



A Gamble with the Rakish Duke (A Game of Rakes #4)

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Category: Historical

Description: "Once I have you, wife, I will not hold back. I will ruin you in ways you can't even imagine."

Abandoned by her husband after their wedding, Duchess Alexandra must save her family on her own—and the key lies in a secret she must keep hidden. But her plan leads her to a gaming hell, and straight into danger.

Boxing by night and haunted by guilt, Duke Oliver never wanted the wife he barely knows. Yet when Alexandra is attacked at the gaming hell, his protective instincts immediately kick in.

Reunited after a year, Oliver can't resist his feisty duchess anymore. Now, he will show her she's his—with every scorching touch, every hungry kiss...

*If you like a realistic yet steamy depiction of the Regency and Victorian era, then *A Gamble with the Rakish Duke* is the novel for you.

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Chapter One

“Y our Grace, if I may speak so boldly, I do not think this is the best way to handle this matter.”

“Ellen, I appreciate your concern, but my mind is made up. There is no other way regarding this,” Alexandra Audley, the Duchess of Westgrave, declared as she watched her reflection in the full-length mirror and the agitated but somehow coordinated maid at her back. “With my father’s considerable debts, I must be here for him.”

Ellen fiddled nervously with the young duchess’s corset, checking the ribbons and lace thrice.

Alexandra was aware that her curvier figure required particular attention to the lacing of her stays, but Ellen was an expert in balancing comfort with achieving a fashionable silhouette.

“Your Grace, must I wait here at Lady Barrington’s country home? Shouldn’t I be with you?”

“The business is best settled by me alone, Ellen. And we are welcome in Lady Barrington’s home, even though she is not often here. I do admire her freedom. Her inheritance has allowed her to travel on her own.”

“S-She’s a widow, Your Grace.”

“True,” Alexandra said thoughtfully.

Alexandra did not care for what Society thought. It was why she was more focused on getting her job done at the gambling hell she was planning to storm into than on how she looked. However, she understood that she had to tame her curves, especially her ample bosom, before she visited a place of ill repute.

“The risk to your reputation... Forgive me, Your Grace.”

The distress was evident in the maid’s voice, and Alexandra could forgive what she would typically consider as overstepping. Ellen knew that she might be speaking out of turn.

“Father’s doing that all on his own,” Alexandra murmured as she smoothed her gloves. “Besides, reputations matter little when you’re already married. Don’t they?”

Through the mirror, she could see Ellen open and close her mouth to protest. The servants might not say anything, but some might suspect that the Duchess’s marriage was nothing more than a farce. Her maid, whom she trusted the most, was the one who knew more than the rest.

Then again, Alexandra had not seen her husband in a year.

“It’s time for me to go,” she said after her maid finished styling her chocolate-brown ringlets.

It didn’t matter what she looked like when she might as well be heading for war.

Holding her chin up with determination, she turned to pat Ellen’s hand and strode toward the door, heading for the awaiting carriage and the potentially dangerous task ahead.

Alexandra arrived at her destination, wondering if it was folly on her part. She took a long, deep breath before walking through the heavy doors of the gaming establishment. The guards stopped her in her tracks, with one holding out a hand to keep her back.

“Where do you think you’re going, sweetheart?” he demanded. “This is not a place for you.”

“Perhaps she is looking for her runaway lover,” the other guard jeered.

All Alexandra could think was how silly they both looked—outwardly fancy but inwardly corrupt.

“Let me in, or I will report your establishment!”

The two large men looked at each other. A flicker of amusement crossed one’s face briefly, while the other remained stern. The Duchess knew that her report would not affect an establishment that even high officials frequented, but the two men shrugged and let her in.

“Let the lady see for herself...”

A shift from the vanilla scents in her country house and the rose blooms in Lady Barrington’s townhouse, the pungent smell of cigars, alcohol, and sweat invaded Alexandra’s nostrils.

She had prepared for this, but the reality overwhelmed her.

Surprisingly, the music was light enough for people to carry on deals and conversations. She recognized Haydn but thought that her mother’s pianoforte rendition would be several times more superior.

The place was crowded with wealthy aristocrats, social climbers, merchants, and the owner's thugs. Despite the generally well-dressed crowd, it reeked of desperation.

"Father's and mine," Alexandra grumbled to herself.

She weaved her way through the crowd, ignoring the blatant curiosity in some of the stares and the whispers that reminded her that what she told Ellen might be inaccurate. Some reputations did matter. She was a duke's wife, after all.

One other thing gambling hells were notorious for was scandal.

"Isn't that the Duke of Westgrave's wife?" a man who looked faintly familiar asked.

"Looking for her husband, of course!" another snorted.

"Or looking for a lover," a man quipped, his eyes roving over Alexandra shamelessly.

Alexandra ignored all the comments she heard—mostly speculations about who she was and what she was doing there—and continued hunting for the man responsible for most of her misfortunes.

Her father.

It was easy enough to find him. A loud argument had broken out near the farthest corner of the gambling hell. Alexandra could recognize his arrogant voice even from across the room.

Suddenly, the envelope hidden in her purse felt heavy. Her chest tightened as she thought of all those years Lord Hartwell failed her as a father. It didn't mean that she'd fail him as his daughter.

“Gideon, you know I’ll pay you as soon as I have the money,” her father begged.

Gideon Lockwood, a man notorious for his business, barked out a laugh. He held his rounded belly with undisguised glee. Then, he abruptly stopped and watched Lord Hartwell with narrowed eyes.

“You? Your son-in-law is nothing but a rake and a drunk like you! How will you repay me?”

“Let me play, Gideon. I will pay you back in a fortnight. In full.”

“That was your promise the last time, Hartwell.” The humor was wholly gone from Lockwood’s voice. Instead, it dripped with menace.

His eyes were blazing, focused on Lord Hartwell’s once handsome face. Drink and lack of sleep had made his skin sallow and thin.

“I will pay his debts,” Alexandra volunteered, her voice surprisingly steady and strong, even though the hand that held her purse slightly trembled. She clasped it in her other hand to soothe it.

The small crowd gawking at the unpleasant scene parted for her, and she found herself only a few feet from the two men. She could see her father’s tired eyes, the grey in his beard and hair.

“The Duchess!” boomed Lockwood. “I hope you know what you are getting yourself into. Have you persuaded your husband to give you money to save your father?”

“I have money of my own,” Alexandra, fumbling for the envelope in her purse.

She made a tight fist to control the movement, hoping the gambling hell lord

wouldn't notice.

"Is that right?" Lockwood asked, the corners of his mouth twitching, but the menace remained.

A low rumble of laughter soon escaped him, his shoulders and belly shaking with his mirth. He met the eyes of two of his lackeys, and all three of them laughed.

"H-Here," Alexandra handed him the envelope while her father looked on with a gaping mouth and furrowed brow.

It was almost painful to let go of the money she had worked hard for, but she had to.

"This should cover his debts," she said.

Lockwood unceremoniously pulled out the banknotes and counted them. The strains of music around them taunted her.

Ironically, it seemed to be one of her compositions.

"Your Grace, your father owes me a much more considerable amount. This here can barely cover half of it. Not even close."

"W-What?"

"Isn't that what I just said? I know where to find the money to pay you back, Gideon. There is no need to rely on this useless chit. I'd never rely on her! She cannot do anything right. If only my son Julian were still alive!"

Alexandra gasped. She would have taken it better if Lockwood had said those words, but it was her father—her father who insulted her.

Useless? Can't do anything right?

She had lived for him for the past few years and married the man he foisted her on with barely a complaint.

He wasn't even finished. "What do you think a bit of coin would do for me? Useless! You are nothing but a brainless chit! I would never rely on such a worthless burden!"

Alexandra's eyes stung. She blinked back the tears that were threatening to fall as she stumbled backward toward the crowd. Inhaling the stench of musky perfume mingled with tobacco and sweat, she almost cast up what little she had for brunch. Then, she felt someone push her forward back to her father and Lockwood.

She held back a shriek. The hurt turned into anger as she got pushed from side to side by a restless throng of gaming patrons.

"Let the lady play instead. That will pay off Hartwell's debt!" someone shouted.

Protests rippled across the rest of the patrons. They seemed disgruntled that Lord Hartwell's troubles interrupted their game time.

Lord Hartwell surprised his daughter by swinging at the man who made the suggestion. Others drunkenly joined in. Alexandra suspected that the other men were merely joining in the chaos for fun. With the main game paused, they were looking for another type of risk.

The Duchess decided then that it was the best time to escape the gambling hell, but someone grabbed her wrist. It hurt.

"So, Your Grace, you're not against mingling with the gambling folks, eh?" A man dressed like a lord pulled her closer to him.

He appeared to be in his mid-thirties and had blonde hair and blue eyes. Some women might find him attractive, but Alexandra could only shudder at his closeness.

“Unhand me, please!”

“You know I have an account here at Devil’s Draw? I can persuade Lockwood to forgive your father’s debts.” His breath smelled of Madeira and cigar, and he was too close for comfort.

Alexandra continued to struggle against the man’s grip, gagging at the smell. The man might look wealthy and handsome, but he was even worse than her father. His money would not change anything for the better.

The grip loosened suddenly as he was flung away from her.

Alexandra watched him stagger backward. Someone had pulled him back and threw him aside like a sack of potatoes.

“No one touches my wife,” a familiar voice growled as her savior stalked the cowering scoundrel.

She watched as her husband, Oliver Audley, the Duke of Westgrave, swung a fist at the man who was harassing her.

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Chapter Two

“That’s your wife?” Alexandra’s harasser asked the Duke, venom lacing every word. “Ha! I don’t know which of you is more unfortunate.”

Alexandra bristled at the comment but knew that there was some truth to it. Her marriage was purely a financial arrangement. What kind of people would agree to that?

“You don’t want to ask me that question again, Percy!”

Oliver looked different. He seemed angrier and more muscular. How long had it been? She had not seen him since their wedding a day—a year ago—and now, with his broader shoulders and intense eyes, he looked both familiar and strange.

Tonight, she was seeing him with new eyes. She reached for her throat and felt her quickening pulse.

“It’s only because I’m in a gambling hell,” she whispered to herself. “Your Grace, you do not have to do that. Let us leave,” she then implored, finally finding her voice.

As soon as her husband turned to her, two burly men rushed to crowd him.

Alexandra screamed as one man swung a fist at Oliver’s face.

Oliver ducked. How could a large man like him move so gracefully? The young Duchess felt hot and cold, and it had nothing to do with the temperature of the

establishment.

The lights in the gambling hell flickered like her feelings, swaying between fear and something more difficult to understand. The feeling made her heart race and her palms sweat.

Her husband took off his tailcoat and cravat. His muscles bunched under his shirt as he did little jumps to his left and right, his body coiled tightly like a spring. The thugs watched the movement, their bodies tense and ready. The three circled each other momentarily, waiting for one to attack.

And one of them did.

One thug landed a punch on Oliver's jaw. Alexandra's hands flew to her mouth, and she let out a breath only when she saw her husband recover and rub his jaw in disbelief, as if he was more annoyed than injured.

The crowd cheered. Money was being exchanged on the sidelines. The fight spurred a new kind of game—betting. The gambling hell was alive again, and she saw Lockwood grinning in the corner.

“Five pounds on the Anvil!”

“No, he can take on both. Ten pounds!”

Alexandra could not believe what she was hearing. The crowd seemed to have a nickname for Oliver, and with the telltale bruise near his temple, it looked like he had already been in a fight before he arrived at the gambling hell.

“Let your wife pay her father's debts, Your Grace!” someone taunted, and the room erupted in raucous laughter, both men and women.

The Duke let out a growl. Then, he lunged at the man who punched him, using his towering height and bigger size to intimidate him.

The other man backed away, and even the other thug looked like he wanted to be anywhere but there. A glance from their master rooted them to the spot.

Despite their near-retreat, Oliver lunged at one of them and hit him square in the jaw. Using his other fist, he landed another punch on the man's gut. With a quick swerve, he avoided the fist of the other thug.

It was enough to make the two thugs to retreat. They were not used to having someone fight them like that.

With both of them staggering backward, Oliver faced the instigator once more. The man looked pale and small before him, but he also knew how to get his way.

"Come and fight me, Percy. Nobody touches my wife and just leaves the fight," Oliver taunted, extending his right arm and curling his fingers in a beckoning gesture.

"You never showed interest in your wife before. I suspect they are right. You don't want her. Why fight for someone you leave behind all the time, Westgrave? Let her pay her father's debts."

The malicious tone and wide grin made Alexandra's stomach churn. She could guess what Percy was insinuating, and it had nothing to do with her playing card games in a dimly lit hall.

She saw a figure fleeing out of the corner of her left eye.

Her father. Of course.

She turned her attention back to the two red-faced men. Her husband was barely sweating, but he was breathing hard from anger. Percy, on the other hand, looked paler with each step Oliver took toward him.

“He is not worth it, Your Grace,” Alexandra said, daring to reach for her husband.

She placed her hand on his shoulder. He started, even though her touch was gentle. A tingling feeling spread from her fingertips to the rest of her body.

Percy looked at them mockingly, and Oliver responded by shoving his face close to the other man’s and snapping it back in warning.

When Percy finally cowered away, the Duke let out a long-suffering sigh. He bent to the floor to pick up his tailcoat and cravat as his wife watched him with interest.

“We are not done, Duchess,” he warned, grabbing her by the arm.

He had only said her name once before, and it was only for show.

With the bored onlookers going back to their games, they did not have an audience. The smell of meat seemed to have grown stronger as the patrons ordered food—fuel for more hours of gambling.

“Do you really think that violence can pay off my father’s debts?”

The Duke’s face softened, and he released her arm, his thumb ghosting over the skin through the fabric of her dress. It was almost like he was afraid that he had hurt her.

“Let us talk outside. You know I am not going to hurt you.”

Alexandra bit back a retort. The truth was that she never thought him capable of

raising a hand at her.

“What were you thinking, Duchess?” he demanded as soon as they were outside Devil’s Draw. “Coming to a gambling hell without an escort? Even an escort would not dare walk through those doors!”

“I had to save my father!” Her voice was just as heated, but she could also hear how it sounded.

“Your father is beyond saving.”

His response echoed her thoughts, but she was still fuming. Her husband should not have intervened. He made her look like a damsel in distress.

“And you? Are you beyond saving, too? Do not hide the fact that your face already had bruises when you came charging in.”

“That is none of your business.”

Oliver’s face had shuttered. He was shutting her out, and it was not in the least bit surprising. They had never made the effort to get to know each other. As soon as they got married, he dumped her in a country house not too far from London but far enough away from him.

“You are right. I am your wife in name only. I should not care about your business,” Alexandra huffed bitterly.

She turned to walk away, catching sight of her carriage waiting for her across the street.

Her carriage? No, it was another of Oliver’s gifts to her, together with the lovely

country house she adored despite the circumstances.

“Where did you get the money you gave to Lockwood?”

“That is not your business either.”

“It made you visit an establishment that a high-born lady like you should not venture into without any friends or a husband. I digress. It is not a place you should go to for any reason, with or without an escort.”

“Why do you care, Your Grace? You’ve barely acknowledged me since our wedding!”

“You’re my wife—that is enough reason. A wife who still has not revealed where she gets her money from.”

“Are you anxious to know how I spend the pin money you’ve left me? I have not touched the bank account, and the banknotes you gave me are still in the lockbox at home. Even if I had taken the money and added it to what I earned, it would still not be enough.”

“Not enough?”

Oliver was right to be confused. He had left her two thousand pounds. Alexandra thought one thousand pounds was more than enough, but she was wrong. Her father had bigger debts than she had expected. He was more addicted to gambling than she had initially thought, and that was a frightening thing. The man was on the road to self-destruction.

“Yes. You heard me right. Now, if you’ll excuse me, Your Grace. The carriage you have generously gifted me is waiting.”

“Let him drive home. I will take you in mine.”

“No. I cannot let your coachman wait for me in vain,” she huffed, before striding toward the carriage.

This time, Oliver did not argue or stop her. He simply followed her. She saw what he meant to do too late and gaped at the coins he placed in the coachman’s palm as he ordered him to leave.

“You can’t do that, Your Grace,” she protested.

“How did you get the money, and why did you not just use the money I left you?”

“I have my ways, too,” Alexandra blurted, suddenly flustered by the way her husband was looking at her.

His green eyes seemed to pierce through her soul, and she felt the bewildering urge to stroke his well-trimmed beard, which could not hide the scar on the seam of his lower lip or the blooming bruise on his jaw.

“What ways?” Oliver asked sharply as he handed her into his carriage.

The well-trained coachman merely nodded and duffed his hat. Then, he discreetly turned his gaze to the horses.

“Yes! Do you also think I’m a brainless chit? Of course, I have ways, too.”

As soon as the words were out, Alexandra regretted them. She didn’t want to reveal too much of her feelings—how her father’s words affected her.

“You believe that, Duchess?” Oliver asked with a frown. When there was no

response, he muttered, “Fine. Believe whatever you want.”

Husband and wife fumed silently throughout the short journey, but Alexandra could not help but feel something else.

Oliver was sitting too close, and she was a woman who had never been with a man—not even her own husband.

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Chapter Three

“Here’s my townhouse,” Oliver declared as he helped her out of the carriage.

Alexandra did not refuse his hand, gingerly stepping down and mentally preparing herself for what seemed like a new chapter in her life.

She looked up at the three-story Georgian townhouse with a red stuccoed brick facade. It was not what she had expected; she knew Oliver had also run into financial trouble because of his lifestyle, and the country house was already grand enough for her.

She did not know what she had imagined before—perhaps she had imagined her husband sleeping in a small room in an inn or with another woman.

The last thought made her uneasy, even though she felt she had no right to be. Neither of them wanted to get married, and even before they got married, she had heard about his frequent visits to brothels and dalliances with high-born ladies.

Oliver was no saint—far from it.

“Do you like it?” His voice broke through her thoughts, too arrogant for her liking.

He was enjoying this, seeing her gaping at his home.

“It’s beautiful,” she admitted grudgingly as she tried to ignore the knot of anger forming in her stomach.

“This is where you’ll stay while you’re in London,” Oliver said, re-igniting the anger that had somehow died down while she stared at the townhouse with awe.

“You do not get to tell me where I’ll stay, Your Grace,” she snapped.

Someone would think Alexandra was being difficult, but she genuinely did not want anyone to control her movements.

The country house had made her forget about the men in her life pulling at her strings. She longed to be back in the fresh air, tending to her garden, away from her father and the likes of Gideon Lockwood.

“Just as I could not stop you from causing chaos at Devil’s Draw?” Oliver drawled, loosening his cravat.

Alexandra didn’t like the smirk on his lips, as if her response was amusing to him. While his attitude made her furious, the casual way he was undressing in front of her made her pulse quicken.

“Well, I couldn’t stop you from being a reckless fool!” Alexandra protested, but she felt a thrill when his voice dropped.

“Reckless? Didn’t that recklessness just save you from thugs?”

“You saved me? Perhaps you are the one who needs saving, Your Grace.”

“Are you certain about that?” Oliver asked teasingly, his grin widening.

Alexandra’s eyes darted left and right. There was nobody around. The townhouse was quiet, and they were on the top floor.

Again, she did not feel in danger around Oliver, but what if he asked for what a man needed from his wife? It would be well within his rights.

Her father had made it clear that she should obey her husband. Thankfully, she did not have to make such choices, so far. Oliver had chosen to leave her.

But now?

His chuckle broke through her thoughts.

“Are you laughing at me?” Alexandra demanded.

“You look like a caged animal. Not like a woman with her husband in their home. The servants are asleep, by the way, but they are here if you choose to scream. Most will be awake in two hours.”

“A woman with her husband may as well be caged,” she boldly responded.

She bit back a reply about not knowing why she would need to scream. She knew full well why, and it made her heart pound in her chest.

“Ah. As a man with his wife.”

Alexandra did not know the Duke of Westgrave could be this infuriating, but he was right.

They were both trapped in this marriage.

She also had not noticed some details before, like how his brown hair curled around his collar and how his green eyes appeared grey in the dim light.

She wanted to follow his gaze, only to see how the colors would dance and shift. At least, that was what she told herself. The cold room suddenly felt stuffy and warm, and she wanted to fan herself, but she wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

His voice was deeper than she remembered, though they did not talk much after the wedding. There were only small nods of acknowledgment and fleeting touches as he held her hands in front of the congregation.

A year ago, he was a nuisance her father flung at her. Right now, he seemed like he took all the space in the townhouse with his height, broad shoulders, and imposing presence. He was a gentleman willing to fight for her.

Alexandra sighed and shook her head, trying to rid herself of this new image. She reminded herself that her husband was just like her father.

"You think too much," Oliver said.

It was not a question, but a statement.

"What is it to you?" she asked.

"Well, you're my wife, and I want to know your thoughts. You were also lost in thought for about an hour," he teased.

"I was not!"

"Yes, you were."

His tone was more reflective of the stories she heard about him. He seemed to have been more carefree at a particular time. He also did not give a damn about her.

“What changed? Devil’s Draw? You like saving me from thugs you’ve been well-acquainted with these past months or even years?”

He winced and rubbed his jaw. His cravat hung loosely around his neck, while his tailcoat lay on the sofa. She must have been so dazed that she did not notice him neatly folding his coat. She didn’t like that he was right.

“No, Duchess. It’s not that. I did not like how Percy manhandled you. He had no right,” he muttered, looking away.

For a moment, he sounded like he cared about her even though it could be simply him protecting his property—his wife. She had craved to feel cared for so long, even now that Julian was forever gone.

“Oh.”

She had heard of how the Duke of Newden, Oliver’s brother-in-law, had paid for his gambling debts. He had saved him because he was in love with his sister.

“I am not proud that we started off on the wrong foot—with you being forced to marry me.” Oliver raked his fingers through his hair as he paced the room.

The words that came out seemed difficult for him to say.

“To be fair, you married me because you lost a game,” Alexandra pointed out bitterly.

“Precisely what I was getting at. It is not fair to you, a woman who—” Again, Oliver stopped himself.

Alexandra only then noticed that they were only inches apart. Even beneath the faint

scent of sweat, she could detect the scent of soap and cologne. He smelled manly, but not in an overpowering way.

“Who what, Your Grace?” she prompted.

“Who is my wife. I am your husband,” he answered.

Alexandra scoffed at the ridiculous response, but she couldn’t help wondering what he really meant to say.

“A husband in name only,” she reminded him. “I do not care if you take whores or mistresses, Your Grace. I will be here. The spoils of war.”

Frustration flashed across his face as he grabbed her arms as if to shake her, but he did not. His arms fell to his sides, instead. Then, he looked at her curiously.

She did not flinch when he reached for a strand of her hair and tucked it behind her ear.

“You’re not the spoils of war,” he whispered.

“I am, but it’s not the end of the world,” she said, rolling her eyes. “Women like me live through it.”

“You don’t have to live through anything,” he insisted, absentmindedly stroking her cheek.

She wondered if there was something on it. Grease? Blood? She tried to muster the strength to pull away, but she couldn’t. The circling motion was hypnotic and relaxing, and she found herself closing her eyes.

She had never let her guard down in front of a man. Never.

“Will you give me anything if I stay with you in your townhouse?”

“Anything.”

His husky voice made her eyes flutter open, meeting his heavy-lidded ones. His green eyes were so close, greyer now. Darker. More mysterious. She was drowning in them, and she must swim upward.

“No, I can’t do that. I can’t live here. Let me live elsewhere,” she replied haughtily, happy to get the upper hand again.

“You cannot mean that, Duchess. They’d whisper. We’re in the same city now. Imagine what they’d say if you lived in a different house.”

“They’re already whispering about us.” Alexandra noticed that their voices had dropped to whispers, and she did not like it.

Whispers meant secrets. Intimacy. Trysts.

“I know. I’ve heard them. I also heard the dark things men say about you,” he confessed, his lips almost grazing her ear.

Was he jealous? A sudden thrill coursed through Alexandra. Did he care what other men thought of her? If they wanted her?

“Dark things?” she squeaked.

“Things they’d do to you in the dark. But nobody has the right—” He faltered, cocking his head again. This time, his lips were so close to hers.

Then she noticed that the candles were burning to their ends, dimming the room further. She could not help but imagine what Oliver Audley would do to her in the dark.

“Nobody has the right to what, Your Grace?” Her voice had become sultry, shocking her.

She had never been a seductress. She valued her mind and independence and had never wanted marriage.

Lust was a folly.

Love was insanity.

His hot but delicious breath fanned her lips, teasing her.

It had been a long day and an even longer night—maybe a kiss was what she needed. A kiss would wake her up from her slumber.

He dipped his head further until his lips grazed the skin below her lower lip. Her toes curled in her slippers, and her fingernails dug into the palm of one hand.

“No, Your Grace,” she breathed, gently pushing at his chest.

She felt the hard planes beneath her palms, and even though her body tingled with the desire to touch him again and run her fingers over his skin, she stepped back.

It was a disaster waiting to happen.

“This is wrong,” she added.

“Alexandra...”

Her name on his lips felt too intimate. What could she hear in his voice? Desire? Frustration? She was perhaps doubly frustrated that he did not argue... that he did not persist.

“Oliver.”

Damn it .

Why did she have to say his name like that? Why did it roll on her tongue so easily? Her mind wandered to forbidden territories—to other things her tongue could do...

Interest flickered in his eyes, as though he could read her mind. They locked gazes again. Their bodies were still too close for comfort, and her breathing became labored.

What was going on with her? This was not in her plans. She was there to pay off her father's debts and leave. She was not there to lust after her husband.

So, she turned around, almost bolting away from him and up the stairs, putting as much distance between them as possible. Yet, as she fled, her pulse racing, she couldn't shake the haunting truth.

The greatest danger wasn't Oliver's touch, but how badly she had wanted it.

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Chapter Four

“The breakfast is delicious, Your Grace,” Alexandra murmured, looking refreshed even after the late night. “My compliments to your cook.”

Oliver noted the pink hue on her cheeks, unburdened by rouge. He realized he had not previously looked at her up close with the morning light caressing her errant freckles and bow-shaped lips.

He couldn’t believe how much had changed between yesterday and today.

This morning, he woke up with his wife in his house.

She had even almost ended up in his bed a few hours ago.

Perhaps she had made the right decision by pushing him away, but it left him with a lingering disappointment that still fogged his brain.

With any other woman, he would have been more forward. The chit’s gown would have been stripped off in minutes—stockings, stays, and all. With Alexandra, he had to be careful, as well as patient.

He knew she was an innocent, and she could only respond to something physical. Oliver did not want her to do something she would later regret.

At least she was staying in London with him. She understood the folly of finding other accommodations when her husband was right there, and that was a start.

A start to what?

Oliver groaned when he realized the big step he had taken. That was not how things were supposed to be. He was living a solitary life—married but with a bachelor's privileges.

Alexandra could barely meet his eyes across the breakfast table. Instead, she seemed to find her teacup fascinating.

“Well, Remy likes being called chef de cuisine , partly to remind everyone that he was trained in France. He is also your chef, Duchess. You are, after all, my wife,” he finally responded.

From the way she glanced left and right at the servants standing and waiting for their orders, and flattened her lips, she seemed to be holding back her words. Her back had become even more rigid if that was even possible.

She took a deep breath, and Oliver noticed how her bosom rose. He reminded himself to send a carriage to Lady Barrington's townhouse to bring her lady's maid. Someone would have to restrain Alexandra's generous, ahem , curves.

For his sake.

He was tempted enough just hours ago, and he couldn't imagine anyone else lewdly eyeing his wife. That might cause another fight, and the one with Percy had to be enough for now.

“For about a month, Your Grace,” she said in an uncharacteristically low voice. “Then, I will retreat to the countryside. Or, perhaps our arrangement has a closer expiration date...” she trailed off, her eyes wide and expectant.

She seemed eager to end their agreement, and for some reason, Oliver wasn't pleased.

"I believe I had mentioned my trepidation about divorce. It may ruin your reputation, Duchess. It will barely taint mine because it is already in tatters, but yours..." Oliver let the implication hang, watching her intently.

Alexandra's eyelashes fluttered as she struggled to make eye contact. Even though she was evidently nervous about the new arrangement, Oliver could detect some defiance there.

Her emerald-green eyes flashed with annoyance. "I do not care for my reputation, Your Grace. I barely have family other than my cowardly father. I have no younger sisters whose marriage prospects will depend on my decisions," she responded, her lips quivering. "And you? I doubt that your reputation is truly in tatters. This world is made for men to do as they please."

"You may be surprised that it is not completely so, Duchess," Oliver said, lifting his chin.

He was growing frustrated with the way they had to sit across from each other, but that had always been the norm.

Sitting apart. Sleeping in separate rooms.

"A divorced woman has options," she argued, her eyes glazed, possibly imagining herself being granted complete freedom.

Oliver reminded himself that he should not even care about their situation. She was merely a young woman who had been foisted on him by her father.

It was pitiful, really, to be sacrificed by your own flesh and blood. He was more

fortunate than her. His sister had ventured into a gambling hell to save him; he at least had Catherine.

“Some men see widows and divorcees as easy prey,” Oliver warned.

“By then, it would not be your concern,” Alexandra responded stubbornly.

Her husband would have believed the strong facade if not for her chewing on her lips. She didn’t seem excited about the possibility of men pursuing her after her divorce.

Somehow, that gave Oliver some satisfaction.

“Even so, I should not be here,” she murmured, again finding her teacup more fascinating than her husband.

“I see you’re enjoying the honey cake,” Oliver commented as she fastidiously cut into her slice.

He noticed how graceful her fingers were, as if they were made for making music. He faintly remembered something about her mother playing the pianoforte and her father boasting about her musical talents.

As if just playing the piano could make a woman a good wife.

It was then that Alexandra looked him right in the eyes. She was blushing, the pink on her cheeks turning bright red. But it was more than that. She kept staring at him, and Oliver felt something strange in his belly.

It wasn’t lust, like with the other women, but a strangely pleasant sinking sensation.

His pulse quickened as her gaze lingered. He was having trouble taking his eyes off

her and did not like it.

Not one bit.

He clenched his jaw and looked down at the remnants of his breakfast on his plate.

Why?

Why was it difficult to tear his gaze away from her?

She was beautiful, yes, but Oliver had seen many beautiful women in his life. Most of them would gladly become his lovers. Even with courtesans, fallen debutantes, and divorcees, he had never held their gazes unless to give them a knowing look. A challenge. The haze of lust usually got rid of all the details.

He was slightly annoyed—only slightly. Women usually agreed with him quickly, but his wife didn't seem in a rush to take his side. She was obstinate, nothing like he had expected her to be.

What had he expected?

The woman licking away the crumbs of honey cake on her lips looked tame and innocent enough, but she wasn't as obedient as he thought she was.

For some reason, he wanted her to look at him a little differently. Perhaps as a friend? He absentmindedly nodded at that. A lover?

He squinted at her and slowly shook his head. She glanced at him strangely.

“Well?” he prompted.

“I like the flavor,” she said, nodding agreeably.

But Oliver suspected she liked the cake more than she let on; there were mere crumbs left, and she had barely touched the rest of her breakfast.

Oliver was tempted to let her eat the rest of her honey cake while he looked her in the eye.

“Oh, do you?” he asked, raising an eyebrow as he rose from his chair.

The sudden movement made Alexandra flinch. She closed her mouth just as quickly, her cheeks pinkening again.

“Are you finished with your breakfast?” she squeaked, looking at him with alarm.

He was amused to see the hunger in her eyes as she looked over the rest of her breakfast.

“Finish your breakfast, Duchess. I am simply going against decorum and will sit next to you,” he said as he strode toward her. “How can I be the master of this house if I cannot make my own rules?”

“That sounds like a novel idea, Your Grace. But what is the purpose of such a rule?” Her eyes followed his movement, and her shoulders rose to her ears and stayed like that until he sat beside her.

“Why, to get to know my wife, of course.” His tone was slightly teasing, but he realized he truly wanted to get to know her.

A footman stepped forward from his post by the wall and, as if he could read the Duke’s mind, poured tea into the cup to his right.

“Thank you, Alfred,” Oliver acknowledged as the footman retreated.

He thought he heard approaching footsteps, urgent and a little louder than normal. Did he have visitors early this morning?

“You don’t have to be this close, Your Grace,” his wife protested in a low voice.

Oliver somehow suspected that she would have screamed at him if not for their present company.

This close, he could smell her scent.

Violets. Interesting.

“Oh, but you must finish your breakfast. Let me pour some honey on your bread.”

“You don’t have to do that.” Her tone was no longer as polite, but he had already reached for the honey.

His hand brushed against hers, and she instinctively recoiled, squaring her shoulders. The movement pushed her breasts forward.

Oliver didn’t pull back his hand. Instead, he studied her face. When she pulled back her hand, he let out a long breath slowly.

“Stay with me here in London, Duchess.”

Oliver made the offer not because he wanted her there; it was simply convenient. That way, he would not need to worry about her whereabouts or her plans. The incident at Devil’s Draw was proof that he had to keep a close eye on her. Much like his sister, she could very well disguise herself and get into the gambling hell again.

“I am no longer who I was a year ago, Your Grace. You and my father thought that I was merely an object to be bartered.”

“It was not how it happened,” he replied.

“Would you like to keep me here, as the pitiful wife everyone calls a weakling, while you continue your affairs?”

Oliver was shocked by the bitterness in Alexandra’s voice. No, not bitterness, he decided. She was right to question him. He had not sought her out for the whole year they were married. It took her attempt to save her father to draw him back to her. For him to remember that she existed.

“I have not been with another woman since the day we got married, Duchess. Yes, I was a rake of the first order for a long time, but I am not completely without honor.”

She raised an elegant eyebrow at his declaration. Of course, she would not believe him.

“Then set me free, Your Grace. Set yourself free.”

Oliver realized that it was more difficult to argue with the woman up close. Her scent was subtle, but her presence was not. He was aware of their proximity—something he was responsible for—and the way her eyes flashed with every word that came out of her lips.

He had grown so tired of women with dull eyes and agreeable words—Alexandra was a breath of fresh air.

Or rather, a hurricane. One that threatened to upend his life and leave him standing in the wreckage, wondering why he had ever thought a breeze was harmless.

“Were you in love with another man, Duchess, when you married me? Is that perhaps why you insist we divorce?” he found himself asking.

Oliver’s chest and throat had tightened with an anger he could not understand. It was one thing to use his fists at Devil’s Draw—more for release than for money. It was another to make this woman agree with him.

A shadow seemed to have passed over her face, but even that could not stop him from watching the emotions flicker in her lively eyes and tug at her plump lips.

“What? No! It isn’t about a man!” Her eyes held his, and he wanted to believe that he saw honest indignation there. “I am seeking my independence, Your Grace. Nothing more. After I save my father, I?”

“You still want to save that cad?” he scoffed, affronted.

His wife opened her mouth to speak, but the distinctive sound of a man clearing his throat halted her.

“Pardon me, Your Grace. A message has been delivered for you.”

Both Alexandra and Oliver were startled. They realized that they had been so focused on their argument—and each other—that they had not noticed the servant standing to Oliver’s left, a silver tray in hand.

Breathing hard but trying to hide it, the Duke snatched the envelope off the tray and ripped it open while his wife gaped at him.

“It is a message from our neighbors, the Dowager Countess of Layton and her son, the Earl of Layton. They’ve heard that you are staying here. They want us to come over for dinner whenever we are ready.”

“How did they find out so quickly?” Alexandra wondered aloud.

“Possibly your appearance at Devil’s Draw. We must make an appearance or two, Duchess. They know you are here. They are like bloodhounds.”

“How would those same hounds behave if we seek a divorce?”

“Oh, it could prove quite unpleasant, indeed.”

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Chapter Five

“I cannot believe I’m doing this,” Alexandra sighed.

She stood beside her husband, her gloved hand resting lightly on his arm as they waited for someone to admit them into Lady Beatrice Portsfield’s townhouse.

Their smiles matched, wide and prepared to prove to everyone that they were a happy couple. They had done it before—pretending to be madly in love in front of the ton .

“Do you remember the plan?” Oliver murmured.

“Smile like a silly duck. Nod and agree even if I find what you say absolutely ridiculous. Look at you adoringly,” Alexandra whispered, her hand squeezing his arm hard, a fake smile plastered on her face.

“Please do not stab me with your fan again like you did at the Countess of Ermington’s.”

She smiled at him sweetly, batting her eyelashes as she said, “That was an accident, Your Grace.”

“Of course, it was.”

Before the couple could continue their conversation, the door swung open.

“How delightful to see you, Your Graces!” Lady Portsfield exclaimed, dressed up in

her finery. The long feather in her hat threatened to poke anyone in the eye if they got too close. “I was right when I told the other ladies how beautiful and radiant you two look together.”

Oliver patted his wife’s hand in gentle warning, as if he’d heard the way her breath caught when the door opened.

He flashed Lady Portsfield a charming smile. “It’s wonderful to see you, Lady Portsfield. Thank you for your invitation. You look lovely as usual.”

“Flattery can get you everywhere in my house, Your Grace. Please come in.” Lady Portsfield, in her fifties and thrice married, giggled like a debutante.

“My husband is right. You are positively glowing, Lady Portsfield,” Alexandra agreed.

Oliver looked at her suddenly. It seemed that he was surprised she sounded sincere.

They followed Lady Portsfield to the parlor, where other ladies of the ton of various ages were enjoying tea.

Oliver groaned inwardly. Dealing with one lady was one thing. But dealing with a gaggle of chattering ladies was a challenge he and Alexandra had never faced before.

“It is said, Your Grace, that you prefer keeping Her Grace in the countryside—perhaps for the idyllic setting it offers. Rumor also has it that the two of you enjoy sequestering yourselves in such romantic retreats,” one of the ladies declared, sounding as if she had been bursting to say the words.

Alexandra frowned, but then she quickly plastered on a smile. She and Oliver had never done anything romantic. Even having tea together seemed slightly like a battle.

“Oh, you are right, Lady Celie. Only now I am ready to share her with the rest of the ton .”

The other women murmured in what felt like a mix of awe and envy. Alexandra thought that the reaction meant they would be saved from any further investigation.

She was wrong.

“So, how did you keep your love alive after having lived apart for quite some time?” asked Lady Celie, squinting at them through her pince-nez.

“Oh, yes! I also want to know,” Lady Portsfield agreed, nodding her head excitedly.

Despite her panic, Alexandra managed to answer, “By writing letters.”

However, her... dear husband , whom she would strangle once they were back home, said, “By visiting each other frequently.”

The ladies looked at Alexandra, then at Oliver, and then back again.

Oliver cleared his throat.

“We did both, to be frank,” Alexandra blurted, nodding enthusiastically just like Lady Portsfield. She heard her husband cough to hide his laughter, and it made her furious. “Lots of letters. Lots of visits.”

“Ah,” the ladies said in unison, fanning themselves.

Lady Portsfield, ever the curious hostess, leaned in closer, her eyes twinkling with anticipation. “And tell us, Your Grace, what was the most memorable gift His Grace has given you?”

“A beautiful sapphire necklace,” Alexandra replied without missing a beat.

“A new horse,” Oliver answered simultaneously, freezing as he realized his mistake.

Alexandra blinked rapidly, her smile tightening. “Oh yes! The necklace was for a special occasion, of course. But the horse was just... because he thought I needed the exercise.”

The ladies exchanged knowing looks, murmuring how thoughtful Oliver was, even if they seemed puzzled by the connection between the gifts.

Lady Portsfield clapped her hands together, thrilled by the show. “And what is His Grace’s favorite breakfast, Your Grace?”

“Porridge with honey,” Alexandra declared confidently.

“Ham and eggs,” Oliver said at the same time.

Alexandra shot him an exasperated look while the ladies tittered behind their fans.

Oliver gave her a sheepish grin and shrugged. “Well, it depends on the day. Doesn’t it, my love?”

“Yes,” she agreed, gritting her teeth. “His Grace’s tastes are quite... unpredictable.”

One of the younger ladies, Lady Evangeline, who had been eagerly sipping her tea, leaned forward with a playful grin. “And how did you spend your first anniversary?”

The question caught them both off guard, and they blurted out different answers yet again.

“We went to Bath for a lovely, quiet weekend,” Alexandra said.

Oliver, clearly not knowing when to shut his mouth, said with a grin, “We had a grand picnic in the countryside near the lake.”

Whispers broke out among the ladies.

Lady Portsfield’s eyes darted between the couple, her eyebrows raised in amused curiosity. “Oh, how charming! A picnic near a lake in Bath. Quite the inventive couple, aren’t you?”

Alexandra let out a strained laugh. “Yes, well... when you’re married to someone like the Duke of Westgrave, you have to keep things... exciting and creative.”

“Indeed,” Oliver added, squeezing her hand playfully. “It’s all about making memories, isn’t it, darling?”

Lady Portsfield beamed, oblivious to the subtle barbs exchanged between the couple. “You two are truly the epitome of a perfect match. I truly do not understand why there are any doubts about you two—you look ever so in love!”

Oliver squeezed Alexandra’s hand again, but this time she felt the warmth in the gesture, a silent acknowledgment of their ruse.

“Yes,” he said softly, looking at her. “We do make quite the pair, don’t we?”

Alexandra couldn’t help but smile, a genuine one this time, despite the desire to smack him once they left. “Oh, absolutely. We’re perfectly matched in every possible way.”

For now, they were safe, but what other questions could these ladies ask?

Thankfully, they spent the rest of the afternoon discussing safer topics and smiling when appropriate.

By the end of the visit, Alexandra realized that her husband was still holding her hand. The tension had somehow eased as the hours passed by.

Terrific performance .

“Your Grace, you and the Duke are a lovely couple,” Ellen had told Alexandra while helping her prepare for bed. “He is so handsome.”

Alexandra’s answering look had silenced the poor girl, but Ellen’s words had lingered in her mind.

What would Society see when she and her husband finally made a public appearance? The thought made goosebumps rise on her arms and her stomach flutter with something unfamiliar but not necessarily unwanted.

It was still dark when Alexandra slipped out of Oliver’s townhouse a week after she moved in with him. Ellen and her trunks had been transported to the three-story building, further emphasizing the enormity of this new arrangement. It made leaving and returning difficult, for not only was Oliver aware of Alexandra’s comings and goings, but also the servants seemed to be privy to everything.

This morning had been well-planned, at least in Alexandra’s mind.

Ellen was again anxious about her mistress sneaking out at dawn, although she seemed pleased that Alexandra was now living with her husband. The girl had read too many romance novels for her own good.

“We are n—” Alexandra caught herself before revealing too much.

Of course, Ellen might have some suspicions, but Alexandra knew she was playing a part. Perhaps it would be entertaining to play the happily married couple among the ton. However, she also had her plans to save her father—the same man who had thoroughly insulted her at Devil's Draw.

That morning was the best time to leave the house because Oliver had left for a meeting the night before and would return late. Ellen would make excuses for her mistress, telling the other servants that she was indisposed and would remain in her room, so she alone could check on her.

Alexandra did not want to leave the house without Oliver's knowledge. It felt like a betrayal, but her situation left her with no choice. Still, he had been mostly pleasant and had given her space. She was more worried about how she would react to his presence—probably like a simpering fool.

The carriage stopped at a market square, where Alexandra ordered Ted, the coachman, to wait for her. She walked into a dark alley where a small bachelor's lodgings with ivy creeping up the walls stood between two others like it. What was different about this building was the nameplate on its door.

John Prescott, Professor of Music.

Alexandra was considering hiring one once she'd earned enough money and Oliver allowed her to return to the country, and perhaps live there alone in peace for the rest of her life.

Somehow, she did not feel as thrilled at the thought.

She knocked on the wooden door, barely breathing. She knew that what she was doing could do irreparable damage to her reputation. While she pretended she didn't care how people felt about her, she still felt uneasy about being shunned. About

ruining her husband's reputation. About forever losing people's affections. Her life was already as lonely as it could be.

"Come in," a soft voice called out.

She exhaled and opened the door.

Meeting John was a dangerous necessity. However, as soon as she heard the strains of music coming from his piano, she calmed down.

His home was private and dimly lit as usual, and the sun had not yet risen. Alexandra inhaled the scent of candles and old sheet music as she wandered closer to the piano. Even in her cloak, she shivered a little.

"Good morning, John."

"Alexandra! Or should I now say, Your Grace ?"

John Prescott, her former pianoforte teacher, was a handsome man in his late thirties. He was slender, with long fingers suited for playing the piano, and kind brown eyes.

He raised an eyebrow at her, perhaps wondering at the urgency of her visit and secrecy.

"Please John, call me Alexandra. My title stifles me, and I need to be myself while I am with my music."

"No, Your Grace. I shan't call you Alexandra again. Please make yourself comfortable," John urged, gesturing to an ottoman inches away from the piano bench.

"Thank you," Alexandra sat down primly, placing her clasped hands on her lap.

Under them was her portfolio case, ready to change hands. Her dark cloak made her look like a young widow about to come out of her mourning.

“So, to what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?” John asked.

Alexandra gulped, her heart racing. Why was she nervous? She had been so determined up to that moment, but now, she felt like her heart had crawled all the way up to her throat.

After a long exhale, she declared, “I want to sell my music compositions.”

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Chapter Six

“Y ou wish to sell your music?” John echoed.

“Yes. I will bring more compositions once I have more time to play the piano,” Alexandra answered.

“Let me see them,” John requested, his voice even.

Alexandra could not read his emotions, and it was making her palms sweat. Her hand shook a little when she passed the folio to her old tutor.

“T-They, uh, should be appropriate for dinner parties and balls.” She fiddled with the lace peeking through her thick coat.

“As most things are nowadays,” John replied dryly as he sifted through the sheets. He then set them on the music rest.

Alexandra’s heart raced. The music that was in her head, that she had worked on for weeks, would now be heard by someone else—someone who could decide if it was good or not.

She balled her fists as John nodded while reading the sheet music. Then, he straightened his back and stretched his fingers over the keys. Alexandra squeezed her eyes shut.

Suddenly, music filled the room. Her music.

The ivory keys echoed the harmony and contrast, recreating a world of dreams and wishes. It spoke of Alexandra's hope for her future. The music was lighthearted but unique.

When she opened her eyes, she could see John swaying to the rhythm. She envied how his body had become one with the notes, ones that she had painstakingly written but could not claim.

She was, after all, only a woman.

The notes became darker near the end. The melody became sharper and more fragmented, and the tempo seemed to be racing to a violent end.

She gasped, as John had to push his usually calm self to reach the heights of her music.

Then, there was silence.

John was breathless, his fingers trembling over the keys. When he twisted to face her, his face was full of concern.

“Y-You didn't like it?” Alexandra asked.

If there was one thing she was confident about, it was her music. If she couldn't have even that, then what was her purpose?

“It's stupendous, Your Grace. But is there something the matter?” His brow was furrowed as he rested his elbows on his lap.

He seemed prepared to listen to her—to whatever woes she might share.

“Nothing is the matter, John,” she lied.

Everything was wrong. She was married, not out of love but for convenience. Her father was drowning in debt, and his life might be in danger. And on top of all that, she could not even sell her music with her name on it.

“The music is frenzied. It is beautiful, but there is anxiety in it. Loss of control. It deserves more than simply being played at dinner parties. It must be played at concertos,” John spoke, pulling her out of her thoughts.

“W-Well, that is a marvelous compliment coming from you, John.” Alexandra realized that her shoulders had been hunched the whole time they were conversing. She straightened her spine as hope bloomed in her chest. “And it could fetch a good price?”

“Yes. However, you must be honest with me, Your Grace. Why do you need the money so badly? You are a duchess. Forgive me for asking, but is the Duke a cruel man? Has he not given you an allowance, as he should?”

“No, John. He is not cruel,” Alexandra responded a little too sharply. “He is a decent man. He provides for me, but I have to earn my own coin. Why can’t a woman earn her own living, even by using a man’s name?”

“If he is a good man, you should not need the money. Your husband is more thrifty than other men like him. He is wiser than most people think he is. At least, that is what I have heard. Alexa—Your Grace, what you are doing is dangerous.”

“Dangerous? How can it be? You take my sheet music and sell it under the name J. Lewis. You said they can be sold as concerto pieces.”

J. Lewis was a name she came up with—J for Julian, her late brother, and Lewis, a

variation of her mother's name, Louisa.

"That may be true. However, these compositions are excellent. People will want to know who wrote them. They won't be happy about the secrecy."

"What about that painter, Eric Westback? I have been informed by a friend that despite him remaining anonymous, the ton still buys his art," she responded, recalling some of the letters she'd exchanged with her friend Lady Mary Barrington.

John sighed. "That is true, but they are constantly speculating about his identity. Word travels fast in the ton, Your Grace. One wrong move and you—and eventually this Westback character—would be found out."

Alexandra fell silent. She knew there were risks, but she did not know exactly what. Nobody was willing to discuss such things with women, especially ladies like her, who were born in supposedly respectable, noble families.

John took her silence as a prompt to continue. "Your reputation can be ruined. You keep visiting me without an escort. You came here when it was still dark out. And I am quite certain your husband is not aware of it."

"No, he is not," Alexandra replied, looking up.

"Even if you do not fear for your reputation, think about your husband's name," John advised. "He is a man of great status. Imagine if people think his wife is breaking her marriage vows. If you are ostracized, Your Grace, no one will buy your music."

"I am aware of the risk, John. But I need to do this."

"Your Grace, if your identity is unmasked, it might expose you to accusations of fraud. As a woman, you are not expected to sell sheet music. You are of genteel birth

and a good marriage.”

“I will sell them under a man’s name, John, as I said. It is not for myself, but for someone whose life may be in danger. Use the name J. Lewis. Please.”

A shadow passed over his face, as if he could tell exactly who it was that needed saving.

Alexandra took a deep breath and smoothed down her cloak. She had to go before her husband discovered her absence.

“Very well, Your Grace. I shall find you a buyer. I will contact you once it’s done.”

“Thank you, John.”

“You are welcome, Your Grace.”

The sadness in his voice made it clear to her that while he admired her work, he also pitied her.

Alexandra slipped out of the lodgings, her heart thundering with apprehension.

The sun was completely up, its bright rays illuminating even the narrow alley she had to walk out of to the marketplace. One small tug on her cloak and someone would see her face and expensive dress.

Not many people might know her now, but Oliver had plans to introduce her to other members of the ton . They could still associate her with the mad chit who slipped into a man’s lodgings at dawn without an escort.

Once in the marketplace, her heart sank when she did not see the carriage. Where was

it? Where was the coachman?

Her temples throbbed as she paced back and forth until she spotted the carriage down the street. Ted must have moved it away to accommodate the tradesmen setting up their stalls.

She inhaled the cold air as she climbed into the comfort and safety of the carriage.

“Are you all right, Your Grace?” Ted asked.

“I am fine, simply tired,” was her brief reply.

The coachman sounded concerned. For her. For himself.

Whatever happened to her, Ted would be implicated, too. As Ellen would be. It was not just a risk to herself, Alexandra realized, and she wondered why she still cared about her father. He did not care about her. She could simply leave London and retire to the countryside, and let her husband live a bachelor’s life.

She was not going to be selfish. After all, it was merely an arrangement. They were married in name only. There was nothing else between them.

“His Grace has arrived, Your Grace,” Ted announced solemnly as they approached the townhouse.

True enough, Oliver’s carriage was already there.

Wild-eyed, Alexandra attempted to come up with an excuse for her absence.

“I bought some pastries and bread, Your Grace. They are in the basket to your left, the one covered with the red cloth,” Ted suddenly said.

Alexandra heaved a sigh of relief, grateful for the man's quick thinking. She knew that her husband was a rake and a pugilist, but he was also an intelligent man.

"Thank you, Ted. But you must know that I did not betray your master."

She felt the need to clarify that. No matter how fair she thought it would be for Oliver to find solace in someone else's arms, she could not imagine seeking another man even though she was not married for love. It went against her beliefs. Her father was already dishonorable enough for both of them.

"I know, Your Grace," Ted reassured her. "If I may speak boldly, though, people will not care about the truth. They want a scandal,"

She nodded at that, taking the basket with her as she alighted from the carriage. She took shaky breaths, hoping Oliver would not notice her nervousness, but she was not given enough time to compose herself.

Just as she raised her hand to knock on the door, it swung open.

"Ah, Duchess. There you are." Oliver narrowed his eyes at her, his head tilted to the left.

Alexandra swallowed as she prepared to give an excuse. For she could not tell him the truth.

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Chapter Seven

“ I bought some bread and a few other things,” Alexandra blurted, looking flustered.

Oliver thought there was something between himself and his wife. Maybe it was respect or physical attraction, but there was something there—intangible but definite. However, seeing her arriving home early in the morning, looking disheveled, made him wonder if he was fooling himself. They were not even friends.

They were strangers whose lives had collided because of a gambling debt.

Then again, she was still his wife. Alexandra was his . She should not be sneaking out, doing only God knew what.

She was wearing a heavy cloak over her dress, the lace peeking as if attempting to tell everyone that a duchess was pretending to be a commoner returning from her morning walk.

There was nothing ordinary about Alexandra. Her face had no artifice, but her emerald-green eyes were enough to catch people’s attention.

Oliver wondered who had been gazing into them this morning. He shuddered at the thought and clenched his hands into fists. He suddenly felt the urge to punch the wall.

Perhaps he could visit the Duke of Oakdale, his friend and boxing partner. He needed to release the pent-up frustration.

Oliver let his wife in. It was not customary, but he'd been waiting for her for more than an hour. He also did not want a servant to see her in her current state.

"Daisy is the one tasked with buying bread at the market, Duchess. There is no need for you to concern yourself with that," he informed her, his voice sharp.

When he closed the front door, the hall seemed dimmer than usual, even though his townhouse was often described as brightly lit by his friends.

Suddenly, he was taken aback by the way the decor looked ostentatious with his wife standing in the middle, wrapped in her shabby cloak, her curls unraveling.

What could have made her locks tumble down and her cheeks flush? He did not want to consider the possibilities, and yet they were ramming into his head.

"Oh. I did not know that, Your Grace," she responded. He saw her lower lip tremble ever so slightly. She chewed on it. "However, I am used to going for walks in the early morning."

"Take Ellen with you next time. She seems loyal to you and will take your side no matter what."

Oliver surprised himself by saying those words—full of suspicion—in a monotone that somehow made the accusation stronger.

"What do you mean by that?" Alexandra asked as she fumbled with her cloak. Her voice had risen, and her fingers trembled.

None of it painted a good picture, and Oliver felt his heart sink into the pit of his stomach.

He reasoned that he was merely concerned about his reputation. He had nearly ruined it once. His wife did not have to add fuel to the fire.

“She told the other servants that you were indisposed when—let me help you with that.” Oliver stepped closer to her and helped loosen the tight knot around her neck.

He was so distracted by her fumbling that he had to stop his questioning.

“I-I can do it,” she stammered, even as his fingers deftly loosened the knot.

Suddenly, his fingers grazed the swell of her breasts. Her skin was soft beneath the rough calluses. She gasped softly.

Oliver stiffened, his fingers still on the cord, but at least the knot had loosened. The knot in his stomach, however, lingered. It tightened, painful but almost pleasurable.

He looked down at the soft skin that he had just touched. The mounds were turning a rosy pink. But, oh , she was so sensitive that the color spread so quickly beneath her bodice.

Yet, here she was, stubbornly refusing to tell him what she was really doing. Gamblers knew when they were being lied to or when something was being hidden from them—at least most of the time.

“As I was saying, your maid lied to my servants for you.”

“I was not well this morning,” she replied stubbornly, meeting his intense gaze.

There was a flicker of fear in her eyes—one that he didn’t expect. One that he didn’t want to see. If only he saw defiance in her eyes, for it would mean she was telling the truth—that she was merely buying bread.

“You look well enough, Duchess,” he responded, pointedly looking at her pinkening décolletage.

Oliver wondered if the woman he married was capable of infidelity. She did not seem too interested in anyone else, and he believed her when she said that she was not in love with another. For her, independence was what she desired. Freedom.

He tucked an errant curl behind her ear. Her eyes widened, as if she was just realizing what she looked like after allegedly buying bread—rumpled and slightly perspiring.

So, yes, seeing her blushing and flustered, it was easy to imagine that she had a tryst before coming back home.

His fists clenched at the idea that she wanted someone so terribly that she snuck out of the house to see them at first light. He imagined her thinking about another man as soon as her eyes opened.

No, it didn’t sound like Alexandra at all. Oliver reasoned that it wasn’t consistent with her character. But love could change people—for better or for worse.

His throat felt raw at the thought, but he shook it away quickly. It did not mean he would not try to find out what she had been doing.

Then again, Oliver did not really know his wife.

What if...?

A nagging thought crept into his mind. What if Alexandra was raising money for her father behind his back?

But how? What can a young woman do to earn enough money to pay off substantial

gambling debts? She refused to use her allowance.

“I suppose it’s the morning sunshine and fresh air, Your Grace. Perhaps you are right. I may have to take Ellen with me on my next venture,” Alexandra said airily, having composed herself.

She tossed her head, making her stray curls bounce against her coiffure.

Oliver decided at that moment that his wife would not go on another venture. Not without his knowledge.

And perhaps not without him.

“You’re here to check the state of your wife’s finances. Is she doing worse than you once did, Your Grace? Forgive me for asking, but does she also gamble? Does she buy too many clothes?” Oliver’s solicitor, Henry Fields, had a cigar dangling from his lips while he rattled off the series of questions.

The room was smoky and dim, reminiscent of the domain of a gambling hell owner than a solicitor’s office.

“The Duchess has no such proclivities. However, her father is drowning in debt. She attempted to pay it off, but her money was not enough. Still, she had a considerable amount with her even though she barely used her allowances. It makes me wonder how and where she got the money.”

“Hmm.”

The noncommittal answer annoyed Oliver. He was willing to pay good money to investigate his wife, and the solicitor seemed not to take it as seriously.

“I need you to investigate her financial activities. Does she have a source of income that I don’t know about?”

“Are you concerned that the Duchess might be involved in something... illegal?” the solicitor asked, resting his cigar on a tray, the smoke curling up in the poorly ventilated room.

Oliver sighed. He did not know what to think. He had let a beautiful stranger into his home, and his simple days of avoiding vice, boxing for entertainment, and flirting with ladies were over.

Things were not simple when his wife was more secretive than an owl—or a slithering snake.

When he went home that night, he was gratified to hear the strains of the piano.

There, in a previously unused music room, Alexandra sat at the piano, playing a melody he was not familiar with.

It was beautiful, haunting, and sad.

He stood quietly by the door of the music room, not daring to make any noise lest she stop.

He had known his wife was talented, but the way her fingers flew over the keys... it was mastery. She was playing like a virtuoso, someone who had been playing concertos for years.

But Alexandra had not. Instead, she had been imprisoned in a loveless marriage and sequestered in the countryside.

The first strains of music lulled him into complacency. They then swerved into darker territory, growing faster. Alexandra's curls bounced as her fingers expertly moved over the keys, her body entirely absorbed in the performance. The crescendo built, fierce and powerful, until it felt as though the room itself was holding its breath.

And so was Oliver.

Then, without a warning, the music stopped, the final note hanging in the air like an unanswered question. Alexandra's hands stilled, but she did not turn around.

"I didn't know you played so beautifully," Oliver said quietly, his voice barely above a whisper, but it was enough to make her shoulders tense up.

She looked over her shoulder, her eyes soft and distant, still lost in the music.

"Your Grace," she murmured, rising gracefully from the piano bench, "I wasn't expecting you."

"I didn't expect to find you here," Oliver countered, his gaze fixed on her. "This music... it's haunting."

A flicker of something—sadness, perhaps—crossed her face. "It's an old melody from my childhood," she said, her fingers lightly brushing the edge of the piano. "I used to play it often."

"That was remarkable, Duchess," he said, taking a step closer, his voice warmer than he had intended. "I wish I'd known this side of you sooner."

She looked at him, her eyes betraying a hint of vulnerability. "There are many things you do not know about me, Your Grace."

Her words hung in the air, both a statement and a challenge. Oliver took another step forward, still holding her gaze.

“Well then,” he said quietly, “I had better start learning.”

Her eyes flickered to his lips, and for an agonizing second, he thought she might step closer. The tension between them was palpable, the kind that could so easily pull them together or break them apart.

But then she straightened up, the cool mask of composure slipping back into place.

“Goodnight, Your Grace,” she whispered as she slipped past him and out of the room.

Oliver stood there, watching her go, her haunting melody still echoing in the air.

And that was when realization dawned on him.

Music .

That could be the key to finding out who Alexandra Audley truly was.

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Chapter Eight

“ O ne more round, and I could have had you on the ropes,” Philip Ellington, the Duke of Oakdale, boomed, laughing and lowering his equally perspiring body into a chair.

Oliver’s muscles ached deliciously. The sweat dripping down his skin, making his shirt cling to his chest, somehow made him feel better. Reinvigorated.

He eyed his friend with a grin. “You and I both know that is not true. I had you from the start,” he retorted, reaching for a towel to wipe the sweat from his brow.

He did not bother to hide his smirk. The two of them had been friends for most of their lives. While Philip was also close with Thomas Riverton, the Duke of Newden—Oliver’s brother-in-law—the two of them were more dedicated to boxing than the others.

Even though he and his wife Aurelia already had a child, Philip still found some time for boxing.

“You need to get on a real ring one day, Westgrave. Show them how well a duke can box.” He shook his head in delighted disbelief. “Show them that we dukes are not weaklings.”

“You know I do compete, old friend,” Oliver reminded his friend, alluding to his activities at Devil’s Draw.

Philip groaned. “Devil’s Draw is not an establishment you should frequent in the first place. Especially now that you’re debt-free.”

“Let us not be so melancholy. We box to rid ourselves of terrible spirits. If it earns me some extra coin, it is even better,” Oliver replied.

Philip did not understand what it was like to be afraid of losing everything. Oliver knew it well. It was why he handled his income more delicately.

“I do it for the exercise, my friend. If you are doing it to rid yourself of some other kind of pain, perhaps you might want to tell me about it.”

“There’s nothing to tell. I am happy that you’re here. It would be ideal if we could do it more often,” Oliver said sincerely as he, too, took a seat.

“You have been doing it often enough. Do not exert yourself too much—you must save your energy for pleasing your wife,” Philip teased.

At that, the hairs on the back of Oliver’s neck stood on end. He had to stop the visceral reaction he had to any mention of his wife, who was preoccupied with other things. Music. Embroidery. Buying bread.

He almost chuckled bitterly at that. At least Alexandra had agreed to accompany him on calls to friends and relatives. He did not like how resigned she’d looked recently.

“You don’t know me at all,” he said half-heartedly. His meaning was different from whatever Philip had in mind.

“I am merely teasing. I know you used to have the energy for all the harlots on Hawthorne Street.” Philip rose to get himself some gin while his friend eyed him warily. “And do not forget that you did the same to me when I tied the knot.”

“That’s a big exaggeration. I did not have that many harlots in my bed.” Oliver might have been a rake, but he was careful about his health, like some of the more informed members of the ton . “As for teasing you about dear Aurelia, you deserved it.”

“I know. As for the harlots, I also know you only dallied with lonely widows and ruined young women.”

“You’re making me sound like a reprobate.” Oliver laughed. “I probably was—still is. I am not quite sure.”

“What does your wife think about that?”

“Why are you interested in my wife, Oakdale?”

“Easy there, friend. I am very happily married. However, from what I hear, the ton is quite interested in your wife. You hid her for a year. Then, she comes out, charming everyone. It seems things have improved in your marriage?”

Oliver did not think things had improved. If they had, why would he be feeling more anxious? He had been living a life without any concerns when Alexandra was living far from London. Far away from him.

Out of sight, out of mind.

Boxing with Philip had eased some of his burdens, but once the distraction was over, his thoughts drifted to Alexandra. He again felt the weight of his suspicions pressing down on him.

“Things are... complicated between Alexandra and me,” he admitted as he leaned back in his chair. “Her interests and mine do not align, as do our plans and beliefs.”

“Do you perhaps miss the days when the ton had not laid their eyes on her?” Philip asked, leaning against the mantelpiece. With a glass of gin in hand, he studied his friend.

“I do. I can feel the weight of their scrutiny.”

“You never cared about what the ton says.” Philip drank the rest of his gin. “Until now.”

“You are right. I never cared about the ton’s scrutiny. However, they are now following Alexandra’s every move. Many know about her father, and they look at her with that in mind.”

Oliver was surprised by his own words. He had not voiced these thoughts even when he was alone, but Philip managed to pry them from him with boxing and good conversation.

“The two of you now live under the same roof. Take it as an opportunity to build something good. Raise a family together, perhaps.”

Oliver’s chest tightened at the thought of the little pit he’d put himself in. He had not told Philip about how he and Alexandra were forced into the marriage. His friend did not know that they did not marry for love and that he constantly worried that his wife loved something or someone else enough to risk her reputation.

“It is not as easy as that.”

“Is it because you find yourself pretending to like her pursuits of embroidery and music?” Philip teased.

Oliver decided that his friend did not need to know what was going on in his

marriage. He could just string out the theme at hand—make him believe things were simple.

“I went to buy bread with her the other day,” he confessed with a boyish grin, the one that made people believe that he never cared—that he only sought entertainment and vice. “The gossip rags will be writing about how the Duke of Westgrave accompanied his wife to the market.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that.” Philip chuckled and looked at his friend with what seemed like admiration—one that Oliver could not, in good conscience, accept.

Oliver went to the market with his wife not because he wanted to share in her interests. He went because he suspected she was about to meet with someone else again.

“It’s time to reclaim your wife, Westgrave,” Philip continued, shaking his head with a smile.

“What do you mean?”

“I’m your friend, Oliver. Of course, I’ve noticed that you two had no contact for a year, and you did not care much about it. Until now.”

“Until now,” Oliver echoed, suddenly feeling queasy.

“Yes. Your eyes sparkle when you talk about her. And, indeed, she is a beautiful woman with charm, grace, and wit. People have been talking about her, but fondly.”

“Enough of this,” Oliver said a little roughly. “Let us box again.”

Philip’s eyes softened. It seemed that he could tell his friend wanted an escape.

Alexandra was still a difficult topic for him.

Oliver took off his shirt, showing that he meant business. He needed to exorcise his wife from his thoughts, even if it meant more physical pain.

Philip nodded in understanding and readily faced him.

It was a friendly spar, but it was no less intense. The Duke of Westgrave enjoyed using his body instead of his head.

The body could handle the pain, but the mind could only take so much.

After Philip had left, Oliver thought of getting some refreshments from the kitchen. He had narrowly avoided drinking gin with his friend, who had managed to make one buried thought blossom—making his forced marriage a real one. However, Oliver might need lemonade or simply a glass of water, instead.

Deep in thought, he walked out of the training room and into the hallway, and he felt something—or rather, someone—collide with him.

“Oh. My apologies, Your Grace.”

It was Alexandra, holding a book open.

The book was *Fanny Hill: Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* .

Oliver could not stop a smirk from forming on his lips.

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Chapter Nine

There were three things that made Alexandra gasp when she ran into her husband in the hallway.

One, she collided with something solid. She had never been that close to a man before, and her breasts seemed to bounce off Oliver's hard chest.

Two, he was shirtless. The sheen of perspiration seemed to emphasize his maleness, his musky scent teasing her senses. She would never forget it ever again.

Three, she was holding a licentious novel that a countess a decade older than her had gifted her.

"We can't wait to see your children, Your Grace. You and the Duke make a lovely couple. Perhaps you need a little nudge," Lady Laverton had said, her serious voice contrasting with the smirk on her face. "Though I've heard he doesn't need it."

It was a... very good read, indeed. She'd read it by the candlelight at night, when it felt appropriate to be consumed. And, well, it did consume her.

Now, she was even reading it in broad daylight. The look on her husband's face suggested that he was well acquainted with the novel.

It was humiliating, to say the least.

Alexandra had been living with her husband for ten days. So far, they had managed to

cohabitate with quiet harmony. Each of them had an activity of their own, except for the times Oliver listened to her play the piano or accompanied her to the market to buy bread. The latter had become a means to solidify her earlier pretense.

Calling on members of the ton felt more like an activity Oliver would arrange. Although Alexandra was beginning to enjoy it, she would not dare say that to her husband.

However, it almost felt like her husband found reasons to be around her. He had to be suspicious.

At the very moment, he did not look suspicious. Instead, he gazed at her with blatant interest.

Flames seemed to lick Alexandra's skin even though they were too far away from the nearest fireplace. She could not look away.

How could she? The Duke of Westgrave had a body honed to perfection. He was not bulky like the pugilists she saw in the papers, but lean and muscular. The taut muscles of his lower abdomen drew her eyes toward his breeches.

She swallowed.

"Do you like what you see, Duchess?" he asked, his tone formal but his eyes twinkling, reminding her of the naughty countess who gave her the book she was holding in her hands.

"W-What do you mean?" She closed the book and hid it behind her back.

Oliver had already seen it, but it seemed like an invitation for more goading if she left it on display.

“You know what I mean. Do you always hide behind your innocence?” he asked, inching even closer.

He was looking down at her, but there was no menace there. His eyes were heavy-lidded, his nostrils flared. Alexandra tried not to breathe in his natural musky scent. Her fingernails pressed harder into the leather binding of the book she held as she barely restrained herself from throwing her arms around him. She had never felt such a scandalous urge before.

Perhaps it was the book, but deep inside, she knew that it was the man in front of her.

“I-I simply think you should not be walking around the house with no shirt on, Your Grace,” she whispered, but she would not let him see her retreat.

She stood where she was, feeling the heat of his skin on her body and his breath on her forehead as she held his gaze.

“Ah. Do we also have rules against reading materials?” he asked, reaching behind her and gently prying the book from her hand. He inspected it closely, but it was clear he knew what it was about.

“Lady Laverton gave it to me,” she protested, reaching for the book with one hand. “If you would give it back, please.”

Oliver raised it higher, out of her reach.

“Your Grace,” she gritted out.

She was about to jump to reach for her book, but then she decided against it. He would not see her beg for anything, much less jump like a prized dog.

She turned around in a huff and strode away.

“Duchess.” His voice held a soft plea that sent a shiver down her spine.

Her toes curled at the familiar way his hand reached out, resting lightly on her arm, respectful but intimate.

His touch was warm against her already heated skin. He didn’t curl his fingers around her arm. He just held her there, gentle but firm enough to keep her close.

When he pulled her toward him, she didn’t resist, though her breathing grew shallow, catching in her throat. His arm slid around her waist, drawing her into the solid warmth of his damp torso.

The contact made her pulse quicken, and she barely stifled a moan as her body responded to his nearness.

No.

“Duchess, you keep running away from me. I am your husband, and I merely want to get to know you. After all, you are the reason I... have abstained for more than a year now.”

“That cannot be true. You? Abstaining?” she asked, her voice coming out hoarse as if she had been screaming.

Oliver nodded, his gaze steady, though there was something dark and teasing just beneath the surface. “Oh yes. Despite what you have heard about me, I am still a man of honor. No matter what the world might think of me.”

His words surprised her, sent a shiver through her.

His lips quirked into a half-smile, and his voice dropped. “But, Duchess, let me tell you... it’s getting much harder to remain honorable, with you standing this close.”

Her heart skipped a beat at his words. It was subtle, but the implication sent heat to her cheeks. Her fingers twitched against his chest, betraying her faltering resolve.

“And you’re not making it any easier,” he added, his eyes boring into hers. “But perhaps we could work on... honoring our vows. Together.”

Alexandra’s breath caught in her throat as the meaning of his words sank in. His hand slid up her arm, just grazing her neck, his touch leaving a trail of heat in its wake.

But before her body could betray her further, she quickly stepped back, breaking eye contact.

“You shouldn’t say such things, Your Grace,” she managed, her voice barely steady.

His smile widened, and this time, it was pure wickedness. “Oh, but I will, Duchess. And I suspect you’ll come to want me to.”

She swallowed hard, every pulse of heat in her veins betraying her desire. But she couldn’t give in. Not yet.

Oliver placed her book in her hands. Then, he walked away, leaving her standing there, trying to catch her breath. A strange new sensation came over her—a throbbing between her legs and a flutter in her chest.

She forced herself to move, wondering why she let him pull her that close. Physically. Emotionally.

It was far too inconvenient for this marriage of convenience.

Chapter Ten

“ I will come with you to the opera,” Oliver declared as he entered the Duchess’ chambers. “Might as well, as I am now dressed for it.”

He vowed to give his wife some space. He needed to be away from her, anyway. However, he found it difficult to do so when he discovered her plans to attend the opera.

He saw her deep frown and Ellen’s confused expression in the mirror in front of them.

Indeed, he was dressed up, his black tailcoat hanging over his breeches comfortably.

Alexandra ran her eyes over his clothes, from his cravat to his shoes. Then, she looked back at her reflection in the mirror. She wore a purple evening gown with an empire waist and gloves that covered her arms.

“You do not have to, Your Grace,” she said calmly, although there was nothing calm about the expression on her face.

“But I will. Ellen, open the drawer in front of you—you’ll find the amethyst and diamond necklace there. Put it around your mistress’s neck. It will look wonderful with her gown.”

The maid quickly complied. She seemed delighted to put such beautiful and expensive jewelry on Alexandra.

“Just because you’ve gifted me this jewelry, as beautiful as it is, doesn’t mean you have to accompany me, Your Grace,” Alexandra said, but she seemed distracted with the amethyst heart pendant.

She traced it with her fingers as if hypnotized by it.

“It is another opportunity for us to be seen together in public, Duchess. I want people to know you are my wife.”

“Ellen, please leave us.” Alexandra’s voice had become weary.

“Yes, Your Grace,” the maid said and scurried away, closing the door behind her.

Alexandra turned to face her husband. “We will attend the opera together, but remember that eventually, I will back to the countryside. All that we have are lies, and I cannot keep on lying.”

“All?”

“Perhaps not all. You have proven to be more decent than I thought you to be. You’ve given me everything I could ever need. However, we cannot get past the real purpose of our marriage.”

Oliver frowned. It seemed as though she could not get past it.

It had been a while since Oliver had been to the opera. The times he had gone, it was often with his sister Catherine and her husband Thomas.

When they arrived at the opera house, he immediately spotted the other couple.

“Oh, finally! I thought you were planning to hide your wife forever, Oliver,”

Catherine teased, playfully pointing her floral fan at her brother.

“Good evening, Sister. Newden,” Oliver greeted, ignoring her comment.

With these public appearances, Oliver found an excuse to tuck Alexandra’s hand in the crook of his elbow.

“Ignore your sister, Oliver. She is simply curious about you two,” Thomas explained with a smile.

Oliver wondered how quickly word of his outing with Alexandra had spread.

“I understand, Newden. Remember that I knew your wife for several years before you met her,” he replied teasingly.

“Of course,” Thomas agreed, lifting his wife’s gloved hand gently to kiss her knuckles.

Catherine giggled delightedly, while Alexandra stiffened against Oliver’s arm. Oliver rubbed her arm with his other hand. It was meant to comfort her, and judging by the way her body relaxed, it worked.

Not long after meeting with his sister and her husband, Oliver felt another shift in his wife’s mood. She was responsive, making him think of other ways he could make her even more so. He reminded himself that they were in public and that he should not be thinking of her that way.

He let himself be lulled by the beautiful music. It reminded him of more innocent days.

Alexandra was just as or even more engrossed in the performance. She did not even

notice that he'd wrapped his arm around her. Oliver could not help it. She was soft against his hard body, a contrast he was growing to enjoy.

With them sitting so close, it almost felt like they had a real marriage. It was a frightening prospect that Oliver had been entertaining of late.

During the intermission, he guided his wife to the lobby to greet acquaintances or to simply be seen. While some wealthy patrons preferred staying in their private boxes, Oliver thought that it would be good to use the time to show everyone that they were a happily married couple.

"John," Alexandra uttered suddenly.

Who was John? Oliver followed her gaze and saw a man a few years older than himself walking toward them.

His curiosity was piqued. Who was this man? Was he the kind of man his wife sought?

John was the opposite of him, and perhaps it was why his wife had never been impressed with him.

"Your Grace." The man's voice was barely a whisper, but it sounded like an explosion in Oliver's head.

There was nothing improper about it, but the warmth and familiarity in the man's voice made Oliver ball his hands into fists—he didn't like it one bit.

"Mr. Prescott," Alexandra responded, with a slight nod. "Your Grace, Mr. John Prescott was my music teacher. Mr. Prescott, this is my husband, the Duke of Westgrave."

“Pleasure, Mr. Prescott,” Oliver offered in a cold tone.

“Likewise, Your Grace,” John responded with a slight bow.

“How did you find the first acts and the overture?” Alexandra asked.

She was outwardly calm, but Oliver noticed her fingers playing with the pendant of her necklace. Her back had also become ramrod straight.

“They were marvelous. However, I can think of a few pieces that could add to the emotions in the story.”

“Perhaps something that starts with a good melody and descends into madness?” she asked, sounding breathless.

“Perhaps,” John demurred, his gaze fixed on her.

It was as if Oliver was not there at all.

His ears perked up at Alexandra’s choice of words. Why were these two discussing what pieces the opera should have? Why did it seem like they knew exactly what the other was saying?

His blood ran cold. He prayed that he would not lose his temper and make a scene.

“That sounds like something you’ve played for me before, Duchess,” he commented, stressing the final word. “That first time you played in the townhouse.”

“It does, does it not?” Alexandra turned to him with a smile, but it was strained, as it did not reach her eyes.

“Oh, and Mr. Prescott? Perhaps you should compose music, since you find it such a fascinating subject,” Oliver could not help but sneer.

At this point, the other man seemed calm, and it grated on Oliver’s nerves. He wondered if Alexandra was playing one of John’s compositions. He could still remember the passion she had put into it, and it made him want to rip off his cravat.

“Ah, no. My passion lies in the academic realm. However, I can appreciate and recognize raw talent. I’ve also learned how to identify what is missing in some pieces or performances.”

“Have you seen my wife perform?” Oliver’s tone was suggestive, emphasizing the last word, and Alexandra looked up at him in surprise.

John did not seem affected by it.

“In fact, I have. She is a wonderful pianist, just like her late mother.”

Oliver’s grip on his wife’s arm tightened. She would not even fight him. She did pull away from him, making him wonder if John’s presence emboldened her. He thought it was proof that she was guilty of something.

“How long have you known each other?” he demanded.

“Enough to know that she can play well. I teach music, after all.” John glanced at him warily.

There was something in his eyes that Oliver could not read. He was certain the man had not seen anyone glance at him that way.

“You teach music and nothing else?” Oliver prodded, steam almost coming out of his

ears.

“Nothing else,” John replied solemnly. “It is a good enough source of income for someone with no wife and children.”

Oliver tucked those details away for later. His wife had been thrilled to see another man—an unmarried, unattached man—at the opera.

Alexandra had originally wanted to go alone. She played the piano with passion, and the gentle-looking music teacher shared that passion. He might seem mild at the moment, but what was he like with Alexandra?

A muscle ticked in Oliver’s jaw, and the next words that John and Alexandra exchanged no longer registered. He put his hand on the small of her back and applied some pressure. He could swear he heard a soft whimper, but there was no complaint.

“I shall leave you to enjoy the rest of the opera and the evening, Your Graces.” John bowed politely. “I believe the next act is about to begin.”

“Will you be going back to company?” Alexandra asked.

Oliver’s lips thinned. Was his wife jealously wondering whether her former music teacher had come with a woman?

“My friend is waiting for me,” John answered, although a strange emotion laced his words.

It could not have been shame. Why would it be?

The music master seemed to be a little uneasy for once, and it gave Oliver some satisfaction. But as he watched his wife staring at John’s retreating figure with parted

lips, another dark emotion reared its ugly head.

It was jealousy, was it not? Fierce and hot and overwhelming. Oliver was unfamiliar with the feeling, but it seemed clear as a cloudless sky that it was what was bothering him.

“You seemed familiar with him,” he remarked as casually as he could muster.

Alexandra blinked. Then, she finally turned her gaze back to him. “He was my music instructor. So, we worked closely together.”

“Worked closely together, you say?” he asked, twisting the words.

“Yes. Piano requires quite intensive practice, Your Grace.”

If she found his words offensive, she did not show it. There might have been a slight tremor in her fingers, but it could have been his imagination.

“Would I know what it is like to... work closely with you, now that you are in London?” he asked, looking down at her with a raised eyebrow.

“Well, I suppose.”

“You sound uncertain.”

“Your Grace, remember that you’re the one who decided to leave me in a country house miles away from you.”

She was right. Oliver could have chosen to get to know her, but he had merely thought her a nuisance. If she had grown closer to other men, it would no longer be her fault. Not entirely, anyway.

He looked away from her, and the two returned to their box. Yet, the tension hung heavy between them.

At the moment, he did not feel like sitting close to her. He angled his body away from her as he watched the next act.

It was the beginning of turmoil in the opera, but it had already spread all over his body.

Chapter Eleven

Alexandra felt bereft. She missed the heat of Oliver's body. It was his way, always finding a reason to be close to her.

Those moments made her believe that their marriage might turn into something more, but she also easily dismissed them as a grand delusion.

Men only wanted to get women in bed. To control them. To parade them in front of the town while they were free to find pleasures in other women.

Oliver said he had abstained since their wedding, but how long would that last? How long would he keep his supposed honor when he realized his growing resentment for her?

However, Alexandra could now understand what he felt about her interaction with John. She remembered slipping out of John's lodgings. She knew the dangers and the implications of meeting an unmarried man without an escort.

At the moment, she was the one endangering the fragile fragments of their marriage.

On stage, a soldier died, and the music sounded like impassioned weeping.

A soldier. Dead.

Just like Julian.

She curled her fingers into the skirt of her gown while she struggled to breathe.

Calm yourself.

She felt a tear roll down her cheek and used her handkerchief to dab the wet spot, careful not to smear her rouge.

Oliver shifted in his seat but still seemed determined to look away from her. Patrons in other boxes would think that she was merely touched by the performance. That the music had overtaken her soul. And perhaps that was true.

But it became too overwhelming.

All she could think about was the gaping hole that Julian's death had left in her life.

He was the only man who had actually cared for her.

But he was gone forever.

So, she rose from her seat, intent on heading for the powder room. The dark halls startled her out of her misery, and she wondered if she should have walked out of the opera in the first place.

She burst into sobs, anyway, more from frustration than despair.

Suddenly, heavy footsteps approached her. They were urgent and fast.

She turned around to see Oliver looking furious.

"Why did you leave?" he demanded.

When he was closer, he saw the tears on her cheeks. He faltered, his anger vanishing instantly.

“What’s the matter? Have I upset you?” he asked, stroking a thumb over her cheek.

The motion felt soothing on her skin, and Alexandra could only imagine the trails her tears had created.

“N-No,” she stammered.

“What is it then?” he asked softly.

“It is nothing. Let us return to the box,” she said and took a step forward, but he stopped her.

“I know our arrangement is far from ideal, Duchess, but... at least think of me as a friend, or even a companion. I need to know what is happening to you.”

“You say that now, Your Grace, but you’re no different,” Alexandra muttered, her frustration bubbling beneath the surface. “Men like you always find something more interesting to chase. You’ll move on the moment it suits you.”

Oliver’s eyes darkened, a flicker of something intense igniting within them.

“Is that truly what you think of me?” His voice was low, tinged with disbelief.

She crossed her arms over her chest, desperately trying to maintain her composure. “You make everything seem like a game, and I do not care for games.”

He stepped closer, the air between them thick with tension. “Maybe that’s because you think everyone will play you. Not everyone is your father, Alexandra.”

His words struck her, igniting a mixture of anger and confusion.

“I am not talking about him,” she retorted, but the defiance in her voice wavered under the weight of his gaze.

“No?” His voice dropped, each word heavy with unspoken meaning. “Then who are you talking about?”

Her pulse quickened, the challenge in his eyes pulling her in, even as she fought against it. She wanted to step back, to shield herself from the heat radiating off him, but instead, she held her ground, her breath hitching in her throat.

“I do not want to be a temporary amusement for you,” she finally snapped, her voice sharper than she had intended. “You might find this situation amusing, but I do not.”

“Amusing?” He took another step forward, their bodies nearly touching now, the tension between them palpable. “Do you think I am amused by this? By you?”

The sincerity in his voice sent a shiver down her spine. She shook her head, trying to dispel the desire blooming within her. “I think you are used to getting what you want without consequences.”

“And you think you’re so different?” he challenged. “Running away from what’s in front of you, acting like none of this matters?”

Her heart raced, each word a taut string pulled tighter between them.

“What do you want from me, Your Grace?” she demanded, her frustration mixing with the undeniable thrill of his proximity.

His gaze darkened, and his voice dropped to a husky whisper. “I want you to stop

pretending that this doesn't exist."

Every word wrapped around her like a silken thread, drawing her in, blurring the lines of anger and attraction. She felt heat rise in her cheeks, and for a moment, she was too stunned to respond.

"I'm not pretending," she said, her voice shaking slightly despite her best efforts to sound strong.

Oliver let out a low, frustrated laugh. "Then what are you doing, Alexandra?"

The question hung in the air, heavy with possibility. She opened her mouth to reply, but the words eluded her. All she could focus on was the way he stood so close, the warmth of his body igniting every nerve in her.

Oliver's eyes softened slightly, understanding flickering in them. He reached out, his thumb brushing lightly against her wrist, sending shivers down her spine.

"One day," he said quietly, "you'll stop pretending."

His lips crashed against hers before she could take another breath. The heat of him, the force of him—it stole every thought, every ounce of resistance.

For a moment, she froze, her mind racing with panic.

But then her body responded instinctively, hungrily. She kissed him back, her hands clutching at his coat as if she needed him to hold her up.

It wasn't the kiss she had imagined—gentle, slow. This kiss was raw, consuming, and she felt like she was drowning in it. Her fingers tangled in his hair, pulling him closer, needing him in ways she had never allowed herself to admit.

The rest of the world vanished. The opera, her fears, her secrets—none of it mattered. At this moment, there was only Oliver.

There was no doubt that she kissed him back as if she had done it so many times before. The taste of his lips, his tongue, destroyed the last fragment of her resistance.

She tugged at his hair again, and he grunted but did not stop ravishing her mouth. All the frustration and desire she had been repressing had exploded into the open.

For a moment, they were a tangle of limbs, mouths, and tongues, but it still did not feel enough.

It did not matter that they were in a public, albeit dimly lit, place. Oliver had no plans of stopping. The force of his desire had him backing her up against the wall.

There was nothing to fear, Alexandra thought. She liked how he handled her, physically trapping her against the rough stucco. Her breasts were squished against his chest, her nipples hardening.

Then, reason came slithering back, slow to react but present once more. Even though his lips felt good on hers and their bodies fit as if they were made for each other, Alexandra was alarmed by how fast she had lost control.

She wanted to pull him closer, even though their bodies were already flush against each other. She could not understand the effects he had on her. Her breasts felt heavy. She felt like she was wading through water, her limbs too weak to move. Only, the kiss made her feel alive .

She moaned when the kiss finally ended. Her arms were around his neck, a result of the frenzy of lips and limbs.

He was not finished, however, his lips moving down to the pulse in her neck. It felt so pleasant, each brush of his lips caressing her skin.

She loved and hated that he knew just what to do, that his experience set her body on fire.

When his tongue dipped to taste and lick, her eyes flew open.

“No!” she cried out as if she had been burned.

It was one word, but it spoke volumes.

The two jumped apart and watched each other warily, their lips swollen and their breaths ragged.

“Alexandra...” Olive spoke her name like a prayer, his fingers running through his hair.

The strands were sticking out after she had mussed them with her hands.

“It’s Duchess to you, Your Grace,” she spat out, but her heart twisted at the cruelty of her own words.

She turned on her heel and rushed back to their private box, before the stricken look on his face could change her mind.

Chapter Twelve

Oliver had kissed many women in his life, especially when he was younger. As he got older and more jaded, he refused to kiss his lovers on the mouth. He would caress their bodies, help them reach climax, but he wouldn't kiss them—for kisses were sacred.

He wanted to believe that whatever earth-shattering experience he just had was caused by that long period of abstinence.

He wanted to believe that Alexandra was not special.

Yet, even in the dim lights of the opera, he could still see every line of her face as if they were outside in the morning sun.

The way her emerald-green eyes glittered in the semi-darkness flashed in his mind, and he wondered what it would be like to lie with her in the same bed, to get a peek of those green eyes at night. Up close. No boundaries.

Alexandra had too many boundaries. Perhaps that was natural for someone who had no good experiences with men. Oliver wondered how much he had to do to peel back the layers and see the woman within—the real one, without any secrets and artifice.

As they made their way out of the opera house, they felt as if they were in on a secret as members of the ton surrounded them, chattering among themselves. They felt like a single entity, separate from the rest, which felt strange, since they had already been married for a year. It felt like a slow realization.

Oliver made sure he walked beside her, even though her gloved hand was no longer holding his elbow. Every now and then, their hands would brush against each other. She would tense up at each contact, but she would not pull away. Oliver thought it a victory in a way.

“You were moved by the performance,” he commented in a low voice.

“Perhaps,” Alexandra replied, her tone neutral.

He eyed her curiously. “I rarely see you get affected by anything.”

“I am not made of stone, Your Grace,” she said, but her voice was hard, and her eyes seemed like emerald steel.

“I know that now.” His voice was now more intimate. “I have finally seen you moved by something other than music.”

She stopped walking then, her breath catching in her throat.

Oliver could only imagine what she was thinking at that moment, but she kept her composure for now. There were no blushes, no stammering, and no lip chewing.

They resumed walking, but they could still feel the tension crackling between them. Walking was no longer just about using their legs. It had become a challenge. Each step. Each swing of the arms.

When they reached their carriage, Oliver offered his hand to help her inside. He could read her hesitation.

After a beat, she placed her gloved hand in his. He knew what was to come, that simmering heat he felt whenever they touched. It was no different now. The kiss did

not extinguish his desire—it only stoked it. Now, he had become more aware of her presence. The scent of violets, subtle and fresh, somehow still tickled his nose.

In the carriage, as they sat across from each other, his sinful thoughts inundated his mind. He wanted her. Perhaps she did not want him back, but he was now determined to make her see that they could make their marriage more interesting.

He craved her presence, even her sharp looks and defiance. That was more than anyone in a forced marriage could hope for.

“Why did you cry?” he prodded, breaking the stifling silence in the carriage.

He had to ask, or her presence would tear him apart. Those beautiful lips that he had tasted not long ago. The rouge stained by her tears. The wary eyes. The heaving mounds that had been pressed against his chest during their kiss.

Perhaps it was lust. Perhaps it was more. He didn’t just want to kiss and touch her. He wanted to know what she was thinking, and what it would take to make her smile genuinely like John Prescott did.

Anger threatened to overtake him. So, he focused on his wife once more.

“The opera reminded me of... my brother, Julian. His death.” Her words surprised him.

He thought he would continue teasing her the whole night until she gave in. However, she simply gave him the reason, and he sensed the honesty in her words.

The awful truth.

Alexandra had lost the one decent man in her life.

“I tried not to cry. I could have. People would have thought I was affected by the performance, but I had to leave.”

“I am sorry.”

There was real grief in Oliver’s voice, although he knew it could never match what she was feeling.

He had lost both his parents, yes, but their deaths had not cost him. He had never felt what he could see in his wife’s eyes after their deaths.

Alexandra looked at him curiously.

Suddenly, he realized that this woman could destroy him. She was now doing it with her own pain.

What else could she do to him if he let her in?

“It-It’s all right, I guess. I need to accept his death as part of life. Loss is part of life.”

Her eyes were fixed on her hands, as if she could control her destiny with them. He wanted her to look at him again when she said those words.

He wanted to shake her and tell her that they could work together to make sure they didn’t lose each other.

But how could you lose someone who was never yours?

Oliver looked at his wife. He thought of John Prescott and his growing animosity toward the man. Seeing the way Alexandra spoke with the music teacher evoked feelings in him that he was unfamiliar with.

A year ago, that situation would have been welcome. If he so much as suspected his wife of loving or even caring for another man, he would have sought a divorce. He was a duke. The ton would have listened to him if he said he had been wronged. On the other hand, Alexandra—the daughter of a disgraced nobleman—would have been shunned by Society. She could live with her music teacher and he would not have cared.

These days, though, things had been different. Oliver could not imagine hurting Alexandra, even if she had been hurting him.

Now, all he could think about was how he could win her over.

But how could he possibly achieve that?

Chapter Thirteen

Alexandra thought the carriage ride was torture.

Normally, she would use the time to relax and ponder about her music. Her fingers would be dancing over her dress, imagining her next performance at home. She would wonder how her next composition could become a masterpiece. Her thoughts would then wander into melancholy territory, reminding her of the impossibility of being recognized for her talent as a woman.

However, after the kiss, it was difficult to think of anything else. She clenched her fists on her lap as she tried to avoid her husband's gaze.

Why was he looking at her like that? He had never done it before.

Before tonight, it was almost like she was a nuisance to him—someone he ought to forget. Yet, tonight, it was different.

She did not think he had it in him to focus on something at all. He was always busy—boxing, gambling, drinking, and dallying with women. Not the introspective man in front of her. Not the man who was looking at her as if she was the only woman in the world.

Alexandra hoped that he would stop acting like that. It had to be a game for him, and she had never been good at playing.

Talk to me. Ask me anything. I cannot stand the silence .

As if he could hear her thoughts, Oliver chose to keep silent throughout the rest of the ride.

He seemed to have been built to annoy, and he seemed deceptively content to study her face. Nobody had stared at her before. Not like this.

Her fingers began tapping on the skirt of her dress. The rhythm was forming, together with music in her head, enabling her to forget for a moment that she was in a carriage with an increasingly attentive husband.

“Tonight was enlightening, Duchess,” he said, finally breaking the silence.

Alexandra tried not to make her sigh of relief too obvious. It came in three short bursts—silent, she hoped. But from the way his gaze dropped to her chest, she realized that her sigh did not go unnoticed.

“Why is that?” she asked, genuinely curious.

“I did not know that you had such a passion for the opera,” he replied with a smirk as he sat straighter.

The way he emphasized the word ‘passion’ was not lost on Alexandra. She felt herself growing hot, despite the crisp evening.

“Your Grace,” was all she could say, but her voice held a warning.

“What? You don’t wish to comment on that?” he asked innocently, folding his arms across his chest.

Alexandra could not help remembering how broad it was. The image of him walking without a shirt on in the hall flashed in her mind. How could it be so vivid?

“Well, I love music. Of course I have a passion for something that features it.”

“I see. It seems we have now arrived home,” he said in a serious tone, but his lips twitched, betraying his mirth.

Alexandra could only silently fume at his smugness. She stomped down the carriage, blatantly refusing his help. She had not turned around to watch her husband, but she was certain she heard him chuckle.

“Let us go for a morning walk. You know, the kind that you like to go on when you disappear in the mornings.”

Oliver’s eyes were not fixed on his wife. He was reading a leather-bound book with a title that Alexandra had to squint to see. His voice was even, but there might have been a little taunt there.

“I do not disappear in the mornings. I go to the market to purchase, uh, things,” Alexandra explained, although she suspected that he no longer believed that story.

“Such things need not be purchased, but you still choose to do it. Today, we will simply enjoy the fresh air. Will you still bring your parasol with you?”

Again, he would tease her but not in a blatant way. It was there. Alexandra wondered how she had discovered facets of his character so early.

“No, Your Grace. I would rather walk out in the open. Unlike other women, I am not afraid of the sun,” she stated as she tilted her head up, looking him in the eye challengingly.

“I have no doubt you are different from other women,” he mumbled, as he inserted a piece of paper between the pages he seemed to have been reading.

He placed the book on the table, which separated the two of them in the drawing room. “So, will you go on a walk with me?”

“After ten o’clock?” Alexandra asked.

She did not really know when the ton liked to take their walks. She had been living in her own little world for so long, isolated by her father from the rest of the nobles.

“Yes. That is the proper time. With an escort or a companion, and not when there is barely any daylight. At which hour did you use to go out for a walk in the country?”

His voice held genuine interest, and Alexandra could not help but be intrigued by the prospect of getting to know this infuriating man.

“Pardon my reclusiveness, Your Grace. Perhaps I could have learned more if my father and my husband were both eager to introduce me to Society instead of conveniently hiding me away?”

“Do not pretend that you want to mingle with the ton , Duchess,” he said idly. “While you may be reading the scandal sheets, I still believe you do not truly care.”

Alexandra almost dropped the papers she was reading. Of course she was interested. Someone who spent the last year like a hermit would want to devour everything about Society. However, she did not appreciate him mentioning it too blatantly.

“Haven’t you seen me enjoy their company of late? Or do you think that is all mere pretense?” she asked, mildly annoyed, clutching the papers tightly in her hands.

“Oh, I have. I hope that I have not created a monster. Then again, you don’t want to put a parasol over your head.”

“Many women my age do not care about getting some sun.”

He just grunted noncommittally, watching her as if he was trying to understand her.

Or perhaps it was she who was watching him closely.

Despite her hesitation, Alexandra found the stroll pleasant. They walked along a gravel pathway while mist hung over the park.

She thought Oliver would take her to popular places like Kensington Gardens or Hyde Park. But no, he opted for a place that reminded her of the countryside. Rougher, less paved, and with more trees and shrubs.

The greenery cleared her head for a moment, but it could not completely rid her of the discomfort—and possible thrill—of walking alongside her husband.

She glanced at him. Oliver seemed at ease, with his hands clasped behind his back and his chin arrogantly tilted up.

What was he looking at? The sky? The birds?

When he lowered his chin, he looked like a master surveying his domain. Yet, she was not completely blind to the fact that he had been stealing glances at her, too.

He remained silent until they reached an uneven patch of ground. That was when he stepped forward and extended his arm with a slight bow. The movement was respectful and protective, but there was a glint of amusement in his eyes.

“Allow me, Duchess,” he urged, wiggling his fingers at her.

Alexandra’s eyes flickered to his face and his proffered arm. She was aware that it

was expected for a husband to assist his wife in such cases. However, she was also intensely aware of the charged tension between them, despite Oliver's humor.

She knew that it would be worse if she did not take his hand. For what reason would she have? She set her concerns aside and placed her hand on his arm, trying her best to ignore the tingles that raced up her arm.

It was a miracle that she was able to keep her calm, but her heart had its own ideas, racing in her chest.

Oliver seemed to have felt her inner turmoil because his face broke into a wide grin. "It wasn't so hard, was it, Duchess?"

"No, Your Grace. Thank you for your assistance," she said politely, almost smiling at his surprised expression—he had not expected her to be so agreeable. "However, I hope such ordinary matters won't be a cause of your amusement."

"I am sorry to disappoint you, wife, but sometimes a man must seek amusement where he can." He laughed, even as he continued supporting her.

She noticed how easily he did so, his body strong enough to carry her own with one sweep of his arm.

"I will have to accept that my wife can be as hard as the stones I was trying to save her from tripping over."

As soon as they were on steady ground, Alexandra pulled back her hand. This time, she tilted her chin further up as she walked without his support.

She wished she had brought more than a tiny reticule, which did not require much use of her hands. She turned it over in one hand, aware that her husband was watching

her with some amusement.

“Your Grace, I am simply content with solitude. I do not have to express every thought and feeling in public.”

“You do realize that the next person is several yards away from us? We may be in public, but you are free to express yourself in front of your husband. Of course, I do wonder if you know what you’re missing.” Oliver gave her a sidelong glance. “I believe you would enjoy life better if you were more... spontaneous. Then again, you were spontaneous enough when you stormed into Devil’s Draw on your own, with nary a disguise.”

Alexandra wanted to tell him that she had a reputation to uphold, but that would be a lie. If she had to storm into Devil’s Draw again, she would with no thoughts of the consequences. She’d also meet with John Prescott again to sell more compositions.

Then, she remembered the fear she felt when she thought she would be found out outside an unmarried man’s lodgings, and without an escort.

Perhaps she should not be hasty...

“Weren’t we spontaneous enough when we both agreed to get married? It takes a lot of courage to marry someone you barely know,” she reminded him.

Two peas in a pod. Yet, they could not be any more different.

“We certainly have to explore our similarities, Duchess, especially since I had nothing much to complain about of late.”

Oliver gave her another of his arrogant, sidelong glances. Instead of annoying her, it made her heart pound so hard in her chest that she was afraid he could hear it.

Every sound. Every weakness. She had to be more careful and keep these noises inside of her.

There was also a flicker in his eyes that told her he was revealing more of himself than he would normally do. It was almost like vulnerability.

That thought excited her; she had to look away from him to gather her thoughts.

“Well, forgive me, Your Grace, for forcing you to be in my company. Having you join me for walks. Spending more time with me in the townhouse.” Alexandra tried to keep her tone light, despite the growing warmth in her chest. “It must be strange for you to find satisfaction beyond your usual company.”

“My usual company?” he asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Yes. You know, gamblers, pugilists, and... ladies of the night.” Alexandra had to take a deep breath at the end, wondering if she had gone too far.

The look in his eyes was serious now. For a moment, she regretted what she said.

“Perhaps I have changed, wife.” Oliver tried to mask the seriousness with a chuckle, but it was too late—Alexandra had seen it.

“Most people can’t afford to change,” she said, trying to steel himself against the complicated man next to her.

Her words were more of a reminder to herself. She needed to remain as she was in his company.

Their walk was finally punctuated by a small grove of trees. The Duchess’s breath hitched as she saw the morning light filter through the canopy and cast a golden glow

on the ground. The grove looked like it was surrounded by twinkling gems waiting to be picked.

It looked like a sliver of paradise, in the middle of London.

For a moment, the two simply stood there, taking in the glorious scene. The quiet was broken by the rustling of leaves. Oliver was quick to reach for Alexandra's hand, gently stopping her in her tracks.

She cursed inwardly as she felt her pulse quicken at the sudden touch. Her reaction to him was becoming predictably painful. Heart racing. Eyes searching his.

She realized their faces were so close. His eyes seemed to be searching her face for some clues.

"Duchess," he murmured, and his calm voice soothed her. "Why must you always guard yourself? It is just me."

"Perhaps because I know that it is better to be guarded than to trust," she whispered, surprising herself with her response.

For a moment, Oliver simply watched her. His hand was still clasping hers. Despite the feelings of discomfort and a sudden bout of shyness, Alexandra did not look away from him. She looked right back.

He sighed. Then, they continued their little stroll, which was the highlight of the morning, after all.

For some reason, the silence between them no longer seemed heavy. Though Alexandra still felt apprehensive, there was also a feeling of relief and an ease that she had not experienced before in his presence.

However, she clenched her free hand into a fist as she wondered whether he was slowly and effectively chipping away at her defenses.

Perhaps it was not too bad. Everyone needed a friend in this world. While she knew that she could live alone, her recent interactions with members of the ton had made her realize that she also needed company from time to time.

Their footsteps fell into a steady rhythm, hinting at the newfound ease between them. Oliver's brief moment of earnestness was gone—that same mask he wore in front of most people these days. It seemed as if he was reverting to the more relaxed demeanor he had been known for, for years.

“So, what are your plans this week, Duchess?” he asked. “Would we be gracing the ton with our presence?”

“What about that ball that Lady Portsfield mentioned?”

Alexandra was truly curious about the event. She liked music, but she never had much opportunity to dance. She wanted to attend a ball even if it meant her husband would hold her close. The realization that she did not mind his company at all dawned on her.

“Aha. So, our Duchess is soon going to be the belle of the ball! Why, of course we will go. If that is what you want, wife.” He grinned at her, looking pleased for some reason.

Oliver did not seem to be the type of man who liked going to balls, but here he was, seemingly looking forward to attending one. Perhaps he was looking forward to teasing her.

“I am not planning to be the belle of the ball. That is for debutantes,” she protested.

“But you want to be there?” He sounded sincerely curious.

“Yes,” she admitted.

When they reached the end of the path, Oliver stopped again when he was slightly ahead of his wife. Then, he turned toward her.

“I believe that I’ve seen you at your most relaxed this morning, Duchess,” he said with a smile.

This time, his smile had no sign of teasing or arrogance. It was just a smile. A genuine one.

“Apparently, I am capable of change,” she returned, tilting her head as she looked back at him.

His grin grew wider when she raised an eyebrow. Then, he nodded in approval. “Perhaps we can do this again, then. These walks seem to be good for us.”

Us .

Oliver said “Us.”

The two stood there for a moment longer, seemingly eager to take in more of the nature surrounding them. Neither was willing to break the brief but satisfying connection.

Even when they arrived back home, Alexandra could feel a warmth spreading through her chest. There was hope there. Perhaps things would be different between them someday.

But how different?

Chapter Fourteen

“ Good evening, Your Graces!” a woman called, eager to catch their attention.

There was a sharp glint in her eyes that betrayed her interest in the couple. “It’s wonderful to see you two out together so often these days.”

The comment was punctuated by a knowing smile, which infuriated Alexandra. She knew that it was normal for people to speculate about their relationship. They had lived separately for a year. Now, they seemed to be taking Society by storm.

The ballroom was full of candlelight and music, and every nook and cranny seemed to sparkle. Elegantly dressed members of the ton swirled about, chattering over the music.

Alexandra had learned to tolerate such events. One could even say that she had learned to enjoy them.

However, tonight was different. There was something crackling in the air, a delicious tension that she wanted to ignore but could not. It had something to do with Oliver tracking her movements as they mingled with the best of Society. He looked like he did not want to lose her in the crowd, even for a minute.

His hand lingered on the small of her back, causing her skin to tingle. They barely touched, but his nearness and heat were enough to make her stifle a whimper.

Several pairs of eyes had swiveled toward them as they entered the ballroom. Some

whispered to each other, unabashedly watching them, and Oliver seemed doubly eager to play the part of the besotted husband.

The young Duchess knew her manners well, though. She returned the attention with cool politeness.

“It took us long to feel ready to share our life as a married couple,” she answered smoothly.

She knew what that implied—that she and Oliver had never lost connection. They just weren’t public about their affections before.

Alexandra felt satisfaction bubbling up inside her. It was also the first time she caught gentlemen she barely knew openly admiring her. These men would not have looked her way when she was still living under the threat of her father’s debts.

But as the Duke of Westgrave’s wife? She was certain that some of them were wondering whether they could convince her to break her marriage vows. She was now a challenge, and Oliver was also aware of it. She could feel it in the way his fingers twitched her lower back.

Alexandra turned to look at him, unable to resist the urge. She was intrigued by the possessive gleam in his eyes. For some reason, it also irritated her.

Why was he pushing this pretense? She straightened her back and purposely turned her gaze away from him, looking at everything except for the man who was almost attached to her by the hip.

“I’m heading for the refreshments table,” she declared, not daring to look at his face. And then she hurried toward the table, leaving him behind.

It did not take long for her to overhear the first snippets of gossip. She had not even taken her first sip.

“His Grace... finally smitten, isn’t he?” a young woman uttered in disbelief.

“Far more captivated than I thought possible...” her friend agreed.

Their heads were close together, as if they were concocting a plan, instead of gossiping about other people at a public event.

“She has done what no other woman could do!” an older woman exclaimed in disbelief and wonder.

Alexandra felt a rush of satisfaction upon hearing those words. She schooled her features to ensure that nobody could see how pleased she was with gossip. It felt good to be the object of people’s admiration and wonder, instead of being in the midst of scandal and ruin.

Her thoughts drifted toward her father for a moment, and just as the women’s gossip made her feel invincible, she now felt like she was sinking. Fast.

Her mind quickly returned to the fact that whatever she and Oliver had was merely an act. They were becoming great at it—perhaps even becoming friends—but that was the extent of it. She had not really tamed a rake. Her father forced his hand, and the ton pressured him to maintain the farce.

Alexandra’s steps were heavy when she walked back toward Oliver. She noticed that his focus was no longer on her. His eyes scanned the ton, finding other men ogling her. He glared at them with pure animosity. His jaw was clenched, and his back was rigid.

A thrill ran down Alexandra's spine as she saw the signs of his jealousy, but she kept her expression neutral. Again, she reminded herself that what she was feeling was the giddiness of being noticed. She was not used to it.

"Would you like to dance, Duchess?" The civility in his voice startled her.

She looked up to see his eyes dancing with mischief. What was he planning to do?

Oliver did not give her time to respond. His hand was already reaching for hers. His grip was gentle but firm when he led her to the dance floor.

Alexandra had wondered what it would be like to dance with her husband. She expected the formality of the steps, and even his grace as he danced. After all, he was a pugilist in his free time, able to perform moves that could knock out more than one man at a time.

She did not expect the heat of his hand when it rested on her waist, slightly lower than was proper. His thumb drew little circles on her back, and she wanted to numb herself for a moment, pretend she was not affected by his provocative touch. However, the hand resting on his shoulder trembled slightly.

Oliver noticed. Oh yes, he did. His eyes darkened as he grinned at her seductively. But what he did next almost unraveled her.

"You seem a bit tense, Duchess," he murmured, his breath warm against her ear.

"Do I?" she asked lightly, as if she was not almost quaking in his arms. "It must be the company. It doesn't help me relax."

He chuckled at that, and she wondered how he took her words. It was an honest statement, even as she continued to mask the effects he had on her body.

Their eyes met. For a moment, no words were uttered, and the ballroom seemed to vanish. Alexandra could no longer hear the whispers. She no longer felt the curious glances.

All she could see was Oliver.

His eyes seemed to be telling her something—something honest and raw. Her survival instincts told her to look away before it was too late, but he had captivated her. His eyes flicked to her lips, and without thinking, she licked them. His grip on her tightened, and she felt him press against her.

What would the ton think of their display of affection?

She did not care.

Alexandra found herself leaning up on her tiptoes, but the sudden change of tempo jolted her out of her daydream. She heard the whispers again—young ladies not bothering being discreet.

“They said he had never looked at any other woman the way he is looking at her right now.”

“It looks like we may have to offer our congratulations in a few months.”

“Well, it’s about time! They have been married for more than a year!”

Alexandra’s cheeks flushed at the thought of what people were seeing in them. However, believing that there was a nugget of truth in what they were saying was dangerous.

“Do you hear what they are saying about us, Your Grace?” she asked softly but

pointedly.

“Only when it’s true,” Oliver replied with the same mischievous grin that had become dear to her.

The way he looked at her betrayed his admiration. For her? Alexandra could not believe it, but it made her heart stutter.

Surely pretending for one night would not hurt?

“You truly think that—” she began, but he suddenly spun her into a graceful twirl, cutting her off.

Then, he gracefully pulled her back against his chest.

She was right. He was an excellent dancer.

She felt the hand on her waist sliding even lower, again teasing the bounds of propriety. However, his eyes were gentle and fixed on her as if he were learning the planes of her face by heart.

She realized that she trusted him. For if she didn’t, she would have already pushed him away and left in a huff.

“You underestimate how well-suited we are, Duchess,” he whispered.

“I hope you will alert me when you are finally done with this amusing charade of yours. Amusement and affection are two different things, Your Grace,” she said with a conviction she could barely feel.

“You are not a source of amusement, Duchess. In fact, you aggravate me with your

stubbornness,” he replied, his voice sounding almost like a groan.

Goosebumps rose all over her arms.

But then, the music ended before she could respond.

Oliver took her hand and lifted it to his lips. The kiss was gentle but languorous, and she felt the pulse in her throat quicken. She suspected everyone could tell what she was feeling, and it overwhelmed her even more.

When they stepped off the dance floor, she felt a strange wave of sadness. She wondered if that was the end of it—the ballroom acting as a stage, just like the opera house—and if this act would ever turn into reality.

Chapter Fifteen

O liver reluctantly let go of his wife's hand. While he loved every moment with her—dancing, mingling, and basking in the way the ton received them—his energy was drained.

Alexandra was right. He was more used to a certain kind of company—something darker, living on the fringes of society.

He hated any kind of pretense and hated himself for making it feel that way for his wife. He could swear there was an attraction there, too. She seemed to take him in the way he did her. But it could simply be the heat of the moment. The act. The excitement.

After the dance and the applause, he felt the anger that had blazed inside him earlier when he saw several lords watching his wife with a hunger he recognized. If the women were thrilled by the romance, some of the men thought they could have a chance with her.

The thought made him want to punch something—or someone.

But what if...?

Thoughts of John Prescott crept into his mind. The man was in no way bolder than some of the lords in attendance. Yet, he brought out some of Oliver's insecurities.

Did women really want him because they liked him, or did they like his money and

title more?

The gossiping hens were right. He had not looked at any woman the way he looked at Alexandra. But was she looking at him in the same way?

He could still remember her excitement and nervousness upon seeing Prescott at the opera, and he did not like the gnawing pain in his chest.

The orchestra played another song after they had danced—proof that the world would continue turning even after he and Alexandra had decided to part ways once more.

The new music that was played was strange and unfamiliar. For some reason, it went straight to Oliver's heart, like a flying arrow finding its target.

He saw his wife, who was only a small distance away from him, stop in her tracks when the tune began. He noticed that she gave it her rapt attention, and narrowed his eyes as the fingers at her sides began tapping in rhythm to the music.

“Who is the composer of this song, Elliott?” he asked the lord who walked past him. “I usually know the music they play at balls, but this one is unfamiliar to me.”

“Oh, that is from a new composer—J. Lewis, I believe. Some say that he is using a pseudonym. Apparently, he does not want to be known, just like that painter, Eric Westback. Many even say that he is from London.”

Oliver thanked the other man for the piece of information. Then, he made his way back to his wife.

“What is it about this mysterious composer?” he muttered, leaning closer to her. “It's cowardly to hide behind a pseudonym. Is he waiting for the praise to come first before he reveals himself?”

Alexandra's eyes opened as his voice jolted her out of her little daydream. The soft look on her face disappeared. "Perhaps his anonymity gives him freedom. Perhaps he does not want his talent to be tied to his real identity."

"I disagree. I believe that a man worth listening to must also be worth knowing. Or perhaps the mystery appeals to your romantic nature?"

She blushed, further piquing Oliver's curiosity. A burning question was niggling at him.

Why did this composer seem to captivate his wife? He'd seen the flash of indignance and passion in her eyes when she defended the unknown composer. It was almost as if she knew the man. Or perhaps, a voice in the back of his head added, she was merely being difficult.

Still, the mention of J. Lewis seemed to have a strong effect on his wife, and her reaction had a strong effect on him.

Oliver felt he had to distance himself from her, but he continued to watch her from across the room as she continued to listen to the mysterious composer's piece.

Alexandra's heart was pounding. She felt that if Oliver had asked more questions, she would have revealed her secret. With him giving her space, she thought she would have time to relax and appreciate her composition. However, her peace was short-lived.

She opened her eyes to meet the harsh gaze of her father, Lord Hartwell.

"Father," she greeted, inclining her head.

Her stomach churned when she saw the expression on his face. She knew that he was

about to tell her something she would not like.

“Alexandra. You’re playing the part of Duchess well enough,” he bit out. “All it did was make you more arrogant and parade around in finery. Otherwise, I see no real benefit from your time here in London. You simply wasted your time with the ton .”

The accusation landed sharply. Alexandra clenched her hands in her skirts. She realized the extent of the vitriol in her father’s heart. After having insulted her in public and taking her money, he still believed it was her responsibility to get him out of trouble.

At that moment, she could feel the burden he had placed on her shoulders. It was certainly ironic that she was the room’s center of attention and the wife of a wealthy duke, but still could not meet her father’s demands.

She felt a swirling mix of shame and resentment.

“You had made it clear that I was nothing but a useless chit. A failure,” she reminded him, a new edge to her voice. She was glad her voice did not waver.

“You were raised to understand your duty, Alexandra. There will be consequences if you fail to do it,” her father warned in a low voice and then sauntered away.

Alexandra could not believe that her own flesh and blood could not show her any sign of affection. The urgency in his words made her burden heavier, cornering her further. Putting her on the edge.

She could not believe that her sensitive mother had fallen in love with such a cruel man.

Alexandra had thought herself a strong woman, but in front of her father, she found

herself nodding like a child. It was an automatic reaction to a man who did not deserve her obedience. She had always strived to be the best daughter, but he only responded with cruelty and judgment. However, this time, something in her was beginning to boil. Itching for a fight.

With her father's dismissal still stinging, Alexandra felt small and alone. The heights that her mood had reached after her dance with Oliver and hearing her composition played at the ball crashed. Evaporated.

When she turned her head slightly to the right, though, relief washed over her.

There stood John Prescott.

Alexandra walked toward her former music instructor, who was smiling at her kindly. He had the power to immediately soothe her frayed nerves, just like the music they shared.

"Mr. Prescott, how lovely to see you here at the ball," she said.

"Likewise, Your Grace," he returned, giving her a slight bow.

With John, her walls were ready to crumble. With him, she was simply a woman. A musician. She did not have to suffer the weight of expectations that she felt everywhere else.

"I can tell you heard your latest composition," he continued in a low voice so that only the two of them could hear.

"Yes. I am thrilled to hear the ton's positive comments on the piece. I'd spotted some pleasantly surprised music patrons," she said, clasping her hands together as if in prayer. "Thank you, Mr. Prescott, for the opportunity."

“It was my pleasure, Your Grace.” Again, John gave her a polite bow.

The orchestra began playing a new piece. Caught in the moment, Alexandra did not think of the consequences of what she was about to say.

“Would you like to dance, Mr. Prescott?”

The instructor hesitated for a moment. “Dance with you, Your Grace? I, er, do not know if it would be proper. I am no lord, and?—”

“Yes, they might say it’s inappropriate. Whatever the case may be, you were my teacher. You are my friend, and we both love music. So, let us dance—the ton be damned,” she insisted.

“Your Grace, I... I do not...” John mumbled.

“Come on, John. Please. It’s just a dance.”

John sighed. “All right. If you say so.”

She smiled at him as he led them to the dance floor.

Alexandra let herself be swept away by the waltz. She was comforted by the music. For a moment, she felt like everything would be all right. She was free from her father’s demands and the strain in her marriage.

With her eyes closed to focus on the music, she was unaware of a pair of eyes watching her intently.

“Your eyes betray you, Brother. Perhaps the ton is right. A woman has finally ensnared the Duke of Westgrave,” Catherine teased.

Oliver was delighted to see his sister at the ball. However, he was distracted by the sight of Alexandra dancing with John.

The genuine happiness on her face irritated him. It should not. It just should not be directed at someone else—a man like John Prescott, the music master.

He did not like how the dance was making him feel—vulnerable and angry. The smile that his wife was giving John was something that he had not seen from her. Not yet.

Perhaps not ever.

“There is no truth in that,” Oliver scoffed. “I am merely treating her like a puzzle that needs to be disassembled. She is an infuriating woman.”

His idea of unraveling the puzzle that was his wife entailed heading straight to her and her dance partner.

John Prescott was light on his feet, graceful, and far too close to her. A pang of something dangerously close to jealousy twisted in Oliver’s chest. It was irrational—after all, he had no claim to her heart. But it felt as though a piece of his heart had been stolen.

“Are you listening, Brother?” Catherine’s voice broke through his thoughts. Her teasing smile dropped as she noticed the way his eyes tracked Alexandra’s movements. “Good heavens, Oliver. You look as if you’re about to march over there and challenge Mr. Prescott to a duel.”

Oliver clenched his jaw. “It’s nothing of the sort,” he lied, though even he could hear the irritation in his voice.

Catherine arched an eyebrow. “Oh, is that so? Then what exactly are you planning to do?”

“I am going to cut in,” he stated simply, already moving forward, not even waiting for his sister’s response.

Chapter Sixteen

“Mind if I steal my wife for the rest of this dance?” Oliver asked, though it was hardly a question.

He’d crossed the ballroom in swift, purposeful strides, weaving through the clusters of guests until he reached the dancing pair.

He had barely paused as he stepped up beside them, his gaze fixed on John.

Prescott blinked, fear flickering in his eyes, but he recovered quickly, offering a polite nod. “Of course, Your Grace.”

As the music swelled again, Oliver didn’t waste a moment. He slid his hand around Alexandra’s waist, pulling her close. Their bodies fit together as if they had done this a hundred times before. His grip was firm, openly possessive, and the look he gave her was searing.

“Oliver,” Alexandra began, startled by his sudden appearance, “I didn’t expect you to?—”

“You seemed to be enjoying yourself,” he interrupted, his voice low as he led her into the next step of the waltz.

Alexandra furrowed her brow, trying to read his expression. “Is there something wrong?”

“Not at all,” he replied, though his grip on her waist tightened, his fingers pressing into her side. “Just thought I’d remind everyone, including you, who you belong to.”

“Who I belong to? This marriage was never meant to be real,” she responded coolly, her eyes flashing with defiance.

“You’ve certainly underestimated what this marriage means to me,” he countered, looking her dead in the eyes.

The tension was back between them. This time, though, there was anger.

Only a few moments ago, they were on the cusp of becoming friends or something else—something deeper. But now, they were back to enduring the animosity between them. Despite it all, Oliver could not help but focus on her lush lips and her wide eyes. There was no artifice in her beauty, but he knew she was still wearing some kind of mask.

As the music ended, Alexandra pulled away from his grasp and left the ballroom.

Oliver did not have to wonder if he should follow. He just did.

“Do you always have to escape when you cannot handle a confrontation, Duchess?” he called after her as he rushed down the hallway.

“No. I feel suffocated. Tired. How can you accuse me of things as if there is something that ties us together—something more than what my father had placed upon you? Why did you not come to rescue me when he was abusing me just before I danced with John?”

John. The familiarity of the way she said the man’s name stirred other emotions within him. He was angry. He was confused. Most of all, he could no longer restrain

himself.

Something more than what my father had placed upon you , she'd said.

Her father.

Guilt followed when he realized what she just said. He had caught a glimpse of Lord Hartwell and thought that he would not dare harass his daughter with members of the ton surrounding them.

He should have been more vigilant. Perhaps it was John Prescott who had saved his wife from her father, and that stung.

Oliver stepped closer, cupping her face in his heated palms. Inside his head, there was a battle brewing.

"I am sorry I wasn't there," he whispered to her, hoping she understood what he meant.

She did not seem to fight him. Instead, she stared back at him with an open mouth and heavy-lidded eyes.

Damn it, how was she so beautiful?

Before reason could take over again, he took her mouth in a searing kiss. All his frustration and pent-up desire fueled the way he claimed her mouth.

At first, she tensed up. He could feel her shock at the intensity of his kiss. However, she had not pushed him away. Not immediately.

After the momentary shock, she began kissing him back with equal fervor, her fingers

tangling in his hair and tugging at the strands.

Everything else—the world beyond the hallway—fell away.

His hand moved from her face to trace the curve of her waist, pulling her closer until there was no gap between them. No space. That was exactly what Oliver wanted—for her to be his. For them to be finally one.

His touch was possessive, and he could feel Alexandra spiraling out of control. She clutched his coat for balance, sharing the heat of her body. Such heat should have consumed him, suffocated him, but it only egged him on. He knew that he had the upper hand because of his experience, but she was also a willing participant.

How far would he take this?

His hand slipped lower, skimming over the fabric of her gown, teasing her senses. He felt her skin quivering beneath his firm touch, and he was nearly undone by her short gasps of pleasure. Their closeness was unraveling them both.

Oliver broke the kiss, only to look at his wife with raw desire. “Tell me to stop, Duchess. Tell me you do not want my hands on your body, my mouth on your lips,” he panted.

Even as he asked, he could not help but press closer, grinding his hips against hers so she could feel his raging erection. Her eyes widened in surprise before she moaned softly, making more blood rush to his manhood if that was even possible.

“Have I rendered you speechless?” he asked, knowing full well that he was playing a dangerous game.

Perhaps she was attracted to him. Perhaps she was merely curious. Seduced. He did

not want seduction. He wanted her to want this. To ache for it.

“How about this?” he asked, flattening his palm against her stomach.

He slowly trailed his fingers up, giving her the opportunity to say no with each move.

She had not said no.

Yet.

Alexandra appeared to have forgotten how to breathe as his fingers skimmed over a breast.

“How about this?” he asked again as he traced his thumb over the swell of her breast.

She closed her eyes, her lips parted in a silent sigh.

She still had not said no as he played with her erect nipple. Her eyes remained closed, and her hips bucked against his.

“I want to taste you. I want to see you,” Oliver said through ragged breaths.

He pressed his forehead against hers and tried to gauge her reaction. Her only response was a whimper and a heavy-lidded look.

“I can see how much you want this, too, Alexandra,” he murmured as he slowly got down to his knees in front of her. “How badly you need it.”

His words were like a caress, stroking her gently and seductively. He knew that he was succeeding when her hips bucked again. She was seeking some form of relief that only he could offer.

“Please...” she whispered hoarsely, her voice thick with unspoken desires.

Still unknown to her.

Oliver’s eyes darkened, and he shifted forward slightly, aligning himself with her. His hand slid down the soft fabric of her dress until it reached the hem, before sliding back up her leg. His fingers grazed the soft flesh of her inner thighs, making her breath catch in her throat. He saw her bite her lip to stifle the noises coming out of her.

“You don’t have to hold back,” he said, his voice barely above a whisper. “You’re with me. You don’t have to hold back with me.”

Her resolve crumbled at his words, and she let out a shaky breath, her hips rolling forward to meet his hand. He rewarded her willingness with a firmer touch, his fingers tracing delicate patterns on her skin. Each stroke sent a jolt of electricity through her, pooling low in her belly and making her desperate for more.

“Oliver...” she breathed, her voice trembling.

He smiled, a slow, knowing smile. Her breathing became fast and ragged, echoing her pleasure. “Tell me, Alexandra,” he purred, his fingers moving higher, closer to the place where she ached the most. A place that was throbbing at that moment. “What do you want me to do?”

She swallowed hard, her throat dry. The question hung heavy in the air, taunting her with its simplicity. She didn’t know the intricacies of female desire, and there were layers of it she still didn’t understand. At least, that was what Oliver could read from her slight pause, the trembling of her thighs.

“I... I don’t know,” she confessed, her voice strangely muffled.

“Then let me show you,” he whispered.

Before she could respond, his fingers slipped beneath her drawers to press against the damp heat between her legs. She gasped, arching her back as his touch ignited a fire she hadn’t known was in her. His fingertips probed gently, exploring the contours of her most intimate place, learning the shape of her desire. They flicked back and forth, teasing her.

“So wet for me,” he murmured, his voice thick with satisfaction.

She nodded, unable to form words as his fingers began to move in deliberate strokes, teasing her with the promise of release. Each stroke brought her closer to the edge, and she could feel the coil inside her tightening, ready to snap.

“Oliver... please...” she begged, her voice breaking.

Her voice made his self-control snap. He pushed her skirt up, baring her sex to him. Then, he shifted forward, to both adore and plunder her.

“Open for me,” he commanded, his voice rough with desire.

She obeyed without hesitation, much to his surprise and pleasure, opening her legs wider as he settled between them. He lowered his head, and his tongue darted out to trace a line over the seam of her sex.

“Oh, Oliver...” she gasped, balling her fists as his tongue found her clit and circled it lazily.

He chuckled softly, the sound vibrating against her most sensitive spot. “Does that feel good?” he purred.

Oliver could only guess what it must have felt like for his sheltered wife to be so thoroughly pleased in a public place. However, he was too far gone. Her taste made him wild with passion, his tongue moving faster, licking and sucking with increasing intensity. Even though he knew he could coax her release that way, his fingers teased her entrance.

“Oliver... I’m...” She struggled to form words, her body trembling with the effort to hold on to her self-control.

“Shh... let go,” he soothed, his voice a deep rumble that reverberated through her. “Let me take care of you.”

He then continued his onslaught, tongue and fingers working together. He knew his shoulders would be bruised from the way she was holding on to them for dear life. But it was worth it. He’d sported bruises for much less than this heaven.

And then, with one final, excruciatingly delicious flick of his tongue, she shattered. Waves of ecstasy washed over her, and she whimpered his name weakly.

Suddenly, a door somewhere in the house opened and closed. The sound jolted them back to reality.

It was Alexandra who pulled away first, watching Oliver with wide eyes and nibbling on her lower lip.

Breathless, the two stared at each other. The intensity of her release had shaken him, and he could tell that it did the same to her. At the moment, though, she was frantically straightening her clothes, trying to hide the evidence of their passion. She inhaled deeply and exhaled with just as much force.

Oliver watched her, paralyzed by longing and frustration. When he finally reached for

her, she stepped back. Her walls were back up.

“This changes nothing,” she declared, trying to sound firm. But her voice trembled slightly.

She then excused herself, slipping into the shadows and perhaps back to the ballroom.

Oliver stood alone in the hallway, torn between the desire to claim her and the painful realization that he might have to let her go.

Chapter Seventeen

“Just a rake playing with my naïveté,” she muttered, pressing her fingers to the piano keys.

While Alexandra enjoyed the ball, the aftermath was exhausting.

She craved solitude, as she often did when she was overwhelmed, seeking solace in her music. The quiet corners of Oliver’s townhouse became her refuge, where she could drop the pretense. The charade was tiring, especially as her heart betrayed her by believing it might be real.

His jealousy and their heated kiss replayed in her mind, stirring conflicting emotions. Her cheeks reddened when she remembered how they went further. She hadn’t known that a man could do that to a woman. She pressed her thighs together as a sweet ache pulsed in her sex.

Music was her rebellion, the one part of her life she controlled. But with every note, guilt weighed heavy—her compositions paid for her father’s mounting debts.

Even though Oliver seemed kinder of late, she couldn’t ask for his help. Independence, even in marriage, mattered more than ever. Still, she dreaded the day he would discover just how far her passion for music had taken her.

“What would he think if he knew who I really was?” she whispered to herself, even as her fingers danced over the black and ivory keys.

When the house fell silent, and Oliver was away, Alexandra played with abandon. The music gave her peace, passion, and purpose, reminding her who she truly was.

Oliver, meanwhile, couldn't stop thinking about Alexandra. He had kissed countless women, but none had left him feeling so undone. Now that he had a taste of her, he wanted more. It was a challenge he was willing to undertake, a puzzle he was willing to solve.

Her willingness during their kiss had ignited something primal in him, yet she had since retreated behind a wall he couldn't penetrate. Her mysterious behavior fed his curiosity and gnawed at his patience.

Oliver threw himself into estate management to distract himself. He oversaw his countryside holdings, boxed to release his frustration, and hunted with determination. Yet, even in the fields, Alexandra lingered in his thoughts.

Her excuse for avoiding him—that she was indisposed—felt like a slap to the face. They had been the subject of gossip at the ball, but now she refused to even go on their morning strolls.

The world moved on, yet Oliver couldn't shake the feeling that something between them had shifted.

She was slipping further away, just when he thought they had bonded physically.

And what was worse, he didn't know how to pull her back.

Perhaps nothing had changed, and they weren't meant to be anything more.

A few days later, Oliver decided that enough was enough. His wife was avoiding him, but it did not mean that he had to avoid her, as well.

He came home earlier than usual, hoping to spend more time with her before supper. They could not simply talk about paltry things over food and wine.

A part of him had been expecting the music that welcomed him. The faint, haunting notes drifted down the hallway. He followed the melody to the music room, like a hungry child after the Pied Piper.

Through a crack in the door, he glimpsed his wife sitting at the piano. She was not just playing, but she was also being played by the music. Swayed by it. Her fingers glided smoothly over the keys.

The sight rooted him to the spot, as he did not dare breathe lest he broke the spell.

Alexandra played a beautiful yet unfamiliar tune. How could that be? Oliver, having been brought up in a noble family, had prided himself on knowing the latest pieces. This piece was so exquisitely composed that he could not believe it had not been played at the most famous parties.

Admiration bloomed in his chest as he continued to watch and listen to the complexity of his wife.

When the music stopped, Alexandra's eyes fluttered open. It was a slow process, as if she was coming out of a dream. And it was like that for her. She would dive into a new world each time she played her compositions.

The first thing she saw was the tall man peeking through the door. He stood there, looking just as surprised as she was. Instead of the smirk she'd expected from him, he wore an apologetic expression. He had been caught watching, but she had been caught baring her soul.

"Your Grace," she breathed in greeting.

Flushed, she hastily reached for her sheet music. She stood up and shoved it in a drawer, her heart breaking as the edges were creased. He did not need to see what she was doing—could not see the correction marks on the notes.

“Why did you stop?” Oliver asked gently.

His eyes, on the other hand, seemed to bore into hers. He truly wanted to know more about her, but she didn’t think she was ready.

“It was nothing, Your Grace,” she replied, her voice barely a whisper, formality dividing them again as if they were meeting for the first time.

“Nothing?” he echoed, stepping into the room, his eyes fixed on the drawer where she kept her sheet music. “It did not sound like nothing. We both know you have a gift, but I am now fully realizing the passion you have for music. Please let me hear you play some more.”

Panicked, Alexandra lowered her gaze to the floor. Suddenly, the lines on the marble had become more fascinating. “It’s just a pastime, Your Grace.”

“Did your mother have you taught to play the pianoforte or did she teach you herself?” Oliver asked, his voice was cautious, just like his approach.

Alexandra was surprised by his questions. She thought he would insist that she play immediately, or demand if she’d been having more lessons with John Prescott.

“My mother insisted that I be taught how to play. She said it was a way of expressing emotions when words were not enough.” Her face softened, and for a moment, she did not care if her husband saw her vulnerability. “She was right.”

Silence fell between them. This time, Alexandra did not mind. For some reason,

Oliver's presence did not rattle her. Instead, it comforted her.

So, she let the silence stretch on and fill the void left by the music.

"My mother wanted me to learn how to play, as well. Not for artistic reasons as your mother did, but because she found it rather fashionable," Oliver suddenly said. "However, my father believed that music was a pastime for the weak." He smiled wryly. "He only encouraged practical pursuits—even violent ones. Everything was better than having his son sit and play music."

The two fell silent again, watching each other from time to time. Assessing. Finding clues in each other's movements.

Alexandra realized that she had missed his presence. She had thought that he would stay by her side and try to make sense of the kiss.

But, no, it was not like that at all.

She had to admit that she was disappointed when he threw himself into managing his estate and his hobbies. She should have been relieved, she reminded herself, but she was not. Instead, she had listened for the sounds of his footfalls at night. She could have sworn they stopped near her door at midnight, but she could have been imagining things.

"You know, Duchess," he murmured, his voice a low rumble that sent a shiver down her spine. "I initially thought you were avoiding me. Now, I believe you are hiding something."

Alexandra turned slowly, forcing a smile that she hoped would mask her inner turmoil. "Hiding? Whatever would I have to hide from you, Your Grace? You know the darkness in me. You know the worst of me—my father's debts..."

She enunciated each word carefully, trying not to waver, even as she grew hot whenever she remembered where his lips and tongue had been. She licked her lips—almost unconsciously.

“I do not know yet, but I intend to find out,” he declared, and the threat felt delicious as he stared at her lips.

Alexandra wondered if she could do to him what he did to her.

No, she shouldn't think about it.

“Perhaps it is best to leave some things alone, Your Grace,” she said primly, although other words wanted to escape her lips.

This time, a hint of vulnerability slipped through even though she tried to maintain her composure. He made it worse by stepping closer, so close that she could feel his warmth and smell the subtle hint of sandalwood on his skin.

“I have the rest of my life to solve the mystery that you are, wife.”

The finality of his words startled Alexandra. She could hear the truth in them. He would not stop until he found out what she was hiding. Which meant that she was running out of time.

Without a warning, he reached out and cupped her cheek, his thumb gently stroking the tender skin beneath her eye. “Dance with me,” he demanded, his voice gentle yet commanding.

“How? Here?” she asked, wondering how it could be possible. “Nobody will be playing music for us.”

Alexandra reasoned that to refuse would be to draw even more suspicion. But was it all that it was? She was committing to a dangerous game.

“Yes. I know you have music in your head,” he said, almost purring.

Reluctantly, she placed her hand in his, feeling the callouses on his palm that spoke of hours of boxing.

His answer rattled her. Did he not know anything at all, or was he playing a game of cat and mouse?

His grip on her hand tightened slightly, pulling her closer until their bodies brushed against each other with every step. Alexandra tried to focus on the rhythm he had started—a silent one punctuated by the thudding of her heart—but she couldn’t.

“Tell me,” he whispered in her ear, his breath hot against her skin. “What is it that you fear so much? Do you think about what happened in the opera house?”

She swallowed hard, her throat dry. “It is... complicated.”

“And the kiss?” he asked, his voice dropping suggestively, making it clear that he wasn’t talking about just the kiss.

“I never thought about it,” she lied.

For some reason, he looked as if he believed her. Oliver suddenly untangled himself from her and left her standing there, wondering what happened.

She took a deep breath, trying to slow her racing heart. She needed to prepare, to steel herself for what was to come. Oliver was getting closer to the truth, and she didn’t know what he was seeking.

Becoming more intimate with her. Or finding out if she had anything to do with J. Lewis.

She was indeed running out of time.

Chapter Eighteen

“Focus, Westgrave!” one of the men on the sidelines shouted.

The Duke of Westgrave had not been at Devil’s Draw for weeks—months, even. It was evident in the way his followers hooted and cheered on their favorite fighter when he entered the gambling hell.

The air in the space seemed thick and hazy with a mix of brandy, sweat, and smoke. The crowd was restless, itching to see a fight.

The yelling turned into aggravated arguments and then into harsh whispers as Oliver squared off against his opponent. He had meant to be there, to stifle an urge and quieten the growing noise in his head.

The noise included flashes of Alexandra’s face. Her voice whenever she evaded him. The music that haunted him in his sleep.

Oliver cracked his bare knuckles. His jaw was tense, mirroring the knot in his stomach. He needed to regain control of his life and his emotions. That was what he intended to do as he narrowed his eyes at his opponent.

The beginning of the match was easy enough. Straightforward. He landed a quick succession of punches on his opponent’s face. The man’s cheek reddened easily.

It should have been a quick match.

Suddenly, the memory of his kiss with Alexandra flashed in his mind, unbidden. He remembered how sweet her lips were, how fiery she was. She might seem in control, but when he unraveled her, there was passion. Then, she was gone again—mentally and emotionally—escaping into God knew where.

“Watch out!” he heard someone in the crowd shout, but he was too slow this time.

A punch landed squarely on his ribs, jolting him back to the moment. He grunted, clutching his side.

“Focus, Westgrave!” people shouted at him.

He dodged the next punch and delivered a jab to the ribs in return.

The crowd cheered, happy to see his mind back in the match. Unlike with other matches, Oliver felt drained quickly, his breath coming in harsh gasps. It was not just from the exertion but also from his inner turmoil.

He knew it all along. He was falling apart.

“I’ve had enough,” he growled, and with a final hook, he ended the match.

His opponent stumbled back, and soon he felt the referee raise his hand to declare his victory. He staggered a little, feeling dizzy. His side also throbbed from the punch he received while he was distracted.

This time, he could not savor his victory.

He realized that he had been missing something.

Or rather, someone.

The townhouse was silent when Oliver arrived. There were no sounds of a piano, and that somehow worsened his grief.

He had won the match, but he felt empty. His knuckles felt raw, and his face stung with a faint bruise he hadn't anticipated.

I must be growing old .

He chuckled bitterly at the thought.

He headed straight to his study so he could pour himself a drink before going to sleep. His movements were careful, as everything ached. It didn't use to before.

He remembered all the celebrations that used to follow his victories—more gambling, more drinking. He had not felt alone like he did tonight, but he hoped that the morning light would erase the foolishness of the boxing match.

Perhaps it was time to change.

He recalled Alexandra saying that some people could not afford to, but he'd show her.

As he climbed up the stairs, candlelight spilled into the hallway from the doorway to Alexandra's room.

She was awake.

“Your Grace?”

She was awake, yes, but not playing her music. He paused, his hand clutching the banister.

His instincts told him to move past her room. After all, she was the reason why he wanted to forget through pain. Through physical violence—one that could soothe the emotional one inside of him. Still, he found himself rooted to the spot, staring at the beautiful figure before him.

Alexandra closed the distance between them quickly, her eyes widening at the sight of him. The dregs of sleep that clung to her were gone—if she had ever slept.

“Good Lord! What ever happened to you?” she asked, a curious mix of alarm and anger lacing her voice.

“It’s nothing, Duchess,” he replied, attempting a nonchalant tone.

He did not want to talk to her—not tonight. He didn’t want to explain why he ended up back in Devil’s Draw.

“Go back to sleep,” he told her.

And because she was Alexandra Audley, she would not be easily dismissed. She wanted to be there, the stubborn wench.

“Nothing? You’re bleeding!” she exclaimed, concern and exasperation etched into her features. Her hands hovered over his face. “Come into my room. Now.”

Oliver was too exhausted to argue. He obeyed his wife, even though he wanted to retreat into himself.

She led him inside, her smaller figure somehow filling the quiet room. Her gentle hands guided him to sit near the lamp.

In mere moments, she had a wet cloth ready and was dabbing the cuts on his face.

She was gentle yet efficient—a pianist and a healer.

For a moment, Oliver let himself close his eyes and simply feel her soft, cautious touches. It felt good to be taken care of, although his pride smarted at the thought of being weak or vulnerable. He rarely let himself feel like this.

“There’s no need to fuss,” he murmured, his voice low.

“Because you’re the great Duke of Westgrave? Well, I certainly need to fuss, since you don’t seem capable of taking care of yourself.”

Oliver was surprised by the genuine concern in her voice, subtly disguised by irritation. She cleaned his wounds with care and precision, as if she had been doing it her whole lifetime.

“What drove you to this? Your face is marred with bruises, but your side looks even worse.”

“Thanks very much, I hadn’t noticed,” he said drily, unable to deny the truth in her words.

“You returned to Devil’s Draw, didn’t you? Why?”

“Boxing clears my head. It gives me focus,” he said through gritted teeth, trying to ignore the pain and his pent-up emotions.

“Why did you need to focus?” she whispered, her eyes fixed on him. “Is something distracting you?”

Oliver was caught off guard by how direct she was. He straightened his back, wincing and slightly moving away from her. Her hand was now hovering over the bruise on

the side of his torso, where the red hue was already turning purple.

Alexandra's gaze softened at his silence. Her hand trembled as she pressed the cloth to his side. She had more questions to ask him, he could see that, but nothing came out of her lips.

"I know it may seem contrary to what you've heard about me, Duchess, but I like a sense of control in my life. Boxing at Devil's Draw helps with it."

"And you feel like you're losing control now? Is that why you went there tonight?" she asked softly, bowing her head even as she continued to gently tend to his wounds.

Their eyes met then, and Oliver felt a shiver run through him—through each part of him she tended to.

His eyes darkened. The usually composed Duke of Westgrave was nowhere to be seen; in his place stood a man at the edge of his control.

He exhaled sharply, his fingers brushing a loose strand of hair from her face.

"Do you want to know why I ended up at Devil's Draw tonight?" he asked, his voice a low, gravelly whisper that sent a shiver down her spine. "It wasn't simply about the need for control, though I told myself that it was. It was because of you."

Alexandra blinked, taken aback by his admission. She opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out. She only stared at him, searching his face, her fingers curling into the fabric of her night robe.

"You are driving me to madness, Alexandra," he continued, his thumb tracing the line of her jaw. The touch was deceptively soft, a stark contrast to the storm raging inside him. "I see you, and I lose every bit of sense I possess. I have never wanted

anything—anyone—this badly. And it is making me lose my control.”

Alexandra drew in a shaky breath. “You... you’re losing control... because of me?” she whispered.

“Is it so difficult to believe?” His eyes searched hers, his grip tightening on her waist in case she might slip away. “I have worked so hard to become the master of my own desires, Alexandra. But with you—” He paused, his voice dropping to a husky whisper. “With you, I feel like I’m teetering on the edge.”

His words hung in the air between them, laden with unspoken need.

Alexandra raised her hand, gently pressing her palm against his chest. Oliver knew she could feel his rapid heartbeat beneath her fingers.

“I... I feel it too,” she admitted, before swallowing. “Why should we fight it at all if we both feel this way?”

Oliver let out a low, humorless laugh. He rose to his feet and stepped closer to her, crowding her against the table, his hand sliding to the nape of her neck.

He leaned down, his lips inches away from hers. “Because once I have you, I will not hold back,” he murmured roughly. “And I will ruin you in ways you can’t even imagine.”

“And what if I want to be ruined?” she whispered back, her eyes searching his.

A growl rumbled in his chest, and before she could say another word, his lips crashed against hers.

Chapter Nineteen

The kiss was possessive, demanding, yet filled with desperation. Oliver gripped her waist, pulling her flush against him, and Alexandra gasped into his mouth, threading her fingers through his hair and tugging him closer.

His lips knew exactly where to go, where to kiss and ravish—no doubt he had many lovers before her.

Her insecurities reared their heads, but before she could pull away, his hands were roaming over her back.

He was pulling her closer, and somehow, all her fears evaporated.

There were no more reservations. No more walls. No more objections. She was ready to surrender to him, even if she did not know what it would mean in the future.

Both had been too contained, too careful to express their real emotions. Tonight was different.

Alexandra traced the line of his jaw with her fingers, reveling in the feel of his trimmed beard.

She shivered at the thought of feeling it on other parts of her body.

Oliver trailed kisses down her neck, making her whimper. Her skin felt alive beneath his lips. She could feel the heat radiating from his battered body, the way his hands

trembled slightly as they continued to roam over her.

Anticipation. Desire. They left her breathless and dizzy. Perhaps she should put a halt to this. Perhaps she wasn't ready. However, a voice in the back of her head egged her on, asking her when she'd be ever ready. Who else could she give her virtue to but to her husband?

"Your Grace," she whispered, "what are we doing?"

Oliver paused to look into her eyes, his lips hovering just above the pulse in her neck. "Tell me to stop, and I will. But I need you, Alexandra."

"I need you, too," she echoed, pulling him closer.

A part of her still reminded her to be cautious. He was badly bruised. He was in pain.

"But... are you certain, Your Grace?"

His reply was a growl as he captured her lips once more. "Yes," he said against her mouth. "I'm certain. And call me Oliver. Such an act does not warrant such formality."

Alexandra chuckled. He was right. They were doing things husbands and wives did.

She melted into him, meeting his touches with equal fervor—she had no idea she was capable of such a thing. There was no protest from her when he guided her backward until she was sitting on the edge of her bed.

"Undress me," he commanded, his voice thick with desire.

Alexandra's fingers fumbled with his already open shirt. She pulled it off his

shoulders, letting it fall to the floor.

She bit her lip.

His chest was broad and muscular, dusted with dark hair that tapered beneath the waistband of his trousers. Even marred with bruises, his body was exquisite.

Her eyes traced every defined muscle, and she felt her cheeks flush. Yes, she had seen him before, but not like this.

“Like what you see?” he asked, a smirk playing at the corners of his lips.

She had missed that naughty smile.

“You know I do,” she responded boldly. “Oliver.”

He chuckled softly, seemingly pleased with her finally calling him by his Christian name.

He reached out to cup her cheek in his hand. “You’re so beautiful, Alexandra. So utterly delicious.”

Alexandra’s heart stuttered at his words. She was rendered speechless, and she might as well. His hands were already peeling her nightgown off her body.

“Lie down,” he ordered. “Let me look at you.”

The young Duchess obeyed, feeling unnervingly exposed but also thrilled at the possibilities. She lay down on the bed as he took off her undergarments.

Oliver stared at her, his eyes heavy-lidded. She writhed a little even as she told

herself to behave. “You look so pretty. Spread your legs for me. Just for me.”

“Please,” Alexandra begged, partly because she was embarrassed by the way her husband admired her body and partly because she wanted him now. “Please.”

Oliver grunted as he quickly undressed before her. Soon, he was in bed with her, their bodies flush from chest to thigh. His bare skin on hers felt like heaven.

“Good God, Alexandra,” he groaned, squeezing her breasts and exploring the rest of her body with his hands. “I’ve wanted this for so long. I want you .”

“Make me yours then, Oliver,” she said.

He kissed her again while touching every inch of her. Mapping her form. Worshipping her body. He traced the outline of her breasts with both hands, his thumbs teasing her nipples into hard buds.

“Beautiful,” he murmured against her skin as he captured one nipple in his mouth.

He sucked hard on the bud, drawing it in and licking it. She arched her back, pushing herself closer to him.

There was more to this, Alexandra knew. She was reminded of it when his hand slid lower, his fingers brushing over the wet heat between her thighs. Her hips jerked at the contact, a moan slipping past her lips as she arched into him.

“Touch me, please.” The words tumbled out in a breathless plea.

His eyes flashed with raw desire, and a dark smirk curved his lips. “Oh, I do love it when you beg,” he murmured, his voice dripping with sinful delight.

Without warning, he slid two fingers inside her slick, waiting core. Alexandra cried out, her thighs falling open wider, welcoming him in. Sparks raced across her skin when he found her most sensitive spot. His thumb circled her swollen nub expertly, teasing her mercilessly.

“So responsive,” he praised, his voice husky, though she could hear his need in it. “Every part of you craves my touch, doesn’t it?”

Alexandra could only whimper in response, her mind hazy with the overwhelming sensations he was drawing from her body. His fingers moved with practiced precision, sliding in and out, curling against that spot that made her see stars.

“Y-Yes,” she stammered, breathless, her hands clutching at his shoulders as she writhed beneath him. “Oh, Oliver... I feel... I can’t?—”

“I’ve got you,” he coaxed, his voice a low growl. “Let go, Alexandra. Come for me.”

He increased the pace, pumping his fingers into her with an intensity that sent her over the edge. She felt the coil of pleasure tightening in her belly, building to an unbearable crescendo, before she shattered with a cry. Her entire body seized as her orgasm crashed over her like a tidal wave. Her inner walls clenched around his fingers as she cried out his name, clinging to him as if he were the only thing keeping her grounded.

He continued to work her through the waves, his lips brushing against her ear as he whispered, “Such a good girl for me. Look at how beautifully you fall apart in my hands.”

As she came down from her high, still trembling and panting, Alexandra’s desire flared again.

“More,” she pleaded, her voice a hoarse whisper. “I want more.”

Oliver’s laugh was dark and sensual. “Such an eager little thing,” he murmured approvingly. “You want me, don’t you? All of me.”

“Yes,” she breathed, her eyes wild with desire. “I need you, Oliver. Now.”

He didn’t make her wait. He positioned himself between her legs and guided the thick head of his manhood to her entrance. He hesitated for just a heartbeat, his eyes locking onto hers.

“Are you ready for me?” he asked, his voice gravelly, barely restrained.

“Yes,” she moaned, tangling her fingers in his hair and tugging him closer. “Please.”

With a slow, deliberate push, he slid inside her inch by inch, filling her completely. The stretch was intense, a delicious burn that made her gasp and cling to him.

He paused for a moment, his forehead pressed against hers. “God, you’re so tight,” he groaned. “So perfect. Made for me.”

Alexandra wrapped her legs around his waist, pulling him deeper, the pain quickly fading into a pleasure that made her toes curl.

“D-Don’t stop,” she moaned, her voice raw with need. “I need you. Harder.”

Oliver’s eyes flashed, and a primal, possessive growl rumbled in his chest. “As you wish, darling.”

He pulled back slowly, almost torturously, before thrusting into her again with more force. He set a rhythm, slow and deliberate at first, each stroke pushing her higher.

But soon, his restraint snapped.

His movements became more frenzied, more desperate. He gripped her hips, his fingers digging into her flesh as he drove into her harder, faster, claiming her with every thrust.

“Yes!” Alexandra cried out, her nails raking down his back, leaving red lines in their wake. “Just like that... Don’t stop!”

He pounded into her, their bodies moving in perfect harmony, like a dance they had practiced over and over. Her cries of pleasure filled the room, mixing with his deep, guttural groans. It was intoxicating; the sound of his moans, the feel of him inside her, filling her...

“God, you feel so good,” he gritted out. “You’re mine, Alexandra. Only mine.”

“Yes,” she breathed, squeezing her eyes shut as another wave of pleasure built inside her. “Yours, Oliver. Only yours.”

Her words sent him over the edge. With a final, deep thrust, he buried himself inside her as his climax crashed over him, his seed spilling into her as he groaned her name.

“Alexandra.”

That... That was music to her ears.

Chapter Twenty

Morning sunlight filtered through the windows, bathing Oliver and Alexandra in a warm glow as they lay entangled in bed.

The linens were rumpled, blankets strewn all over the floor—they were the only witnesses to what happened last night.

Oliver woke up first. His body was still tender from the bruises he had sustained in the boxing match last night, and he knew what he would see if he looked at himself in the mirror. However, there were other, more delicious things that he wanted to look at.

At the moment, his focus was on his wife. It was his first time seeing her asleep, just as unguarded as she was last night. Her face was soft and peaceful, as if she had no worries in the world.

She was a virgin. He had seen the faint streak of blood on her thighs, which he'd wiped away with a damp cloth before they drifted off to sleep.

No man had claimed her before, and it made him feel guilty for suspecting her of betraying her vows. It also made him feel proud.

Alexandra was his, and he wanted her to know that he was hers.

Her eyes opened slowly, her lashes brushing her cheeks. They immediately met his, and a blush crept up her face. Oliver brushed a stray lock of hair from her face,

wanting to see more of her.

“You’re a puzzle, Alexandra. Do you know that?” he murmured, smiling down at her as he propped himself up on his elbow.

“Oh? And would you still want to unravel me?” she asked teasingly.

He liked her that way. He liked her every way, especially last night.

“Tell me something, then. Something about you that I wouldn’t guess,” he urged, his fingers trailing down her arm.

Alexandra looked away for a moment, considering her answer. “My brother Julian. He... He was the one person who always understood me. When he was gone, I was unmoored, and Father only saw me as an object to barter.”

Oliver’s breath caught at the sadness in her voice. He had seen her fiery side, combative and stubborn. He’d even seen her happy side. But this side... it was raw.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. His fingers wrapped around her arm and squeezed comfortingly.

“Thank you, but it’s been years.”

“That doesn’t mean you can’t feel sad about it.”

She gave him a small smile. “When I play the piano, I like to think that Julian is still with me. Both he and Mother.” Her voice was laden with grief, but her eyes had lit up when she gazed at him. “What about you? Is there anything you can tell me about you that nobody else knows?”

Oliver gazed at her, frowning. She too had lost her mother, though from what he'd gathered, she actually had a relationship with her, unlike him. And she'd lost her brother too, finding herself trapped with her bastard of a father.

Sometimes life took a lot more than it gave.

"Sometimes, I wonder," he admitted, "if all of this—the title and the obligations that come with it—was meant for me. If my sister had not intervened, I would have been living in squalor, or the blackguards of Devil's Draw would have murdered me."

Alexandra studied him thoughtfully, chewing on her lower lip. All he wanted to do then was to kiss her lips again, press her into the mattress, and make love to her all morning—duties be damned.

"You have the command and authority of a leader, but you are also kind to the people who work for you. You are fair, Oliver. I might not have asked questions, but I've seen the way you treat your servants," she said earnestly. "That being said, you are also the most infuriating man I know."

Oliver laughed. He liked that the tension between them had dissipated. He realized just how at ease he was with his wife.

Imagine that.

A whole year had passed before he could finally say that.

The easy companionship remained even in their outings. They were no longer pretending. This was real.

And he hoped it would stay that way for good.

It was another ball. The old Alexandra would have pouted in private and seethed in public, while exchanging snide remarks with her husband. But that evening was different.

Oliver's attention no longer strayed from her. She thought he was blatant the last time, but now he had thrown discretion to the wind. She no longer questioned his intense gaze. She longed for it. She reveled in it.

"Are you ready?" he asked, his eyes sparkling with glee even as he tried to suppress his smile.

When he offered her his arm, she took it enthusiastically. It now felt natural to stand beside him. There were no worries weighing her down as they danced and mingled with the ton .

Between dances, Oliver leaned in close, his lips grazing her ear. "I must admit that I rather enjoy this," he whispered, making goosebumps rise on her sensitive skin.

"This?" She raised an eyebrow at him.

"Being here. Dancing with you. Being by your side," he replied, his voice deeper, more intimate.

Now that they had become intimate, his words carried more weight. The hand on the small of her back no longer felt strange. It was meant to be there.

But as a J. Lewis composition played in the background, Alexandra felt her blood run cold. Nothing was quite as perfect as it seemed.

She still had her secret to keep and her father to save, even if the wastrel was not worth saving.

Alexandra lay on the bed, her chocolate-brown hair spread over the dark pillow. Oliver stood over her, his chest heaving. He was as naked as she was, his manhood hard and ready.

“Oliver, come here. Come to me,” she panted, her voice a sultry whisper that he did not recognize.

It sent shivers down his spine.

His eyes traced every curve of her body before he kneeled between her legs. He trailed his fingers over her inner thighs, smirking when she trembled under his touch.

His lips crashed against hers. As always, the kiss was desperate and hungry. Their tongues danced together, exploring each other. Tasting. Ravishing.

This time, he had other plans. He trailed kisses down her neck, softly nipping her skin as she squirmed beneath him. He held her hips as they bucked. Pride surged within him as he realized that she needed him as much as he needed her.

But he was not done yet. He licked down her chest, her nipples, her navel, and then, finally, he stopped at the juncture of her legs.

He looked up, seeking permission even as passion seemed to have overtaken him. She flushed and nodded, allowing him to slide one finger into her. The gasp that escaped her lips made him harder than he had ever been.

“Oh,” Alexandra breathed, her head lolling back and her hips moving to the rhythm of his finger.

Oliver added a second finger, stretching her gently while his thumb rubbed circles over her clit. He could tell that she was getting closer to her release as her hips

bucked against his hand.

“Please,” she begged, her voice cracking with a need so intense. “Make me yours again.”

“Come here,” he growled as he lifted her over him.

His member sprang up, hard and throbbing. Alexandra watched it with wonder. She circled her fingers around it, marveling at its heat, length, and girth. Oliver helped her position herself above him, aligning his shaft with her core.

Slowly, she lowered herself onto his hard member, savoring the stretch. The feeling of being filled by her husband completely. She watched in awe as he disappeared inside her inch by inch.

Oliver moved his hands to her breasts, loving their weight in his palms. He kneaded the globes as she began to move over him.

“You feel incredible. Your heat. Your beauty,” he groaned. “The perfect fit.”

Alexandra could only moan her agreement as her movements became frantic. Oliver watched her beautiful face as she sought her release. He was exhilarated by the orchestra of heavy breathing and slapping flesh.

This was music.

Alexandra leaned down to kiss his lips. Their tongues tangled together, even as they continued to move as one. They had perfected their rhythm, his thrusts meeting hers.

“Yes, yes!” Alexandra cried out as she broke the kiss to arch her back.

He felt her body tense up and her core tighten around him, the ripples causing him to follow soon after.

Oliver held her hips as he spilled his seed deep inside her, shuddering with a grunt of triumph and pleasure. He had never felt like this with any other woman, as if his soul was bare while his body basked in the pleasure.

“You know, I didn’t think this was possible. Us. Like this,” he confessed after their breaths had evened out and she collapsed on his chest.

“Neither did I,” she admitted, her finger tracing the line of his jaw.

Oliver knew that he would do everything to keep it that way between them.

Chapter Twenty-One

“ O ur arrival had caused a stir again, Duchess. We are still in season,” Oliver whispered in his wife’s ear.

A few days later, they arrived at the soirée hosted by their neighbor, the Dowager Countess of Layton. The elderly woman had expressed her dismay that the couple had not been visiting her as often when they lived within walking distance.

Lady Layton was well-known for hosting parties that fueled gossip. Because of that reputation, most notable members of the ton would attend them, and anyone would be grateful for an invitation.

Tonight, Alexandra was excited about the soirée. It had been a pleasure to go anywhere with her husband.

She watched the room with undisguised glee. The townhouse was elegant, but she was more focused on her art and her husband to truly mingle. She vowed to see what she could do to improve the décor at their home. Lady Layton certainly knew what she was doing.

Crystal chandeliers made the candlelight dance, casting a warm glow over the guests. Loud chatter, laughter, and murmurs blended. Alexandra could only imagine the gossip and scandals that were brewing at that moment.

“We are still the latest diversion. I can imagine, though, that there will be new couples to focus on soon enough. The place is a gossip haven,” Alexandra remarked,

her eyes scanning the smiling faces greeting them.

As they mingled with the ton , Alexandra spotted the Countess of Laverton, the lady who had given her that scandalous book. The older woman smirked at her, eyes lighting up with mischief.

Alexandra recalled reading *Fanny Hill* for the first time. It shocked and titillated her. She knew that reading it and any other book like it would now have her seeking out her husband, as she now knew what pleasures the bedroom could provide.

“Ah, Your Grace!” Lady Laverton did not walk toward her, but she glided over to her. Her gown was elegant and understated, shimmering like the crystals in the chandeliers. “It’s good to see you and the Duke.”

“You are most kind, Lady Laverton,” Alexandra responded while casting a quick glance at Oliver.

She was happy to see him looking so entertained. The haunted look on his face after he had returned from Devil’s Draw was gone—at least for now.

Lady Laverton leaned in conspiratorially, flicking her fan open as if to shield them from the others’ view. “Tell me, my dear. Was the book I lent you, uh, enlightening?”

Alexandra blushed but kept her composure. “It was certainly informative, My Lady.”

The older woman chuckled. She fanned herself as if the room had gotten hotter—and perhaps it had.

“I knew you’d find the book entertaining. I believe we should meet with the other ladies to discuss it in great detail.”

“Lady Laverton,” Oliver began, wrapping his arm around his wife’s waist protectively. “I trust that you have been recommending some appropriate reading material to my wife?”

“Oh certainly, Your Grace,” Lady Laverton replied. “I’m all for broadening the horizons and feeding the intellectual mind.”

Alexandra stifled a giggle, both embarrassed and intrigued by the exchange. She was certain her husband knew that she and the Countess were talking about the book he caught her reading.

A new arrival gave her a respite.

“Well, if it isn’t my good friend and boxing partner,” said the Duke of Oakdale as he strode toward them.

His grin was disarming, reminding Alexandra that he was a ton favorite.

“Philip.” Oliver clapped his friend on the back, returning his smile. “Good to see that you are here with no bruises.”

“Duchess,” Philip greeted Alexandra with a respectful nod, before chuckling. “I seem to have better luck lately, but I also have not seen much of you at the ring.”

“I had been thoroughly occupied,” Oliver responded, casting a teasing glance at his wife.

“Ah, better yet. I believe you owe her enough of your time. However, do you know, Duchess, that your husband is a force of nature during a match?” Philip asked. “Any boxing match.”

Alexandra's eyes danced with mischief as they darted between her husband and his friend.

"Is he now?" she asked, although she knew full well how her husband was in a fight.

She'd seen him fight more than one man at a time the first time she went to Devil's Draw. She'd also seen the effects a fight could have on him.

Her cheeks burned at the thought of what happened after she tended to his bruises.

"He does seem like he'd make a good sparring partner," she added.

"And I have never doubted that you could make a formidable sparring partner, Duchess," Oliver said, winking.

Alexandra was about to respond, but her train of thought was interrupted by another conversation near them. Her ear caught the name, J. Lewis.

She wondered why there was another issue regarding her pseudonym. She had hoped that people would soon lose interest, but speculation about the composer's true identity and whereabouts had only grown. It should not be a surprise in Lady Layton's home.

The woman herself was fueling the gossip, undoubtedly speaking her mind, while her son, the Earl of Layton, stood beside her quietly. He appeared to be disinterested in the gossip and was merely there to indulge his mother.

"Mr. J. Lewis again," Lady Layton lamented so dramatically that Alexandra wondered how she had not yet asked for her smelling salts. "Why is that man hiding, anyway? People love his music. Why doesn't he want the recognition?"

“It’s a shame he won’t reveal his identity,” a gentleman about Oliver’s age mused. “He’s a talented composer. He should be able to handle public acclaim. It’s the same with Westback—he’s an excellent painter, yet he refuses to reveal himself to Society.”

“I’ve said it before,” Oliver said. “He does not like the ton’s scrutiny, or he’s merely a coward.”

Alexandra, who was holding his arm, could not help but tighten her grip on him. He looked down at her with some amusement, seemingly unaware of her distress.

“Anonymity can provide you with freedom,” she said, her voice sharper than she had intended. “When a composer’s identity is hidden, people listen to the music. They don’t appreciate it because of who the composer is. There are no biases.”

“I know you’re fond of this mysterious composer, my dear wife,” Oliver remarked, raising an eyebrow. “I still want to meet him so I can introduce him to his biggest admirer—you.”

“I simply appreciate art in its barest form without having to know everything about the artist,” she retorted, meeting his gaze.

People were now staring at them curiously. When she noticed it, Alexandra was prepared to step back, but Oliver seemed to be enjoying her reaction.

“It’s almost as if you know Mr. J. Lewis personally,” he playfully whispered in her ear.

“What if I did?” she whispered back, matching his tone but keeping her expression neutral.

Alexandra could feel the crackling tension between them. She knew that he had long begun suspecting something, and she must do something about it.

To direct the attention of the crowd to someone else, Alexandra turned to the young Earl of Layton.

“Lord Layton,” she said suddenly, startling the otherwise stoic man. “Do you enjoy the works of Mr. J. Lewis?”

“Yes, very much so, Your Grace. His compositions have a raw quality that makes them stir the crowd so easily. It’s like he is more interested in the emotions than the technique.”

Alexandra could not breathe. That was one of the first critiques she’d heard about her technique. Everyone else was simply interested in whether Mr. J. Lewis was ready to reveal himself or not. She knew that if people found out that a woman composed the music, they would say, Ah. So that was why.

She knew she wouldn’t like that.

“My son has refined taste. He can play the piano and the flute,” Lady Layton declared proudly.

Alexandra felt Oliver stiffen next to her. She recalled how he had wanted to learn to play the piano, too, but he hadn’t because of his father.

He cleared his throat and briefly studied her face. Alexandra knew that he knew what she had tried to do, and he seemed prepared to do the same—at least in public.

“I can see that. Lord Layton might make a fine patron of the arts in the near future,” he said.

The elderly Countess gave them a satisfied smile and launched into an in-depth discussion of her son's musical achievements. While some in their group had barely covered their yawns, Alexandra was relieved by the distraction.

It was time for her to breathe again. She wanted to be free of Oliver's probing gaze. The others might not suspect her at all, but her husband had gotten enough clues.

She did not expect the respite to be so short-lived. Oliver would never let her off easily, after all.

He took her hand as they walked toward the refreshments table. His fingers stroked her knuckles casually but possessively.

"Your loyalty to the mysterious composer is admirable, Duchess," he said, raising an eyebrow at her.

"What do you think of it, then, Your Grace? Do you question my loyalty to you because of it?"

He stopped mid-stride and watched her— studying her. It was as if he thought he could read her mind if he tried hard enough.

It was unsettling, yes, but it also made Alexandra want to fan herself. She wanted to kiss him right there in their neighbor's home, but there were emotions on his face that were too fleeting to read.

"No," he whispered as he leaned toward her. "I know you are mine, Alexandra. But sometimes I do wonder if there's more to your defense of J. Lewis than mere appreciation. Perhaps you defend him because you know who he really is."

Alexandra's breath caught in her throat. She lifted her hand to fiddle with her

amethyst pendant. Recognizing her anxiety, Oliver reached out and covered her fingers with his.

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard a couple so intent on debating the motivations of an anonymous composer,” Philip suddenly remarked a few feet from them, and they pulled away from each other.

“A spirited discussion. In fact, every conversation with him is spirited,” Alexandra replied, beaming at her husband’s friend.

“I would expect nothing less from him, and from you. If you want to discuss something else further, you can call on me.”

Alexandra chuckled, while Oliver clapped his friend on the back. “She might just hold you to that, my friend.”

The rest of the evening was spent discussing safer topics. Lady Layton spent the time introducing everyone to everyone else, even if the said members of the ton already knew each other. Alexandra even endured more tales about her son. She was certain that the young Earl was embarrassed by his mother’s openness about his accomplishments, imagined or otherwise.

Through it all, though, Alexandra remained vigilant.

Could she bear to lose him if the truth came out?

Chapter Twenty-Two

“That bloom is leaning too close to the gravel path,” Oliver noted that morning, though he spent more time watching his wife’s face.

Oliver realized that when he was with his wife, the morning dew felt fresher, and the flowers seemed to bloom brighter.

How had he not noticed these things before?

Ah. That question was easy enough to answer. He had spent most of his life in smoky rooms, drinking and gambling away his money. Fighting with his fists was the one thing that never took away his essence.

“Perhaps it’s stretching toward the sun. Isn’t that what the botanists say, anyway?” Alexandra replied, her voice light but somehow distant.

Oliver frowned.

“That flowers grow toward the sun?” Alexandra added.

“Perhaps it doesn’t understand the danger of doing so,” Oliver said, the playfulness overshadowed by his serious undertone.

He looked at her, gauging whether she caught his meaning—that sometimes what seemed natural could be dangerous, too. That the passion she had for playing could be consuming her.

And yet, the dark circles under her eyes seemed to suggest that it was a good thing she was getting some sun in the mornings.

She avoided his gaze. That made his chest tighten and his jaw clench.

They were growing closer physically, there was no doubt about that. In the bedroom, there was no hesitation, and they were learning what the other wanted. When it came to other things, she'd pull away just when they were getting close.

"How can it be dangerous when it's the natural state of things?" she wondered aloud, seemingly no longer speaking to him.

He now understood her fascination with the mystery of J. Lewis. After all, he was fascinated with the mystery of her. She continued to confuse him. During the nights they were not together, he would hear the faint strains coming from the music room. Sometimes, they were soft, gentle lullabies with a melancholy edge. Other times, they were fierce and angry.

Emotional.

But what of technique? It was a shame that his father had put a halt to all of his music lessons when he was young.

There were days when Oliver found sheet music tucked haphazardly in her desk drawer. There were torn pages. Some were stashed in the most unlikely places. It was almost as if she no longer cared to conceal her pastime.

One evening, he had returned from a late night with Philip and their other friends to hear the melody drifting from the music room.

This time, it was haunting. The emotions were so raw that he had to clench his fists to

stop himself from knocking on the door—from demanding what was going on.

Something was happening to the Duchess.

And he had to know what.

Days later, Alexandra seemed to have returned from the land of the dead. She was again cheerful, effortlessly navigating the ton .

Her grace and refined manners had attracted several ardent admirers, men and women alike. However, the shadow of her father still loomed large. He moved in the same circles despite his predilection for vice in unsavory places. Therefore, Alexandra still felt a strange feeling in the pit of her stomach whenever she attended soirées.

For good reason.

In this particular gathering, her father stood in a corner with two men his age. He seemed to be deep in conversation with the other men, and she could not help but wonder if he also owed them money.

Her heart sank further into her stomach. She was working hard, coming up with music to entertain and inspire, simply because she wanted to pay off his debts, and here he was, looking like he had nothing bothering him.

Then, he turned toward her. His eyes widened, first with annoyance, and then with a strange kind of glee.

“Father,” she said, startled by the way he was looking at her.

“Your Grace,” he replied mockingly.

Afraid that he would cause a scandal in someone else's home, Alexandra closed the distance between them.

"I am trying to collect money to pay off your debts, Father. It will be a slow process toward freedom for you and me, but we will manage somehow," she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

"That is all you can do, you little chit? I've warned you. I don't know where you get your money from, but it can't be from your dear husband. Do you want me to go to him and ask him if he knows what you have been doing?"

His response shocked her. She had expected him to threaten her in places like Devil's Draw, but not here. Not with members of the ton present. He had always charmed his 'peers,' as he would call them.

There was nothing else she could do but to distance herself from him. Barely holding back tears, she whirled around and walked away from him, only to be accosted by a woman.

"How are you settling into your life as a duchess?" Lady Harriet, a well-known gossip, asked her with a grin.

"I've learned to settle in as best as I can," Alexandra said noncommittally, but her heart was still pounding from the encounter she just had with her father.

Lady Harriet seemed unconvinced and unsatisfied. She raised an eyebrow at Alexandra. "I hear married life is an even more challenging commitment, especially when your husband had been, erm, a notorious rake. Your Grace, how do you manage?" she probed, her voice irritatingly high-pitched.

Alexandra was about to retort, but she noticed that her husband had returned to her

side.

Oliver could not help but admire the way his wife plastered on a patient smile, not taking Lady Harriet's bait.

"Why, Lady Harriet, I believe in letting people believe what they want. It gives me more peace. I can say anything I want tonight, but I won't please everyone with my answers."

Lady Harriet laughed, but her eyes showed a hint of uncertainty. Oliver knew that she did not get what she wanted from Alexandra.

There was also unease on Alexandra's face. The attention had been wonderful at first, but she had gotten tired of it.

"Come, my love," he said softly, providing her with an escape.

She raised an eyebrow at the term of endearment. They had not mentioned that word in private and were only ever formal in public.

"Let me introduce you to someone."

As they were a safe distance away, Alexandra tugged at her husband's arm.

"There is nobody to introduce me to. Am I right, Your Grace?" she asked, her eyes twinkling mischievously.

Oliver preferred her this way, not the melancholy, secretive woman she had been as of late.

"No. I was merely saving you from that woman," he said, not hiding his contempt

and amusement. “But what do you think of what she asked you? Do you believe all the stories about me?”

“I am curious, but I will wait for you to tell me, Your Grace. We have not made promises to each other. You do not owe me anything,” she said lightly.

Oliver swallowed. It was not what he wanted her to say.

He had felt some kind of triumph and accomplishment for sharing her bed and enjoying her friendship. However, he realized he wanted more. Not this. Not her uncertainty. Not her emotional distance. Yet, he also knew he could not force the same feelings on her. She had been trapped enough. He had to make her see that they could make their marriage real, not just the physical part.

But how?

His shoulders felt heavy as they continued mingling with the ton .

The Devil’s Draw was calling him again. In the gambling hell, there were no expectations beyond the pain.

The fire in his throat. The bruises on his jaw. Broken bones and broken dreams.

When she shut him out, Oliver felt like he lost something he never had.

“Your father-in-law’s debts are being settled. Might be discharged soon if only he doesn’t come to gamble again,” someone at Devil’s Draw had commented one night.

Oliver did not respond, but the information lingered.

So, Alexandra wouldn’t stop until she could pay all her father’s debts.

Ever since that interaction with Lady Harriet, Alexandra had withdrawn. He had knocked on the door connecting their rooms several times, and each time she'd given him an excuse.

She was pulling away.

Life with her was back to how it was. An arrangement. A transaction. The ton seemed to feel the change in them. Whispers about trouble in paradise were getting louder. Neither commented on nor denied the rumors.

One night when they went back home, they found themselves in the drawing room drinking sherry. It was a rare warm moment.

“Why have you shut me out? You’ve done this before. Then, you came back. Now, you’re somewhere else again,” he said, no longer able to take the silence and distance between them.

He stood by the drinks cart while she half-reclined on the sofa. She had just finished her drink.

“Me? I shut you out? After I reminded you what our marriage really is, you stopped talking to me. You went back to taking your pleasures at Devil’s Draw.”

“Alexandra, I may have been a rake once, but I would never force women, even to talk to me or enjoy my company. I have seen you happy during the balls and soirées, but the same cannot be said of late. It’s like you are fading away.”

“I’m not. I’m simply?—”

The pause that followed frightened Oliver for some reason. It seemed she was close to revealing her true fears.

“Simply what?” he still prodded even as the hand that gripped the glass of sherry became clammy.

“Adjusting. I pretended to have settled in, but all of this...” she trailed off, turning away.

Oliver knew that there was more to her emotional distance than not having settled into her new position as a wife and duchess.

He set his glass down on the drinks cart with a clink, then strode toward the sofa and knelt beside her, taking her hand in his. Her skin was warm against his, but he could still sense her holding back.

“Tell me,” he whispered. “What are you trying to make sense of, Alexandra?”

She squeezed her eyes shut as if trying to forget where she was. “Everything. Our marriage, your return to Devil’s Draw, the pressure from the ton ... Everything.”

Oliver knew she was still holding back. His grip on her hand tightened. “Our marriage is our own, and nobody else’s. They can say whatever they want. Isn’t that what you told Lady Harriet when you put her in her place?”

“We’ve begun pretending again. It makes me wonder if everything that happened between us was just part of the pretense.”

Her eyes sought his. However, when he looked at her intensely enough, she bowed her head.

Oliver’s throat felt dry. He swallowed hard, but he persisted—he would solve the puzzle that was his wife.

“We’re not strangers, Alexandra. We have managed to build a life together, though it may not seem like it yet. I am willing to raise a family with you if you would like that.”

She gasped at that. For a moment, he thought that he had shattered the last of her defenses, but he was wrong.

“A life built on lies and secrets,” she murmured sadly.

There was no resentment in her eyes, though. It occurred to him that it was herself that she blamed, or was that simply his imagination?

“You’re still trying to discover who I really am, and I have not let you.”

“It is how marriage is meant to be. I was not married before. I have never courted a woman either, but I know that the discovery is a process. Gradual but ultimately satisfying.”

“No, stop this. Just hold me.”

For a moment, Oliver hesitated. He was venturing into uncharted territory. It was a request that seemed both strange and familiar. Still, he was afraid to give it another thought, fearing she might slip away forever.

When she leaned into him, he wrapped his arms around her. She fit in his arms well, and at that moment, he felt something. Something he had been missing for weeks—a connection.

“Just like that,” she murmured against his chest, her tears staining his shirt.

They stayed like that for a while. Then, naturally, when Alexandra tilted her head up,

Oliver's lips descended on hers.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Alexandra had missed Oliver, but she could not fault him for staying away from her and looking for fresh diversions.

She had not been a welcoming wife, facing him with a dour face almost every day. She could not help it. She needed to form and keep a shield between them—to protect herself.

To protect him.

She had been risking her reputation and marriage, publishing compositions as J. Lewis. All the proceeds thus far went to paying off her father's debts, and it seemed that he had the talent for piling more debt onto them.

He was a greedy bastard; it was time to admit it. There were times when she wondered if staying with Oliver was worth it. Perhaps it was time to retreat to the countryside—time to admit defeat. She felt like drowning in her father's debts, and she could only imagine that he did not care at all.

“That is all you can do, you little chit? I've warned you. I don't know where you get your money from, but it can't be from your dear husband. Do you want me to go to him and ask him if he knows what you have been doing?”

A man had stopped by the townhouse to slip the letter into Ellen's hands. Her father and the terrible men surrounding him knew where she lived, naturally. Her husband was a duke and a prominent member of the ton. It was difficult to hide, and she was

afraid that Oliver would become embroiled in her troubles.

There were times, though, when she still hoped for a better life with him. When he went back to gambling and drinking, she thought that she had lost everything and did not believe that she could get them back.

“I’ve missed this, Oliver,” she confessed between kisses. She was shivering now, even though her skin was hot from the sherry.

“I know, my love,” he murmured into her neck.

It was the second time he’d used the term of endearment, but Alexandra dared not hope that it meant more than just that—a term of endearment. A way to call someone.

“Come here and kiss me some more, Your Grace,” she urged, giggling at the surprised look on his face.

“Your wish is my command, Duchess,” he murmured as his hands tore her gown off her body.

“Now what?” she asked teasingly as she lay on the sofa, naked as the day she was born.

“I can’t make love to you when you are uncertain about the way forward,” he said, looking grave even as he undressed in front of her.

She bit her lip.

Her husband did not know it, but she liked looking at him. Every part of him. His beauty often distracted her from her problems, and she appreciated it.

“There may be things I am not certain about. But when it comes to this, I am certain,” she assured him, spreading her legs for him.

It was only then that he joined her. Their kisses were passionate, filled with something that had not been there before. Alexandra was certain of it as she tasted his lips and clung to his muscular body.

When Oliver entered her, there was something more. As if their souls had merged. With each thrust, he’d somehow reach a place he had not before, heightening her pleasure.

“Oliver...” She moaned his name as if it was a prayer.

“Yes, darling?” he asked, not stopping.

He dipped his head to lick her nipple as he waited for her response. Then, he focused on driving them both to the edge of madness. His grip on her hips was firm enough to bruise, but she did not care.

“Just be with me,” she whispered hoarsely.

He stayed with her, pounding into her with urgency as he sought his pleasure and hers. They had mastered this dance, clutching at each other as if they did not want the other to disappear. He even continued thrusting into her after they shuddered with their release.

In the aftermath, he rested his head on her chest. Alexandra ran her fingers through his hair, loving the feel of his skin on hers. Their heartbeats created a symphony, one she had been trying to ignore.

Finally, Oliver lifted his head, gazing down at her.

“Alexandra...” he murmured, his voice thick with emotion.

It was as if he was about to tell her something, perhaps something she was not quite prepared for.

So, before he could say anything more, she placed a finger on his lips, silencing him.

“Shh... not now,” she whispered, her eyes sparkling with a mix of relief and contentment. “Not now...”

When his eyes had closed and slumber had taken over, Alexandra wondered if she should have just let him talk.

The following morning, deliciously aching after their lovemaking, Alexandra woke up with a few realizations.

One, she called the intimate act lovemaking .

Two, she could not imagine returning to the countryside without Oliver.

Three, she?—

She stopped there. She did not want to say the words because that would make everything real. Painfully real.

She stood up completely naked, admiring her husband’s equally naked body on the sofa. An embroidered pillow covered his manhood, which made her giggle.

He was hers. She could no longer imagine a reality without him in it, and that made her throat constrict. A sob threatened to burst out, and she clapped a hand over her mouth.

What was happening to her? One moment, she was in the throes of passion. The following morning, she was happy and sated. Then, she was distraught all over again.

“A good morning to a beautiful woman,” Oliver said, his husky voice making her blush. “Stay like that for the day. Do not look for a gown to cover yourself.”

“And what will happen when we have guests?” she teased. “What about the servants? Do I show myself to them? See if they approve?”

He sighed as if he truly contemplated having her naked the whole day. Then, he rose from the sofa, took her gown from last night, and helped her into it. Slowly. Tenderly.

Again, Alexandra felt like crying and she did not know why.

Oliver, meanwhile, found himself increasingly restless, his mind racing. Although he and his wife had reconnected the night before, there was still something between them, and he was determined to discover and rid them of it.

Alexandra, even as she gave him more of her body, continued to guard her emotions.

The frequent late-night piano playing continued. The candlelight slipping under the door to the music room, her hushed movements, and the occasional sheet music all fueled his curiosity and frustration. He was more discreet with his listening, unwilling to disturb her from her passionate playing.

There was no way that playing the piano was merely a pastime for his Duchess. She had not only mastered the keys, but she had also commanded them.

Through the crack in the door, he watched her. As he had expected, she was playing the pianoforte as if she were one with it. Her fingers moved gracefully over the black and ivory keys as if they were parts of each other.

He could see her profile, the way her face softened as if she was living in another world.

Perhaps she was.

Oliver could hear his own breaths, but he knew that his wife could not hear anything beyond her piano playing. Then, she stopped and murmured to herself. He had not seen her do this before.

What was she doing?

He listened more closely. Yes, every time she stopped playing, she whispered something. Now, she was writing something on the sheets with a quill, making him catch his breath.

And all the pieces of the puzzle fell into place.

One night, too restless to sleep, Alexandra paced in her room. She should be happy—ecstatic even. After all, she and Oliver had reconnected. They talked about their future. What he did not know was that she had just given birth... to her latest composition.

Alexandra realized that caring for someone meant wanting to be honest with them. Her heart was often heavy with her secrets, weighing down even her happiest moments with Oliver.

But what if she told him? What would he think? Would it be the end of J. Lewis and his compositions?

Fear and excitement warred within her. On the one hand, she was afraid that her identity would be unmasked and she would have to flee into oblivion. On the other

hand, she felt a flicker of excitement about finally being recognized for her achievements. She certainly had not enjoyed the fruits of her work, and her father was forever ungrateful.

The music room no longer felt like a refuge. It was now a prison with walls that were thin enough to reveal her passion but opaque enough to hide her secrets.

Confession. For now, she could only do it through playing the piano. Her nightgown clung to a body drenched with the sweat of guilt. Her latest composition was sorrowful and yearning, revealing the turmoil that continued to plague her even as she tried to live a happier life with her husband.

As with most nights, Alexandra let herself get lost in the moment. She was aware that Oliver sometimes listened, though not how often.

A part of her wanted to be caught, she realized.

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught a figure silhouetted against the faint candlelight. Oliver's presence was unmistakable, but she was afraid to look at his face.

What would she see there? She'd like to see admiration and love, but she knew that was her wishful thinking.

Oliver was no longer hiding. He walked toward her, not even bothering to muffle his footfalls.

Alexandra stopped playing as soon as he stopped inches away from her. A tense silence hung between them. It was not like last night, when he came in and saw her trying to hide the proof that she was J. Lewis. This time, she felt that he knew more, but she would still try to deny it.

Her heart thudded painfully in her chest, dread coiled in her stomach like a snake about to spring. However, she straightened her back, seemingly composed.

What if he told her to leave? Why would he want to spend the rest of his life with a coward and a liar?

Time seemed to stand still as they studied each other. But then, he broke the silence.

“Why didn’t you tell me, Duchess?” he asked in a low, measured voice.

Despite his civility, Alexandra sensed the betrayal he felt. He also did not call her by her Christian name.

Regret washed over her. Why didn’t she simply ask for his help? He had proven from the very first day they were reunited that he was capable of defending and protecting her, but her pride was strong, and their connection back then was non-existent.

She could not say a word. She could only hope that her pleading eyes were enough to show him that she had not meant to deceive him. She was merely trying to help her father.

Her breath hitched when he came closer.

“You’re J. Lewis,” he declared.

No, his time to ask questions was over.

Her hand flew to her throat as if she could force down the lump that had formed there.

She nodded. “Yes,” she whispered weakly. “I never meant to deceive you, Oliver.”

No, she would not take several steps back as she always did when feeling cornered. She was keeping his name on her lips. However, she noted how his brow furrowed and his eyes glistened.

The candlelight cast shadows on his face as he finally made sense of something he had suspected before.

“But you did,” he said through gritted teeth. “You kept a secret from me while I thought what we had was real.”

It was like a slap to the face. Her insecurities had attempted to shield her against perceived and future hurts. There were no words that could make this better. She had lied to him, and the secrecy was proof that she did not trust him enough.

“I had to protect myself, Oliver,” she choked out. “As a woman, I would not have been taken seriously.”

“You’d assumed that I would ridicule you? You thought I would reveal your name against your wishes—deprive you of your passion? Have you not noticed how I listen to you and appreciate your music from afar?”

Alexandra bit her lip. She did not want to cry in front of her husband. He’d think that she was using her tears as a weapon. But she also wanted to reason with him, even if she could no longer understand her own motivations.

Silence fell between them. It seemed for a house that loved music, silence always found them.

Oliver took another step closer, and his wife could barely look at him.

“Alexandra,” he began, the rough emotion in his voice giving her fresh hope. He

reached for her chin and tilted it up so that he could look her in the eyes. “I want you, but not with a wall between us. Not with you escaping whenever I peel back a layer covering who you truly are.”

It was her turn to reach for him, and she flattened her palms on his chest. She liked that he was firm and solid in a world where she could barely grasp her dreams.

“I... I don’t want to lose you, Oliver,” she finally admitted, her voice trembling at the enormity of her words.

She did not want to be vulnerable before anyone, but her fear of losing him was greater.

“And I you,” he said, his voice breaking as he covered her hands with his own. “You have brought hope to my life. Even your most melancholy music made this place a home. So, please trust me. Tell me your secrets, and you can ask me to tell you all of mine.”

“You don’t want to be with me, Oliver. My troubles will only drag you down. You’ve worked hard to help yourself become?—”

“Shh,” he murmured. It was his turn to put a finger on her lips. “You’re the one who helped me overcome my unhealthy desire to frequent Devil’s Draw.”

“But you still went there,” she reminded him, her tone mildly accusatory. Her head rested against his chest, and she listened to his heartbeat.

“Only because I thought you did not care whether you lost me or not,” he whispered.

It was then that Alexandra let herself cry in front of the man she had learned to accept as her friend. Her lover. Her husband.

They stood like that for a long time, wrapped in each other's arms, finding comfort in each other and the sounds of their heartbeats.

Alexandra was prepared to give Oliver all her truths now—all her secrets. But then, she felt his body stiffen.

He gently pulled away from her and asked, "What is John Prescott's role in all of this, Alexandra? Does he know about J. Lewis?"

Chapter Twenty-Four

“Who gave this to you, Ellen?” Alexandra asked her maid, who looked paler than usual.

Ellen’s hands were trembling. She did not know the extent of her mistress’s concerns, but she knew that the Duchess had been sending letters to someone and had been receiving notes from strange men.

A week and two days.

That was the precise period of peace Alexandra had before she received another letter from her father. She was not even given a fortnight of bliss with her husband, but she was still grateful for the time no matter how short. Guilt still came over her when she thought of her original mission to pay off her father’s debts.

When would she finally be free of him?

When would she finally be able to truly live her life?

Even her music had to be sold under a man’s name. The transactions had to be done through yet another man, and she owed her title to another. The latter did not feel as restrictive as it used to, but still.

You have a fortnight to collect all the money I’ll need to pay off my debts. Know that I am aware of the secrets you’re both keeping. You also know what happens when such delicate secrets are spilled to the ton. Beware.

Her father had decided to send her this warning not long after the break of dawn. It was unsettling that it might have been the first thing he thought of when he woke up, or perhaps he had not even left Devil's Draw yet. He was probably addled by drink, and yet he still found the mental fortitude—or insanity, whatever the case may be—to write her this note.

When Alexandra admitted to Oliver that she was J. Lewis, she thought it would be the end of her problems—at least for a moment. She knew that with her father in the picture, that would never be the case.

Alexandra had not explained the contents of the letters she had received, but she knew that Ellen had noticed the shift between her and Oliver. There was more affection, for example. Whatever they had might be better than most ton marriages.

At least, that was what she told herself. What she felt.

“A man in a hooded cloak. He was almost the Duke's height but broader,” Ellen explained, wringing her hands.

“Hmm. And he just shoved the letter at you?” Alexandra asked in a calm voice, her arms hanging at her sides. In her right hand was a small leather book, and her fingers tightened around it.

“Yes, Your Grace. He was rough about it, too. Shoved me so hard that I almost fell,” Ellen said, still visibly shaken.

Alexandra could not blame her. They had stayed in the country for a long time. They did not have these types of concerns. All they had to concern themselves with every day was what activity to add to the gardening and what meals to plan to take full advantage of the farm.

“I’m sorry you went through that. It means that I must run errands again from now on,” Alexandra said, feeling resolute.

“Errands, Your Grace?” Ellen echoed, concern written all over her face.

Alexandra thought of all the reasons she shouldn’t be out there. Her promise to Oliver. Scandal. Gossip. Especially now that the ton knew her well. She was no longer the wife that was hidden in the country.

However, this final piece was too important to entrust to someone else.

Perhaps it wouldn’t be so bad now that her husband knew about her identity, and how she needed someone to sell her compositions. They did promise that there would be no more secrets between them.

However, she felt that if she talked to her husband about her father’s threats, he would take it upon himself to solve her problem. What could he possibly do? Threaten her father back? Sue him?

Would he have a physical altercation with the blackmailer? Pay off his debts?

None of these possibilities sounded great to Alexandra. She must do something, once and for all. Her latest piece could fetch a good price, and maybe after selling a couple of her jewels, she would be done with it. Hopefully, she could then distance herself from her father.

“Yes. Errands. Get me my cloak, Ellen. I need to make a run before the Duke comes back,” Alexandra ordered, not thinking her decision through.

She didn’t care what her maid thought at that point. She only wanted to get enough money to pay off her father’s debts. She couldn’t live like this forever.

Then, she recalled what her husband said after realizing that John Prescott was involved in selling her compositions.

“I understand why you did it, but I don’t want you dealing with Prescott alone again,” he had said gravely.

“Are you afraid for our reputation?” was her cheeky response, which earned her raised eyebrows and a deep frown.

“It’s not about our reputation, and you know it, Alexandra. If we are going to work toward a better future together, we need to establish trust. I know you can’t trust the man who married you off to a stranger. But now, I believe we can work together as partners. We are in this together.”

She had agreed. Then, they kissed and spent many hours in bed.

Oliver’s presence had a strong effect on her. Whenever he was at home, she wanted to be close to him. Even if it was simply to hear him breathing. To watch him sleep. Whenever he was away, the ticking of the grandfather clock would grow louder, and she would feel the urge to spin its hands faster so that he could be home.

But today was different. Alexandra had to see John one last time, hopefully not twice more.

“Your Grace, I can do it quickly and carefully. I know this errand is important to you.”

“And for that, I am thankful, Ellen. But today, I must face my problems by myself,” Alexandra said gravely.

Ellen nodded quietly, understanding what her mistress needed. She rushed upstairs,

her feet barely making a noise.

It was then that Alexandra realized that even though Ellen did not seem to agree with her plans, she would still follow. The fact that the girl was making sure nobody else heard them was enough proof.

“Be careful, Your Grace. I would have gladly taken on the task. Whatever you may be dealing with, there are some men out there who may wish you harm. I know you have your reasons, but it would be much better to wait for the Duke,” Ellen advised while helping her mistress into her cloak. She made sure to cover her properly.

“You are right, Ellen. I would be safer with the Duke. However, I don’t want to involve him in this mess. Things will only get worse.”

They locked gazes, a silent conversation passing between them. Alexandra could hear what her mind was thinking better than if she had actually said something. Her heart was pounding in her ears.

With coin for the coachman, she set off to John Prescott’s house. They were quick enough so that they could get back before Oliver came home, but not too fast that they would draw attention.

In John’s lodgings, she was like a storm—all emotions and fast talk. Alexandra did not like this side of herself.

“Your Grace, I thought you won’t deliver the compositions yourself. Your maid had been doing a wonderful job.”

John looked just as flustered, walking around his parlor as if he was about to be attacked by an army. Or arrested.

“I need a great deal of money. Do you think this piece could fetch the equivalent of... well, the annual income of a family of four living in the village?” she asked breathlessly, clutching her composition to her chest.

Suddenly, there was a bang at the back of John’s house. The music master himself turned his head toward the noise. He heard it, too.

“What was that?”

“Nothing,” John said evenly.

However, his eyes looked wild, and his arms were raised, his palm facing outward as if in surrender. As if he had been caught.

“Was somebody here?” Alexandra asked.

Her thoughts were racing. Who could it be? What if he was with a friend—the one he was with at the opera? Was the man a member of the ton , and would he spill their secret?

“There’s nobody here but us, Your Grace,” John replied through gritted teeth.

For the first time, Alexandra found herself stepping back from him. She had never been afraid of John Prescott, her former music teacher. However, there was something about him this morning—he looked like a trapped animal.

“If you’re certain.”

Her heart was in her throat, and she thought she might faint. She reminded herself that it wasn’t ideal. She didn’t want John to send for a physician to examine her in his home.

Breathe, she told herself. Breathe.

“I am, Your Grace. Now, please let me have a look at your composition,” he urged, reaching for the sheets encased in leather.

“Here it is,” she said meekly, handing him her latest masterpiece. She tried not to let her hand tremble.

For some reason, her view of Prescott had changed. It was a strange thought. But she shook it off, reminding herself that he had several chances to hurt her but he never did.

Silence fell over them as he perused her new composition. Alexandra could hear her blood roaring in her ears as she waited with bated breath for his assessment.

When he took a deep breath and looked at her, she clutched the back of the wooden chair to her right. She might have swayed a little, but she kept her eyes on him.

“Your Grace, your music has been garnering quite a reputation. A good one. The ton had even requested more of your work. I didn’t tell you because I didn’t want to pressure you. I heard your marriage is also doing particularly well, and I didn’t want to disrupt that by insisting that you make more music.”

“It’s not disrupting my marriage,” Alexandra insisted. Her eyes flicked to the sheets in his hands as if they were living things that could escape at any time.

“No. I can see that. However, what I’m trying to say is that you have attracted the interest of several potential benefactors. The orchestras are aware of that. Therefore, this here is as good as a commissioned work. I’ve already gotten big offers for this.”

Alexandra heaved a sigh of relief, her hands pressed to her chest. “That sounds

wonderful! So, I'll earn a large amount this time?" she asked, shocked by how girlish her voice sounded.

"Yes. In fact—and don't be shocked—I already have the down payment. They insisted I accept it because they suspected it was I who composed the music. It's a good amount, Your Grace. As you said you needed an amount equivalent to the annual income of a village family, wait here—you're going to get it and more."

Alexandra was speechless. Emotions ran through her, each one as intense as the next.

Excitement. Despair that someone else might take credit for her work. Apprehension. Fear.

Nothing good has stayed in her life. It always dissipated.

She was certain that someone was in John's lodgings. Did he go to fetch the other person?

"Here it is," he said, startling her out of her reverie.

He had finally returned to the parlor and was handing her a thick envelope.

"Oh."

"Count them. I didn't touch it," John said gently.

Alexandra opened the envelope, and gasped. It was full of banknotes, more than she had ever seen at once. Yes, she had her allowance from her husband, but she had barely touched it. The money remained in the bank unless she felt the need to redecorate or buy a new dress. She didn't use to buy dresses regularly, but being introduced to the ton had changed that.

“It-It looks like I don’t need to s-sell my jewelry,” she stammered as she tried to control her emotions.

“I hope you resolve whatever problems you have, Your Grace. We need to retire J. Lewis at some point. They’d been asking. Even your father asked if it were me,” John said, paling after he’d said the words.

“You talked to my father?” Alexandra asked, her voice rising.

“H-He saw me after I left the music director’s office,” John explained, looking down at his bare feet.

Alexandra was startled by the realization that she was talking to a barefooted man, no matter how ridiculous that seemed to be. He had just told her that her father might suspect that he was J. Lewis, and she was distracted by his bare feet?

“I do hope you’ll be careful when you submit this composition and collect the rest of the payment, Mr. Prescott,” she said a little coldly.

She had not spoken to him like this before, but she was confused and suspicious. Something was wrong, but she could not place it.

“I will.”

She counted a few banknotes and handed them to him. It was only fair. He did have to be more careful.

“Thank you, Your Grace.”

Alexandra didn’t know if it was her imagination, but he sounded regretful. He wasn’t happy about taking some of the money. Not at all.

In a matter of minutes, she was at Devil's Draw, scandal be damned. She did not know where her father was staying, and if he weren't there, she would just have to directly pay Gideon Lockwood.

It was mid-morning, but some men were already at the notorious establishment. The thugs were no longer surprised to see her as she headed straight for Lockwood's private office.

Her father was sitting there with the smug-looking Lockwood. His head hung as if he was barely awake, possibly drunk.

"Father, why am I not surprised you are here early in the morning?" she asked with her hands on her hips.

"I see the Duchess has more sense now than before. Wearing a cloak? Of course it does not really hide your beauty, my dear. And you're here at my establishment? Again? I'm flattered," Lockwood drawled.

"I'm here to pay, Father," she addressed her father, who was now looking at her with half-open eyes.

"It's about time."

"Come here, little girl, and show me how much you have for me," Lockwood jeered, beckoning to her with a beefy hand.

Alexandra bristled, but she didn't have a choice. She was in his territory, paying for her father's debts. She handed him the envelope.

"Looks like someone had torn it apart it took something from it," Lockwood noted as a bleary-eyed Lord Hartwell looked on. "Did someone else take anything from my

money?”

“No. Of course not,” Alexandra snapped. “I was merely counting the banknotes again.”

“Well, it’s not enough. Your father is a gambler. He cannot stop himself.”

“How much do I still owe?” Alexandra asked, even though she was afraid to find out.

“Ha. Finally, Daughter. You are claiming my debt as your own, as you should,” croaked her father, who had managed to straighten up.

Lockwood told her the remaining balance. At this rate, she might have to sell some jewelry, after all.

Chapter Twenty-Five

“Where is your mistress?” Oliver demanded. “Don’t tell me we are going to do this again, Ellen.”

The maid was as pale as a sheet. She was standing a few feet from the townhouse’s entrance as if she had been frozen in time. As if she had been waiting for Alexandra or Oliver to come the whole time. A long time.

Oliver had just arrived home, and he already knew something was wrong. It was pure intuition.

For the past few days, he had been living in marital bliss. He had even asked Henry Fields to stop investigating his wife’s source of income and following her around even if he weren’t there with her.

No more secrets. That was what they had promised each other. Oliver was not too pleased to discover that his wife had to solicit the help of her former music teacher to sell her compositions.

Her confession had also confirmed his earlier suspicions that her early morning walk was not for the purpose of purchasing food or trinkets. It was to meet John Prescott.

What Oliver had felt for his wife for the past few days was true passion. She was an innocent who had not known how to make love before he introduced her to it. A virgin. Therefore, he was certain that what Alexandra had with Prescott was not physical. But what if it was something else?

He struggled with the thought during the nights, even as his wife's head lay on his chest. However, as the days went by, he learned to accept her story.

"Damn, man," Oliver had muttered to himself.

A week and two days. He didn't expect any more upheaval, except perhaps from his profligate father-in-law. He and Alexandra had grown closer. Every night, before or after making love, they would reveal new things about each other.

Their childhoods. Their mothers. How some women succumbed to the pressures of Society and became independent like Oliver's mother, and how talents were stifled—just like the talent of Alexandra's mother. Just like Alexandra's talent.

Warmth filled Oliver every time he thought about what his wife could do. He felt pride and something else. That something else sometimes made his chest tighten and prickle, and it wasn't indigestion.

"I, uh... I don't know, Your Grace," Ellen cried, her hands clasped together.

"So, you don't have a story prepared for me today. When did she leave?"

"Not too long ago, Your Grace. This morning."

"This morning? It is still morning, but it's almost noon. Early morning?" Oliver pressed, walking closer to the maid. He didn't really want to intimidate, but he needed answers. Immediately. "Why aren't you with her?"

"She left perhaps two hours ago, Your Grace. Right after daybreak, a man wearing a cloak came here with a letter for her. That man shoved me as he gave me the message. I told Her Grace that it would be safer if you accompanied her, but she still left on her own. I didn't want to insist that I come with her unless she asked me to."

Oliver's thoughts raced. Alexandra might be in trouble. What could the letter be about? Could she have been threatened by someone from Devil's Draw? Did someone from the ton discover that she was J. Lewis?

"You were sending letters for her, weren't you?" he finally asked.

"Y-Yes, Your G-Grace."

"Where did you send those letters?"

"I sent them to a man living near the marketplace. His lodgings have a nameplate in front that says John Prescott, Professor of Music ."

Oliver started seeing red, but he didn't want to lose control in front of the maid. So, he took a long, deep breath as he pulled at his hair. The slight pain somehow gave him some clarity—what little was left of it.

"If she comes home before me, tell her that I am headed for Prescott."

Somehow, he managed to keep the anger at bay. However, he was certain that Ellen could see it on his face.

"Your Grace, I know I'm speaking out of turn, but I believe you two are happy and that whatever Her Grace went there for has something to do with the threats she has been receiving."

That gave Oliver pause. He knew that Alexandra might need more money to pay off her father's debts. He had heard a new melody coming from the music room the past few nights. He'd like to think that whatever they had together had somehow inspired her.

The new composition was passionate, with just a hint of sadness. Something touched his soul whenever he heard it, and yet he could not bring himself to openly listen to her as she played. He was still afraid that she would stop as soon as he set foot into the room.

Perhaps if he had done so, she wouldn't be selling it? For that was the only valid reason to leave the house early in the morning to meet with John Prescott without an escort.

Or was it?

Whatever the case might be, Oliver was prepared to look for his wife all over London.

Suddenly, the door swung open. A harried-looking Alexandra was about to enter when she saw Oliver standing there. The maid quickly made herself scarce.

"Oliver, I—" Alexandra began, all the color draining from her face.

"Where were you, Alexandra?" Oliver demanded. "You know what I mean by my question. I wouldn't have asked if I didn't suspect that you weren't visiting a member of the ton or purchasing gifts at the market."

"Oliver." Her voice was now pleading, and tears welled up in her eyes.

Oliver simply wanted to take her in his arms and make every worry go away, but he wouldn't accept lies and secrets. Not anymore. He was ready to bare his soul to this woman. He was ready to open his heart. She might already own it, but her own heart felt more untamed. Unattainable.

"You went to Prescott, didn't you? Why can't you simply let me pay off your father's

debts?”

“You know why,” she said softly, her voice barely above a whisper. For a moment, the look in her eyes was no longer pleading but accusatory. “I want to solve my problems. My father is my problem.”

“Alexandra, I’m your husband,” Oliver reminded her, stepping closer and feeling a breeze. That was when they realized the door was still open. “What’s mine is yours. I’m supposed to protect you. I heard about the man who came with a letter.”

“Oliver, you know that I don’t want our relationship to be more...” Alexandra whispered. A tear rolled down her cheek, but she seemed calm enough. Steady on the outside. “If you pay off his debts, it will remind me that we only married for that.”

“But there are other ways to get around that!” Oliver roared, losing his temper. “You don’t need to go to Prescott for that. You could have asked me to give your composition to a messenger and send him to another music teacher. Or to a benefactor. Have you thought of that?”

“No,” she said simply. “And I won’t have you making these plans and decisions for me, Oliver. You and my father had already stripped that away from me a year ago.”

“So, you regret this? Us? Do you still want the precious divorce that you talked about? The one that would be a noose around your neck?”

“I don’t care what the ton says,” Alexandra said, faltering a little. Oliver could detect that it was only a half-truth. She had started caring. She had enjoyed becoming part of something. “I regretted being pushed around, yes, but I?—”

“You regretted it?” Oliver interrupted, his temper flaring again.

He could no longer think clearly. All the things that happened between them were what? A matter of convenience?

Perhaps he'd thought so himself in the past, but now, hearing it from her...

Perhaps it only happened because they were in the same house? Perhaps she was thinking of Prescott the whole time, and Oliver was the safe choice?

Alexandra shivered. The wind seemed to be getting stronger outside. Oliver strode toward her and reached behind her to close the door. With that one move, he had pulled her close to him. He could smell the violets in her hair and the clean scent of soap. She had left the house without applying perfume, but she still smelled damn good.

She whimpered. "I don't regret marrying you, Oliver. Not now. But..." Her eyes were fixed on his chest, not meeting his own, and he would not have that.

He took her chin and tilted it up. "Tell me now. Do you have feelings for John Prescott? I want to know."

"Of course not!"

"You went to him. What did he look like? Was he dressed like a gentleman ready to mingle with the rest of Society? It was early in the morning, Alexandra."

"It's not what I'm feeling that you care about, Oliver. It's what the ton would say if they found out that your wife is meeting with a man in his lodgings without an escort," Alexandra argued, pushing him back and slipping out of his little trap.

"Fine, Alexandra. You're the one who broke a promise, and yet you are looking at me as if I've done you wrong. You can leave for the country. Send Prescott a letter if you

want him to follow you,” he said bitterly, pulling at his cravat. It loosened with one tug, and he threw it on the floor.

Alexandra looked at him with wide eyes. Another tear rolled down her cheek, and her face reddened. Her index finger trembled as she pointed it at him.

“How dare you accuse me of that, Oliver? I’ve told you who I was and what I’ve done with John. How quickly has your mind jumped to infidelity. What do you think of me?” she asked, jabbing her fingers into her chest.

“You’re not doing yourself any favors by referring to him by his Christian name, Duchess. Perhaps staying in the country can keep you out of trouble. Take your maid and the coachman with you. I don’t want to see them here either. They had done enough.”

His voice was calm, but he was anything but. He could feel his wife slipping through his fingers.

Oliver turned his back on her. He no longer wanted to see her face. She couldn’t even ask him for help when she knew he could do it for her. Everything that the music master was doing. He had more means, more connections.

What if she was afraid he would buy the composition? He quickly dismissed the possibility.

“I’m not going there because you told me to, Your Grace. I’m leaving with Ellen because there is no more reasoning with you. I apologize for the way I’ve handled things,” she muttered, right before storming upstairs.

Oliver’s heart stuttered when he heard her apology, but it had also hardened. He had no hold on Alexandra. Her true passion was her music and independence. She didn’t

trust him enough. She didn't willingly tell him about being J. Lewis. Instead, he had to ask her about it. She was cornered and had to respond.

Today, she had proven that she would run to another man for help rather than ask her husband. It was over and shouldn't have begun in the first place. Oliver blamed himself for his past transgressions. He had lived a terrible life of drink, gambling, and women. Now, he was paying for it.

The door slammed upstairs. There was a slight commotion as he heard footsteps going back and forth. Something was being dragged across the floor. Then, there were the banging noises as Alexandra and Ellen went downstairs, his wife stomping and the maid gingerly following.

Before Alexandra could leave the house, he opened the door and left.

He knew just where to go. It wasn't right, but he needed something to dull the pain in his chest. He would rather feel his jaw crack or his fist sting.

Devil's Draw welcomed him with its jeers and stench. It seemed some men had not gone home yet, and the establishment would not kick out those who had already spent so much money on its services.

"Back so soon?" a lord asked. "What happened to the wife? Got tired of her? Let me have a go, Your Grace."

Oliver didn't even think. He simply swung his fist at the man, who staggered backward and cradled his jaw in his palm. Oliver shook his hand. There was a little sting, yes, but it was not enough.

The other men looked at him warily, keeping their mouths shut this time.

“Who’s ready to fight?” Oliver bellowed.

Nobody seemed to want to fight an angry duke who just felled a man who tried to insult his wife. Everyone was curious, though. Oliver knew they were probably wondering why he was there. He was certain they had heard how his public appearances had been a success.

After a beat, a large man stepped forward. Damn. It was Peter the Giant. Oliver was taller than most men of the ton , but Peter was even taller. He was also built like a tree trunk.

“Always ready,” he grunted.

“To hell with it all,” Oliver muttered and moved closer to what could be the death of him.

The happy people at Devil’s Draw would soon report that the Duke had held his ground and fought the fight of his life against a man much bigger than him.

“He didn’t fall more than once,” one said.

“He’s alive,” another quipped.

All Oliver knew was that for a moment, he forgot about Alexandra. After all, he was focused on staying alive. Now that the fight was over, however, everything stung, and he might have to see a physician to ensure he didn’t break anything.

What was worse was that he could see her face clearly in his mind again.

Chapter Twenty-Six

When Alexandra ordered Ellen to help her pack her leather trunks, she was still furious. That fury gave her enough energy to commit to the task without pausing.

She didn't like how Oliver quickly concluded that she had betrayed him. Yes, she was ridiculous—not him, even though his accusation hurt. After all, how else would you describe a woman who helped her father pay off debts that he kept accumulating?

It was an impossible task for an impossibly unlikable man. She also slipped away to meet with a man in secret—as if on a tryst. She broke the rules of the ton and expected to be welcomed back home with open arms.

Was she expecting commendation?

Did she think Oliver would embrace her and kiss her forehead and tell her, “I understand why you did that. Is it going to be all right from now on?”

Despite her guilt, she was also angry and hurt. She did not expect Oliver to suggest that she leave. He even said they could divorce. He had given up! The one week and two days of bliss with her husband were quickly gone as if the moments they had shared were nothing.

Just because he was jealous.

Just because he cared more about the scandal.

At the foot of the stairs leading to the house's entrance—now the exit—the butler, Graham, approached Alexandra and Ellen. Judging by the way his lips were pressed together into a thin line, Alexandra could only expect terrible news. At this point, she had mastered the art of acceptance.

No, that was a lie.

“Your Grace, your father wants to see you. It is urgent, his messenger said,” Graham announced in a monotone that she was not used to. “He says that he is staying at the house on Devon Lane.”

Alexandra might not be that familiar with Oliver's servants, but she knew that Graham was not a typical dour man. He might disapprove of her and Ellen's comings and goings, but he had been polite and often had a smile on his face.

“Oh, I see. Did the messenger leave a note?” she asked.

“It's probably the same man who accosted me early this morning, Your Grace,” Ellen said. This time, there was no nervousness in her voice, but an uncharacteristic anger.

Alexandra could only nod weakly.

What did her father want this time? Could he read her mind from quite a distance? Did he suspect that she was planning on absconding?

Graham was still watching her expectantly. So, she tilted her chin up and straightened her back. She would not escape from her problems. Perhaps when she was finally past them, she could have peace.

“We will be heading for Lord Hartwell's residence immediately, Graham. Thank you for swiftly informing me,” she said calmly.

The positive thought quickly evaporated when she remembered what Oliver said—to ask John to follow her. To live with another man. It still stung how he thought of her after she had given him her body willingly. After she had spent time sharing her thoughts and simply basking in his warmth.

It was time to go. She kept her composure, looking very much like the Duchess the ton expected her to be—graceful, elegant, and in control.

In the carriage, however, the gravity of her situation crashed down on her. She could not admit that she was foolish and obstinate. She could have taken Ellen with her, but she didn't.

For her father, she had decided to isolate herself, instead of being open to her husband. It would seem that she didn't care about Oliver's feelings. She was simply focused on her mission—selling a composition she could never claim in her lifetime, and it wasn't fair.

Seeing Oliver had made her panic. He had seen her face when she was still devastated over her father's complete disregard for her efforts and over John's insinuation that people thought it was him who had been writing the compositions all along.

Three men. Three terrible interactions.

For some reason, it was her interaction with Oliver that broke her. In the carriage, with Ellen and the coachman the only two living souls within earshot, she wailed.

"Your Grace," Ellen began, holding out a hand but seemingly not daring to touch her mistress unless she was asked to.

For more than a year, Alexandra had been suppressing her emotions. Despair. Feelings of being unwanted. Rejected. She let herself sob quietly. It might be her only

opportunity to do so. After today, she would have to steel herself from more heartbreak and disappointment.

“We’re going to my father’s. To Devon Lane,” she told the coachman after wiping her eyes with her hands like a child.

It didn’t matter anymore if her father could see her distress. It would be better if he knew what he was doing to her. More likely, he would not even care.

Ellen did not comment. She merely looked out the window with a frown on her face as people went about their day, unaware of what was happening inside the carriage.

“Don’t fret, Ellen. We won’t be staying with my father. That is out of the question. We will leave London as soon as I find out what he wants.”

Alexandra’s heart was breaking apart, and she couldn’t even admit it to anyone. After all, she had gotten what she wanted. She knew how to earn money. If things soured further with her father, she could simply run away and be her own woman.

Perhaps the proud Lord Hartwell was beyond saving. Perhaps everything that happened from her wedding up to this very moment was a mistake.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

“M y goodness! Why do you look so ghastly?” his sister gasped in horror, her hands reaching for his face but stopping a few inches away.

Oliver was beaten bloody, his face swollen and tender. However, it didn't matter to him. All he knew was that the house felt empty without Alexandra there.

He never thought he would see the day when he would want someone else to be in the house, aside from his discreet servants. He had been used to the solitary life at home and the chaos in Devil's Draw. For a time, it had felt enough. It was a strange kind of balance that worked for him.

Now, he wondered if he could have handled the situation better. He still felt betrayed, but he realized he could have sat down with Alexandra and asked about her day instead of throwing a barrage of accusations at her. Ellen had told him about the cloaked man with the letter. His wife must have been shaken enough to make a colossal mistake.

If Alexandra cared for John Prescott more than a student would her music teacher, would she deny it? A part of Oliver still raged with jealousy, yet his more reasonable part concluded that his wife would speak her mind even if it hurt him. She would have said that she loved Prescott if that was the truth.

But Oliver was riddled with doubt. He never knew a time when he could simply say he was certain about anybody. For as long as he had been fighting at Devil's Draw, he had seen darkness mirroring his own.

Even though he knew Alexandra was on her way back to the countryside, he wanted to avoid everything that reminded him of her. Staying in his London townhouse would only torture him with thoughts of whether he had made a mess of everything. There was only one thing he could do—he would go to Catherine's.

His sister was indeed younger than him by a few years, but she seemed older and wiser. She had saved him once from his debts. Perhaps, she could offer some help now too.

But this time, the Duke of Westgrave didn't want his sister to know that he needed saving at all.

Unlike his house, Catherine's home was organized. The Duchess of Newden had ensured all her servants had the proper training and manners. The butler opened the door promptly and announced Oliver's arrival.

Oliver could only shake his head in amusement, though the action jarred the bruises on his neck and face.

Then, Oliver frowned at Catherine's comment. Was it that bad? He remembered seeing a cut on his brow and a purplish tint on his left cheek.

Peter the Giant had lived up to his name. Would Oliver be fighting him again? If the opportunity arose again, he would. He had already felt what it was like to get beaten by the man and would love to see the giant on the floor for once.

It was a frightening thought that he would willingly risk his life again. What value did he place on it starting today? Nothing much. Alexandra would arrive in the countryside by nightfall and would begin a new life there without him. It was always what she wanted.

“Uh, boxing,” he finally replied, bowing his head and trying to hide the full extent of his bruises from his sister to no avail.

Catherine scrunched up her nose and shook her head in disbelief before fanning herself.

“You can’t be serious, Oliver. You look terrible. I thought you were done with that nonsense,” she scolded as she turned around and motioned for him to follow. “You’re a married man.”

“It’s nothing,” he muttered as he looked left and right.

His sister’s house was elegant and polished. His own house was, too, and because of Alexandra, it had looked more like a home than a sterile building to sleep in.

“Where is Alexandra, by the way? I thought the two of you had become inseparable. Has she seen your face?” Catherine asked as she entered the sitting room, where she flung herself on the sofa. She patted the space next to her.

Oliver sat down next to her. “She went to the country for a little break. The soirées and calls have taken a toll on her. You know that she had gotten used to the quiet of the countryside,” he explained, almost believing his own words.

“Hmm. Might she be expecting, Brother? You certainly were very attentive to her after you two had your little reunion. George would be happy to have a playmate.” Catherine clapped her hands together excitedly, her eyes sparkling at her own imaginings.

George was her three-year-old son. Oliver loved his nephew with all his heart. The thought of his own child running around with George made his chest tighten. He had never entertained the idea of having a child. He was the son of an unfaithful man and

a dependent woman. He didn't see romance going the right way. In fact, he'd just accused his wife of being unfaithful.

"I-I don't think so," he said, threading his fingers through his hair. He pulled at some strands to wake up his weary brain, still rattled from being punched by Peter the Giant about two hours ago. It had been a long day. "She seems fine."

"Not all women are the same when they are expecting, Oliver," Catherine said, clearly enjoying the conversation. If she only knew what was really going on.

"May I stay here for the night, Catherine?" Oliver suddenly asked.

At that moment, the glee in his sister's eyes vanished. He was sorry that he dampened the mood, but there was no going around it.

"Oliver, something's wrong. Do you want to talk about it?" Catherine asked, her voice softer and gentler. She had also straightened her back and focused on him.

"I am not ready to talk about it," Oliver simply said. And that was that.

Catherine had her maids prepare a room for him, and the siblings retreated to their rooms.

The only reason Oliver fell asleep that night was because he was exhausted from the fight. Good choice, then.

The next day, sunlight streamed into Oliver's room like an unwanted guest. He groaned as he tried to cover his eyes, but his blanket had been pulled off him. He tried to pull it back to no avail.

"Wake up, Oliver! We have an invitation to a soirée, and it's already noontime!" his

sister cried.

He was about to mutter foul words when he heard a little giggle. Oh no. George was in his room.

“Catherine, you are not playing fair. Where is your husband? Why do you have George with you?” he asked, barely keeping his temper in check as he stumbled out of bed, grateful that he was wearing breeches and a nightshirt.

“Uncle Oliva!” George called out, jumping into Oliver’s arms.

Despite his sore muscles, the Duke of Westgrave caught the future Duke of Newden in his arms with ease.

“Your uncle must bathe as soon as possible, Georgie. He needs to accompany Mummy to a party.”

George immediately left his uncle alone and ran to his mother. “Can I go?” he asked.

“Unfortunately, no, sweetheart. You will be utterly bored there. It’s all talk. No games.”

“No games?” George pouted. Then, he looked at his uncle wistfully before he left the room.

“We are expected at Lady Arthur’s house in two hours, Oliver,” Catherine declared, folding her arms over her chest as she watched her brother hold on to one of the bedposts.

“Why do you have to do that?” he groaned.

“I don’t want you wandering around my house looking like a lost puppy. I also believe that you’ll tell me exactly what happened between you and Alexandra.”

And that was that. It was how Oliver got himself invited into Lady Arthur’s soirée. For the first time in a long time, he was going to attend with a sour face and without his better half.

To be fair, Catherine had always been a wonderful sister. She still was. They had a reason to be at the soirée together. Her husband was away on business, and she was terribly bored. So, she invited her brother to accompany her. Meanwhile, Alexandra was supposedly indisposed. She probably was, after what happened the day before.

The Duchess of Newden also made sure to walk beside her brother and assist with answering any questions from the more curious attendees. It didn’t mean, however, that she was finished interrogating him.

“Where is Alexandra? Everyone’s asking about her. They’re looking at you with deep suspicion, Brother,” she whispered at some point while swirling her glass of sherry.

“You’re the one who thought it a grand idea to bring me here,” he whispered back, all the while plastering on a smile for everyone else.

He gripped his brandy glass in his hand and kept the server within his line of sight. He felt he needed something stronger for tonight—something that would make him survive the blatant curiosity and invasive questions of the ton .

“Well, you must tell me what is happening. Did you send her back to the countryside? Have you gotten tired of having a wife and missed being at Devil’s Draw?”

“Catherine, what do you think of me?” he asked, although he did not miss the way his

sister raised her eyebrows at him.

“I can help, Oliver. Whatever it is, it may be merely a misunderstanding.”

“Alexandra is better off where she is at the moment, Sister,” he said, his hand moving to his cheek, which stung as if it was mauled by wild animals—not that he had experienced that firsthand.

Catherine looked at him one more time, feeling defeated. With her shoulders slumped, she left him on his own and headed for some of her acquaintances.

Oliver felt miserable about ruining his sister’s good mood, but he could not help it.

The introductions were over. Therefore, most of the ton had moved from the drawing room to the music room, where someone notable was supposedly expected to play a piece. It was then that the conversation a few ladies were having had become so loud that even the growingly apathetic Oliver could not help but overhear.

“I heard from someone reliable that J. Lewis will soon release a new piece,” one lady gushed excitedly.

“Where did you hear that?” her friend asked, fanning herself as if it had gotten hot in Lady Arthur’s music room.

“Someone who works for the orchestra. It is going to be better than anything he had ever composed before.”

“Do you think we’ll hear it here?” another friend asked.

“No, I doubt it. This one’s a fresh acquisition. A gentleman I know said that he was going to watch the comings and goings at the music director’s office so that he can

finally unmask J. Lewis,” said the lady who had initiated the conversation.

“Hmm. Were there any suspects among those who frequent the office?”

“This is where things get very curious, indeed. They say it’s that music professor, John Prescott.”

“Oh. Him? He is a respected man. Handsome. But he is still unmarried. There have been whispers about him,” the lady with the fan said, her voice dropping lower that Oliver had to strain his ears to hear.

He moved closer to the gossiping ladies, pretending to closely inspect what remained of his brandy. One of the ladies noticed him and smiled. Then, perhaps remembering he was married, her smile faded a little and she reengaged with her two friends.

“Yes. There are rumors that he has a special friend who visits him at his lodgings,” the lady who was speaking continued.

What?

Oliver tried to make sense of what he was hearing. Could they be talking about Alexandra?

Chapter Twenty-Eight

The voices of the gossiping ladies dropped to whispers, and Oliver could no longer hear what they were saying. He would have to step right into their little circle, which was not acceptable at all.

He sighed in frustration as he gave the ladies one last glance before he headed to some familiar faces.

Who could be John's rumored paramour? His heart raced at the thought. Why couldn't his wife choose a middleman who was married and whose wife was there for every transaction?

His suspicion grew again. It became worse when everyone stopped chatting to listen to the composition of the mysterious J. Lewis. It was different now that Oliver knew who wrote it. It was his dear wife who wrote each note and used her skills and emotions to form the music that the guests were currently enjoying.

Oliver felt proud. He had married a tremendously talented woman. He had unconsciously puffed out his chest when he heard the strains of music. He wanted to tell everyone that he heard those same notes in his townhouse, played by a beautiful madwoman in the middle of the night.

He also felt indignation and anger at the fact that many people believed it was John Prescott who wrote the pieces.

No. Alexandra, whether she remained his wife or not, deserved to be commended for

her work.

Then, his chest tightened, and his head began to spin at the possibility that Alexandra was the reason John Prescott had not married yet.

Yes, Oliver was afraid of the scandal—of people talking about his wife being with another man. However, he was also concerned for Alexandra. Women had it harder when it came to being the object of gossip. They could be ruined forever.

“Oliver?”

It was Catherine, returning to his side. He inhaled and exhaled deeply before downing the rest of his brandy. “Yes?”

“What do you think of this J. Lewis? Everyone’s been talking about him and his identity.”

Oliver wanted to laugh. Everyone in Society, including his sister, had taken it upon themselves to believe that J. Lewis was a man.

“Well, I am certain that whoever J. Lewis is, he or she is a talented composer. We’ve had our share of music lessons, Cathy. What do you think?” he asked, glad that a footman was walking around, picking up empty glasses and serving more brandy.

Oliver swapped his glass for a full one even though his sister was glaring at him.

“Interesting that you said he or she, Oliver. You’re the only one who’s entertaining the possibility of J. Lewis being a woman. And oh, I do love this composer. The emotions are very vivid, certainly, but the technique is also exquisite.”

“Have you not considered that someone from the fairer sex can be J. Lewis?” Oliver

asked genuinely.

If there was anyone—aside from Alexandra—who would advocate for the rights of women to behave as they wanted, it would be Catherine.

“I have. It was just that everyone simply assumed that J. Lewis was a man because ladies often only get taught how to play and not to create their own music. Now that you’ve said that, perhaps women should be allowed to nurture their talents.”

Oliver loved how indignant his sister looked. However, neither of them could help Alexandra right now. He had also asked his wife to leave. So, there was that.

“Oliver, where is Alexandra? Whatever fight the two of you had, there is always a solution. Talk. You can’t let your pride get in the way this time,” Catherine advised, her voice hard but her eyes soft.

Oliver wished he could tell her about what was happening, but he couldn’t.

“I should go, Catherine. I-I shouldn’t be here,” he said, thinking of Alexandra.

Had she already arrived at the country house? Perhaps.

Perhaps she had only taken a few things with her. He imagined that he would go to see her and apologize—see if there was anything that could be done about their marriage. He would listen to her this time, find ways in which he could help her with her problems on her own terms.

Alexandra was probably right when she chose Prescott to help her sell her compositions. The idea of her husband taking over the process would make her feel even more trapped.

Trapped.

That was not how Oliver wanted her to feel. He needed to go home.

At least to see if she had returned.

“Run faster,” he urged his coachman, who quickly obeyed.

They raced through London as if they were heading for a different country altogether, not a townhouse only a few blocks away.

When the carriage rolled to a stop, the Duke looked upon his residence with trepidation. There was something different about it.

He rushed inside, already breathless before he flung the door open.

An eerie silence greeted him. No strains of piano. No giggling from the young maid. No footsteps running down to greet him.

Yes, the past few days had been bliss. But it was because of Alexandra. He hadn’t expected her absence would feel like this.

As if something was ripped away from him.

“So, it’s over,” he whispered.

Of course she did.

But could he still go and see her? He could visit her in the countryside—properly woo her this time. Make her feel special, even though she already was.

He ran up the steps. He needed to see for himself. For some reason, he went to see the music room first. Without Alexandra, it felt empty. Hollow. It was like a piece in a museum—dead and forgotten, even though she had not left that long ago.

Oliver checked the drawers, but no sheet music was left save the ones he and Catherine used to play—much simpler pieces than the ones Alexandra played. There were no J. Lewis compositions either, except for a crumpled sheet music on the piano.

Breathing hard, he ran to his wife's room, which she had only used for the past few nights to dress herself. He opened her wardrobe and found nothing. There were trunks on the floor, neatly piled on top of each other. A note lay on one of them.

Here are the dresses you bought for me. I won't be needing them anymore. You can perhaps donate them to charity or sell them to fripperies. If you want to be free of me, wait for when they discover who I am. The scandal will give you a reason to divorce me. Do what you will.

Alexandra.

Alexandra had left and had no plans to return.

The reality crashed down on him. Around him. In him.

Oliver had thought that he was content with being a bachelor for the rest of his life, but Alexandra had changed all that.

A year ago, he was irritated by the thought of spending his life with one woman. Not only that, but he didn't want to end up with a woman he didn't choose—a constant reminder of how he had made a terrible mess of his life.

He groaned aloud, no longer able to suppress his feelings. Everything felt tight. He turned around, suddenly feeling dizzy. He needed to leave Alexandra's room. He needed air.

As he stumbled out of her room, he was startled by the sight of someone standing in the hallway. It was one of his footmen, and he looked grave.

"Your Grace, the Duchess is not in the countryside, if that is what you fear."

"What? Where is she then?" Oliver asked, pressing a hand to his forehead.

"Her Grace stopped at her father's house first. She might still be there," the footman replied.

Oliver didn't wait for another second, he ran down the steps and hollered for his coachman not to step down from the carriage. He was fortunate that the man was practically inseparable from the horses.

On the way to Lord Hartwell's home, countless thoughts raced through Oliver's mind. But most of all, he wondered if his wife was still there. Then, he wondered why she would even go to her father's house.

Did she want to go there? Did her father ask her to come?

Oliver cursed himself for forgetting to ask the footman.

They arrived at Devon Lane in no time. However, he could not see Alexandra's carriage anywhere.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

“ W hy am I here, Father?” Alexandra asked. She could not keep her voice from shaking with anger and apprehension.

Lord Hartwell reclined on the sofa, looking smug and content. It was not the expression she’d have expected from someone indebted to a gambling hell lord like Gideon Lockwood.

“Where are your manners, Daughter? Should you not be greeting me? Asking about my health?” Lord Hartwell asked, shifting in his seat so he could sit up.

With a pang, Alexandra noticed that his back was no longer straight like when she was a child. Her father was getting older, but he had not changed. She thought about Oliver, about his compulsion to return to Devil’s Draw for another fight whenever he was frustrated or melancholy.

Was her father feeling sad about how his life had turned out? Was he feeling angry? There must be a reason he was drawn to the gambling hell. Why he was tied to it. But it still didn’t give him an excuse to be cruel and selfish.

What about Oliver? Would he grow old like her father? Would it be because he was always meant to tread that path, or would it be because she left?

He wanted her gone.

Alexandra steeled herself. She knew that she could not depend on any man.

“You’re lecturing me about manners, Father? Have we resorted to such ridiculousness? I’ve been trying to help you, and you have never once tried to help yourself. All I get from you are insults!”

There was a small whimper behind her. It was Ellen. Alexandra knew that she had someone she could trust. But would it be enough? Her father was a ruthless man, blinded by drink and gambling.

“Well, my dear, you may get something else from me. Not insults, not this time. I can even praise you! All you need to do is pay off my debts. All of them, Alexandra. Not a little here and there. Lockwood is greedy and will take more and more if I can’t leave Devil’s Draw for good,” Lord Hartwell explained.

For a moment, Alexandra believed her father, except for the part where he claimed he would praise her. That was simply absurd.

He wanted out.

However, she was also reminded of her attempts to pay off his debts only to discover that he had somehow accumulated more debts. The total was staggering even at the beginning. It continued to grow at an alarming rate. Her last composition at least gave her some hope that she could pay.

Her belongings—the ones paid for by Oliver—were mostly left behind at his London townhouse. She had to swallow her pride when she brought her jewelry to sell it. She wondered if her husband had noticed. He would certainly know the reason if so.

“That is all I can afford to give,” she insisted, her lower lip trembling. Her heart sank into her stomach as she realized just how far gone her father was.

He was a lost cause.

Some drunks managed to recover. Some gamblers steered away from cards and other types of games. They might fall hard, but they learned from their actions.

“All you can afford to give? You, the Duchess of Westgrave? If you have been listening closely to the news like a man would have—like your brother would have if he were alive—you would have learned that your husband is not only wealthy, but he has also made some wise investments. He is getting richer and richer.”

Alexandra shook her head in disbelief. She didn’t care about Oliver’s money. He had worked hard to make up for his past mistakes. He deserved what he earned.

“Did you hear me, Daughter? Do you want some whore to enjoy your husband’s money? Think. I thought you were the smart one of my two children.”

The threat in Lord Hartwell’s voice was evident. He rose to his full height to emphasize the danger he could pose to his daughter. Slowly and deliberately, he approached her.

“I can’t give you his money, Father. You should know that he asked me to leave his London townhouse. I am going to return to the country.”

“Perhaps that is for the best. You have not gained much from that man. He had made you starry-eyed. You fell for his false charms. A rake will always be a rake, Alexandra,” Lord Hartwell cautioned, widening his eyes at her.

“You made me marry him,” Alexandra retorted, recoiling from him.

“For the money. But that isn’t why I sent for you. We’re here because I know who you are, J. Lewis,” her father whispered, as if he was keeping the knowledge a secret.

“W-What?” she spluttered, swaying a little. Ellen was quick to steady her.

The maid did not comment on Lord Hartwell's declaration.

"Yes, you heard me right, dear daughter. I found out that you had been writing music as J. Lewis, the mysterious composer. At first, I could not believe it," Lord Hartwell said, shaking his head, his eyes gleaming with madness. "I could hear some familiar patterns, a small part of it similar to what your dear mother used to play all those years ago. Yes, she also played her own compositions. I thought that it was merely in season. Then, proof landed right on my lap. Financial records under your pseudonym. What a bold move, Daughter! Perhaps you are worthy to be called my daughter, after all."

He rubbed his palms together in glee. Then, he clapped three times like a child.

"Who gave you the information? There must be someone," Alexandra said, knowing that she was falling further into his trap the more she talked.

However, she wanted to know who had discovered her identity. Her father might have suspected it, but to obtain proof?

"It does not matter who told me or gave me the proof. What's important is that we now know we don't need your husband anymore. You merely must compose more music. We keep on selling as J. Lewis. We take advantage of everyone's curiosity. Then, we secure another marriage for you, this time with someone who will provide us with the money we need."

"You mean the money you need. I'm already married, Father," Alexandra protested. She couldn't believe how serious she was about that. It wasn't that long ago that she was willing to risk her reputation just to get a divorce. "Even if I were not, I can live in the country without much."

"You consummated your marriage, I assume," her father said with a sneer.

Alexandra couldn't believe that once upon a time, she looked up to this man. He was her father, nothing was going to change that. But her affection for him was slowly fading.

"Yes," she said evenly, tilting her chin up. "It's a marriage, after all."

"Why didn't he just leave you alone like he did for more than a year?" her father grumbled, pacing back and forth.

Somehow, she had ruined more of his plans.

"So, what were you planning to do? Take his money and then have the marriage annulled?" Alexandra asked.

"Precisely! Keep up. Your brother would have understood the task immediately. But you—you let yourself be swayed by a rake! One day, when he finds a woman more beautiful or more interesting than you, he will leave you. You'll find yourself alone, Alexandra, with no money. But as J. Lewis, we have more opportunities."

"I can't keep on hiding as J. Lewis, Father. It's dangerous."

"I'm glad you know that for a fact, dear daughter. You'd rather risk yourself than ask your husband for money, then?"

"I wanted to know if I can help you without begging anyone else to assist me. I wanted to know if I am any good at composing music, and I was right. It was you who kept on digging a deeper grave for yourself. When I came here, your debt was still manageable. I didn't have to sell my best composition for a laughable sum."

"Pride. You want to be as brilliant as your mother," Lord Hartwell said, a hint of sadness breaking through the arrogance. He seemed to have chosen not to hear the

part about him drowning in debt.

“I won’t help you anymore, Father. I am leaving. The townhouse. You. Your debts. I did what I could do, and I know I did well.”

“Whether you are staying here or leaving, Alexandra, you will pay off my debts,” he insisted, his voice now menacing. He sounded like one of Lockwood’s men, not her father.

“I won’t. I’m leaving,” Alexandra said, folding her arms over her chest and staring at him defiantly.

“I will send your husband a letter revealing who you really are. I heard that he thinks J. Lewis is nothing but a coward hiding in the darkness, afraid of criticism!”

Alexandra laughed with derision.

Her father’s eyes widened as realization dawned on him. “He knows?”

“Yes, he does. Didn’t I remind you that I am married? It’s a real marriage, Father. As for you, you must learn what it means to be a true father. All you are right now is a beggar.”

Lord Hartwell roared with anger, stomping his foot like a child throwing a tantrum. It was probably his drink-addled brain. All the brandy and the gin, as well as the smoke and dark corners of Devil’s Draw, had stripped him of the last bit of his humanity.

“You will still pay off my debts, Alexandra,” he said, the muscles in his face twitching. He reached for his daughter as if he was trying to reach for her neck.

Alexandra did not step back.

“I might, but I can’t promise I can pay for everything. The last composition sold well, but your debts are still greater, Father. I am not trying to say no because I don’t want to. I came to London to help you. I left my quiet life in the countryside for you.”

“If you don’t, the ton will find out who J. Lewis truly is!”

“You wouldn’t dare! I can tell them you have fabricated evidence! Oliver will help me!” Alexandra shouted, clenching her hands into fists.

Even as she said those words in anger, she realized she believed them. Oliver would come to her aid, even if she wasn’t his favorite person at the moment.

“Fabricated? Well, I have stronger proof that you are J. Lewis,” Lord Hartwell said, grinning widely as he rubbed his palms together.

“No, you do not. Who will believe a drunk and gambler over a duke and his duchess? If you had been listening to the ton’s talk, you would know that we are well-liked among our peers,” Alexandra declared, her hands on her belly as she tried to muster as much courage as possible.

“I do. Let me call for a friend. He will certainly tell you that he will support my claim—no, it isn’t even a claim. It’s a revelation. Oh, how the ton will be shocked to learn that their beloved J. Lewis is nothing but a young chit playing duchess!”

Alexandra choked back a sob, not because she was afraid of being discovered. She was devastated that Devil’s Draw had turned her father into this monster.

“Who? Who can it be? Nobody else knows about—” She faltered as she thought of the only two people who knew her secret.

And no, Oliver would never go to her father and reveal her identity.

Her lower lip trembled as she realized that she had been betrayed by someone she had always trusted—someone her husband thought she trusted better than she did him.

“Yes, I know that you know, Alexandra. Come out from where you’re hiding, Prescott!”

Chapter Thirty

“J ohn?” Alexandra squeaked in disbelief. “How could you?”

John Prescott walked into the parlor, looking paler and gaunter than Alexandra remembered him. He was in his late thirties, but it almost seemed like he had recently developed a hunch.

Her words hung in the air between them. His eyes didn’t look like they belonged to someone who had just betrayed her. How did he not look like a villain?

Damn him.

“Y-Your G-Grace,” John stammered, not daring to meet her eyes. It looked like the hunch was more of a bow—or simply a manifestation of his guilt.

“Did you give my father my financial records?” Alexandra asked, hoping for a different answer. Perhaps he was being blackmailed.

“I did, Your Grace,” he admitted, bowing his head lower.

Alexandra strode to where he was standing near the door, as if he was ready to escape if needed. Then, she slapped him. Hard.

“Apologies, Your Grace,” he whimpered, raising his hand to his cheek but not quite touching it.

“Were you earning more from my compositions than you were telling me, John?” she asked.

“No. Believe me, Your Grace. I was giving you the full amount. You will still get money from the latest composition, which was well-received. Then, you have royalties for the rest of your life.”

“For the rest of my life?” Alexandra sobbed bitterly. “As J. Lewis? You can reveal my identity. I don’t care much for my reputation. My husband already knows who I am beyond the woman who was given away by her father. Beyond the spinster who the ton didn’t notice until she became the Duke of Westgrave’s wife.”

“You don’t understand, dear daughter. I know you well. You like to sacrifice, don’t you? A little saint in the making.”

“What do you mean?” Alexandra asked, whirling around to face her father again.

“You don’t care much about the ton discovering your secret. But what about your husband’s secrets? What about John Prescott’s secrets?” he taunted.

“John’s secrets?” Alexandra turned back to see John straightening up and meeting her eyes. There were unshed tears there, and his cheeks were red.

“I—” he began. He swallowed noisily, as if the words he was trying to say were too difficult. They were stuck in his throat, trying to get out.

“He is having a difficult time telling you, I can tell,” Lord Hartwell said with glee. “What John is trying to say is that he is a gentleman of a certain persuasion. A molly. A sodomite!”

John visibly recoiled at the last few words, each crueler than the one before it.

Alexandra looked at her former music teacher with understanding.

The friend he was with at the opera.

The whispers about him.

The slamming of his lodgings' back door.

She suddenly felt pity for him. She knew that he wouldn't accept such a feeling, but she felt it anyway. She knew what it was like not to be free. At least, she had found a way out of her prison. It was still out of reach, but it was there. Possibility.

She wondered what possibilities John had.

"It's nothing to be ashamed of," she said softly.

"That's what you say, dear daughter. But you have always been different. What would the ton say if they knew about his predilections?"

"I am so sorry, Your Grace," John apologized again, giving her a slight nod.

"It's not your fault, John," Alexandra said, although her chest felt tighter than when she had been arguing with her father.

"So, Alexandra, what do you think? Prescott is relying on you. I will keep my mouth shut about his predilections if you pay off everything and more."

"More?"

"Money for your dear father," Lord Hartwell said with a smile that didn't reach his eyes.

“You’ll get the money. But you need to sign a statement saying that you will never breathe a word about John and his friend.”

“His friend,” he sneered maliciously. “Don’t forget that if you try to find a way out of our agreement, I will also reveal your husband’s secrets.”

“Oliver’s secrets? He is not ashamed of his past. Perhaps he was back then, but he no longer is,” Alexandra declared confidently, remembering the late nights when she and Oliver had talked about many things after making love. Sometimes, they just spent those nights talking. It wasn’t lust that they shared, she realized. It was more than that.

“Yes, for the most part, Alexandra. Now, think of his past and add the revelation that his wife is no other than J. Lewis, and what do you think people will say?”

Alexandra simply stared at her father. Never had she entertained violent thoughts about anybody but at that moment. Her father knew that while she could sacrifice her reputation, she wouldn’t want John exposed or Oliver seen in a bad light.

“Don’t know what to say, Alexandra?” her father sneered.

“I’ll pay Lockwood. You can rest assured,” she said. “Please don’t hurt John or Oliver.”

“Ah. Hurt? There are many ways to hurt a man. Like ruining his reputation, for example. Prescott will lose his students and patrons if they find out what he is,” Lord Hartwell said, his voice dripping with disdain. “As for your dear husband, he’d see that marrying you was a futile attempt to fix his reputation. His business partners may not be too happy about dealing with a liar. A liar who cannot control his wife.”

“I will pay his debts,” a voice boomed from behind John.

Chapter Thirty-One

Oliver was rattled. It was why he didn't see the carriage right away. It was right there, its colors blending with the rest of Lord Hartwell's dreary townhouse.

He swore that his sigh of relief could be heard from across town. His chest felt lighter after that as he jogged toward Hartwell's house.

Rusty railings and wilting bushes decorated the front, suggestive of how Hartwell's life had fallen apart because of his vices. Oliver thought of the times he had almost ruined his life and thanked his lucky stars that he was able to turn his life around.

His first lucky star was Catherine.

The other one was Alexandra.

She was here, confronting or being confronted by her father. She shouldn't have to be here alone, without protection. Oliver knew Hartwell enough to know that he didn't want his wife exposed to his abusive nature. Not again, anyway.

Oliver didn't need to be announced. He took some banknotes and handed them to the butler. When the manservant quickly accepted the money, Oliver couldn't help but shake his head in an odd mix of relief and disgust.

It was so typical, he supposed. Hartwell's servants were just like their master—disloyal.

He'd been to this place before. It was only once or twice, but it had left a mark on him. It led to a series of events that he thought he would regret. In the end, though, he could not regret marrying Alexandra.

In fact, he was regretting telling her to leave.

There were fleeting moments when he thought he would be happier without her, but whenever he thought of her, he would feel slightly annoyed but never truly angry. It was like he had a slight inconvenience in the countryside, but it also saved him from some women.

Whenever a woman approached him then, he had a reason to stay away.

"I'm married, don't you know? My Duchess simply wants a little break from the ton."

The oohs and aahs were often laughable as women tried to disguise their disappointment with something else. But he also knew that there was greed behind it. They wanted to marry a duke for the title. Or perhaps they only wanted him for his body. There was never an interest in getting to know him better.

As with Alexandra? She didn't even want to see him. That was why she was the perfect choice.

Today, though, he wasn't certain he could settle for the aloof and distant facade she often presented to others. He wanted more of her. Not just her body or her music, but all of her.

His thoughts were interrupted when he heard voices in the parlor. He was startled to see that Prescott was standing by the door.

Instead of rushing to confront the man, he stopped when he heard the other voices in the room. Hartwell. Alexandra. They were all there.

It really was a confrontation.

He listened. He heard Hartwell threaten both Prescott and Alexandra. Oliver felt pity for the man he used to be jealous of. It must be hard not to tell other people about the person you love. Right now, he just wanted to grab his wife and tell her what he had slowly come to realize—that he loved her and must have done so for a long time.

He wanted everyone to know, but he knew that Prescott didn't have that good fortune.

“He never tried to control me, and that makes him a better man,” his wife said.

His chest tightened at the way she defended him, even though he had told her to leave. He didn't give her a chance to tell him what was going on. Yet, she apparently still held him in high regard when he could have easily told her father that he would not help him.

Hartwell's behavior made Oliver's jaw clench. He felt like he was in Devil's Draw again, in the midst of the cheering and jeering. Whenever he was there, his only desire was to feel the physical pain to forget the emotional one. The urge was to punch and overpower.

At that moment, he felt something else. The desire to hit was no longer about getting rid of his pain, but to get rid of his wife's pain.

How dare her father make her feel unsafe?

“I will pay his debts!” Oliver bellowed.

He didn't have any more patience for the disgusting way Hartwell was handling his daughter.

"Ah, late for the party, Your Grace! Come and see how distressed you have made your wife by telling her to leave London. She had begun enjoying the soirées and little friendships," Hartwell said with a strange kind of cheer. "So, you're going to pay off all my debts at Devil's Draw? Lockwood is certainly waiting. I can feel the noose around my neck tightening."

How could he sound so happy right now when he had made people miserable, including himself?

"As it should. You brought this upon yourself, Hartwell," Oliver reminded him as he casually closed the distance between them.

Prescott had cowered, letting him in without any issue. Oliver could almost feel the man shiver, and his heart went out to him.

"Now that I think about it, you didn't exactly complain about marrying my daughter. You realized even then that she was a good investment," Hartwell said maliciously.

"Investment?" Alexandra spluttered, not believing her ears.

"Yes, that is what you are. What daughters are. Audley here certainly was fortunate to have married my child. Not a hunchback. Not an old spinster, as people were saying," the wretched man continued. "He married a beautiful young woman of keen intellect, until she let lust take over."

Oliver felt his muscles tense up from anger. His fists had clenched, and his body had stiffened. He could not believe the audacity of the man before him. At that very moment, his wife finally looked his way and paled as she scanned his face.

“Oliver! What happened to you?” Alexandra cried, rushing to him.

Her hands were on his face, but barely. She was gentle, knowing that she could hurt him easily. Tears welled up in her eyes.

Oliver wondered how awful he must have looked for her to want to take care of him even after he told her to leave. After all that mistrust.

“I... it’s nothing,” he said, taking her hands in his own. He kissed one of them softly. “I-I had to go to Devil’s Draw,” he admitted, his earlier anger dissipating as shame washed over him.

Alexandra’s eyes were shimmering with tears, red and slightly swollen. She had already cried before he came, but he was not necessarily blameless for that.

“You hear that, Alexandra? The Duke was at the gambling hell. Again! A rake will always be a rake! Did you not know that his father was unfaithful to his mother? Didn’t he share that little story with you? No. I can see it on your face, dear daughter. Blood is strong, you know,” Hartwell scoffed. “Give it time, and he will show you his true colors.”

Oliver was quiet. Perhaps Hartwell was right on that point. He went back to a place he shouldn’t have simply because he didn’t know how to deal with his emotions. However, he also knew that there was no woman he wanted to be with other than his beautiful and talented wife. He was here for her now and would not let her go unless she told him to.

“You know that you’re wrong, Father!” Alexandra cried. “Oliver is not like that. He is nothing like that!”

She had untangled herself from her husband and turned to face her father. She was

not going to hide from him this time. No. No more.

“For now, Daughter.”

Oliver wanted to punch the smug look off his father-in-law’s face. He tried to hold on to his belief in respecting his elders, especially his wife’s father. He reminded himself that without this profligate, he wouldn’t have Alexandra. He would still be living an aimless, empty life, going back and forth between Devil’s Draw and his house.

“Enough, Hartwell. I have had enough of listening to you. Set your daughter free, or I will unleash the full wrath of the ton on you.”

“The full wrath?” Hartwell echoed as if he truly couldn’t understand. His eyebrows were knitted together in confusion, and he lifted his hand to his chest.

Oliver wondered if it was all mockery and if it was right for him to finally hurt this man. Physically.

“Yes. I will use all my connections to make sure you don’t get to show your face anywhere near us again. You will be pushed back to the country, or worse. I will even force you to leave England.”

“You can’t do that,” Hartwell whimpered.

It was then that Oliver noticed just how pale and dry the man’s lips were. His right hand trembled at his side.

Was he ill?

Oliver decided that if the man needed help, he should have asked the proper way. He shouldn’t have resorted to threats, cruelty, and endless gambling.

“I can. I will pay off all your debts, but you will leave your daughter alone. We will not hear from you again unless you want a public castigation, Hartwell. Enough is enough.”

Hartwell fell silent. His smug expression had vanished. His face was blank as his shoulders slumped.

A deep breath.

A small frown.

He fidgeted, walking around in circles. Oliver could see Prescott watching the whole thing with curiosity and hope. Would the man who was threatening to ruin his reputation—and possibly his life—finally be defeated?

While Oliver could understand Prescott’s role in the matter, he still was not convinced he was an ally. How did Hartwell find out that the man knew J. Lewis’s real identity?

Then, Hartwell spoke, “All right.”

It was so simple and short. Oliver couldn’t believe it, and he wouldn’t take any more chances.

“You will sign a document drafted by my solicitors saying that you will stay away not only from Alexandra and me but also from Prescott. I am willing to help you get rid of your debts. You must attest that you have received the amount, or we can give the money to Lockwood, and he’ll sign a statement confirming that your debt has been paid in full.”

“Alexandra—” Hartwell began.

“No, you do not get to talk to your daughter again. You lost all rights when you made her a pawn in your little game. Children, of both sexes, should not be used for financial gain.”

“W-What if you two have children in the future? Will I get to see them?” He seemed older then, and his back seemed to be more hunched.

Was it all an act?

“No, Father, you will not. You have hurt me long enough. I don’t want you near my children, not until we can be completely certain you will not speak to them the same way you speak to me. I should have severed all ties long ago, but I still had hope and believed that you could finally love me.”

Oliver’s heart shattered upon hearing his wife’s words. He could remember the pain his sister had to carry upon finding out what his father was. He was saved from the brunt of it.

“Alexandra, I-I was only afraid that?—”

“We won’t listen to what you have to say, Hartwell. My wife is kind-hearted. She loves you. She came to London to pay off your debts and risked her reputation to sell compositions under a man’s name. If you talk to her, she will more likely give you another chance. But I won’t. Maybe in a few years, you may try again. But not now.” Oliver’s voice was sharp and unyielding.

He was looking at the man who ‘sold’ his daughter.

He was looking at the man who didn’t bother to check how she was doing during her first year of marriage.

Oliver felt guilty for doing the same thing, but he saw his mistakes now. Even if he didn't love Alexandra back then, he could've handled things the proper way by checking if she was comfortable. If she was happy.

He was looking at the man who had forced his daughter to pay off his debts.

He was looking at the bastard whose daughter tried to save him at Devil's Draw, and he repaid it with insults.

Oliver could not imagine a life where his future children would visit their grandfather. Their family could only be Catherine's. He couldn't think of anyone else at this point.

Hartwell looked at his daughter as if for support. The eyes that had often shone with hatred and contempt were soft now. Dull.

"No, Father. That will not work this time. The last time you looked at me like that, you married me off to a stranger days later."

Oliver felt like he had been punched. Did she still regret being married to him? Was she merely making the best of it?

"There are no regrets now," she continued, "now that I know who Oliver truly is."

Oliver reached for her hand. She turned to him and smiled. It was sweet, but the tears were still there. He vowed that he wouldn't let her hurt like this again.

"Are you choosing your husband over me, Alexandra?" Hartwell asked in a husky voice.

Oliver knew that if he didn't get rid of his own vices, he would look like his father-in-

law one day—perhaps even worse. After all, he boxed. His face still bore the evidence of the last fight.

“Yes, Father. I am choosing a man who saw my talent and who saw not only a woman but also a person. I am leaving the past behind. I can’t stay with someone who has called me stupid and worthless. I am worthy of so much more,” Alexandra declared, jutting her chin.

“She is,” Prescott confirmed with wonder. Although Oliver didn’t turn around to look at him, he could hear the smile in his voice. “The brilliant student had become a master. Oh, how our genders have betrayed us, Your Grace.”

Alexandra nodded at him. This time, when she turned to her husband, her smile was brighter.

“Let us go home, Alexandra,” Oliver said.

He knew he had to say the words. He was there to take her back, to let her know that she didn’t have to leave for the country unless it was with him.

She looked at him curiously.

Uncertainty tainted their little reunion, and he would have to reassure her that he would listen to her from now on.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Alexandra reveled in being held by Oliver. She felt secure with him and was relieved that he came to rescue her. She was so close to agreeing to anything her father asked her to do, even if it meant being his slave forever.

Yet, there were still some loose ends. She could still remember feeling anger and disappointment upon discovering that John betrayed her. Yes, she could understand his reason, but it still stung. It also reminded her how unsafe it was to keep a secret among the ton .

As for Oliver, she didn't know what he was planning to do with her—with their life. Again, she understood why he did what he did, but she couldn't believe that he had given up on her so quickly.

He was here, though, and that mattered. She was glad that he found her, but she wondered if he would have still followed her if she were already in the country.

Alexandra was ready to listen to his reasons, nonetheless. They were about to leave her father's house when John stopped her.

“May I have a word, Your Grace?” he asked meekly.

Alexandra could see that he was trying to ignore Oliver's glare.

“I must hear what he has to say, Oliver,” she said softly, patting her husband's hand gently as if she could soothe him that way.

“If that is what you wish, Alexandra,” he replied gruffly, looking deeply into her eyes.

Whenever he did that, it was difficult to leave him. She wanted to kiss him, but she was uncertain if that was the wise thing to do. Not at this point.

“I will wait for you in the carriage.”

“I won’t take long,” she promised.

Then, she squared her shoulders and faced John. In a flash, she remembered the first time she’d met him. She was still a young girl, and he was a man who had several connections in the music world.

She remembered the awe, the excitement, and the feeling of accomplishment when he declared that she had true talent. At a young age, she realized that she didn’t want to be merely an onlooker when it came to the pianoforte. She wanted to be like her mother and more. Definitely more.

The years passed, and she discovered that she was indeed more. The notes were not merely a means to an end— she created the notes.

Now, the man who had helped her craft and sell her compositions stood before her, looking fragile and nervous. His long-fingered hands, which she used to admire, were clasped together as if in prayer.

“Yes, John? You must know that your betrayal hurt me. You have made me feel unsafe. I wouldn’t have dreamed of selling my compositions under a man’s name if I knew this would happen. Perhaps my naivete had led me to believe that I could do it without being detected,” Alexandra confessed.

“I am terribly sorry, Your Grace. There were rumors about where J. Lewis was submitting his compositions. Your father followed me there, confirming his suspicions. He said that there were notes that reminded him of your mother’s playing. The passion. The gentleness that mingled with ambition,” John explained, the look in his eyes pleading.

“I suppose you were put in an impossible position, John,” Alexandra murmured.

“You didn’t come for a long time, as you rightfully sent your messages with your maid. But he must have noticed something strange about our meetings. So, he spied on me again. It was then that he confirmed the rumors about me.”

“I am so sorry that you’re in dangerous situation, John. As much as I understand how confusing and restricting your situation is, you and James must keep your relationship a secret, unless you know you will be accepted. I promise that I won’t tell a soul about it, and my father wouldn’t dare after Oliver’s threat,” Alexandra reassured him, reaching out to touch his arm briefly.

“I won’t tell anyone about your identity either, Your Grace. Please tell the Duke that I am eternally grateful he decided to give Lord Hartwell a call this afternoon. It saved James and me.”

“It saved me, too.”

John smiled then. There was still a hint of sadness there, in the way the corners of his lips tilted down a little, but it was still a smile. Alexandra was glad to see that he was determined to move on.

“The Duke came to save you, Your Grace. I am merely a fortunate bystander who happened to be present when a man came to save the woman he loves.”

Oliver loved her?

Alexandra's chest tightened at the thought. Could it be true, or was she merely raising her hopes?

"I wish you well, John," was all that she could say. Perhaps they wouldn't part ways as true friends, but they shared a terrible encounter with the same man. "And I forgive you. You were not given much choice."

"Thank you, Your Grace. I bid you farewell, for now. Let time decide if we will see each other again."

"I hope you forget about J. Lewis, John. He must retire for now, until he is brave enough to face the challenge," Alexandra murmured.

"J. Lewis who?" John asked with a grin before he turned around and walked away.

Alexandra took a deep breath before she walked to the carriage that awaited her. Ellen quietly followed. The Duchess felt guilty that she almost forgot her maid was there.

"I will ride in the other carriage, Your Grace," Ellen said with a small smile.

Alexandra knew that it must have taken some courage for Ellen to say the words. It was not considered proper for maids to make suggestions. Then again, it didn't seem right to let Oliver ride alone.

"I will see you at home, then," she said.

She said it. She had finally called her husband's townhouse her home.

In her room, Alexandra had already prepared for bed. She sat at her vanity and combed her brown curls, her eyes fixed on the reflection of her husband standing behind her.

“You are a marvelous woman, Alexandra,” he said softly.

“Marvelous? Didn’t you just tell this same woman to leave your home immediately?” she teased, though she still felt a little hurt.

“I am sorry, my darling. It won’t happen again. I was blinded by jealousy. Instead of thinking about you meeting with Prescott in private, I should have focused on your strength and independence.”

“Ironically, it was my father who instilled those qualities in me—by not being there for me. By being constantly condescending.”

Alexandra squeezed her eyes shut, trying not to think of all the moments her father had been cruel to her. She remembered the sleepless nights she willed herself to finish her compositions for him.

“I suspected so, Alexandra. He made you strong by being weak. One day, he will realize what he has lost,” Oliver said, resting his hands on her shoulders.

“I had hoped that when I paid off his debts, he would see me as a person and not a burden. He often told me that I was nothing because I was a woman,” Alexandra lamented, her voice breaking.

She reached for the hand that was on her shoulder. It was warm and solid. It was Oliver.

“You are not a burden. I wish I had treated you better, but I was drowning in my own

misery and bitterness,” Oliver explained, gently massaging her shoulders.

She moaned softly. She had not realized just how tired she was. Her muscles recalled how she and Ellen scrambled for her belongings and the seemingly perpetual tension they were in.

“We were strangers, Oliver. I can’t blame you for that. However, I must admit that I didn’t like you back then. I resented how I had been passed from one cad to another.”

Oliver chuckled softly, but his eyes were melancholy as they met hers in the mirror. “I had lost a chance to discover who you truly were, back then. You seemed to have quickly adjusted to life in the country, from what I heard. When I last visited our house there, the servants praised your practicality and tidiness. They miss you.”

“I miss them, too,” she whispered.

“Do know this, Alexandra. If you wish for us to leave London and live a quiet life in the country, you only need to tell me. I love you. I have loved you for some time now. It frightened me, at first. It made my head whirl and my chest hurt to think that you may love another man,” Oliver confessed, still holding her gaze in the mirror.

“Y-You love me?”

It seemed impossible. She was the spinster who could not find a husband. She didn’t want one. He was a wealthy duke. If her father was telling the truth, then her husband was indeed getting richer.

Perhaps her father had done her a favor by marrying her off to a duke. It might be the last good thing he did for her and she didn’t know it back then.

“I do. I had never felt like this with any other woman. Most women only wanted my

title and money. My standing in Society. But you—you made me want you without even trying.”

“I hid a secret from you, Oliver,” she reminded him.

“As you said, it was during a time we didn’t know each other well. We were strangers.”

“Yes. I-I love you, too, Oliver. I think I’ve known it for a while. I didn’t like how it made me vulnerable, afraid that if you found out what my secrets were, you would bolt and leave. I cared about what you think of me. I wanted you to see me as someone who could live off her own money, but I was drowning because of my father.”

“You love me too?” Oliver asked, turning her chair around so that she could face him.

“Yes,” she whispered shyly.

Oliver didn’t wait for another moment. He pressed his lips to hers, and Alexandra quickly deepened the kiss. She clutched at his arms, squeezing them, then looped her arms around his neck while he wrapped her legs around his waist.

He was already hard, making her let out another moan. She ground her hips against him, trying to feel more of him. His heat and hardness rubbed between her legs where she needed him most.

But they were still fully clothed, and it was frustrating.

Oliver carried her to her bed and laid her down gently. Alexandra spread her legs to accommodate him. He took off his clothes, impatient and hungry for her. When he

was fully naked, he kneeled between her thighs. She was still in her chemise, but she was the most alluring woman he had ever seen.

“Do you like this chemise, my darling wife?” he asked, his voice nearly a growl.

“I do,” she panted.

“Then I am terribly sorry. I must tear it off you. I’ll buy you another one. I’ll buy you plenty.”

With that final warning, he tore her chemise, revealing her nakedness. She was just as eager, arching into him, offering her breasts. His eyes darkened, the sight making his manhood throb.

“I’ve missed this,” he groaned as he dipped his head to taste her.

His lips were so close to her turgid nipples, but he wanted her to squirm. To beg. To want it. He blew hot air on them, making her whimper. Then, he licked one after the other as she ground her hips against his. When he sucked on one hard, she yelped.

“Oh, hush, dear wife, if you don’t want to wake up the whole household,” he teased.

Alexandra giggled softly, but then she whimpered again when her husband slowly drew her nipple back into the heat of his mouth.

“I need you now, Oliver. Please,” she begged, her voice breathy.

Oliver could remember when she was still an innocent, uncertain of what she wanted.

He loved her then. He loved her even more now.

Alexandra's vision blurred as the pleasure washed over her. Her husband was eager to torment her with his tongue. That tongue knew just how to lick each nipple, and with his teeth, he grazed and nibbled on the tingling, sensitive spot.

A punishment?

No. Everything he did to her made her wild with love and desire. She never thought it possible before.

"I will always give you what you want," Oliver said as he pulled her up until he was seated on his lap. His erection stood between them, teasing the lips of her sex.

"W-What do I do now? How do you want me?" Alexandra panted.

"Lower yourself onto me, slowly ," he commanded, his voice hoarse with passion as he fisted the base of his hard length.

Alexandra did as she was told, sinking down onto him slowly, feeling every ridge and vein in his manhood. She was wet enough to make the descent comfortable, but the stretch was what made her want it more.

"Ride me, Alexandra. You know what to do," Oliver purred, meeting her heavy-lidded eyes.

His wife held onto his shoulders, taking the reins of the man she loved. She couldn't think of anyone else she could trust with her body and her life. Then, she rode him.

At first, it was a gentle canter, with her moving down and up slowly and deliberately. Then, she quickened her pace. The slapping of their skin and pants seemed to surround them as she felt his length hit places that made her eyes water and the coil in her belly tighten.

Tighter it became and ready to burst.

“That’s it, Alexandra. You are a goddess,” Oliver murmured.

Alexandra was trembling so hard that she could barely keep up the pace. Her husband must have sensed it because he gripped her hips hard and thrust up into her at a punishing pace.

“Yes, Oliver. Yes. That way. Please. God. No,” she moaned, no longer caring that the words did not make sense in the heat of her passion.

Oliver grunted as he spread her legs further apart and kept on thrusting. She was now convulsing with pleasure, and he soothed her by tonguing her nipples as he continued ramming into her.

Alexandra pushed her breasts together, wanting him to take them. Wanting him to take all parts of her. Swallow her whole and sink into her.

They were one. Body. Soul. Mind.

He suckled hard, pulling at her nipple with his hungry mouth but not pausing his thrusts. Alexandra reached the pinnacle, seeing stars behind her eyes. She felt weak and strong at the same time, her limbs loose even as Oliver flipped her over so that she was lying on her back. His final thrusts were more erratic, driving her to another release.

Then another.

Oliver was relentless this time.

“I’ve missed you,” he groaned as he slowed down his pace and spilled his seed into

her.

“I’ve missed you, too,” she said, pulling him down to her chest.

They were both drenched in sweat, but they didn’t care. They were sated. Loved.

“I love you. Please remember that, Alexandra. I wish that I had gotten to know you earlier. Loved you more. Made you safe. You shouldn’t have to go to places like Devil’s Draw. They are hell on earth,” Oliver said sincerely.

“I love you, too. While I wished I’d gotten to know you earlier, I must experience things on my own, Oliver. I can’t forever be the sheltered woman who only thinks of fairytales and romance.”

“You’re not that kind of woman either, Alexandra,” Oliver said in mock indignation, looking up at her face, his chin resting lightly on her breasts.

She giggled. She loved that he knew her enough to say those things.

“But perhaps I am now a fan of licentious literature,” she teased.

“Ah, that is something I can support. We will find more copies of such books if that will make you more amorous,” he agreed.

“I am amorous whenever I’m with you,” she admitted.

“Then it means our next mission won’t be much of a challenge,” he murmured, his breath warm on her naked skin.

“What mission?” she asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Filling this house or the country estate with children,” he said, looking serious.

“Oh.”

SIX MONTHS LATER

He was gone. Six months after his schemes crumbled, Lord Hartwell had to leave the country, reduced to a much humbler existence.

Alexandra's heart hurt for the father who was supposed to protect her. Even though he turned out to be the opposite, she continued to hope that he'd do better with what he had now.

Bittersweet. That was the word that could describe her victory.

Alexandra sat by the drawing room window, watching the afternoon sunlight bathe the garden in a golden glow. Music continued to play in her head. Her penchant for creation had become stronger as of late, for a good reason.

She was finally with the man she had never even dreamed of—Oliver. There was also a secret niggling at her.

A letter rested on her lap, its seal broken. Oliver noticed it as he approached her.

"A letter from your father? What does he have to say for himself?" he asked, looking a little amused.

"He's, uh, complaining as usual. Adjusting to his simpler life," she murmured.

"Ah. But you're still reading his letters, and they are piling up in your drawer. They're competing with your compositions," Oliver teased, but his eyes had softened.

Alexandra knew he understood her conflicted feelings about her father.

Oliver joined her on the loveseat, and they both stared gratefully at the beautiful scene before them.

“It’s difficult, yes, but I want to know if there will be progress, eventually. He has no more allies and no place to return to,” she explained, her fingers tracing the leather-bound book on her left.

“He should stay there,” Oliver murmured, even though his expression remained unreadable.

She couldn’t help but turn to him and study his handsome face. She always wanted to drink him in when she was with him.

She reached for his face and rubbed his beard. She loved doing it—it comforted her.

“I know he should stay away from us, leave us in peace. B-But I want him to be better. To feel better.”

“I know,” Oliver whispered. “He never deserved you, though. You rose above him and broke the shackles he used to control you. That’s what matters now.”

Her lips curled into a faint smile. “I couldn’t have done it without you.”

Something exciting had been simmering underneath Alexandra’s peaceful facade. However, it was her music that revealed it.

“There’s something strange about you, but I’m still trying to figure it out,” Oliver told her one day, looking at her adoringly as he sat on the ottoman behind her, watching her breathe heavily after playing the pianoforte.

“Do you want me to tell you?” she asked, a sly smirk on her face.

“Ah. Not yet, not unless you want to tell me now. I want to see if I can guess,” he said, placing a challenge. A little game.

“No, I am not ready right now,” she said.

Peace came in waves. Oliver returned to boxing twice, just to see how he would feel about it. But seeing his wife weeping did not give him pleasure—not at all. He stopped even coming near Devil’s Draw. Soon, Alexandra could no longer smell the smoke and gin on him. Instead, he smelled of nature and fresh rain. His long walks always meant he came back after surveying the grounds or speaking with his tenants.

“Do you not miss it?” Alexandra asked once.

“The only thing I miss about it is the fact that I saw you in a different light when you stormed in one night to save your bastard of a father.”

“Ah, shh,” Alexandra murmured.

“So, will you tell me your secret?” he asked.

“We are there, almost,” she said mysteriously.

He raised an eyebrow at her but remained dutifully silent.

One afternoon, Alexandra watched him ride across the fields. Her heart swelled with pride as she drank in his confident posture and fluid movements.

Life. Oliver had finally embraced life.

Devil's Draw was nothing but an impediment—a stain on morality, an obstacle to pursuing a healthier, fuller life. Her eyes continued to watch him until he dismounted and joined her. She smiled at his flushed face. He quickly smiled back.

“You look happy,” she murmured as he reached for her hand.

They walked toward a bench to sit and watch the fields.

“Look at where we are, Alexandra,” Oliver said, his eyes scanning the greenery.

She giggled at the thought of their first walk together. They were so stiff back then, but they were undoubtedly drawn to each other.

“You’re thinking of our first walk together? The one that was supposed to make you forget about your morning meetings with Prescott?” he asked wryly, reading her mind.

“You know me so well now, husband,” she teased.

He would stiffen every time she called him that. It made him feel old, he said, but he still called her ‘wife.’

“Ah. But yeah, I’m happy. We have a good harvest. The new irrigation system is working and increasing production.”

“You have made me proud, Oliver. I hope you know that you have done well,” she praised, reaching for his hands and taking them in her much smaller ones.

“You are my inspiration. I can do no wrong with that,” he said, freeing one hand and putting it over their clasped ones.

While husband and wife certainly enjoyed each other's company, they also frequently mingled with the ton. They also developed a special relationship with John Prescott.

The three had become united in music and past turmoil. Somehow, it enabled Alexandra to write more music. Her compositions, under the pseudonym J. Lewis, continued to gain acclaim. Everyone wanted not just the mystery but also the pure passion.

"His music sounds happier. I wonder if there's a big change in his life," a lady commented.

"Perhaps he got married!" her friend exclaimed.

The biggest rumor was that either John Prescott was J. Lewis or he knew who it was. Whenever he went out with James, eyes would turn to them, thinking that a new piece was about to be released.

At least none of them suspected anything more between the two men. For they were far too focused on the mysterious composer.

"Perhaps it's Prescott's friend!"

"He's probably an agent for J. Lewis!"

Nobody batted an eye when they realized John Prescott was friends with the Duke of Westgrave and his wife. It was almost expected, as the ton still remembered the Duchess defending J. Lewis's choice to live a mysterious life.

"The Philharmonic requested one of your pieces, Your Grace," John said one day as he and James visited Oliver and Alexandra. "It's a great honor!"

“Truly?” Alexandra clasped her hands together with glee, her face brightening. “They accepted one of them?”

“They didn’t just accept it,” James clarified, grinning. “They even gave it rave reviews. You are a celebrated, albeit anonymous, composer.”

The Duke and Duchess never doubted the honesty and secrecy of the couple before them. In fact, John and James had more to lose than them. But their initially fragile bond had eventually grown stronger.

Oliver, seated beside his wife, pulled her toward him and hugged her. Pride was etched on his face. As they had become more open with each other, Alexandra could read every emotion on his face.

“You see? Now, everyone finally recognizes just how extraordinary you are,” he murmured in her ear.

Alexandra felt warm all over, but she knew the situation well enough not to give herself too much hope.

“It’s J. Lewis they are praising, a man full of mystery. They aren’t thinking of me when they listen to my music—a duchess who reads and sews in her free time. Yes, I play the pianoforte often, but they don’t imagine that when they think of me. However, I am glad that they appreciate my music.”

After some tea and lemonade, with biscuits and cake, John and James finally bid them adieu. It was the time that Alexandra was waiting for, and yet she still hesitated before speaking.

“Oliver,” she began tentatively.

Oliver stopped and turned to her, concern flashing in his eyes. “What is it, darling?”

“I’m pregnant, Oliver,” she said, after taking a deep breath.

She took his hands and placed them on her abdomen. There wasn’t much of a change there, but somehow, she felt her husband’s hands tremble. It was almost as if he felt something.

He froze for a moment, at a loss for words. But then his face lit up with so much happiness that it made her giggle.

“Y-You—Alexandra...” he stammered as a maelstrom of emotions crossed his face in the blink of an eye.

Joy. Surprise. Love. Admiration. They were all there. It made Alexandra want to cry tears of joy, but they wouldn’t come. There was just that bubbling brook that was her heart.

“Alexandra...” Oliver pulled her in his arms. “You’ve just given me the greatest gift imaginable.”

“I thought you might be overwhelmed,” she said, her voice trembling with emotion. “I admit that I am.”

He pulled back so that he could look into her eyes. “Overwhelmed with happiness, yes. Alexandra, I had not felt anything like this before. I want to meet our child soon. You have granted me one of my secret wishes—to be a father. Yes, I may not have had the most exemplary of fathers, but I intend to be a good father for our children.”

“Children,” Alexandra echoed as she let her tears fall freely.

She leaned into his embrace, knowing that he would always catch her if she even looked like she was about to fall.

With Oliver, she had finally found someone she could truly feel safe with.

The End?

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:16 am

A Few Years Later

The country estate was alive with laughter and music. The Audley family found it a comfort to stay there whenever they needed a break from the hustle and bustle of London.

Alexandra sat at the pianoforte while her daughter Emma perched beside her. The little girl's tiny, dimpled fingers tapped tentatively on the keys. She somehow created a simple tune with her mother's guidance.

"That's it, my love," Alexandra encouraged in a soft voice. "Try it again while listening to the rhythm. You will feel the music."

Oliver leaned against the doorframe. In his arms was David, their youngest son. He watched his wife and daughter with a gentle smile.

"You are making her work hard at such a young age," he teased, stepping into the room.

Alexandra glanced over her shoulder, her eyes sparkling with amusement. "If I don't keep Emma busy, she'll terrorize everybody else!"

"Mama!" Emma protested, pushing her lower lip out. "I don't terrorize them. They love me!"

Oliver chuckled, leaning down to kiss the crown of her head. David blubbered happily as he did. "Of course not, my little angel. They do love you. Ellen says you

can do no wrong.”

“Papa, can you play?” Emma asked, giving him that wide-eyed, innocent look. She knew that she often got her way whenever she did that.

Oliver feigned horror, clutching his chest. “Me? Play? Do you want me to scare all the birds and butterflies in the garden?”

Emma giggled. “Mama says you’re not very good. That you would rather listen.”

Alexandra laughed, her eyes meeting Oliver’s.

Oliver grinned. “Well, she’s not wrong.”

Later, as their children played in the garden, Alexandra and Oliver strolled hand in hand along the path, their eyes following their children with pure love. Ellen was close behind the little ones, ensuring that they were safe. The roses were in full bloom, their scent heavy in the warm air.

It was perfect.

“Do you ever think about how far we’ve come?” Alexandra asked wistfully.

“Every minute, my love,” Oliver replied, his tone serious. “I used to think marriage was merely a trap, and it didn’t help that we were not given a chance to court. We were thrown into this.”

She smiled, leaning her head against his shoulder. “I used to think love was a weakness. I thought of my mother’s love for my father, and how her music turned more desolate near the end. Now I know it’s our greatest strength.”

Oliver stopped walking and turned to face her. He pulled his hand back only so that he could cradle her face. His thumbs brushed against her cheeks, and she reveled in the roughness. The strength.

“I love you, Alexandra. I never thought it would be possible to love someone like I love you.”

“And I you, Oliver,” she whispered, her voice cracking.

Their kiss was punctuated by the laughter of their children, the trilling of birds, and the scent of roses in the air.

The End.

Chapter One

“W hoever could it be at this hour?” Eloise asked.

The sharp rap of a knocker at the door sent a shiver down Eloise’s spine. She glanced at her mother, who returned a brief, worried look.

Eloise bit down on her bottom lip. She had no idea who was at the door, yet something inside of her warned her it wouldn’t be good.

Rose Manning, Dowager Duchess of Danridge and Eloise’s mother, rose to her feet to greet their guests, throwing Eloise another apprehensive glance. She was a meek woman of five-and-fifty and one prone to dramatic outbursts.

This time, however, Eloise had a feeling that her mother was right to be concerned.

A knock such as that one was neither the knock of a friendly visitor nor of someone coming with well wishes. It was an ominous knock, if ever there could be such a thing.

A gust of chilly air rushed into the parlor as the butler opened the door, followed quickly by the smell of damp wool and cheap cologne. Eloise scrunched her nose up against the scent, trying to recall where she had smelled it before.

Her question was quickly answered.

The butler, normally so sure of himself, entered the parlor wearing a rather sheepish

and uncomfortable expression. He too knew that nothing good would come from this visitor.

“Mr. Carlisle to see you, My Lady,” he said in a weak voice.

At the mention of his name, the Dowager Duchess let out a cry of despair. Eloise’s eyes widened as she choked back her fear, and Mr. Carlisle entered, flanked by two intimidating, rough-looking men..

She keenly recalled why she had recognized that scent. She had long ago come to associate it with a visit from the creditor though she pushed it out of her mind whenever it arose.

That was one of the last things her dear, late father had left them with—a mountain of debt and a relationship with this creditor and his thugs.

Lady Danridge let out another cry of despair, dabbing her damp forehead with a handkerchief that she had fished out of her pocket.

“Is it really that time? Surely it cannot be, can it, Eloise?”

“Lady Danridge,” Mr. Carlisle greeted with a thin, reptilian smile. He gave a mock bow, his gaze lingering on Eloise longer than propriety allowed. His eyes swept over her, making her feel exposed though she kept her chin high and her expression steady. “And Lady Eloise. Lovely as always.”

Eloise fought the urge to recoil under his oily gaze. She knew he derived a perverted degree of pleasure from making her uncomfortable, and she refused to give him the satisfaction of seeing her squirm.

“Oh, goodness, Mr. Carlisle,” her mother said, her voice quivering. “You are early.”

She glanced again at Eloise, as if her daughter was the mother and she was the child.

Eloise looked away. She could not protect her mother in this situation, and neither should she have to. She knew her mother was lost in her grief, but so was Eloise.

“I am prompt, My Lady,” Mr. Carlisle replied smoothly, stepping further into the room, his henchmen remaining near the door like wolves guarding their prey. “And I bring urgent news.”

“More demands, no doubt,” Eloise said coolly, folding her hands in her lap.

“Tell them, Eloise,” Lady Danridge said, turning the handkerchief over and over in her hands. “Tell them they are too early.”

Carlisle’s grin widened at Eloise’s defiance, entirely ignoring her mother’s plea. “Astute as ever, Lady Eloise. Indeed, I am here to remind you of your family’s... predicament.” He drew out the word, savoring it. “As you are aware, your father’s debts are quite substantial, and time is running out. You have one month left.”

“One month?” Eloise’s mother gasped, her hand clutching her chest. “I thought we had more time. Tell him, Eloise, will you not?”

Carlisle shook his head with mock sympathy. “Afraid not. If the debts are not paid in full by that time, I will strip both your townhouse and the country estate of everything you own. It is only a shame that I cannot take the buildings themselves.” His tone turned harder, more threatening. “It is all in the contract as agreed.”

Eloise’s heart raced though she kept her expression impassive. “My brother has been working abroad tirelessly to settle these debts,” she said. “He has already paid off a large portion.”

“Ah, yes, Lord Danridge,” Carlisle said, his voice dripping with disdain. “He has been quite diligent. However, it is still insufficient. Let me remind you, my dear,” he leaned in slightly toward Eloise and lowered his voice to a menacing whisper, “the debt must be paid by someone in your family. No loans from outside sources. That is also part of our arrangement. If you try to deceive me, I will find out, and the consequences will be most unpleasant.”

“Your agreement was with my father, not with us,” she snarled in response.

Mr. Carlisle barked with laughter, and his two henchmen laughed with him. “You know as well as I that should a man die without settling his debts, they are passed on to his family. Your late father has placed you in this situation, Lady Eloise. I am merely claiming what is rightfully mine.”

Carlisle’s gaze shifted, his eyes darkening as they roamed over her body in a way that made her skin crawl.

Eloise felt a cold shiver run down her spine at the thinly veiled implication behind his words. He was a man who took pleasure in wielding his power over them, and she had no doubt he would use any pretext to ruin them.

Or worse.

“Of course,” he continued, his voice adopting a sickly-sweet tone, “there are other ways a family might settle such debts. Surely, a young lady like yourself, so beautiful and... charming, could find other means to help her family. Men of my acquaintance, as well as myself, are always eager to assist... for the right favor.”

Eloise’s stomach twisted in disgust, but she held her ground, her eyes narrowing. “I am sure we will find a way to resolve this without resorting to anything so indecent, Mr. Carlisle.”

Her mother cried out, her hand once more to her forehead as she swayed unsteadily on her feet. Eloise jumped up and guided her to a seat as she had done so often in these situations.

“Make him go away, Eloise,” Lady Danridge cried. “Please. My heart cannot take it.”

Carlisle laughed softly, straightening himself and casting one last, lingering look at Eloise. “One month. That is all you have. After that, your lovely possessions will be mine. And who knows? Perhaps you will be, too.”

Without waiting for a reply, he turned on his heel, motioning for his henchmen to follow as he strode from the room.

The door closed behind them leaving Eloise and her mother in a suffocating silence. Lady Danridge sank further into the chair, the damask fabric seeming to swallow her small frame. She trembled as tears welled up in her eyes. Eloise rushed to her, wrapping her arms around her mother’s frail shoulders, her own heart aching as she tried to steady the older woman.

“Oh, Eloise! What will we do?” her mother cried, her voice breaking between heavy sobs. “We are ruined... utterly ruined!”

“Mama, please,” Eloise whispered soothingly, holding her mother tighter. “We will find a way. Jeremy will help us; I am sure of it.”

Her mother frantically shook her head, her cheeks pale. “You must write to him at once! He must come home, Eloise. He is the only one who can save us!”

Eloise bit her lip, trying to contain the turmoil churning inside her. Her mother was partially correct. Jeremy had always been their protector, their savior when times were dire. But he was far away—too far to return in time to prevent their ruin. Even if

she sent him a letter immediately, it would take weeks to reach him, and by then, they would have lost too much time.

“We have no one else to whom we can turn,” Lady Danridge continued, her voice desperate, her eyes searching. “No one in the family will help us. Your uncle... your father’s cousins... they have all washed their hands of us. Jeremy must come back. He is the only one who can save us.”

Eloise felt a stab of irritation. Her mother had so much faith in Jeremy, which was rightly deserved, but that did not exclude someone else from lending a helping hand. Lady Danridge always considered Eloise weak, simply because she was a woman.

Jeremy had already done so much for them. He had paid off some of their father’s debts and had fought off the creditors wherever and whenever he could. He had already given up so much of his life to repair the damage caused by their father’s foolishness. Even if there was enough time, Eloise refused to rely on him any longer. No, she would take this burden upon herself. She would find a solution.

“I will write to him,” Eloise fibbed softly as she gently stroked her mother’s hair. “I will send a letter today, and he shall return in no time at all.”

Lady Danridge nodded, her sobs softening as she leaned into Eloise. Her small assurance had provided her mother with some temporary solace. “Yes... yes, do write to him. He will come. He will make it right,” the Dowager Duchess whispered.

As her mother’s tears subsided, Eloise kept her resolve hidden behind a calm facade. A plan had begun to form, its first tendrils creeping through her mind.

She pressed a soft kiss to her mother’s forehead and whispered, “It will be all right, Mother. I shall take care of it.”

I must find a way on my own, and I must do it before it is too late.

Chapter Two

“Must we attend, Mama?” Eloise pleaded as she found herself whisked off to yet another ball the following evening.

She was unsure whether her mother had simply forgotten that the family’s reputation was hanging in the balance or that she simply did not care. Either way, it was too late now. They were already ascending the grand staircase of the sprawling manor that was hosting the event.

“We must show our faces, Eloise, otherwise the Ton will begin to gossip,” Lady Danridge insisted, her chin held high with the stubborn pride of a woman who refused to let misfortune define her.

I imagine they are already doing that.

As they entered the ballroom, glittering chandeliers cast their light upon the wealthiest and most privileged members of the Ton.

Eloise found it difficult to concentrate on the festivities. Her mind kept drifting to the weight of their debts, the looming threat of Mr. Carlisle, and the lie she had told her mother. But tonight, appearances were everything. Tonight, she would find a way to solve their woes.

“Eloise! You look stunning this evening.”

“Hannah! You cannot know how good it is to see you,” Eloise said as she gave her

dear friend a quick heartfelt embrace.

Hannah Bryton, the youngest daughter of the Earl of Frinton, was as beautiful on the inside as she was on the outside. Though she could outshine even the prettiest girls in the Ton, she had never shown much desire to do so, and that was one of the many reasons Eloise loved her so much. She was shy, grounded, and cautious, but she was also the most caring person Eloise had ever met.

“I have hardly seen you at any of the recent events,” she said. “I thought you might have fallen ill.”

Eloise returned her smile though it did not quite reach her eyes. “Nothing that dramatic, I assure you. I have simply been busy.”

Hannah linked her arm with Eloise’s, guiding her towards a quieter corner of the room away from the thickest throngs of guests. “Well, it is good to see you. You have been missed although I daresay you have not missed much.”

Eloise chuckled softly. “I can imagine.”

“Are you quite sure everything is all right?” Hannah asked.

“I am certain,” Eloise said firmly. “I promise. You know I would never hide anything from you.”

If only that were true.

“I know,” Hannah said. “There was?—”

Her words were cut short by a commotion ahead as a flock of fawning ladies fluttered their fans around a newcomer. Eloise raised herself up onto her tiptoes to get a better

look.

“Good evening, one and all,” the newcomer called, his voice booming across the ballroom.

If she did not know any better, Eloise would have thought him the host, but he was merely another guest.

Hannah leaned in with a mischievous smile. “Look who is gracing us with his presence this evening. I do believe he is only here to remind us all how terribly charming he is.”

Lord Gideon Larson, Earl of Mortcombe, was a bombastic man. He always wanted everyone to know that he had arrived, and he would also make a fuss every time he departed.

He was attractive, Eloise supposed, but in a superficial, false sort of way, his nose perpetually tilted slightly upward as though the world existed solely to admire him. He was vain and arrogant in a way that only the wealthiest of men were, and he had somehow become the most eligible bachelor of the Ton.

Eloise could not see what all the fuss was about.

Eloise groaned and lowered herself from her toes. “If charm could be measured by vanity, he would have an endless supply.”

“Careful,” Hannah teased. “He is heading this way. Are you quite sure that you do not wish to join the gaggle of gigglers?”

Lord Mortcombe sauntered over to them, his posture the very picture of smugness. “Ah, Lady Eloise,” he drawled, his voice as slick as oil. “You look positively radiant

tonight. I do believe you have immeasurably surpassed the beauty of this wondrous evening.”

Eloise curtsied politely but could not suppress a small, wry smile. “How very kind of you to notice, My Lord, though I fear it might be the chandeliers that deserve the credit for my radiance this evening.”

He chuckled, clearly believing his wit had elicited hers. “Indeed, you may be correct. They are such stunning chandeliers, are they not? I have considered adding some to my own home.”

Eloise raised an eyebrow, her tone dry as she replied, “Yes, perhaps they would brighten up your world a bit.”

Lord Mortcombe blinked, not quite catching her barb. He continued undeterred, stepping closer and lowering his voice as though sharing some great secret. “I must say, I have been watching you for some time, Lady Eloise. You have an air about you, a grace that is hard to find. Surely, you have noticed the attention that you have garnered?”

Eloise tilted her head, pretending to ponder. “Indeed, My Lord, I have taken notice. Though, I must admit, I have found that many gentlemen are drawn to appearances rather than substance.”

Lord Mortcombe beamed, assuming her comment was an acknowledgment of his own interest. “Exactly, my dear! You understand the importance of appearances. After all, that is how we get to know each other, is it not?”

Eloise exchanged a glance with Hannah, who was doing her best not to laugh outright. Had the man listened to a word she had said, or was he really that obtuse?

“Oh, indeed,” Eloise replied, her words coated in amusement. “But I also place so much value on conversations of real depth and meaning. I do find them so refreshing.”

Lord Mortcombe straightened his cravat, puffing out his chest. “Well, I like to think of myself as a man of intellect, Lady Eloise. I have read quite a few books, you know.”

“How fascinating,” Eloise said sweetly. “Pray tell, what are you reading at the moment?”

“I... er...” Lord Mortcombe floundered, his cheeks reddening. “Actually, I am between books at the moment.”

“Really? But a prolific reader such as yourself must have recently finished one, did you not?”

“Y-yes,” he stammered, clearly on unstable ground. He cleared his throat and straightened himself.

Eloise pressed her lips together to prevent herself from laughing openly at the poor man, yet she could not stop herself from teasing him. “Have you read Lord Byron’s latest?”

“Ah yes,” Lord Mortcombe replied proudly. “A man of great political values. His treatise on government was quite compelling.”

“Government?” Eloise raised her eyebrows while Hannah hid behind her back, stifling her giggles. “I would say it is almost as if the man is in love with the government. One day I would like to hear some of your thoughts on his... er... treatise. ”

His face faltered for the briefest of moments before he recovered and flashed her a winning smile. “Yes... perhaps.”

“Lord Mortcombe, if you have a moment,” someone called from behind them.

Another tittering lady was vying for his attention. Lord Mortcombe glanced at her then turned back to Eloise, winked, and disappeared into his crowd of adoring fans.

Hannah snorted with mirth as soon as the Earl had left. “You are terrible! Now that poor man will regale everyone with tales of Byron’s supposed political theories!”

“Serves him right,” Eloise said. She flicked open her fan and watched him leave. “Even my aunt’s poodle knows Byron is a poet. It is not my fault Mortcombe failed to pay attention to his lessons at that fancy school he attended.”

“How often do you think he spends practicing that smirk in the mirror?” Hannah asked.

Eloise laughed quietly, shaking her head then returning her gaze to her friend. “Far too long, I suspect. He is dreadfully pleased with himself, is he not? He is as vain as ever.”

There is no amount of charm or money that could make me endure a man like that.

The two girls continued to exchange pleasantries after which Hannah was asked to dance. Eloise gracefully withdrew to one corner of the ballroom in search of a solitary moment.

Teasing Lord Mortcombe had been a welcome distraction, but now that she was alone, she could not stop thinking about Jeremy, her mother, and their dire family situation. There was nowhere on earth she could hide, nowhere she could be

unburdened from the weight of that knowledge.

As the evening continued, the lively atmosphere of the ball was suddenly shattered by a stirring near the edge of the dancing area.

The music faltered briefly as whispers began to ripple throughout the guests and spread like wildfire. Eloise's curiosity piqued when she saw a group of guests gathering, their eyes wide at the news of the scandal.

"Did you hear?" Hannah whispered, suddenly appearing next to Eloise and leaning close to her. "Lady Charlotte and Lord Marbury... caught in the garden!"

Eloise's eyes widened. "Caught? You mean?—?"

"Yes, in a very compromising position," Hannah confirmed, her voice hushed with the thrill of gossip. "But Lord Marbury has already announced their engagement. They were forced to act quickly, of course."

"Goodness."

A woman nearby, well-known for her loose tongue, loudly commented, "Well, is that not convenient for Lady Charlotte? She is penniless, after all. An engagement is just the thing to save her from ruin."

The words rang through Eloise's ears, resonating with more than just idle gossip. She watched as Lady Charlotte and Lord Marbury accepted the congratulations of their fellow guests, the expressions on their faces carefully composed, though Charlotte's eyes betrayed a hint of relief behind her forced smile.

The engagement had not just saved her reputation—it had secured her future.

Eloise felt her stomach clench.

A quick engagement.

Secured her future.

A way out.

She glanced at her mother standing across the room, the light from the chandelier's candles making her appear regal as she watched over the crowd. But beneath that poised exterior was a woman in despair, drowning under the weight of her late husband's debts. And Jeremy, far away, would not be able to save them in time.

The image of Mr. Carlisle's leering face flashed through Eloise's mind, along with the sound of his threats. Her heart raced as everything suddenly fell into place.

That is what I need to do.

Creating a scandal was not necessary, but she urgently needed to become engaged to a wealthy gentleman from the Ton.

Her eyes drifted through the ballroom, searching, assessing. She needed someone of means, a gentleman who would not ask too many questions; someone who would not care about the intricacies of her family's finances and perhaps lacked a degree of intelligence.

Her gaze landed on the very last person she wanted to consider, but he fit the bill perfectly.

Lord Mortcombe.

He stood across the room, surrounded by his usual flock of admirers, his vanity as nauseatingly palpable as ever. Eloise had always dismissed him as a self-centered, vapid man, completely absorbed in his own reflection. But now, as she watched him preen under the attention of his flock of ladies, a plan clicked into place.

Mortcombe is perfect.

Wealthy, vain, and, most importantly, easily managed. He would not dig too deeply into her family's affairs. He was exactly the kind of suitor who could solve her problems without asking questions or complicating matters. Moreover, his overinflated ego might actually work in her favor. He did not even know who Lord Byron was, for goodness' sake!

"Eloise?" Hannah's voice broke through her thoughts. "Are you all right? You seem distracted. I know it is all extremely exciting, but..."

Eloise blinked, turning back to her friend.

"I am fine," she murmured as her mind continued to sift through the steps of her strategy.

A husband could save us from ruin. And Mortcombe, with his wealth and arrogance, is the key to that salvation.

She felt a rush of determination. If Lady Charlotte could secure her future with a swift engagement, so could she. Eloise just had to convince Lord Mortcombe that her hand in marriage was worth pursuing and that she was a prize to be won—and quickly.

Her heart pounded, but she lifted her chin. If this was the game she had to play to save her family, then so be it.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:16 am

“ I must say, Your Grace, it is refreshing to see that you are still here. Most gentlemen would have folded by now.” Lord William Radcliffe, a man known for his arrogance and deep pockets, leaned back in his chair, eyeing Felix with a smug grin.

The dim glow of candles and the thick haze of cigar smoke created a heavy atmosphere inside the gaming hell. Laughter, murmurs, and the clinking of glasses filled the room, but at one particular table, the crowd was silent and focused. All eyes were on the high-stakes card game between Felix and Lord Radcliffe.

Felix sat with his usual calm demeanor, his sharp eyes never leaving the cards or his opponent. A small stack of chips lay neatly in front of him while Radcliffe’s pile had grown considerably. The stakes were high and the tension was profound.

Felix met his gaze without flinching, a faint smile playing at the corner of his lips. “Patience is a virtue, Radcliffe. But then again, I do not expect you to know much about virtue.”

A murmur rippled through the onlookers. Felix’s cool, measured tone contrasted with Radcliffe’s brash arrogance and seemed to be getting under the nobleman’s skin.

Radcliffe chuckled though there was a flicker of annoyance in his eyes. “It is a shame that you will be learning a lesson the hard way tonight. I have seen better men walk away from this table with nothing.”

Felix raised an eyebrow, casually tossing a few more chips onto the growing pile. “Perhaps you should concern yourself with the cards in your hand, rather than reminiscing about other men’s failures.”

Radcliffe's mistress, a lonely but beautiful widow, ran a finger along his shoulder then leaned down to whisper in his ear, her red lips bright against Radcliffe's pale flesh.

Felix could not hear what she had said, but he was sure she was offering him some words of encouragement. Radcliffe smirked, glanced up at her once, then turned back to the game.

The crowd was riveted, eyes darting between the two players as Radcliffe's smirk faltered. The game had become a battle of wit and nerve as much as it was one of cards. Radcliffe, for all his wealth, was not used to being challenged this way.

The next round began, and Felix carefully studied Radcliffe. His opponent's arrogance was his weakness. Radcliffe had a habit of overplaying his hands, believing his wealth could buy him out of any dire situation.

Felix was counting on that.

Radcliffe tossed a significant amount of gold sovereigns onto the table, the clattering sound echoing like thunder in the quiet room. "Care to match that, Your Grace? Or have you finished pretending?"

Felix's fingers hovered over his chips, his face unreadable. The crowd held its collective breath. His mind raced, calculating every card that had been played. Radcliffe, sensing an advantage, leaned back in his chair with an air of superiority.

Felix's friend, Percy Covington, the Viscount of Stentford, had been sitting quietly behind Felix.

Percy whispered urgently into Felix's ear, "You have come this far. No shame in stepping away now. A loss like this is not worth it, old boy."

Felix ignored his advice, his gaze still fixed on Radcliffe, his lips curling into a slight smile.

“I never lose,” he said with quiet confidence, his words carrying more weight than the idle banter being thrown about the room.

The final round began. Radcliffe placed his bet, eyes gleaming with a sense of inevitable victory. Felix remained cool and collected, letting Radcliffe believe he had the upper hand.

Radcliffe placed his cards on the table with snap. “Take a look at that,” he sneered.

His mistress, still lingering, giggled into his ear. “I told you that you could do it,” she sang. “You are always the winner.”

The smug nobleman began to reach for the pile of gold sovereigns, but Felix held his cards in the air, ready to reveal them.

“Not so fast, Radcliffe,” he said as he laid his superior hand down on the table.

The stunned silence lasted for only for a heartbeat before the room erupted in a chorus of cheers and gasps. Radcliffe’s face fell, his overconfidence shattered.

“But... No!” Radcliffe cried, staring wide-eyed at the cards. “It cannot be! How could... How... No, I say!”

“Let us just say that the better man won, yes?”

Felix leaned back in his chair, savoring the moment as the crowd buzzed with excitement, voices rising in disbelief and admiration. Even though he took no pleasure in seeing a man so defeated, he could not deny he enjoyed the thrill of the win.

Percy slapped Felix on the shoulder with an incredulous laugh. “You madman,” he breathed, shaking his head. Felix shrugged as a satisfied grin spread across his face.

“I told you,” Felix said smoothly. He leaned forward to collect his newly won coins. “I never lose.”

Lord Radcliffe didn’t move. He remained perfectly still, staring down at his loss with such intensity that Felix almost felt sorry for him. But the man had kept on betting even when he had known he shouldn’t. He should have folded while he was in the lead.

“Not all is lost, Radcliffe,” Felix said with a chuckle. “I am sure you shall have plenty of opportunities to win it back in the future. If I let you, of course.”

As the cheers subsided and the crowd began to disperse, Lord Radcliffe’s face twisted with barely concealed fury. He stood abruptly, shoving his chair back with a sharp screech.

“This is not over,” he spat, glaring down at Felix.

Felix methodically collected his winnings, ignoring the bitterness in Radcliffe’s tone.

“Of course, it is. Do not be an idiot.”

The nobleman stormed off, his pride deeply wounded, but not before his mistress, draped in her fine silks, cast a lingering gaze in Felix’s direction. Her lips curled into a faint smile, eyes glinting with interest as she watched him rise from the table.

He noted that she did not leave with Radcliffe, and he was about to say something to her when Percy clapped him heartily on the back, still chuckling from the spectacle.

“You never cease to amaze me, Felix. Just when I think you have pushed your luck

too far, you pull off something like that.” He shook his head in admiration and disbelief.

Felix pocketed a few coins and shrugged with a half-smile. “What can I say? I strive to please,” he replied casually, a glimmer of satisfaction dancing in his eyes.

As they moved away from the table, Percy leaned in conspiratorially. “Any word from our friend Danridge? How has his overseas trip treated him?”

Felix’s playful demeanor faltered for a moment, his expression darkening slightly. “None, I am afraid.”

Percy sighed. “I do hope it all goes well. I understand his family has its share of issues... Hopefully his luck will turn in his favor.”

Felix paused, his thoughts briefly returning to his own life. “We all have our burdens, do we not?”

“That we do, old boy.” Percy grinned as he downed his drink then gestured at Felix that they ought to have their glasses refilled.

As the night wore on, the atmosphere became even thicker with smoke and chatter. Felix stood by the bar, a glass of fine brandy in hand, surveying the room with a sharp, calculating gaze. His earlier victory over Lord Radcliffe had only heightened his confidence, and the subtle buzz of admiration from onlookers did not go unnoticed.

“The way you took him down, Your Grace,” one man said, gravitating toward him as many had throughout that evening. Alcohol had made his voice loud and his laugh boisterous, and he looked at Felix with something akin to awe.

“Indeed,” Felix replied, not meeting the man’s gaze. Though he feigned disinterest,

he rather liked the sycophancy.

“It is no wonder that God chose you to be a duke,” another inebriated fellow uttered. “A nerve like that—it is nearly unheard of.”

Felix deigned to throw him a weak smile. “One either has it or does not. I would wager that you do not.”

“But that final hand!”

He continued to listen with waning interest, allowing each of the various men their moment as they relived the final hand of his game, each one exaggerating the stakes. He sipped his drink slowly, his mind already a step ahead. Felix always planned two moves in advance.

Winning the game had been satisfying, but he could not help the feeling that something was missing. He needed more. A bigger thrill.

When Percy returned to his side and leaned against the bar, his face was flushed with brandy and laughter. “It seems Radcliffe still has not recovered from the thrashing you gave him,” he remarked, nodding toward the far corner where Lord Radcliffe sulked, his wounded pride on full display. He knocked back another drink and immediately demanded a refill.

Felix’s eyes briefly flicked over to Radcliffe before returning to his drink. “Men like Radcliffe do not take defeat well,” he said coolly. “But they forget that arrogance blinds them. He never stood a chance.”

Percy chuckled. “You make it sound so easy.”

Felix turned to face him, the intensity of his gaze as sharp as a blade. “It is. People are rather predictable, my friend. You study them long enough, and they all show

their hand. Radcliffe plays as he lives—reckless, overconfident. He thinks wealth and a title give him power, but it only makes him a bigger fool. It is almost enough to pity him.”

“Almost,” Percy teased.

“Indeed. He chooses to put himself into these situations. Therefore, he must deal with the consequences.”

Percy gave a low whistle, shaking his head in admiration. “That makes me wonder if you see through everyone like that.”

Felix’s lips quirked into a half-smile, the glint of mischief evident in his eyes. “Everyone who matters,” he replied smoothly.

His gaze roamed the room again, briefly landing on the widow who continued to watch him from across the hall.

The silk of her gown clung in all the right places—Felix could easily picture her naked, and he did so now as he looked her up and down.

“Most people are too self-absorbed to realize how much they give away,” he added.

Percy followed his gaze, spotting the widow. “Seems you have attracted some attention.”

Felix grinned. “It would seem so, but is that not always the case when one wins a substantial sum?” He emptied his glass in one thirsty gulp then slammed it on the bar. “If you will excuse me, gentlemen, I have some business to which I must attend.”

Felix woke up late that morning, much later than he usually did. As he stirred from his deep slumber, his mind was already rattling with plans for the day ahead. He

slowly turned to see Radcliffe's mistress, whose name he only vaguely remembered, still fast asleep in his bed.

Lydia? Claudia? Amelia? It could be any of those. Not that it mattered. Felix chuckled. He'd taken more than just the man's money.

With practiced ease, he extricated himself from the bed and dressed in a set of simple but well-tailored clothes. He pulled on his shirt and trousers then added a waistcoat and a cravat, his movements efficient and silent. He wanted to avoid waking his guest, a delicate process he had perfected over the years.

Felix slipped silently out of the room and down the corridor to where his butler awaited him. The house was still in the early stages of the morning, and the servants moved about with quiet efficiency.

"Good morning, Your Grace," the butler greeted him with a nod of respect.

"Morning, Hargrave," Felix replied, glancing back at the closed bedchamber door. "Make sure that my guest is given a proper breakfast before she departs."

"Of course, Your Grace," Hargrave assured him, as always, his expression one of practiced discretion.

The man had seen this routine many times and knew exactly how to oversee such matters.

"Also, arrange a bath for me." Felix rubbed a hand over his face. "And have the papers brought to my study."

Hargrave lowered his head. "Very well, Your Grace. I shall see to it immediately."

As Felix turned to head toward the staircase, Hargrave called after him respectfully.

“Your Grace, I must remind you of Lady Brimsleigh’s soirée this evening. It is an event to which you confirmed your attendance and had asked me to remind you of it.”

Felix’s brow furrowed. He had indeed promised to attend his godmother’s dinner party although he had nearly forgotten about it amidst the busyness of the week. He wondered idly if there was any way he could get out of it.

The soirée would indeed be the highlight of the evening, a necessary social engagement that would require his presence and, as always, his charming demeanor.

He only hoped he could find a toy or two to play with while there—at least a tryst in the gardens would keep things interesting.