms folded beneath her breasts. "Now what?"

Robert stared at the lock again then stepped closer to her. She tilted her head, watching him like a cat might a very interesting mouse.

"You have something I need," he murmured.

"I usually do," she replied, but her breath hitched slightly when he reached up.

He didn't ask. He simply slid a hand into her hair.

She stilled.

Gently, he found the simple pin tucked just behind her temple, hidden beneath a twist of hair. He tugged it free, slow and precise. A single strand slipped loose and curved across her cheek.

His fingers brushed her skin as he tucked it behind her ear. And there, just there... he felt it. That spark. That sharp awareness that flared to life only between them, igniting like flint and steel.

Her breath caught. His jaw tightened.

For one suspended second, he forgot about the lock. He forgot the room. The mission. The weight of his dead. He only saw her .

“I’ll return it,” he said quietly as his fingers lingered a fraction too long.

“You’d better,” she replied, but her voice was softer now. It almost sounded like a promise.

He stepped away, the pin still in hand and the air between them charged and fragile. Kneeling at the door, he studied the lock. It was a simple, older design. Brimwood had favored tradition over innovation.

Fool.

A few deft twists, a turn, the faintest click, and the tumblers yielded. The door creaked open. He stood and looked at her.

Evelyn’s eyes gleamed in the dark. “Show-off.”

Robert held the door for her, hiding his smirk. “Ladies first.”

She glided past him like moonlight incarnate, and he followed her into the lion’s den. The door shut behind them with a whisper of wood on wood, but even that soft sound seemed deafening in the stillness of the house.

Robert waited until the latch clicked into place before he turned.

The air in the Viscount’s study was heavier than the corridor, dense with dust and the faint, cloying scent of ink and old tobacco.

The room reeked of curated legacy: there were leather-bound books that had never been read, a globe no one had ever spun, and a great oak desk that seemed to guard its secrets with aristocratic disdain.

Evelyn stood in the middle of it, motionless now. Her eyes swept the space with the practiced efficiency of someone who had grown up here but had never truly belonged.

“Where would he hide anything important?” he asked in a low voice.

She pointed to the desk without hesitation. “He never let the staff clean inside it. Said they’d move things. Always locked the bottom drawer.”

“Not tonight,” Robert muttered.

He crossed the room in long strides and crouched beside the desk. The bottom drawer was exactly where she’d said. It was sturdy, inset, and fitted with a lock far more modern than the one on the study door. So, he withdrew the hairpin again.

Behind him, he heard the faint rustle of Evelyn moving.

Her bare feet were silent on the rug as the brush of her robe caught the edge of a chair.

The tension coiled between them remained taut, unbroken.

They were allies, yes, but something deeper thrummed beneath the shared danger, something that hadn’t dissipated since he’d touched her cheek.

The lock clicked open. Robert slid the drawer free, and a flood of letters spilled into view. His breath stilled.

There had to be dozens. Perhaps more. They lay there, stacked in precise bundles, tied with twine, each labeled by year in Brimwood's meticulous hand. Every envelope bore seals, stamps, or crests. Some edges were frayed with age. Others, too crisp, appearing instead new and recent.

Evelyn was beside him now, kneeling. Her hair brushed his shoulder as she reached for one of the bundles marked 1816 .

"They're organized," she whispered, incredulous.

Robert lifted a packet marked 1817 . That was the year his family's carriage had been ambushed. His fingers tightened around it.

"You think the answer's in there?" she asked, and he could hear the trembling of her voice.

"I think if there's any record of dealings with the wrong kind of men, it might be in these letters."

They began to read. The silence was only broken by the occasional shuffle of parchment, the quiet exhale of breath, the faint shift of weight as they leaned toward the single candle Evelyn had insisted on lighting just one and shielded it from the window.

Robert's eyes scanned correspondence filled with diplomatic pleasantries, financial notes, updates on shipments of tea, wool, tobacco...

There was nothing yet.

Evelyn cursed softly beside him, barely a breath, but sharp. "He was buying a ridiculous amount of sugar in 1815. Twice the normal price. From someone in York

I've never heard of."

Robert grunted. "You think it's a cover?"

"I don't know anything yet," she admitted.

The pile beside them grew. Robert's back ached, his fingers were smudged with ink from envelopes handled a hundred times, but he kept digging.

Then, he froze. His thumb brushed a crest, an unusual one. A wax seal, crimson red and too heavy. Too theatrical. He slid the letter from the stack.

October 1817. Addressed to Viscount Brimwood. Sent from a private residence in Sussex.

He broke the seal. Read. Then read it again.

He didn't realize Evelyn had stopped reading until her fingers closed gently around his wrist.

"What is it?" she whispered.

Robert swallowed. "It's vague. Careful. But... there's talk of a shipment being intercepted. Retaliation. Something about 'removing obstacles.'"

Evelyn's brows drew together. "Your parents?"

"I... don't know," he whispered, his eyes fixated on the letter which he kept reading, although his trembling fingers did a weak job of aiding his eyes in discovering more.

### Chapter Twenty-One

“N o, wait... he’s innocent,” Robert finally said, voice cutting through the dark like a blade.

Evelyn gasped. “What did you say?”

Robert didn’t answer immediately. He withdrew the letter again which was all creased now, with its edges softened from the press of his own fingers, and stared down at it as though it might change between blinks.

But his voice, when it came again, was steady. “Your father had no part in it. None.”

Evelyn’s mouth parted, but the words refused to come. She blinked against the shock, the confusion, the betrayal of relief.

“This letter I found... it wasn’t orders, it wasn’t collusion. It was a warning. Someone linked him to the attack. He was trying to find out why. ”

Her hand reached for the lapel of his coat. She needed something solid. The floor felt suddenly far away.

“But I... I saw the crest,” she whispered. “His seal was on that letter, wasn’t it?”

“It was,” Robert said, lifting his eyes to hers.

“But see here... in this letter, he writes to the Crown.” He paused to search for

another letter, then one more.

“In these as well. He wrote several times. He was furious. Desperate. I think he was trying to understand why his name kept appearing in reports and documents he never signed. He suspected his signet had been stolen.”

“Forged,” she echoed what they both were thinking. Her knees nearly buckled. “But he never mentioned any of this to us.”

“He wouldn’t have,” Robert said grimly. “Not if he knew how it would look. You said it yourself, he believes himself untouchable. What would it do to a man like that, realizing he’d been used?”

Evelyn’s thoughts raced. The study’s oppressive silence still seemed to cling to her skin. “So... he was a pawn in this game?”

“Worse,” Robert muttered. “He was a witness who didn’t even know he’d seen something.”

He drew out another letter, one she hadn’t noticed him slip away, and unfolded it. “Here... this is the official reply from the Crown. They agreed. The seal was compromised. The King ordered it changed, publicly, in the presence of high witnesses.”

Evelyn leaned in, her breath warm against his shoulder. She could just make out the neat, stiff script beneath the candle wax blot: ...and in accordance with the Office of the Privy Seal and His Majesty’s judgment, your signet must be considered forfeit...

Her breath caught. “So... he is not involved in the death of your family.”

Robert’s voice darkened. “I thought him the worst things a human being could be

accused of. And he was none of them.”

The words were flat, bitter, but Evelyn saw more than the bitterness; she saw the fracture in him, the crack of doubt that had been held closed by rage for far too long.

She reached for his hand, curling her fingers into his. “Robert. You couldn’t have known. You had every reason to believe he was?—”

“Complicit. Guilty.” He looked at her. “I came into his house with blood in my mouth.”

“But you’re not leaving it that way,” she said, reassuring him. “This changes everything.”

He nodded, slowly. But then, his brow furrowed, eyes turning inward again. “One question remains.”

Evelyn knew before he said it.

“Who stole the seal?”

They stood there, side by side, as the ancient house held its breath around them.

“I don’t know,” she murmured. “Could it have been someone close to him? Someone with access to his office?”

“Possibly,” Robert agreed. “Or someone who intercepted his correspondence. Someone who knew enough about your family’s dealings to make the forgeries believable.”

“Someone who wanted both our families destroyed,” she said quietly.



He didn't answer. He didn't need to.

Because the idea had already begun to take root between them. It was not a single person, not a name but a shadow. A presence. Someone clever enough to copy a seal and cruel enough to use it to start a blood feud between noble houses. Worst of all, it was someone who was still out there.

What neither of them seemed to realize was that they lingered there too long.

Even as Evelyn opened her mouth to speak again, a faint sound met her ears.

It was a soft scuffle. A shoe dragging over stone?

A creak that did not belong to the house's usual nocturnal sighs?

It came from upstairs, or perhaps the servants' corridor, but it was close .

Robert heard it, too. His head snapped toward the hallway, his eyes narrowing with the precision of a predator. Evelyn felt his body still, every line of him going alert, controlled and terrifyingly calm.

She didn't need to speak. Neither did he.

They moved in perfect synchrony as they huddled all the letters together and placed them back in the drawer.

He knelt swiftly, with the last letter still hidden inside his coat, and slid the hairpin back not the lock.

The faint click of tumblers falling back into place was almost too soft to hear, but Evelyn heard it.

Her pulse, by contrast, roared in her ears.

They immediately headed out of the study and eased the door shut with a careful hand.

Robert proceeded to lock that as well, then, he rose swiftly.

They crept back through the corridor, careful not to disturb the creaking floorboards that Evelyn knew too well.

The moonlight was gone now, swallowed by a passing cloud, and the darkness felt thicker.

She could feel Robert at her back, his hand brushing against hers every few steps to guide her along without a word.

The sound behind them came again. Faint, shuffling. Perhaps nothing. But perhaps everything.

They reached her door. Her hand touched the knob, but she hesitated. She turned to him. He leaned forward, his voice low, barely more than breath.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

She blinked, startled by the gentleness of it. He was not a man who said such things easily... if ever. The words wrapped around her like warmth in the cold, entirely unexpected and impossibly intimate.

“You don’t have to—” she began, but he shook his head once.

“I do.”

Her lips parted, but again, no words came. Not the right ones. She stepped back into the threshold of her chamber, eyes still locked on his.

Robert reached into his coat and tucked the hairpin safely into an inner pocket.

“I’ll return it,” he said, that familiar dry edge back in his voice, softer this time. “Eventually.”

She was still smiling as she closed the door gently behind her, leaning against it just for a moment. Even a minute later, her heart still hadn’t slowed.

Evelyn stood before the long mirror, her reflection cloaked in the shimmer of candlelight and silk.

Her gown was a deep emerald green, the sort of shade that demanded to be noticed: lush, bold, and gleaming like forest leaves after rain.

It hugged her figure with unapologetic elegance, the neckline sweeping just low enough to make her mother sigh and her father grumble.

She fastened the final earring with deft fingers and tilted her head, scrutinizing the image before her. A duchess, certainly. But also a woman on a mission, a woman who was half huntress, half diplomat, entirely unwilling to be ignored.

The knock came as she smoothed her gloves. Two firm raps. She turned just as the door creaked open, and there he was. Robert stopped just over the threshold.

She felt the shift in the air before she saw his expression—like a stillness that spread from his chest to his fingertips.

His gaze traveled slowly, intently, from the sweep of her shoulders to the curve of her

waist then met her eyes with something unspoken behind his own.

She watched the flicker of breath he didn't take, the pause that told her all she needed to know.

"Oh dear," she said lightly as her lips curved. "Don't tell me you've come to inform me of a sudden illness. Or perhaps you've remembered some pressing engagement involving brooding in a dark corner with a glass of scotch that will make you utterly unable to attend this ball?"

His mouth twitched... almost a smile. "Tempting."

"Mm, I thought so." She stepped closer, hands clasped before her. "It's just... this is rather a difficult dress to waste on my mother's compliments and other gentlemen's leering. If you abandon me now, I shall be forced to flirt outrageously with some poor man just to make up for your absence."

He arched a brow. "You say that like it's a threat to me. "

"Isn't it?"

Another flicker at the edge of his lips, but then his voice dropped to that maddeningly calm timbre. "You look radiant."

She stilled. It was not the teasing nor the sarcasm she had expected. It was that quiet sincerity that completely caught her off guard. His gaze didn't leave hers, and it held something more than admiration. It was fierce loyalty, as if he would go to war simply because she had asked him to.

"Well," she said, trying to reclaim her footing with a tilt of her head, "if you're going to be charming, I may lose my reputation entirely."

He stepped inside, closing the door with a soft click. “You’re under the impression you still have one because you seem to have forgotten that you are a ruined woman... ruined by me. ”

Her eyes narrowed. “Is this your way of apologizing then?” she teased. “You’re going to endure society and music and watered wine for me?”

He moved closer, the black of his evening coat as stark and sharp as ever. He hadn’t donned anything fashionable or festive, of course not , but he had shaved, and the crispness of his attire suggested he’d made an effort.

“I would endure worse for you,” he said, and it was not flirtation.

It was fact. Evelyn felt her pulse skip, the teasing on her tongue evaporating. But he didn’t let the moment linger.

“Besides,” he added with a shrug, “someone has to keep all those leering eyes away from you.”

She glanced over her shoulder, her eyes sparkling. “Jealous, Your Grace?”

He offered her his arm. “Possessive.”

Her breath hitched, but she masked it with a smile and slipped her hand into the crook of his arm.

“Then let us go,” she said sweetly, “and ruin a perfectly good evening together.”

“As long as there are no quadrilles.”

“Oh, there will be quadrilles.”

He groaned, quietly and for her ears alone, as they stepped into the corridor. And Evelyn smiled, for even among the glittering artifice of the ton , she would not be alone tonight.

### Chapter Twenty-Two

The waltz soared into a glittering crescendo, and Evelyn turned her head just in time to see the Viscount of Firth descend the staircase like a stage actor arriving too late for the final act. He was alone.

Evelyn's breath caught, her gloved fingers tightening imperceptibly around her fan. Her gaze swept the entrance once more, but Matilda was not there. No flash of pale lavender silk which was Matilda's favorite shade. No familiar laugh. No hesitant smile. There was only him .

And suddenly, the air inside Lady Weatherby's ballroom grew thin.

The Viscount's appearance was precisely as she remembered: painfully polished.

He was all gleaming in royal blue satin and excessive confidence, a smug smile tugging at the corners of his lips as though he were enjoying a private jest at everyone else's expense.

A jeweled pin glimmered at his cravat, unnecessarily large like everything about him.

Pretension embodied.

He moved with calculated grace, the arrogance in his posture suggesting that he still believed half the ton owed him reverence for some obscure, possibly fabricated, link to royal blood.

Evelyn had always thought he looked like a portrait of a man who imagined himself a king but lacked the presence to rule anything save his own mirror.

Her mother's voice broke through the crackling tension.

"No Matilda," Lady Brimwood murmured, worry threading through her tone like a pulled stitch. "Odd. They were meant to arrive together."

Evelyn's mouth was dry. "Perhaps she was delayed."

Perhaps she was forbidden.

She saw it now, clear as a slap to the face, how very little she'd seen of her sister.

Not since that wretched day the Viscount returned with Matilda on his arm like a prize, smug and victorious.

Evelyn had never truly spoken to her since it all happened.

And now, regret pooled in her throat like ash.

She should have asked the questions that tormented her night after night. She should have written. She should have demanded answers.

A flash of green caught her eye as the Viscount made his way toward them, gliding across the ballroom like a serpent through grass. Every pair of eyes turned to follow his path. Evelyn felt her mother straighten beside her, her spine rigid with polite anticipation.

He reached them and bowed low, all in unnecessary flourish. "Lady Brimwood. Your Grace."



He looked up at Evelyn then, his eyes gleaming like glass, reflecting nothing but his own satisfaction.

“May I say, Your Grace, you are a vision,” he said, his voice a velvet drawl. “It appears marriage has only added to your brilliance. The stars must truly envy your radiance tonight.”

Evelyn fought the urge to gag. She managed a smile instead, as sharp as a knife, civil and entirely unamused. “And you, My Lord, are as flattering as ever.”

“I try.” He turned then to Lady Brimwood. “I’m afraid Matilda was feeling somewhat... indisposed. She sends her regrets. I came on our behalf.”

Evelyn felt her stomach twist.

Indisposed or locked away?

“Oh,” her mother murmured with concern flitting across her features. “That is unfortunate. I hope she recovers quickly. Will she not come later?”

The Viscount gave a polite, indifferent shrug. “I fear not. Best to rest, you understand. Fragile things, nerves.”

Evelyn’s fingers curled at her side. Matilda had never been fragile. Nervous, yes. Gentle, often. But not fragile. The lie rang clear as a bell.

And then, as if he sensed the moment and wished to ruin it completely, the Viscount turned to Evelyn with an oily smile.

“Would Your Grace honor me with this dance?”

A dance?

Evelyn thought she didn't hear that well. Dance? With him? It took all her restraint not to recoil. Her mouth opened, the refusal perched on her tongue like a falcon ready to strike, but before the words could take flight, her mother laid a gentle, warning hand on her arm.

"Evelyn," she whispered, "we mustn't make a scene."

Her jaw tightened. Her heart thundered. But she knew what her mother meant. Declining a dance without cause was not just rude, it was a declaration, and this night was too public.

She looked up at the Viscount. Every inch of her screamed no.

But she dipped into a small, formal curtsy, teeth clenched behind her smile, feeling the stab of each of these subsequent words she was forced to speak aloud. "Of course, My Lord."

He offered his arm. She took it. And as he led her onto the ballroom floor beneath chandeliers that glittered like watching eyes, Evelyn vowed that whatever secrets he was keeping, whatever horrors he had locked behind Matilda's closed door...

she would uncover them. Even if it meant dancing with the devil.

The moment they stepped onto the dancing area, the violins soared.

Evelyn placed her hand upon the Viscount of Firth's shoulder though every bone in her body resisted the touch.

His gloved hand found her waist with too much familiarity, the pressure just a shade

heavier than was proper.

They began to move, following a mechanical waltz beneath the chandeliers.

For a moment, they danced in silence. The polite kind, the brittle veneer of civility stretched over a chasm of loathing.

Then he leaned in.

“You know,” he murmured, the scent of cardamom clinging to his breath, “I always did think you would come around. A woman like you, so sharp, so fiery... it’s the flame that licks the blade, not the hearth that keeps it. You were meant for more than polite titles and dreary dukes.”

Evelyn kept her smile frozen in place though she longed to break his nose with her fan.

“Is that what you told my sister?” she replied sweetly. “Before or after you dimmed the flame in her eyes?”

He chuckled, and the sound grated her. “Matilda is... pliable. Obedient. Not every woman can manage boldness as well as you, my dear. But still... I wonder.” His gaze swept over her face, hungry and vile.

“Have you reconsidered? Running away, I mean. Or perhaps, now that you’re a duchess, you’ve simply decided you’d rather be familiar with power before deciding who wields it best.”

Evelyn’s blood turned to ice. Her steps faltered for half a beat before she righted them, her fingers tightening on his sleeve.

“You are filth,” she said, the words precise, controlled, but venomous. “My husband is twice the man you will ever be. And I would rather dance with the hounds in Hyde Park than be anything to you.”

His face changed. His charm evaporated like fog at noon, revealing the shadow beneath, revealing the predator in the parlor. His grip on her waist became punishing, his smile now a mask pulled tight over rage.

“You’ll regret that,” he said softly, venom threading each word. “You always did have a mouth that moved faster than your sense. You’ll find London is not so safe for arrogant little duchesses with scandal on their heels and no family willing to shield them. I could?—”

But he never finished.

Another voice, low and calm, cut through the swell of strings like a blade through silk.

“I believe you’ve had your turn, My Lord. Might I steal my wife for the next?”

The Viscount’s head snapped around. Evelyn didn’t need to look. The sound of that voice rushed through her like a sigh of relief and a crack of thunder all at once.

Robert.

She turned, and there he was, clad in black like vengeance itself, eyes trained on the Viscount with a polite smile that didn’t reach their cold, assessing depths.

The Viscount hesitated. The other dancers spun on, unaware that a battle had formed in the quiet beneath chandeliers. Evelyn could feel the tension stretch like a taut string between them.

Robert stepped forward, extending his hand to her. “My dear?”

Her answer was silent but final. She slipped free of the Viscount’s grip and into Robert’s, as if she’d been waiting for rescue, not because she was weak but because the man beside her was the storm she would rather ride into battle with than face the world alone.

The Viscount’s jaw flexed. He gave a tight, shallow bow.

“Of course, Your Grace.”

And stepped aside.

Robert’s hand slid to her back, and they began to dance.

Robert guided her into the rhythm of the waltz, the warmth of her hand settling into his like it belonged there.

She looked up at him, and her voice was quiet when she spoke. “Thank you.”

He arched a brow, the corner of his mouth tugging into a grin. “It looked like you needed rescuing.”

Her lips curved, that particular smirk of hers, which was sharp and sweet and absolutely maddening. “I had everything perfectly under control.”

“Of course, you did.” His voice was low, amused. “You only looked one breath away from clawing his eyes out.”

She laughed then, a breathy, vibrant sound that sent something warm rippling through his chest. She fit against him so well in the dance, yet she was anything but delicate.

Her presence filled the space between them, fierce and real, her scent wrapped in lavender and something darker, something undeniably her .

His gaze dropped to hers again, lingering. “I heard what you said to him.”

“Oh?” Her lashes lifted in mock innocence.

“I’m proud of you.” His voice dropped, more intimate now. “You were magnificent. Watching you put him in his place like that... I’ve never been so glad you married me.”

For just a second, she blinked. It seemed that he had caught off guard. But then her eyes glinted, wicked as ever. “Don’t let it go to your head, Your Grace.”

He chuckled. “Too late.”

She tilted her head, drawing him in with the mischief that always danced just beneath her words. “I wonder if you’d still be proud if I’d slapped him with my fan.”

“Utterly,” he murmured, his fingers resting more firmly at her waist. “But I’d have had to pretend to be horrified. Society demands it.”

They circled the ballroom, the music spinning around them, but Robert only saw her. He always only saw her. Every inch of her sparkled with life: the way her lips quirked, the way she leaned in just slightly when teasing him, the way her hand was so sure in his.

“You know,” she said, affecting a thoughtful tone, “you’re very smug for a man who arranged all his inkwells by height.”

He stiffened. “They were ordered by function.”

“You had them in categories.”

“Because it made sense.”

She smiled sweetly. “One of your maids moved them, didn’t she?”

He narrowed his eyes, half-glowering, half-bemused. “She kept shifting the sand tray two inches to the left. Two inches. I thought I was losing my mind.”

“Monstrous.”

“She also placed my ledger vertically . Like a novel.”

Evelyn gasped, mockingly scandalized. “A novel ? Robert, say it isn’t so.”

He exhaled through his nose, biting back a grin though it tugged relentlessly at his lips. “I almost had to dismiss her.”

“Oh, I would have had her drawn and quartered.”

He met her eyes again, and this time he didn’t look away.

She was laughing, but he saw the flicker of concern still beneath the humor.

The shadow of the Viscount’s presence was still hovering.

Robert hated that he’d let that man come within an arm’s reach of her.

Hated the gall of it, the arrogance, the threat .

But she’d handled it with wit and fire and steel. And heaven help him, he was

helpless before her.

He eased her closer, just slightly, careful not to attract notice from the rest of the room, and murmured, “You know, Evelyn... it terrifies me sometimes. The man I am with you.”

Her teasing faded just a shade, the levity in her gaze deepening into something more fragile, but she didn’t flinch from it.

Instead, she brushed his chest with her gloved fingertips and whispered, “Good. You should be terrified.”

And just like that, the spark was back. He smiled, and the rest of the ballroom seemed to fade away.



### Chapter Twenty-Three

“ I swear, I blinked, and a goat trotted directly into the bakery.”

Evelyn leaned back on the settee with her stockinged feet tucked beneath her, laughter threading her voice. Her fingers curled around the delicate porcelain of her teacup as she watched her friends react.

Cordelia gasped, violet eyes wide. “Inside the bakery? Not just nibbling at the doorstep?”

“Oh no,” Evelyn replied as her eyes gleamed with amusement. “Straight in through the door as though it had an appointment. Knocked over an entire tray of currant buns. Poor Mr. Tilbury nearly fainted.”

Cordelia pressed a hand to her heart then let it fall dramatically into her lap. “That’s it. I’m moving to the country. Nothing interesting ever happens in London except scandal and the occasional duel. But goats in bakeries? That’s poetry.”

Hazel, seated with perfect posture by the hearth, merely arched a brow over the rim of her tea. “Perhaps you might reconsider after a week without hot water and a stable full of gossiping tenants.”

“Hazel, you wound me,” Cordelia sighed though her smile flickered, dimmed for a heartbeat too long.

Evelyn saw it, just a flicker, but it was there, the shadow behind the laughter. She was

learning to look for it now.

She tucked it away for later. As always, Cordelia would not speak of it unless she wanted to, and pressing her was like chasing fog. Instead, Evelyn continued, “Goats aside, the duchy is... beautiful. Quiet. Wiser, somehow, than London.”

“You’ve gone soft,” Hazel said though her eyes were warm. “You always said you’d loathe being tucked away like a kept bird.”

“I did. And I still refuse to be tucked anywhere, I assure you, but it isn’t that. It’s...” Evelyn paused, searching for the right words. “There’s a rhythm to it. A stillness that makes one notice things.”

Cordelia tilted her head. “Like what?”

Evelyn set her teacup down, fingers trailing the rim of the saucer.

“Like the cracks in the plaster of the schoolhouse. The missing panes in the poor widow’s cottage.

The fact that the market square has had the same rotting cart blocking the drain for what looks like two years.

It’s not ruin. It’s neglect. Small things that have grown into... bigger things.”

“Isn’t that the steward’s duty?” Hazel asked, frowning. “To maintain such concerns?”

“Yes. But apparently the last steward was a cousin of a cousin, and he vanished with a suspiciously full purse sometime before Robert returned to claim the title. Robert’s been going through the accounts, but it’s a tangled mess. And while he unravels it, the village simply waits.”

Cordelia leaned forward, her voice softer now. “What will you do?”

Evelyn looked up, a fire lighting behind her eyes.

“We’ll fix it. I want to bring proper schooling.

Repairs. A new well for the south fields—they haven’t had fresh water in months.

Robert said it wasn’t my responsibility but.

..” She smiled, small and fierce. “He also said that just before I bullied the baker into accepting new shutters free of charge.”

Hazel huffed a quiet laugh. “You do have a certain... persuasive nature.”

Evelyn shrugged, unrepentant. “I prefer effective .”

Cordelia was watching her again, that glimmer of awe mixed with affection. “You’re going to change everything there, aren’t you?”

“I don’t know about everything,” Evelyn said with a quiet smile. “But I can’t live there and pretend not to see. And now that I have seen... how can I do nothing?”

For a moment, the drawing room was silent save for the ticking of the longcase clock in the corner and the soft clink of porcelain.

Then Hazel pointed out, “It suits you.”

Evelyn blinked. “What does?”

“The duchess of a place that needs saving.”

Cordelia's voice was barely above a whisper. "You make it sound like a storybook."

Hazel's eyes didn't leave Evelyn's. "Perhaps it is. But you've always been more heroine than spectator, Evelyn. And the Duke clearly knows it, too."

Suddenly, Evelyn shot upright, her skirts rustling like a storm of silk. "That's it! I must go to Robert!"

Hazel blinked. "Now? "

Cordelia's teacup nearly slipped from her fingers. "I beg your pardon?"

"I have to tell him everything: my thoughts on the schoolhouse, the well, the new carts for the vendors. Oh! And the hedge by the chapel that's grown so wild it's practically threatening small children."

Cordelia collapsed in a fit of laughter. "Evelyn, it's nearly half past ten!"

"You make it sound like I've announced I'm off to elope with a poet," Evelyn said, already halfway to the door.

"I'll be precisely five minutes. Perhaps six.

But I must tell him now, or I'll forget something, and then it'll gnaw at me all night, and I'll end up waking him at some ungodly hour with a half-written list about wheel spokes and?—"

Hazel raised a brow. "Wouldn't be the first time."

Evelyn paused, only to toss a teasing look over her shoulder. "Oh, do stay seated. Honestly, you behave as if I were abandoning you to the wolves. I'll return in a

blink.”

Cordelia flung a cushion at her. “Tell your brooding duke that we want you back, Duchess of Urgency.”

“He’ll probably be grateful to be interrupted,” Hazel added dryly. “If only to have a moment’s peace from that dreadful steward ledger.”

“I shall pass along your affection,” Evelyn called with a grin, already sweeping through the doorway. “Don’t drink all the tea without me!”

The girls’ laughter trailed after her, muffled by the walls as she disappeared into the hallway. The moment she reached the stairs, she gathered her skirts and began to climb while her thoughts raced ahead of her.

She had to tell him... had to ! Before it scattered, before the excitement faded, before the memory of that goat in the bakery dulled even slightly.

Her mind spun with plans and purpose.

But most of all, it spun toward him.

The ink had long gone cold. Numbers danced in tidy columns across the parchment before Robert’s eyes, orderly and restrained.

They were exactly as he preferred them to be.

He was bent over the latest of the estate’s ledgers, brow furrowed in stern concentration, when the door to his study burst open without so much as a knock.

He wasn’t startled. He didn’t even need to look up to know who would dare such a

thing.

“Robert, I am so sorry,” Evelyn breathed, already halfway across the room, her cheeks flushed, and her hair was in charming disarray from running up the stairs.

“But if I don’t say this now, I’ll forget, and it will bother me all night, and you know how I get when something bothers me, like that time I misplaced my pearl hairpin, and I was convinced a magpie had stolen it?—”

“I recall,” he said, dry as dust, but she was already off.

“I’ve thought about it, and we absolutely must repair the schoolhouse.

No, not repair, restore. The plaster’s cracked like old bark, and the windows barely keep out the wind, and the teacher, bless her, uses a rock to prop the door open.

A rock , Robert. That cannot continue. And I know it’s not a disaster by London standards, but if you had seen the way the children looked at me when I said I’d come back soon... ”

He leaned back in his chair with his arms crossed, watching her with a look that might have seemed impassive to anyone else.

But in truth, he was... well, amused wasn’t quite strong enough of a word.

He was enthralled. She was pacing now, her hands gesturing wildly, the fabric of her gown swishing at her ankles like an impatient tide.

“And the widow Barrow’s roof is barely standing. Thatch is falling off like it’s been insulted. She smiled at me, Robert. With two teeth missing and a kind of dignity that made me feel like I was the one in need of help, not she.”

She turned, eyes bright and alight with purpose. “And the well in the southern field is dry. Entirely dry. The tenant farmers are walking a mile and a half for water, and it’s not clean, and I just— I can’t let that continue.”

He gave a quiet nod. Just enough to let her know he was following.

“And someone ought to look at that hedge by the chapel,” she added. “It’s attempting murder, I’m certain of it.”

He blinked once but still didn’t interrupt. She looked like a thunderstorm in silk.

Finally, finally, she stopped, still breathing hard, her hands on her hips, and her eyes wide with a fire he’d never been able to look away from.

“So,” she finished, “I was wondering if that would be... all right.”

There was a breath of silence as Robert rose from his chair slowly with the quiet, deliberate grace that made people instinctively step back. He didn’t move toward her, not yet. He just stood there, one hand braced on the desk, looking at her like she’d just rewritten the order of his world again.

“All of that,” he said evenly, “is more than all right.”

Relief softened her features for a moment before curiosity narrowed her eyes. “You’re not going to say anything else? No notes? No objections? Not even about the hedge?”

He allowed himself a small smile, that rare, slanted thing that only ever appeared for her. “I wouldn’t dream of interfering with you and your crusade for order among village shrubbery.”

She gave him a look. “You’re mocking me.”

“Never.”

She squinted. “You are.”

Now, he stepped closer, not too close but close enough that her presence warmed the space between them. “You want to rebuild our duchy. You’ve thought of things I haven’t. You’ve seen what I missed. That doesn’t deserve objection, Evelyn. That deserves admiration.”

Her mouth parted slightly, surprise flickering there before she masked it with a scoff. “Well, don’t go writing sonnets about me just yet.”

His gaze lingered.

I already have in the quiet corners of my mind.

But he only said, “I wouldn’t insult you with verse. You’d correct the meter.”

She grinned, delighted. “I absolutely would.”

He didn’t say that watching her storm into his study like that, so utterly breathless and entirely herself, had made his heart ache in that slow, bewildering way it had begun to whenever she was near. He didn’t say that loving her was the most reckless, inevitable thing he had ever done.

Instead, he reached out and tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear. “Don’t let your friends drink all the tea.”

She blinked up at him then laughed and turned for the door, her steps already lighter.



She was already halfway to the door when she unexpectedly paused, almost as if she had forgotten something in that long list of hers.

Robert barely had time to process the sudden shift in her movement before she crossed the floor in a few light steps and threw her arms around him in a spontaneous, breathless hug.

“I know you don’t like surprises,” she whispered, her cheek briefly brushing against his chest, “but this one felt important.”

Then, before he could utter a word, before he could think to raise his arms and hold her properly, she pulled back just enough to press a swift, soft kiss to his cheek.

It was fleeting.

But it shattered him.

He felt it like an arrow loosed from some hidden part of her, a thing she hadn’t quite meant to reveal and perhaps didn’t realize she’d given. Her lips left behind a trail of fire and her scent, that ever-present mix of something wild and something comforting, lingered like a secret.

She turned on her heel, skirts swishing, and with a flick of her wrist and a grin tossed over her shoulder, she called out, “Don’t touch anything in here! I’ve just managed to learn your system of... terrifying order!”

And then, she was gone.

He stood rooted, a quiet man felled by something far mightier than steel or flame. He reached up, slowly, and touched the spot on his cheek where her lips had landed.

Then, he sat back in his chair, utterly still, except for the ghost of a smile tugging at the edge of his mouth.

The ledger before him was forgotten. His ink had dried again.

But Robert didn't care. Not when his whole world had just flown out the door like a bird on the wing, laughing, and left his heart fluttering in its wake.

### Chapter Twenty-Four

Something in him snapped.

It wasn't loud. It wasn't thunderous. It was silent, a shifting of earth beneath stone, a fault line giving way. All the walls he had spent years constructing, all that logic, iron restraint, that quiet fortress of grief he never let crumble, began to fall apart, one careful stone at a time.

She had kissed his cheek. Not because she had to. Not out of duty or politeness or some wifely obligation. She had done it like it was the most natural thing in the world, as if he deserved affection.

He had spent years convincing himself that he could not ever feel this.

That love was too great a risk. That the heart he'd once given freely had already been burned to ash when his parents and brother were taken.

That loving again meant risking ruin again.

But then she had held him and kissed him and laughed as she left him behind.

And now, Robert could not sit still.

He pushed back from his desk with sudden purpose, the chair skidding quietly across the rug. His long strides carried him across the room in seconds, out the study door, down the hall where her laughter still echoed faintly.

He didn't think. He ran .

She had just turned the corner at the top of the stairs when he caught her.

“Evelyn...”

She turned, surprised. A question lingered in her eyes, but before she could speak, he was there.

His hands slid around her waist, drawing her into him.

He bent, without any hesitation now, and pressed his mouth to hers in a kiss that was quiet, certain, and deep with all the feeling he had refused to name.

It wasn't rushed. It wasn't fierce or desperate. It was soft. It was a promise, shaped in silence.

She melted into him with a sigh, her hands rising instinctively to curl into his chest. She kissed him back like she had been waiting, without even knowing, for this very moment.

When he finally pulled away, his forehead lingered against hers, and he exhaled a breath that felt like it had been trapped in his lungs for years.

He looked at her then as she was—her cheeks flushed, her lips parted in shock and something far more delicate. He smiled.

“All right,” he murmured, voice low and warm. “Now, you can go back to your friends.”

She stared at him, speechless.

He raised one brow in a mockingly patient look. "I'll even promise not to touch anything in the study."

Her eyes widened then she let out a stunned, breathless laugh.

And as she turned away, smiling so brightly he could feel it even after she disappeared down the hall, Robert stood in the corridor alone with his heart beating with a wonder he had once believed long dead.

And this time, he didn't stop himself from feeling it.

The following day, Robert stood before the tall doors of Lord Brimwood's study, his knuckles hovering for a breath too long before they rapped against the wood. The sound echoed with perfect politeness, but in reality, it masked the storm behind his ribs.

He had planned this. Rehearsed it. Practiced the tone, the casual curiosity. The neat lies woven into truth.

A moment later, the door opened, and Lord Brimwood looked up from his writing desk, eyebrows raised.

"Your Grace," he greeted. "This is a surprise."

Robert inclined his head. "Forgive the intrusion, My Lord. I hope I'm not keeping you from anything critical."

"Only estate tedium." The man gestured to a leather armchair before the desk. "Do come in."

Robert sat with his spine straight and his hands folded neatly in his lap. He waited for

the door to click closed behind him before speaking.

“I came to speak with you about something that has troubled a friend of mine.” A pause. “Lord Mason Cunningham. He believes someone may have tampered with his seal, perhaps even forged it. I recall Evelyn mentioning, once, that you had endured something similar.”

Brimwood’s mouth tightened faintly then loosened into a faint nod. “Yes. A strange business, that. Long years ago now.”

Robert watched him carefully. “Would you be willing to tell me how it was discovered? And what was done?”

The man sat back, steeping his fingers.

“There isn’t much to say, I’m afraid. I had letters returned to me that I had no memory of writing.

Questions from gentlemen I never contacted.

It all seemed to happen at once. There were inquiries.

An audience with the King. The seal was remade, witnessed by those in authority, of course, to mark the change. ”

“But there was never any confirmation of who had forged it?”

Brimwood shook his head slowly. “None. No suspects. No accusations I could prove. It stopped after I changed the seal. Whoever they were... they vanished.”

Robert’s eyes narrowed slightly. “And you never attempted to search further?”

There was a pause then Brimwood offered a small, sad smile. “Some things, Your Grace, remain beyond our reach. I had a family to think of. An estate to protect. And I was not a young man with time to spare. Eventually, I had to let it go.”

Let it go.

The words sank into Robert like cold water down the spine. He nodded, offered a few more polite inquiries, and after a short while, took his leave, all appropriate courtesy in place. He walked through the halls alone with his hands behind his back and his thoughts loud in his skull.

Let it go.

He had lived for this, for vengeance, for answers, for the blood-pounding, obsession-driven need to know who had orchestrated the carriage attack. Who had stolen his parents from him? Who had taken his brother’s future and left only cold, dry earth behind?

But what had it given him? Nothing but years wasted, nights lost, the heavy drag of fury in his chest like an anchor. And now...

Now, he saw Evelyn’s smile when she was planning a village school. Her eyes were bright with purpose. He felt the ghost of her kiss on his cheek, the curve of her laugh trailing through the halls like sunlight.

A new life was blooming around him, soft and unsteady and utterly precious. And vengeance had no place in it.

He stood still at the window at the end of the corridor, watching the gardens below. A breeze stirred the hedgerows. Somewhere far off, a fountain splashed gently, indifferent to the war that had just quieted in his soul. For the first time in years,

Robert allowed himself to exhale the burden.

He would not chase shadows anymore. He would build something solid. Something good. Something with her. Let the past bury its dead. He was done carrying their ghosts.

Those were the thoughts nestling inside his mind as the carriage lulled him into a sense of comfort on his way home.

The soft patter of rain had begun while the carriage rumbled through the streets.

It was gentle at first, a mere mist on the windows, then steadily thickening to a persistent drizzle that streaked the glass in trembling rivulets.

He would tell Evelyn tonight.

He would take her hand and tell her everything, starting from his decision to let the hunt go, the weight he was no longer willing to carry, and finally, the life he wanted with her.

Not just under the same roof, not just as partners in investigation or responsibility, but truly, as a husband who could be worthy of her fire, her light, her heart .

He found himself smiling, faintly, at the thought of how she would react. She'd probably tease him, he thought, accuse him of growing soft. She'd arch that brow in mock skepticism, only to reveal her pride in the next breath, too bright to hide.

The wheels crunched over the gravel drive. He leaned forward as the coach slowed before the townhouse which was his... no, their home. And then he saw it.

A figure, cloaked in soaked gray, standing too close to the front door.



He blinked, rain lashing softly against the carriage as he stepped down into it. His boots met the wet stone, water seeping into the fabric of his coat. The figure didn't move. She was peering through the parlor window, one gloved hand pressed to the glass.

His first thought was that it might be another vagrant. He had seen them before and always instructed his staff to help where they could. Some sought food, some warmth, some place to disappear for the night. He never turned them away.

He took a few steps forward, prepared to address her gently, and then she turned. The hood slipped back just enough for the lamplight above the door to catch her face. His steps faltered. His breath stopped.

It was Matilda.

Her hair clung to her pale face in wet strands, her eyes wide, frantic, locked on his as if she had only just realized he was there.

She looked nothing like the proud girl who had once swept into a scandalous elopement.

She looked lost.

Ruined.

And Robert could only stand there, frozen in the rain, the words he'd rehearsed for Evelyn falling from his mind like water through his fingers.

### Chapter Twenty-Five

The door slammed open with a crack like thunder.

Evelyn leapt to her feet, her book tumbling to the carpet as her shawl slipped from her shoulders. The wind surged in with the storm, and with it came Robert, all drenched from head to toe, his dark coat heavy with rain, and his hair slicked back against his brow.

But he wasn't alone. Clutched tightly against his side was a woman, who was half-collapsing into him with each uneven step. She had her hood pulled over her head entirely while her whole body trembled with cold.

Evelyn froze, feeling her breath catch in her throat, then the hood slipped back.

"Matilda?" Her voice sliced through the air like a blade.

Her sister's face was pale and pinched while soaked strands of hair stuck to her cheeks. She looked like she'd run from death itself.

"Help her to the settee," Evelyn said sharply, already moving. "Now."

Robert didn't hesitate. He guided Matilda down onto the cushions as Evelyn yanked the bell cord with a violent jerk. The storm outside beat at the windows, thunder rolling low through the sky like a growl.

Matilda was muttering apologies between gasps. "I'm sorry, I know you didn't want

to see me... Evelyn, I'm sorry—I had to come?—”

“Hush,” Evelyn said, kneeling beside her, grasping her ice-cold hands. “You’re here now.”

Matilda shivered violently. Robert stripped off his soaked coat and draped it over her shoulders just as the maid rushed in.

“Blankets. Now. And hot tea,” Evelyn ordered. “Quickly.”

The maid vanished. Evelyn turned back, tucking a limp strand of Matilda’s wet hair behind her ear. Her sister’s eyes darted between her and Robert, wild and pleading.

“What happened to you?” Evelyn whispered, but Matilda only shook her head, more tears spilling.

Robert stood nearby, silent, watchful, his jaw clenched.

Matilda’s lips were tinged blue, her fingers trembling so violently that Evelyn could feel the minute tremors through her own hands.

She hadn’t let go of her since the moment she’d grasped her, as though some part of Matilda feared she might vanish or be pulled away.

“I wanted to come sooner,” Matilda rasped. Her voice was hoarse, almost foreign. “I tried. Evelyn, I tried . But Laurence, he... he told me I couldn’t.”

Evelyn’s mouth opened, but she didn’t speak. The words clotted in her throat.

Matilda’s breath hitched. “At first, I didn’t understand.

I thought I was simply... being too emotional, too weak.

I'd write to you, and he'd promise to send them.

But weeks passed. Months. He said you never replied.

That you didn't want to see me. That you'd said so.

That you had thrown me away for what I did. ”

“I did,” Evelyn whispered, ashamed. “I received some of your letters, Matilda, but I... I burned them. I didn't even open the first one.

” Her voice cracked. “I was so angry. So hurt. I didn't want to see your name or hear it.

I thought you'd chosen him. That you'd known who he truly was and still run off with him. ”

Matilda shook her head desperately while her eyes were brimming with tears. “No. No, I didn't know. I didn't know anything .”

The door opened, and the maid returned, her arms laden with thick woolen blankets, towels, and a silver tray bearing a steaming teapot and three delicate cups. She set it swiftly on the nearby table.

“Bring a fire to the guest chamber,” Evelyn instructed further. “And have dry clothes prepared. She'll be staying here.”

The maid bobbed a curtsy and fled.

Evelyn rose, retrieved the thickest blanket, and gently wrapped it around her sister's shoulders. Matilda's eyes squeezed shut at the gesture, her lips trembling anew, but she said nothing. Evelyn poured tea with a measured hand, the faint clink of china filling the silence like nervous breath.

She handed Matilda the cup, steadying her hands when she nearly spilled it.

"Now," Evelyn said, kneeling once again before her, voice low but firm, "tell me everything."

Matilda stared into the tea for a long moment, as if searching for courage in the swirling steam.

Then, she spoke. "He is... not a good man, Evie."

The words fell between them like a stone.

"I thought he was just... cruel, controlling. But it's more than that. There are things... documents he hides, people who visit only at night, packages that arrive sealed and unmarked. And letters, always letters. Always written in someone else's name."

Evelyn's skin prickled.

"I started copying them when he was away," Matilda continued, her voice barely audible. "I didn't understand half of what I was reading. But some of them, some mentioned your name. And Father's. And... Robert's."

Evelyn's eyes snapped to Robert, who stood just behind her, silent and still, but she felt the tension ripple through him like a pulled thread.

"What sort of letters?" she asked, her voice taut as a bowstring.

“I don’t know everything yet,” Matilda whispered. “But I think Laurence has been forging things. Names. Seals.”

Matilda’s eyes darted toward the flickering heart light, as if unsure how much more her mouth dared to speak.

Evelyn leaned in closer, still gripping her sister’s hands in hers. Her knuckles whitened beneath the weight of rising dread. Robert hadn’t moved from his place behind her. His presence was a constant wall of quiet strength. She could feel his tension as surely as if it were her own.

“There’s something else,” Matilda whispered, her voice thick with shame. “Mother told me.”

Evelyn frowned. “Told you what?”

“That you’d been in Father’s study.” Matilda looked up, her brows drawn tight. “She heard you. That night. She said she thought it might’ve been a servant, but something unsettled her, so she went to see for herself. She said nothing more, but her expression... Evelyn, she knew it was you.”

Evelyn blinked. A flicker of cold certainty spread through her chest. “So it was she,” she murmured.

Behind her, Robert gave a single nod.

Matilda clutched her blanket closer. “That’s when I... I decided to do the same. In his study. I’d never dared before. Laurence kept it locked, but that night, he left the key in the drawer. I—” Her voice cracked. “I needed to know. And I found it.”

Evelyn felt her breath catch.

“The seal,” Matilda said softly, eyes glistening. “Father’s old signet. Hidden beneath a false panel in his desk. Wrapped in a linen cloth like it was nothing.”

Evelyn’s stomach turned.

“And there were papers,” Matilda went on.

“Not just the ones with Father’s name. Letters—copies—written in your handwriting, Evelyn.

Or what looked like it. But I know you didn’t write them.

And there were others... contracts, correspondences addressed to someone I didn’t recognize.

Names crossed out. Dates rewritten. And one letter?—”

She swallowed hard.

“One that referenced the attack on Robert’s family carriage. In detail. Exact detail.”

The silence that followed was suffocating.

Evelyn stared, unblinking, heart pounding like the storm outside. She couldn’t look at Robert... not yet. Her gaze stayed fixed on her sister, who now looked small and exhausted, shivering in her blanket like a child who had wandered too far into the dark.

Matilda’s voice was down to a whisper now. “I don’t think he was just involved. I think... he arranged it himself.”

Robert staggered back a step.

The room swayed, the crackle of the fire distorted and distant, as though he were underwater. His vision narrowed, tunneling on Matilda's pale face and the words she had spoken, the same words that ricocheted through his mind like musket fire.

The seal. The letters. The carriage.

He couldn't breathe.

He turned away abruptly, unable to look at either woman as he paced to the other side of the drawing room, each step heavy, each heartbeat a roar in his ears. His hand clenched at the back of a velvet armchair, knuckles white with strain.

"Are you certain?" he asked. His voice was low, dangerously quiet. "You are certain about what you saw?"

Matilda nodded slowly, her eyes red-rimmed now.

"The wax seal bore your family's crest, Robert.

It was mentioned in one of the letters... there was even a crude sketch of it in the margins.

I didn't want to believe it at first. I thought perhaps someone had planted it, or...

"That was where her voice cracked. "...or that I was imagining things. But then I found the letter describing the carriage route. The timing. The slope in the road where it would be most vulnerable."

Robert turned away, jaw tight. Rage. Grief. Vindication. They all tangled in his chest



like fire and ice, and all he could do was breathe through it.

“Where are they?” he asked harshly. “The letters.”

“In Laurence’s study. I couldn’t take them; I feared he would notice.”

He turned to Evelyn, his gaze meeting hers and in it, he saw the mirrored fury, the disbelief, the flicker of something deeper...

fear, yes, but not for herself. He strode to the door, the decision made in a flash of clarity that cut through the haze of confusion and pain.

But before he could reach for the handle, a hand closed gently around his.

Evelyn.

He froze. Slowly, he turned to face her. He expected resistance. A plea. He expected the measured argument of someone who wanted to keep him safe, to pull him back from the edge.

Instead, she looked up at him with clear, unwavering eyes and said the words he secretly longed to hear. “Be careful.”

His breath caught.

“Do what your heart tells you,” she added, her voice barely above a whisper. “I trust it.”

Robert stared at her, undone by the quiet strength in her gaze, by the absence of fear, by the fullness of faith she had in him. No one had ever looked at him like that.

He reached for her hand and raised it to his lips, pressing a reverent kiss to her knuckles, then leaned forward and brushed her forehead with a kiss so soft, it could only have been a promise.

“Always,” he murmured.

And then he left, with his cloak swirling behind him and the storm still howling in the dark beyond.

### Chapter Twenty-Six

The corridor was quiet but for the soft pad of Evelyn's slippers against the carpet and the whisper of her sister's damp skirts brushing against her own. Her arm was securely wrapped around Matilda's trembling frame, guiding her toward the guestroom at the end of the hall.

"I never meant for it to happen like this," Matilda murmured, her voice hoarse with exhaustion and shame. "You must think I'm a coward. I was a coward."

"You were scared," Evelyn replied softly. "And trapped. That's not cowardice, Matilda."

Matilda's eyes shone with unshed tears as she looked at her sister. "But I ran off with him. I hurt you. And then when I realized what he truly was, I still stayed. I thought I could fix it. I thought it was my punishment."

Evelyn shook her head and gently pressed her lips together, halting them just outside the guestroom. "You don't have to do that anymore," she said. "None of that matters now. You came to us. That's what matters."

She pushed open the door and led Matilda inside. The room was warm, soft with lavender-scented linens and the welcoming glow of firelight crackling in the grate. Evelyn crossed to the wardrobe and pulled out a nightgown of soft cotton and lace, holding it out before turning back to her sister.

Matilda stood motionless, wet curls plastered to her cheeks, her expression dazed.

Evelyn stepped forward and gently began unfastening the buttons at the back of her sodden dress.

“You don’t have to—” Matilda began, but Evelyn shook her head.

“I want to.”

She peeled the heavy gown away with care, helping her sister out of the damp layers with quiet efficiency.

The fire warmed the room steadily as Matilda stood in her shift, her arms folded tightly around herself.

Evelyn guided her into the dry nightgown then took a brush from the vanity table and gently began untangling her sister’s hair.

They didn’t speak. The silence between them was no longer brittle. It was healing, stretched with years of pain and regrets now cautiously stitched together by something gentler.

When Matilda was dressed and dry, Evelyn pulled back the sheets and helped her into bed, tucking the covers up around her like she used to when they were children playing pretend and hiding from imagined monsters.

“You’re safe now,” Evelyn whispered, brushing a damp lock of hair back from Matilda’s brow.

But Matilda didn’t relax. Her hands remained clenched in the coverlet.

“You don’t understand,” she said, her voice trembling. “Laurence... he’s wicked , Evelyn. Truly. There are things... things I still haven’t told you. I think even now, we

don't know the full extent of what he's done. Or what he's capable of."

Evelyn's chest tightened, but her voice remained steady.

"Robert is with him now," she said. "And Laurence won't be able to twist or slither out of this. Whatever he's done, whatever he's hiding, Robert will find it. And he'll make sure Laurence answers for every last sin."

Matilda stirred beneath the covers, her voice a soft rasp breaking the quiet. "Evelyn," she whispered, her eyes barely open, "I need to say it."

Evelyn sat up straighter in the chair beside the bed. "You don't have to," she said gently. "You've been through?—"

"I do." Matilda pushed herself up, clutching the blanket tightly around her. Her face was pale but resolute. "I need you to hear it. I'm sorry."

Evelyn shook her head, but Matilda reached for her hand.

"No, please. Let me say it." She drew in a shuddering breath.

"I hurt you. I chose him. I thought he wanted me. He said I was better than you. That I wasn't loud or willful or difficult.

He said I was gentle, that I'd make a perfect wife.

And I..." her voice cracked, "...I wanted so desperately to be loved, Evelyn. I did everything he asked of me. I smiled when he told me to. I spoke when spoken to. I made myself small, agreeable, whatever he needed. I... I became just a mirror of what he thought a woman ought to be."

Her shoulders quaked. “And even that wasn’t enough. He grew tired of me. Grew angry. Rough. At first, I told myself I deserved it. That I’d failed him somehow.”

Evelyn’s blood ran hot, her heart pounding like war drums. “Don’t,” she said, her voice dangerously low. “Don’t you dare take the blame for what he did.”

Matilda nodded slowly, her lower lip trembling. “I know that now. It just took me too long to see it.”

Evelyn slid onto the edge of the bed, gathering her sister into her arms. “Listen to me, Tilly,” she said fiercely, using the old childhood nickname. “You did what you had to do to survive. That man... he doesn’t get to define your worth. He doesn’t get to own your story.”

Matilda clutched her tightly. “Is it really over? Can I ever be free?”

Evelyn pulled back just enough to meet her sister’s eyes. “Yes. Robert will bring the truth into the light. And once it’s done, you’ll be free. Free to breathe again. Free to be you. Not someone else’s idea of who you should be.”

A ghost of a smile flickered over Matilda’s lips. “You know our parents will be scandalized,” she said, her voice hoarse with remnants of laughter and sorrow. “A divorcee in the family... Mother will faint into the draperies.”

Evelyn huffed a soft, incredulous laugh. “Well, then we’ll buy her new ones.” Her grin faded into something softer, more solemn. “I don’t care what they think, and you shouldn’t either. You’ve tried for so long to please everyone. It’s your life, Tilly. Live it.”

Matilda blinked hard, her tears finally spilling over, but her smile remained. “I missed you.”

“I missed you too.” Evelyn wrapped her arms around her again, holding her tight, as though she could shield her from every storm yet to come.

For a long moment, they sat like that, sisters once more, not just in blood but in truth. The fire crackled softly, its light flickering over their embrace, and for the first time in years, Evelyn felt something mend inside her.

Matilda was back. And she wasn’t letting her go again.

Robert kicked the townhouse door open with a crash that echoed down the marble-floored corridor.

“My Lord!” the butler gasped, stumbling into the entrance hall. “You... you can’t simply barge in like?—”

“Where is he?” Robert’s voice was low and lethal, each word sharpened by rage.

The butler stammered, “I—I beg your pardon, but?—”

But Robert was already striding forward, his dark greatcoat flaring behind him like the shadow of a storm. He wrenched open door after door, the drawing room, dining room, morning room, until his hand landed on the brass knob of the study. Without hesitation, he threw it open.

There sat the Viscount of Firth, lounging behind his desk with a tumbler of brandy in one hand and a stack of correspondence in the other. The moment their eyes met, the glass froze midway to his lips.

“Your Grace,” he said slowly, rising to his feet, the color draining from his face. “What is the meaning of this?—”

Robert was on him in a blink. He seized the Viscount by the lapels of his velvet coat and slammed him hard against the bookcase behind the desk. Glass rattled, and a framed miniature clattered to the floor.

“You bastard,” Robert hissed, his face inches from the man’s. “Tell me everything. Now.”

The Viscount clawed at Robert’s wrists, struggling to breathe. “You’re mad... unhand me!”

Robert tightened his grip, dragging him higher. “Tell me!”

“All right, all right! ” the Viscount rasped, his voice breaking.

Robert held him pinned, but his entire body was trembling with desire to snap the man’s neck and just be done with it. He was beyond reason, every muscle brimming with fury held back too long.

“I forged the seal,” the Viscount choked out. “Used your father-in-law’s name. Sent the letters.”

“Why?” Robert snarled.

The Viscount’s lips twisted into a grimace of fear. “Please, I’ll tell you everything. I kept records. It’s all in my safe, just let me down!”

But Robert didn’t move. His heart pounded, his knuckles white. He wanted to crush him. He wanted justice. And yet, he needed proof.

He released the Viscount with a hard shove, and the man crumpled to the floor, coughing and gasping like a dying dog. Robert stood over him, dark and quiet, his



fists still trembling.

“Then we’re going to the safe,” he said coldly. “And if you try anything, and I do mean anything, I will end you before you can take your next breath.”

The Viscount of Firth limped to the safe behind a painted landscape, his fingers trembling as he spun the dials. Robert stood behind him like a reaper in waiting, his jaw clenched so tightly it ached. His every breath burned with fury.

The safe clicked open. The Viscount retrieved a bundle of documents tied in silk ribbon. “Here,” he muttered, placing them on the desk with a shaking hand. “You wanted the truth... well, there it is. Every bit of it.”

Robert said nothing. His eyes scanned the brittle pages, his fingers tracing names and seals that had haunted his dreams for over a decade. Then, the Viscount spoke again.

“It was true,” he said bitterly. “The royal lineage. Some ancient, dusty claim through a second cousin thrice removed. Forgotten by everyone except me.” He sank into the chair, defeated. “I was twenty. You were ten. And your family stood in my way.”

Robert’s head snapped up.

“If your family had died, and there were no heirs,” the Viscount continued, his voice low and venomous, “I had enough men in court, clerks, stewards, fools happy to take coin, to smooth over the lines of inheritance. I would have had the title. The land. Everything.”

“I needed a proper seal, of course, if I were to set out righting these wrongs. What allowed me to steal of Eleanor’s father was mere servant complicity.

A footman, who worked there temporarily, was easily blackmailed into procuring the

seal for me.

I kept it on my person just long enough to cast a mold of it in wax, then it was just a matter of casting the replica in metal. ”

His voice broke with twisted nostalgia. “I commissioned the robbery and the murders. Simple, clean. But your bloody housekeeper got clever, hid you away with some of the staff. By the time I found out you were alive, it was too late. The paperwork was unraveling. I couldn’t claim anything.

I couldn’t get near you, although I tried to, but you’ve locked yourself away in that manor house, refusing to allow any visitors. ”

Robert’s stomach turned. The roaring in his ears grew louder.

“And then,” the Viscount sneered, “you had the audacity to return from the dead. At one point, I considered simply setting your home on fire, and making sure no one was left alive... to finally end what had been started a long time ago. But it would have been such a shame to ruin that manor house.” She scoffed, then added.

“And you didn’t just come back from the dead but with Evelyn.

My Evelyn. I wanted her. I thought she was a pliant little thing, but she wouldn’t bend.

” He gave a bitter laugh. “She always looked at me like she could see right through me.”

Robert’s voice came out quiet and dangerous. “So I lost my family. My entire life. For your chance at my title?”

The Viscount met his gaze and spat at his feet.

“I would do it again,” he snarled. “And I’d make damn sure you stayed dead this time.”

Robert moved before he even realized it.

His fist slammed into the Viscount’s jaw then into the ribs, stomach, cheekbone.

The chair tipped over with a crash. Robert followed him to the ground as his fists pounded into flesh, every strike a release of grief and agony bottled for fifteen long years.

The Viscount tried to shield himself, but Robert struck again and again.

He saw red. He felt the bones shift under his knuckles. He heard nothing but the ghost of his brother’s laughter, his mother’s soft hum, his father’s proud voice, all torn away.

But then, he saw Evelyn. He saw her face, calm and radiant. Her hand pulling his. Her voice telling him to follow his heart.

That was when his arm stilled mid-swing. Breathing heavily, Robert stood. His chest heaved, fists bloodied. The Viscount groaned beneath him. His face was swollen, his lip split, and his eye already darkening.

Footsteps echoed in the corridor.

The butler appeared at the door, gasping. “My... My Lord, is everything?—?”

Robert didn’t even look away from the broken man at his feet.

“Fetch the constables,” he cut him off. “Now.”

### Chapter Twenty-Seven

Evelyn folded a gown with care, her hands trembling only slightly as she laid it into the open trunk. The sound of a drawer closing echoed softly behind her. Matilda was helping though the silence between them stretched taut like a drawn bow.

Evelyn smoothed her hands over the silk of the next gown. “You don’t have to help, you know,” she said lightly though her voice lacked conviction.

Matilda didn’t respond right away. She was wrapping a shawl with deliberate precision before placing it beside the other neatly packed items.

Finally, she looked up, her brow furrowed. “Why are you doing this?”

Evelyn paused with her hands resting on the edge of the trunk. For a moment, she couldn’t find her voice.

Then, with a small sigh, she spoke quietly.

“We had an arrangement, Matilda. Robert and I. From the beginning. We were to spend a month together, after our wedding. Once he uncovered the truth about what happened to his family, I believed that arrangement might change, but he didn’t say anything.

So, now, all that is left is for us to go our separate ways.

Discreetly, of course. We’d remain married in the eyes of society but nothing more.”

Matilda turned fully toward her, eyes wide with disbelief. “But... Evelyn. You love him.”

Evelyn smiled faintly, a sad sort of smile, and folded another chemise with practiced grace. “Yes,” she said softly. “I do.”

“Then why...” Matilda’s voice cracked. “Why would you leave?”

“Because he hasn’t said anything,” Evelyn replied, her voice calm but edged with pain. “Not a word about what he wants. About us. He has what he needs now. Closure. Justice. And I... I was just a part of the journey that got him there.”

Matilda stared at her, helpless. “But you hoped.”

Evelyn nodded, slowly. “I did.” Her fingers curled slightly against the fabric she held. “I hoped that somewhere along the way, something would change. That maybe... maybe he’d look at me not as a partner in an arrangement but as someone he wanted to stay.”

Tears pricked at the corners of Matilda’s eyes, but she blinked them away. “You’re just going to leave without speaking to him?”

“It would be too painful,” Evelyn said quietly. “To see him. To say goodbye and still walk away. I couldn’t bear it, Matilda. Not now. Not after everything. So, I’m doing what’s best for both of us. I just want him to be happy. Even if that life doesn’t include me.”

Matilda crossed the room and hugged her fiercely. Evelyn didn’t resist. She closed her eyes and let her sister hold her, swallowing down the grief pressing hard against her chest. Then, they simply continued packing, as if that didn’t symbolize the end of Evelyn’s happiness.

The soft rustle of gowns being folded and the occasional snap of a trunk latch were the only sounds that filled the room. Matilda worked beside her in silence, her movements quiet and methodical, but Evelyn's hands slowed with every item she packed. Her mind, however, would not still.

She kept thinking of him.

Robert... his voice, his quiet smiles, the way his eyes softened when he looked at her. The way he'd kissed her forehead before charging off into the night, fury burning in his gaze, purpose in his stride. Her chest ached at the thought. Had he slept at all? Had he eaten?

She didn't know. And the not-knowing gnawed at her.

Her fingers lingered on the last of her belongings, which was a ribbon he had once tucked behind her ear during a walk in the gardens, laughing as the wind tried to carry it away. She held it for a moment longer than necessary then laid it atop the others and closed the trunk with finality.

"That's everything," she managed to muster.

Matilda gave her a look, hesitant and searching, but Evelyn offered only a small smile. "Go on ahead. Wait for me in the carriage. I'll be only a few minutes."

Matilda hesitated. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," Evelyn said gently. "I just need to write a note. Something for Robert. He deserves... something. I don't know if I can make it a proper goodbye but at least an explanation."

Matilda opened her mouth to argue but then closed it again. With a nod, she slipped

from the room. Evelyn stood alone in the quiet chamber, her eyes sweeping over the space that had become a home, however briefly.

She moved to the writing desk by the window, the one with the ink-stained blotter and the neatly stacked stationery she often used to write to Cordelia and Hazel. She took up a sheet of cream-colored parchment, dipped the pen in ink, and paused.

Her heart beat a little faster.

She assumed he was still with the constables, handling the legal unraveling of the Viscount's crimes. There must have been a tangle of lies and bribes to sort through. That was why he hadn't returned, why he hadn't come to her, why he hadn't said anything.

It had to be.

She touched the tip of the pen to the paper and began to write carefully and sincerely, words she wasn't sure he'd ever truly hear.

My dear Robert,

By the time you read this, I will be gone. Please do not take this as a farewell born of bitterness or regret, for it is not. Rather, it is the only way I know how to preserve what we had without clouding it with awkward goodbyes or unspoken questions.

When we married, we did so with an understanding. A shared purpose. We would walk together only for a while until the shadows of the past allowed you peace. I never expected anything beyond that.

The words but I hoped lingered in her mind, demanding that they be included in the letter, but she refrained from doing so. She didn't want to make it overly emotional



but rather practical, just as he himself was.

I only ask that you be happy. Whatever form that happiness takes, be it vengeance fulfilled, peace restored, or a new chapter begun, may it be yours, and may it be full.

And if, in some quiet corner of your soul, you ever think of me, I hope it is with warmth. I will think of you with the same.

Yours—gratefully, quietly, and always with affection,

Evelyn

When she finished, she folded the letter and sealed it, pressing the wax with her signet ring. Her hands trembled slightly as she addressed it.

To Robert.

She placed it on the desk where the housekeeper would see it the moment she entered. Then, with one last glance around the room that had witnessed both her heartbreak and her hope, Evelyn turned and walked out.

She dared not look back.

Robert burst through the front doors, the echoes of his boots crashing through the entry hall like thunder. Rain still clung to his coat, misting the polished floors as he strode through the house with purpose.

His heart was racing not with fury this time but with the need to see her, to tell her everything. That it was over. That justice had been served. That he could finally look ahead and that he wanted to look ahead with her.

He crossed the foyer and called her name once then twice.

“Your Grace?” the housekeeper’s soft voice halted him as he passed the staircase. She stepped forward, her hands folded over a sealed envelope.

“She asked me to give this to you,” the woman said with her eyes downcast. “She left it in her room. I... I thought you should have it right away.”

Robert stilled. His breath caught in his chest as he reached out and took the letter. He read it once. Then again. And again. By the time he looked up, the housekeeper was gone, and the silence pressed in like a stone weight.

He slumped into the nearest chair in the drawing room, the parchment slipping slightly from his fingers. His hand braced his forehead, his eyes shut tight against the burn behind them.

She was gone.

She had told him before that she never wanted to be controlled, that she would never let a man define her life. He’d admired that fire in her. After all, he had fallen for it without even realizing it. And yet... in his silence, in his delay, he had failed to tell her the one thing that mattered.

That he loved her.

He loved her more than his revenge. More than the bloodline and legacy he had clung to for so long. More than the haunted memories that had ruled him.

And now, she was gone.

He stood suddenly, the letter crumpling in his hand as he walked into his study. The

fire had gone out in the hearth. He tossed another log in then struck a match. The flames caught with a sputter, illuminating the room in flickering gold.

He sat at his desk and tried to focus, to think of documents, of titles, of the next steps with the Crown's lawyers.

But all he could see was her. His mind was plagued was her laughter dancing through his hallways, her fingers skimming across the backs of his books, her voice, soft but unyielding, telling him exactly what she believed in.

He leaned back in his chair, the paper still clutched in one hand, and stared at the fire. He had respected her wishes. He forced himself to do so. But now that he had, he wasn't sure how to live without her.

Robert sat in the chair far longer than he meant to. Evelyn's letter lay open on his desk, the ink beginning to blur where his thumb had pressed too tightly over the words. He read it again, slower this time, feeling as each line resembled a blade sinking deeper.

I only ask that you be happy.

But she was his happiness. And he had been too late in saying so.

The study felt stifling now, heavy with her absence.

Her voice echoed in every corner of the house, in the drawing room where she had read beside the windows, in the halls where her laughter had lingered, in the bedroom where she had once told him she would not be a shadow of a wife.

And now, this house was nothing but a shell echoing with everything he had lost.

He rose abruptly. The chair scraped against the floor.

His coat was still damp from the storm the night before, but he didn't care.

He grabbed it from the stand, his cravat loose, fingers trembling as he fastened the buttons.

He couldn't stay here, surrounded by reminders of what could have been.

He needed to clear his mind, to think, to act, before he let another moment slip through his fingers.

"Mason," he muttered under his breath, already reaching for the door.

Within minutes, his horse was saddled. The wind bit at his cheeks as he galloped down the muddy lane toward his friend's estate, a hard and urgent rhythm pounding under him, the only thing matching the rhythm in his chest.

Mason's home stood warm and lit, like a welcoming beacon. Robert barely waited for the stable boy to take the reins before striding to the front door and rapping his knuckles hard against it.

Moments later, Mason himself opened the door, his eyes widening at the sight of Robert: disheveled, grim-faced, and wet from the waist down.

"God's teeth, man, what happened to you?" Mason asked, stepping aside. "Come in before you freeze to death."

Robert stepped in, brushing past him, dragging fingers through his hair. He paused only once, long enough to say in a low voice, "She's gone."

Mason blinked. “Evelyn?”

Robert nodded once, sharply. “She left this morning. Thought it was over. That our arrangement was done. And I...” He stopped, exhaling hard, jaw clenched. “I let her think it was.”

Mason frowned deeply. “What are you going to do?”

Robert couldn’t stop trembling. “The only thing I can do, Mason... let her go.”

### Chapter Twenty-Eight

“Y ou truly mean to sit here and come to terms with it instead of riding after her?” Mason asked, leaning back in his armchair with his brows raised skeptically.

Robert leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and clasping his hands tightly. The dying fire cast flickering light across his features, deepening the hollows beneath his eyes.

“I have to try, Mason. I told her I wouldn’t control her. That I respected her freedom. That this marriage would never be a cage.”

“Yes, but you love her.”

Robert’s jaw flexed. “I do.”

Mason spread his hands. “Then talk to her.”

“We already talked before,” Robert said quietly. “We had that conversation. We set our terms, drew our lines. I agreed not to ask for more than she could give. She kept her word. So must I.”

Mason’s expression softened. “But things have changed, for you at least. You weren’t in love with her when you made that agreement. Perhaps she wasn’t in love with you either, then. Perhaps... she is now.”

Robert stared into the fire for a long moment, the flames dancing in his reflection.

“Then why would she leave?” he asked at last, voice low and aching. “If something had changed, wouldn’t she have stayed and told me?”

Mason sighed. “You two are very complicated, do you know that?”

That dragged a tired half-smile out of Robert. “You think I don’t know?”

That was when Mason stood up, stretching his arms into the air above his head. “Well, brooding by the fire won’t help you. Come on, let’s go knock the sense back into you with some sparring. If you can’t say what you feel, might as well throw a few punches.”

Robert huffed a laugh. “That’s your solution to heartbreak?”

“Works every time,” Mason said, clapping him on the shoulder. “And you look like hell, old friend. Come on. Let’s see if I can finally beat you.”

“You never have,” Robert muttered, rising to his feet.

“Well, maybe now that you’re love-struck and half-mad, I stand a chance.”

The two men stepped into the cool morning air. And though the ache in Robert’s chest had not eased, there was something grounding in the thought of fists meeting leather and breathless silence between blows. A brief escape. And perhaps, amid it all, clarity.

About half an hour, they reached their destination.

The boxing room smelled faintly of leather, old sweat, and the faint bite of linseed oil from the polished floorboards.

The familiar scent and setting might once have steadied Robert's nerves, but today, it all felt distant, as if the world had drawn several paces away and left him floating within the husk of his own body.

Mason tossed him a pair of gloves. "Try not to embarrass yourself, Your Grace."

Robert caught them, though belatedly. The leather slapped against his chest. He did not bother lacing them immediately. His fingers felt clumsy, heavy, as though waterlogged. Every movement was a delayed echo of what it should have been. Still, he forced the gloves on and stepped into the ring.

The first punch came quick. Mason always opened with a feint and then a clean jab. Robert should have known that. He did know it, but his body reacted too late. The jab landed square on his shoulder, snapping him back a step.

"Come now," Mason taunted lightly, circling him. "You're moving like a man twice your age and half your wit."

Robert huffed, raised his gloves again, but it was all wrong.

He couldn't settle into the rhythm. His breath was ragged already, not from exertion but from the turmoil roiling inside his chest. Every blow he attempted felt sluggish, as though his limbs were bound with invisible chains.

He struck but missed. Parried, but it was too late.

Another punch grazed his ribs.

"She's all you're thinking of, isn't she?" Mason goaded, ducking a lazy swing. "Your Lady Bird."



Robert's jaw clenched. He swung again, harder this time, more out of frustration than any form. Mason sidestepped easily.

“Good Lord, Robert,” Mason said with a breathless chuckle, “if you fought the French like this, we'd all be speaking their damned language.”

Robert dropped his hands, momentarily winded not from the fight but from the weight in his chest. “It's like I've lost control of myself,” he murmured. “My body... my thoughts... they aren't obeying me.”

Mason lowered his fists too, watching him carefully. “Because your heart's too loud to hear anything else.”

Robert stared at the floorboards, jaw working. A fine sheen of sweat dampened the back of his neck. His cravat felt too tight. His gloves suffocating.

He missed her.

Mason turned sharply. With a low growl of frustration, he stormed forward, fist raised, and in one clean motion, aimed a punch directly at Robert's face.

But he stopped.

The blow hovered just inches from Robert's jaw, his knuckles trembling with contained force. Robert didn't even flinch.

Mason arched a brow, smirking slightly. “See?” he said, calm and unflinching. “You're good for nothing. All dramatics and wounded sighs.”

Robert scowled. “You're insufferable.”

“And you’re an idiot,” Mason snapped, pulling off his gloves with sharp, annoyed jerks. “Now stop whining, and go speak to her. Get your blasted life in order.”

“I told you,” Robert said, jaw tight, “I’m following my wife’s wishes.”

Mason stepped forward, dropping the gloves onto the bench with a thump. “And how, precisely, do you know what her wishes are?”

Robert blinked, caught off guard. “She wrote me a letter.”

“Ah yes,” Mason said with biting sarcasm, “a letter penned in a rush, filled with apologies and assumptions. Did she say, explicitly so, that she did not love you? That she did not wish for a life with you?”

Robert faltered. “No, but?—”

“People change, Robert. Their hearts shift. Circumstances shift. And feelings,” Mason jabbed a finger into his shoulder, “can deepen. But no one can make a choice if they aren’t given the chance to do so.”

Robert stood very still, breath caught in his throat. Evelyn’s laughter, her fierce eyes, her trembling voice when she said she would follow whatever path he chose—it all rushed through him like a gust of wind breaking open a shuttered window.

“You’re right,” he whispered, the beginnings of a grin tugging at the corner of his mouth. “Damn it, Mason. You’re right!”

Mason stepped back with a smug shrug. “Of course, I am.”

Without another word, Robert ripped the gloves from his hands, tossed them at Mason, who caught them with a grunt of surprise, and bolted for the door.

“Where are you going?” Mason called after him.

“To find her,” Robert shouted over his shoulder, already halfway down the corridor.

“To give her the choice she never got.”

Mason shook his head, chuckling as he watched his friend disappear. “Finally,” he muttered to the empty room. “About bloody time.”

The scent of lavender and old wood hung gently in the air as Evelyn stepped through the threshold of her new townhouse.

It was modest by London standards but fashionable with delicate molding, tall windows, and just enough character in the creaking floors to make it charming.

The walls were still bare, the fireplace cold, and only a handful of her belongings had arrived, but it was hers. Her own space.

Matilda hovered nearby, draping a shawl over the back of a chair, while Hazel and Cordelia busied themselves with unpacking trunks and fussing over curtain colors.

“It’s rather cozy,” Cordelia said gently, smoothing her hand over the mantle. “I quite like it.”

“It will be perfect once you’ve put your touch to it,” Hazel added. “A few paintings, perhaps a new rug... yes, this could very well be a lovely little escape.”

Evelyn smiled faintly though the expression didn’t quite reach her eyes. “Yes. I think so too.”

She knelt beside a half-opened trunk, withdrawing a familiar silk dressing gown and folding it with care. It still smelled faintly of lavender water and something else,

something that reminded her of her dressing room at the ducal estate. Her throat tightened.

Matilda watched her with silent concern while Cordelia perched on the arm of a chair.

Hazel, always the direct one, finally spoke. "Evelyn, dear... are you certain this is what you want?"

Evelyn paused, smoothing the fabric over her knees. "It is what we agreed upon. From the beginning."

"Yes," Matilda said gently, "but much has changed since then."

Cordelia nodded. "You love him."

Evelyn's fingers curled slightly in the silk. "I do." She forced the words out before they could choke her. "But that is not enough, not if he doesn't feel the same."

"You don't know that," Matilda said softly.

"I do know," Evelyn replied, rising slowly to her feet. "He had every chance to say something. I waited... and he said nothing. And I... I couldn't bear to stay just to be told goodbye."

She turned toward the window then, with her arms folded across her chest, watching the misty outline of carriages pass along the street. Her heart ached like a bruise pressed too often.

"This was for the best," she added, more quietly this time, as if trying to convince herself. "We both deserve a life not built on pain. And he deserves to be free of the

past.”

There was a pause, heavy with words left unsaid, until Cordelia stepped forward and wrapped her arms around Evelyn’s shoulders.

“You are the bravest woman I know,” she whispered.

Evelyn closed her eyes, breathing through the ache in her chest. “Then why does it feel like I’ve broken my own heart?”

Cordelia’s arms tightened around her, and Evelyn leaned into the embrace for a breath or two before stepping away with a fragile smile.

Hazel knelt by the open trunk and began folding the rest of Evelyn’s gowns with brisk efficiency. “Because you have,” she said simply, not unkindly. “But sometimes a clean break is better than lingering in uncertainty. Time will ease it.”

Evelyn turned back toward the center of the room, her fingers twisting in the fine muslin of her sleeve.

“I thought I had prepared myself. I told myself this was always going to end.” Her voice trembled despite her best efforts.

“But last night, before he left... I hoped. I don’t know why, but I hoped he would say something, do something. Anything.”

Matilda spoke up from her place near the hearth, her voice hesitant but clear. “He may not have known how to.” She was pale but steadier than she had been the night before. “The Duke... he is not a man accustomed to speaking his heart.”

Evelyn gave a soft, humorless laugh. “No. He speaks through action. And last night,

he acted. He left.”

Silence stretched across the room. The only sound was the ticking of the small clock on the mantel, counting out each painful moment.

Cordelia sat herself down beside Evelyn and took her hand. “You’re not alone in this. Whatever happens next, we are with you. Always.”

Evelyn blinked away a tear and squeezed her friend’s hand. “I know. And I am grateful. Truly.”

Hazel stood, dusted her skirts, and gestured to the disheveled pile of trunks. “Then I suggest we stop mourning and start arranging. There’s far too much to do in this house, and I, for one, refuse to allow you to wallow when there are curtains to be hung.”

That earned a small laugh from the group, and the tension in the room eased just a little.

Matilda stepped forward with folded linen in her arms, her expression both earnest and timid. “May I help too?”

Evelyn smiled warmly at her. “Of course you may. This is your home now, too... for as long as you need.”

Matilda’s eyes shone, and for a moment, Evelyn could forget the sharp ache in her chest. There was comfort in this sisterhood, one born of pain but tempered in love.

Still, as she turned to help Cordelia with the books, her gaze drifted again to the window. She told herself not to look for him. But she did.

Suddenly, a deep, loud voice echoed through the corridor, just outside the drawing room.

“Evelyn?”

Evelyn suffocated a gasp. Her head was shaking, and she was unable to stop it.

“It can’t be,” she kept repeating to herself.

But it was. And a moment later, Robert appeared in the doorway.

### Chapter Twenty-Nine

“ E velyn...”

His voice rang out, firm yet breathless, from the doorway.

She froze. The book in her hands slipped from her fingers and landed on the floor with a soft thud. When she turned, her eyes wide and lips parted in disbelief, Robert could hardly breathe. She had never looked more beautiful.

A simple gown hugged her frame, and the light from the tall windows fell upon her like a benediction. Her hair was half-pinned, a few curls falling around her cheeks, flushed with shock. And in her eyes, he could see all the pain, surprise, and something he dared to hope was still love.

“I... may I have a moment?” he asked hoarsely with his eyes flicking briefly to the others in the room.

Cordelia’s mouth was slightly open in delight, and Hazel raised one stern brow at him before nodding. Matilda hesitated a moment longer, studying her sister, then silently tugged Cordelia and Hazel with her toward the adjoining room.

And then, it was only the two of them.

Robert stepped forward, slowly, like a man approaching something sacred. He wanted to ask her why she left without a word. He wanted to rage, to demand, to confess, but everything tangled together until he no longer knew where to begin. His



heart thundered against his ribs.

“I...” His voice caught. He stopped in front of her, eyes searching hers. “I don’t know if I should ask why you left or tell you that I love you first.”

Evelyn blinked rapidly, her lips parted and trembling. So, he chose the truth.

“I love you,” he said, allowing his voice to reveal everything he was feeling at that moment.

“I don’t think I knew what love was before you.

Not truly. I didn’t believe in it, not after what happened to my family.

I lived in darkness for so long, Evelyn.

Revenge became my purpose, silence my companion.

I thought... I thought if I opened myself to anyone again, it would destroy me. That I would lose them, too.”

He took her hands, gently, reverently, as though they were made of porcelain.

“But you...” he continued, his voice faltering with the weight of everything he had never said, “you taught me to see the world with different eyes. You taught me warmth. You made me laugh again. You challenged me. You saw me, and you didn’t look away.”

Her eyes glistened though she remained still.

“I don’t want a life without you,” he said as his fingers tightened slightly around hers.

“Not one governed by fear or ghosts or what-ifs. I want a life with you. Whatever it looks like. Whatever you’ll allow me to give.

You said once you didn’t want to be controlled, and I swear to you, I never will. But I had to come. I had to tell you.”

He stepped back then, chest heaving slightly. His eyes burned, his heart thundered, but his voice remained quiet.

“I love you, Evelyn. I think I always have.”

And then, he waited. He waited even as the silence stretched between them, delicate and taut like spun glass. Robert watched her, his every breath a prayer, his every heartbeat thudding with the fear that he had come too late.

Evelyn’s eyes shimmered. Her hands trembled in his, but she didn’t pull away. Instead, she reached up slowly, fingers grazing his jaw, her touch feather-light, as if confirming he was real.

“You love me,” she whispered, more to herself than to him.

He nodded, not trusting his voice now that the words were out, bare and honest, beyond the armor he had always worn. Evelyn gave a soft, broken laugh, then a tear slid down her cheek. She quickly brushed it away.

“I told myself,” she said, voice wavering, “that you didn’t say anything because you didn’t feel it. That our arrangement had simply run its course. That it was over.”

“It was never just an arrangement to me,” Robert said at once, stepping closer. “Not after I met you. Not after I came to know you. It began that way, yes, but somewhere along the way, it became everything.”

Evelyn's lip trembled again. "I left because I couldn't bear to hear you say goodbye. Because if you didn't love me, I... I couldn't pretend to be indifferent. And I didn't want to become someone who begged for scraps of affection."

His hands came to cradle her face, and his forehead dropped to hers.

"You were never a scrap," he said fiercely. "You are everything. The air I breathe. The future I didn't think I could have. I was a fool not to say it sooner. I was afraid... but not anymore."

He kissed her then, so very gently and reverently. Not out of passion but out of promise. His lips lingered on hers, as if sealing a vow he would never again be too proud or too broken to make. When they parted, Evelyn looked up at him, her tears now freely falling, but her smile radiant.

"You're an idiot," she whispered.

He grinned, relief washing through him like sunlight breaking through a storm. "You know, that is exactly what Mason told me."

"Clever man," Evelyn laughed and then pulled him into a fierce embrace, burying her face into his shoulder. He held her close, never wanting to let go.

From the other room, faint gasps and giggles could be heard. Cordelia's voice carried, not very quietly, "Well, it's about time."

Hazel added dryly, "Indeed. I was beginning to wonder if I should lock them in a room together."

Evelyn gave a muffled laugh into Robert's cravat. He smiled, kissed the top of her head, and whispered against her hair, "Shall we go tell them I've ruined your elegant

townhouse with declarations of love?”

She looked up at him, eyes gleaming. “Yes. But I think they already know.”

That was when the girl trio erupted back into the drawing room.

“There they are!” Cordelia squealed, clapping her hands and nearly bouncing on her heels. “Took you long enough!”

“I was starting to think we’d have to draw up another contract for you two,” Hazel said dryly though her eyes were warm with amusement.

Matilda pressed her hands to her chest, eyes misty. “Oh, thank heavens. I was so afraid...”

Robert barely had time to register the explosion of movement before Cordelia rushed forward and threw her arms around both him and Evelyn in an enthusiastic, if slightly chaotic, embrace.

“Careful,” Evelyn laughed, half-laughing, half-sputtering against Cordelia’s shoulder.

“Careful, my foot,” Cordelia said, pulling back just enough to grin up at Robert. “Do you know how unbearable she’s been since yesterday? Brooding and noble and packing all her things like a tragic heroine. We were about a minute away from writing to the theater to get her cast in a drama.”

“She’s exaggerating,” Evelyn objected, her cheeks taking on a pink hue.

“Only slightly,” Hazel added with a smirk, setting down a tray of newly poured tea she had somehow wrangled back into the room. “Though I must say, Your Grace, if you had any intention of showing up heroically, you chose the perfect moment to end

this story with a happily ever after.”

“I try,” he said, smiling softly at Evelyn. Then, glancing back at the women with mock gravity, he added, “Though I must make a correction to your assumption.”

The room fell briefly still. They looked at him expectantly.

“This,” he said, gesturing gently between himself and Evelyn, “is not our happily ever after. Not yet.”

Cordelia gasped theatrically. “What?!”

Robert chuckled. “It’s only the beginning.”

There was a beat of silence before Matilda let out a small, delighted laugh, and Cordelia groaned, “Oh, now you’re going to be one of those romantic husbands. This is unbearable.”

“Let them be romantic,” Hazel said firmly though her mouth twitched. “They’ve earned it.”

Evelyn leaned into Robert’s side, her fingers threading through his. He glanced down at her and found her already looking up at him.

“Besides,” Evelyn said, “I quite like being at the beginning of something.”

Robert bent and kissed her forehead, murmuring, “So do I.”

Cordelia made a gagging sound, Hazel rolled her eyes fondly, and Matilda just beamed.

Robert looked around the little drawing room with the soft afternoon light warming the edges of the rugs and drapes, the scent of tea and rain still clinging faintly to the air, the company of the women who had become, in their own way, part of his life too.

That was when he thought, for the first time in years, that perhaps he had come home, not to a place but to her.

Matilda's voice, gentle but edged with urgency, broke through the swell of laughter.

"Your Grace," she said, stepping forward slightly, her smile faltering into something more solemn. "What happened with Laurence?"

The room quieted. Evelyn stiffened slightly beside him, her hand tightening in his. Cordelia and Hazel exchanged glances but said nothing, sensing the shift.

Robert met Matilda's eyes. He saw the tension in her shoulders, the way she braced herself not just for the answer but for whatever storm might follow it.

"He's in custody," Robert said evenly. "The constables arrested him this morning."

Matilda let out a soft breath and with it, a tremble.

"I gave them everything you told me, and they've taken possession of his study. The documents and letters you mentioned will be evidence enough to ensure the case stands. Once they begin sorting through the records, the scale of his schemes will become clear."

"Will he... will he go to trial?" Matilda asked.

"Yes," Robert said. "And he'll answer for every one of his crimes, fraud, conspiracy,

attempted murder.” His voice dipped, darker now. “And the deaths of my family.”

A silence settled over the room, heavy but not oppressive. Just the kind that followed the naming of something long buried and now unearthed.

Matilda slowly sank onto one of the chairs, her shoulders sagging as though she had been holding herself upright through sheer force of will.

“I can’t believe it’s over,” she whispered.

“It’s not over yet,” Robert said, softer now. “But it’s begun. Justice is moving now, and this time, no bribes or influence will stop it.”

She nodded, eyes glassy with unshed tears. “Thank you. I didn’t think anyone would ever believe me. Not fully.”

“I did,” Robert said simply. “You brought the truth. And you gave me the choice I never thought I’d have—what to do with it.”

He felt Evelyn’s hand reach for his again. He glanced at her and saw the faint shimmer in her eyes as she gazed at her sister, the bond between them restored and healing.

Matilda gave a small, broken laugh. “And here I thought I’d be scorned and cast out.”

Cordelia, never one for stillness, flopped beside her dramatically. “You’ll only be cast out if you don’t help us finish packing Evelyn’s absurd number of books again.”

Hazel sighed. “Truly, they are heavier than the furniture.”

Even Matilda laughed, the tension breaking like sunlight through clouds. Robert let

the sound wash over him, grounding him.

Matilda turned toward him, leaning in just enough, so he could hear her quiet murmur, “Thank you, Your Grace.”

“Robert, please,” he smiled. “But this is all because of you and your bravery to speak up.”

“Yes,” Evelyn smiled somehow sadly. “You didn’t give up, even after I turned my back on you.”

Matilda pressed her hand to her chest. “How could I give up on those I love the most?”

Evelyn wrapped her arms around her sister, and everyone gave them a moment. Though the past still lingered like a shadow at the edge of the room, Robert felt that finally, a bright future was unfurling before them, and they would be finally together, finally true.



*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:15 am*

“Y ou’re being suspiciously cheerful this morning,” Evelyn said, eyeing Robert over the rim of her teacup. “What are you planning?”

Robert leaned back in his chair, the corner of his mouth curling in that maddeningly inscrutable smile. “You wound me, Madam. Can a husband not simply be pleased to spend the morning with his wife?”

“Well, perhaps. But not without an ulterior motive.” She set her cup down and narrowed her eyes at him. “You’ve been humming. That never bodes well.”

“I do not hum,” he protested though the smile grew wider. “And if I did, it would be in a very masculine, dignified way.”

“Of course,” she said dryly. “Is the humming related to this mysterious outing you mentioned before breakfast?”

He stood then, offering his hand to her. “Come. We’re going riding.”

“Riding?” She took his hand and allowed herself to be helped up. “Where?”

“To the village.”

“Robert—”

“It’s a surprise,” he cut in, eyes gleaming with something secret and warm. “And before you ask, no, I won’t tell you what it is.”

“You’re impossible.”

“And yet, here I am. Your impossible husband.”

She rolled her eyes but couldn’t quite smother her grin. “Very well. But if this ends in livestock or me having to make some sort of speech to the townsfolk, I’ll never forgive you.”

“You wound me again,” he said with mock offense, offering his arm as they left the breakfast room. “I would never inflict either upon you. Though you would make quite the rousing village orator.”

“You are truly insufferable.”

“And yet, you married me.”

She gave him a sidelong look as they made their way to the stables. “I’m starting to think I had a moment of madness.”

He helped her mount her mare then swung up onto his horse with an ease that made her stomach flutter. He still looked the part of a brooding figure from a half-forgotten dream, but he smiled more now. His eyes were lighter. The darkness that had once cloaked him seemed, at last, to be receding.

They rode out together, side by side, along the winding country lane. The sun was warm on her back, and the breeze tugged playfully at the ribbons of her hat. She glanced sideways at him as they neared the village.

“Will I like this surprise?”

“I hope so,” he said softly, his gaze steady on the road ahead. “It’s something I’ve

been thinking about for a long time.”

As they approached the edge of the village, Evelyn’s brow furrowed. Something was... different.

“Robert,” she said cautiously, slowing her mare. “Why are there garlands hanging from the trees?”

He said nothing at first, only urged his horse forward, and so she followed. But with every yard they advanced, more color appeared. There were more ribbons fluttering from windows, more floral wreaths draped over fence posts, and more strings of painted bunting stretched across the narrow streets.

Music drifted toward them, the sounds lively, familiar, and sweet. Her heart started to beat faster.

“What in the world...” she murmured.

They rounded the final bend, and the village square came into view. Evelyn gasped.

The entire square had been transformed. Tables were lined with food and flowers.

Lanterns were strung overhead, swaying gently in the breeze.

Children were laughing as they darted between booths.

Musicians were playing a cheerful tune in the corner while townsfolk mingled, smiled, and clapped in rhythm.

She stared at it all, wide-eyed. “Robert... what is this?”

He dismounted with a quiet smile then stepped over and offered his hand to help her down. "It's for you."

She blinked. "For me?"

"To celebrate everything you've done. The school, the clinic, the workers' homes... every single improvement. The villagers insisted on throwing a celebration in your honor. I may have helped them organize it. Just a little."

She was speechless. Her eyes filled with disbelief and wonder as the townspeople began to turn toward her, clapping and cheering. A few of the children ran up and hugged her skirts, calling out, "Lady Evelyn! Lady Evelyn!"

The fact that they were not addressing her in the correct manner a duchess was to be addressed in was the last thing on her mind at that moment.

Still stunned, she turned toward Robert. "You... you did this?"

He shrugged lightly though his eyes were warm. "I only followed their lead. They're proud of you. As am I."

Before she could speak, she caught sight of familiar figures emerging from the crowd.

Matilda waved eagerly, already wiping away a tear.

Behind her were Hazel and Cordelia, all smiles and teary eyes, followed closely by Mason, who gave her a mock bow and exclaimed, "Told you he was up to something!"

The joy hit her like sunlight through stained glass. Her throat tightened.

“I don’t know what to say,” she whispered.

“Say nothing,” Robert murmured near her ear. “Just enjoy it. You’ve earned every moment.”

Before she could say anything to that, two young girls, no more than eight or nine, giggled as they grabbed Evelyn’s hands, tugging her forward.

“Come, My Lady!” one of them cried. “You must dance with us!”

Evelyn laughed, breathless, glancing back at Robert who merely gave her an innocent shrug and leaned against the nearest post like a man utterly uninvolved in the whole thing.

She allowed herself to be swept forward with her skirts gathered delicately in her hands as the girls led her to the circle of dancers forming near the square’s center. The fiddlers struck up a brisk tune, something jolly and quick-footed, and soon others were spinning and stepping into place.

To her delight, Hazel and Cordelia were already there, clasping hands and twirling with scandalous joy.

Matilda followed shortly after, clumsy at first until Hazel grabbed her and pulled her into the steps with exaggerated flair.

Matilda laughed. It was a true, unguarded laugh Evelyn hadn’t heard from her in years.

Evelyn’s heart ached in the best possible way.

The girls released her hands, and she twirled once by herself before a familiar hand

reached out and caught hers. It was Mason, grinning like a fox.

“May I, my dear duchess?” he asked with exaggerated courtliness.

“You may,” Evelyn replied with equal drama, dipping into a curtsy before they fell into step with the music.

They spun and laughed, tripping once or twice, but the crowd clapped and whooped with every near stumble. When the song ended, Mason bowed dramatically and stepped away, only for another pair of arms to catch her waist from behind.

“You’re rather popular today,” Robert murmured close to her ear.

“You did this,” she said, trying to sound scolding, but her voice was far too full of joy.

“Guilty,” he said as he turned her toward him, taking her hands with a gentleness that felt somehow reverent amid the boisterous cheer.

The musicians struck up another song, a little slower this time, and he guided her into a waltz.

Around them, the villagers danced and cheered, but in that moment, Evelyn saw only him: her husband, her beloved, the man who had once believed he was incapable of love and now looked at her as though she were his entire world.

“You’ve gone soft,” she teased quietly.

“Only for you,” he replied.

Evelyn rested her head lightly against Robert’s shoulder as they moved through the

dance, the music winding around them like a ribbon. His hand was firm at her waist, guiding her with quiet assurance, yet there was a tenderness in his grip that hadn't always been there.

She smiled against his coat, marveling at how far they had come, from strangers in a calculated arrangement to this: two hearts in perfect rhythm, moving as though they'd always belonged to one another.

Around them, the village square shimmered with life.

Children darted past with ribbons trailing behind them, elderly couples clapped along to the beat, and the scent of sweet pastries mingled with the warm air.

Lanterns were being hung now from posts and over stalls, and Evelyn could see fresh garlands of flowers adorning nearly every door and railing.

It was more beautiful than anything she had imagined, and all of it was for her.

She pulled back slightly to look at Robert, studying the faint smile at the corners of his mouth, the way the sun caught the strands of his hair, a little tousled from the ride. Her heart ached in the most delightful way.

“You really did all this?” she asked softly.

He tilted his head, feigning innocence. “I may have spoken to a few villagers...” She was on the verge of tears, and he could see it.

So, he continued, “Before you ask why again, it is because you saved the soul of this place, Evelyn. You noticed the details others didn't, and you gave it back to them.

And also... I have a selfish reason for this...

I love seeing you like this, so happy and free, so... alive.”

Her breath caught in her throat. There was a time she might have doubted his words, might have guarded her heart. But not now. Not after everything.

Before she could respond, Cordelia and Hazel twirled past, laughing loudly, with Matilda trying to keep up behind them. Evelyn laughed as well, breaking away from Robert to grab her sister’s hand.

“Come on, Tilly,” she said, pulling her into the center. “You’re not getting out of the next one.”

Matilda groaned dramatically but followed. “I shall collapse in public, and it will be your fault.”

“Oh, the scandal,” Hazel said, grinning as she took the other side.

The music changed to something livelier, and soon all of them were spinning in a larger circle: Hazel, Cordelia, Matilda, Evelyn, and several village girls who joined in without hesitation.

The square pulsed with warmth and movement, and Evelyn found herself breathless again but not from exertion.

It was joy. Full and blinding and all-consuming.

She caught Robert’s gaze across the crowd. He was watching her with a quiet smile on his face that was far too intimate for a public setting. She smiled back.

This was no longer the life she had accepted with resignation. It was the life she had chosen. And, she realized, as she twirled with her friends and sister under the bunting



and the open sky... it was the life she had always longed for.

The End?

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:15 am*

Evelyn stirred beneath the linen sheets, one hand instinctively drifting to her belly, now full and heavy with the promise of new life. The morning light streamed in through the parted curtains, warm and golden, brushing over the rose-colored drapery and casting soft patterns across the floor. She sighed, content yet weary, the weight of late pregnancy making even rest feel like work.

Robert's side of the bed was empty, the sheets still warm. She smiled faintly, running her fingers over the place where he had lain. Always up early, her husband, likely off ensuring that everything for today's picnic was perfectly arranged.

### Chapter One

“This cannot be happening.” Lady Andrea Cowper, daughter of the Earl of Statton, felt her heart sink into the pit of her stomach as she stared into the familiar piercing grey eyes of her father, Lord Percival Cowper.

“You need not act so surprised, daughter. After all, I am your Father – I hardly need permission to visit you.” Lord Statton’s lip curled around the word father, as though the reminder was physically unpleasant to him.

Andrea was slightly taller than her father, but years of stooping to hide her “unwomanly” height always made him feel as though he towered over her.

, With some satisfaction, she noticed that the light brown hair on her father’s head appeared to be thinning.

Absently, she touched a hand to the dark blonde hair on her own head, noticing her father’s eyes narrow as she did so.

“Of course you do not, though you have seen very little occasion to do so before now. It has been nearly a year since we last saw one another.” Andrea gritted her teeth.

She had taken great pains to avoid her father in that time. Her father did not even acknowledge the comment as he peered around with the air of a man who had trodden in something unpleasant.

“I was under the impression you had won a rather tidy sum from the Dowager

Duchess of Caverton 3 years ago. Why is it that you seem determined to live in a house that is little better than a hovel?" Lord Statton's nose wrinkled.

"Of all the row houses around us it is the most dilapidated, I'm sure your neighbours must hate it. "

"It is rather poor form to talk about money, Father. Or so you have always told me." Andrea forced herself to smile, her words clipped with barely restrained defensiveness. "Besides, it is not like we are in St. Giles, we're still in Mayfair."

"This is barely Mayfair, and you know it." He sniffed.

"You act as though it is falling down. I assure you, it is perfectly sound." She knocked on the doorframe to illustrate this point, her irritation getting the better of her.

This is my home, he holds no power here.

"It may not be as grand as some of the others, but it suits my needs just fine. After all, I am only one woman of independent means."

"Are they truly independent if they are little more than some charitable donation?" His grey eyes flashed with disdain.

"I earned this money." Andrea clenched her fists, and took a deep breath, focusing on the air travelling through her body. Her father arched an eyebrow at her. "Those games were not some silly little jaunt."

"So you insist. Though with your wit, I wonder how. Still, the Dowager Duchess is not exactly known for her sense." He shook his head. "Though I am sure even she would be horrified to see your 'investment'."

“Actually, she was the one who helped me secure the home. And she has visited on more than one occasion.” Andrea straightened a little as she saw the smirk fade from her father’s face.

He holds no power here His eyes flashed and he gestured to her door. “Are you not going to invite me in?”

Without waiting for an answer, he swept past her and into the hallway. For a moment, Andrea debated simply leaving the house and ignoring him, but the thought of her father alone, unsupervised, in her home made her feel as though she would lose the contents of her stomach.

For the first time, Andrea wished that she could have hired male staff without causing a scandal in the ton. If she had been a widow, no one would have batted an eye – but she was an unmarried woman.

“Curses.” She muttered under her breath, the shock of her father appearing on her doorstep finally fading.

“I cannot say I care for your choice of décor.” Her father wrinkled his nose as he took in her home.

“Well then, it is a good thing you do not live here.” Andrea dug her nails into the palm of her hand, forcing her words out from clenched teeth. “If it offends you so much, perhaps you should leave.”

“I will leave when I am ready. There are things you and I need to discuss.” Lord Statton leaned forwards on his cane.

“Unfortunately, that will not be possible.” Andrea smiled sweetly. “A pity you did not think to send a card ahead of your visit Father – I would have told you that I

could not meet today, I have been invited to the christening of the Duke and Duchess of Verimonre's son. ”

Lord Statton glanced up and down at his daughter, his lip curling even further. “ You plan on leaving the house, like that?”

Andrea tugged at her dress. It might not have been the most exciting thing, but she did not think it looked awful. Yes, it was a little plain, but it was pretty enough. She resisted the urge to look at her reflection in a nearby window.

“I see fashion is the price you have paid for your... independence.” He stared down his nose at her, making Andrea realise she had dropped back down into a slouch. “Besides, this will not take long.”

“I would not want to miss my godson's christening, and you know how busy London is at this time of year.” Andrea nodded towards the door. “Though if you wish to continue this discussion, I am sure you can walk me to my carriage.”

She made to stride away from him, but he grabbed her wrist. His grip was like a vice and a slight pop sounded as he squeezed her. Andrea bit back a yelp of pain. This close to her father, she could smell stale smoke on his breath, the overpowering waft of his cologne made her head pound.

“Insolent girl. I have been far too indulgent of you for far too long and it stops now. You are my daughter. You will show me the respect I deserve, or I will make you.” His eyes narrowed, his voice an angry hiss from between tightly clenched teeth.

“Let go of me.” Andrea tried to ignore the pain spreading across her wrist. “This is my house. And I have already given you more than enough, or had you forgotten my contribution to your estate?”

Lord Statton dropped her hand, shaking his head and straightening the lapels of his coat. “Your contribution. It is an insult. It should all have come to me. But instead, you decided to be selfish. Though it is hardly surprising. You only think of yourself.”

“That is not true.” Andrea forced herself not to rub her wrist, she would not give him the satisfaction. “If it was, I would have given you nothing. I would have left you to flounder in your debts.”

“If you were truly a proper daughter, you would be married, with children. That is a woman’s place; to be a mother and a wife.”

With children. Andrea’s chest tightened at the thought. “We had an agreement. If I could win the Dowager Duchess’s games and earn my independence, you would not force me to marry.”

“Because I thought you had at least some modicum of good sense. Every good woman wants a husband, and yet here you are, practically celebrating your singledom.” He spat the last words. “Do you know what people are saying about you? The things they whisper behind closed doors?”

“I expect it is the usual unimportant drivel. The ton is loathe to see a woman unshackled to a man.” Andrea made a dismissive gesture with her hand. “I do not particularly care what they think. I am perfectly happy on my own.”

“Do you truly think your happiness is more important than propriety? You are far too arrogant for your own good, and look what trouble it has already caused you. If only you had your mother’s looks or even her temperament, we might not be in this mess.

At the very least, we might have had even one suitor.

” Pain and anger flashed across her father’s face, and Andrea felt as though she had

been slapped.

She took a step back, her stomach twisting as her father glared at her. His eyes met hers, and his scowl deepened. Her green eyes had often been a point of pain for him, though she scarcely understood why. Plenty of people thought green eyes were pretty.

She shook her head, and spotted a small painting on the wall of an oak tree growing tall and proud, on its own. It had been a gift from the Dowager Duchess and Andrea recalled the inscription on the back of it.

Your spirit reminds me of myself, let this oak remind you of your strength.

Andrea drew in a breath, turned to her father and smiled a dagger sweet smile. “Then I must take after you.”

He laughed bitterly and made a dismissive gesture. “We both know that is not true. Regardless, I have no intention of allowing you to bring such shame to my name and title.”

“Then disown me.” She lifted her chin slightly, standing up to her full height.

“You would like that would you not? You always were trying to shirk your duties.” His brow creased. “No, disowning you would only tarnish things further. It is far better that you are married.”

“Far better for who?” She folded her arms across her chest.

“For everyone.”

“I will not do it.” Andrea’s voice was cold, and she gesticulated at him angrily with her right hand. “Why should I?”



She did not need to listen to him. She had her own house. Marriage would mean she would have to give it all away. Her house would become her husband's. Everything would be his.

Let alone the expectations that came with marriage. She knew all too well what that could lead to... Her chest tightened and she rested a hand against her thundering heart.

“Because even you are not heartless enough to trample upon the reputation of a dying man.” Her Father's words hit her with the force of a bullet.

“What?” She stumbled slightly, clutching at a wall for support. Surely, I misheard.

“I am dying. The physician's think it will be within the year.” He turned from her, his knuckles white around his cane. “I have no wish to die a failure, and your determination to be a thornback – for that is what they say you are – will be seen as that.”

That took Andrea by surprise. She would have expected to be called a spinster, but a thornback? Surely she could not have been old enough to be considered so thoroughly undesirable?

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:15 am*

“I do not believe you. I think you are lying to me.” Andrea ran the pad of her thumb across each of her fingers in turn, using the feel to steady her heartbeat.

“And why would I do that?” Her father canted his head towards her, a glint in his eyes.

To control me. She almost said it, but could not bring herself to do so. She studied her father, looking at the way he leaned on his cane.

She made an encompassing gesture with her left hand. “You look perfectly healthy to me.”

“What I look like to you is immaterial. You are not a physician, you are a woman.” He laughed bitterly. “Truly, you have a heart of stone. Most women would hear that their father is dying and leap to his aid.”

“I am not most women, as you well know.” Andrea ran a hand through her hair.

“You know what you did. What you took from me. Though I confess, I am grateful your mother is no longer with us after the shame you have brought upon the family.” He met her gaze, a cold empty look in his eyes.

“If you have any sense of filial loyalty, you will marry. Surely you would allow me the gift of a little peace in the time I have left.”

“Why should I, when you have given me nothing but grief my entire life?” Andrea clenched her fist.

“Because you are the reason I am the way I am. You and the constant reminder you present. Or has your time away from me made you forget just what your presence in this world cost this family.”

Green eyes, the mirror of her own, flashed in Andrea’s mind.

Her mother’s kind smile, only known from portraits.

A lump formed in her throat and she dug her nails into the palms of her hand to keep from shaking.

It is my fault he is like this. Everyone told her he had been a different man before her mother had died.

Since I- No. I will not think about that.

“I will not go into the next life with the stain of your behaviour on my reputation.” Her father shook his head, lip curling in disgust. “I will not let you rob me of joy in both life and death. Or do you wish to so thoroughly disgrace your mother’s memory?”

“I... I am not.” Andrea wished she sounded more certain, but the thought of the woman shrunk her. What would she think?

“Are you so sure about that?” Her father moved towards her, a wolf sensing weakness in its prey. “And what about this house? This Burrough is hardly known for its... soundness. It would be a pity if anything were to happen to it.”

Andrea winced. “Are you threatening me?”

“No. I am simply trying to teach you a lesson that thus far you have failed to learn.

There are consequences to your actions.” Her father’s eyes flashed. “Just as there are consequences of your birth.”

The implication lay heavy between them, shame squeezing its way into the space. She could not fight this. He was dying and clearly desperate.

“. I shall marry. I am sure I can find myself a suitable husband if\_” Andrea began but her father cut her off, a triumphant gleam on his face.

“\_Oh there will be no need for you to do that.” His grin broadened and Andrea’s stomach twisted violently as he took a step towards her.

“What do you mean?” Her voice was scarcely more than a whisper.

“I have already found you a husband.” He leaned towards her and whispered. “Lord Crossley is to claim you for his own.”

Andrea stumbled back from him, her jaw dropping. The world around her seemed to collapse. It felt as though the very air had turned to stone. She barely noticed her father leaving.

She was too busy thinking about her future husband and the fact that her life was over.

“But Lord Crossley is nearly sixty!” Lady Cecily Nightingale exclaimed a few hours later as they waited for the christening to start.

Andrea hastily made a shushing motion to her friend, glancing around at the various members of the ton gathered around them. Thankfully, no one took much notice of them as most of them were used to Cecily’s outbursts.

It helped that almost everyone gathered for the post-christening garden party was related to Duke Verimore in some way. His family was rather large given the three fruitful marriages of his grandmother.

“Do not shush me!” Cecily whispered, glancing around. “You cannot really mean to allow your father to wed you to Lord Crossley? Aside from his age, the man is one of the biggest lechers in England.”

“I know.” Andrea shuddered. “I do not know a single woman he has not accosted at some point in their lives. Even before his wife died, he flirted with anything even vaguely woman-shaped.”

“Exactly!” Cecily shuddered. “You cannot possibly marry a man like that.”

“I do not want to marry anyone at all.” Andrea sighed. “It is my father forcing this upon me.”

“But how? You do not even live with him, and you have your own money.” Cecily’s brow furrowed.

“He is my father. And bonds like that are not so easily broken.” Andrea opened and closed her mouth, glancing at Cecily as she tried to decide how much she could say.

I cannot tell her the truth. “And he made me see how truly awful my reputation has become. They are calling me a thornback, Cecily. A thornback!”

Cecily canted her head towards her. “I thought you did not care about such things.”

“Not for myself, but it is having an effect on him. And well, whatever else I might think of him, I do owe him some semblance of filial piety.” He is dying. She would be an orphan, truly alone when he left her.

“Your duties as a daughter do not mean you have to marry Lord Crossley. You will be miserable!” Cecily’s eyes widened and she clapped her hands together.

“You should try and find someone else! Grandmother is having a ball, and everyone who is anyone will be there. That is the perfect place to find a husband.”

Andrea arched an eyebrow at her friend, her chest tightening. “You make it sound so easy.”

“It is.” Cecily shrugged.

“That has not been my experience.” Andrea hugged her arms around herself self-consciously. “I seem practically to repel people.”

“You have not repelled me. Or cousin Dominic. Or Charlotte. And grandmother loves you as though you are family!” Cecily gestured around them. “And you know how hard it is to gain her approval!”

“But I cannot marry any of you! Friends are one thing, but men...” Andrea swallowed, hollowness spreading through her chest. “Romance... All of it... I just... I do not have the knack for it that most women do.”

Among my many other womanly failings. Her father had been only too happy to remind her of her ineptitude with men.

“Men are simple creatures, dearest Andrea. Besides, someone as pretty as you should have no trouble attracting someone!” Cecily gave her an appraising look, nodding to herself thoughtfully.

“Yes, with the right clothes, perhaps a new necklace or two... And we’ll have to do something about your dresses, they are far too plain! ”

Andrea was barely aware of Cecily's words as she launched into all of the things they could do to win Andrea a husband. It was hard to feel particularly hopeful, not with what she knew.

A familiar laugh caught her attention and she found herself following the sound before she was even aware of what she was doing.

Frederick Felton, the Duke of Caverton, was a cousin of Cecily's and his laugh had the singularly irritating quality of being highly infectious. He had the kind of easy grace that came from never having to worry about anything.

Andrea shook her head, but was unable to tear her eyes away from him.

Of course, life would be easy when you were not only wealthy but the very picture of rakish good looks. He was taller than most of the men around him, his dark hair was long and fell in artful locks around his face.

He had dimples that gave him a boyish charm and his dark blue eyes reminded Andrea of a lake.

"Some people have all the luck." Andrea muttered under her breath, thinking of her own green eyes and how often her father had lamented their colour.

Where Andrea took great pains to fade into the background, the Duke clearly wanted to be seen and to be liked. He moved towards a crowd of rowdy children, stopping and chatting to people as he did.

"I shall always be thankful to Sir Brummel for making breeches popular." A woman beside Andrea muttered to her companion. "It makes it so much easier to appreciate the male form."

“Especially one as fine as Duke Caverton’s. And I do appreciate that he adds a little colour to the room.” Her companion replied fanning herself.

“In more ways than one.” The women devolved into a fit of giggles.

Andrea only just managed not to roll her eyes, glancing back at the Duke in his beautifully tailored outfit, with its indigo coat. He did cut rather a striking figure.

He laughed, a rich and unshackled sound that forced a smile across Andrea’s lips, until she realised and hastily stopped herself.

The Duke scooped a small boy into his arms, animatedly talking to a gaggle of children who had been causing a commotion only moments before.

“My turn! My turn!” a little girl cried, holding her arms out to the Duke.

“Of course.” He lifted her up with his free arm, balancing a child on each shoulder and making the others laugh in delight.

He made silly faces and acted the fool, and each child seemed completely at ease with him. Andrea watched him curiously. How is it possible that a man can understand children so well?

She had not spent much time with children, after all, she had few friends and only one of them was married. In the few instances she had interacted with them, she had felt so uncomfortable she had scarcely known what to do with herself.

Yet to watch the Duke, it seemed easy, almost natural. Something inside her twisted, and she almost took a step forward before catching herself.

Guilt filled Andrea as she looked at the Duke. I suppose it is easy enough to look



after a child when you know you can give it back. He does not have to worry about anything. At that moment, the Duke looked up.

Their eyes met from across the room, and he flashed her a dazzling smile that made her heart skip a beat.

He canted his head towards her, a smile tugging at one corner of his mouth. His dimples made him look boyish. To her immense frustration and embarrassment, she blushed a deep shade of scarlet. His smile broadened and he winked.

She glared at him, and had half a mind to tell him that her blush had nothing to do with him. To her irritation, his grin broadened, and he returned to playing with the children.

She shook her head. “What would it be like to be that free and uncaring?”

“Pardon?” Cecily frowned and belatedly Andrea realised she had spoken aloud.

Her cheeks coloured, and she turned away from the Duke. “I was just thinking about the fact that I thought I had earned my freedom and here I am, preparing to give it away.”

“What do you mean?” Cecily asked.

“Well, when I marry – everything will go to my husband. The house, what money I have, it will all be in his control.” Andrea could not keep the bitterness from her voice, her lip curling at the thought.

“Well grandmother has been married thrice, and I do not think it has affected her freedom terribly.” Cecily gestured to the Dowager Duchess Caverton who had just entered the church and was laughing raucously.

The Dowager Duchess was three times a widow, and one of the richest women in England. She was the reason that Andrea had managed to buy her house in the first place.

“Maybe I do not have to give it all up.” Andrea muttered as the Dowager Duchess caught her eye and waved cheerily. “She certainly did not.”

“So you will come to the ball then?” Cecily’s smile was so wide, Andrea could not help but return it.

“Yes, I will.” Andrea nodded. “And Lord Crossley can find himself another victim.”

Cecily laughed, and it buoyed Andrea. Perhaps there was some hope after all.

### Chapter Two

“O h goodness, is that Lord Byron?” Frederick Felton, Duke of Caverton, pointed to a spot in the distance.

Everyone around him whipped their heads around to look in the direction he was indicating, and Frederick took their moment of distraction to slip quietly away.

The garden of his London estate was teeming with people, and everyone seemed determined to get some little piece of him. He had thought that the crowd would be too busy congratulating his cousin on his son’s baptism to bother him.

Unfortunately, this had not been further from the truth. The last group had cornered him for nearly an hour.

“I cannot believe that old trick still works.” He grinned to himself. “That must be at least the fifteenth time I have used it.”

He ran a hand through his hair, and shook out his shoulders. Straightening his coat lapels, he strode towards the maze and the hidden door in the westernmost hedge that would allow him to make his escape.

A harried looking servant walked past him, holding a plate of small quiches and assorted pastries. The smell caught his attention, and Frederick turned around, flagging the servant down and helping himself to a handful of quiches.

“Thank you.” He covered his mouth as he spoke around the quiche.

Frederick turned around, ready to complete his escape, when he found himself staring down at a woman with an extravagant bun, wrinkles and sharp blue eyes. She was a head and shoulders shorter than him, though her hair was so high that it towered above him.

“Ah, Frederick. Just the man I was looking for.” His grandmother, Agatha Felton, Dowager Duchess Caverton, smiled at him. “I trust I am not interrupting anything.”

She glanced at the maze behind them and arched an eyebrow at him. Frederick kicked himself. Drat – undone by food, again! He would not have put it past his grandmother to have sent the servant there in the first place.

“Grandmother.” His mouth was still full of quiche, it seemed to grow with each chew.

“Do not speak with you mouth full, Frederick. It is a deplorable habit.” The Dowager Duchess looped an arm through his and began to walk in the direction of the garden pavilion and the party he had just escaped.

Frederick’s heart sank. “My apologies.”

The words were muffled by the last vestiges of quiche and his grandmother rolled her eyes. “If you insist on behaving like a school boy, I will treat you as such. Remember, when Colonel Brandon visited last summer?”

Frederick nodded and swallowed his final mouthful. “You caught him about the ear and dragged him down to the scullery. Though I cannot remember what he did to deserve it.”

His grandmother laughed. “He made one too many comments on the quality of the food. Oh, nothing so brash as to outright insult me, but enough that he wore my

patience rather thin.”

Frederick had not liked the Colonel much.

The man had been far too loud for his taste, and upset more than one maid.

He had enjoyed watching his grandmother treat him like a child.

Of course, his grandmother could do that, she was the richest person in the ton, thrice a widow and no one with a lick of common sense would upset her.

“This sort of behaviour is exactly why I tried to convince your father not to send you to Eton. Boys come back with all the right social connections, and the table manners of a wild animal.” His grandmother shook her head.

“Though one would think at thirty you would have regained some of that good sense.”

Frederick gave the Dowager Duchess his most charming grin. “What need have I of sense when you have more than enough for both of us?”

She shook her head, but Frederick could see the small smile on her face. “Perhaps I grow tired of being sensible. I am old, and I find it rather tiresome.”

“Then why should I be sensible?” Frederick teased.

His grandmother gave him a flat look. “Because you are young. And a duke. Though it would seem that far too many of the ton have taken leave of their good senses.”

“Oh?” he canted his head towards her. “But you have gathered such a fine cohort of eligible young women today. Surely they cannot all have taken leave of their senses.”

His voice was teasing as he gestured towards the various groups of women who were following him with their gaze. His grandmother snorted.

“No, for some of them had no sense to begin with. And the men are even more nonsensical.” She sniffed and made a dismissive gesture with her hand.

“It is an indicator of how far the youth of today have fallen, that a wonderful woman like Lady Andrea feels she must settle for a match of convenience.”

“Lady Andrea? The one who won your games?” Frederick followed his grandmother’s jerk of her head.

His eyes found a pretty woman in a plain yellow dress. Her green eyes, dark blonde hair and fine features were rather pretty. They would have been more pretty if she had not been glaring at him.

He tipped an imaginary hat to her, his grin full of mischief as he winked.

That almost always gets them to smile. To his surprise, her glare only intensified.

His smile almost slipped from his face, but he caught it in time.

Glowering back will do no good. Remember, light and breezy makes life easy.

“Frederick, have you listened to a word I have just said?” His grandmother’s voice broke through his staring contest with Lady Andrea.

He gave a start and turned to face her. She was looking at him, her lips pursed and eyes narrowed.

“Something about marriages and the moral failings of youth?” Frederick quirked a

corner of his mouth into a half smile.

His grandmother gave him a sharp clip about the ear and he yelped. “Do not think you can charm your way out of everything, Frederick. Even you are not that sweet. I was saying that I miss the passion of love. It has been years since we had a good wedding in the family!”

“Cousin Cecil was married last week.” Frederick pointed out.

“I said a good wedding, Frederick. Your cousin is many things, but interesting is not one of them. Nor is his wife. I do not think I have ever been so unamused at a celebration.”

“It was a little slow.” Frederick was not about to admit that he had no idea how dull the celebration had been, because he had slipped away at the earliest opportunity.

“Besides, he is a third son of a minor lord. And I am far less invested in the future of his line than I am with the future of the Caverton line.” His grandmother fixed him with a narrowed look.

So, this is what she wanted. Frederick held in a sigh, forcing himself to smile instead. “There is plenty of time for our line to continue, grandmother.”

“Frederick, you are thirty! If you were a woman, they would call you a thornback.” His grandmother shook her head. “Besides, who knows how many years I have left? I want to hold the future of Caverton in my arms before I die!”

“You can hold me.” Frederick teased, which earned him another flick on the ear.

“You are not a baby. Though if you continue acting this way, I may be forced to treat you like one.” She looked him up and down.

“I have been called far worse than a baby.” Frederick laughed. “Besides, you would not treat me that way, it would be far too boring for you.”.

His grandmother gave him a wolfish grin. “I might. Do you wish to test me?”

He ran a hand through his hair, repressing a shudder that went through his spine. “No.”

“Good. So, when are you going to get married?” Her blue eyes seemed to pin him in place, as though he were a particularly interesting insect that she wished to display.

“I... It is as you said, too many people are looking for marriages of convenience. I am one of the richest men in the ton. I want a woman who loves me for me, not my money.” Frederick shrugged.

It was not entirely a lie. He loathed the idea of being married to one of the status hungry women of the ton. The thought of someone caring only for his money was unbearable. But I have no wish to be in love or to be loved.

He shifted from foot to foot, tugging at the collar of his shirt. He swallowed and ran a hand through his hair. His father’s face floated to the forefront of his mind, but he pushed it away violently.

“That is sensible. And you know I abhor such arrangements. They are so droll.” The Dowager Duchess sniffed, her disdain drawing him back into the conversation. “It is a pity you are so recognisable, though that is impossible to avoid when you have taken such pains to be so friendly with so many.”

His grandmother’s tone made her implication clear, and Frederick shifted from foot to foot. The woman was altogether more wily than any one person had a right to be.



“I thought you liked my sociability?” Frederick swept a lock of hair from his face. “Besides, surely it is no bad thing to be so well liked.”

“I did not say it was a bad thing. Simply that it is inconvenient. If you were not already the ton’s favourite bachelor, I would suggest you disguise yourself and win a woman’s heart as a nobody.

Then you would know she loved you for you and not your money.

” His grandmother patted his arm reassuringly.

“That sounds rather like the plot of one of Cousin Cecily’s novels.” Frederick narrowed his eyes suspiciously.

“Does it? Well, even the most trite novelist is bound to have a good idea eventually.” She grabbed a flute of champagne from a nearby servant, leading them away before Frederick had the chance to help himself.

“And do not think I cannot tell that you are trying to change the subject, my dear Frederick. We were talking of marriage, not novels.”

“As I said, grandmama, I have no wish to spend the rest of my life shackled to a woman who sees only my fortune and estates. And I doubt you wish for such a woman to be my duchess.” Frederick gestured to the small path that led to the house and the Dowager Duchess’s rooms.

“Of course not. That would be a most tedious endeavour.” She smiled at a woman who was approaching them, dismissing her with a wave of her hand before she could come another step.

Frederick could see the look of disappointment on the woman’s face, but was relieved

that his grandmother seemed intent on having him to herself. At least for now. “Then you see why I am not in want of a wife.”

“I see why you have no desire for a match of convenience, not why you have no wish for a wife. For love.” The Dowager Duchess shook her head. “At this rate, I fear I will be dead and buried and you will still be unwed!”

Frederick gave her a look, arching his eyebrows and letting a small smile steal across his face. “You are healthier than most women half your age. I suspect you will outlive us all.”

“You flatter me, but that does not change the creaks I feel in my joints. Besides, I have no desire to outlive my grandchildren, three husbands is quite enough.” An unreadable look stole across the Dowager Duchess’s face, and for a moment, Frederick thought he saw pain there.

Before he could say anything, the look vanished and in its place his grandmother fixed him with a steely gaze. “Come now, tell me, why are you so reluctant to get married?”

He stumbled, and tugged at the collar of his shirt. “I have already told you.”

“You have told me part of it, but I suspect only the smallest.” His grandmother pursed her lips. “I would understand your reluctance to marry.”

He swallowed. I cannot tell her the truth. “If I promise to look for a bride this season, will you promise to leave the subject alone?”

“Are you promising to search for your future wife?” Her eyes brightened and a smile spread across her face.

“Yes.” He hastily continued before his grandmother could speak, “Though I will not settle for anyone. She must be the right woman.”

This last part was a lie. As far as he was concerned ‘the right woman’ would never come along; he had absolutely no intention of courting the kind of passion his grandmother seemed determined for him to find.

And without love, his only option would be to settle for one of the many women who only wanted his fortune.

He hid his thoughts with an easy smile as his grandmother nodded. “Very well, I shall let the matter be.”

“Thank you.” He felt her slip her arm from his as they walked into the centre of the pavilion.

“Thank you, my boy. You have brought an old woman joy.” She stepped away from him, raising her voice so that her next words carried across the lawns. “How wonderful that Duke Caverton is finally looking for a wife!”

Frederick’s eyes widened but before he could do anything, his grandmother slipped away and at least a dozen women crowded around him.

She is too wily by half.

### Chapter Three

“I am sure it is fine.” Andrea scanned the crowd in the ball room, fidgeting as Cecily fussed over her dress for what seemed like the hundredth time.

It had been a week since the baptism, and she was at the Dowager Duchess Caverton’s ball. Cecily had spent much of the three days dragging Andrea to and from the modiste.

After much negotiation, Andrea had found herself wearing a dress more elaborate than she had ever worn before. It was a deep purple with gold embroidery, cut in the style of the continent with matching shoes and gloves.

“Fine is not good enough. Now hold still, this will only take a moment.” Cecily adjusted her gold necklace around Andrea’s neck and then nodded in approval. “Good. Now you look perfect.”

“I feel like a fool.” Andrea rolled her shoulders out.

“You look radiant.” Her friend beamed.

Andrea tugged at the sleeve of her dress. “Everyone is looking at me.”

“That is the point. We want them to notice you.” Cecily gave her a reassuring squeeze. “Have you decided which of the men you will pursue? I still cannot believe the length of grandmother’s list. There must have been at least fifteen names!”

“Seventeen, actually.” Andrea patted the small bit of paper she had tucked in her glove. “And I thought I would start with Duke Havilliard.”

“A duke!” Cecily’s eyes widened.

Andrea shrugged. “I do not think anything will come of it, but he is talking to your grandmother right now and she could make the introduction.”

“Be still my beating heart. The sheer romance of it will overcome me.” Cecily rolled her eyes and shook her head exasperatedly.

“I am not here for romance, Cecily, I am simply trying to find a suitable husband who will allow me at least a modicum of freedom.” Andrea squared her shoulders, frowning at her friend.

Cecily was adjusting something else on Andrea’s dress. “And you do not care if he is handsome?”

“Why would I?” Her frown deepened.

“You are going to spend the rest of your life with him. He might as well be pleasant to look at.”

“I suppose.”

They fell into silence while Andrea watched the Duke talking to the Dowager Duchess. He seemed handsome enough, and the Dowager Duchess had recommended him. She had also recommended several of her own family but Andrea could scarcely blame her for that.

Cecily’s voice brought Andrea back to the present moment. “And what is your plan

for approaching the Duke?”

“I thought I would just ask him to marry me once your grandmother introduced us.” Andrea shifted uncomfortably as Cecily gaped at her.

“Tell me you are joking?”

Andrea pursed her lips, resisting the urge to hug her arms around herself. “It seemed the most expedient thing to do.”

“Expedient!” Cecily massaged her temples with her fingertips. “Andrea, you are trying to get a husband.”

“Exactly. I am not trying to find a love match, but simply arrange a business deal. It is simply a marriage of convenience, I do not need some coy, grand performance. If I just ask him, and he is not interested, I can simply make my way to the next man.” Andrea frowned as she watched her friend use a thumb and forefinger to massage her brow.

“Even in a marriage of convenience, you need to be an appealing prospect!” Cecily’s exasperation was clear in her voice.

“What would you do?” she gestured to her friend.

“Flirt a little! You do know how to do that, do you not?” She said it as though she were simply pointing out that the sky was blue.

“Of course not!” Andrea’s cheeks flushed such a deep shade of scarlet, she was sure it clashed horribly with her dress.

“It is easy, we can practice a little here.” Cecily glanced around them.

Andrea canted her head at her friend. “You want me to flirt with you?”

“Just pretend I am a tall strapping young man.” She stood up a little straighter, putting her hands on her hips in a way that almost made Andrea laugh.

Her mind had gone frustratingly blank. “What should I say?”

“Well, why not say you like his eyes?” Cecily suggested.

“But what if I do not?” Andrea frowned.

“It does not matter Andrea. You just need to play to his ego, flatter him a little and then get him talking. Ask him lots of questions about himself. Men love the sound of their own voice.” In deeper tones, Cecily continued, “Good evening, Lady Andrea.”

This is ridiculous. Andrea forced herself to smile at her friend, wondering if the smile looked more like a grimace. “Good evening, Duke Haviliard. I um... you have nice shoes I suppose.”

“Better, but perhaps we could leave off the I suppose. Be a little more definite. But not too definite. He may think you abrasive.”

“I am never going to be able to do this.”

“Of course you will. Now go and get yourself a husband!” Cecily adjusted Andrea’s necklace one more time, and gently pushed her forward. “I think they have just walked onto the balcony.”

Andrea stumbled as she made her way towards the balcony Cecily claimed the Duke had walked towards. The last shred of her confidence had vanished and she tried to keep all of Cecily’s advice in her mind. She stepped onto the balcony, but there was

no one to be seen.

The sound of footsteps caught her attention and she saw a girl who could have been no more than nineteen slinking into the shadows.

“Curious.” Andrea muttered, following her as her own curiosity got the better of her..

The girl had the distinct look of a hunter pursuing their prey. The hair on the back of Andrea’s neck stood on end as they moved further into the gardens. The music and laughter of the ballroom was replaced by the sound of footsteps and the rustle of leaves in the wind.

Just when Andrea thought she should turn back, she hear the sound of a man’s exasperated sigh. “So that is who she is after.”

The Duke of Caverton was leaning against a nearby tree, his eyes closed and a slight frown on his face. The moonlight on his features and the absence of his usual easy smile made him look like a work of art.

Her moment of distraction almost made her lose sight of the girl.

Casting about, she saw a flash of yellow that was the debutante’s dress.

She was hiding in a bush, a little way away from the Duke, so intent on her target that she seemed oblivious to everything else.

He would have to pass the bush to get back to the ball, and Andrea had a sneaking suspicion that he would not be allowed to do so.

“And just what do you think you are doing?” Andrea tapped the young girl on her shoulder.



The girl gave a startled yelp, her eyes going wide as she whirled to face Andrea.  
“Oh... Um... I was just... I needed some fresh air.”

“And that meant you had to hide in a bush?” Andrea arched an eyebrow.

“I... What business is it of yours?” The girl’s lip trembled.

Andrea shrugged. “It is none. But I do not like schemes, and you have the look of someone scheming.”

“I am doing nothing of the sort.” The girl shook her head.

“Really? Because it looks to me like you were setting an ambush, hoping to stumble into a certain duke and force him into marrying you.” Andrea’s jerked her head towards the Duke and fixed the girl with a hard stare.

Her voice came out sharper than she had expected, and the girl’s eyes filled with tears. “I... I did not want to. My mother... She... Well, she said that I had to. That this would be the best way to get a good husband. She wanted me to be the diamond of the season but that has gone to Lady Geraldine.”

“The diamond may be the most sought-after gem, but that does not mean the others are any less beautiful.” Andrea’s face softened and she held out a hand to the girl, pulling her to her feet. “What is your name?”

“Penelope Cartwright. Miss Penelope Cartwright.” Penelope answered, dusting off her dress.

Andrea nodded. The girl’s mother was the ton’s biggest gossip and one of the most power-hungry women she had ever met. “I am Lady Andrea Cowper.”

“You are the one who- nevermind.” The girl’s cheeks flushed with colour, and Andrea suspected she had been about to repeat a particularly salacious rumour. “Mother will be furious with me.”

“I am sure it will pass.” Andrea gave Penelope’s arm a reassuring squeeze. “You have plenty of time to find a husband. Do not let anyone push you into a match you do not deserve.”

“But he is a duke, surely there can be no better match?” Penelope frowned.

“He may be a duke, but you do not know the first thing about him. A title tells you nothing of a man’s character. For all you know, he could be the most monstrous villain.” Andrea’s father’s face appeared in her mind.

Penelope tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, chewing on her bottom lip. “But he seems so nice.”

“Seeming is not the same as being. You should get back to the ball. There are plenty of young men who I am sure would be most worthy of your affections.” She gestured back towards the ballroom. “Do not let yourself be forced into a life time of unhappiness.”

For a moment, Andrea was worried that the girl would insist on remaining, after all, she knew only too well the hold a parent could have on their child. Thankfully, Penelope nodded and gave Andrea’s hand one last squeeze.

“You are much nicer than I thought. Thank you.” She smiled and disappeared back into the ballroom.

Andrea watched her go, her head canted towards the young girl. She felt like she had expended the very last of her energy and the thought of trying to find a man, talk to

him and convince him to be her husband was enough to make her cry.

She sighed and ran a hand through her hair. “Nicer than she thought? What on Earth do people think of me?”

“I could tell you, for a price.” A man’s voice said from behind her.

She jumped and whirled around to see Duke Caverton surveying her with an amused smile on his face. “Do you truly think I am such a monster, or were you exaggerating so that you might steal me for yourself?”

Irritation flared to life in her chest. “Neither. I simply did not want to see a girl throw her life away on someone else’s wishes.”

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“And a marriage to me would be that?” He arched an eyebrow, but his smile did not falter.

“If you are fishing for compliments, you will not find them here. There are plenty of women only too happy to flatter you and I have no intention of being one of them.” Andrea narrowed her eyes at him.

“Are you this prickly with everyone or is that reserved just for me?” The Duke canted his head towards her.

“I am not prickly.” She snapped.

He gave her a disbelieving look and Andrea found herself slowing down. “And if that is not prickly behaviour, then I am a goat.”

For a moment, she hesitated and then she found herself saying, “It is just that you seem to have things so easy. You breeze in and out of situations and women throw themselves at you, clamouring to be married, meanwhile I am here chasing men with the slimmest hope of success.”

“My life is not so easy as all that.” He shook his head, his brow creasing. “Ever since grandmother’s announcement, I have been hunted by every eligible woman in the ton and her mother. This latest escapade is the fourth such instance I have avoided.”

He wrinkled his nose and then smiled at her, a twinkle in his eye. “Thank you, by the way.”

“I did not do it for you, I did it for her. And this is precisely what I am talking about. You act as though you are hard done by, when in truth you could have your pick of anyone in the ton. And even if you never married, you would face few repercussions.” Andrea gritted her teeth.

“Just my grandmother’s wrath. Besides, I do not have every woman in the ton throwing themselves at me.

Grandmother told me that you were searching for a husband and yet you have not thrown yourself at my feet.

” He gestured to himself, and gave her a mocking bow before adding.

“The struggle to find a husband is just the same as the struggle to avoid a wife. I spend my life having to look behind bushes and plant pots.”

“That must be so hard for you. How truly awful to have every eligible woman want your affection.” Andrea’s every word dripped with sarcasm as she shook her head, making a disgusted noise. “We truly live in different worlds.”

She stalked off. Of course, a man like that could not understand the situation she was in. He had choices. He would not lose anything through marriage, where she would.

Once more his footsteps followed behind her but she ignored him, speeding up instead...

“Leave me alone. If we are discovered, the scandal will be all the ton talks about for the next month! We will become social pariahs. Or worse, married.”

“You truly have no wish to marry me?” his footsteps faltered and the surprise in his tone stopped her in her footsteps.

She turned to face him, and found that he was looking at her with a serious expression on his face. She flexed and unflexed her fingers.

“It is nothing personal, in truth I have very little desire to get married at all. Yet I have no choice. My father... Well it does not matter, I have to marry”

“You say that as though it were a death sentence. I thought all women longed to be married.” He canted his head towards her, an earnest expression on his face, his lips pursed thoughtfully.

“You would think it a death sentence if you had to wed Lord Crossley.” The words tumbled from her mouth before Andrea could stop them.

She expected him to make some kind of joke or to shrug it off as though it were water off a duck’s back but instead he nodded. “Many women would. He is not a particularly pleasant man.”

“He is not.”

“That is why you are looking for a marriage of convenience. But surely you could find a love match? It is not as though you are hard on the eyes. Why, you are even pretty when you glower!” He grinned at her, the earnestness fading as he swept a hand through his hair.

She ignored the compliment, grateful that her blush would be hard to see in the moonlight. “I cannot afford a love match.”

“Why not?” His dark eyes searched her face, brows raised.

“Because marriage would rob me of everything. And love... Love does not guarantee I could keep my independence. My freedom.” A lump formed in her throat, and she swallowed hard, the last thing she needed was to cry in front of this man. He has

already managed to get me to share far more than I wish.

Duke Caverton's eyes widened. "You are talking about your house, are you not? It will go to whoever you marry. It will be your husband's property."

"As will I."

The Duke nodded thoughtfully. "You should marry me then."

"Marry you?" Andrea snorted. Of course, he would make such a joke.

"Think about it. Neither of us have any desire to be married, and I have more wealth than any one man needs – I am sure we could find a way of you keeping some things in your name or at least ensuring you have your independence." He gave her a wry smile.

"It would certainly be nice not to have to spend every waking moment searching for traps."

She studied him, searching his face for some sign that he might be lying, but she could find nothing. This cannot be happening. "You are serious?"

"Of course, I am." He laughed, and she had to admit that the sound put her at ease.

"You would truly let me keep my home?" She narrowed her eyes. "You would not expect any... wifely duties of me?"

"No, it would be a marriage in name alone." His cheeks coloured and he rubbed the back of his neck. "You could keep any portion of money you wished. After all, once we were married it would be mine, so why should I not bequeath it back to you?"

Andrea's mouth was dry, excitement coursing through her, but she shook her head.

“My father would never agree.”

The Duke’s eyes widened. “Why ever not? I am a duke! Most men would be delighted.”

“Not my father. He likes to be in control.” She clenched her fists. “My father likes to remind me of that.” This is his version of penance. Punishment for my behaviour; I have no doubt the man would cling to life longer if only to spite me.

There was a beat of silence, and Andrea felt a heaviness settle over her body, her shoulders slumping. The Duke clapped his hands together. “Then we must give him a reason he could not refuse for our marriage.”

He is serious. Andrea chewed on her bottom lip, trying to think of how she could convince her father that this match was his idea.

She began to pace. “It would require rather careful thought,” she rubbed her chin as her mind raced with all the potential ideas for their ruse to work.

“Definitely planning, after all we only get one shot at this.”

“Or perhaps a simple moment of serendipity.” He grinned like a schoolboy who had just stolen the answers to a particularly difficult exam.

“What –” her words were cut off as he took her hand in his.

The warmth of his fingers spread through her, and she looked at him. He was not smiling, simply looking at her with an intensity that sent an inexplicable shiver down her spine.

“You said it yourself, if we are discovered, we would have no choice but to marry.” He took a step towards her.



“It would have to be a big enough scandal to force my father’s hand. Just our discovery would not be enough.” She shook her head, though she did not dare move away from him, her heart picking up its tempo.

“Then we seal it with a kiss.” He pulled her close, an arm going around her back.

His touch was soft, as though she were something precious he could not bear hurting. The smell of amber filled the space between them. They were so close, she could feel his breath against her lips. The sound of voices drifted across the air.

“You swear this will be a marriage on paper alone?” she whispered.

“I swear it.” He breathed back.

Their eyes met. The beating of her heart echoed through the air around them. Or perhaps it was his heart. He tilted her chin up with just the tip of a fingertip, but he did not close the distance between them.

She knew she could stop this. He was giving her the choice.

“Kiss me.” She let the words out before she lost her nerve.

His lips touched hers, and all rational thought left her. Warmth spread through her, and for once, everything in her head stilled.

She was so lost in the experience, that she almost missed the startled cry from behind her, but the sound of clapping broke through the haze.

They broke apart, breathing heavily. She turned and found herself staring at the Dowager Duchess, who was smiling so broadly that you would think she had discovered a hidden treasure.

“Welcome to the family, my girl.” She clapped her hands in delight.

There was no going back now.