



A Lady, Her Lord, & Their Duke (Regency Menage #3)

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Category: Historical

Description: Dominant Lady Arabella Carlisle and her submissive husband Lord Neville Carlisle enjoy a rare ton marriage; a blissful arrangement of affection, discipline, no children, and the occasional gentleman lover with an unbreakable rule: threesomes are anonymous, one-night-only amusement at a club, not forever.

But on their tenth anniversary they match with a novice submissive, unmasked as Edmund Vane, Duke of Stanforth, a powerful yet coldly reclusive widower. Beneath his icy shell lies a wounded soul desperate to be owned, and Arabella and Neville can't resist his aching need...or their own fierce desires. Soon they sink into a decadent world of dark pleasures, but as walls come down and feelings grow, the fledgling trio risks more. For rebellion always comes with a reckoning...

This fem domme Regency FMM romance contains explicit sex scenes, language, and enthusiastically consensual discipline.

CW: family member deaths

Total Pages (Source): 10

CHAPTER 1

Golden Square, London, August 1817

It was an objective fact that Lord Neville Carlisle had an exceptional backside. Whether encased in trousers, breeches, or buckskins, both the ton—and scandal sheets—agreed that never had a firmer, more elegant arse graced society's halls, clubs, and drawing rooms.

Nev's backside looked even better naked. However, when that creamy canvas was reddened and crisscrossed from the stinging kiss of a riding crop and stuffed full with a dildo from their ever-growing collection, it ascended to genuine work of art.

Sighing in contentment, Lady Arabella Carlisle resettled herself against the pile of pillows on their bed and drank in the lascivious display. While disciplining her husband left her soaking wet with arousal, it was his joyful, tender gratitude afterward, the blissful pleasure-pain haze in his heavenly chocolate-brown eyes, that she loved best. Neville craved this and needed it regularly. They both did. Fortunately, ten years prior, he had demonstrated impeccable wisdom in proposing to a no-nonsense woman who not only encouraged his sexual submission...but reveled in it.

"Tell me, my darling," she said, reaching over to smooth his rumpled, silver-touched blond hair as it glinted in the cool morning light. "Did I select an appropriate anniversary gift?"

Neville blinked and offered a sleepy yet mischievous grin. "You spoil me, Ara. I'll be

sore all day. Every step a reminder of my wife's perfectly stern hand."

"Good," Arabella said crisply.

He moaned, a tentative, unspoken reminder that she had not yet permitted him an orgasm. And she wouldn't. Not until this evening's special surprise. "You look like the cat with an entire bucket of cream, madam. Dare I assume you remain content with your purchase?"

She laughed. "Naughty man. You know full well that content doesn't begin to describe my feelings. Each year I think I could not be happier...and each year I am proved wrong. What we have is so very rare. A truly excellent marriage."

Neville rubbed his cheek against her hand, then turned his head and pressed a kiss to it. "I know I say this every year, but perhaps eventually I'll understand why you chose a near-impooverished, politically radical baron fifteen years your senior to wed. It is no exaggeration to say every titled bachelor from London to Edinburgh was pursuing you. Including a few minor royals."

That was true. At twenty she had been the toast of the town, praised as an incomparable, a diamond of the first water, the very epitome of womanhood and other such blathering nonsense. Ha. The men offering such lavish, empty words scarcely looked at her face and never engaged her mind. They saw her plump figure as a promise of fertility, and her enormous dowry as a swift way to rebuild their estates, fill their stables, and fund their peccadillos. As a textile merchant's daughter without a drop of blue blood, she hadn't been a person to them. Just a womb with a mountain of guineas...someone to fleece, impregnate and ignore.

Unbeknownst to all these suitors, though, Miss Arabella Ferndale had one winning card in hand: her father. While a ruthlessly successful businessman, Papa had always been affectionate and indulgent toward her. His one stipulation for her future husband

was a title...but which title was entirely her choice. She'd then proceeded to shock society speechless by strolling past the lines of dukes and marquesses and earls vying for her hand...for a baron who tried very hard to dissuade her.

“The others were pursuing my dowry. You saw me ,” Arabella said simply. “No one else asked questions or demonstrated any curiosity about my hopes and dreams and desires. And they assumed I wanted children when I simply do not.”

“True.”

“Also, you were an open book about yourself. The others wanted me shackled in matrimony before they would even hint at the truth of their finances or politics or sexual preferences. I abhor deceit. And men who believe I'm too beautiful to think.”

Neville grinned. “It would certainly behoove me to be discreet about my politics. Alas, I have that terrible habit of climbing on any stage available and bellowing about abolishing slavery and extending the vote. The Piccadilly Market stallholders and Cheapside shopkeepers both love and hate me; I gather the crowds, but also nobles armed with rotten vegetables.”

“Ah yes, the men of Polite Society ,” said Arabella, rolling her eyes.

“Now, my love, if they didn't demonstrate rampant hypocrisy, how would we know who the truly powerful were? Besides, my tongue is nimblest under a hail of jeers and tomato pulp.”

“I must respectfully disagree,” she purred. “I think it is nimblest when inside me. Speaking of which...”

Neville moaned again, much louder this time, and carefully maneuvered himself into position between her legs. These days, her husband was so deliciously adept at

pleasuring her that he required little guidance. However, Arabella gained particular enjoyment in tangling her fingers in his silky hair, of tugging roughly until he panted with need, of wrapping her sturdy thighs about his head and forcing his face into her pussy as she ground against his mouth. God, the way his nose nuzzled her thick black bush and his tongue lapped at her swollen clitoris so frantically!

“Yes,” Arabella praised as the familiar throbbing, tingling rush to orgasm built and built inside her, as her senses swam in the heady musky scent of her juices. “That’s the way. Worship your owner.”

He opened his mouth a little wider, his upper lip rubbing her clitoris as his eager tongue plunged deep in the slick channel his cock rarely went. Nev didn’t want children either, and it was so much easier—and empowering—knowing their play wouldn’t risk this.

“Tell me,” mumbled Neville, as his tongue flicked and danced, hurling her closer and closer to ecstasy. “Tell me .”

“I adore you!” she gasped, a wild cry tearing from her throat as she flew to the stars on the wings of pure bliss.

Eventually, Arabella released her husband from her tight grip and he stared up at her, his gaze beseeching, his breath short, sharp pants. “May I come? My cock is going to explode.”

“No,” she said firmly. “Not until tonight.”

For a moment, affronted shock flared in his gaze, and she almost spanked him for the impudence. Then understanding dawned, and the excitement on his face warmed her to the soul. “You’ve made an appointment at Sanctuary.”

“I have,” Arabella replied. “We’ll choose a playfellow at the club, then romp to our hearts’ content in the diamond chamber.”

Neville beamed. “My favorite treat. I love you so much, Ara.”

Then show me, don’t tell me .

Arabella immediately suppressed the unwanted, wayward thought. Talking was Nev’s talent. His gift from the gods. The speeches he made raised funds, opened hearts and changed lives. And he spoke the truth, although playfellows were a treat for them both. Being worshiped by her husband was wonderful enough, but there was something truly divine in directing two men to pleasure her—and each other. Before they’d wed, Nev thought being attracted to both women and men was sufficiently grave to halt her interest. Especially alongside the age difference, him not wanting children, and desiring submission and correction in the bedchamber. Such silliness! That had only confirmed he was precisely the right choice.

Of course, there were strict, unbreakable rules when it came to playfellows.

She and Neville only ever indulged at Sanctuary, the luxurious, expensive haven for those who insisted upon complete discretion and wide variety in their sexual experiences: threesomes, instruction in discipline, restraints, and use of accessories, a kind and professional first time for virgins, or merely to be matched with another client of similar tastes. Every member was over twenty-one, vouched for by another, and endured a very probing interview regarding their likes, dislikes and wishes to ensure they received exactly what they wanted. They also wore demi masks and hair coverings for extra privacy.

Perhaps more importantly, and in respect of their marriage, Arabella restricted this treat to just a few times a year...and they never had the same playfellow twice. This wasn’t about love or companionship or forming a permanent trio like the Townsend-

Grants or the Hunter-Whitmores had. This was one night of limitless pleasure, then a cordial farewell.

Arabella smiled and cupped Neville's cheek. Then she went up onto her knees and shuffled down the bed to gently remove the dildo from his backside and carefully apply ointment to his welted flesh. Her husband made a guttural sound; he was so primed for tonight's activities. "Now, my darling," she said. "I'll order two trays for breakfast and hot water for bathing. After that you must attend to your errands in town while I balance the ledgers and read letters. We'll meet again for supper, then go to Sanctuary."

Neville snorted. "Arabella, you light up at balancing ledgers the same way other ladies light up at a new necklace."

She raised a haughty eyebrow. "I am my father's daughter. And it means you have ample time to stand on crates and be pelted with scraps, does it not?"

"Touché," he replied, blowing her a kiss. "Thousands are in your debt, including me. Now please, I beg you, madam...won't you feed your precious pet? I cannot campaign for reform on an empty stomach."

Arabella's lips twitched as she reached for the bellpull and tugged it firmly. Her baron was particularly adorable when he begged. "One hearty breakfast, on its way."

Yet even now, eager anticipation fluttered in her belly. Ledgers exercised her mind, but a new lover to tease and torment at Sanctuary? Sheer perfection.

Stanforth House, St. James's Square

"Father? Father!"

Oh Christ.

Edmund Vane, Duke of Stanforth, contemplated diving under the carved oak library desk, but his hellion daughter would find him. Cressida always found him. Given a chance, the chit would be an expert Bow Street Runner; except then she would take over the city and London had endured sufficient tyrants in its history.

“Do cease your unseemly shouting,” he replied, as she burst into the room without knocking. Truly, if anyone in the House of Lords knew how blithely, how disrespectfully Lady Cressida Vane treated the almighty Duke of Stanforth, they would swoon.

Cressida poked out her tongue, then delicately settled herself on an embroidered chaise and smoothed her pale blue skirts. While everyone agreed she favored her sire—they were both tall with brown hair and hazel eyes—occasionally Cressida displayed a fussy mannerism so entirely her late mother Lydia that it was damned unnerving. “Good afternoon to you, too.”

Edmund sent her a stern look. “I hope you have an excellent reason for invading my library.”

She smiled sunnily. “I do! Well, two reasons. The first is that I received a letter from Harry—”

“Your brother’s name is Lord Denby. He’s an earl, even if he is ten.”

Cressida rolled her eyes. “Harrison Edmund Vane, Earl of Denby, writes that Eton is cold and damp, the food is terrible, and the masters are...hmmm... bug-eyed madmen who smell bad. However, he also says he’s met a terrific boy called Toby, they are already the best of chums, and both are looking forward to the start of their first term.”

Edmund almost snorted. Little had changed at Eton since his attendance, then. He'd agonized over sending his heir away at such a young age, but Denby had pleaded, and he never pleaded for anything. Unlike Cressida, the boy was quiet and reserved. Always watching with his solemn, reproachful Lydia eyes, not openly blaming Edmund for the fever that snatched her away, but a far harsher emotion: disappointment. For what use was an immensely wealthy and powerful duke if he couldn't save his duchess's life?

He winced at the reminder of his greatest failure, although his estrangement from Denby was a close second. Cressida had always acted as an intermediary between them. Why did it so often feel like the austere Vane methods to shape and mold a son as his father and grandfather had demonstrated...were just plain wrong?

Edmund cleared his throat. "I'll have my secretary send extra funds. The Eton kitchens might be a slophouse, but there are plenty of enterprising pie sellers nearby in the village. Now, what is the second reason you are here?"

Cressida's eyes took on a certain gleam, her chin jutting out with a determination he knew all too well.

Oh Christ .

"I've decided to marry Sir Kenneth Lochore, the member of parliament from Yorkshire. But quite ridiculously, because I've not yet reached my majority, I require your permission. So, please arrange it at once."

Inwardly, Edmund made a wheezing sound. Or perhaps not so inwardly, for Cressida's eyes widened in alarm. "Beg pardon?" he choked out. "A betrothal ? You're far too young."

"Father," she said, very patiently, "Eighteen is an entirely unexceptional age to wed,

especially for a duke's daughter. I've been out two seasons; next year society will start hurling phrases like 'long in the tooth' and 'on the shelf'. I won't stand for it."

Edmund scowled at her impeccable logic. Society would do exactly that. "Why Lochore? And why the haste? Wait a moment. He hasn't...if he has, I will ensure in future that bloody Yorkshireman cannot even be elected collector of rat excrement in Seven Dials."

Cressida sighed. "Before you start frothing at the mouth, Sir Kenneth has done nothing improper except be deliciously handsome, intelligent, kind, and worthy. He has his own funds. And excellent prospects. Some are saying he might be Home Secretary or even Prime Minister one day!"

"And what of...tender feelings?" Edmund asked awkwardly, still frantically trying to gather his scattered thoughts. "Does Lochore care for you?"

For perhaps the first time in her life, Cressida blushed. "He said he does. And I'm already in love with him. Why? I didn't think that would matter to you."

Because a loveless marriage is a hell I wouldn't wish on anyone.

"I want you to be happy," he said abruptly. "Wed to someone you can talk to about anything. To have children if and when you want. To have choices."

His daughter nodded sagely. "Everything you didn't have."

Edmund's jaw dropped. "Excuse me?"

"Oh, please," said Cressida tartly. "I have eyes and ears. And I can count. Yours was a forced union; you and Mother were shockingly mismatched and thoroughly miserable. And it only got worse when Harry took so long to arrive."

He made that wheezing sound again, flailing for solid ground when Cressida had so neatly shredded him with the truth about himself and his late wife. One raucous country Michaelmas festival had changed the entire course of his existence. He'd been celebrating reaching his majority, Lady Lydia Harrison was a rebellious young woman seeking adventure, and after sharing far too much apple wine, they'd briefly coupled in a stable antechamber. It shouldn't have decided anything and it was certainly no foundation for marriage, yet she'd become pregnant and he'd been a husband and father at the tender age of twenty-two.

Neither he nor Lydia touched apple wine again. But understanding their vast differences, they'd vowed to do their duty then amicably live separate lives. Unfortunately, after conceiving Cressida so effortlessly, they'd waited a further eight long years for Denby.

Knowing they were both able, it had been a nightmarish cycle of bishop blessings, taking the waters at Cheltenham or Bath, and trips to Paris and Geneva to consult with expert physicians. Trying this bed, that position, a certain day or time. Drinking disgusting herbal tonics and eating bland food. While he and Lydia had never enjoyed a passionate marriage, it became a tortuous chore where they could scarcely look at each other. Not man and wife, but seed producer and womb. Yet finally the heavens showed mercy and Lydia triumphantly birthed the ducal heir. Alas, her victory was short lived compared to her efforts; she'd passed of a fever when Denby was four.

Edmund had not considered remarriage and he certainly didn't want more children. In truth, even the thought of a mistress repelled him because once again it would be a loveless transaction, or someone vying for coin or coronet. Nobody saw Edmund the man. Just Stanforth the duke. But while his fate was an existence bereft of pleasure or genuine affection, of being alone...Cressida could have so much more.

"Do not speak of things you know nothing about," Edmund muttered eventually.

“If the past is taboo, then I claim the future. You’ll make enquiries about Sir Kenneth?” asked Cressida, fixing him with a gimlet stare.

“If I consider it, you’ll leave my library immediately?”

His daughter beamed. “Yes. On one condition: you do the thing.”

Edmund sighed. “Surely you jest.”

“Never!” she hissed, marching over to haul him from his chair. Next, she escorted him to the floor-to-ceiling bookshelf ladder and climbed up onto the second step. “Be sure to say the words. Unless you’ve forgotten them?”

Edmund raised a brow. An actual impossibility—he’d said them thousands of times. After bracing his hands on the ladder’s sturdy wooden frame, he called, “Onward, Pirate Princess!” and gave it a hard shove.

Cressida shrieked with delight as the ladder sailed on well-oiled hinges down the length of the bookshelf, until it bounced against the soft leather cushion at the end and came to a shuddering halt. Then she stepped off, shook out her skirts, and curtsied. “Until next we meet on the high seas,” she called, before hurrying from the room.

He shook his head. Not even on the rack would he confess his dread of the day Cressida shunned Pirate Princess, her favorite game for over a decade. But it was fast approaching. His firstborn was ready to marry .

Returning to his desk, Edmund stared blankly at the document pile. But not even picking up his quill helped.

Cressida wanted to marry Sir Kenneth Lochore. A Whig politician !

Preposterous.

Obviously he needed to discover everything about the knight. What lay beneath the man-of-the-people mask? Sure, Lochore might have conducted himself honorably at Waterloo, and was a gifted orator, but that meant nothing when it came to the future of Lady Cressida Vane. Did the man drink heavily? Wager unreasonably? Have mistresses? Possess a sharp tongue and sharper temper?

Someone would know.

Edmund tapped his chin as he pondered all ton men with a reformist bent. After discarding several known for indiscretion, he wrote down one name.

Lord Neville Carlisle.

His stomach fluttered. There was something altogether unnerving about the outspoken baron. Carlisle was assured, confident, and somehow grew more handsome as he aged. Even stranger among the ton: he openly adored his beautiful young wife, she openly adored him in return, and they completely ignored rebukes over their lack of children. Rumor said they even refused separate rooms—not for convenience, but because they enjoyed sleeping together!

What would that be like? Did they begin their day with sweet kisses and rough fucking? No doubt Carlisle made use of that agile tongue; his baroness would probably suffocate him with her magnificent breasts if he failed to pleasure her...

Edmund sucked in an unsteady breath at the shockingly erotic thought. Even his dormant cock had stirred. But he didn't have time to imagine the Carlises' bedchamber antics, not when he needed information on Sir Kenneth Lochore.

He glanced down at his ornate pocket watch. Three-thirty. If he recalled correctly,

there was a tea house near Whitehall where reformers often met.

It was time to find himself a baron.

As he stirred two sugar cubes into his cup of steaming hot tea, Neville sighed and stared out the shop window at the rain-soaked street.

Everyone had called 1816 the year without a summer, but 1817 was no better. Just endless bloody rain, which was exceedingly unhelpful for a man trying to change hearts and minds. When people were suffering and exhausted, they narrowed their thoughts to basic survival. Food. Shelter. Clothing. Hope tended to fall by the wayside, and without hope, it was difficult to see a better tomorrow...or take steps toward it.

Thank God for Arabella. Because of his beloved wife's unwavering support and funds , he'd made countless speeches all over Greater London, started petitions, and organized meetings. More importantly, he'd been able to donate money to several parish schools. Education was key. Education was power . The boys and girls of today who could read and write and count, who were given the opportunity to explore the world through nature and art, inventions and languages, could join together and be the leaders of tomorrow. Hopefully, leaders who could vote and vastly improve a system currently designed to hold them down, not raise them up.

Neville sighed again and took a gulp of his beverage, almost moaning as it warmed his insides. Although in fairness, tea would never replace his favorite heat: that created when riding crop or palm firmly met his arse. Arabella had disciplined him thoroughly this morning, and even now the form fit of his trousers gently tormented his flesh, enough that he'd chosen not to sit at one of the many tables in the busy tea house. Instead, he was leaning on the elbow-height wooden bench that stretched the entire length of the shop front window, surrounded by piles of liberal newspapers, pamphlets, and books.

Yet every so often he moved his hips, just for the delicious reminder of his wife's enduring affections. Ten years! Ten glorious years he had belonged body and soul to Ara, and he'd probably been humming tunes all day at the prospect of tonight's outing. In mere hours, he would be sucking cock. Perhaps fucking arse. Even being sucked and fucked himself as his wife commanded.

God, he loved her, even if perhaps she wasn't as forthcoming with return words of love as he might wish. Ara instead tried to shower him with gifts, which he certainly didn't deserve and attempted to dissuade her from. But overall, Arabella was his one true mate: a beautiful dominant woman who shared his values, also had no desire whatsoever for children, and reveled in their sexual play. They were living their dream life. Even if it did rain relentlessly.

"Lord Carlisle? Might I have a word?"

Startled at the clipped, cold, yet vaguely familiar voice behind him, Neville slowly turned around.

Bloody hell.

The Duke of Stanforth? In a tea house for reformers?

He was actually shocked. As were the other patrons; everyone around them was staring at the duke with the kind of wild, bulging eyes usually reserved for nudity in Hyde Park.

"Your Grace," Neville managed at last, delving deep for the effortless charm he allegedly possessed. "Forgive me, I wasn't expecting to see you here. How may I assist? As the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse aren't galloping past, I'm presuming you're not joining the cause."

Wait. Had the duke's lips twitched? Had he almost smiled ?

Good God. Perhaps the Horsemen were on their way. Every Duke of Stanforth had been exceedingly high in the instep, but this one's glacial manner and rigid adherence to tradition and protocol made him rather frightening. Which was a damned shame because he was gloriously attractive. Thick brown hair with a little silver at the temples, intriguing hazel eyes with gold flecks, tall, broad-shouldered, and the thighs of an expert rider. On more than a few occasions when Stanforth had addressed the House in his relentlessly cool, calm tone, Neville had imagined hiding under the lectern, opening the duke's trouser fall, and sucking his cock. Would that tone change? Even a little?

"Alas not. We have different beliefs," said Stanforth, his gaze darting around assessingly, as though confirming all possible exits. Could the duke actually be unsettled?

An imp of mischief overtook Neville. "Really? Are you pro-slavery?"

"Of course not," snapped the duke. "It's abhorrent."

"Then you think workers are disposable? They should be dismissed without cause or not paid?"

Stanforth glared at him. "It is my experience that people who are properly compensated and treated fairly are loyal, discreet, and industrious. An easy decision."

"Ah," said Neville mock-solemnly. "So you believe that only the ideas and policies of wealthy noblemen matter, as they are the cleverest and most just."

"Obviously that isn't true. Plenty of exceptional and interesting minds aren't nobility. Humphry Davy. Edward Jenner. Charles Babbage. Coleridge and Wordsworth. John

Soane. The late Miss Austen. Mrs. Fry.”

Neville grinned at the reprimand. “Your Grace, I say this with all due respect...but you may, in fact, be a reformer.”

Stanforth drew back, a comical expression of horror on his face. “I beg your pardon?” he said icily.

“There, there,” said Neville, unable to suppress a hearty laugh. “Your dirty secret is safe with me.”

Even more unexpectedly, something flashed in the duke’s hazel eyes that appeared a lot like yearning. A deep, aching desire completely unrelated to politics. But how could that be? Stanforth had it all. When he spoke, everyone listened. And no one threw rotten fruit.

Utterly intrigued at a possible hidden contradiction, Neville deliberately eased the oddly erotic tension by taking a sip of tea. “Forgive me, Stanforth, I’m in a merry mood today. I shan’t tease you further.”

“Merry about what?” asked the duke abruptly, tilting his head.

“Ten years of wedded bliss to my beloved baroness,” Neville replied.

“Then the rumors are correct. You truly are happy,” said Stanforth, looking both baffled and... envious ?

“Quite,” said Neville, his mind whirling at yet another astonishing contradiction. How could a man like Stanforth be lonely? “Your Grace, are you well? For I’m quite certain you didn’t invade a reformer tea house just to offer congratulations.”

The duke closed his eyes briefly as though gathering strength. Then he took a deep breath. “I wondered if you were free to discuss a delicate matter. My daughter, Lady Cressida, has approached me about a betrothal to someone of your sort, and I need to know everything about him.”

Now bemused, Neville quirked a brow. “My sort ? I’m afraid you’ll have to be more specific. That covers a multitude of sins, does it not?”

Stanforth actually flushed, and Neville felt a moment of pure alarm. The end of the world could not happen today.

“That was poorly phrased,” the duke gritted out. “I mean no offense. To be blunt, Cressida’s heart is set on Sir Kenneth Lochore. If you had the time and inclination to discuss his character, I would be in your debt.”

Neville blinked. Although he knew Stanforth had two children, no one had ever declared him a doting papa. Yet he was actually willing to entertain a love match for his daughter? To someone well outside his lofty circle? How very interesting. It seemed this man possessed many, many layers. “Of course. Although not today, I’m afraid. Lady Carlisle is expecting me home for an early supper, then we have evening plans at Sanctuary.”

The duke frowned. “Sanctuary? That name is vaguely familiar. Is it a theater? A restaurant? Somewhere for wagering, perhaps?”

Surely it was the devil himself that made Neville lean closer. Stanforth smelled so good, like shaving soap and fresh herbs and warm skin. Inhaling until his head swam, he blurted rashly, “It’s a private pleasure club on the corner of George and Manchester Streets, Your Grace. For those who have, hmmm, less conservative tastes and enjoy indulging in wicked play with others. You know. Discipline. Use of accessories and costumes. Voyeurism. Exhibitionism. Threesomes.”

Stanforth rocked on his heels, his cheeks now bright red. And yet once again pure yearning flashed in his eyes, like someone with empty pockets peering in the window of a sweet shop. Well, well, well. Which of those sexual acts did the duke deny himself? What part of his true nature did he always suppress?

Reaching into his waistcoat pocket, Neville retrieved one of his engraved calling cards. “Here,” he said cautiously, holding it out. “Sanctuary is exceedingly discreet, all members are documented and thoroughly interrogated before gaining their club mask. However, if you present my card to the owner, Madam Venus, and say I vouch for you, you’ll gain entrance for one evening. See if the club is something you might enjoy. Oh, and all members are over twenty-one and consent to their choices. At Sanctuary, everyone gets exactly what they want.”

“I...er...ah...” mumbled Stanforth, but he actually took the card and stuffed it into his waistcoat pocket. “I won’t delay you further. My secretary will send a note regarding a time to discuss Lochore.”

“Very well—”

“Good day, Carlisle,” said the duke, his tone curt again, as though their entire conversation had not taken place. Then he turned and strode out of the tea house.

Neville shook his head and pushed aside his now-cold beverage, but he couldn’t help watching Stanforth climb into his luxurious town carriage. Perhaps one day the duke would make use of the calling card. He’d been tempted; Neville would wager every penny of Ara’s fortune on that. Especially as Stanforth gave a passing fair imitation of a man who hadn’t orgasmed in a while. Speaking of which...

Neville smiled as he picked up his hat and walking cane, offered a jaunty wave to the other tea house patrons, then sauntered out into the misty rain.

Madam Arabella and a playfellow at Sanctuary beckoned.

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CHAPTER 2

Sanctuary! At last!

Neville stepped out of the club's complimentary black hackney, then held out his hand to assist Arabella down onto the footpath illuminated by two large lanterns at the nondescript entrance.

At this point he could scarcely contain his excitement. And although Arabella was a far more pragmatic soul than him, it was clear by the sparkle in her beautiful blue eyes that even she was eager for their night to begin.

"Here we are," said Neville, as he ushered her into the building. As usual, they were greeted by what appeared to be a busy and prosperous modiste: rows and rows of gowns waiting to be boxed and sent, countless bolts of fabric, trims in a glass case, and a large, well-lit room of six seemingly industrious seamstresses. This was the mask to deter the law, gossips, and nosy troublemakers; not a single gown was created here. The 'seamstresses' were all Sanctuary maids who took turns in the seats amongst their other duties within the club.

Sanctuary itself was spread across four fairly modern three-story red-brick townhouses on Manchester Street that had been significantly reconfigured and refurbished since their construction in the 1770s. From the false shop, novices were directed to the left—and their final trial of a truly diabolical but thankfully short underground cellar maze—while current members like himself and Arabella continued down a hallway to the right.

“You’re thinking about the maze of doom, aren’t you?” said Arabella, her grin knowing.

“It will haunt me for eternity. I know it only takes a few minutes, but it feels like hours of walking bare stone tunnels and all you can hear is your breathing and the echo of your shoes. I was ready to claw the walls,” he replied with great dignity.

His wife laughed. “Madam Venus knows how to separate the wheat from the chaff. Fortunately, it’s only the first time that people get directed left. In saying that, I honestly don’t know what her seamstresses would do if someone actually arrived to be measured for a new gown.”

“Could you imagine,” said Neville, chuckling as they approached the reception area. It was elegant yet tranquil with cream silk walls, brown leather couches, thick carpets, and tasteful oil paintings hanging in gilt frames. Heavy cream velvet drapes covered the windows, the room had a softly welcoming glow from beeswax candles in polished silver candelabras, and the well-tended fireplace kept the room pleasantly warm.

They were greeted deferentially by an attendant who then swiftly departed to fetch Madam Venus.

Arabella hesitated. “Oh, I forgot to ask. Did you have any preferences for tonight’s playfellow?”

A tall, hazel-eyed duke .

Neville cleared his throat as he swallowed down the foolish words. The likelihood of Stanforth keeping the card was small enough, but attending tonight? Ha. “You know how partial I am to brawny submissives. The kind who look like they could snap a body in half but kneel so demurely and beg to suck cock. Or perhaps a very proper

gentleman who swoons at the sight of your perfect breasts and can only be revived by an emergency dose of pussy nectar.”

Arabella laughed, not a delicate titter, but the full-blooded, full-bellied sound he cherished. “Ten years you have entertained me with such wordplay and I shall never grow tired of it. Either of those options sounds delicious. As it has been six months since our last visit, there might be quite a few new candidates to consider.”

God willing, a tall, hazel-eyed duke .

Neville tossed his head, annoyed at himself for yet another thought about Stanforth. He needed to remain in reality, not indulge in whimsy. “I cannot wait to find out who might be available...ah, here she is, the Empress of Eros herself. Good evening, Madam Venus,” he finished cheerfully.

The smiling owner of Sanctuary strolled toward them, an exquisitely dressed, bejeweled, and lithe blond woman of about fifty years. Just like Arabella, Venus’s father had been a successful merchant, although she’d married a retired soldier rather than a lord. Also just like Arabella, Venus ruled her domain with an iron fist in a satin glove.

“My dears!” said Madam Venus, kissing them both on the cheek. “It’s been far too long. Zachariah sends his love, but he is currently occupied in removing a broken bed. I have repeatedly told a certain group of ladies no more than five soldiers at a time, but they will persist in playing their favorite game: Seven is Heaven. What a damned bother.”

Arabella snorted. “It wouldn’t matter if you etched it on their foreheads, Vee. Not even Wellington could halt a pack of dowagers who have done their duty and are now able to fuck someone they actually want.”

“Very true,” said Madam Venus as she ushered them into her spacious and well-appointed office. “Now onto far more important matters...happy anniversary! Ten years have simply flown by.”

“They have,” agreed Ara, sinking gracefully into a butter-soft leather armchair. “The ten happiest years of my life.”

Neville squeezed his wife’s hand as he also sat down. “I concur. And I can’t think of anywhere we’d rather be than here at Sanctuary to celebrate. What delectable fare do you have available for us tonight?”

Surprisingly, Madam Venus hesitated, leaning back in her chair and tapping her fingernails on her carved oak desk. “I have several scrumptious playfellow options. However, before I make introductions, I wanted to put forward a different possibility. Something you’ve not tried before.”

“Oh?” said Arabella, her expression turning intently curious. “And what might that be?”

“I’ve just concluded an interview with a mature but inexperienced gentleman who has known only a coldly dutiful marriage bed. He expressed a strong interest in watching a loving married couple who enjoy fucking, perhaps taking part if invited to do so. While he does not wish to put his cock in a cunt, this gentleman is amenable to using his tongue or fingers as instructed. Also, he’s never been touched intimately by another man, but I believe he just might be a little curious. So you would essentially be initiating a beginner. A green tunic.”

Neville’s heart began to pound. No. Surely not.

Could Stanforth possibly be the mystery beginner?

“Is there anything else you can tell us about this novice?” asked Neville urgently.

Madam Venus smiled. “His nickname is Charlie. He’s tall, broad-shouldered, skittish as a mistreated colt and will need plenty of praise and encouragement. A man of position and great responsibility. But as you both know, sometimes men who hold the most power in the world wish for a little respite. To have someone else make decisions. To be forced to their knees in the bedchamber.”

Arabella sat forward, licking her lips. “He’s a powerful submissive? I would be his first owner?”

“I suspect he is,” said Madam Venus slowly. “Truthfully, I doubt Charlie has ever had the opportunity to explore his own desires. In the absence of love, of safety, of fucking just for pleasure, it is hard to identify one’s true sexual self. How could Charlie know how desperate he is to be commanded? But eyes are the window to the soul, and he yearns . Reminds me of a certain baron.”

His wife made a sound of raw lust. Neville was already pressing his thighs together in a futile effort to ease the constriction of his trousers. Charlie was Stanforth, he could feel it in his bones. And just the thought of initiating the duke, of pleasuring Ara in front of him, showing him how to worship her properly...then touching him as he obeyed...perhaps even slowly, gently fucking Stanforth’s virgin arse...

Neville sucked in an uneven breath. “What do you think, Ara?”

“Yes,” said Arabella decisively. “Nev and I will give poor Charlie the best night of his life thus far.”

Madam Venus grinned. “Excellent. You have the diamond chamber, of course. Charlie is currently being bathed and prepared; once you’re changed and ready, meet me in the ballroom and I’ll introduce him to Gage and Laurel.”

In his fervent anticipation, Neville had almost forgotten about his nickname. While he loved the way Arabella purred or growled “Nev”, he’d always struggled with his dull given names of Neville Gage. To him, neither sounded sensual or strong—he was quite content to be called Carlisle. But at least Gage was easy to remember, as was Laurel for his wife.

A quarter hour later, Neville and Arabella had completed their mandatory sponge bath and were wearing their club-issued, knee-length tunics, fashioned of gold satin. He loved wearing satin, the way it felt so cool and decadent against his skin. Now just one task remained: helping each other with the black cloth caps that entirely covered their hair, and the close-fitting black satin demi masks that concealed all but their mouth and jaw.

Arabella slid her hand under his tunic and briefly gripped his still-tender arse, her fingernails lightly scraping his skin. “I could just eat you all up. You know how wet it makes me, seeing you ready to play.”

Neville’s mouth watered. He would never get enough of his wife’s heavenly pussy. “Fortunately you’ll have two tongues this evening. But before we go...I must tell you this. I think I know who Charlie really is. You know how I told you at supper that a certain duke approached me at the tea house for information about Sir Kenneth Lochore? I gave him my card. And told him to use it here. If his eyes are hazel with gold flecks...”

Arabella gasped. Then shivered. “Oh God. The things I’m going to do to him. But let’s not keep our novice waiting. Come along, my darling.”

He grinned. “As you command, madam.”

“How are you feeling, Charlie?”

Edmund forced a smile at Madam Venus's soft enquiry. Reeling was a word. Floundering. Anxious. Vulnerable.

Opening one's heart and baring one's soul were simply not actions a Vane undertook. Ever. And yet earlier he'd permitted this kind yet brisk woman to subject him to the most painfully intensive interrogation of his life: ruthlessly removing his armor of title and power, probing old wounds and scars...and uncovering desires he didn't even realize he possessed.

Now he was breaking the most strident Vane rule of unfailing propriety; standing in the middle of a spacious yet crowded ballroom wearing a mask, hair covering, and a goddamned green satin tunic that barely reached mid-thigh. Waiting for a couple that he prayed would be Neville and Arabella Carlisle, so he could watch them fuck.

It was enough to give anyone palpitations.

"Well enough," he answered politely, glancing about the ballroom for the hundredth time, trying in vain to locate his potential evening companions.

Naturally he couldn't request the Carlises by name, but he'd tried to be specific. Loving married couple. A woman with bountiful curves. Experienced. A charming, well-spoken man. However, there were so many people here, and with the masks and tunics, it was almost impossible to tell who they were. No matter their rank in society outside these walls, everyone was equal and anonymous in their quest for pleasure.

What if another couple strolled up? He'd not thought this through at all.

He'd not thought any of this through, from accepting Carlisle's card to loitering outside for a solid twenty minutes, to stumbling through that godawful underground maze. Once again, was he the creator of his own downfall?

Edmund gulped, firmly resisting the urge to flee. Clearly, only he felt like this. Everyone else in the ballroom seemed so damned happy . Some were sipping brandy or wine or selecting bite-sized treats from the lavish buffet table. Others were being introduced to a prospective lover or lovers and the chatter was deafening, although not as loud as the cheers and applause from one corner where a small crowd watched exhibitionists through a glass window.

While there were two others wearing green tunics, both had already been claimed. In truth, if Madam Venus wasn't standing beside him, he might have leaped out the nearest window and sprinted all the way back to St. James's Square. The unknown was bloody terrifying. Would they think him a fool? Disdain his lack of knowledge and experience? Wonder which affliction kept him living like a bloody monk instead of enjoying a string of mistresses?

Damnation. He couldn't do it. This impulsive idea was the worst in the history of the world.

About to inform Madam Venus he'd changed his mind, he instead swallowed the words as the woman waved and beckoned two masked people in gold tunics toward her. One was a tall and lean man, almost as tall as himself, but moving with a panther-like grace and confidence. The woman on his arm was petite and so voluptuous that her tunic strained against her breasts and backside and belly and upper thighs, a battle of clothing and flesh that hopefully would see her body the victor, for it was surely a crime to constrain such lushness.

It was the Carlises. God forgive him, he would recognize Lady Arabella Carlisle's figure blindfolded and in the dark. When the former Miss Ferndale had entered the marriage mart, every titled bachelor in the realm pursued her, and he'd envied them the freedom to do so. As he was a married man, the beautiful heiress had not even glanced his way, but it had been rather fascinating watching a procession of cocky senior peers approach her, so sure of success, only to be soundly rejected. Then

Arabella had caused a further storm by wedding Neville Carlisle, an older baron without ancient lineage, vast estates, or wealth, and Edmund had envied her as well, for even as a woman with so few legal rights, Arabella had been able to choose her spouse.

Madam Venus cleared her throat as the couple halted in front of them. “Good evening. Rather than me blathering on, why don’t you two introduce yourselves?”

Carlisle’s firm lips curved up in a warm smile as he bowed. His arms and legs were dusted with dark blond hair, his jaw revealed a hint of shadow, and even with a mask covering two-thirds of his face, those expressive chocolate-brown eyes missed nothing. “Good evening. I’m Gage, at your service, sir.”

Edmund bit his lip, his stomach fluttering at the smooth words with a hint of mischief. What service was he referring to? “G-Good evening,” he stuttered, before taking another breath for composure. “I’m...er...Charlie.”

“Charlie,” purred Arabella as she regally inclined her head rather than curtsying. All the while her vibrant blue eyes glittered in a bold, proprietary way that urged him to surrender and kneel. “What a fine figure of a man you are. So enticing. You may call me Madam Laurel.”

Edmund’s cheeks heated at the compliment and he was briefly grateful for the annoying mask. “Thank you.”

Her lips twitched. “Now, tell me, Charlie. How do you feel about plump ladies? My darling Gage willingly puts himself at risk of suffocation between my breasts or perhaps being crushed by my thighs when he worships my greedy pussy. Are you as brave as he?”

A strangled gasp tore from his throat at the blunt, explicit words. And yet now that

Arabella had said them, he could actually see himself sucking her nipples as she firmly held his head in place. Or, oh Christ, being restrained, forced to lick her pussy clean under threat of punishment if he didn't gather every drop of honey with his tongue...

Edmund shuddered, his fists clenching as he tried desperately to calm his raging arousal. What the hell was happening? He'd never considered submitting to a woman, and hadn't been physically punished since receiving the cane at Eton. Yet somehow imagining the two together made blood rush straight to his cock.

Oh no. He was harder than stone. Tenting his damned tunic in front of everyone. And he couldn't disguise it.

Mortified, Edmund stared at his feet. "I...er..."

"Fuck, I'm hard," said Carlisle abruptly. "Madam Laurel, I am begging you to take us to the diamond chamber or I'm going to come like a geyser in the middle of this ballroom."

Edmund's head shot up to look straight into the other man's twinkling eyes...then he glanced back down at Carlisle's groin. It was true! The baron's cock also jutted against his tunic! But even more shocking; Carlisle was completely unbothered. Perhaps...perhaps becoming aroused so swiftly wasn't a humiliating failure?

Arabella turned to her husband. "You're so naughty, trying to provoke me into spanking you. I suspect our new friend Charlie here might also be rather wicked."

Madam Venus, who had been silently observing their interplay, chuckled. "I suspect you three are going to get along famously. I'll leave you to become better acquainted. The diamond chamber is ready when you are."

And with that, Sanctuary's owner strolled away to another small group.

"So," said Arabella airily. "I think we should retire to our room immediately, don't you?"

"An excellent idea," said Carlisle. "You're going to leave Sanctuary a new man, Charlie."

All Edmund could do was nod as he followed the couple across the ballroom, through a set of double doors guarded by two burly footmen, and down a long, carpeted hallway. It actually resembled any wealthy home; plenty of beeswax candles to light the way, embossed paper on the walls, velvet drapes, a few Constable landscapes and even a bust of King George. Yet he couldn't appreciate any of it. Not when his mind was spinning.

He was desperately curious about submission. The Carlisle marriage. Sexual discipline. Bedding purely for pleasure not procreation and speaking freely of desires. Yet while all that seemed a giant step forward in the quest to find his true self, one aspect still held him back: not wanting to wear a tunic, mask, and hair covering. Or be Charlie. He wanted this fantasy to be real. For Edmund to be experiencing this whole new world with Neville and Arabella, not Gage and Laurel.

When they finally reached the last door at the end of the hallway, a smiling maid bobbed a curtsy, then handed over a brass key to Arabella before quickly departing.

The baroness smiled as she unlocked the door and held it open. "The diamond chamber. Prepare to be impressed, Charlie."

Her husband started to walk into the room, until Edmund blurted, "Wait."

Both Carlises froze.

“Yes?” said Arabella, her tone cautious.

How the hell did he say this without sounding like a madman? Or a milksop? Madam Venus had made it very plain that her club’s rules were sacrosanct, and here he was about to request the breaking of a key one: anonymity.

“I want this very much,” Edmund began carefully. “But—”

“It is completely understandable to feel anxious,” said Arabella, her gaze softening as she reached out and touched his arm. “We were a bundle of nerves our first time.”

“Absolutely,” added Carlisle. “I couldn’t even stand still. I was hopping from one foot to the other like a demented rabbit.”

“It’s not that,” said Edmund, lowering his voice to a whisper. “I want...I want to break a rule.”

Arabella’s eyes widened. “We’ll discuss inside,” she said firmly.

He gulped. It was now or never.

Stanforth, the first-night novice at Sanctuary, wanted to break a rule? In the presence of Madam Arabella?

The audacity .

Arabella pressed her lips together in annoyance as she guided the errant duke into the well-lit and pleasantly warm diamond chamber; around London’s largest bed made up with linen so soft it would be like gliding on water, past the huge, diamond-studded rectangular mirrors offering views from all angles, and away from the huge embroidered screen that divided off a corner of the room for bathing or ablutions.

Instead, she settled herself into a leather armchair beside the smoldering fireplace and gestured for Stanforth to stand before her so he might make his case. Neville curled up on the adjacent chaise like a lazy house cat, but his gaze was watchful.

“So,” she said crisply, trying not to notice how broad the duke’s shoulders were, how firm and muscled his thighs, the objective loveliness of his gold-flecked hazel eyes, or that he had the kind of slightly fuller bottom lip that urged a lady to bite it. “You wish to break a rule, Charlie? I will say, I am usually very much against this, but I am curious which rule you deem so unimportant. Do explain.”

The duke visibly swallowed, then endearingly tugged on the ends of his short green tunic like he was trying to cover more of his thighs, a rather futile exercise. “I know this goes against Sanctuary’s much-vaunted anonymity. I thought I could manage the false name and the mask and the hair covering, but as it turns out, no matter how far I run to escape myself, I cannot. I’m a forty-year-old man who has bedded one woman and gained no pleasure from it, for my marriage was a forced mismatch and very unhappy. I’ve never taken a mistress, for I didn’t want further bedchamber transactions. I feel like I’m standing on a clifftop with two excellent teachers, waiting to learn how to soar, but I can’t do that as Charlie. I want to be me. And you to be you.”

Nev snapped to attention on the chaise. “Then you know who we are,” he said thoughtfully.

“Yes,” said Stanforth quietly. “I guided Madam Venus with as much detail as I could, because I didn’t want to embark on this journey with complete strangers. But I think you also know who I am. So what I’m asking is...if tonight could be real. If you aren’t comfortable with my request, and that is completely understandable, I’ll leave immediately so you might continue to enjoy your evening.”

Arabella blinked, stunned to the core. Of all the rules that she had supposed a

wealthy, extremely powerful duke might want to break, that was literally the last one. And the aching loneliness in Stanforth's voice when he'd spoken of his past!

She shifted restlessly on the armchair. Initiating a novice was an erotic fantasy she didn't even know she wanted until Vee had put forth the idea. And it was arousing beyond measure. But this man, this duke, was already tugging at her heartstrings, a thoroughly unwanted concern and tenderness well beyond merely wanting to command his body in bed. And that was bloody terrifying.

In saying that, though, if everyone already knew everyone, why bother with the masks and hair covers? When it came to fucking, they were an annoyance. And it was naturally easier to be Arabella rather than Laurel. Would it really be so bad if they broke this particular rule in this private, locked room? No one need ever know. And it was only for one night, after all.

Arabella rose slowly to her feet and approached the duke. When she stood directly in front of him, she placed her hand in the center of his chest, allowing her fingertips to brush his flat male nipples through the satin of his tunic, making him groan. A swift glance down confirmed that indeed, that rather splendid erection still very much wished to play.

"Very well," she said briskly. "I will permit the removal of masks and hair coverings this evening. And the use of real names. But understand one thing, Your Grace ...if you remain in this chamber, you will belong to me the entire time, following my every command just as my husband does. If you are truly ready to experience the erotic freedom in submitting to a woman, then say yes. I will move slowly...but I'll not be gentle."

The duke moaned softly, his heartbeat becoming slightly erratic under her palm. "Yes," he said hoarsely. "Oh yes."

Arabella smiled inwardly. Even now, her prospective pet was angling his shoulders a little so she might caress him further. Stanforth was clearly touch-starved, something that would shortly be remedied.

“Yes, ma’am,” she ordered. “If you follow my instructions and demonstrate proper respect, you’ll find I’m very generous toward lovers who please me.”

“Orgasms beyond your wildest dreams, Your Grace,” said Neville as he lounged back on the chaise and casually caressed his hard shaft through the gold satin. “My cock hurts at the thought of what we’re going to teach you. How you’re going to come and come.”

Stanforth shuddered and began to pant. “I...er...”

“It’s very simple,” said Arabella as she trailed her fingers down until they rested just above the duke’s rearing cock. “All you have to say is ‘please, ma’am, remove my mask and hair cover’ and we may begin your first lesson in sexual obedience.”

She actually held her breath waiting for his reply; even Neville had tensed on the chaise. Never had an answer been so important. With every fiber of her being she wanted to initiate this man to pleasure, to wreck him with orgasms and leave him sore and satiated and forever changed by his meeting with Arabella Carlisle at Sanctuary.

At last, Stanforth met her gaze, and she was struck by two thoughts: the honest vulnerability in his eyes, something utterly startling for a duke so used to power and control in a world constructed entirely for men. But far sweeter than that, his submission.

“Please, ma’am, remove my mask and hair cover,” he said quietly but clearly. Then the duke bent down so she wouldn’t have to go up onto her toes.

Pleased at the thoughtful gesture—only Nev had ever instinctively considered her comfort before his own—Arabella rewarded Stanforth by trailing her fingertips along his swollen cock and briefly squeezing the end, making him gasp.

God, she burned to dominate and discipline the duke. To own him. To have him beg to please her. To be the first woman who left him senseless with pleasure. But she and Nev needed to move slowly, a gradual introduction to the world they knew so well.

Reaching up, she carefully removed his hair cover, revealing thick brown hair, cut military-short at the back and sides. Then she removed his mask.

“There you are, Stanforth,” Arabella said, smiling as she cupped his face and gently rubbed her thumbs across his cheekbones. “Indeed, it would have been a dreadful shame to hide such an attractive face. Nev, I’ll attend to your hair cover and mask, and you’ll remove mine.”

In no time at all, all three were ready, although Arabella did take another moment to smack her husband’s thigh for playing with his fully erect cock without permission.

“What next, Madam?” asked Nev, his glittering gaze an agonized plea for sexual relief as he waited on the chaise.

Only Nev understood her cruelty as she leaned down and kissed him softly, sweetly, before turning back to Stanforth. “Now, Your Grace. How much you wish to learn is entirely up to you. There’ll be no pregnancy risks whatsoever, but this is a one night only offer. From you I want to hear every moan, every gasp, every roar. And you will inform me immediately if you are unsure or unwilling; our play can stop or move in a different direction at any time. Do you understand?”

Stanforth smiled shyly, his shoulders relaxing. “Yes, ma’am.”

Oh God. There he was again, making her feel something. The duke was not another Neville to pet and cosset. He was an attractive man to use for her pleasure. That was all.

Irritated at her lapse, Arabella met Stanforth's gaze. "Then let us begin. Take off your tunic."

He actually hesitated. "Er..."

"Do you want me to go first?" asked Nev, already reaching for the hem of his gold tunic.

"No!" said Stanforth quickly. "I mean...well..."

Arabella raised one eyebrow. "You cannot tell me, having attended Cambridge, that you've never seen another man's naked body, Your Grace."

The duke's shoulders slumped a little. "I have. But I never joined in when the lads got rowdy. A Vane does not indulge in frivolity."

She inhaled slowly, fiercely resisting the urge to take the man in her arms and stroke his hair. Bloody aristocratic parents and their bloody awful ways of raising sons. Coming from a warm and loving home, Arabella had been shocked to discover how touch-starved, how coldly indifferent, Nev's upbringing had been. He'd needed a great deal of care, and it seemed Stanforth required the same. To learn how to cherish his body and be proud of it.

"Nev darling," said Arabella slowly. "Please take off your tunic. I wish Stanforth to see your delectable figure. To admire it. To know that it will please me to show off his own."

Her husband nodded, tugging off the gold garment and tossing it onto the chaise, preening in the guise of stretching as he revealed his lean, elegant form. His long cock. And that sensational backside.

Stanforth paused, openly staring. And then, in one quick, awkward movement, he removed his own tunic.

Arabella licked her lips. Two exceedingly handsome, naked men. Both hers to command.

Exactly how she liked it.

CHAPTER 3

“We eagerly await your commands, Madam Arabella,” said Nev, his eyes twinkling with mischief and excitement as his gaze flicked between her and the very naked duke.

Oh God. They were both exceedingly handsome, but one man brimming with charm and confidence, the other a society iceberg melting in the warmth of sexual attention and choice, was like being presented with an entire dessert buffet. She wanted everything. Immediately. Which was rather unnerving for a woman who prided herself on control.

Being at Sanctuary always made her feel dangerously wild and wanton—perhaps another reason why she restricted their visits. Yet tonight, her fierce lust seemed limitless. There was no way even darling Neville and his magnificent tongue could calm such a tempest by himself; he would need the help of their nervous novice who was clearly aching to begin.

A fact that only made her wetter.

In truth, Arabella needed a moment to regather her thoughts, to be the stern and calm mistress they both needed, not a giddy girl.

“Stand together in front of the fireplace,” she said abruptly. “Do not move. And do not dare touch yourselves. I am going to check everything is in place for our play.”

Nev looked slightly startled at that; he knew as well as she that Sanctuary’s

preparation was always impeccable—extremely well-heeled patrons would accept nothing less. But she regally ignored him and instead strolled over to examine a neat row of trestle tables against one wall. Each table was covered in a crisp white linen cloth and illuminated by a single diamond-studded candelabra.

The first offered bottles of brandy, champagne, whisky, port, fruit punch, and lemonade, plus crystal tumblers and glasses. The second presented an array of the most exquisite sweets imaginable: pastries, cakes, fruit tarts, meringues, syllabub with whipped cream, chilled buckets of pineapple, chocolate cream, and brown bread ices from Gunter's, and various dishes of lemon drops, marzipan, caramels, and peppermint sticks. But the third table made her smile the most: a generous selection of new sexual accessories including dildos of various sizes, cock rings, nipple clamps, a riding crop, a flogger, a long, tapered feather, satin-lined shackles, silk scarves, and a full glass bottle of pale gold oil.

Superb, of course. Everything required for a wonderful night's play, with no expense spared. As Nev very disobediently restricted the gifts she could buy him to small items like dildos or perhaps new shoes or decent brandy, she was forced to be more creative—some might say cunning—in her spending. Hiring Sanctuary's very best room was one way of expressing love, just as she donated lavishly to his favorite causes.

But she couldn't delay their play for a moment longer, no matter what wild lusts or unprecedented emotions were swirling in her mind.

Arabella turned around and smiled at her husband and prospective lover. "Why don't you both come over here? Nev, darling, would you undress me? Slowly now, so Stanforth gets a premium view."

Nev near-flew across the chamber to assist. The gold tunics had been specially designed not to disturb masks or hair covering, so fastened with cords at the shoulder

and waist. As soon as her husband loosened the ties, the satin garment fell to the floor and she stepped delicately out of it. Immediately, two sets of eyes seared her flesh, and she allowed herself the vanity of a full body stretch, lifting her arms above her head and arching her back as she performed a slow turn, before strolling over to the bed in a way that made her ebony hair float around her shoulders, her wide hips sway, and breasts gently bounce.

“Christ,” breathed Stanforth.

“I know,” said Nev reverently. “Hands down the most beautiful woman in England. Probably Europe as well.”

Her lips twitching at the lavish compliments, Arabella caressed her dimpled backside, briefly parting her nether cheeks to tease them with a glimpse of her anus.

Both men groaned.

Satisfied she was driving them quite mad, Arabella then climbed up onto the end of the enormous bed and kneeled, putting her hands on her hips so they had an unobstructed view of her jewel-hard, dark pink nipples ready to be sucked, and her wet, musky-scented pussy.

God, the hunger in their gazes. The sheer, blatant need.

And she owned them both.

But with great power came great responsibility; a skilled and experienced dominant woman always ensured her submissives were as fulfilled as she was.

“Nev,” said Arabella, beckoning him over. “Come closer.”

With the bed beneath her knees, they were almost the same height, and she cupped her husband's face and kissed him deeply, before running greedy hands over his shoulders, his back and hips. Then, she dragged her fingernails over the flesh of his delectable arse, making Nev moan.

"I love you, Ara," he gasped. "Please. More."

Arabella glanced at Stanforth. Once again, the duke was standing with his hands rigidly at his sides, as though he was afraid of what they might do. And his eyes. Twin pools of hazel yearning. "I see you appreciate my husband's perfect arse as much as I do, Your Grace. But what do you see on that creamy canvas?"

Stanforth swallowed hard. "You made the letter A."

"Yes I did," purred Arabella. "Because Neville Carlisle is mine. My cherished pet...my goodness, do you know how hard Nev gets when I claim him so? Turn around, darling. Show Stanforth how close you are to coming."

Nev made a guttural sound as he obediently turned, his seed-damp cock bobbing against his abdomen. "So close," he whispered.

Arabella wrapped her arms around him from behind, threading her fingers through his chest hair, lightly scratching him before pinching his nipples. Nev shuddered, but he was far too experienced to buck. She rewarded his forbearance with kisses to his shoulder and a sharp nip to the neck, right where he liked it. "I enjoy teasing my husband. And marking him, as you can probably tell," she laughed. "Would you like to be marked, Stanforth?"

"Please," the duke said hoarsely.

After kissing Nev again, a rough, raw kiss that bruised his lips and left them a little

swollen, she directed her husband to stand to one side, and beckoned Stanforth toward her. The duke was trembling slightly, but it was hard to know whether it was anxiety or arousal. Perhaps it was both, for his cock was so swollen, the head was a reddish-purple color. Poor man. Perhaps she should show mercy. It was his first time after all.

Cupping Stanforth's face, Arabella lightly massaged his temples and ran her fingers through his hair. Almost instantly, the duke closed his eyes and sighed softly. Damnation. The man might even be more touch-starved than Nev, and that was saying something.

Moving one hand, Arabella closed her fingers around the back of Stanforth's neck, holding him firmly in place. Then she kissed him softly, rubbing her lips against his over and over until he relaxed. Bloody hell, the duke might as well be a virgin!

She pressed her thighs together, a rather futile effort to ease the incessant throb of her clitoris. Between marking Nev and initiating Stanforth, her pussy couldn't be any needier.

"Open your mouth for my tongue," Arabella commanded. "But your hands stay by your sides...you too, Nev, don't you dare touch yourself while you watch us."

"Yes, ma'am," grumbled Nev, having the temerity to pout.

Clearly, he needed another spanking; this morning's efforts had not sufficiently quelled his disobedient streak. But making him wait and wait to come was a punishment in itself, so she looked back at Stanforth. The duke's cheeks were a little flushed, his temples glistening with perspiration, so she leaned forward and licked his lips before darting her tongue into his mouth. Slowly, skillfully, Arabella teased him until his tongue tentatively began pushing back, and soon they were tangling together.

Somehow, Arabella managed to stifle her moan. This duke might well become as good as Nev at kissing. “Now, Your Grace,” she murmured unsteadily. “Where shall I mark you?”

“On my arse. Same as Carlisle,” Stanforth panted. “Could...could you do the letter A on me as well?”

Arabella hesitated. The rational, logical part of her said no, that was an honor reserved solely for Nev, the man who permanently belonged to her, not a one-night lover. Besides the fact that she’d already broken the anonymity rule, allowing the removal of all masks and hair covers. And yet...entirely unbidden, her free hand was already sliding down to Stanforth’s backside, her fingernails tapping on the firm, smooth flesh before scraping a palm-sized letter A.

Stanforth arched, moaning raggedly. “Forgive me, ma’am, I’m going to...I'm going to...”

In one smooth movement, Arabella took his thick cock in hand, ruthlessly squeezing and rubbing it. Then she nipped his lower lip. “Come,” she ordered harshly.

The duke orgasmed with a low roar, seed exploding from his cock with the violence of an erupting volcano, covering her fingers and wrist and his own belly.

“There now,” Arabella crooned, dusting his face with soft kisses as Stanforth slumped against her. “Isn’t that so much better?”

Yet when her gaze met Nev’s, for perhaps the first time in ten years, his face was unreadable.

Oh God. What had she done?

Something fundamental had changed.

Neville stared at the pair in front of him as he worked through the ramifications in his mind. His wife was a stern madam who never broke rules, especially in regard to playfellows, and she considered Sanctuary hallowed ground. Yet tonight, not only had Ara allowed it, she'd marked Stanforth's very fine arse with the letter A.

A claiming.

Ten years might have passed, but he still remembered the first time Ara had marked him. The joy, the relief of knowing he'd been chosen, that henceforth he would belong to her. Did Stanforth understand? Did Ara realize she had now claimed a second man? That rather than being a pair with occasional lovers, they would move forward as a trio? That remained to be seen.

As for himself...it was both surprising and remarkable that the emotions coursing through his veins were not sadness or jealousy or envy, but fierce arousal and pure elation. Even now he was anticipating the time that Stanforth embraced his own needs and desires, was properly cared for and disciplined...and crossed the final frontier of his journey: giving pleasure to, and receiving pleasure from, another man.

"Nev?" said Arabella, an underlying anxiety in her tone as she stroked a still-trembling Stanforth's hair.

His wife's concern was misplaced. It was right and proper that his fellow pet received post-orgasm care. Because Stanforth was the third they had been waiting for.

Neville took a deep breath. With each past playfellow, he'd wondered if they might be the one, that special man he would feel something other than mild lust for. A man to join him and Ara forever in a trio. Each time, he'd had an enjoyable romp, but nothing more. No desire to wrap his arms around the man and just hold him, to talk

about anything and everything. To teach him. Sleep with him.

However, with Stanforth...all Neville's instincts demanded he kiss the other man, imprint himself so completely that the duke finally comprehended who he was: a submissive who craved both women and men. But no. Tonight was slow and gentle. A beginning. The glimmers were there; already Neville had caught Stanforth's lingering gaze several times. The duke was curious. Very, very curious. And not at all averse to watching a naked man touch his cock. But he'd clearly never before had the opportunity to explore. And this was not something that could be rushed or forced, especially for someone so inexperienced sexually, and struggling with the ducal cage he'd been raised in.

Arabella was their queen and would command them both. But as a fellow submissive, it was up to Neville to support and coax Stanforth, to offer demonstrations of what could be. To show him that a lady, her lord, and their duke could very much be forever.

"Let me fetch you both some water," said Neville eventually.

Arabella nodded while a blushing Stanforth looked grateful.

Neville smiled to himself as he strode over to the fireplace and carefully ladled some hot water from the hanging iron bucket into a porcelain bowl waiting beside it. Sanctuary's staff had also helpfully left a small packet of dried herbs, so he carefully sprinkled them over the water, inhaling the fresh, clean scent of thyme and rosemary with an approving nod. After snatching up two clean washcloths and a hand towel, he returned to the bed.

"Thank you, my darling," said Arabella softly, bestowing a kiss to his forehead. But her gaze still held grave concern, and he certainly didn't want that.

“Allow me to wash your magical hands, ma’am,” he replied, before turning his head to Stanforth. “Help yourself to a washcloth, Your Grace. The water is hot, and it’s scented with herbs. Lovely and refreshing. By the by, it’s always good to get that first orgasm out of the way. Your second erection will last so much longer.”

“My second ?” asked the duke, looking startled. “After the first...I’m not sure I’ll recover.”

Arabella laughed as she held out her seed-splashed hands. “Oh, you’ll recover.”

Rather endearingly, Stanforth blushed harder.

Neville immediately took a washcloth and cleaned Arabella’s fingers, before patting them dry. He was actually appreciative of the mindless task, as it allowed time to further ponder Stanforth’s past. How bad, exactly, had the duke’s marriage been? And he’d never taken a mistress? On one hand it seemed unthinkable, and yet it explained so much of his virgin-like response to pleasure. He’d never come like that before.

Which only made it imperative that it happen again. The more Stanforth orgasmed outside a pussy and grew accustomed to the sensations, the easier it would be to train him. A man who had never experienced ecstasy in service of a beautiful dominant woman didn’t know what he was missing and wouldn’t strive for it. But a man who understood would become a man like Neville. Obedient yet provocative in the hope of discipline. Entirely, joyfully submissive.

God, he couldn’t wait for Stanforth to find that Utopia.

When Arabella and Stanforth were both clean, Arabella climbed off the bed and sauntered over to the refreshment table. “I need sustenance,” she said saucily. “And so will you both, for the game I have planned.”

Neville shivered at the promise. Years of experience with his wife, of being tormented for hours and repeatedly denied orgasm while being teased mercilessly, meant the play she had in mind would be spectacular. But with Stanforth involved as well, already so sweetly succumbing to need...it would be a true challenge for Neville to retain his well-honed sexual nerves of steel. For there was something supremely erotic in watching a very proper duke, unable to hide his response, being utterly undone by pleasure.

Neville hurried over to the refreshment table and poured Arabella a glass of champagne. Then he turned to the duke. "Brandy? Or something else?"

"I'd love a brandy," said Stanforth. "Looks a fine color."

"Only the best at Sanctuary," said Arabella, as she picked up a plate. "Nev? What will you have?"

His mouth watered at the selection. "All the pastries and fruit tarts you can spare. Also an extremely generous scoop of brown bread ice."

Arabella shook her head with a sly wink. "No ice yet, I'm afraid."

Neville blinked, then raised an inquiring eyebrow at his wife. When she gave him a brief nod, he almost moaned. Oh God. They were going to play Winter and Summer, his absolute favorite erotic game, involving Gunter's legendary ices and Arabella's even more legendary breasts.

After filling a plate for him, Arabella cut a large slice of heavy fruit cake and added several meringues for Stanforth, then selected a dish of lemon syllabub with whipped cream and several pastries for herself. Once they had temporarily sated their hunger and finished their glasses of champagne and brandy, Arabella directed them to leave their dishes on one end of the table, then beckoned them back to the bed.

Slowly, with the care and precision of a stage performer that understood every movement mattered, Arabella climbed onto the bed. Then she padded on hands and knees to the center, tormenting him and Stanforth with glimpses of her soaked pussy, her thick bush, and her swaying breasts as she stretched and flexed. Finally, she turned onto her back, settling herself on a pile of pillows like an empress waiting to receive her subjects, carefully arranging her hair so it didn't become trapped under her back.

Neville could only stare at such a portrait. Arabella was an erotic goddess and it was an actual miracle from the heavens that she had chosen him. Except then she offered further proof, bestowing a wicked smile and sliding a hand down between her heavy thighs, parting her bush to offer an unobstructed view of her glistening pink labia, before lightly, delicately circling her swollen clitoris.

“Ooooooh,” she moaned.

He bit his lip, swallowing down a desperate plea to be able to suck that bud until she screamed, to fuck her core with his tongue until she came all over his face. No. It was too soon. Despite the fact that his cock was so hard it could be used in battle, he had to wait.

Stanforth made a guttural sound, utterly transfixed at the sight. “I’ve...I’ve never seen anyone so beautiful. So sensual. Ever.”

Glancing down at the other man’s rapidly hardening cock, Neville hid a smile. Stanforth was certainly answering his own question about recovery. “I’m sure you are wondering, Your Grace, but I am living proof that a man will not, in fact, perish from needing a woman more than he needs to breathe.”

“How do you do it?” whispered the duke, his gaze actually admiring. “Obey and not lose your damned mind?”

Arabella laughed and spread her thighs a little wider apart. “My husband is exceedingly well trained, Your Grace. I should know, I trained him. But he has learned over time that with great patience and forbearance and attention to my pleasure...comes the kind of orgasm so intense, so powerful, and so long, that it drains him quite dry. What you enjoyed before is only the tip of the iceberg, as they say.”

Stanforth actually swayed, looking a trifle dazed. Then he blinked, rallying himself in a way that only a duke could do. “You said...you said something about a game?”

Arabella raised an imperious brow. “I beg your pardon? Do remember that men not properly respectful are liable to be spanked.”

The duke flushed. “Forgive me, ma’am. Please might we play the game you mentioned before?”

“Much better. And yes, I believe it is time for festivities to begin. Nev, darling, you know what is required.”

Neville nodded eagerly. Not only would they soon be playing Winter and Summer, but Stanforth was about to receive a sexual lesson he would never forget.

Let the play begin.

In terms of erotic experience and knowledge, it was utterly humbling to know that he, Edmund Vane, Duke of Stanforth, was a babe in the woods compared to Arabella and Neville Carlisle. But what was also humbling: how generous they were in freely sharing that experience and knowledge when they gained nothing in return. No one ever did that in the ton. Everything was a transaction, whether it be money or favors, an introduction or patronage.

So while Edmund desperately wanted to forget who he was and romp like a beast in the rain, part of him remained wary. Cautious. Not just of making mistakes or being a fool, but wondering: what did they want ?

He'd already experienced the most astonishing orgasm imaginable at the hands of the most beautiful woman in England...while being watched and encouraged by a disturbingly compelling man. Yet now they were to play a sexual game that would prove such a release just the tip of the iceberg? Impossible.

However, what was also disturbing: his confusion when Madam Arabella threatened to spank him for not being properly respectful, in that strict governess tone. Why, when he truly wished to please her, did a part of him want to misbehave? It made no damned sense. Nor did his fascination with Carlisle's mouth. His elegant yet strong hands. And that long cock.

Christ.

A sharp slap to his bare arse jolted Edmund from his wayward thoughts. He gasped, both at the unexpected sting and faint warmth, and the way it made his cock throb. Was Madam Arabella's discipline always like that? Because it felt good . "Forgive me, ma'am. My mind wandered."

"Neville needs assistance," she said impatiently.

"Of course. Might I have the opportunity to atone?"

A warm male hand came to rest on his shoulder. "Now you're asking the right question, my friend," said Carlisle, as though he'd passed a difficult exam with aplomb. "But hurry up, you are delaying Winter and Summer, and that is a travesty. We need to fetch the ices."

“All three flavors,” added Madam Arabella with a sultry smile. “It would be an insult to Gunter’s otherwise. And don’t forget a dildo.”

Edmund followed Carlisle to the dessert table, then reached for the small bucket of pineapple ice. “Er...what is Winter and Summer?” he murmured.

The baron grinned as he collected the chocolate cream and brown bread ices. “Very simple. We decorate Arabella’s breasts and belly with the ices...winter...then lick them off...summer. After that, I’ll show you how to worship her pussy. It tastes even better.”

Edmund blinked. Forget chess or whist, Winter and Summer was clearly the greatest game that could ever be played. Yet even in his anticipation, he couldn’t help staring at Carlisle’s fully erect cock. It was so big. So hard. And the other man had barely touched it. “Doesn’t that hurt?” he whispered hesitantly. “Why don’t you just come?”

“My cock hurts terribly,” said Carlisle matter-of-factly. “But I don’t yet have permission to come. Why do you ask? Do you want to suck it better, Your Grace? To have your mouth stuffed full?”

For the longest moment they held each other’s gazes, and Edmund trembled.

What would it be like to suck a cock?

“Gentlemen,” said Madam Arabella sharply. “You dawdle.”

Carlisle shivered. “That governess tone is my fourth favorite thing, after her sweet pussy, her breasts, and the way she wields a riding crop. If only we had more time, Stanforth. I think you’d enjoy Madam’s cruelest kiss. You can feel it for hours.”

Pure unvarnished envy surged through Edmund. He might be a wealthy and powerful

duke, but the Carlises had so much more. Love. Affection. Passion. They lived to pleasure each other.

Stop it . Concentrate on what you do have: one night to learn.

After the baron also collected a thick dildo, the two men returned to the bed where Madam Arabella waited. She was perfection in contrast: creamy skin, dark pink nipples, vivid blue eyes and silken ebony hair. Now Carlisle had explained what Winter and Summer was, Edmund wanted to begin the game immediately. To take one of those taut nipples in his mouth. To taste her sweet center. To be entirely at Madam Arabella's mercy.

"Why Stanforth," she drawled, cupping one breast and tweaking the nipple as she moved restlessly on the bed. "Whatever are you pondering?"

"That if you crushed me between your thighs I would die happy," Edmund blurted.

Madam Arabella laughed, the merriest sound he'd ever heard. "Please me and you might receive such a reward. Now, feed me ices. Nev, show our duke how it's done."

"With pleasure, ma'am," said Carlisle as he scooped up chocolate cream for his wife. Then he took a second spoonful, dabbed it around her left nipple, and sucked it clean.

Her moan seared Edmund to his very soul.

"Now you, Stanforth," she instructed. "Pineapple."

With the precision of a watchmaker, he fed Madam Arabella the pale yellow ice. Next, he smeared the chilled confection around her right nipple, even daring to graze the jewel-hard peak with the cold metal spoon, and her ragged gasp gave him confidence like nothing else could. Swooping down, he engulfed her nipple in his

mouth, sucking ravenously until she cried out.

“You taste so good,” Edmund whispered unsteadily.

“Again,” Madam Arabella commanded. “Again and again, both of you. Nev, put the dildo in my pussy. Don’t stop until I come. Don’t you dare .”

Almost shaking with arousal, Edmund watched Carlisle push the leather phallus deeply inside her, his finger hooked through a small metal circle at the end. Then they used Madam Arabella’s breasts and belly like a dessert dish, decorating her skin with the ices and laving it off. Soon her flesh was covered in soft pink abrasions, her nipples sucked and bitten to decadent ruby. However, when Carlisle began expertly manipulating the dildo, easing it in and out of her core, twisting and turning the phallus as he gently nudged her clitoris, Madam Arabella writhed on the bed, her fingernails slashing at the sheets. Moments later, her orgasmic cries echoed in the chamber, full-throated sounds of ecstasy and triumph.

Once she lay still at last, Carlisle inhaled deeply of her soaked pussy. “May I taste, ma’am?”

“Use your fingers,” said Arabella breathlessly as she nodded. “Show Stanforth what I like.”

Slowly, reverently, Carlisle removed the dildo before pushing his middle finger inside her slick heat then withdrawing and lapping away the wetness with a guttural groan. Next, he sank two fingers in. “My wife has a greedy pussy. See how it grips my fingers, demanding another orgasm? Here. Taste heaven.”

Confused, Edmund stared at Carlisle’s honey-covered fingers.

“Lick them clean,” said Madam Arabella. “Immediately.”

At the stern command, Edmund's lips just parted and the baron smeared them with pearly wetness. The flavor exploded on Edmund's tongue, sweet and musky and instantly addictive. "More?"

Carlisle chuckled as he re-coated four fingers in nectar. "Here you go."

"Wait," said Madam Arabella harshly. "Fuck his mouth with your fingers. Like a cock."

Edmund hesitated. Could he take another man's fingers into his mouth? It was so intimate, so much more than merely watching a naked man. And yet when Carlisle waved his wet fingers under Edmund's nose, he craved that honey intensely.

Moaning, Edmund opened his mouth and received Carlisle's forceful fingers, all thoughts, all reason departing as his world reduced to pure instinct. No decision-making, just one task: sucking. But now his thirst had become unquenchable. "Please," he gasped hoarsely, unsure what he was even asking for.

Madam Arabella moved closer and put her hand on his shoulder, the touch both inflaming and supportive. "Stanforth needs your cock, Nev. Be the first to spill down his throat."

Carlisle groaned. "Kneel, love. You're going to suck me dry."

Gloriously humbled once more, Edmund accepted the baron's shaft into his mouth. Carlisle was careful and gentle to start, but soon thrust increasingly deeper and rougher, and the combined taste of earthy seed and musky pussy was delicious. But although Edmund's jaw ached and his eyes watered, it still wasn't enough. He wanted every inch of Carlisle's cock.

Mindless in his lust haze, Edmund gripped Carlisle's thighs and swallowed more

cock, choking a little but continuing his frenzied sucking until he heard the most heavenly sound: the baron's orgasmic roar. Carlisle's seed gushing down Edmund's throat set off his own release and he reached down to grip his spurting cock, rubbing and squeezing to prolong the shockingly intense pleasure until he sagged against the end of the bed.

"Magnificent, Your Grace," said Madam Arabella as she smoothed his hair. "Simply magnificent. How far you've come!"

Edmund froze as reality hit like an anvil.

He'd gone too far. Being pleased by a married woman was one thing, but he'd sucked another man's cock. And without the protection of a mask and hair cover, the couple knew exactly who he was. While he might know them intimately, he didn't know them. And now, like the worst of fools, he'd granted Neville and Arabella Carlisle the power to ruin him.

Lust fled as absolute panic consumed him. Staggering to his feet, Edmund dashed around the room to snatch up his discarded mask and put on a complimentary quilted robe. Then he stumbled toward the door.

"Wait!" called Madam Arabella. "Please..."

Ignoring her concern, his skin icy, his vision blurring and teeth chattering at yet another terrible mistake entirely of his own making, Edmund fled the room.

Last time his punishment had been a loveless marriage.

To which fresh hell would this lead?

CHAPTER 4

For two full days, Edmund had remained in his bedchamber claiming illness. Unfortunately, such uncharacteristic behavior provoked his longtime and exceedingly loyal valet, Rivers, to summon a physician. After a comprehensive examination, the experienced physician had phrased his words carefully about mystery fevers coming and going just as swiftly, but they both knew there had been no such malaise. No doubt the man believed his ducal patient had weaved a tale to disguise the effects of too much brandy or perhaps even a brawl, and would play along for continued favor.

The truth was far more humiliating.

The almighty Duke of Stanforth—like his father and grandfather before him, the very portrait of decorum, authority and rigid control—had unraveled. How could he ever reconcile this figure with the reckless, greedy chameleon who not only sexually submitted to a woman but had also been intimate with a man? Far worse, he was at the mercy of a couple who could at any time hurl him to the wolves printing scandal rags in the bowels of Fleet Street, or extort him privately for favors. While he was confident money wouldn't sway the Carlises—they had far more than most—position and introductions and public support was another matter entirely. They moved in very different circles. He had a great deal of influence, the Carlises did not.

But quite aside from a crisis of character and very real blackmail fear, had come the utterly unwanted awakening of his sexually neglected body. A night at Sanctuary had changed everything. Instead of quiet slumber he dreamed of Madam Arabella: her ruthlessly skilled hands draining his cock, him sucking pineapple ice from her taut

nipples, learning the exquisite taste of her pussy. Equally, he dreamed of Carlisle. The other man calling him “love” the way it felt to have his mouth filled by a large cock, to swallow seed.

Now Edmund was hard all the damned time, his cock refusing to be ignored or cold-bathed again. Although he’d silently, miserably handled himself twice to obtain relief, it wasn’t working. His body cared not a whit about the significant risks and foibles of bedding a married couple; it yearned for another night of being the Carlises’ playfellow. To go even further and learn of sexual discipline and riding crops. Anything to hear Madam Arabella’s governess tone, and yes, be crushed between her thighs as he drowned in the succulent haven of her feminine core. Anything to once again enter that wonderfully serene place where his only responsibility was sucking Carlisle’s cock.

But he couldn’t. Madam Arabella’s rule had been quite clear: one night only. And after the debacle of his undignified exit, he couldn’t return to Sanctuary or go, hat in hand, to the Carlisle townhouse to plead his case. That would be far too mortifying, not to mention the gossip that would start. Trying to be free and enjoy himself at the age of twenty-one had nearly disgraced the hallowed Vane name. He simply couldn’t do so again.

“Your Grace?”

Edmund blinked and rubbed a hand across his jaw. The silver-haired physician was now studying him like a jar of unruly tropical insects as he repacked his brown leather satchel. “Yes?”

“I believe your bodily functions to be entirely restored, but perhaps there is something else amiss? Something troubling your mind? If so, there are many tonics available. Or I might suggest a short sojourn to Bath or Brighton? Melancholy is easily defeated by good sea air and a dose of the waters.”

Somehow, Edmund didn't recoil. Or hurl a breakable object from his bedchamber desk. He'd already consumed a lifetime's worth of tonics and water and sea air and this was certainly not an issue where such remedies would assist. "I'm already feeling much better. But thank you for attending me. My secretary, Mr. Yates, will settle your bill."

The physician bowed. "Very good, Your Grace. But do not hesitate to call upon me again should you need to."

As soon as he departed, Rivers slunk in looking a little sheepish. "Yes, I may have panicked. But you never take to your bed, sir. Not even back when...well, you know."

When Lydia had passed.

Edmund sighed, firmly suppressing his irritation. His valet meant well and had no idea what had happened at Sanctuary. In truth, Rivers would probably swoon if he knew his usually immaculately-presented employer had strolled about a crowded pleasure club in a short green satin tunic...or sprinted down a hallway in a quilted robe. "Let's put this behind us and get me ready, shall we?"

Rivers hesitated, his large ears twitching against the sides of his bald head. The man looked like a retired pugilist but was perhaps the loftiest valet in London, the kind who attended kings or princes, and when they were scarce, reluctantly lowered himself to a duke. "About that..."

"It is best if you confess immediately."

"I may also have sent a message to Lady Lovell. She is downstairs in the parlor in a prayer vigil with the bishop and Lady Cressida."

Oh Christ .

Sylvia Lovell was Lydia's younger sister, an uncomfortably strange woman who firmly believed he remained a widower because he pined for his dead true love. Cressida tolerated her aunt for ten minutes at most; any longer and there would be pistols at dawn. "Rivers, you don't possess sufficient cat-lives to behave so carelessly. Lady Lovell? Really?"

The valet lifted his chin. "If you dislike such drastic measures, Your Grace, might I suggest not alarming the household like you did? The crumpled state of your clothing when you returned from that political meeting was bad enough. But then not coming down to breakfast or even touching the jam tarts Cook sent up! They are the best in England. She was beside herself! You remained in this chamber, wearing your robe . You declined to attend the theater and canceled an appointment with your steward. I believe Lady Cressida was about to take a battering ram to your chamber door. Or construct a sheet rope to kick in a window."

Edmund winced. Listed like that, it was understandable why his valet had lost his wits and not only sent for a physician, but also bloody Sylvia. "Calm down, old man. No further interventions are required. And you're still the best valet in London, no matter what everyone says about Lord Whitmore's Mr. Hunter."

"Such acclaim is impossible when you dare to strut about in crumpled clothing," grumbled Rivers. "Hunter would never allow his lordship to commit such a travesty. If the other valets knew, I would be shunned ."

"I'll not do that again," said Edmund solemnly. The battle for supremacy among London's top valets was no laughing matter, and he had let his man down.

Rivers harrumphed. "Well then. Speaking of the Whitmores, you will be attending their Summer's End soiree tonight? Everyone is going—it would be best for all

concerned if you were seen perfectly attired and in good spirits.”

Edmund hesitated, almost declining. The earl and countess had caused quite the stir last summer, publicly announcing themselves as a household of three with the earl’s valet. But since the young countess had presented her husband with an heir his exact miniature, society seemed to have forgotten they were scandalous. Or were at least ignoring it in exchange for charitable patronage and elegant parties. The ton were fickle friends, but also fickle foes.

“Yes,” he said eventually. “I did promise to escort Cressida.”

“Very good, sir,” said Rivers, looking excessively relieved.

Thirty minutes later, Edmund was bathed, shaved, dressed, and strolling downstairs to the parlor his sister-in-law had seized control of. The moment he walked through the door, Cressida yelped and actually ran to him, throwing her arms about his shoulders and clinging like a barnacle to a ship.

“Father,” she whispered. “Send Aunt Lovell away at once or I’ll make her walk the plank into shark-infested waters. The bishop as well.”

Somehow, Edmund suppressed his amusement, then made a show of firmly extracting himself. “How unseemly, Cressida. Clearly you need time in your room to calm your sensibilities before attending the Whitmore soiree with me this evening...no, no argument young lady, you are going.”

Cressida’s eyes lit up with excitement, but she hung her head as though chastened. “Yes, Father.”

Once she’d darted from the parlor like a prisoner fleeing Newgate, Edmund reluctantly approached the two visitors holding court in his domain. “Sylvia. Bishop.”

His blond sister-in-law rose to her feet, shook out her plain gray gown, then dabbed at her dry eyes with a lace handkerchief. “My dear Stanforth. We’ve been so worried. I know it is difficult to gaze upon an exact replica of your lost love, but we simply couldn’t ignore your valet’s desperate plea.”

Edmund grimaced. Sylvia scarcely resembled Lydia at all but behaved as though they’d been identical twins. Before his wife passed, he’d often had the uncomfortable feeling that Sylvia wished to exchange lives with her sister. “I regret any distress, but as you can see I am quite well. Bishop, thank you for the vigil, but you must have far more important duties. And Sylvia, I’m sure Lord Lovell is eagerly awaiting your return home.”

Momentarily she glared at him before offering a simpering smile. “How stoic you are, like every Stanforth before you. Such restraint and self-control are altogether admirable. That is why we’re so close.”

Am I stoic and restrained and controlled, though? Or am I really the naked free spirit sucking nipples and cock at a pleasure club?

Edmund swallowed hard as once again the question crashed through his mind.

Damnation. How could he settle this and regain some sort of inner peace once more?

Neville stared out the bedchamber window into Golden Square, envious of the warmly dressed riders and amblers, even the small circle of hardy-souled painters with their canvas and easels. Fresh air might actually clear his head, yet for the first time, he didn’t want to be around people.

Never had he experienced such a chaotic tangle of emotions after a night at Sanctuary. Usually he felt good, yet for two full days he’d been crushed by disappointment and worry and confusion since Stanforth had fled the club in clear

distress at his actions.

Arabella was devastated, blaming herself for encouraging Stanforth to suck Neville's cock before he was ready for such intimacy. In truth it was entirely Neville's fault. He'd given Stanforth the calling card entry. He'd clearly pushed a novice far past his limits, roughly using the duke's mouth instead of being gentle. It had been Stanforth's first time with a man—of course he would be anxious and unsure! Madam Venus had literally warned them that the novice was as skittish as a mistreated colt.

Most frustrating of all, they were bound by Sanctuary's strict rules in respecting Stanforth's privacy, of not approaching him outside the confines of the club. But how did a lowly reformer baron approach a powerful, proper duke and apologize for fucking his mouth too roughly anyway?

It was a mess. A terrible, wretched mess.

Neville sighed glumly and crossed the room to collapse onto the well-loved leather couch in front of the blazing fireplace. Yet even such a cozy arrangement didn't improve his mood. Or halt his unshakable belief that he and Ara were meant to be with Stanforth. Never in a thousand years would he disrespect his wife or their marriage by approaching the duke alone, but he simply couldn't forget how well, how easily they'd worked together to pleasure their madam. Or Stanforth's serene greed as he'd sucked Neville's fingers, then his cock...

"Stop it," said Arabella sharply as she stormed into the room carrying an armload of parcels.

"Stop what?" he replied, but his flushed cheeks certainly weren't from the fireplace.

"You're thinking of him when you should not. The matter is over. I was a damned

fool at Sanctuary, but nothing can be done and that is that.”

“So you’re not thinking of him?” Neville asked softly.

Arabella gave him a ferocious glare as she dropped all the parcels onto their bed. “That is irrelevant, Nev. Breaking rules only results in mayhem, so I will not be so indulgent again. Playfellows are for one night only. We must go forward, not dwell in the past.”

“But—”

“No,” she said, her tone kinder but firm. “Let us instead concentrate on this task: a care parcel for Toby. I’m sure your mother and sister have sent along everything he needs for Eton, but it is the sworn duty of Aunt Arabella and Uncle Nev to provide everything he wants. The more frivolous, the better. No boy of ten can successfully trade with woolen stockings or a comb. He must have items his schoolmates wish for. Toy soldiers and marbles. Bags of sweets, carved sailing ships, and terrifying tales of headless ghosts.”

Neville smiled at the wisdom of a true merchant’s daughter even as he inwardly debated his next move. While they certainly did need to put together Toby’s parcel, a celebration of his nephew and heir’s first term away at Eton, Arabella was plainly using this task to avoid an uncomfortable and emotional conversation. His wife prided herself on being practical and no-nonsense, but he knew in his bones that she’d been hurt by the duke’s abrupt departure.

“Ara, my love,” he said coaxingly, patting the couch arm. “Won’t you come and sit?”

Arabella’s gaze narrowed. “You wouldn’t be attempting to distract or coddle me, would you?”

“I wouldn’t dare,” he replied cheerfully. “Consider this a husband’s plea for cosseting.”

Her lips twitched, but she strolled over and sat beside him on the couch before wrapping her arms around him. “How do I have the fussiest, neediest pet in England?”

“Just fortunate, I guess,” said Neville as he rearranged himself so his head rested on her ample lap, his equal favorite pillow with her ample bosom. Arabella was just so perfectly soft and plump, he actually had to restrain himself from draping around her like a damned housecat whenever she sat down. Pet was indeed the word.

Soon he sighed in utter contentment as she began smoothing his hair and massaging his scalp. Being bedded and disciplined by Ara was actual heaven, but he also craved her casual affection. Unlike his rigid and disapproving upbringing, she had received hugs and praise. At the start of their marriage Ara hadn’t truly understood how starved of comforting touch most aristocrats were, but she’d soon put that to rights. “God, I love you.”

“I know,” said Arabella, her tone amused. “But now that I’m neatly trapped—you know full well you’re irresistible when practically purring—you’d best say what’s on your mind.”

Neville plunged into the fray. “Stanforth missed out on this . And I strongly suspect he needs cosseting more than any man in England.”

Her hand stilled. “The duke chose to leave,” she snapped. “No, chose to flee instead of receiving the care he’d earned through his obedience. I would have...I would have treated him so tenderly...”

Ara was terribly hurt.

“You are the queen of madams. So loving and generous. No submissive in the world could wish for better,” said Neville carefully. “But Stanforth didn’t know what came next. He doesn’t know us. That he could trust Arabella and Neville Carlisle to ensure many orgasms and a peaceful soul. The duke merely succumbed to fear, which is not uncommon in a novice exploring his true self for the very first time. It must be a hell of a shock for a man forever in control, forever in command, to find such ecstasy in ceding both.”

Arabella sighed and resumed stroking his hair. “All that makes sense. And yes, my pride is bruised at rejection. Yet also...that play feels so damned unfinished. Incomplete.”

“Because it is unfinished, Ara. But...”

“But what?” she said impatiently.

Slowly, Neville sat up and took her hands in his, his mind scrambling for the correct words. It was an exceedingly important speech, and he believed in the rightness of it with every fiber of his being. But Arabella followed her head, not her heart, so he had to make a case. “I know we have rules for playfellows and I respect them utterly. However we both feel robbed. Incomplete. Does the story have to end where it did, or could we, together with Stanforth, rewrite it?”

Arabella frowned. “You mean one more night?”

No. The first of many more. With the other man you claimed.

“Yes,” said Neville. “One more night where the duke gets to explore his submissive side, receive a taste of discipline, come until he’s wrung dry...and experience Madam’s cossetting as he should have done the first time. I also want to make amends if I pushed him too far, too fast. Or, if Stanforth wishes to engage in a different scene

where I submit to him at your command...I'm willing to do so. However, if this is not something you want for us, I'll never mention it again. I love you far too much to ever risk our marriage."

She moved restlessly on the couch; he could practically feel her inner war. Arabella truly wanted this but had been burned in breaking her rules. And what he proposed was indeed risky, something she abhorred. His wife's brilliant mind weighed everything for risk and return, the sole reason he now lived so comfortably. But this wasn't an investment. Cold numbers. It was a man, someone who had already behaved erratically. And yet this man appeared to be the key to their future: living as a trio rather than a pair.

Now they'd opened the door, they needed to walk through it.

"I've never been so torn," said Arabella slowly. "While no one could ever replace you in my affections...something felt different with Stanforth."

"I agree," Neville replied, nodding.

She exhaled unsteadily. "Perhaps we should try again, although I'm not entirely sure how. You know him better than I. Do you have a suggestion? Is this something that could be tacked on when the two of you discuss the politician courting Stanforth's daughter?"

Neville rubbed his thumbs across Ara's knuckles as he pondered ideas and just as quickly discarded them. This would be the most delicate undertaking of their lives. And perilous to boot. "I think we keep that separate. We, and Sir Kenneth by extension, are the possibilities of the future, when the duke will want to regain his feet by returning to the familiarity of his ducal cage. He needs to be gently but firmly coaxed out again, and not by the man whose cock he sucked, for that was his great risk. It must be in a neutral environment. Definitely not his home. Or Sanctuary."

Arabella nodded thoughtfully. “Katherine Whitmore is hosting a soiree tonight—she sent a note inviting us. Nothing like two ladies discovering their husbands are both adorable, older submissives to bond a friendship. Do you think Stanforth might attend? I could brazenly ask him to dance.”

He sat up straighter, his spirits rising. “Perfect! During a waltz you could speak to him privately, offer our apology or reassurance, and put the question of another night to him. Ara, you’re a genius.”

His wife arched one imperious brow. “Quite. Now, on your feet, Nev. Not only must we put together Toby’s parcel, I’ll not have my pet looking shabby next to Lord Whitmore or Stanforth. We have much work to do!”

As their carriage waited in the line to pull up in front of the Earl and Countess of Whitmore’s Grosvenor Square townhouse, Arabella smoothed her ruby satin evening gown for perhaps the fortieth time.

It was only about a mile between her and Nev’s home in Golden Square and this exceedingly fashionable address, but about a world away in terms of social position. Golden Square was reasonably respectable and home to several minor nobles, but the three-bay red-brick townhouses were also a haven for artists and clerks. Grosvenor Square was pure blue-blooded ostentation. The houses were enormous, mostly five to seven bays, with a cellar, an attic, a mews behind, and columns on either side of the front door like a damned museum. The area outside the houses was neatly cobblestoned and the square’s central garden with its vast emerald lawn, symmetrical shrubbery, elm trees, and footpaths, could only be accessed by residents with a key.

Yes, her father might be far richer than these families, but most residents would look down on her.

“Don’t think about them. You look absolutely exquisite,” said Neville as he lounged

against the carriage's brown leather squabs, looking rather exquisite himself in black jacket and trousers, a sapphire-blue waistcoat, and simple cravat.

Arabella snorted, but his compliment did help her nerves. "They live in a square shaped like an oval. It makes no damned sense, yet anyone who points that out gets the word 'peasant' stamped on their forehead."

He laughed. "I'll get a stamp as well. I'm just the third Baron Carlisle; my title won't be acceptable for at least another two hundred years. Only for the Whitmores would I venture into this stronghold of stuffiness. Are we moving? Thank God, I think we are. I can see their townhouse now."

A quarter hour later, they were finally through the door and in the receiving line. As usual for a Whitmore soiree, the decorations were superb; this evening a confection of bows, banners and flowers in gold and orange and brown to farewell summer and welcome autumn. Neville went first, shaking hands and talking briefly to both Katherine and her bespectacled earl Michael, yet Arabella frowned. Where was their third?

"Katie!" she said, kissing the pretty blond countess on both cheeks. "You look radiant. But where is Hunter? He's done a marvelous job with the decor."

Katherine Whitmore leaned closer. "Gerard is upstairs in the nursery with Miles. Our adorable wee tyrant wails like a banshee until one of his papas rocks him to sleep. But rest assured that Gerard will be down later to dance with me. I have been positively itching to do so, but it is a risky endeavor. I've lined my stays with cabbage leaves to halt leakage. Good grief!"

Arabella winced in sympathy. Women endured many indignities with their health, but thankfully this was one she would never personally experience. "Poor dear. But your household of three is well otherwise? Those men are offering lots of love and

support?”

The countess smiled. “They are. I never dreamed that happiness like this was possible. Two husbands are a handful, of course, but the rewards are infinite. I know I blather on, but have you and Carlisle ever considered a permanent trio rather than playfellows?”

“Until recently, no,” said Arabella.

Katherine gasped. “Arabella! We must have tea. Soon .”

Arabella winked and turned to Michael Whitmore. “Good evening, my lord. How do you make spectacles look so charming? And that cravat. Annoyingly perfect.”

The shy earl beamed at her. “Welcome, my lady. We are thrilled you and Carlisle came. It’s been far too long, and you make every soiree sparkle. Gerry toiled almost as long with my cravat as the decorations, but he succeeded in the end. Once our son is asleep, Gerry will be down to oversee proceedings. I prefer it when he’s close by.”

She patted his hand. In some ways Michael reminded her of Nev; submissive men were just the sweetest.

Is there a chance I could have two rather than one?

At the mind-jolting thought, Arabella almost stumbled. But somehow she regathered her composure. “Completely understandable, my lord. Now, Nev and I are going to sample your beverage collection. We’ll speak later.”

She took Neville’s arm and they strolled into the ballroom. It was barely nine o’clock, but the cavernous space was already three-quarters full; the ton loved a Whitmore party. Most guests were milling around chatting and sipping drinks; some were

dancing a quadrille to music provided by a talented quartet, and others had retreated to the antechamber to play whist.

After making their way to the trestle tables near-groaning with bottles and glasses, a footman poured brandy for Neville and champagne for Arabella. Then they moved across to one of the ballroom pillars, an excellent central point to study the crush of people.

Abruptly, Neville leaned down. “Lady Cressida Vane just came out of the powder room. She only attends gatherings where her father is present or she’s chaperoned by the mother of a friend. No grandmothers, and I don’t think she is close with her aunt. So it is certainly possible that Stanforth is here.”

Arabella took a sip of champagne, her stomach twisting in anticipation as she gazed about the ballroom, hoping to see the duke’s tall, broad-shouldered figure. After several minutes of fruitless searching her spirits drooped...until a small group parted and the man himself marched through, seemingly toward the refreshment area.

“Go and occupy yourself, my darling,” she muttered to Neville, gulping her remaining champagne and setting the empty glass on a passing footman’s tray. “Our mission to rescue Stanforth from himself is about to begin.”

“Godspeed,” said Nev before disappearing into the crowd.

Arabella smoothed her gown, then strolled back toward the refreshment area. While Stanforth looked resplendent in his black jacket, muted silver waistcoat, elaborate cravat and old-fashioned gray breeches, she would always prefer him in a short green satin tunic. No, completely naked and on his knees.

“Good evening, Your Grace,” she said huskily.

The duke froze, a vast swathe of emotions crossing his face. Fear. Defeat. Faint hope. Then he rallied and glared at her, his expression colder than a Siberian winter. “Lady Carlisle. Are you well? Your husband mentioned the other day that it was your tenth anniversary. Congratulations.”

Arabella almost shivered at his frigid tone. This was the utterly unapproachable and exceedingly lofty Duke of Stanforth the world knew, the absolute opposite of the man from Sanctuary. And yet he wasn’t immune to her, not at all. Despite his best efforts to be formal and remote, his gaze kept returning to her bosom and lingering. Like Nev, the duke was enraptured with her breasts, which were displayed to perfection in the low-cut, puff-sleeved ruby gown with tiny shimmering crystals at the bodice and hem. “Thank you, that is very kind. It sounds like the quartet are preparing to play a waltz. Would you care to dance?”

Stanforth shook his head. “I don’t usually partake.”

Arabella moved closer and rested her gloved hand on his sleeve, neatly trapping him. “Please. There is much to discuss, don’t you agree?”

Somehow, his gaze grew even chillier. “Very well, my lady.”

Wordlessly, he escorted her to the dance floor before taking her hand in his and settling his other hand at her waist, warm and sure. Once the music began, Stanforth finally deigned to look at her as they turned and stepped. “Your terms, madam?”

Arabella frowned. “Terms? Oh good heavens. You think this is about blackmail?”

“Isn’t it?” he bit out. “You and your husband have the power to absolutely ruin me.”

“We don’t want to ruin you,” she replied calmly. “We want to fuck you.”

The duke actually stumbled, and she swiftly exerted pressure on his shoulder to guide him further over toward the wall, far away from any listening ears.

“Beg pardon?” Stanforth choked out.

“Oh, you heard me well enough, Your Grace,” said Arabella. “And I wonder if even now that magnificent cock is stirring. Have you thought about that night? How I marked your arse? How you came so hard in my hands? How you sucked pineapple ice from my nipple? Do you remember how good my pussy tasted?”

“Yes,” he whispered at last.

“Yes, ma’am,” said Arabella ruthlessly as they continued to waltz.

Stanforth moaned softly. “Yes, ma’am.”

“I understand how overwhelming it can be, discovering and exploring your true desires for the first time. However, it was very poor form to flee after such beautiful obedience. I’m afraid you’ll have to atone for that.”

The duke closed his eyes briefly but managed to keep dancing as the music commenced its final flourish. “Discipline?” he murmured.

Arabella nodded. “A stern spanking. Tomorrow, you’ll surrender yourself for punishment at the location of your choice. I can arrange Sanctuary membership if you wish. However, as before, there’ll be no masks in the room. And you will belong to me.”

“Yes,” said Stanforth, surprisingly firmly. “Eight o’clock? Would that suit?”

She smiled approvingly, subtly caressing his shoulder. “It would. Until then, Your

Grace. Thank you for the dance.”

The duke bowed. After sinking into a curtsy, Arabella swept away, grander than an empress. She found Neville waiting impatiently beside the buffet table, nibbling at an apple tart.

“Well?” he asked, visibly swallowing.

“Stanforth’s atonement shall commence tomorrow night at eight. He requested Sanctuary,” Arabella replied airily.

“Success! Oh God. It’s happening. How can I wait that long?”

“You must, my darling. As I’m feeling feisty, I may well tease you until then,” she growled, discreetly cupping his backside. “Now, hand me one of those apple tarts. They look awfully good.”

For the rest of the evening, Arabella watched Stanforth like a hawk. While the duke sent a few furtive glances their way, he kept his distance.

She grinned. He probably wouldn’t sleep tonight. Then again, neither would she and Nev.

Tomorrow would change everything .

CHAPTER 5

Humming tunelessly to himself, Neville neatened the rows of dried herb jars and stepped down from his footstool.

This small, fragrant, ground-floor antechamber was where he prepared soothing post-discipline ointments to relax. He wasn't entirely sure why the methodical process of crushing chamomile or lavender with pestle and mortar then adding just the right amount of boiling water, almond oil, and white wax soothed his senses, but he'd first learned of such processes from his childhood nurse; apparently it was the only time he'd stopped talking.

Book learning had always been a chore and his tutors had despaired of him ever reading and counting as a gentleman should, but he'd scraped by in his studies. In truth, only debating ever held his interest. And asking questions. The fact that Arabella could solve mathematical equations like income and expenditure in mere moments, only added to her allure. He was more than happy for her to have command of his accounts.

Well, command of everything, really.

Few people would truly understand the sentiment, but in surrendering control, he had finally found freedom. From the day Arabella scooped him up, he'd discovered how it felt to be cared for without restraint or condition, to be the man he truly was and revel in that. She didn't require the most learned husband, the strongest or richest or most blue-blooded. Just her Nev. With Ara at his side he could be a reformer, a philanthropist, a doting uncle...and a gloriously content submissive husband who in a

few short hours would be even more content as they played with Stanforth again.

Today had been an agony of anticipation, but at least puttering about with his herbs had helped move the clock forward a little.

“There you are, my darling!”

His head shot up at Arabella’s slightly frazzled tone. “Is something amiss? Oh God...Stanforth hasn’t canceled?”

She took a deep breath. “No, nothing like that. Your mother and sister-in-law are here. They await us in the parlor.”

Neville’s heart sank. He’d always been the black sheep of the family; that had merely intensified when his younger brother Harvey not only wed first but sired Toby prior to Neville meeting Arabella. It was seemingly irrelevant that Harvey had been a useless wastrel his entire life before his untimely demise in a drunken riding accident. That he’d attracted thieves and swindlers like sugar attracted ants. Or that he’d sunk the family into debt with a succession of increasingly outlandish investment schemes that always failed.

No, because Harvey had married Valerie and sired a son, he was the golden child, the revered saint simply led astray by wicked tricksters and villains. His mother forever belabored that point and refused to thank Arabella for paying the debt or funding everything, including Toby’s pending Eton education. All because Ara wasn’t proper .

“Damn it,” Neville said irritably. “Why today? As usual, I offer my humblest, most heartfelt apologies for the nonsense about to ensue.”

Arabella folded her arms. “The well of my patience has run dry with your mother. I

have every sympathy for Valerie and Toby's circumstances; if not for them, I would wash my hands of her entirely."

As would he. In truth, it was clear that the lad's endearing, clever nature sprang entirely from Valerie. But his nephew would be a fine baron in due course; Neville had no reservations whatsoever in his heir, and he and Arabella enjoyed lavishing treats on Toby as only an aunt and uncle could. But that devotion didn't extend to wanting children of his own, no matter what society or the church decreed. It just wasn't his destiny.

"I know," he muttered. "Mother is terrible in all ways. But at least we've got an excuse for a short visit, an evening out."

Arabella nodded. "I shall hold tightly to that thought. Now, come along. The sooner we begin, the sooner we can march her out the door."

Arm in arm, they hurried to the front parlor. Fortunately, it had been cleaned yesterday by the maids and was fresh and sweet-smelling; the carpets and drapes dust-free, cushions plumped, and the fire burning cheerily in the hearth.

One less thing for the dowager to complain about.

"Mother," Neville said curtly, inclining his head. "Valerie. What an unexpected surprise."

As usual, the silver-haired dowager baroness disdainfully looked him up and down, then heaved a theatrical sigh before settling herself onto the overstuffed chaise next to her long-suffering daughter-in-law. "Carlisle. Arabella."

"I've ordered a tea tray," said Arabella as she perched on a high-backed chair, strategically close to the door.

“Thank you,” said brown-haired Valerie as she nervously smoothed her lilac half-mourning gown. “Tea would be lovely.”

“With cakes, one hopes,” added the dowager. “Only commoners serve without.”

“Of course,” Arabella gritted out.

Neville pressed his lips together. Why did his mother always have to be so damned supercilious? Especially to the woman who funded their life? It wasn't like the Carlises held high favor at court or possessed an ancient line or prized title—they weren't the Stanfords or Whitmores of the world. “How can we assist, Mother? Ara and I have evening plans, so this must be a short visit.”

“Very well,” said his mother. “You force me to be direct. Next month it shall be two full years since the passing of our beloved Harvey. Remembering such a profound loss has clarified my thinking. I did my duty and bore two sons, but alas, I have just one grandson. No burden could be greater.”

Oh God .

Neville's fists clenched. This argument was so old and rancid it was liquified pulp, and he could practically feel the searing fury now radiating from Arabella. His mother would shortly end up in the Thames with anvils attached to her ankles. “Mother—”

“Do not interrupt, Carlisle. It is past time you two stopped this defiance. Ten years I have been lenient, but now I must insist. As well as a gross dereliction of duty, everyone knows it is immoral and ungodly to remain childless by choice.”

“Excuse me?” said Arabella in the kind of soft, deadly tone that any sensible person would run from. His mother was not sensible.

“I have devised a plan. Tell them, Valerie.”

His sister-in-law blinked, looking utterly miserable. “I’d rather not—”

The dowager scowled. “Woeful girl! I shall explain. Valerie’s maid has black hair. For generous compensation, she would bed with you, Carlisle, and give you an heir. Arabella already has a rather rounded belly, but she could tuck cushions under her gown to make it bigger. And if the procedure fails and produces a daughter, you simply try again. This is the best and only way forward. And my plan can begin at once!”

For a long moment, Neville could only gape as his ears rang and his vision blurred. Had this lunatic really just said what his mind insisted she had? Bed a woman other than Ara, get that woman pregnant, then have Ara feign a pregnancy...all to satisfy his mother’s desire for another grandchild?

For the first time in his life, he was speechless. Entirely unnerving for a man who could speak on any topic at any time to any crowd.

“I think it’s best you leave,” he ground out eventually. “At once.”

“Yes,” said Arabella coldly as she rose to her feet. “Mrs. Carlisle, it is regrettable that you were dragged into this.”

Valerie nodded, but the dowager gasped. “I beg your pardon?”

“Let me rephrase, my lady,” snapped Arabella. “If you do not remove your vile, poisonous self from this house in twenty seconds, I will cut off all funds forever. Oh, and believe me when I say there is a higher chance of ice skating in Hell than that horseshit you just spouted. You are nothing but a fool.”

His mother pressed a hand to her chest. “ Carlisle . Surely you’re not going to permit this...this...dock whore to speak to me like that?”

“Why would I censor a truth teller?” said Neville, more outraged than he’d ever been in his life, and that was saying something. “And I say no to your plan. No to your remaining here. No to your insults. Do not make me toss you out a window, because I will do so. Arabella is the only woman I will ever bed. Arabella is my love, neither of us want children, and that is that. Forever. Now, either move or be catapulted from this townhouse.”

For a long moment, his mother stared at him like she might have the audacity to argue. Then she sniffed, rose to her feet, and curtsied. “Harvey would never have spoken so—”

“OUT.”

And with that, the pinch-lipped dowager and an apologetic-looking Valerie departed the room.

Neville exhaled slowly and turned to his wife, mortified beyond belief. “I do not know what the hell that was. A maid? Cushions ? She’s demented. If I was charitable I might say enduring grief, but...all I can do is beg your forgiveness, Ara.”

Arabella walked straight to him, wrapping her arms around his waist and resting her head on his shoulder. “My darling, you’re shaking.”

“Shaking with rage,” he burst out. “I refuse to have that conversation one more time.”

Immediately, she began rubbing his back, and Neville leaned down and pressed a kiss to her forehead. Could a man legally disown his mother? He would do it tomorrow.

“No forgiveness required,” Arabella said eventually. “Although I do like it when you beg. You’re going to be doing a lot of that this evening. As is a certain duke.”

Relieved beyond measure at her strength, Neville shivered. “I cannot wait.”

In the small but well-appointed powder room of Sanctuary’s diamond chamber, Arabella finished combing her hair and stared at the looking glass in front of her. Then glared.

Even now, anger and frustration clawed at her insides, emotions that were entirely unwanted and unhelpful before commencing play with a new submissive. She should be excited and in command, not imagining hurling an elderly woman into a pit of feral weasels.

And yet that was her current state of mind after the earlier confrontation with the bloody dowager.

Arabella concentrated on taking slow, even breaths. Anger and frustration were two emotions, but there were others equally troublesome: hurt and fear. Hurt that no matter what she did, no matter how many lives she improved or donations she paid or parish schools she supplied...she would always be judged on her choice not to have children. Why were people so ridiculously bothered by others following a different path? And they always demanded a reason. A defense of the choice lest she be branded unfeminine or selfish or a child-hater. Apparently the truth, ‘I simply do not wish to be a mother’ wasn’t acceptable. It was altogether bloody unfair, because Nev felt exactly the same about fatherhood, but didn’t receive a tenth of the criticism she did.

Being a parent was simply a life choice, not an indicator of good character or morality; the number of downright awful aristocrats with children put paid to that. It wasn’t like the barony was being left high and dry either. But perhaps that was her

greatest fear: Toby hating her for it. And Nev changing his mind or insisting he didn't want children just to please her. What if he secretly did want a son to inherit rather than Toby? What if he did bed another woman for a child?

Every part of her violently recoiled at the thought.

A soft tap came at the door. "Ara? Are you ready?"

Arabella straightened her shoulders, then tightened the belt of the gold quilted dressing gown she wore. No. Tonight, there was no room for unhappy thoughts. Only pleasure.

She stepped out of the powder room, and in one swift movement had Neville pressed against the wall. Then she cupped his face and kissed him deeply, twining her tongue with his until he groaned.

Eventually Arabella moved back, allowing her hands to fall onto his robe-covered chest. "Mine."

Neville grinned smugly. "Yes, ma'am. Every inch."

Hmmm. Her husband clearly required discipline.

Sliding her hand under his robe, Arabella lightly scratched his hair-dusted chest with her fingernails and teased his flat nipples. As her husband began to pant, shamelessly thrusting his rapidly hardening cock against her belly, she grasped his length and squeezed hard, making him moan. Owning it. Owning him.

"Naughty," she murmured. "Are you trying to get sent to the bench?"

"Surely I deserve that for such provoking behavior," said Neville pleadingly.

Arabella snorted, but after removing his robe, led him over to the padded leather kneeling bench. It was a rather ingenious device that spread a submissive's legs while supporting their upper body so they could lean forward and offer their backside for discipline.

First she secured Nev's wrists, rendering him delightfully immobile, then Arabella nodded in satisfaction. "Now we wait. I want Stanforth to see this."

Her husband had the audacity to turn his head and pout. Immediately, she moved behind him and administered two sharp smacks to his perfect backside as a warning.

Neville bit his lip, a familiar and endearing expression of need flashing across his handsome face. So endearing she almost relented and gave him a proper spanking. But no. Tonight they would be showing Stanforth what sexual discipline involved.

Abruptly, a brisk knock came to the main chamber door. When Arabella called permission to enter, a Sanctuary maid poked her head into the room. "Beg pardon, ma'am, but your guest is here."

"Send him in," said Arabella. "Thank you."

Moments later, the masked and hair-covered duke walked into the room. Like her, he wore a knee-length satin robe; unlike her, he was entirely hesitant and unsure. The poor man had no sexual confidence whatsoever.

"Good evening," Stanforth said awkwardly, his gaze halting on Neville and lingering.

"Good evening!" said Neville cheerfully. "You're just in time to witness my punishment. Come on over."

Silently blessing her husband's easy charm, the way he could talk to anyone,

anywhere, Arabella nodded. “Quickly, Your Grace, and discard that mask and hair cover. We are eager to begin.”

Stanforth obeyed the instruction then hesitated. “Could we...would it be acceptable to address each other less formally?”

She blinked at the unexpected request. “I insist you refer to me as Madam Arabella, but I will call you whatever you wish.”

“Edmund,” he said quietly. “I should like to be just Edmund.”

“Fine, strong name,” said Neville. “Call me Nev. But meanwhile, my arse is not burning and how is that fair or just?”

Arabella almost laughed. Her pet was particularly rambunctious tonight. “As you can plainly tell, Edmund, my husband is rather desperate to be cropped. For the best view, and so you’re not in my way, I need you to stand on my left side. I believe you might misbehave and touch your cock while I do this, so I would like to bind your wrists behind your back with your robe sash. As with everything tonight, you may accept or decline.”

“I accept,” whispered Edmund.

“Very well,” she replied, swiftly stripping off his robe before he had time to worry, and winding the satin sash around his wrists so they were secured behind his back in a snug but not constricting knot. “Now, Edmund, look at this glorious creamy canvas. To begin, I warm up Nev’s flesh by rubbing and spanking it, then I’ll discipline him with my crop.”

Neville moaned, attempting to arch his back. “Less talk. More slap.”

Arabella curved her hands around his backside, deliberately teasing him with a longer than usual massage for the impudence. When his skin was light pink she began spanking him, lightly at first then with increasing firmness until the sharp slaps echoed in the room with Nev's pleas for more...and Edmund's uneven breathing.

It appeared the duke was enjoying the show if his rising cock was a gauge.

"What's it like, Nev?" asked Edmund unexpectedly. "Is it very painful?"

"No," said Neville dreamily. "Madam is just preparing me. It stings and my arse is warm but not painful as such. My cock is so hard, though. Are you hard?"

"Yes, he is," said Arabella, amused, as she picked up her riding crop. "Now, Nev, you'll receive ten to start. Edmund, see how my bare feet are planted firmly on the floor, no carpets or mats to slide on? Also watch how my arm stays low rather than performing an arc movement. This ensures I continue hitting his arse and don't stray into forbidden areas like his sides or lower back. They are far too delicate to be cropped."

Edmund nodded thoughtfully. "Makes sense. Only pugilists want to rattle the innards and ribs. Go on."

She stilled. "Excuse me?"

The duke blinked, his brow furrowing. "Er..."

Turning her wrist in crisp, elegant movements, Arabella ran the leather end of the riding crop along the duke's inner thighs, before placing it under his cock and lifting the thick shaft. "You dare to give me an instruction?"

Edmund gasped. "N-no, ma'am. Please forgive the misstep."

Oh, the man was in purgatory. His stoic iciness had abandoned him entirely and he was leaning into danger rather than shying away. Right now he was flushed and trembling, his huge cock bobbing merrily between black leather and hard belly, trickling seed. This duke truly did want to be owned. He craved it like a starving man craved a banquet.

“Perhaps,” said Arabella coolly. “That will depend entirely on whether you please me later with your tongue. Are you ready to be crushed by my thighs?”

Edmund made a guttural sound. “Yes, ma’am,” he choked out.

She nodded, then turned back to an unusually patient Neville. Her husband thoroughly deserved an explosive orgasm. “Right, my darling. Ten for you. Actually, I think twenty.”

Swish. Crack. Swish. Crack .

With measured ferocity, Arabella administered the riding crop blows, mostly to Nev’s backside but gifting him several to his upper thighs as well. He writhed against the bench, his flesh decorated in shades of pink and red, his gasps and cries of ecstasy spurring her on to greater strength. Once he’d received his twenty strokes, Arabella set down the crop then picked up a bottle of oil. After lubricating her fingers, she teased Nev’s anus, her other hand reaching around to grip his engorged cock.

“Please,” he begged shamelessly. “Please, ma’am. Fuck me.”

“Yes,” she replied, kissing his shoulder. “You’ve earned your reward.”

When she knit two fingers together and slowly penetrated his back entrance, Nev’s head thrashed, his whole body arching to encourage a deeper, faster conquering.

Arabella's pussy throbbed, her nipples jutting against her satin robe. Never would she tire of this heady feeling of absolute sexual power. She had brought her husband to the edge of orgasm—only she would decide when he tumbled into ecstasy. But tonight Nev had pleased her, so she roughly handled his cock while finger-fucking his backside, and in seconds his low roar thundered to the heavens, his seed spurting and spurting over her hand as he came.

"I love you," gasped Neville as he sagged against the bench. "I love you so much."

"Beautifully done, my darling," said Arabella, carefully removing her fingers, then unfastening his wrist bindings before kissing his forehead. "I am exceedingly pleased."

Neville had found heaven. But one glance at Edmund told a very different tale.

The duke was trapped in the hell of agonized yearning...and only she could free him.

He'd never witnessed anything so erotic in his life.

Edmund rolled his shoulders and rocked on his heels in a futile attempt to regather his composure. He'd achieved two small victories this evening: not coming when Madam Arabella had caressed his inner thighs, then lifted his cock and balls with the riding crop. And not coming when she had disciplined Nev, then fucked the baron with her fingers.

Another damned thing he now wanted to know. What did it feel like to be spanked?

To be penetrated?

Nev made it look like he'd seen angels. Maybe he had. But even more enviable than the orgasm; the way Madam Arabella was cuddling and kissing her husband. Praising

him.

What Edmund had witnessed previously in this room wasn't pretense or just a show. These two truly loved each other. They loved pleasure. There was no duty, no chore, no willing one's mind away from the event to endure. Just two people who not only understood but reveled in their spouse's sexual needs.

He wanted that kind of love for himself. No, it was far more than a want now. It was a critical, essential need.

"Now, Edmund," said Madam Arabella as she washed her hands in a bowl of heated herbed water. "What am I to do with you?"

Nev slowly stood up from the bench and flexed his legs and back, then examined his crop-patterned arse in one of the room's many mirrors. "He needs to learn how to properly attend to your pussy, madam. And be disciplined. I would be happy to assist."

"I like the sound of that," she replied, discarding her dressing gown into a puddle of satin on the floor, then sauntering over to the enormous and thankfully sturdy bed in the center of the chamber. After arranging herself in the middle, Madam Arabella beckoned them both. "Nev, untie Edmund's hands and bring him to me."

As soon as his wrists were free of the cord, Edmund flexed them. Strangely, he already missed the restraint, the helplessness of being unable to touch himself.

Madam Arabella patted the bed in front of her. "If you wish for discipline, here on your hands and knees, Edmund."

Trying to control his eagerness, he obeyed. Seconds later, Edmund groaned softly as a firm, masculine hand began caressing his back, arse, and upper thighs. How could

such an innocuous touch feel so good?

Madam Arabella smiled indulgently as she cupped her right breast and tweaked the nipple. “Nev does indeed have magic hands and will warm up your skin before introducing you to spanking. He’ll start lightly; you may request a firmer touch if you wish. After that, you are going to make me come with your mouth. Only then will I decide whether you are permitted an orgasm. I know you badly want one...but you must please me as Nev did.”

Edmund nodded. His throbbing cock might be desperate for release, and there was still that element of confusion at enjoying another man’s touch, but there was no way he would crumble this time. Not with a reward like Madam Arabella’s pussy on offer. She was already glistening wet, and the musky scent made his mouth water. “Yes, ma’am. I’m ready.”

The first few slaps to his arse were indeed light, almost affectionate. He nearly asked for harder, but bit his tongue, wanting to concede control to someone far more knowledgeable. Instead, Edmund went down onto his elbows, so his arse was higher. He was immediately rewarded as the blows became firmer, enough to make his skin tingle. But he wanted more. To be so aroused, so mindless with lust and need that he would writhe as Nev had done.

The other man paused to roughly massage Edmund’s flesh. When Nev’s fingers delved down to Edmund’s inner thighs then up to lightly stroke the underside of his balls, Edmund moaned. Nev was so skilled. So sure! “Yes .”

Madam Arabella shifted restlessly on the bed in front of him, her hand trailing between her legs to part her bush, offering him a brief glimpse of the succulent pink petals beneath. “Tell me what you need next, Edmund,” she said huskily.

“To taste you. To burn. To be taken,” he blurted, not even sure if he was making

sense. “I want to know.”

But she nodded. “Nev, darling, would you fetch a small dildo for me? Two thumb width. You’re going to introduce Edmund to being fucked.”

Edmund shivered, pure excitement coursing through his veins at her words.

Being fucked .

Something done to him, where he didn’t have to think or instruct. Just feel. In truth, alongside the excitement was pure relief. At each step, he’d been given choices. He’d had a voice in accepting or declining. And none of this was about conceiving a child. He was free to simply enjoy the journey.

Soon, Nev stood behind him once again, then came a splash of warm, slick liquid on Edmund’s lower back. Oil!

“I’ll start with a finger, then put the dildo in your arse,” said Nev, as casually as he might talk about the weather. “Don’t worry, Edmund, I’ll use plenty of oil. This will feel exceedingly strange at first, pressure and burn, but you’ll soon be thanking me, trust in that.”

Edmund chuckled at the quip, but oddly enough, he did trust Nev. And Madam Arabella. Never in a thousand years had he imagined there might be a way to learn and discover that felt so damned safe. So damned friendly. Like he mattered, not because of his title or wealth, but because he wished to submit. “I’m ready.”

Well, he’d thought he was ready. But as Nev’s oil-slick finger rimmed his anus then shallowly penetrated the tight hole, Edmund gasped. Christ. How could something feel so wrong and yet so very right at the same time? Yet his body was awakening to sensation like a sleepy dragon, stretching and sparking and sending an urgent

message to his engorged cock: are you ready to come ?

Edmund inhaled deeply as slowly, so slowly, Nev pushed his finger deeper. In. Out. In. Out. As the other man had warned, the penetration did burn, yet perversely he craved more of the fullness and pressure. This was so damned confusing his mind whirled and his hands clutched at the bedsheets for anchor.

Abruptly, Madam Arabella moved in front of him. Her fingers tangled in his hair and tugged his head up with just enough force that he groaned, shocked at the sexual jolt that arrowed through his body.

She smiled kindly. “You need a distraction, sweetheart, so you don’t drown in your own thoughts. It’s time to put your tongue to work. I’ll guide you. Begin.”

Soon Madam Arabella had shuffled down the bed and spread her thighs wide to reveal her gloriously slick labia. Reverently, Edmund bowed his head and inhaled, addicted to the fragrance of wild, hot pleasure. Then he extended his tongue, tentatively licking the petals, and delectable musky honey filled his mouth.

Edmund moaned, the sound catching as something larger than a finger pressed at his back entrance. Large and unyielding and utterly overwhelming. But before he could think about that, Madam Arabella tugged on his hair again, bringing his mouth closer to her pussy.

Experimentally, he circled her swollen clitoris with just the tip of his tongue, and when she cried out, a rush of victorious elation filled him. In the past, both he and Lydia had always ensured the act was completed as soon as possible, so hadn’t kissed or touched or pleased each other. But Madam Arabella wanted it. No, she was insisting upon it.

Despite his lack of experience, he would do his very best.

“You taste,” Edmund mumbled as he flattened his tongue and dragged it along Madam Arabella’s heady center, “so good.”

She cried out again, grinding against his chin until his face was drenched in juices. “Yes. Yes .”

Edmund paused, shuddering as the burning, stretching, solid fullness of the dildo in his arse grew too pronounced to ignore. How could he bear it? Yet when he tried to buck, Nev held him immobile with surprising strength, twisting and turning the smooth, polished stone phallus inside him until Edmund’s mind threatened to splinter.

He growled, a guttural, feral sound that was swiftly muffled as Madam Arabella took him captive between her thighs. By instinct alone, Edmund nuzzled her soaked pussy until he found her clitoris and then, closing his mouth over it, began to suck. Soon he existed in a hazy, dreamy world of pain-tinged bliss, Madam Arabella’s tight grip on him and the dildo ruthlessly fucking his arse the only things stopping him from floating away.

Moments later, Madam Arabella bucked on the bed, her orgasmic scream echoing around the diamond chamber. But Edmund barely had a moment to gulp in air when her thighs fell away from him, as Nev wrapped his oil-slick hand around Edmund’s swollen cock and rubbed with ruthless precision. Pleasure hit him like a storm surge and a low roar tore from his throat as he came, his seed gushing and gushing like it might never stop.

Exhausted, barely conscious, Edmund began to shake. After the dildo was removed he was pulled into a caring embrace, his head settling neatly onto luscious breasts and his hair tenderly stroked. Equally good, a warm body surrounded him from behind, pressing soft kisses to his neck and shoulders. And they were complimenting him. Praising his efforts. His obedience. His courage.

Ah. So this was what it felt like to see angels.

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CHAPTER 6

For an entire week Arabella had kept herself relentlessly busy each day: hours on her precious ledgers, settling accounts, deciding menus and recipes with the housekeeper, approving purchases, visiting family, and overseeing the delivery of supplies to three parish schools Nev supported.

Anything to distract her from two clear facts: she had completely abandoned her longstanding unbreakable rules around playfellows...and was enjoying some of the best sexual experiences of her life. Now, she and Nev had spent four exquisite nights with Edmund at Sanctuary, teaching and pleasuring and disciplining him, because rather than sating her appetite for the duke, each occasion only whetted it further.

Which was bloody terrifying.

Many men claimed to be submissive, but there always came a time when they wished to take control and center their own pleasure. Whether through certain words, a slowness to obey, or a bitter petulance when she wouldn't reverse roles, she could easily spot a charlatan. Edmund, however, had leaped into sexual submission as though born for it. It continued to be an honor to initiate him with Nev's assistance, and knowing that under that icy, proper ducal shell was such a vulnerable, sweet soul was the cherry on top of the syllabub.

But she and Nev were a whole pair, not two thirds searching for that missing piece.

Weren't they?

Arabella stalked down the narrow hallway, the click-clack of her heels hurting even her ears. Most days she could tolerate the small townhouse, even the lack of a garden. But today it was a prison. And she couldn't even discuss it with Nev, for he was giving a speech on abolishing plantation slavery at a merchant's gathering organized by her father at Ferndale Shipping. That would certainly be contentious; a lot of men and a great many aristocrats made huge sums from the revolting practice that continued in the island colonies. She would have loved to witness him speak—Nev's passion for reform was truly inspiring. But even her indulgent father had banned her from attending, saying it was strictly gentlemen only. Bah.

"I've got to get out of here," she muttered.

"Beg pardon, my lady?"

Arabella glanced up to see their endlessly patient and dignified butler, Oakley, who was standing in an alcove studiously polishing silver plate. To the man's great credit, he had never even twitched an eyebrow at taking all instructions from the baroness rather than the baron. "I am planning an escape, Oakley."

"Do you require weapons, madam? An alibi? Or just the town carriage?" asked the butler.

She grinned. "Just the town carriage. If his lordship returns early, tell him I've gone to call on the Countess of Whitmore."

Oakley bowed. "Very good, my lady."

In no time at all, Arabella's carriage was approaching Grosvenor Square. The other residents could squeal all they wanted, but only Katherine could assist with this particular delicate issue.

As soon as they pulled up in front of the sprawling Whitmore townhouse, Arabella near-tumbled out of the carriage, not even waiting for a footman to lower the step. Then she marched up to the front door and rapped the brass knocker.

The door opened to reveal the butler, Kenney.

“Yes?” he began, before offering a warm smile. “Oh, good morning, Lady Carlisle! How may I assist?”

Arabella inclined her head. “Good morning, Kenney. Is Lady Whitmore at home to callers?”

“Do come in, madam. I shall go and enquire.”

While she waited, Arabella glanced around enviously. This townhouse always felt so damned cozy because of Gerard Hunter’s impeccable taste. Although in fairness, while she admired the way he put together carpets and drapes and furniture and paintings to create a home, he had so much space to work with. After her father’s vast Blackfriars estate, moving to the cramped baronial townhouse in Golden Square had required a stark mind adjustment; scarcely a day went by when she didn’t curse the narrow stairs, small rooms, and thin walls. Unfortunately, Nev was reluctant to leave his childhood home.

“Lady Carlisle, please follow me to the parlor,” said Kenney as he returned. “Lady Whitmore will be down presently. She is just getting her hair trimmed.”

Arabella hesitated. “I could return another day.”

The butler shook his head. “Madam, her direct words were ‘do not move one inch from the parlor’. I believe her ladyship is, er, very eager to take tea with you.”

In minutes, Arabella was perched on a comfortable chaise, a full tea tray in front of her. The Whitmore's cook had generously provided heavy fruitcake and sugar-dusted cinnamon wafers, and she was unable to resist the lure of two wafers. Not long after that, Katherine dashed in, her pale blue gown swirling about her ankles.

"Aha!" said the blond countess as she slumped onto the chaise opposite and poured herself a cup of tea. "My cunning wafer trap was successful. They have a secret ingredient that compels a body to confess all."

"Cunning indeed," said Arabella, laughing. "Your hair looks wonderful, by the way. Where are the rest of the family?"

"Here, Lady C," said a Scots brogue from the doorway, and she turned to wave at tall, auburn-haired Gerard Hunter, who was cradling a warmly wrapped infant against his shoulder and holding Lord Whitmore's hand. "We're taking this wee rascal for a stroll in the park. Surely he cannae stay awake all week."

"God willing," said Katherine, blowing them both a kiss.

Once the men departed, Arabella raised a brow. "Not sleeping?"

Katherine sighed. "Miles hates to miss a moment. No doubt in the park he'll nap like an angelic cherub. But please. I'm desperate to discuss anything other than babies. I haven't even had time to read a book, so it is your duty as a friend to entertain me. Do proceed."

Arabella rallied herself. "I need your counsel on something that only you or perhaps Viola Townsend-Grant could answer."

The countess lit up. "You're considering a permanent threesome arrangement?"

“Yes. No. I don’t know,” said Arabella. Unable to remain seated, she stood and began pacing the parlor. “I mean, we haven’t even discussed such an arrangement with the gentleman. He’s a novice in every sense of the word. To pleasure. To submission. To intimacy with another man. But the way he’s embracing it so swiftly...it’s actually beautiful to observe. And so, so arousing.”

“You like him,” said Katherine slowly. “I mean really like him.”

Arabella nodded helplessly. “I didn’t think I could ever have romantic feelings for a man other than Nev. My husband is everything to me, and I certainly don’t love him any less. What the bloody hell is going on? No other playfellow made me feel like this. I’ve broken all my rules and you know how I feel about rules.”

The countess laughed. “Arabella, this was me a year ago. I did not understand how I could have feelings for two men. Especially two so very different men. But sometimes the heart expands. I could not choose between Michael and Gerard, and thank God I do not have to. The best way forward is speaking to His Grace. See what his hopes or wishes are.”

“Excuse me?” said Arabella, freezing. “Who?”

Katherine rolled her eyes. “Please. I saw you two dancing and talking at our soiree. It went from chilly to scorching, then you watched each other all night. But I won’t say a word to anyone. This is your story.”

Heat swept across Arabella’s cheekbones. So much for discretion. And naturally, talking to Edmund was the correct way forward. But that sounded far too easy. It was too easy. Men and women had a knack for complicating everything because of fear or worry or a previous bad experience. For heaven’s sake, even she and Nev had met terrible playfellows; the reason why they restricted threesome activities to the safety of Sanctuary.

But if they did move forward as a trio, Edmund wouldn't be the only novice.

This would be new for all of them.

“Well, it's bloody unnerving,” said Arabella irritably. “I'm a merchant's daughter to the bone, lowest risk for highest return. But this couldn't be riskier. And it's not just my heart on the line, it's Nev's heart, too. And our marriage. What if Edmund doesn't want a future with us? He sits at the pinnacle of society and has two children to consider. Damn it...”

Her vision blurred.

Katherine gasped, then jumped up to curl an arm around her shoulder. “Wait. Don't withdraw from the race before it has even begun! Yes, the duke is at the top of the tree, but it must be awfully lonely up there by himself. And hard for him to trust, when nearly everyone covets his title and money. Give him time, and yes, grace for mistakes. Give yourself grace. Unfortunately, there is no helpful title at Hatchards like *A Lady's Guide to Households of Three*. Perhaps I should write it.”

Arabella sighed. “Yes, you should. But such rational advice is lost on me today, I fear.”

Katherine patted her shoulder. “There, there. However, I cannot emphasize enough the importance of patience and plain speaking in a trio. Michael and Gerard and I each have our quirks and virtues...and we've learned to express ourselves much better. Some like to show their love. Others prefer to speak of it. I need to do both, for my men understand love differently. I know you are the most generous woman alive, but don't forget words of affection are just as powerful. Let them see your tender, vulnerable side.”

“I understand,” Arabella replied, nodding, even as butterflies unleashed in her

stomach.

She and Nev had quite a perilous path ahead. And no guaranteed reward.

Edmund finished the last bite of his late breakfast, a decadent combination of coddled eggs, ham, fried potato, herbed tomatoes, buttered toast with marmalade, and hot tea, and sat back in his chair with a contented sigh. Over the past week, like a true rake, he'd not returned home from Sanctuary until three in the morning each time, then stayed abed until eleven.

Even with some of Nev's soothing ointment, his arse remained tender from all the spanking and dildo-fucking...but he felt astonishingly light of spirit. In truth, leaving the warm and cozy diamond chamber bed with Madam Arabella and Nev wrapped around him was always wrenching. How were those hours the soundest sleep he'd ever experienced? Here at Stanforth House he possessed the best four-poster bed and the finest linen that money could buy. Yet he rarely enjoyed a good night's rest.

Now, for perhaps the first time in decades, he felt...good.

"So, Father, I am wondering...when are you going to confess?"

Edmund jerked upright and raised an imperious brow at his daughter, who was currently standing at the sideboard and piling a plate of food higher than his. "Confess?"

Cressida sighed audibly and walked to the table before setting her plate down beside him. "I heard you humming from the hallway. Humming . Like a demented bumblebee. On several occasions you've stayed out until three, slept late, and eaten like you've been plowing fields since dawn. So I ask you once again: when are you going to confess?"

Christ. This must be what it felt like to be interrogated in a court of justice. No, that would probably be easier, for no man had Cressida's smiling assassin tenacity. "Another father might point out that precisely none of those things are your business."

His daughter scooped up several forkfuls of ham and eggs, delicately sipped her tea, then fixed him with a look. "A woeful attempt at distraction. Hmmm. I suspect you have a lover."

Edmund spluttered. Something he was doing entirely too often with her lately. "Beg pardon?"

"My dearest sire, I will remind you once again that I am eighteen . I read widely, from textbooks to scandal sheets. I also have married friends and widowed acquaintances, so I hear gossip in powder rooms that would turn your ears purple. But also...I'm not sure why you assume my disapproval if you did have a lover? You've been alone a very long time. Even before Mother passed."

He blinked at both the calm tone and the reprimand. "I apologize," Edmund said abruptly. "In sailing cadence...I am in uncharted waters and navigating on a moonless night with a blindfold. I don't even know if this has a future."

Cressida nodded thoughtfully, then ate several more bites of food. "But you want a future?"

"Yes," said Edmund, before he could halt the word. "Er, I mean—"

"Do not dissemble, it doesn't become you."

"I dissemble because I don't know ," he replied, irritable as a bear with a burr in its paw. "Rules have already been broken. Several times. I can have no expectations."

This time it was Cressida blinking. “Oh. My. Word. The humming. The defensiveness. The uncharted waters. Ahoy! Father is experiencing tender feelings !”

Edmund drew back. The chit was indeed terrifying. “I most certainly am not.”

“You are!” she said gleefully, actually thumping her fist on the dining table. “Poor thing. Forty years old and love is hitting you like a runaway cart. Never mind, I know the perfect distraction. Shopping! You may buy me a new bonnet.”

“Wait, what?”

Cressida beamed as she leaped to her feet, almost knocking her chair over. “I’ll go change my gown and brush my hair. You have another cup of tea. Then we can have some quality father-daughter time. Back soon!”

As she dashed out the door, Edmund’s lips twitched. His protest had been token; after such a wonderful week he’d been planning to suggest an outing to town together. If his daughter was set on marrying the bloody reformer politician, then he needed to collect as many moments as possible before his Pirate Princess sailed away for good.

A half hour later, Cressida was escorting—some might say dragging—him into her favorite Mayfair milliner. The number of young ladies perusing the selection, eagerly followed by attendants, was rather overwhelming. As were the towering displays of ready-made bonnets, and the glass-topped cabinets full of trims like satin ribbon, cards of lace, dyed feathers, carved wooden miniature fruit, and dried flowers.

Fortunately, the smiling proprietor took pity on Edmund, guiding him to a chaise beside the front window so he could watch the world outside while waiting. It was abundantly clear from Cressida’s bright eyes and the fawning attention from two attendants that this would take a while.

He'd only been people-watching a short time when the uncomfortable realization hit that he was seeking out plump ebony-haired women and tall blond men. Gah. Wasn't it enough that his dreams were consumed by Arabella and Nev, that he continually recalled the way it felt to orgasm like an erupting volcano? That his body wanted more discipline, more fucking, more being held and kissed and stroked?

Edmund exhaled slowly.

Buck up, man. Now that you know what you like, you can ask Madam Venus at Sanctuary to find you a new lover. Arabella and Nev will simply carry on as the happily married couple they are.

The thought only made him more irritable. Moving restlessly on the chaise, Edmund abruptly froze as a familiar figure strolled past. Sir Kenneth Lochore! He and Nev still hadn't discussed the politician, being quite distracted by other far more personal matters.

Before he could even question the action, Edmund bolted from the milliner out onto the street and called his name.

Sir Kenneth halted and turned, then bowed deeply, looking rather stunned. "Your Grace. What an unexpected surprise. Are you out for a stroll as well?"

"Cressida is trying on bonnets," Edmund replied, assessing the man in front of him like he was making a possible purchase at Tattersalls. The knight wasn't overly tall, perhaps a head shorter than himself, but had the kind of wide shoulders and broad chest that many ton men attempted to create with padding. His neatly brushed hair was dark auburn, his eyes a vivid blue, and his clothing fairly typical for a man on the rise: well made without being ostentatious, a brown jacket, gray trousers, crisp cravat, and polished black shoes.

The politician beamed. “I’m sure she’ll find something marvelous—the lady has impeccable taste.”

Edmund folded his arms and glared. “Indeed. But if I gave you five minutes, no notes, no time to practice, to persuade me on the merit of your suit for her...what would you say?”

The young man’s eyes bulged, then he lifted his chin. “Five minutes is not nearly long enough to speak on Lady Cressida’s virtues, Your Grace.”

“We have time. Tell me...tell me your favorite things about her.”

“Her boldness. Her quick wit. Her blunt speech,” said Sir Kenneth, his gaze softening. “I do not seek a wife who says yes sir, no sir, three bags full sir, but someone who challenges me. If a man remains resolutely in his own circle, he thinks the entire world agrees with him. And that is simply not so. I am also enamored of Lady Cressida’s kind heart. The way she champions the less fortunate. The way she rocks on her heels when she laughs. I believe she will be a wonderful mother—”

“Oh?” Edmund scowled, about to launch a tirade, but he was temporarily thwarted as an older couple walked past. This really wasn’t a conversation for a public footpath, but such a prime opportunity to learn the true character of the man who dared to pursue Lady Cressida Vane could not be ignored. “So you seek to cage her? Leave a vibrant young lady trapped in the country birthing baby after baby while you rake about town?”

“No!” said Sir Kenneth, looking genuinely horrified. Then his expression smoothed into thoughtfulness. “I think I might understand why early motherhood concerns you, so allow me to ease your mind. At twenty-five years old, I don’t feel ready to be a father, and I certainly wouldn’t pressure my wife either. I love wading in the political mud to fight for change. To help others. But I also love to travel, to see what is

possible. I hope my wife shares in this adventurous spirit. At the right time, we would grow our family to an agreed number, bringing them into a loving, caring home. I won't be an absent or cold father like mine was, but one who toasts bread and cheese, plays games, and tells stories...oh dear, I am rambling on. Hazard of the job, I fear."

Edmund nodded slowly. "I note you didn't mention Cressida's looks. Or her dowry."

Sir Kenneth's cheeks turned pink. "She is lovely. So very lovely. And I understand her dowry is substantial. However, I have my own funds, enough for a comfortable home, so dowry size is of no matter. And a pretty face is one thing, but I wish to discuss matters with my wife. Seek her counsel. So I value Lady Cressida's clever mind far more than her beauty. Well, there you have it, Your Grace. Are my hopes ruined?"

Edmund sighed, his heart aching at the impending change. But this steady soul would be an excellent match for hellion Cressida, even if he was a reformer politician. "Make an appointment with my secretary at your convenience and we'll settle terms for the betrothal documents."

Sir Kenneth gasped. "I may propose?"

"You may propose. Now, carry on before my daughter spies us."

"Thank you, Your Grace!" exclaimed the other man fervently, his eyes sparkling. "You'll never regret this. I'll make Cressy...er, Lady Cressida so happy."

Feeling ancient, yet strangely relieved, Edmund waved the politician away, then returned to the milliner. Cressida looked up from examining a bolt of emerald satin and frowned at him. "Where have you been? Discussing the business of old men?"

Edmund nodded solemnly. She would find out soon enough. "Something like that."

As the long line of men departed Ferndale Shipping's largest warehouse, Neville couldn't help breathing a long sigh of relief. Like every speech he gave, he'd received a very mixed reception: some cheering and applauding, some staring grimly, and others heckling him or even tossing spoiled fruit. Today it had been blackberries, which seemed rather a waste when there were so many empty jam pots crying out for preserves.

But, as always, two questions haunted him: how much longer would such speeches be necessary? And could he bear the heavy burden of continued failure?

A full ten years had passed since Grenville's An Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade had passed in parliament. Ten years! They had been so joyful in 1807, believing with all their hearts that this stain on human history would be no more. But although the Act had effectively banned the transportation of slaves, it made no provision for the emancipation of those already enslaved. Even now, British subjects who owned slaves were under no obligation to free them.

Unfortunately, rich men still ruled the world, and while they occasionally conceded a change, it would take Hercules himself to prise their fingers from the gavels of power.

"Here now, Carlisle," said his rotund, silver-haired father-in-law Hector Ferndale as he ambled toward him. "Don't look so downhearted! I'm sure you've brought more souls to the side of the just, and there will come a time when the numbers are enough."

Neville sighed again. Arabella's father was a shark in the merchant trade, but he was more honorable than most, for he transported fabrics rather than human cargo or the sugar that came from West Indian cane plantations. Unfortunately, not nearly enough of his fellow merchants followed suit. Moral arguments didn't tend to hold much sway against large profits and aristocrats were equally as greedy; plenty of estates

had been refurbished or rebuilt and stables replenished with dividends coming entirely from slave enterprises.

“I never expected reform to move so damned slowly,” Neville replied in pure frustration. “We all thought the Act a magnificent starting point from which all rivers would flow, but they simply haven’t. Parliament progresses with the haste of cold treacle while people suffer.”

Hector patted him on the shoulder. “Well, you know what I think.”

Neville smiled reluctantly. “I cannot bribe the entire House of Lords.”

“Why not? They’re as mercenary as anyone. Perhaps more so. Costs a lot of money to fund horses and mistresses. Lords do love to ride.”

“Hector, you are a bad man,” said Neville, laughing now. “I am very fortunate you—and your darling daughter—are with me, not against me.”

His father-in-law beamed. “Well, should your scruples loosen, plenty of money in the vault. Don’t tell Hell’s Belle, though. She gets feisty about bribery. And about a body being late for supper. Best you go on home, my lord, have a bath and get those clothes laundered. Not sure if you’ll save that cravat, though. Blackberry juice is a beast to remove.”

Neville nodded. “As is tomato pulp. At least it’s not horseshit, though. I had to burn some clothing after one Piccadilly Market speech. It was fresh.”

Hector’s eyes widened. “I’m called a bad man; I always wonder if they’ve met Polite Society. Anyway, must be off. Mrs. Ferndale is as feisty as her daughter about tardiness. Give our love to Belle.”

Shortly afterward, Neville settled in a hackney for the four-mile return to Golden Square. There was always so much to see: the eerie Tower of London, bustling Cheapside shops, and the imposing dome of St. Paul's Cathedral. It wasn't always a pleasantly scented journey, especially with the Thames at low tide, which exposed more thick pungent river mud and rotting wood. Fortunately, once they passed Charing Cross, there wasn't far to go.

The only drawback to riding in a hackney: it gave him sufficient time to brood. Certainly on the lack of reform progress and his own shortcomings...but also how he felt each time Edmund departed their Sanctuary threesome bed.

Bloody bereft, in truth. After play the three of them lay together for hours, talking and kissing and touching. And they slept so damned peacefully, like being wrapped in some sort of love cocoon. When he and Arabella returned home from Sanctuary, they never spoke much, just climbed into bed and held each other. Breakfast was becoming increasingly subdued; in all honesty, if it had been anything other than an important opportunity at his most generous supporter's office, he wouldn't have left the house.

Damn it. Damn it!

Neville huffed out a breath. He was being ridiculous. They'd had their second night, their third and their fourth, and yes, each occasion had been everything he ever dreamed of in a threesome, however, they were living on borrowed time. Edmund could decide at any moment he was ready to find a mistress rather than continue a secret affair with a married couple. But where would that leave Neville and Arabella Carlisle when so much had changed?

The moment the hackney pulled up in front of their townhouse, Neville climbed out and hurried to the front door. It immediately swung open to reveal Oakley.

“My lord,” said the butler, wincing at the blackberry stains. “I shall order a bath at once. I believe her ladyship is in your bedchamber, er, cleaning out a chest of drawers.”

Oh God .

Ara only did that when wrestling with troublesome thoughts.

“Thank you, Oakley,” Neville replied. “I shall go straight up, and yes, I would appreciate a bath before I turn into jam.”

After crossing the small entrance hall to the narrow wooden stairs, Neville took them two at a time to reach the upper floor faster. Then he near-sprinted to the master bedchamber and burst through the door. “My love?”

“In here,” called Ara, before walking out of the antechamber where her clothes were stored. “Oh good grief, Nev. What did they do to you?”

“Blackberries,” he replied ruefully. “Smuggled in under a waistcoat. Your father was very displeased—he thought he’d secured all potential weapons at the warehouse door.”

His wife frowned. “You know I believe in the cause with everything I have, but I do worry for your safety. What if one day it’s something more than rotten fruit or vegetables?”

Neville grimaced. The thought often crossed his mind, but he refused to dwell on it. Living in fear only drove a man to madness. “I cannot stop fighting because there might be a lunatic with a dagger or pistol lurking. It is only when support becomes too loud and overwhelming to ignore that change comes about. That was how we got the slave trade abolished, that is how we’ll get emancipation as well. Now, Ara, why

are you cleaning out drawers?”

Arabella flushed, but before she could reply, footmen arrived to fill the permanent copper tub in the corner with buckets of hot water. Just as quickly, they were gone.

“Let’s get you scrubbed clean,” she said, bustling about for a towel, sponge and soap.

Obediently, Neville began removing his berry-ruined clothing, but once again, his wife was attempting a distraction. “What happened today?”

“I’m annoyed at myself. I still haven’t sent that box of treats to Eton for Toby. He is the heir and deserves much better.”

Her response was startling. The Michaelmas term, Toby’s first, would begin on September 1. The box wasn’t late. Was this about his mother’s awful comments? “Ara—”

“Also, today I called on Katie Whitmore and asked her counsel on permanent threesome arrangements,” said Arabella in a rush. “My mind is mud right now. Get into the tub so I can occupy my hands.”

Somehow his limbs moved, easing him into the delightfully hot water. But his own mind was spinning . What was Ara considering? Was this about Edmund, or another, future possibility? “Even if they are muddied, I think you need to tell me all your thoughts. Before you scrub the skin from my bones.”

Arabella sat back on her heels and exhaled slowly. “The past week has been very special. Hasn’t it?”

“Yes,” he agreed cautiously.

“We’ve enjoyed many playfellows over the years, but it has always been easy to bid them farewell. That is not the case with Edmund at all.”

Neville closed his eyes briefly, then covered her hand with his. “He could not be more different. This week, for the first time, I wanted to be part of an actual threesome. To submit alongside Edmund, yet assist you as well. I enjoyed spanking him. Fucking him. Watching you restrain and tease him. But we’ve barely scratched the surface and that is both exciting and alarming. Because it would stab me to the core if you thought I wanted Edmund instead of you. Or more than you. You’re the air I breathe, Ara. I simply could not imagine a world where I didn’t kneel to serve you.”

Arabella lifted his hand and kissed it. “Then, my darling, I think it’s time we went to Edmund and made our thoughts known. To find out his. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” he replied, grinning. “May I also humbly suggest that to ease your mind over Toby, we travel to Eton tomorrow and deliver the box personally? I know he would be thrilled to see his favorite person in the world, and he’ll have the box in time for term commencement.”

His wife harrumphed, but she was pink-cheeked and smiling. “Very well. Then we’ll visit Edmund. But first, I am going to wash your hair, Baron Blackberry. It smells like an old wine barrel.”

Neville nodded, abruptly more hopeful than he’d ever been.

Could this be their new beginning?

CHAPTER 7

Neville stared out the carriage window, drumming his fingers on his knee as every wheel turn took him and Arabella closer to Eton College. The school was actually located in Berkshire, not too far from Windsor Castle, about twenty-three miles from London.

On clear days like today, with thankfully no rain and just a scattering of clouds, it would take just over five hours each way. This included stopping for a change of horses at Arabella's preferred inn, a well-kept establishment on the outskirts of Brentford. The inn not only had a large stable of experienced carriage horses, and a carpenter and blacksmith for any carriage issues, they were very efficient and obliging toward those with a warm smile and heavy purse.

To ensure he and Ara reached Stanforth House at a reasonable hour later, they'd departed London at dawn. But although the journey was barely a few hours complete, he was already hungry. And unsettled. If not for Toby, he wouldn't set foot in this illustrious school again; attending as a King's Scholar had been the worst experience of his life.

"Toby will have a much better time, my darling."

He blinked at Arabella's words. The way she deciphered his thoughts was bloody uncanny. "Because of you, he'll be an Oppidan and my gratitude for that is boundless. It doesn't matter how clever or good-natured a boy is, there is no life other than hellish for a King's Scholar. The violence. The bullying. And there are so many boys to manage, the schoolmasters won't do a damned thing about it. I think that is

why Eton friendships tend to last a lifetime. They were forged in fire and that is no jest or exaggeration.”

Arabella pulled her lap rug higher to her waist. While it certainly wasn’t a cold day, there was a nip of pending autumn in the air. Really, it was always better to travel with extra cushions and rugs though, not just for warmth, but for comfort. The roads away from London were rather diabolical; even the most well-sprung carriage seemed to hit rocks and ruts with great precision. “Dare I ask what was the worst thing?”

Neville considered. “It is quite impossible to name one thing. The food was goddamned awful, although I gather that has nearly always been the case. All the lessons are taught in Latin rather than English or even French. The school day starts at six in the morning and ends at eight at night with just an hour for play. Boys only leave the place for summer holiday, they even stay there for Christmas. And the older lads are lawless terrors. Power is wielded without mercy...although I suppose that is preparation for the world outside.”

“Oh God,” said Arabella, her expression horrified. “Why didn’t you tell me all these details before?”

“Because being Baron Carlisle’s heir means very little for Toby. It’s a relatively new title and has no great estates or fortune to speak of. But attending Eton will open endless doors and I want the world for him. The fact that he can stroll into school, not as a charity case but a young gentleman with a generous allowance, and has relatives who care enough to send him treat parcels, is the best possible start a lad could have—”

“Is it?” she asked bluntly. “How?”

“Because the future leaders and men of influence will be his peers. His friends . Toby

can go further, so much further than me. And when he speaks, perhaps change will happen in weeks or months, not years. He'll be a success, not a failure..."

When his voice caught, Neville coughed to compose himself. Where the hell had all that come from? Proximity to Berkshire had turned his mind to syllabub. Thankfully Toby hadn't witnessed any of that; the poor lad would leap onto a mail carriage and stay aboard until he reached Edinburgh. Or further. Dundee. Aberdeen.

"Nev," said Arabella firmly, "how can you possibly consider yourself a failure? As an uncle, you've been an infinitely better father to Toby than Harvey ever was. Toby is fortunate in so much more than my money. He has an example of a good, decent man. A loving man. One with steadfast principles who fights for righteous causes, the downtrodden and the voiceless, and never gives up. That is why he sees you as a hero."

Neville's cheeks heated at the lavish compliments. "Best stop, or my puffed-up head won't fit through the carriage door."

"I wish you saw yourself how I do. I wish I could show you. Or at least distract you from those burdensome thoughts. But..."

Arabella's voice trailed off, and he truly understood her perplexed grimace. While he would walk through flames for the attention of her heavenly mouth and exceedingly skilled hands, it somehow felt wrong without Edmund here to join in or be commanded. That was the difference. The duke had become an essential part of their play. An essential part of their lives .

"You soothe my soul, Ara," he said, leaning forward to take her hand in his. "And you've built the platform beneath my feet. If I have achieved anything, it is because of you."

Her gaze softened, yet before she could speak, his stomach rumbled and she laughed instead. “Goodness me. My poor pet is starving. Allow me to feed you before your entire being is consumed by that cavernous abyss. I am rather enamored of your body.”

Neville chuckled. “As I am of yours. Let’s both eat.”

Arabella began rummaging in the food basket by her feet. “Yes. Because Cook doesn’t trust any inn, shop or pie cart to sustain us properly, we have fresh buttered bread, a few raisin pastries, apple tarts...oh yes, and some sugar-dusted cinnamon wafers because I begged Katie Whitmore’s cook to give me her recipe. They are perhaps the most delicious sweet I’ve ever tasted. Also a flask of lemonade. Plus one of...good grief, what is this ?”

Neville shuddered at the ghastly sight of the mottled reddish orange cordial. “I believe Cook is trying to guard us against future winter ills. That looks like a tonic with castor oil, carrot, beetroot, and lemon.”

“Edmund would know. The poor man has probably consumed every tonic under the sun. I know he hasn’t said too much about his marriage, but what he endured before conceiving his heir was terrible. It seems whether you want children or don’t want them, there are trials to endure.”

He nodded as he downed a chunk of soft buttered bread followed by several of the scrumptious wafers. Unwrapping the duke was like unwrapping a parcel with sixty-five layers. He was so guarded about his past; entirely understandable considering his frightful upbringing. In truth, the more he learned, the more Neville was ashamed of the assumptions he’d made about Edmund. Power and position certainly hadn’t protected him from pain. “I wonder what he is doing right now.”

“As long as he’s not bedding someone else or breaking the law, I really don’t mind,”

said Arabella as she finished a second raisin pastry then dabbed at her lips with a linen napkin. “Speaking of bedding...”

His ears pricked up. “Yes? Pray continue, my lovely, beautiful, talented, splendid wife.”

She snorted. “At ease, soldier. I was pondering what acts we might try in future if Edmund wishes to continue as a trio. Obviously, binding his wrists, he seems to enjoy that. Or making him touch himself. One thing I would like to attempt with you both is Edmund fucking my arse while you fuck his. What do you think?”

Neville groaned. “Arabella Laurel Carlisle, you simply cannot say ‘at ease, soldier,’ then follow it with exceedingly erotic suggestions. Have a care for my trouser fall.”

His wicked wife batted her lashes as she reached for the small box of comfits in the food basket, before popping one of the mint-flavored sweets into her mouth. “But what do you think? Would Edmund want that?”

“I hope so. And a whole lot more. I just want to fuck him and hug him and make him laugh. Forever.”

She hesitated. “Forever?”

Oh God. He’d let his tongue run away from him. But there was no plausible way to walk those words back. He needed to stand behind them. “Only once before in my life have I fallen so fast and hard. When a certain Miss Ferndale hoisted me over her shoulder and dragged me back to her lair. I was helpless in the face of her magnificent br—”

“Breasts?”

“Brain,” he continued smugly, only wincing a little when Arabella kicked his shin. “But now Edmund is in my heart, too. Just as he’s burrowed into yours.”

Arabella nodded slowly. “I sent a note before we left, saying we would call this evening. We have a lot to talk about. Everyone must have their needs met, and I suspect it won’t be easy extracting information from a man well used to hiding or suppressing it.”

“And this is the first time Edmund has lovers who truly care about him in bed and out. Who want him to be happy. He was scarred by his marriage, it’s not undying love that stopped him remarrying or taking a mistress.”

His baroness grimaced. “The ton does enjoy romanticizing past nonsense. In the meantime...brace yourself, my darling, the carriage has just turned onto Eton Road.”

Neville covered his eyes. “And you were diverting me so brilliantly.”

It was time to buck up and face the demons of Eton past.

Ugh.

There was something endlessly fascinating about buildings that were almost four hundred years old.

As their carriage moved slowly toward Eton’s heart, Arabella studied the imposing red and cream brick structures. People often talked of Eton as an old school steeped in English history, but until one drove amongst it, it was hard to understand how old and how steeped. For God’s sake, the school had been founded by King Henry VI. Not the miserly king who ended the War of the Roses or his monstrous son who churned through six wives and introduced the wretched Buggery Act, but the Henry before them.

Oh, the tales these bricks could tell.

“Bloody hell,” she muttered.

Nev snorted. “Welcome to Eton. Less of a mouthful than Kynge's College of Our Ladye of Eton besyde Windesore. On your left is the College boarding house where all us highly unfortunate King's Scholars resided. I know those arched doors and narrow windows don't appear particularly terrifying, but inside was the first-floor Long Chamber where we slept; the less said of that vile inhumanity, the better.”

“It masks the crimes well. Is that the chapel?” she asked, pointing to a large cream brick building.

“Indeed,” said Nev, grimacing. “Prayers every day at five in the morning.”

Arabella clasped her hands, fighting the urge to burst into every building and liberate the boys like a madwoman freeing chickens from a coop. “Which boarding house is Toby in again?”

“It's called Jourdelay's,” said Nev. “This one up ahead.”

The moment the carriage pulled up, Arabella scrambled out and glared ferociously at the four-story red brick building. The surroundings here were far more pleasant; two lads were sitting under a mulberry tree sketching and another group were kicking a ball about in the courtyard.

She didn't trust the tranquil scene for a moment.

“Shall I bring the parcel?” asked Nev.

“Just hold for a bit, I want to find Toby first,” Arabella replied, walking toward the

front door of the boarding house.

A young woman in a plain gray gown immediately appeared and bobbed a curtsy. “Good morning, madam. Are you looking for Dame Sara?”

Nev leaned down. “Each boarding house has a dame overseeing it,” he whispered.

Arabella smiled at the maid. “I am Lady Carlisle. His Lordship and I are looking for our nephew, Master Toby Carlisle. Is he indoors or outside?”

“I believe he’s watching the hoop racing on the west side of the building, milady.”

“Thank you,” she replied, already marching away and preparing for battle, Nev hurrying after her. Only when she saw for herself that Toby was safe and well would her mind ease.

It actually took less than a minute to find him; the lad was playing conkers with another boy of about the same age. While they were both wearing black trousers, white shirts, and black waistcoats like all the Eton boys, shorter, fair-haired Toby was laughing, while the other lanky, brown-haired boy seemed more solemn, although he was smiling at the game.

“Toby,” she called, trying not to yell like a fishwife and embarrass him.

The lad turned and his face lit up. Then he bounded over, the other boy trailing behind him. “Aunt Arabella! Uncle Nev! What are you doing here?”

“We are a more efficient mail carriage for parcels,” said Nev as he ruffled the boy’s hair. “Are you going to introduce us to your friend?”

“Oh!” said Toby, grinning bashfully. “May I present my very best chum, Lord

Denby. He's an heir like me! I call him Harry. Harry, this is my aunt and uncle, Lord and Lady Carlisle."

The lad bowed, very stiff and formal. "Pleased to make your acquaintance, my lord. My lady."

Nev's brow furrowed. "Wait. Denby. Heir to whom?"

Something like deep, aching sadness flashed across Denby's face, an emotion far too intense for a ten-year-old.

Toby clapped his friend on the shoulder and gave them a surprisingly fierce look. "His father is the Duke of Stanforth. But Harry's not like him. He's much better and nicer. He cares about others, even if his father hates him. And I'll plant a fencer on anyone who argues, it doesn't even matter if Headmaster Keate flogs me."

Arabella froze, her mind splintering like her nephew had started singing in fluent Russian. This solemn, sad lad was Edmund's son? And according to the boy, Edmund hated him? How was that even possible? That wasn't the Edmund they knew!

Inwardly flailing, Arabella glanced at Nev. Had she misheard? Was being at Eton turning her mind to mud?

Except her husband looked equally shocked.

"Er, no need to punch anyone, and school floggings are awful," said Nev eventually. "But we are delighted to make your acquaintance, Denby. Or do you prefer Harry?"

The lad blinked. Then smiled tentatively. "Harry. It's short for Harrison. My sister calls me Harry. I like it."

“Harry it is,” said Arabella. “But my dear, I must ask...why do you think your father hates you? That is a heavy burden to carry.”

“He always has,” said the lad quietly. “Because I took too long to be born. Father and Mother had to wait eight years. That was my fault.”

Arabella pressed her fist to her mouth. Any moment she might burst into tears and that was utterly unacceptable. To witness such despair, when a heartfelt conversation between Edmund and Harry could put this to rights. Well, she had broken all her rules when it came to Edmund and was about to break another: minding her own business.

As Katie had said during their visit, open and frank conversation in a threesome was essential, which meant that Edmund’s painful past could not be allowed to poison his future. And that included the bond between father and son. It was up to her and Nev to provoke change, to start the mending of this rift before they could embrace Edmund as a permanent part of their future.

“Right,” she said crisply, “Here’s what is going to happen. We are all going to return to London. This is an injury that must be reset so it can heal.”

Harry stared at her with wide eyes. “Are you...are you going to abduct us? Like a pirate?”

Arabella nodded. “You might not know this, Harry, but my father sails ships filled with treasure chests. He pretends he is a textile merchant but...he is very, very wicked. As am I.”

“It’s true,” breathed Toby. “I’ve been to the docks—Mr. Ferndale has lots of ships. Listen to Aunt Arabella. She always knows best.”

A laugh almost escaped, but the situation was too serious. Arabella glanced at Nev. “Discreetly get the boys into the carriage. I will hunt down the dame.”

With shoulders back and chin high, Arabella marched back into the boarding house. The same maid from before directed her down a hallway to a small corner office where a rather harassed-looking older brunette in a black gown was flicking through a pile of files and ledgers on her overcrowded desk.

“Dame Sara?” she asked politely. “I am Lady Carlisle, Toby Carlisle’s aunt. May I have a moment of your time?”

The woman sighed, as though rallying herself, then she offered a brief smile. “Of course, my lady. Is there a problem?”

Arabella hesitated, rapidly recalculating her approach. The poor woman was obviously overworked with far too many young lads in her care, and probably horribly underpaid. “No problem. I wanted to ask a small favor, for which I will compensate you handsomely.”

Dame Sara frowned, but not swiftly enough to mask the flash of interest. “And what favor might that be?”

Arabella smiled and leaned forward conspiratorially. “I’d like my nephew and his best chum Lord Denby to have one last hurrah before school begins. To take both boys now and return them, safe and sound, tomorrow. So what I would require from you, is, hmmm, a slight miscount when you check beds tonight and in the morning.”

The brunette tapped her chin as she stared at Arabella’s reticule. “I am scrupulous with numbers and couldn’t possibly miscount...but boys who are unwell sleep in the infirmary chamber away from the others. They could be in there for a night. No more, mind.”

“A fine and efficient system,” said Arabella. “Now, I also know someone so scrupulous couldn’t possibly accept payment for such a favor. But if some coins appeared on your desk...who’s to say where they came from?”

“I am a very busy woman,” said Dame Sara, nodding. “I can’t watch my desk all the time.”

Opening her reticule, Arabella dug around until she retrieved two crowns, then she placed them on the desk. “I am a practical woman. What a joy to find another in you.”

Dame Sara’s eyes bulged at the amount. “Aye, my lady. We understand each other perfectly. You just make sure the lads are back in time for supper tomorrow, or there will be physicians involved and hell to pay. Be careful traveling out as well. Other dames aren’t so...practical.”

“Of course. Good day,” said Arabella as she departed the office. Good grief. Another rule broken; this time blatant bribery! She truly was her father’s daughter.

On returning to the carriage, Arabella climbed in and directed Toby and Harry to crouch down, which they did with great glee. Then she covered them with her lap blanket.

Nev’s lips twitched wildly. “Dare I ask?”

“Certainly not. To London!”

There was a reconciliation to achieve.

Edmund braced his hands on the parlor window and gazed out onto St. James’s Square. This view was peaceful—the other side of Stanforth House looked over

bustling Pall Mall, and past that, the Prince Regent's overblown Carlton House—but if he looked out here, he could just see an expanse of green lawn and trees and shrubbery. If he closed one eye and tilted his head, he could almost pretend he was in the country.

He truly needed a moment alone after a frantic morning. At breakfast, he'd received a short note from Arabella, requesting an audience for her and Nev this evening. But he'd been unable to concentrate on that mind-whirling news, for less than an hour later, Sir Kenneth had arrived on his doorstep, a determined expression on his face and a ring in his pocket, asking to speak to Cressida.

Edmund smiled at the memory. The man had certainly wasted no time at all in proposing to her, and his daughter's shriek had almost lifted the roof. But the way she had hurled herself into the politician's arms, the way Sir Kenneth had grinned and twirled her around...that had been lump-in-the-throat special. This was how a betrothal should be: lots of laughter and cheers and excitement for the future.

Of course they'd then opened bottles of champagne and brandy to toast, and both Sir Kenneth and Cressida's voices had wobbled with emotion as they bantered and jested. After that, Cressida had insisted on sharing the news with all the servants in Edmund's employ, so he'd ordered even more bottles from the cellar so everyone could have a glass. There was now an air of merriment throughout the townhouse as Cressida's admittedly lovely diamond-and-pearl betrothal ring was examined and exclaimed over.

But now Cressida and Sir Kenneth had departed in the politician's carriage to share the news with his family, their closest friends, and members of his party, and Edmund was alone with his thoughts. A dangerous enterprise.

The discreet throat-clearing behind him almost sent Edmund crashing head-first through the window. He turned around to see Yates, his secretary. "Good God, man,

do I need to put a bell around your neck?”

Yates chuckled. “Forgive me, Your Grace, I think you were very deep in thought after earlier events. But I wanted to confirm: Sir Kenneth has requested a formal meeting to discuss terms later this week. Is that acceptable?”

“I’ll make myself available,” said Edmund. “And you did send some extra funds to Denby? Would hate to think the boy was going hungry due to Eton slop.”

“Of course, Your Grace. I had two footmen ride to Eton. In regard to the wedding, I expect there will be a lot to plan. Is Lady Cressida thinking St. George’s? Or Westminster perhaps? I shall make enquiries about available dates and the reading of the banns. Enjoy the rest of your day.”

Edmund waved absently as his secretary departed. Yes, there would indeed be much to plan for the wedding, but now his thoughts had abruptly turned to his heir. Would some distance between them perhaps soften his son’s heart? Could they start again and rebuild something much better without Cressida as some sort of translator or emissary?

It was so very strange, but the time spent with Arabella and Nev had changed him in many ways other than sexual. Finally it seemed like he could see good in the world. Feel joy. Have some fun. His father and grandfather had actually been rigid and icy and proper, but Edmund could no longer play that role. It wasn’t him, and the falseness of it was distasteful, a vise crushing him. He wanted freedom. Companionship. Love. And yes, passion. With Arabella and Nev.

Waiting for them to arrive was truly torturous. The note had indicated early evening after they completed a brief jaunt out of London, but that could be anytime, really. And depending on what they had to say, it could either remain one of the happiest days of his life, or take a turn for the worst. Was there any chance they wanted him as

much as he wanted them? And not just an affair...but forever?

Naturally, there was much to discuss, but it just felt so right being with them both.

Edmund sighed. He desperately needed to distract himself, but there was simply no way he could concentrate on documents. Or reading. And while visiting one of his St. James's Square neighbors, perhaps Norfolk at number 31, or the Castlereaghs at number 18 held appeal, it would be devastating to not be here when the Carlises arrived.

Damnation. He was on the verge of losing his mind.

"Beg pardon, Your Grace, but you have a visitor."

Somehow he suppressed a woeful yelp at being startled a second time. Yet as the footman's words sank in, Edmund's heart leaped in an uncomfortable blend of anticipation and anxiety. Arabella and Nev were here!

After gathering his composure, he smiled briefly at the footman. "Thank you, send them in."

However, as soon as he'd given the instruction, his confidence failed him. Should he stand? Sit? Was he wearing the most appropriate clothing or should he have changed? Would the drawing room be a more suitable location? On the leather armchairs in front of the fire in his bedchamber? Was it too early or too late for refreshments? Both Arabella and Nev had a sweet tooth, perhaps he should order cakes and pastries...

"Good afternoon, Stanforth."

Utterly confused and equally annoyed, he frowned and glanced toward the parlor

door. What the bloody hell was Sylvia doing here? And why did she look so unusually cheerful, dressed in a pink gown? Most of the time his sister-in-law wore gray and possessed the long-suffering, put-upon air of a puritan ordered to speak to a sinner. “Sylvia. This is a surprise. I’m actually expecting guests. Is something amiss?”

The blond woman giggled as she hurried to him. “I just heard the momentous news. It’s all anyone is talking about in town. Cressida betrothed to Sir Kenneth Lochore!”

Edmund relaxed a little. “Indeed, it is wonderful. I think they will be a splendid match—”

“Naughty man, teasing me so,” said Sylvia, actually rapping his wrist with her fan as she batted her pale lashes. “I will admit to a certain disappointment that you did not send a note arranging a private rendezvous immediately. But I’m here now, and all will be well.”

His shoulders tightened to the point they could be used to prop up a building. A private rendezvous? Damnation. There was nothing vague about that, she’d gone far beyond the pale. “Teasing? I have no idea what you are talking about,” he replied curtly.

Sylvia shivered. “Oh, I see, you are going to make me say it. How masterfully, how cruelly you wield your power over a lady’s heart, my dear duke! Very well. Denby is now at Eton. Cressida is betrothed and will soon be gone from this house. We can finally be lovers as we always hoped and wished!”

Christ .

Edmund could only stare, unable to articulate the revulsion currently churning his stomach. Bed Sylvia? His late wife’s sister? He would ride naked through Vauxhall

Pleasure Gardens holding flaming torches to his groin before that would occur. Such a desire had not even floated in his mind. Not to mention that the only people in London he wished to pleasure and be pleased by were Arabella and Nev. They understood him. They recognized his sexual needs and met them in extraordinary ways. They cared about him. And it had nothing whatsoever to do with his title or his money.

“No,” he said bluntly.

She stared at him, clearly confused. “Excuse me?”

“I have never looked at you in that way. It is not something I want, and it’s long past time you ceased entertaining such thoughts,” replied Edmund, on one hand disliking the need for harsh words while understanding this was definitely not an occasion for dissembling.

“What are you talking about?” said Sylvia, her tone rising. “Of course you want this. It’s the only reason you married Lydia. To be close to me.”

What the hell ?

Had he been transported into a play at Drury Lane? How could she spout such utter nonsense? Everyone in the entire bloody country understood why he and Lydia had married so young, without any kind of courtship or attachment; hell, even Cressida knew!

Edmund took a deep breath in an attempt to calm himself. His sister-in-law was obviously not well. “Sylvia,” he said more gently. “You know that is not true. And I think it’s best you leave. Lord Lovell does not deserve such shabby treatment and you are better than this.”

“My husband has always known of my love for you. I told him. And he concedes to a better man. Do not fight this. Do not fight me .”

And with that, his sister-in-law launched herself at him in a grotesque parody of Cressida and Sir Kenneth’s earlier embrace. Her slight frame and bony limbs were bruising, and even as he grabbed her shoulders to shove her away, her dry, cold lips pressed against his in the most unromantic, unerotic kiss imaginable.

“Oh dear,” said a cool feminine voice from the parlor doorway.

Edmund turned, his revulsion turning to horror at the sight of not only Arabella and Nev, but also an unfamiliar blond lad. And...oh Christ...Denby?

His solemn, disapproving son had just witnessed that? His lovers had just witnessed that?

It was hard to imagine a deeper, darker pit of hell.

CHAPTER 8

The parlor was so quiet they could almost hear the ants on the shrubbery outside.

Edmund gritted his teeth at the injustice of it. He'd made a lot of mistakes in his life, but an affair with his late wife's sister was not one of them.

Then Arabella strolled into the room with the grace and precision of a cat stalking a mouse and an equally feral look in her blue eyes. "Oh dear," she said again, the words firing like bullets from a pistol. "Lady Lovell, what on earth are you doing?"

Sylvia lifted her chin, but it trembled ever so slightly. "I think it perfectly obvious, Lady Carlisle."

"Not really," said Arabella, closing in on her prey. "Because to us, it looked like you were inflicting yourself on an unwilling participant and that is simply not acceptable. Did His Grace consent to that kiss? Or more broadly, did he offer any indication at all that he wished that from you, his married sister-in-law?"

Right before Edmund's eyes, Sylvia began to wilt. "Men like kisses!"

Nev shook his head. "It isn't right when a man forces a kiss on a lady, nor the other way around, Lady Lovell. What kind of example are you setting for the lads?"

Edmund cleared his throat. "Perhaps I haven't been specific enough, but let me say this plainly, Sylvia. There is nothing between us except a familial bond. You are my late wife's sister, no more and no less. Although I suggest you make yourself scarce

in future. Cressida will decide whether she wants you at her wedding, but knowing how she feels, I do not like your chances. Now, I suggest you leave Stanforth House. I'll advise my staff accordingly."

Her cheeks flushed crimson, Sylvia stalked from the room, slamming the parlor door behind her.

Arabella exhaled slowly. "Well. That was...interesting."

"I have never—" Edmund began miserably.

"I know," she replied, tilting her head meaningfully toward the two bug-eyed boys. "But we have a far graver matter to air, and it must be attended to immediately. Harry, Toby, why don't you sit on the couch?"

Edmund blinked. A far graver matter? Harry ? What the devil was going on? "Perhaps someone could explain why Denby is here when he should be at Jourdelay's boarding house?"

Nev actually frowned as he sat beside the boys. "He prefers Harry. It's rather nice, isn't it, when titles can be discarded amongst those we care about?"

Edmund winced at the pointed reminder of their second night together, where he had asked to be just Edmund rather than the Duke of Stanforth. It had felt good, very good, to be just Edmund. "I'll rephrase. Why is Harry here when he should be at Jourdelay's boarding house?"

Young Toby met his gaze directly. "We were abducted by pirates, Your Grace," he said with great dignity. "Covered by a blanket and all."

Arabella's lips twitched. "Thank you, my dear. In summary, Harry and Toby are best

chums at Eton—”

“I know that,” said Edmund quickly, trying to regain some sort of equilibrium. “Cressida read me your letter, Den...er, Harry. I didn’t realize Toby was related to the Carlisles, though.”

“Our nephew,” said Nev fondly. “My heir.”

Arabella coughed. “Anyway, Nev and I traveled to Eton today to take Toby a parcel of treats. Things he can eat or play with or trade. However, when we were introduced to Harry, he said something so alarming that we simply had to scoop up both boys and come straight here.”

Edmund went cold. What had his son said?

“Go on,” he croaked, bracing himself. “Wait, no, I’ll hear it from Harry himself. What did you say?”

Harry took a deep breath, as though bracing himself as well. Toby put a hand on his shoulder, and a little devastatingly, Nev put his hand on the boy’s other shoulder. “I said that you h-hate me. Because I took too long to be b-born.”

The words were like an arrow to the heart. His son thought he hated him?

Christ. His failure was far worse than he’d ever imagined.

Edmund rubbed a hand across his face, then through his hair, but it was too late. His armor of stoicism had disappeared, he was stripped bare and drowning in shame.

Just when it seemed all hope was lost, a feminine hand came to rest on the small of his back, halting his plummet into the abyss. A simple gesture of support.

Encouragement. A chance to make this right.

“No,” he said eventually, then more forcefully, “No.”

“But you don’t like talking to me,” said Harry. “Or playing games. And...and you love Cressida. She is your pirate princess. But I’m never your pirate prince.”

Edmund swallowed hard, but a jagged boulder remained lodged in his throat. “I...I...”

Abruptly, Arabella cleared her throat. “I am famished. Nev, Toby, why don’t we invade the kitchens and see what they have to offer?”

The three Carlises then departed the room so swiftly that sparks almost flashed from their heels. Leaving him and Harry alone. Just staring at each other.

Edmund straightened his shoulders and slowly moved forward to the overstuffed couch. “Mind if I sit?”

Harry looked startled, but he shuffled over. “I didn’t...I didn’t mean to embarrass you, sir.”

Edmund flinched at the formality. He’d been such an ass, continuing the most foolish Vane family tradition of keeping sons at a distance. It didn’t make a boy more resilient and ready to be a duke, it just hurt. Toby was clearly, openly loved, and not only did he seem to be a good friend, he was quite prepared to stand up and fight for what was right. The mark of a true gentleman. “You didn’t embarrass me. Or at least no more than I deserve for not being the father you should have had. I have made so many mistakes, not least of which was not saving your mother when she was sick.”

Harry frowned. “But you didn’t give her the fever. She got caught in the rain when

out riding with her friend and was in wet clothes for hours. And you summoned a physician with all the tonics and poultices. He was the best. Everyone said so.”

Edmund sat forward, hunching over at the reminder of those harrowing few days. No one had expected Lydia to fall so quickly. Nor could they explain how the fever had consumed her like a locust, robbing her of the ability to speak or eat, draining her strength until she was an ashen, sweating shell. Then she passed. Oh, the physician had tried to placate him with terms like “weakened lungs from a childhood illness” and “prolonged exposure to cold wind” but Edmund hadn’t believed him. His duchess was dead, and it was his fault. If he’d just done more, moved faster...

Then he felt it. The softest touch on his shoulder. A pat.

Even after everything, his son was trying to comfort him.

Edmund’s vision blurred and he sucked in a breath, trying to quell the waterfall gathering. But tears were soon trickling down his face. “I apologize,” he choked out. “For not playing with you in the nursery. For making you feel so hurt and heavy and alone. It was very wrong. I was very wrong. I felt the same as you growing up...and then I continued the poor example my father and grandfather set.”

“Sir—”

“Listen to me, Harry. This is important. How long it took for you to be born...that was not your fault. It was no one’s fault. Sometimes babies come fast, and sometimes they come slow, and sometimes they don’t come at all, no matter how hard you wish. But the night you arrived...all the stars were shining. They knew how special you were. If you’d come earlier...it might not have been you. And we wanted, we needed our Harry.”

His son stared at him, eyes glistening. “Really, sir?”

Edmund exhaled slowly. “Not sir. Just Father. I should have told you long ago how glad, how fortunate I am that you are my son. Just as I am glad and fortunate that Cressida is my daughter.”

“Cressida said that even though you and Mother didn’t do so well together, you both loved us very much. Is that true?” Harry asked hesitantly. “It is hard to know because Mother didn’t play with me either.”

How did one explain aristocratic upbringings that could vary from loving to indifferent to downright hellish? Lydia’s childhood had been no warmer than his own, hence her rebellion at the Michaelmas festival. Two people, both looking for love and approval in entirely the wrong way. And both so...so unready for children. Hell, they’d barely known each other, let alone what they wanted in life or for a family. And then his father had passed and he’d inherited the dukedom as well. Overwhelming didn’t begin to describe that time.

“It is absolutely true that your mother and I loved you both very much,” Edmund said slowly. “Unfortunately, we didn’t know how to say it. Or show it very well. Because we didn’t learn how.”

Harry’s brow furrowed. “But it’s so easy. You say ‘I love you’ and wrap them in a big hug and ruffle their hair and play with them. That’s what Toby’s mother does. And his aunt and uncle.”

“The Carlises are very, very smart,” Edmund replied, before awkwardly holding out his arms. “If you want to...”

In seconds Edmund was jabbed in five different places as his lanky lad scrambled onto his lap and wound his arms tightly around Edmund’s shoulders. And it was marvelous.

“We could play toy soldiers,” mumbled Harry. “Before I go back to Eton.”

“Yes, we could. Perhaps with someone who fought at Waterloo.”

Harry gasped. “Who?”

Edmund grinned. “When your sister returns home, I’ll let her explain.”

Indeed, today had been a very, very good day.

Neville sat back in his chair and dabbed his lips with a linen napkin after consuming perhaps the most delectable berry tarts known to man.

A half hour ago, Edmund’s valet, Rivers, a man who seemed to be everywhere, all at once, had directed him, Arabella and Toby to the amusingly-labeled small dining room—a cavernous space—where they had then been presented with a buffet of bite-sized treats and freshly-made tea. The strikingly warm welcome had made him hesitate, until a maid whispered that all the servants were very, very grateful for their support in the dismissal of Lady Lovell before she could sink her claws into His Grace.

Poor Edmund. Something else that had clearly been weighing heavily on his shoulders.

Toby cleared his throat. “Do you think Harry is well? He’s never said anything about his father using his fists or a birch or anything, but...it has been a while.”

Neville exchanged a glance with Arabella, who nodded ever so slightly. “Why don’t you eat another of those pastries,” he said. “I’ll go and peek into the room.”

His nephew nodded eagerly, but in truth Neville was equally eager to reassure

himself. Obviously a deep hurt had provoked young Harry to have such an opinion, but it was impossible to believe that Edmund hated his own child.

After rising to his feet and smoothing his jacket, Neville departed the dining room and casually sauntered back to the parlor. Comparing this place to the Golden Square townhouse was like comparing a tea shop to the British Museum. Everything was priceless. The carpets, the drapes, the chandeliers, the furniture, the paintings, hell, even the trinkets. Yet it was missing a certain warmth, a certain coziness. Really, it was missing any personal stamp of Edmund and his children.

As he approached the parlor door, Neville began tiptoeing so his shoe heels didn't echo. Then he glanced in.

Oh.

Edmund had Harry on his lap and the lad was curled against him, clinging on even as he dozed. And Edmund...Edmund just looked at peace.

Neville grinned, about to turn away, when Edmund unexpectedly looked over and met his gaze. They stared at each other for a long moment, when impulsively, Neville touched two fingers to his lips and lowered them, blowing a kiss.

Then Edmund smiled and returned the gesture.

It was like being struck by lightning.

Oh God. Edmund felt the same?

Neville had always known he fell fast and hard and forever. His love for Arabella was intense and all-consuming and he would never be silent about it, but to fall equally hard for Edmund had been the first shock. Could Edmund love him in return so soon?

Arabella's love was a brick-by-brick build that grew into a palace. She did not trust easily but loved fiercely and deeply. He'd been more than prepared to wait for Edmund's feelings to match his own.

But the duke was there now? They could be a trio?

Neville shifted from one foot to the other, desperate to walk into the parlor and kiss Edmund properly. But no. Everything was more difficult when children were involved. Instead, he blew another kiss, then practically flew back to the small dining room, only to find Arabella and Toby sitting in awkward silence, something they never did.

"Here now," he said carefully. "Who are these two quiet mice pretending to be my wife and nephew?"

Arabella smiled tightly as she stirred a sugar cube into her tea. "We were waiting to hear news. Also...I told Toby I wished to discuss something very important once you returned."

A little confused, Neville sank back onto his seat. Thankfully, they had complete privacy in the room. "Everything is excellent in the parlor. The Carlisle Mission of Father and Son Reunite and Reconcile may be considered a resounding success. Now, what did you have to discuss with Toby?"

Arabella set down her teaspoon. "Toby, my dear, I need to know how you feel about being your uncle's heir. How you truly feel. Not what your mother or grandmother or friends or anyone else thinks...just you."

Toby looked briefly startled, then his expression turned thoughtful as he set down the pastry he'd been eating. "Grandmother was mean, wasn't she? About you and Uncle Nev not having any babies."

For perhaps the first time ever, his wife's jaw dropped. "Er...why do you say that?"

Their nephew rolled his eyes. "I heard her barking at Mama a few weeks ago. When they were getting me ready to go to Eton. Grandmother doesn't want me to be a lord, she wants me to go to Divinity School at Cambridge, then become a curate, then a vicar. Like her precious Harvey. A traveling vicar . Why does she think I am a slug-head who can't remember all the bad things he did? Father was a vicar like I'm...like I'm this raisin pastry."

A snicker erupted from Neville, and despite his best efforts it soon became a full-blown belly laugh. Describing a self-indulgent ne'er-do-well like Harvey as a traveling vicar was the most ludicrous story imaginable; the fact that even a ten-year-old saw through it like glass demonstrated exactly how ludicrous. Even Arabella's shoulders were shaking as she attempted to control her amusement. "You are definitely not a raisin pastry. You are clever and observant and know damned well what is what."

Abruptly Toby turned exceedingly grave. "I don't want to be like Father. Every day I try not to be. He didn't care about anyone. And he yelled at me because I wouldn't tell him he was the best and cleverest and that he was going to be very rich. He made Mama cry a lot. I don't understand why Grandmother loved him so, so much and talks about him like he was a saint."

Arabella sighed and sat back in her chair. "Sometimes when a loved one dies, especially when they pass at a younger age, people remember only the good and not the bad. Over time, the good can become very, very, very good."

"Or just lies," said Toby bluntly.

"Or just lies," agreed Neville. "I wonder if your Aunt Arabella needs to hear directly from your lips how you feel about being my heir. For it does have a lot of

responsibilities, and because we have together chosen not to have babies, those responsibilities will fall to you.”

“I would hate for the barony to be a crushing burden,” added Arabella. “Something too heavy that you are unprepared or unwilling for. So please be frank.”

Toby nodded. “I like being the heir. Knowing that one day, far, far away I will take over from Uncle Nev and sit in the House of Lords and make speeches and help people. I mean, I don’t want to know everything now, because Harry said being a peer means sitting in a library and reading lots of boring papers. But maybe when I come home each summer holiday you could show me one thing about the barony.”

Arabella brightened. “Like ledgers?”

Neville snickered again. “Be very careful, Toby, what you wish for.”

His nephew blinked. “I love numbers. My tutor said I am best at mathematics.”

Oh God .

Neville shook his head and glanced at his wife. “He’s all yours, my love.”

Arabella clapped her hands in true glee. “Next summer, Toby. You and me and a ledger.”

Neville could only smile at such madness. But another, much larger part of him felt pure relief. Toby wanted to be his heir. And he and Arabella would support the lad in all ways possible; especially against his grandmother and the vicar nonsense. And repel horrific ideas like the one to impregnate a maid that had aged him about twenty years. Neither he nor Ara would ever forgive the dowager for that; there would be serious consequences, it was just a matter of what and when.

“Is this a private party, or may anyone join?” asked a familiar deep voice, and they all turned to see Edmund and Harry in the dining room doorway. Edmund had his arm around his son’s shoulder, and the lad was positively glowing.

“Come in,” said Arabella. Then she grinned. “I promise I have not entirely taken over your household.”

“I wouldn’t mind,” said Edmund softly. “Will you stay? Supper and a guest chamber is no trouble whatsoever.”

“Please?” said Harry. “Father said when Cressida gets home we can play toy soldiers with someone who fought at Waterloo .”

Toby gasped and turned pleading eyes on them both. “Can we?”

“Yes,” said Arabella, glancing at Edmund. “There is much more to be said, I think.”

Edmund inclined his head in clear deference. “I’ll inform the kitchens to set an extra three places. Perhaps after supper we could discuss private matters?”

“An excellent idea,” said Neville as his stomach flip-flopped in anticipation. “Now, let’s finish these sweets. It would be a grave insult to such a skilled pastry cook to leave even a crumb.”

Harry immediately sat next to Toby and piled his plate. Edmund sat next to Arabella, and Neville saw the moment she discreetly touched his thigh, for the duke shivered, his eyes closing briefly.

Edmund needed to be held as much as his son did.

Neville almost smiled; Arabella was well versed in the care and management of

touch-starved peers. Then his thoughts turned pensive. Did she truly want another one, though? It wasn't an easy leap to go from a marriage of two with occasional playfellows, to a marriage of three. And how would they make it work living apart?

Tonight loomed as either shadow or sunshine.

What would it bring?

After a delicious supper of roasted beef, glazed carrots, green beans, creamed potatoes, and meringue with vanilla cream, Arabella, Neville, Edmund, Harry, Toby, Lady Cressida and Sir Kenneth had all proceeded to Harry's bedchamber to engage in perhaps the most comprehensive battle of toy soldiers in English history.

While Arabella had expected a popular politician like Sir Kenneth to be as good a storyteller as Nev, she'd been pleasantly surprised at how fascinating he could make even the most mundane details.

As they'd laid out the toy soldiers, Sir Kenneth explained the tactical brilliance of the mighty Duke of Wellington choosing Waterloo as a battlefield due to the ridges and valleys, and the nearby towns he'd garrisoned. He spoke of the brave men from Britain, the Netherlands, the Kingdom of Hanover and the Duchies of Nassau and Brunswick. Where the infantry and gunners and calvary and sharpshooters had been located, and how utterly formidable the enemy Napoleon's forces were. Sir Kenneth had even demonstrated how Wellington's men formed the squares that so effectively repelled the French charge, how the highly skilled Prussian General von Blücher's forces swept in just when it seemed all hope was lost, and the place where Wellington and von Blücher had met and saluted each other in victory.

The boys had been enraptured, deciding Sir Kenneth and Lady Cressida would be the coalition leaders of their forces. Edmund and Nev were declared Napoleon and Marshal Ney, and despite Arabella's best efforts to turn the battle in the French favor

by raiding Harry's toy box for a wooden Trojan Horse, marbles, and a spinning top, they were unfortunately defeated.

What a time. Between the teasing and banter, the cheers and commiserations, the boisterous evening truly felt like a family occasion. But now the boys were tucked into bed, Sir Kenneth had departed, and Cressida had retreated to her chamber, leaving Arabella, Nev and Edmund standing a little awkwardly in the hallway.

They had so many experiences behind them, yet somehow it seemed like they were starting afresh once again.

Arabella cleared her throat. "Where shall we sit and talk, Edmund?"

He hesitated. "My bedchamber is probably the most private location. But I don't want anyone to think I have expectations...not with the children here."

"Let's go there," she replied decisively. Privacy was of the essence for this particular conversation.

Soon all three were seated on the leather couch in front of a roaring fire, glasses of brandy in hand. Edmund's ducal bedchamber was simply enormous, with lovely large windows, thick carpets, a few exquisite Constable landscapes, and a carved oak sideboard she would sell all her worldly goods for. Unfortunately, the rather ancient-looking four-poster bed did not look at all large or sturdy enough for three people.

Edmund smiled encouragingly. "Well. Here we are."

"Before we discuss anything else," said Arabella quickly, "I want to apologize for this afternoon. I know very well how difficult family business can be. Yes, there was a good outcome for you and your son, Edmund, but I should not have forced that without your knowledge. Or removed Harry from school."

Edmund shrugged. “It needed to be done, though,” he said quietly. “I’m not sure Harry and I would ever have gotten there by ourselves. I always thought we were very different, but now I see we are actually so similar. I will be in your debt, no, in debt to you both, forever.”

Nev sat forward. “Speaking of forever...”

Arabella almost laughed. Her husband was practically champing at the bit. In truth, she had so many chaotic feelings twisting and turning inside her that it would be difficult to articulate them all. And speaking on emotional topics was something she’d always found challenging. But as Edmund had been prompted to face his past, and she and Nev had received reassurance from Toby, now they could all march forward. “We’ve been on quite a journey. There have been two critical discussions in this household today; Edmund and Harry, and Nev and I with Toby...”

Nev sat closer and took her hand as she met Edmund’s gaze.

“Our decision to remain childless has been met at various times with confusion, disdain, anger, and much judgment. Most recently, Nev’s mother tried to convince us that Nev should impregnate a black-haired maid and pass off the child as ours. It was...”

Edmund’s jaw dropped. “What the bloody hell?” he burst out.

“It was fucking horrific,” growled Nev. “As well as foolish. While we adore Toby, Ara and I have never wanted children of our own. It’s just not our path, and we are very weary of stating that to people who refuse to mind their own damned business. We love our life, and thought we were complete as a pair who enjoyed occasional playfellows. Well, until we romped with a certain duke at Sanctuary and everything got turned on its head.”

Arabella reached across and took Edmund's hand and squeezed it. "While we've had some grand times with one-night lovers over the years, precisely none of those men touched our hearts like you did, Edmund."

Nev nodded. "We've never before had a second night with a playfellow let alone a third or fourth. Never wanted to. But with you, breaking that rule was essential."

Arabella smiled ruefully. "And I never break rules and rarely seek outside counsel. But I actually consulted Lady Whitmore about turning a couple into a threesome; we became fast friends after learning we each had a submissive husband. She gave me sound advice: honest, frank discussion. So here is my unpolished truth: I love Nev. However, I have also developed very strong feelings for you, Edmund. So strong, that I cannot be without you. I love your courage, your heart, and the tenderness you bring out in me. But be aware what I'm asking and offering here. I wish to be your madam. You would belong to me, body and soul, and I would care for you, pleasure you, and discipline you. For always. Just like I care for and pleasure and discipline Nev."

For the longest moment, an actual eternity, Edmund stared at her, and Arabella's blood went cold. Oh God, did he not want that?

Then he blinked rapidly. "Forgive me. It sounded like you said you want me as your lover for always and I can scarcely comprehend a third perfect event in one day after my daughter's betrothal and reconciling with my son. Are you sure it is what you want? What you both want? For I know it's not about money. Or title. Or a child. So it can only be...me. And that doesn't seem enough."

"Not enough?" Arabella said fiercely. "You are magnificent. And you are mine."

Nev rose gracefully to his feet before tossing a cushion down and sinking to his knees in front of her. Then he turned and held out a hand to Edmund. "Hurry up, love. Come and take your place beside me. Madam is waiting."

A huge grin lit up Edmund's face and he scrambled down onto the floor to also kneel in front of her. Then he winced a little. "Bloody hell. Should have brought a cushion."

Nev burst out laughing. " Always bring a cushion. Wooden floors are not our friend."

Arabella's lips twitched with amusement, but she forced herself to give her two pets a stern look as she cupped both their cheeks, stroking Nev's blond hair with her left hand and Edmund's brown hair with her right. Yes. This was exactly how it was supposed to be for Lady Arabella Carlisle, two adoring men at her feet, ready to serve and worship her. Perhaps in future she might just shock society and present herself as Lady Arabella Vane-Carlisle to indicate the two men who belonged to her.

What an intriguing thought.

"You are smiling, ma'am," said Edmund softly.

"Yes," she purred, as content as a cat with both cream and canary. "Why would I not? I have all I desire."

Then she leaned forward and kissed Nev deeply until her husband moaned. Once satisfied that he was a quivering, panting puddle, Arabella kissed Edmund, holding the duke's head and mastering his mouth until he broke away, giddy and gasping for breath.

"How do you do that?" said Edmund unsteadily. "It's love without saying the words."

"I know," said Nev. "Trust me, you'll always know where you stand with Ara."

Arabella laughed. "Indeed. Now, you two. Show me how my pets care for each other."

Edmund hesitated, once again that vulnerable uncertainty in his eyes, and she added his Vane ancestors to her list of wretched people. But Edmund would come to understand the importance of touch, not just in bed, but casual affection. How to give and receive what he so obviously needed.

Fortunately, Nev took the lead and slid his hand behind Edmund's neck before leaning forward and brushing his lips back and forth against Edmund's. It was soft and sweet and she could actually watch as Edmund relaxed into the kiss, even reaching out to place his hands on Nev's shoulders. Then Nev deepened the kiss, reaching around to cup Edmund's backside, and they both moaned.

Arabella bit her lip, her pussy burning with arousal, but forced herself to say one word: "Stop."

Both men turned and stared at her, blinking in dismay.

She leaned back on the couch. "Not here, not now. But I propose a visit to Sanctuary once the boys are back at school. Do you both concur?"

"Oh yes," whispered Edmund.

"Indeed," said Nev, his eyes glittering.

Arabella nodded. "By the by, I have been pondering a sexual act I think would be particularly delightful..."

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CHAPTER 9

The way Ara was turning the carriage ride home from Eton into a scene of glorious sexual torment remained the stuff of legends.

Neville bit his lip and glanced over at Edmund, who sat next to him in Edmund's large, luxurious carriage. But his fellow submissive's gaze was entirely fixed on Arabella's show.

And what a show it was.

To start, she had merely offered brief glimpses of her nipples. Then she'd tweaked and caressed them until they were dark pink and jutting above the square bodice of her deceptively modest bronze-striped traveling gown. Both he and Edmund had offered to suck them; Arabella had not only sternly refused, but then began teasing them by raising her gown and parting her thighs, wantonly displaying her wet, fragrant pussy.

Now her two men were perspiring, panting, and more than a little desperate.

Arabella tsked. "You two are entirely too loud with your moans. Your pleading. What would the driver say? Show me your handkerchiefs."

Oh God. What was she going to do?

When he and Edmund both produced clean squares of linen, Ara smiled sweetly before very slowly, very deliberately, rubbing each handkerchief against her labia

until it was sodden. Then she gagged them both.

Nev quivered at her deliciously exquisite cruelty; the simultaneous bestowing and withholding of pleasure. His wife truly ruled supreme.

“Now,” Arabella mused, tapping her chin. “What to do with two handsome but very naughty pets? I think you’ll both stand, unfasten your trouser falls, then grip that wooden panel above you. Don’t you dare let it go.”

After yanking the window curtains closed, Neville and Edmund each revealed their very hard cocks. Then they spread their feet for better balance in the rocking, swaying carriage, and held onto the sturdy wooden ridge opposite their heads.

Two cherished pets, gagged, helpless, and excited beyond measure.

Entirely in command, Arabella stroked her clitoris for an eternity, before fingering herself to not one, but two shuddering orgasms. And all they could do was watch.

Edmund groaned around his gag, seed trickling from the swollen head of his cock.

Neville held on by the barest thread, his own length throbbing with the need to come.

Then Arabella closed one hand around Edmund’s shaft. “So delightfully thick, Edmund. I apologize for not bringing a dildo, you’ll have to endure my mouth instead.”

The duke writhed as she ruthlessly sucked his cock, and he soon spurted seed down her throat with a muffled roar. The moment she released him, his legs gave way and he collapsed onto the carriage seat.

Arabella tenderly smoothed his hair, removed his gag and dribbled brandy into his

mouth. “Well done, sweetheart.”

“Christ,” whispered Edmund. “I may never move again. My owner is a goddess .”

“Yes, I am. A little brandy, Nev?” asked his wife innocently.

“Mmmm,” he replied, nodding.

However, once she’d removed his delectable gag, Arabella didn’t trickle brandy into his mouth. She tugged down her gown bodice and decorated her breast and nipple with the amber liquid. “Clean me. Immediately. So Edmund can watch.”

As Neville found brandy-flavored heaven, lapping and sucking the liquid from her creamy flesh and rosy nipple, he almost retained his composure. Except then Ara wrapped the handkerchief gag around his cock, tormenting him with light squeezes and rough rubs of the pussy-wet linen until he succumbed to a violent orgasm with a harsh cry.

“Unfair,” he mumbled blissfully, trying to remember which way was up.

Arabella batted her lashes as she delicately tucked her breasts back into her bodice. Then she pushed the curtains aside to look out and yelped. “Bloody hell, we’re almost at St. James’s Square. Put yourselves to rights, gentlemen, and be quick about it.”

Somehow, he and Edmund made themselves vaguely presentable as the carriage entered the square, although their greatcoats would cover a multitude of sins.

“That journey went so fast,” said Edmund.

Neville laughed. “Distractions help.”

Arabella shook her head. “We were a bit close to home for that. Edmund, is your neighbor particularly stuffy or someone who watches out windows? Is it best to soothe future ruffled feathers with a bottle of good brandy or just brazen it out like it never happened?”

“Actually, you needn’t worry,” said Edmund slowly. “That townhouse is empty and has been for months. An older couple owned it but their bones grew intolerant to London winters, so they moved to Tuscany. They refuse to lower their price, but in the current state of everything there aren’t many who can afford such prime property. Hell, I even had my man look at the numbers, but after two poor harvests and with investment returns so volatile still, I need reserve funds for my estates.”

“So it’s for sale?” asked Arabella. “Hmmm.”

Abruptly, all Neville's faculties returned. Was she considering purchasing the townhouse next to Edmund’s? Although it was less than a mile between Golden Square and St. James’s Square, in London a short distance didn’t mean a quick journey. Living next door to each other would be brilliant. With a little renovation, they could move freely between the two, and no one outside would be any the wiser. If they bought the largest bed possible, Edmund could come and join them at night. And they could dine together; complete discretion unless they wished otherwise. With Arabella’s fortune, she could easily afford it. Hector had been telling her for years to leave Golden Square for something bigger, but she’d always refused.

“What are you thinking, Ara?” Neville asked, trying to appear nonchalant.

His wife hesitated as the carriage pulled up outside Edmund’s townhouse. “I’m not sure. Nothing, really. I know how attached you are to your childhood home—”

He blinked. “Wait, what?”

Arabella's brow furrowed. "You've never wanted to move from Golden Square."

"Not because I'm attached to the house. I don't really have any happy memories there. More that I've never wanted you spending thirty thousand pounds on something new for my benefit. You do enough for me already."

"Oh my God," snapped Arabella, her eyes sparking flames. "Neville Gage Carlisle, prepare to receive the hardest spanking of your life. I try to respect your wishes around gifts even if I don't agree, but we've been living in a paper-walled hatbox for ten bloody years! It is just as well I love you...Edmund, take heed and never ever commit such a foolish act. Swear you won't."

"No, ma'am," said Edmund, very meekly. "I swear."

Neville exhaled slowly. "Although the hardest spanking of my life sounds rather good, I promise not to be so foolish again. And if you purchase the townhouse next door to Edmund's so we can discreetly be a very happy threesome, I would be delighted."

Once all three had climbed out of the carriage, the driver continued onto the mews and the footmen disappeared inside Edmund's townhouse.

Arabella pulled her satin-lined pelisse closer. "Do you happen to know the owner's man of affairs, Edmund? I should like to look indoors."

Unexpectedly, Edmund grinned. "I have the key. The couple strongly dislike lawyers, calling them thieves and swindlers, so asked me to hold it. Presumably because I'm far too dull and proper to use the place for orgies or turn it into a gaming hell."

Neville laughed. "The curse of the responsible gentleman. But could we see the place?"

“One moment,” said Edmund, before dashing inside.

While they waited, Arabella wrapped Neville in a hug. “What am I to do with you? Here, you’ll be so close to Westminster, Piccadilly, and your tea shop. You can host political dinners. Castlereagh will have no excuse; he lives a stone’s throw away.”

“All true,” he murmured, leaning down to kiss her forehead. “Do forgive me. I forget my pride deprives you of giving, the way you show your love. If you can say I love you, I can be an exceedingly spoiled husband.”

Moments later, Edmund returned, a key in his outstretched hand. “Here it is!”

They must have looked a sight, near-sprinting next door, but as soon as they stepped inside the vast, empty entrance hall, Neville felt a rush of excitement. There was no furniture or ugly paintings or trinkets to dissuade him, just a blank canvas waiting for an artist.

“What can you tell us?” asked Neville, as he glanced around admiringly at the sculpted plaster ceilings, sturdy columns, and smooth polished wooden floors. Even now he could imagine turning this place into a home.

“The floor plan is actually quite similar to Norfolk’s at number 31, except on a smaller scale,” said Edmund. “Basement has the kitchens, scullery, footmen accommodation, and cellar. Ground floor has the dining room, two bedchambers for housekeeper and butler, the library, morning room, and parlor. Lovely wide staircase right in the middle that goes all the way up. First floor has a master bedroom and dressing room, plus a music room, ballroom, and two drawing rooms, but really it’s up to you how they are used. More bedchambers on the second floor, so plenty of space for Toby or guests. Maids comfortably accommodated in the attic. The large windows offer superb views and lots of light, and the fireplaces keep it toasty warm. On the Pall Mall side you have your own mews and enclosed garden, of course.”

Arabella laughed as she twirled around. “Just the space alone is wonderful. You don’t even need to explain further. Although I do have one very important question: how big a bed could we fit in the master bedchamber?”

Edmund blushed. “How big do you want?”

She strolled up to him, then curved one proprietary hand around his arse, before beckoning Neville over and doing the same to him. “For three, of course.”

Neville swallowed hard. Their future was so close he could almost taste it. “When can we start?”

Arabella held them closer. “I’ll call on my banker tomorrow.”

Indeed, their couple had become a threesome.

And it was magnificent .

Arabella had always known that money opened doors. But money together with a determined and highly organized merchant’s daughter, a cheerfully encouraging baron, and a powerful duke’s connections and influence could compel actual miracles.

What they had achieved in a week!

Glancing around her new dining room, she allowed herself a moment of pure, unabashed pride.

First, she and Nev met with her banker and arranged a draft to purchase the townhouse. Then, with Edmund and Sir Kenneth’s assistance, they had hired fifty former soldiers currently without work to assist in their move from Golden Square;

disassembling and reassembling furniture, and driving carts to collect new pieces from various shops and warehouses. For a sizable donation to a welfare organization for widows, they had also acquired twenty extra women willing to polish, scrub, and dust both their old home and their new one. A team of footmen led by Oakley, formerly an apprentice carpenter before becoming a butler, and Oakley's son, a master stonemason, had carefully knocked a hole in the first-floor hallway wall, installed a narrow wooden door, and covered both sides with false bookcases.

But now the mammoth task was complete. All the Golden Square servants were happily ensconced in their much larger quarters and they'd sent a letter to Toby telling him of their grand new address. The only task left: trying out the master chamber's enormous and exceedingly sturdy new bed.

Neville sauntered into the room, openly admiring the beautiful rectangular oak dining table that easily sat thirty people. "I still have no idea how you managed all this."

Arabella laughed as she kissed him. "Easy. A great deal of money, Edmund's name, and about one hundred hardworking helpers."

"Speaking of our duke, what time is he joining us?"

Glancing at the dining room clock resting on the fireplace mantel, Arabella yelped. "Very shortly. I've already told Edmund to come and go as he pleases, but we wanted to make a specific time today to ensure the door and bookshelf system worked. And that it's quiet. Yes, I'm aware Oakley tested it several times, but...you know."

Her husband grinned. "I know my beloved sets the very highest standards and that is one of the thousand reasons I adore her."

Arabella harrumphed, but her cheeks heated. "Let's go and wait for Edmund. I've ordered a picnic supper to be sent up later."

Arm in arm, they left the dining room then walked up the wide staircase that curved up to the first floor. Nev actually kicked his feet out in a few dance steps. “I will never tire of a staircase where we can walk several abreast rather than having to leapfrog each other. I really do apologize profusely for the prolonged stay at Golden Square. Speaking of that house, what should we do with it?”

Arabella shrugged. “It’s your house, my darling. I’m sure finding a buyer would be easy...but I suspect you have another idea.”

“I do,” he said ruefully. “Offering it to Valerie so she no longer has to share with Mother. It’s time she enjoyed some freedom, especially now that Toby’s at school. There are lots of people searching for work, so hiring new staff wouldn’t be an issue. And if she feels inclined to meet someone new, there are several respectable bachelors living in Golden Square. Also a plethora of wild artists.”

She nodded at the very Nev response, caring and charitable. One of the thousand reasons she adored him. “An excellent idea. Valerie deserves to kick up her heels, and I’ll happily fund staff for her. Your mother is a different story. I won’t cut her off, however her continued allowance will rely on one critical condition: she stays far, far away from us. Is that fair?”

“More than fair,” said Nev as they strolled down the hallway. “I won’t specify the remotest part of Siberia, but definitely away from London. I’ll send her a note in the morning. Now, what is that mysterious gown box sitting outside the bedchamber door?”

Arabella stilled. The box was stamped with the name of her favorite modiste, yet she’d not ordered anything. “When did this arrive? I’m not waiting on a gown.”

“Perhaps it’s a surprise,” said Nev, his cheeks turning pink. “Devised by a husband and a lover with the assistance of a certain rogue textile merchant. The level of

cunning and distraction we employed now makes us eligible as Home Office spies.”

Arabella’s eyes burned. Her men had procured a special, secret gift? “Well. Well . I’d better open it then.”

“One moment,” said Nev, turning to the false bookcase. “Hurry up, Edmund!”

There was a faint click and the bookshelf opened. Edmund stepped out, and closed it behind him. “Apologies. Have I missed the grand unwrap?”

“Just in time,” said Nev.

Arabella swallowed hard, stunned at her emotional reaction. Then she quickly unfastened the ribbon, opened the box, and removed the fine tissue paper surrounding the gown. And gasped.

It was a garment created by angels; a long-sleeved, gathered-bodice purple gown in the softest satin imaginable. “It’s...it’s...”

“Fit for a queen,” said Edmund quietly.

“Our Queen Arabella,” said Nev. “Why don’t you try it on?”

Uncaring that she stood in a hallway, Arabella immediately gestured for her men to act as assistants and soon she wore the sumptuous purple gown. Oh God. The cut! The fabric! So comfortable and yet so flattering, draping her buxom curves rather than clinging. And the regal color made her feel like a queen. But the way her pets were staring with such reverence, such admiration, such hunger...

It was time to reward her faithful subjects.

“Such a thoughtful gift requires recognition. Come along,” Arabella said graciously, beckoning them to follow her into the newly refurbished master bedchamber. This was the room she was proudest of: with thick cream carpet, cream silk walls with gold leaf accents, heavy gold velvet drapes, a bed twice the normal size with a sturdy wrought-iron frame for restraining naughty submissives, two chests of drawers, a mahogany writing desk, and several armoires, it was the stuff of dreams. “May I present our new bedchamber.”

“Perfect,” said Edmund. “The gold is so elegant...like Nev’s hair.”

“And Edmund’s eyes,” said Nev slowly. Then he winked. “Not our practical queen indulging in a little sentiment?”

“Nonsense,” said Arabella, blushing. Thankfully she was rescued by a knock at the door, and she hurried over to collect the covered silver tray from a maid, before placing it on top of her desk.

Supper could wait. Orgasms could not.

Strolling over to the first chest of drawers, Arabella selected a bottle of oil and her favorite dildo, a superb example of Florentine leather enclosing a polished stone core that filled her to perfection. Then she turned back to her men. “Now, you two. Undress each other and do not tarry. You have many tasks ahead.”

It was almost comical how fast they obeyed. When Nev and Edmund both stood before her, naked and restless, their cocks rising and filling under her avid stare, Arabella nodded in satisfaction.

“How can we please you?” asked Nev.

“Much as I hate setting this heavenly gown aside, you’ll undress me,” said Arabella

crisply. “Then we shall break in this new bed with a very special game. The act I described in Edmund’s bedchamber that night.”

Her husband groaned, a guttural, needy sound. “Oh God. Yes. Edmund fucking your arse and me fucking his. Can you imagine the connection. The pleasure-pain.”

Edmund sucked in a breath. “Please yes. But I’ve never...er...done that.”

Arabella smiled. Her duke was yearning again and it made her greedy pussy throb. “We’ll take this step by step, sweetheart. Now, do not dare wrinkle my queenly gown.”

Never had a lady been so carefully disrobed. Soon, her gown, petticoat, stays, chemise, shoes and stockings lay draped on the chaise, and Arabella was ready to play. Strolling over to the bed, hips swaying, she settled herself in the middle, before spreading her thighs wide and exposing her center to their avid gazes.

“May we...may we make you come?” asked Nev hoarsely.

“Right now?” begged Edmund.

“You may.”

The way they scrambled onto the bed made her giggle, but soon she was sighing in pleasure as Nev on her right and Edmund on her left each sucked a nipple with frantic urgency. Cradling both men in her arms, she slid her hands through their hair, firmly tugging if they became too enthusiastic. However, soon the urgent needs of her pussy became too great and she gently directed their heads toward her wet, aching center.

Nev gave Edmund a wicked grin as they each kissed their way down her fleshy belly to her mound. What did the naughty man have in mind?

Boldly holding her gaze, Nev leaned down and dragged his tongue back and forth along her labia, before circling her clitoris.

Arabella cried out in delight. Then Nev stopped and lifted his head, reached for Edmund and kissed him deeply, rubbing his pussy-wet face against the other man.

The impudence .

“Yes,” gasped Edmund before repositioning himself to push his tongue inside her, frantically lapping her nectar like it was the only nourishment that could keep him alive. “I need...I need more.”

“Do it, sweetheart,” said Arabella fiercely. “Now, Nev darling, get the dildo and fuck me with it.”

Soon Edmund was sucking her clitoris and Nev was slowly penetrating her with the huge dildo. It felt so damned good Arabella could only thrash her head, her fingernails clawing the bed sheets as a spectacular wave of bliss built and built inside her. Then Neville thrust the dildo deeper and Edmund sucked her clitoris just a fraction harder and the wave crashed. She screamed in ecstasy, her body writhing as the pleasure went on and on.

Two delicious submissive men she loved with all her heart providing one gloriously violent orgasm.

The perfect beginning for their brand-new bedchamber.

And their brand-new life.

Until he'd first been with Nev and Arabella, Edmund had never before considered the magic, the true healing power of joyful bedding. With them, it wasn't a cold duty to

be completed as soon as humanly possible, but something exciting and blissful to be savored.

Like the taste of Arabella's honey, for example.

Edmund licked his lips as he carefully sat back on the bed. "Each time I think maybe that will sate my hunger for a bit, but it never does."

"Poor sweetheart," crooned Arabella as she delicately stretched on the bed, her creamy skin flushed, her eyes sparkling, her pussy still stuffed full of dildo...the very portrait of a wanton erotic goddess. "Your cock is very hard. I think you want to be inside me very badly. Coming deep in my backside. Don't you?"

"P-please," he stuttered, his mind not even able to fully grasp such a wonder. Arabella was so beautiful. So generous and giving and caring. And all she wanted was his obedience and devotion. For him to be his true self. That was the most freeing thing in the world. "But...I don't want to hurt you..."

"I'll help you, love," said Nev, caressing Edmund's shoulder. "Just like in the past, we're going to worship Madam together. And it's going to be so, so good."

Edmund shivered, his cock jerking at the hot sexual promise in his lover's eyes. Now, it seemed foolish beyond words that he'd never before fully recognized his own attraction, his own craving for both men and women. But with Arabella and Nev it made perfect sense. And the way they were so clear in instructions. The way he always felt so damned comfortable to enjoy and explore. What a priceless gift. "I'm ready, Nev. I need this. I need you both. Please. Show me."

Arabella blew him a kiss then carefully turned over onto her hands and knees, her luscious arse swaying in invitation. "Prepare me well, then fuck me hard, sweetheart."

Nev groaned. "I envy you, Edmund. I will never, ever forget the first time I came in Ara's arse when she had a dildo in her pussy. Nothing can prepare you for the tightness. The heat. The way she gripped me when she orgasmed, forcing me to come and come until I had no seed left..."

"Stop, I beg you," said Edmund unsteadily as his cockhead grew damp with seed. "If you keep talking like that I won't even last to get inside our queen."

Nev grinned wickedly. "Talking is what I do best. Just remember, love: while you prepare Ara, I'll be preparing you. Start with your tongue. Then one finger. Two. Three. We have plenty of oil, always be generous with it."

Arabella moved restlessly on the bed. "Your queen says get to work. Both of you."

"Yes, ma'am," said Edmund, taking a moment to properly appreciate the lush globes of her arse, the tiny pink star of her anus, the way her pussy so snugly gripped the dildo inside. Then he inhaled deeply of her musky juices, before leaning down and flicking his tongue across her back entrance.

Arabella arched. "Don't you dare tease me."

For the briefest moment, Edmund considered doing just that, for the sole purpose of provoking discipline. Then Nev brushed a kiss across his shoulder. "If you want my cock inside you, best get your tongue moving, Edmund."

Suddenly desperate to be penetrated, Edmund gently nudged Arabella's legs wider apart so he could kneel between them. Then he began swirling his tongue, rimming her anus before pushing inside as much as he could.

She moaned. "Yes. Good."

As though Nev had been waiting for such praise, he caressed Edmund's arse, running an oil-wet fingertip between his nether cheeks, circling that tight hole before slowly, carefully entering him.

Edmund groaned at the burgeoning hint of fullness. It just felt so damned good.

Snatching up the oil bottle, he trickled some of the golden liquid on Arabella's arse, then guided it into her anus with one finger, then two. In. Out. In. Out.

"More," demanded Arabella. "Are you preparing Edmund's arse, Nev darling?"

"He is...Christ..." gritted out Edmund, his eyes almost rolling in the back of his head as Nev added two more fingers.

Don't come. Don't come. Don't come .

In a futile attempt to distract himself from the incessant throbbing of his cock, Edmund added a third finger to Arabella's arse. It was a tight fit, her velvety walls compressing around his fingers, and even now the unyielding dildo in her pussy tormented him with the promise of how such movement would feel against the underside of his shaft. In his feverish excitement he accidentally nudged the end of the dildo, and Arabella's shuddering gasp gave him an idea.

As he continued to thrust three fingers inside her arse, Edmund hooked a finger from his left hand through the gold circle at the end of the dildo, then began thrusting that as well. Sometimes together, sometimes separately.

"Oh God," cried Arabella. "Harder. Harder ."

The moment he penetrated her backside and pussy as firmly as he dared, she screamed, her whole body bucking in a writhing, shuddering orgasm.

“Well done, love,” said Nev, his fingers in Edmund’s arse becoming gloriously, wonderfully rougher.

Edmund shook with need. “I...I can’t wait...”

“Fuck me,” said Arabella sharply, actually slapping the bed with her palm, clearly nowhere near finished. “I want your cock in me immediately, Edmund. Hurry. Hurry.”

After carefully removing his fingers, Edmund wet his cock with oil, groaning as even the lightest touch sent sparks across his sensitive skin. Then, gripping her hips, he positioned his cockhead at her well-prepared back entrance and began pushing it in.

Christ.

It wasn’t even comparable to fingers. The scalding heat. The pressure. The way her anus seemed to suck his cock further and further in, rippling and clenching around his entire length.

Arabella moaned, her hips tilting to press hard against his groin, in absolute control beneath him.

Edmund couldn’t even speak as arrows of sensation darted around his body. Was he speaking? Making any sense? He’d willingly entered a different world, a heady, decadent one where nothing mattered but pleasure. The race to orgasm. And he needed to come more than he needed to breathe.

Abruptly, Nev gripped Edmund’s hips. “No. Wait for me.”

All the air whooshed from Edmund’s lungs at the hot, aching burn of the other man’s entry. Nev’s large cock inside him was too much...far too much...infinitely more

than fingers or any dildo could ever be, yet buried inside Arabella, Edmund was helpless to do anything but take it.

Owned from in front and from behind.

“Please,” Edmund gasped. “I need to move. Please.”

“I’m deep in his arse, ma’am,” Nev gritted out. “He’s so fucking tight. So full.”

“Yes,” moaned Arabella. “I swear I can feel you both. Now fuck him into me.”

When Nev slowly withdrew then roughly thrust, Edmund cried out as his own hips jerked forward with the sweet force, engulfed in the most exquisite pleasure-pain sensation imaginable, his head swimming as Arabella’s arse constricted ruthlessly around his throbbing cock. Again and again Nev thrust, Edmund received and thrust, and Arabella demanded more. Now mindless, reduced to a frenzy of need, Edmund curled himself around her, his hips churning, his cock on the verge of explosion. And then the room filled with a perfect sound: Arabella’s loud cry of orgasmic bliss.

With a guttural roar, Edmund’s seed gushed inside her arse, the ecstasy seemingly never ending as she came and came, her channel spasming around his cock and milking him of every last drop. Yet just when he thought it couldn’t feel any better, Nev bit Edmund’s neck as he thrust impossibly deep and released his own seed in an endless rush.

There was a moment of utter stillness, of absolute peaceful contentment. Then Arabella wobbled beneath him and Edmund blinked, his mind scrambling to do something, anything, yet his limbs not obeying. Fortunately, Nev understood and carefully eased out of Edmund before reaching around to help Edmund withdraw from Arabella. Then they both collapsed onto the bed.

Arabella turned onto her side, her hand trembling as she removed the dildo from her pussy, her cheeks pink and eyes shining. “So, Edmund,” she said softly, unsteadily, reaching over to cup his cheek. “A night of many firsts for you. Tell me how it was.”

Edmund took her hand, his other hand scrabbling for Nev’s so he could kiss them both. “I didn’t know,” he replied simply. “I didn’t know pleasure like that was even possible. To be forty years old and discovering everything...it seems ridiculous. And yet this would not...could not...be possible with anyone else. It’s not just fucking. Anyone can do that. It’s the care. The support. The...”

“The love?” said Nev, as he gently stroked Edmund’s back.

“Yes,” said Edmund hoarsely as his vision blurred. “I’ve never had that. It’s astonishing. I don’t know what to say except thank you. And...and...I love you both so very much.”

Arabella grinned. “From now on, you’ll have love in abundance. One true mate is splendid enough, but two? Now that is what the poets might call heaven on earth.”

“Actual paradise,” said Nev. “When are we going to tell the children?”

Edmund blushed. “Cressida has her suspicions. Wall renovations tend to do that. As for the boys...no doubt they will eventually have questions, either on their own or from ton gossip. If Harry asks, I will tell him I am very happy.”

“And a reformer,” said Nev, laughing. “There’s no escaping it now, not when you’ve welcomed Sir Kenneth and us into the family.”

Edmund made a weak spluttering sound. “Perhaps,” he mumbled.

“There, there,” crooned Arabella, stroking his hair. “All will be well, I promise.”

Oh no. It was far, far better than that.

This was what the storytellers called happily ever after .

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December 1817

While it was only a short distance between St. James's Square and Piccadilly, the weather today was far too cold and miserable for walking, so Arabella and Edmund were riding in his carriage to watch Nev and Sir Kenneth speak.

Arabella glanced across at her ducal pet. Never had Edmund looked so stern and lofty in his black jacket and trousers, elaborate cravat, muted bronze waistcoat, and polished black shoes with diamond buckles. Yet now she understood that was the mask he hid behind when nervous or unsure, her first urge was to wrap herself around him and guide his head to rest on her breasts until his worry was assuaged. But today he was taking a very big step. And wrinkled clothing would not be at all the thing.

“Are you sure you're ready, sweetheart?” she asked softly, reaching over to take his hand.

Edmund nodded, grimacing slightly as he shifted on the comfortable cream leather squabs. “I am. It's been months now. We've told everyone dear to us: Cressida and Sir Kenneth, Harry and Toby, Miss Valerie, your father and mother and brothers, even Madam Venus and the Hunter-Whitmores. I want to make it known outside our closest circle. I'm just very thankful for this morning's discipline to remind me of your love should my courage fail me at any point.”

Arabella smiled. Both her men had received a cropping before breakfast; Nev always liked to go into a speech with a well-disciplined arse—he said it was like she was there, holding him, even when she couldn't be. But her husband didn't know she and Edmund were coming to watch today. This was to be a surprise.

And it was a big step. A significant one. For not only would Edmund be publicly acknowledging their threesome relationship, he would also be publicly supporting the reformist cause. This went entirely against every belief held by previous Vane men, against everything Edmund had been taught—it was certainly unusual for a wealthy duke of an ancient line who sat at the very top of the social tree. Not even young Devonshire was this radical.

But they'd received two early Christmas blessings regarding this impending moment: Edmund's brother-in-law, Lord Lovell, had put his foot down and insisted Sylvia rusticate in the country for an extended time. And, after Nev's note and several very blunt conversations, the dowager had discovered exactly how serious the threat of fund withdrawal was if she didn't leave London. She had scurried away to rent a cottage in Cornwall, leaving a very happy Valerie behind in Golden Square with a playful ginger kitten and several very attentive bachelor neighbors.

Indeed, Sylvia Lovell and the dowager baroness were two bugs who would not be spoiling the picnic.

"As always, sweetheart, it was my great pleasure to warm such delicious arses," said Arabella. "And I will of course be at your side to assist. As will Cressida, if she can prise herself away from her betrothed."

Edmund grinned reluctantly. "Indeed. I know I've said it many times before, but the fact you two get on so well is just wonderful. Cressida always wanted someone to create mayhem with."

"I am more than happy to act as her older sister," said Arabella pertly. "I would have boxed her ears if she'd dared to call me mama. In saying that, I have completed one rather important maternal task for your daughter."

"Oh?" he replied, his brow furrowing in confusion. "Which one?"

“The other day, that mischievous minx strolled into my library while I was working on my ledgers and very demurely, very sweetly asked if I might give her... the talk .”

“I see. So the pirate princess did, in fact, fire a challenge across the bow,” choked out Edmund, his shoulders rocking with laughter. “And so, my queen?”

Arabella winked. “Naturally there could only be one victor. Unlike many mamas, I was neither flustered nor vague. Let it be known far and wide that I rendered the Lady Cressida Vane owl-eyed and speechless with my frankness. However, may I also add, now she is armed with such knowledge...I’m not sure that Sir Kenneth is truly prepared for the excitements of his future married life.”

“I’m not sure either. But come January’s end when they exchange their vows at Westminster, he will learn. In the meantime, I know Sir Kenneth loves having Nev close by when he visits. Between them, they might be the most gifted orators I’ve ever heard. ’Tis fortunate that they both strive for good.”

“I cannot wait to hear them today,” she admitted as the carriage pulled up near to where Nev and Sir Kenneth had arranged their small, temporary wooden stage.

As she stepped out into the cold afternoon air, Arabella shivered, immediately grateful for her heavy striped calico gown, thick woolen spencer, sturdy kidskin boots, and cozy muff. Although it wasn’t raining, the sky was steel-gray and the ever-growing crowd kept glancing upward uneasily. Then she turned to Edmund. “Ready, Your Grace?”

He lifted his chin and climbed out of the carriage, before very deliberately taking her hand and curling it around his arm. A statement of intent.

Warmth seeped through her at the solid strength and she blinked in surprise at the easing of her own shoulders. It seemed she had also been a little tense, and the way eyes were turning upon them and whispers beginning, proved exactly how justified

that tenseness was.

London loved a scandal. And they were about to witness a particularly juicy one.

Well, she was an iron-willed merchant's daughter who answered to nobody.

Arabella strolled directly up to Nev and tapped him on the shoulder. "There you are, my darling," she said loudly. "It is I, your beloved wife, Arabella Vane-Carlisle."

Nev spun around, clearly startled. Then he saw Edmund and his eyes widened further before his lips curved into a beaming smile. "In which the queen of everything and her handsome companion hurtle cat-like into the crowd of pigeons."

Arabella waved an imperious hand before slipping her free arm around her husband's waist and brazenly cupping his delectable arse—right where she'd cropped it earlier in the morning—and lightly rubbing the still-tender flesh. He shivered. "We are here to applaud and cheer loudly. And when I say we, I mean both of us."

Nev went still, gazing at Edmund. "Really?"

"You were right," said Edmund gruffly. "I am a reformer. I've just never dared to break the long Vane tradition of being a Tory before. But that changes today. I believe in the cause and will support you in every way. Publicly. Like you've always supported me...love."

Nev sucked in a breath, his eyes actually glistening. "Bloody hell. I...I...it really must be Christmas month."

"Don't you dare cry," said Arabella, blinking furiously to stop a waterfall of her own. "You have a speech to give. Now, one fierce hug, then Edmund and I will stand to the side so you and Sir Kenneth might convert the masses to the way of the future. We're expecting brilliance!"

As the scandal sheets would later screech, on that cold winter's day on a Piccadilly footpath, Lady Arabella Vane-Carlisle, Lord Neville Carlisle, and His Grace the Duke of Stanforth announced to all and sundry that they weren't just acquaintances or even friends...but committed lovers and life companions.

What the gossips didn't know: at long last, Edmund had found the freedom to become his true self. And Arabella and Nev had found the last necessary part for true bliss. Just like the Townsend-Grants and the Hunter-Whitmores before them, the Vane-Carlisles would march forward, now and forever...as a household of three.

Indeed, love was the most perfect gift of all.

Need another scorching hot threesome romance but keen to try a different era?