



A Virgin for the Duke of Ash (Ton's Wolves #2)

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Category: Historical

Description: When Evie's brother leaves for his honeymoon, he assigns his most ruthless -and most handsome- friend to take care of her. And to make his job easier, the Duke of Ash brings her to his estate...

Duke Daniel's past has turned him into a dangerous Wolf. Someone who has vowed that his line ends with him. So he has no business lusting after his best friend's sister...Especially when he promised to protect her from everyone. Including himself. Until she steps into his bedroom...

Now he must marry her; but he can't ever touch her...If only he was strong enough.

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

An enchanting regency romance of 80,000 words (around 400 pages), written by Sally Vixen and published by Cobalt Fairy.

No cheating, no cliffhangers, and a strong happily ever after.

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CHAPTER 1

Warm hands...Gentle hands...

Daniel let out a soft groan as he felt the feathery touch trail past his bare abdomen to his rapidly hardening manhood.

Had he returned with company last night? In the ungodly hours of the morning, he was not quite sure.

However, those soft touches were enough for his instincts to kick in, and with a feral growl, he rolled over until his hard body was pressing against the womanly softness beneath him. With expert speed, he pinned those wrists over her head as his slumberous eyes peered at the woman who had been so bold as to awaken him with an erection so early in the morning...

Only for his blood to run cold as a pair of steely blue-gray eyes gazed back up at him in utter shock, a soft gasp escaping slightly parted pink lips.

It was Evie, damn her to hell!

He immediately leaped off the bed as if her very skin scalded him, and he glared at her as she scrambled to pull the sheets up to her eyes—not before he caught a glimpse of her delectable curves through the sheer nightgown she wore, however.

Daniel would have laughed at the sight if he had been one to laugh. Instead, he only growled the one logical question that penetrated through the haze of lust.

“What in the name of God are you doing in my bed?”

Evie just blinked at him with her wide eyes, before she hastily shifted her gaze to the side.

Daniel, however, was finding her sudden lack of words rather infuriating.

And rather frustrating, considering he was standing there at the side of the bed with a cock hard enough to pierce through wood.

When she bit her lower lip, it took all of his self-control to not let the slightest groan slip past his damned lips.

So, he narrowed his eyes at her and allowed the corner of his lips to tilt up in cold amusement as he asked her, “Well then, are you trying to seduce me, My Lady?”

His words had the effect that glaring and growling did not. Evie immediately leaped off the bed, her blue-gray eyes bright with fury.

“You wish!” she seethed, crossing her arms. “And for your information, Your Grace, if I ever felt the need to seduce anyone, you would be the last person on God’s green earth that I would pick!”

Daniel, to his great vexation, found himself admiring how that one simple act of fury only emphasized the fullness of her breasts until he swore he could see the faint shadow of her areolae through the thin fabric of her nightgown.

“Although your display of feminine rage is admirable,” he retorted coldly, “it still does not explain why you are in my bed and touching me in a most scandalous manner.”

A pretty red stain spread across her cheeks. “Of course, I had no intention of touching you there—or anywhere else, for that matter!” she replied defensively. “I... well, I...”

“Please, do go on,” he sneered. “I patiently await your explanation for your actions.”

She glared daggers at him. “My room was simply too bright,” she bit out. “I tried blowing out the candles, but the light coming in from the corridor was still too much. I thought that I could... simply find the darkest room and spend the night there just this once.”

“You found your room too bright?” he enunciated flatly, crossing his arms over his chest. “Why do I find that hard to believe? Most young ladies despise the darkness.”

In fact, the many women he brought to his bed would even plead with him to at least leave a few candles on. Daniel himself liked sleeping in absolute darkness, which was why he had taken great measures to make sure that not a sliver of light ever made it into his sleeping quarters.

Who would have known that it would attract Evie to slip into his bed uninvited?

“Well, I do not like the light,” she replied with a haughty tilt of her chin. “And anyway, since you are neither young nor a lady, you cannot possibly know that. I absolutely detest fire and?—”

He saw her eyes widen, before she pressed her lips shut. She took a deep breath and spoke in a much more even manner. “I would appreciate it if you could provide me with accommodations very much like this one. You did say,” she added with a bit more hesitation, “that I could have any room in Ashton Hall that I liked.”

“I did not mean you could crawl into mine, for heaven’s sake!” he roared.

Evie frowned at him. “Well, I did not know it was yours,” she began, but then hastily shut her mouth.

“Never mind,” he snapped, picking his shirt off the floor. “You can have this room!”

“Y-yes, but where will you?—”

“I’ll find somewhere else to sleep in. Unless,” he added with a raised eyebrow, “you want to share this bed with me. In that case, I have no objection?—”

“Scoundrel!” She glared at him.

He smirked at her. “I thought so.”

He shrugged his shirt on and strode out of his bedroom before the impressionable young woman sitting on his bed could notice the erection that was threatening to burst out of his pants.

Evie was proving to be far more trouble than he had initially bargained for.

And it was only the first day.

Damnation!

He had never thought of Evie as anything more than Colin’s younger sister before. Perhaps he should have been more cognizant of that fact, especially now that they were living under the same roof.

Because a friend’s annoying younger sister should never have aroused him like that in the first place.

Evie watched as Daniel strode out of the room in large, angry strides, and who could blame him? It was not every morning he woke up to a strange woman in his bed, touching him in a most intimate manner...

Or maybe not, she realized with a frown. He had probably had many women in his bed—and they might have done a great deal more than simply touch him.

Somehow, though, the thought of another woman touching him made her blood run cold.

But who could blame them, really? When he had turned around to button his shirt, she had caught a glimpse of his broad back, his muscles bunching and flexing in a way that practically called out for her fingers to touch them. To see if they were as hard and smooth as they looked...

And before that, she had definitely felt something hard.

“I must be going mad,” she muttered to herself with a slight shake of her head. “This is Daniel Stanton we are talking about. I could not find a much more infuriating man in all of creation, even if I tried.”

She doubted there was even another man in London with that kind of back that she had seen. It had been enough for her mouth to go dry just looking at him.

He truly is built like a Greek statue, she sighed inwardly. It was just too bad that his attitude left a lot to be desired.

She shook her head as she grabbed the robe she had casually draped over the back of a chair when she slipped into bed last night. It had been dark, then, and she had been so desperate for even just a wink of sleep that she had not bothered to check if the room—the bed, specifically—had already been occupied.

But now that the sun was beginning to peek over the horizon, she needed to get back to her own rooms before her maid discovered that she was missing. Even if the servants at Ashton Hall were extremely disciplined, scandal still had the most unfortunate tendency to find its way to the papers.

Or to the waiting ears of the matriarchs of Society.

“I cannot believe that it is only my first day here and I am already getting into trouble,” she murmured as she slipped out of the room—Daniel’s room.

She had barely managed to slide back under the covers when her door swung open and her grandmother swept in, followed by Evie’s maid, Jane, who held a basin of clean water and had some towels draped over her arm.

Lady Wellington could be considered a rather handsome woman at her age, and even though she usually had a cheerful demeanor, Evie was well aware that her grandmother hid a crafty mind beneath her charming smile. Otherwise, how could Colin ever be persuaded to even consider marriage, with her brother being one of the most obstinate creatures to ever exist?

But now that Colin and Alice were happily married, Evie knew without a doubt that her grandmother would turn all her attention towards her as her only unwed grandchild.

What is it with dowagers and their intense need to see all of their descendants married?

However, Evie did not have much time to dwell on her thoughts, for her grandmother had already swept the curtains aside to flood the entire room with light.

“Rise and shine, my darling!” she sang. “It is a rather beautiful day for a turn about

Rotten Row, don't you think?"

Evie could think of a great many things—better ones—to occupy her time than an excruciating trip to the park, but she could never tell her grandmother that.

Instead, she could only groan and turn over with the sheets pulled over her head.

"Oh dear, you look as if you have not slept a wink!" her grandmother chided. "Were your accommodations not to your liking? I was under the impression that we were assigned the very best rooms in Ashton Hall."

"It was much too bright last night," Evie grumbled.

It was hardly a lie, though. It had been too bright.

But then again, she had also most aggravatingly been pulled out of her slumber far earlier than she would have preferred. When she recalled how his hard body had rolled on top of hers, his hands pinning her wrists over her head, Evie felt a strange warmth pooling low in her belly.

Strange . I have never felt this way before.

She had also never been in such close contact with a rogue before, so perhaps these things were to be expected.

"You poor child," she heard her grandmother carry on. "You are even looking a little flushed. Are you sure you are all right, my dear?"

Evie felt her face heat up a little more. "I-I'm fine, Grandmama. I am just not used to everything here, I suppose."

“Yes, perhaps I should have a word with His Grace about that.” Lady Wellington frowned slightly. She affectionately patted Evie’s cheek. “Even if he is the one your brother trusted to keep you safe, that does not mean he can neglect your comfort.”

Evie simply smiled and murmured some words of agreement as she allowed Jane to assist her in dressing and doing her hair.

Later, she would have to ask the maids if there might be another room that was not as well-lit as the one she had been assigned. Preferably, they would not insist on setting her up into one with a fireplace.

The thought of the logs crackling in the hearth alone was already enough to make her shudder. The heat and light combined would be nigh on intolerable.

Also, it would be much better if they could give her a room as far from Daniel’s room as possible. When she recalled how she had shamelessly draped herself over his muscular form, she felt as if she might die of embarrassment.

Even if she found it strangely thrilling—which she should not, by the way.

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CHAPTER 2

Damn that outrageous woman! And damn Colin for saddling me with this impossible task!

Daniel inwardly cursed as he stomped towards the exclusive gentlemen's club. The poor man who had been tasked with opening the doors for its elite clientèle wisely kept his head down as he led him to his usual seat—one that afforded him a greater view of the rest of the room while keeping him mostly out of sight of the other patrons.

“Will you be having your usual, Your Grace?”

His response was only a slight nod, but it was already enough to send the waiter scurrying to get his order posthaste. As soon as the man left, he assumed a more relaxed position, his body settling into his seat, while his senses remained on high alert.

Evie was proving to be so much more trouble than he initially thought. The mere recollection of her hand sleepily trailing down his body to lightly rest on his manhood was enough to make him hard again and bring to mind images he had absolutely no business visualizing.

Images of her luscious body bent over the sofa as he pounded into her from behind.

Or her sweet lips wrapped around his rigid length.

Fortunately, the waiter chose that time to bring him a bottle of his favorite whiskey. Daniel wasted no time in pouring himself a full glass and tossing it back, relishing the burn the alcohol left on its way down his throat—a far better, saner alternative to the near-perpetual state of arousal that plagued him ever since he woke up to find Evie in his bed.

He frowned darkly at that. He had always prided himself on his self-control, and it absolutely boggled the mind how an innocent young lady threatened to unravel all of that with just a few light touches.

I must be losing my mind . This is Colin's sister I am fantasizing about. A more troublesome woman could not be found on this earth.

An entanglement with Evie—no matter how tempting it sounded at the moment—would only bring more trouble than he cared for.

A sudden burst of raucous laughter finally managed to pierce through the dark thoughts swirling in his head. His eyebrows snapped together as his keen hearing began picking up the conversation of some of the club's more disreputable members.

“I heard Miss Wilmington will be bringing in the rubies from Lord Wilmington's mines!” a nasal voice declared. “I daresay that none of you fools can top that!”

The small gathering let out a collective gasp of astonishment, and Daniel could not help the slight smirk that tugged at the corner of his lips.

The pompous nobleman who had made such an announcement was none other than The Honorable Humphrey Clifton, the second son of Baron Clifton and a known profligate with nary the resources to sustain his ambitious extravagance. Indeed, it would have been far more astonishing if Lord Wilmington actually consented to a match between him and his daughter.

Fools, every single one of them, Daniel scoffed inwardly.

But then again, he had heard of far more ludicrous wagers in his three decades of existence. Many members of the beau monde had the same tendency towards the excessive and outrageous.

That day, however, he had lost all tolerance for such inanity.

With a slight raise of his eyebrow, the waiter who served him rushed immediately to his side. Daniel merely had to glance slightly at the rowdy group for the man to grasp his intention.

“I shall take care of it, Your Grace,” the man promised him with a deferential bow. With measured steps, he hastened over to the group.

Daniel saw the brief flash of hesitation on his face before he approached who appeared to be the leader of the group. The so-called gentleman’s face scrunched up in obvious displeasure, and he glanced over in Daniel’s direction.

“The Duke of Ashton, eh?” he sneered. “Well, we have paid our dues to this club fairly. Surely, His Grace would not be so impolite as to kick us out.”

Daniel did not even bother to look in his direction. The rabble always made a lot of noise when they were about to be tossed out. Even the thin veneer of sophistication could not hide a man’s true nature.

“Come now. Surely His Grace is not at all as you make it seem, Darnley,” a more congenial voice appealed. “Perhaps His Grace would care to join us in a friendly wager?”

I would rather be tormented by seven devils .

The one who tried to at least make an attempt at civility was none other than Thomas Salsbury, the Earl of Sidmouth. Tall and charming with warm brown eyes and golden hair, he was a favorite of ambitious mamas and their daughters. Their adoring gazes would follow him even when he walked into the most crowded ballrooms.

A pity, really, that he did not have much to stand on.

Daniel gazed idly at him, his eyes frosty with disdain. For a moment, he saw the Earl's smile falter slightly, which only made him smile even more.

Truly a wolf in sheepskin, nothing more.

Lord Sidmouth's lips curled into a wider grin, arrogance oozing from his every pore, as if it would make up for the silent blow that Daniel dealt him.

"In fact, I wager that I shall secure Lady Evelyn Fitzroy's hand in marriage!" he announced confidently. He glanced slyly at Daniel. "What do you say to that, Your Grace?"

The rest of the club fell silent, and all gazes swiveled back to the silent man sitting at the corner table.

His words had the very effect of taking a bludgeon to Daniel's skull. In his eyes, the Earl of Sidmouth had suddenly changed from merely an annoying blight upon God's creation to a man who appeared to have grown tired of living.

It was no secret that Evie was under Daniel's protection, entrusted to his care by Colin himself before his departure. To declare such a thing was not merely throwing the gauntlet at his feet—the fool was slapping him with it.

"I would say that some men indeed still fail to comprehend the enormity of the earth

and their insignificance in the greater scheme of things,” Daniel replied scathingly.

He stood up and glared at Lord Sidmouth, who subconsciously took a step back when he so much as looked at him.

He has nothing but this false bravado to show, and he dares to challenge me?

Daniel put his hat on and eyed every single one of them. Some of them visibly shrank back, but he found no joy in their obvious defeat. These idiots would only rise again the moment he turned his back to them.

“I suggest you put an end to this nonsense,” he warned them. “You would all do well to keep your distance from Lady Evelyn Fitzroy, or you will have me to deal with, and believe me”—he smiled coldly—“it will not go well for you.”

For a moment, he saw fear flash in the Earl’s eyes. Some of the younger, weaker men in attendance gulped visibly.

These were men who grew up in the lap of luxury, living privileged lives. What did they know of pain?

Only enough to fear it.

The Earl of Sidmouth pressed his lips into a grim line and stood up. “I find the company in this establishment lacking,” he announced stiffly, his hands clenched into fists.

He promptly picked up his hat and whirled around, heading for the door with large, angry strides. Seeing as their ringleader had left, the rest of the circus immediately scrambled for their hats and sticks as well and headed out en masse.

Beside Daniel, the poor waiter heaved a sigh of relief.

Daniel turned to the man with a raised eyebrow. “You have just lost some customers for the night, and yet you are pleased?”

The man let out a grateful smile. “His Lordship, the Earl of Sidmouth, is not exactly known for his generosity.”

“One would think that a gentleman of his stature would be more willing to part with his coin,” Daniel remarked softly.

“If he had coin to part with...”

Daniel shot the man a knowing look, and the waiter immediately ducked his head, although his expression was largely unrepentant as he went about cleaning up the mess the group had left behind.

The Earl of Sidmouth might have found favor amongst the womenfolk, but there were those who saw him for what he truly was.

A joke.

Daniel, however, did not find his latest repertoire the least bit amusing.

“Where do you think they will be headed for tonight?” he asked the waiter.

The man did not even look up from his task. “I heard that Lady Horton is hosting a great ball tonight, Your Grace.”

Daniel smiled grimly. Whatever schemes that pathetic coward had, he was going to make sure they were not going to succeed.

Just the thought of that bastard putting his hands on Evie was enough to inspire the ungentlemanly side of him.

It would seem that everything about her simply unleashed his darker side—and not always for the better.

Ever since she was young, Evie had the most disconcerting feeling that her emotions could be read from her face alone. It certainly did not help that for the past few years, the Dowager Countess of Wellington had taken over her upbringing. Her grandmother simply had a way of ferreting out the truth from anyone with but a single glance.

She could not possibly have known what transpired this morning, could she? Evie fretted as she smiled wanly at the gentleman who had offered to fetch her some lemonade.

Her grandmother had made no mention of it, and besides, she had made sure that she was not seen tiptoeing back to her rooms earlier that morning. If Daniel did not mention the incident to anyone, then no one would ever know, and she knew that he would never breathe a word of it to anyone.

Not if it would jeopardize his friendship with Colin.

He might be largely antagonistic towards Evie, but the man valued his friendship with her brother greatly, so she can rest assured that no one else would know of how she had managed to find herself in his room, in his bed, in the dark of the night.

How she had draped herself over him most scandalously, her hands wandering where they should not...

“There you are, Evie!”

Evie was jolted out of the quagmire of her thoughts by that soft, cheerful voice. She looked up to find Phoebe, Alice's younger sister, smiling most charmingly at her.

"Is something amiss? Are you coming down with a fever?" her friend asked her anxiously, reaching out to feel her forehead. "You look rather flushed, my dear."

Evie shook her head a little too frantically. "It is nothing. I merely felt a little hot, that is all."

"Are you sure?"

She managed an overly large smile and nodded. "Absolutely."

Phoebe did not look too convinced, but she decided not to press the issue, and Evie was grateful that her closest friend in all of London was tactful enough to sense when a conversation had become largely uncomfortable.

"Have you been dancing with Lord Percy?" she asked her friend instead.

"Yes, I have!" Phoebe nodded. "How can you tell?"

"Because there was a slight limp to your gait," Evie replied wryly.

Both young ladies shared a knowing look before they burst into laughter.

Lord Percy was a nice enough gentleman with a decent income, but his dancing skills left a lot to be desired. Unfortunately, he also seemed largely unaware of this fact and would take to dancing with nearly every young lady in attendance.

"I would have liked to be able to dance tonight," she said woefully, showing Phoebe her empty dance card. "I might have even danced with Lord Percy if he was kind

enough to offer.”

Her friend frowned as she scrutinized the card. “Well, that is a rather strange occurrence.”

It was strange indeed, for not only was Evie well-liked amongst the ton, but one might also even go so far as to say she was the Season’s Incomparable.

From the moment she made her bow and gained the Queen’s favor, it had seemed she was destined to sweep the rest of London off its feet. Combined with her extremely generous dowry, gentlemen had been queuing up to her parlor to call on her. Her dance cards had never been empty.

Except for tonight.

Evie had a sinking feeling that somebody was responsible for the distance her suitors had taken to putting between her and themselves, but she could not be so sure. After all, the goal of the Season was for her to find a suitable match.

Daniel could not possibly have been sabotaging her success, could he?

At that moment, the butler announced the arrival of the Duke of Ashton, and as one, all eyes swiveled to the door, where a tall man with eyes as green as emeralds strode in with a self-assured air.

Speak of the devil and he appears!

Evie groaned inwardly.

“Evie, you do not perhaps think that His Grace?—”

“I do not care what His Grace thinks,” she quipped rather quickly.

I do not even want to see him tonight!

Seeing him only dredged up that feverish recollection of his hard body pressing against hers, his hands pinning her wrists over her head.

Evie had never been so close to a man as she had been to Daniel that morning.

And she most certainly had never felt that keen sense of awareness, that fragile vulnerability juxtaposed with a strange, dark, feminine power. It was a most contradictory feeling and one that thrilled her to no end.

Looking at him now, she only wished that he would not notice her. That he would leave her to enjoy the rest of the night without his interference.

However, when he shifted that intense green gaze in her direction, she knew that such fancies were not meant to be.

Why oh why had she been cursed with such ill luck ever since Colin left her care in his hands?

CHAPTER 3

I could think of a hundred better ways to spend the night than this.

Daniel narrowed his eyes as he swept his gaze around the ballroom. When it landed on a familiar figure with dark brown hair, her pale, creamy skin seemingly glowing in contrast to the deep midnight of her dress, he could not help but clench his hands into fists at his sides.

And then, he saw the hungry gazes that more than half of the male population in the ballroom was throwing at her, and his anger surged to unparalleled heights.

He had told the Dowager Duchess to keep an eye on her at all times. Why was that infuriating woman standing in the ballroom with no one else but Alice's younger sister? Where was her grandmother, the esteemed Dowager Countess? She should have known better than to leave her charge alone in a pit of vipers!

He quickly made his way to the pair and glared at Evie, who tried to avoid his gaze.

"Why are the two of you unaccompanied?" he demanded.

He saw her bristle, as if she considered decking him right where he stood, if such a laughable notion were possible.

"There is quite the crush tonight," Evie retorted. "We are hardly unaccompanied."

It was true, of course. With a full ballroom, the two young ladies could hardly be

considered alone.

That, however, was not enough for Daniel. Not when he was painfully aware of all those men currently eyeing Evie as if she was a buffet set up in the middle of the desert.

“Lady Wellington and the Dowager Duchess left just a few moments ago to get some refreshments,” Phoebe explained softly. “They should be back shortly, Your Grace. You need not be worried.”

If she thinks that makes anything better, then she is sorely mistaken!

Daniel knew all too well the different tactics these so-called gentlemen employed to ensnare innocent young ladies. He’d be damned if he allowed them to attempt such a thing right under his nose!

“Fabulous,” he muttered coldly. “I guess that means I have to take care of you for now.”

Evie returned his glare with a fierce one. “Well, nobody ever told you to do such a thing! You can go over there”—she pointed haughtily to the other side of the ballroom—“and we shall be perfectly fine without your ominous presence hovering over us like a thundercloud.”

“Need I remind you of how your brother practically begged me to keep you out of trouble?” he retorted, an eyebrow raised. “Did he not promise me anything I wanted in return?”

“Well, he never would have made such a request if he had any idea how terrible you are to me!” she shot back.

For a moment, they stood there, glaring at each other, neither one of them feeling the need to give up.

Daniel had never met a more exasperating woman in his entire life. Not only did she insist on challenging him at every turn, but she was also pushing him past his limits. If a woman ever decided to become difficult, she would not have done as spectacularly as Evie at that moment.

“Your Grace, you must forgive Evie,” Phoebe interjected. “She is only vexed because her dance card is empty.”

Really? Is that all there is to it?

He felt a slight tingle of satisfaction that apparently, his earlier threat in the club had reached the rest of the male population of the ton. Sometimes, being the menacing scoundrel that Society made him out to be did have its advantages.

Evie, however, was not one to appreciate a good thing even when it landed on her lap and squawked at her.

He narrowed his eyes at his obstreperous charge, who only glared stubbornly back at him.

“Do you want to dance?” he bit out.

She appeared to be surprised by his question, but recovered rather nicely by scowling and crossing her arms over her chest.

Daniel pressed his lips into a grim line and prayed to the high heavens that his gaze did not stray to her bosom.

Do not look down. Do not look down. Do not look down...

“What does that have anything to do with you?” she scoffed, drawing his attention back to her flushed cheeks and bright eyes. Her chest was heaving slightly, the soft swell of her breasts pressing against the beaded neckline of her dress.

But he had already managed to maneuver her deftly to the dance floor, where several other pairs had gathered. It was a much better move than to allow his gaze to linger longer where it should not.

Almost immediately, he heard the soft whispers breaking out all over the ballroom. Dozens of pairs of eyes swiveled to them—some of them surprised, some curious, but a great many more were envious. Fortunately, Evie was much too incensed with him at that moment that she was oblivious to it all.

“Just because I wanted to dance does not mean I want to dance with you,” she huffed under her breath.

Daniel could only smile mirthlessly at her. “Well, you are stuck with me, sweetheart. Take it or leave it.”

She glared up at him just as the musicians began to pick up their instruments. In the end, Evie was still a well-bred young lady, and well-bred young ladies did not leave their dance partners on the dance floor and storm off in a huff.

Besides, if she refused to dance with him tonight, she would have to refuse everyone else for the rest of the night. The rules of Society made no sense to Daniel, but for once, he was grateful for this one.

“Do not look so pleased with yourself,” she grumbled as she bowed.

He returned her scowl with a brilliant smirk. “I would not dream of it.”

There were much better things to dream of, in his opinion, but none of which were appropriate for polite conversation.

Arrogant jerk! Conceited idiot!

In her mind, Evie called Daniel a thousand and one names—some of which were quite unladylike and could not be uttered in polite company.

Not that she cared to be polite to him.

Phoebe had been right in that she was a little upset that her dance card had remained empty up until he had whisked her off to the dance floor as if that solved anything. In fact, she had a feeling that it would only make things worse.

As soon as they reached the dance floor, she noted the many stunned looks directed their way. As far as she knew, Daniel never danced at these events, and now that he himself had led her to the dance floor, what was everyone going to think?

“With the way you are looking at me, one would think that we are on opposite sides of a duel,” he remarked under his breath.

In spite of the displeasure in his words, he maintained a dashing smile that lent his normally icy features some degree of humanity.

If she did not find him so infuriating, Evie would have admitted that he was rather handsome with his dark hair and piercing green eyes. Most young ladies gravitated towards the likes of the Duke of Sinclair with his dazzling charm, but there was something about Daniel and the way his shuttered green eyes seemed to be holding a thousand secrets that seemed to make her weak in the knees.

Not to mention that she now knew for a fact that he was pure muscle under his exquisitely tailored clothes.

“Tell me how I am supposed to look at you, then?” she croaked.

His lips pressed into a grim line. “You are the debutante. I think you would know better how to go about these things.”

Evie nearly burst into laughter at that. “Well, it is true that you do resemble a fish out of water.”

“I most certainly hope not,” he scoffed. “I would like to think that I am doing a better job at moving to the tune instead of flopping about on the chopping board.”

The thought of him flopping about like a freshly caught halibut was so ridiculous that she could not help the giggle that finally bubbled up her throat.

“I suppose it is not polite for a young lady to laugh at her dance partner,” he surmised. “But it is infinitely better than you looking at me as if you could not decide whether you would like to shoot me or run a rapier through my chest.”

Evie, much to her surprise, found herself smiling up at him. “Not that I know which end of a pistol to point at you,” she told him softly. “But those are rather fine ideas.”

He gave her a strange look, one that made butterflies flutter in her belly. “If you so much as looked at a man like that, I suppose he can be persuaded to accomplish the task for you.”

“Look at him like what?” Evie looked at him in confusion.

“Never mind,” he said quickly, his eyebrows snapping together. “Just stay away from

them altogether, and we might be able to last until your brother returns.”

She looked at him as if he had just lost his mind. “But is not the purpose of this Season to find a suitable match?” she asked him, feeling a little irked. “How am I supposed to do that if I am to stay away from every potential suitor?”

His mood seemed to grow even darker at her words. “Do you enjoy the company of these so-called suitors of yours so much?” he snapped.

Evie balked at his harsh tone. “Not really. I was just wondering if I had done something wrong... If I had embarrassed myself somehow and that’s why no one approached me tonight...”

His expression softened slightly, but his next words absolutely floored her.

“Do not be silly,” he told her. “I just forbade them from coming near you.”

“E-excuse me!?” she sputtered, her eyes wide. “You forbade them from coming near me? Just who do you think you are?”

He frowned darkly. “I am the man your brother entrusted with your well-being while he is off gallivanting.”

“Colin is not gallivanting, he is on his honeymoon,” she corrected him, feeling even more vexed by the minute. “And I am quite certain he would never agree to... to... to whatever it is you are doing right now!”

Her voice was rising as her frustration peaked. She had not done anything wrong—it was all due to his machinations! Now, how was she supposed to find a match when nobody was allowed to come near her?

Is he insane?

Even her own brother had not been as overbearing, and Colin was already considered exceedingly overprotective, as far as older brothers went.

“I would advise you to keep your voice down, My Lady,” Daniel told her in an icy tone. “You would not want to attract undue attention, would you?”

Evie pressed her lips into a furious line, but she continued to glare at him. “Oh, so now you are trying to deflect?”

“I am not deflecting,” he replied matter-of-factly.

“Yes, you are,” she hissed back.

There were a great many things she wanted to say to him—choice words, mostly—but the dance had already come to an end. Evie bowed stiffly, flushing slightly when she noted that several eyes were watching them with keen interest.

“This discussion is not over,” she told him under her breath.

Daniel had the gall to smile slightly at her, as if he was amused by her anger.

“We may continue the discussion later,” he agreed. “We live in the same residence now, or have you forgotten?”

How could she forget? Ever since Colin had left her in his “care,” she had longed to return to Blackthorn Estate.

Still, she smiled coldly at him. “Not later. We are going to talk about it now.”

She noted the slight tick in his jaw with some satisfaction.

“I shall be in the garden,” she told him. “I suggest you do not make me wait overlong.”

CHAPTER 4

He could not believe her audacity—or her naiveté.

The gardens were no place for a gently bred young lady to be traipsing about in the dark of the night. Evie might think that it simply was someplace they might be able to hold a conversation without anyone listening in on them, but Daniel knew better.

The gardens were where the ton secretly let out their darker, baser selves. These were places of trysts and rendezvous, where the members of Society enacted their more scandalous fantasies away from the censorious eyes in the ballrooms.

She cannot possibly mean to go there...

Daniel clenched his jaw as he watched Evie resolutely sashay out of the ballroom, pausing briefly to lean against the door frame with just one hand to cast an expectant look at him over her shoulder. If she had intended to seduce him, she could not have done better with that one sultry look.

But, of course, she was not seducing him.

Planning my complete evisceration would be more likely .

He had to admit that warning off every gentleman in London might not have been the best move, but he had heard enough from those bastards at the club. The Earl of Sidmouth could not have been the only one having such intentions towards Evie—he was simply audacious enough to state them for everyone, including Daniel, to hear.

Even just thinking about it right now made him want to punch the man and leave a dent in his skull.

If the sweet, little fool thought that he was going to feel remorse for his actions, then she was sorely mistaken. He was not going to apologize for keeping her fine bottom out of a great deal of trouble further down the road.

He found her standing with her proud back to him. Underneath the moonlight, her skin glowed as if she had been carved from the finest alabaster, her skirts rustling from the slight breeze that blew past.

It was a cool night, but his blood rushed hot in his veins at the sight of her.

He still had not been able to get rid of the memory of her sleepily draping herself over him. Nor could he so easily forget how hard he had been when he pressed her soft body into his bed, his hands pinning her wrists over her head. Even now, the image flashed through his mind, making him ache once more.

“You cannot make my decisions for me.”

Her voice was cold as it carried in the night air. She turned around to face him, her blue-gray eyes steely with resolve.

He frowned as he crossed his arms over his chest. He already knew she was going to say something like this.

Colin and Lady Wellington had indulged her to this degree, but the world was not going to be as kind to her. Her wide-eyed innocence, the way she regarded the people around her with such a trusting smile... how could she know that those very same people would gladly celebrate her downfall?

“Of course, I can,” he told her implacably. “Your brother left you under my protection, and you will do as you’re told if you know what is good for you.”

She glared back at him, her chin raised haughtily. She was as defiant as Hippolyta, the Queen of the Amazons, and just as fiercely exquisite. Her lips pulled back into a snarl, and a keen desire to taste that luscious mouth washed over him.

“You keep saying that like it is your only excuse,” she flung back at him. “Maybe that is the only excuse you have.”

He raised an eyebrow at her. He knew she was going to be difficult, but Evie was proving to exceed his expectations in that aspect.

“Maybe that is all the excuse I need.” He shrugged.

For a moment, they stood there, glaring at each other. Locked in a battle of wills.

Evie was much too innocent and trusting to be left on her own. With men like Sidmouth after her, leaving her to maneuver the intricacies of the Season was like throwing a duckling into a den of snakes.

Like hell Daniel was going to allow something like that to happen.

“Tell me, Your Grace,” she asked him, “have you ever managed a debutante’s coming out before?”

He frowned. “No.”

“Have you ever accompanied one through a Season?”

“I cannot say I have.”

“Have you ever considered marrying one?”

His eyebrows snapped together. Her questions were getting more outrageous by the minute, and he could hardly see the point in them.

“You must be out of your mind,” he scoffed.

He had no intention of marrying anyone—debutante or otherwise. If she harbored any delusions about that...

“Then what makes you think that this”—she gestured towards him in frustration—“well, whatever it is you think you are doing will produce the best outcome?” She stepped up to him and glared haughtily at him. “You are most unqualified to tell me what to do, as well as how and when to do it!”

By now, she was close enough that he could see her bosom heaving from her passionate speech and her pupils dilating in the darkness. He was close enough to catch the scent of that soft, undeniably feminine fragrance that emanated from her body.

If he reached out, he could drag her to him and kiss those words right off her lips.

It was a most tempting idea, but Daniel liked to think he had better control of his baser desires, and he was not about to let a self-proclaimed debutante who hardly left her country estate entice him into it.

“Oh, I think I am more than qualified, sweetheart,” he drawled silkily, his voice dropping to a low growl. “Have you forgotten that I have a reputation for devouring naive young ladies like you who wander off into the dark unchaperoned?”

He heard the soft intake of her breath, saw the sudden realization dawning in her

eyes.

“Y-you would not dare,” she squeaked.

He smiled at her, feeling his feral instincts rise to the fore at the sudden meekness of her tone.

“You will find that I do dare to do whatever the hell I want.”

He took one step forward. She took one backward.

“You might be in your element in the ballroom, but out here, you have been grossly outclassed, Evie.”

He took another step forward. And then another. Until he had her back pressed against a marble column. He braced his arm over her head as he leered down at her, allowing the dark lust to swirl openly in his eyes.

He had not lied to her when he told her that he had never been with a debutante—their nigh-on endless, vapid prattling and inexperience were more than enough to discourage a man’s lust. Daniel himself had rather... peculiar tastes, and the gently bred young ladies of the ton were not his usual fare.

Tastes that would shock Evie to her very core.

Which was why he had absolutely no idea why this particular lady aroused him so much. She was everything he did not want. Should not want.

And yet, he had never wanted to taste, to feel another body as much as he wanted to feel hers.

Just one taste . One taste and I shall sate my damned curiosity once and for all.

As his hand curled around the back of her neck, Daniel knew he was going to burn for this.

That Colin was going to kill him.

But as his lips descended on hers, he found that he did not care at all.

Kissing Daniel Stanton was not what she had in mind when she told him to meet her in the gardens.

It might be what most people did in the gardens, but Evie liked to think that she was more sensible than most people. The funny thing was that she was quite certain that most sensible people would agree that it was unwise to poke and prod a bear until it devoured you.

The problem was that she rather liked being devoured.

Evie let out a soft gasp as his lips moved over hers. Hot. Fierce. Demanding.

Daniel was one who would take and take and take and leave nothing behind.

His body was hard and unforgiving as it pressed her against the column at her back, but his lips—good Lord, there was nothing quite like his lips.

They slid over hers so sensuously, molding her against him as his hand trailed down her shoulder to her hip, sending sparks skittering over her fevered skin. When his fingers curled, she felt as if her insides had been turned to liquid heat.

She let out a soft mewl as she pressed back against him, eager for more of what he

was showing her. Her hand traveled from his shoulder down to his chest, where she could feel his heart beating wildly against her palm.

She smiled inwardly, feeling a sort of power in the knowledge that he was just as affected by the kiss as she was. Thrilled, her hand wandered lower, when she felt a hand wrap around her wrist in a vice-like grip.

Suddenly, he pulled away from her so quickly that she was knocked off balance. If it had not been for the column behind her, Evie had no doubt she would have fallen to the grass in an ungraceful heap.

Her eyes flew open only to find that Daniel was not as pleased as she thought he would be.

In fact, he was glaring at her with an intensity that would make lesser men tremble in their boots.

CHAPTER 5

Damn it all to bloody hell!

Daniel stumbled back like a drunken sailor, swiping a hand over his face as if it would erase what he had just done.

To Evie, of all people. The woman he was supposed to protect.

And a rather fine job you have been doing, a small voice taunted him.

He had been so bent on protecting her from all those bloody bastards that he had neglected to keep her from the biggest bastard of them all—himself.

“Damn,” he swore softly. “Damn it all!”

“Daniel—”

He held his hand up to cut her off.

What the hell was he thinking, kissing her like that in the gardens? Anyone could have walked in on them, and if they had been discovered, Evie would have been ruined.

Either that or she would have been forced to marry him.

Daniel could not think of a fate worse than that.

Oh, she might want him for now, but when the lust-filled haze dissipated, would she still look at him the same way?

It must have been this morning, he thought to himself with gritted teeth.

Ever since he had woken up to Evie's sleepy touches, her luscious curves pressed against him, he had not been able to function well. She had managed to throw him completely off-balance—a most dangerous accomplishment if there ever was one.

“I apologize for that,” he muttered softly. “We should return before they notice our absence.”

He did not even wait for her reply. He simply turned on his heel like the coward that he was.

How he staggered back into the ballroom, he honestly could not recall.

All that he knew was that there was a thirst in him that no wine or liquor on this earth could quench. Still, he managed to grab a glass from a passing tray and managed to quickly finish it off.

“Good God, man!” he heard a familiar, jovial voice remark. “I have not seen you drink so much since that time we stumbled into that brothel in?—”

He turned around and glared coldly at Ethan Audley, the Duke of Sinclair, one of his supposedly closest friends. Right about now, he was not exactly acting like the true comrade-in-arms that Daniel had once thought him to be.

“What the hell happened to you?” his friend asked in a lower voice. “I have not seen you this flustered since—well, I must confess that I have never seen you agitated at all.”

Daniel set the glass down on a passing empty tray. “If you are going to aggravate me unnecessarily tonight, I suggest that you save your antics for another day,” he growled.

To his eternal vexation, Ethan merely laughed, his eyes twinkling merrily as he regarded him with a mischievous look.

“My, somebody is rather ill-tempered today.” He grinned. “You know what? Perhaps you should retire to bed and nurse your spirits—preferably with a nice lady to attend to your needs.”

If Ethan thought that his words of advice would help, then he was sorely mistaken.

No sooner had the words “bed” and “lady” left his lips than Daniel’s filthy mind immediately conjured up images of Evie writhing in his bed.

Naked.

“No,” he said curtly. “Not tonight.”

“Well, that’s too bad.” Ethan shrugged his broad shoulders. “The Marchioness is coming your way. Maybe she can help you with that foul mood of yours.”

He followed his friend’s gaze to a dark-haired lady dressed magnificently in deep red velvet. On others, that dress might have been considered rather scandalous, but the Marchioness of Cobham still managed to pull it off with great aplomb.

Except that Daniel did not find any of that appealing tonight. In fact, he had not found a woman appealing for quite some time.

Maybe Ethan is right . Maybe I should see to these needs before I make a bigger fool

of myself.

Unfortunately, none of his usual preferences were interesting enough.

“You are on your own, my good man.” Ethan grinned at him, clapping a hand on his shoulder before walking away.

For a moment, Daniel looked on absently after his friend had left. Among their group, Ethan was considered the charming one, wooing ladies left and right and leaving a trail of broken hearts along the way.

Daniel, however, did not subscribe to the same philosophy that his friend did. He did not believe in fostering a relationship beyond that of the transactional kind that offered the physical release he sought.

There was nothing wrong with either of those.

Except when he saw Ethan casually approaching a small group consisting of two elderly women and two much younger ladies, he could not help but wonder if he should try his hand at it.

And when Evie looked up at Ethan, a soft smile playing over the lips he had kissed not more than an hour ago, he felt his hand clench into a fist at his side.

If it had been possible to die of mortification, Evie had no doubt that she would have fallen dead on the cool grass of the gardens the moment that Daniel left.

Unfortunately, life must go on, even though she had to stumble back to the ballroom on unsteady knees, rendered absurdly weak by the most scorching kiss known to mankind.

Of course, I might have been exaggerating it, since I hardly have any other experience to compare it to...

Still, she was fortunately able to make her way back before anyone noticed her absence, even managing to snag a glass of lemonade from the refreshments table and affecting a look of extreme boredom and nonchalance as she walked back to join Phoebe and her grandmother.

Her pride might have suffered a severe blow after the first gentleman that kissed her reacted as if it was the worst thing to ever happen to him, but if he was going to pretend like it had not happened, then she was not about to trumpet her devastation for all the world to see.

“Good evening, ladies.”

She angled her head slightly and saw Ethan, another one of Colin’s closest friends, smiling at them. When his gaze fell on Phoebe, it lingered for no longer than a breath, before he turned to the rest of the group.

“Your Grace, you are late again,” Lady Wellington admonished him.

He grinned boyishly at the Dowager Countess. “Of course, one must build up the anticipation prior to the arrival, My Lady.”

“Still as mischievous as always.” The Dowager Duchess of Ashton shook her head with a wry smile. “I, for one, am eagerly awaiting the day when you finally meet your match.”

“Do not hold your breath, Your Grace,” Evie told her with a conspiratorial smile. “Some gentlemen tend to avoid the subject of matrimony like the plague!”

The ladies burst into restrained laughter while Ethan protested his innocence.

It was so typical that she would have fallen into the same patterns as easily as a duck taking to the water if she had not been so distracted.

As she craned her neck subtly to cast her eyes around the ballroom, she was vaguely aware of Ethan launching into yet another of his outrageous tales. Evie was certain she had heard it once or twice before, but Phoebe hung on his every word.

Besides, Evie was much more interested in the events that unfolded before her eyes from across the room.

She watched with narrowed eyes as a magnificently dressed woman with dark hair and upturned dark eyes made her way over to Daniel, her hips swaying gracefully as she walked towards him. A smile that could only be described as sensual tilted the corners of her lips as she looked up at him. To her surprise, he did not push her away as he usually did.

Like the way he had pushed Evie away earlier in the gardens.

White-hot anger pierced through Evie as she looked on at the scene.

He has just walked out of the gardens after kissing me, and he has already moved on to his next prey. No wonder he is one of the Wolves.

When she saw the woman lean in to whisper something to him, she felt her insides roiling violently. Her hands clenched into fists at her sides, and it took all of her self-control to stop herself from shuddering violently.

Why am I feeling this way? He is only acting the way a rogue should act. Why should I be surprised?

From the very beginning, she had known who Daniel was. She was more than familiar with his reputation amongst the ladies. Even the gentlemen seemed to give him a wide berth—so much so that it sometimes seemed as if he was a world apart from them.

Why, then, should she be surprised that he acted the way he did in the gardens?

Maybe this is nothing more than my great disappointment in how my first kiss turned out .

That kiss had been everything she had ever dreamed it would be and more—until it was not.

Until everything came crashing down on her when Daniel looked at her as if he had made the biggest mistake of his life.

Perhaps he did. Perhaps she did, too.

“Evie?”

She was yanked out of her thoughts by that soft call. She turned her gaze back to Phoebe, who was looking at her wide-eyed, a trace of panic in her gaze.

Beside her, Ethan looked at her before his gaze flicked over to Daniel. When he looked at her again, there was a gleam of suspicion in his eyes.

Realization dawned on Evie, and her eyes widened in horror.

Have I... Have I said something I should not have?

Like divulging the details of her first kiss?

For the second time that night, she wished the ground would open up and swallow her whole.

Ever since she had made her bow, Evie had behaved as perfectly as a well-bred young lady should. She had engaged in friendly conversation with everyone and never spoke a word out of turn. She had forced herself to be lively and charming, even when she wanted nothing more than to return home and enjoy the peace and solitude of her own company.

However, none of that mattered, for now she was making one blunder after another until she was more socially inept than the most hopeless wallflower.

All because of a man who probably never gave her as much time of the day as she dedicated to him!

“I could hardly blame you, My Lady,” Ethan sighed despondently, his voice louder than it usually was. “This ball lacks entertainment. Now, if Lady Wellington was to honor me with a turn about the dance floor, I might consider my night saved.”

Lady Wellington laughed and shook her head, teasingly chiding him for being a mischievous rascal before allowing him to lead her to the dance floor.

The other gentlemen, seeing Ethan taking to the dance floor once more, renewed their vigor as well and scurried off in search of dance partners, much to the pleasure of the young ladies.

As the Duke of Sinclair cheerfully exhorted the musicians to play a lively tune once more, Evie found her gaze straying back to the man across the ballroom.

This time, Daniel was alone. His broad shoulder was leaning against a column of polished marble, a glass of claret in his hands once more. His green eyes were dark as

he gazed at the twirling couples on the dance floor.

Even then, as dark and foreboding as he looked, Evie could not help the familiar heat that pooled low in her belly at the sight of him. Nor could she stop the warmth that rose from her chest up to her cheeks.

“Damn him,” she muttered softly to herself.

Damn him, indeed, and all the knots he had managed to tie her in.

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CHAPTER 6

A man must never lack for alcohol in his own residence.

In Daniel's case, he had a liquor cabinet set up in his study, although he had never felt the need to delve into its contents as much as he did that night. The expensive vintage would now serve its purpose, if only so that he might burn away the memory of Evie flushed under the moonlight, looking up at him with limpid eyes, her lips swollen from his kiss.

He had never found a woman as wildly seductive as she was at that moment, and that, in itself, was a problem. A great one.

It was only a kiss.

He had certainly done more than that. And yet, it felt different somehow. It felt dangerous. Like he was playing with a flame that threatened to burn out of control.

And he hated losing control.

What the hell am I doing?

He was supposed to be watching her, not sampling her charms.

It had seemed a simple enough task, making sure that she stayed out of trouble long enough for him to turn her back to her brother. Who would have thought that Evie would try to cross him at every opportunity she got?

Even when she was not around, he had to deal with those damned suitors sniffing after her like a pack of hounds that had caught the scent of their prey. Thinking back to Sidmouth's arrogant proclamation, he was sorely tempted to plant his fist into the bastard's smug countenance.

He still did, actually.

He poured himself a generous measure of whiskey before tipping his head back and drinking it all. He was about to pour himself another glass when a crisp voice pierced through the relative peace of his study.

"I was not aware that you had become a lush."

He paused, holding the bottle in midair, and scowled.

What the hell is everyone's problem tonight? Is it Torment Daniel Stanton Night?

He turned around with a raised eyebrow to find the Dowager Duchess of Stanton looking at him, her eyes sharp. A small smile played on her lips, and he cursed himself for letting her see him in a moment of weakness.

"It is nothing." He shrugged, affecting a picture of nonchalance. "I was just about to head off to bed, anyway."

The older woman looked at him with a knowing smile. "You never drink before bed."

Daniel set the bottle down with a glare. "Is there a reason for your visit at this ungodly hour?" he snapped.

"Oh, nothing," she replied breezily. "I merely wanted to ask if there was anyone who had caught your eye at the Hortons' ball."

“I thought I had made it clear that I will not be fulfilling my duties as a duke in that aspect,” he retorted sarcastically. “So, you will have to forgive me for disappointing you, Duchess.”

To her credit, Caroline Stanton, the Dowager Duchess of Ashton, did not look the slightest bit fazed by his harsh tone. Lesser men would have quailed, but she stood there serenely, her back ramrod straight.

But then again, she had to be made of sterner stuff for her to outlive the bastard she had married.

“But you did dance with Lady Evelyn,” she pointed out calmly. “You never danced with anyone before that.”

He looked at her as if she had lost her mind. Pray tell, who would he dance with at a ball like the one they had just attended? The Dowager Duchess knew better than anyone the kind of women that Daniel dallied with—none of whom could be seen in public.

“You never even danced with the Marchioness before,” she pressed on. “I just found it... most unusual .”

And why the hell should he dance with the Marchioness of Cobham? The woman was already married, and that matter between them was more transactional than anything.

“What is so unusual about it?” he bit out. “The whole ton knows that Lady Evelyn Fitzroy is under my protection for most of this Season, along with Lady Wellington. It would have been far more unusual if I had simply ignored her.”

“I see,” the Dowager Duchess sighed. “So, it was simply like that, I suppose.”

“Correct.”

She smiled sadly at him as she walked over and patted his face gently, causing him to flinch slightly.

“I just hoped that you would not allow that awful man to dictate how you live your life,” she told him softly. “He is gone now, dear boy, but you still insist on tormenting yourself.”

He did not say anything more, and Caroline walked out of his study with the same quiet grace that she had entered with. Years of marriage to one of the most contemptible men had not cowed her. She was indeed an admirable woman.

However, if she carried on pressing him about finding a young lady to bind himself to for the rest of his life, he feared that even he would lose his patience with her.

And with Evie taunting him at every turn, his temper had become very short, indeed.

She waited until she heard the door to the study close, mostly keeping out of sight until the Dowager Duchess walked out and disappeared down the corridor. As soon as she was gone, Evie resumed her anxious pacing just outside the study.

I am not going to bed without resolving what happened between us . Even if I have to go into the dragon’s lair myself.

After the ball, the carriage ride back to Ashton Hall had been steeped in an unusually heavy atmosphere. Occasionally, her grandmother and the Dowager Duchess tried to break the tense silence, but they were largely met with monotonous replies. In the end, both of the older ladies simply sighed and gave up.

When they arrived at the mansion, Evie avoided her grandmother by feigning fatigue

and begged to be allowed to retire to her rooms posthaste. Her grandmother had looked at her strangely for a moment before bidding her to rest well.

But how am I supposed to rest after what just happened?

Evie had never been kissed before, but she had a vague idea that when ladies had their kisses stolen, they did not have the same effect that Daniel's kiss had had on her. Oh, she had heard them giggling about it, almost as if such a scandalous thing was like a secret prank of some sort.

She had never seen one so wrecked by the aftermath of it the way that she had been.

That kiss had been everything she had ever thought a kiss should be—and more .

And right now, what stood between her and the answers to the questions roiling in her mind was a heavy oak door.

Courage, Evie , she told herself, taking a deep breath. Fortune favors the brave. Here goes nothing.

As she gathered the courage to face Daniel, the door to the study suddenly swung open, and the object of her conflicted thoughts strode out of the study with a determined gait. For a moment, all she could do was stare at the broadness of his back and the way his linen shirt stretched over his muscles.

When she finally came to her senses, his strides had already put some distance between them.

“Wait!” she cried out.

In a fit of desperation, she dashed towards him, her hand outstretched. She managed

to grab him by his arm.

When he looked at her as if she had just lost her wits, Evie wanted to sink to the floor in mortification for the third time that night.

“What do you want?”

His biting, icy tone nearly made her recoil, but she stood her ground.

“I think we should talk,” she replied, pleasantly surprised at how her voice did not quiver as much as her insides did.

Daniel had taken off his jacket and his cravat. The first top buttons of his shirt had been undone, allowing her to glimpse the muscular column of his throat. He was no less as imposing as he had been fully dressed at the ball. In fact, one might say that he looked even more forbidding, as if the wolf in him had shed all pretense and stood before her in all his wild, untamed glory.

Unfortunately, she did not feel the least bit scared of him. On the contrary, that strange warmth flooded her veins once more, and she felt something within her clench at the sight of him. A tingling sensation danced up her spine, and she was wholly, intrinsically aware of the man that stood before her.

“It was an accident ,” he enunciated, his voice as calm as a still lake. His eyes betrayed no emotion as he glanced coolly at her. “We were both frustrated. It will not happen again, I assure you.”

Instead of feeling relieved by that, she felt... disappointed . Annoyed even.

“Oh. An accident.”

He raised an eyebrow at her incensed tone. “Why? Did you think there would be something more?”

At that moment, she dearly wished she could wipe the icy nonchalance off his face. Instead, she managed to gather herself and smile pleasantly at him.

“I did not think so, no.”

“Good.”

Somehow, he did not sound as pleased as she thought he would be. After all, it was quite rare for her to be so agreeable to whatever he said.

“Since that is how it is”—she continued to smile at him—“then I shall leave you to visit your Marchioness or haunt whatever club you wish to head off to.”

She was not going to unravel before him. Not like she did when he kissed her in the Hortons’ gardens. She was going to walk away from this with her head held high and?—

She let out a slight shriek when he pulled her back and braced his arms on the wall on either side of her head, effectively caging her body with his. Even as she glared up at him, she could feel the tremor of excitement that ran through her, felt the liquid heat pooling low in her belly.

“Just what the hell do you mean by that, Evelyn?” he demanded, his voice a low growl that sent a thrill through her.

For so long, she had always been “little Evie” or “Colin’s little sister.” The way he said her name made her feel more like a woman. Like he had finally shed the illusion of her as a child and saw her for what she had now become.

She had to resist licking her lips, which had become dry so suddenly.

“Well, is that not what you wanted?” she replied, tilting her head back to meet his fierce glare. “Are you not a Wolf? Is that not what Wolves do?”

She saw it again—that flash of danger in his smile. That wickedness that hinted at sinful things.

Evie knew that she should run away. That this meant trouble and that conventional wisdom was screaming at her to get away.

Who could have known that her instincts of self-preservation would be lost in the face of that slight smirk?

He had leaned in close to her, so close that she felt as if he might kiss her again...

“You have no idea what you are saying, sweetheart,” he murmured, his hot breath tickling the side of her face. “And you should sincerely hope never to find out.”

As they stood there, Evie could feel the strain in his arms as he held himself away from her. She was not blind.

All it would take was for him to angle his head ever so slightly, and their lips would meet once more in an all-consuming kiss?—

Suddenly, he pulled back, his breath coming out in a harsh exhale. For a moment, she gazed back at him, still reeling in surprise.

And disappointment.

Once again, a very keen disappointment.

“Leave, Evelyn,” he whispered huskily.

She wrinkled her nose as she glared up at him. “I told you that you cannot tell me what to do.”

His eyes flashed at her defiance, and she could see the feral Wolf lurking in their vivid green depths once more. It stared at her hungrily, as if she were its prey.

Not tonight, she decided. Tonight, he can have a taste of disappointment.

Nimbly, she ducked under his arm and skipped away. Just when she was out of his reach, she paused and looked at him over her shoulder.

“Good night, Your Grace.”

She swore she heard a hoarse curse behind her, but she did not dare look back. She should leave while she had the upper hand.

After all, it was infinitely much better to walk away with one’s head held high.

CHAPTER 7

Evie found it quite fortunate that breakfasts in the city were held much later compared to the country. Otherwise, she never would have found the strength to crawl out of bed after spending the better part of her night tossing and turning, wondering what else Daniel might command her to do.

She honestly did not know why that idea sent a shiver down her spine.

“Oh, Evie, darling! There you are!” her grandmother called out with a smile that was much too bright for Evie’s tastes.

Lady Wellington set aside her fork as she bid her to sit by her side.

Opposite her grandmother, the Dowager Duchess of Ashton smiled serenely at her as she sipped her tea. At the head of the table, Daniel sat wordlessly, muttering a soft grunt when Evie took her place beside her grandmother.

Nothing unusual there. He never participates in conversations between women, anyway.

As she reached for a plate of freshly baked rolls, she stole a glance at him. Dressed in a fresh linen shirt, he looked the very picture of a wealthy English nobleman languidly enjoying his breakfast while the womenfolk of his household fluttered uselessly about him like butterflies.

Evie fought the scowl that threatened to break through her facade and forced a smile

as she buttered her bread and listened to her grandmother and the Dowager Duchess chatter excitedly about the opera to be held next week.

“I heard that Miss Mallory will be singing the aria,” the Dowager Duchess remarked. “I must say, I have never come across someone as talented as her in a long while.”

“That is quite true.” Lady Wellington nodded slightly in agreement. “All these new singers coming along and they simply cannot compare.”

Evie stole a look at the stoic man who had turned his attention to the morning paper. Every once in a while, he would pause to take a sip from that wickedly strong coffee that was brewed especially for him in the morning.

She could not detect the slightest inflection from him. Not even a faint quiver.

His ability to remain unfazed is truly admirable .

She would have thought that he would show at least the slightest reaction. After all, it had been widely rumored once that Miss Mallory was his paramour.

“How I wish dear Colin would return soon,” Evie heard her grandmother sigh. “Then, I can hold another house party. These things have always been so entertaining, especially for one at my age.”

“Not to mention that it resulted in one of the most talked about matches of the last Season.” The Dowager Duchess smiled in agreement. “Would you not agree to that, my dear?”

The last question had been aimed at Daniel.

Evie surreptitiously watched him from beneath her lashes as she pretended to be

wholly engrossed with the business of stirring the exact amount of sugar into her tea. She noted the minute changes flashing through his dark eyes as he casually set the paper aside.

“Indeed,” he bit out. “We are all looking forward to dear Colin’s return.”

He was staring at her so intensely that Evie could not trust herself to reply to that particular remark. Instead, she chose to simply let his comment roll over her as she nodded slightly and sipped her tea.

I should have added more sugar to it .

She was extremely proud of herself, as she did not deign to reply, choosing to merely smile and nod slightly as if to acknowledge that he had said something.

“Ladies, excuse me,” she heard him say in a low growl. “If anyone has need of me, I shall be in my study.”

Evie nearly laughed when the Dowager Duchess simply looked at him and, with a serene smile, said, “Oh, we would not think of disturbing you, my dear. You can leave us ladies to our own devices...”

As Daniel walked out of the breakfast hall, Evie could not help but gain a new level of admiration for the older woman.

Truly, it must take such great strength to be able to live with Daniel Stanton under one roof and not lose her sanity in the process.

In Society, if such a thing was never mentioned, then it could be considered as never having happened. After all, everyone loved to talk dearly, especially about other people’s business, so for a matter to not even merit a mention, then it was as good as

having been efficiently swept under a rug.

Or so Evie had supposed as she sat in the parlor with an almost dazed expression on her face.

Across from her, Phoebe peered at her over her cup with a worried look on her pretty features.

“Dear Evie, have I called on you at an inopportune time?” she asked in concern. “Perhaps I was too early...”

Evie shook her head and reached out to clasp her friend’s hand in reassurance. “No, no, no.” She smiled. “I... was simply lost in my thoughts for a moment.”

Phoebe was probably much too polite to mention that she looked as if she had not had a wink of sleep the entire night—which was true, though.

Evie had spent the better part of her time in bed, tossing and turning. Torn between demanding more answers to an endless array of questions and doing as Daniel had suggested—to regard it as an unfortunate and unspeakable accident.

In the end, she had decided that if he was going to act like the entire thing did not matter, then she would not give him the satisfaction of seeing how his kiss left her so unsettled.

If only it was that simple .

She did, however, derive some sort of pleasure from seeing him in a bad mood that morning—well, worse than his usual, it would seem. At least to her, it looked like she was not the only one so affected by what had transpired between them.

A kiss, Evie , she reminded herself. It was a kiss, and you would do better to call it by its proper name .

A searing, toe-curling kiss that left her breathless even now, sitting in a sunlit parlor, sipping tea with her closest friend in all of London.

Phoebe let out a soft sigh and smiled slightly. “I had thought... well, I had thought that perhaps His Grace was cross with you. That he might have...”

She pursed her lips and did not finish her sentence.

“Not at all.” Evie shook her head. “He might be... a little difficult to get along with, but nothing so grave as what you are possibly thinking.”

Phoebe blushed slightly and looked down, although she looked slightly mollified by the reassurance that Evie was doing well, considering the circumstances.

Inwardly, Evie could only blame Daniel for her friend’s concern. He certainly did not have a reputation for being warm and congenial. In fact, he was mostly cold and hostile to anyone who dared to approach him. Even the most ambitious mamas steered clear of the Duke of Ashton and his forbidding presence.

Only the foolish ones dared approach him . I suppose I must be more foolish than most...

“I must say, I never thought I would see the interior of Ashton Hall,” Phoebe said softly. “His Grace normally does not welcome callers.”

Evie paused in the act of pouring herself more tea. “He does not? But certainly, the Dowager Duchess must have callers.”

Phoebe shook her head gently. “Her Grace receives visitors at a different residence. It is indeed an astounding concession that His Grace has allowed you to accept visitors here.”

And I am supposed to be grateful for his bountiful grace?

Evie scrunched up her nose.

It was more likely that Daniel allowed her to receive callers at Ashton Hall, not out of the goodness of his heart, but because he wanted to keep an eye on who was calling on her.

Which brought to mind another question—why were her gentlemen callers so drastically reduced? Had it been at Blackthorn Estate, the parlor would have been bustling with activity already.

If someone said that Daniel had nothing to do with the scarcity of her visitors, Evie would not have believed it.

“Perhaps they are simply afraid of him.” She shrugged. “Who could blame them? He can most certainly be quite vexing.”

“Vexing might not actually be the term I would use.” Phoebe smiled demurely. “His Grace is rather... forbidding.”

Evie snorted at that. Forbidding was putting it lightly—the man was a walking thundercloud. How he ever became friends with her brother was a total mystery to her.

How Colin could ever think that it was a good idea to entrust her to him was even more unfathomable. Love must have seriously altered her brother so much for him to

have considered such a thing.

“Well, you have been fortunate to not spend a significant amount of time in his presence,” Evie reasoned. “But it is nothing that I cannot handle, in any case.”

“You truly are extremely brave.” Her friend shot her a hesitant smile. “Alice was exactly the same.”

Evie could not help but laugh a little at the mention of her resolute sister-in-law, who was also Phoebe’s older sister. In her case, however, she simply had to deal with Colin’s stubbornness.

Daniel was a whole different category.

“As long as you say that nothing is amiss, I shall believe you.” Phoebe set her cup down and delicately wiped her mouth with a napkin. “Well, I shall not take up all of your time, dearest. Besides, you know how Mama gets absolutely worried every time I go out...”

With one daughter making one of the most successful matches last Season, it was perfectly understandable for the Marchioness of Brandon to be so fretful.

Evie laughed and accompanied her friend to the door. “And I shall not keep you overlong, lest Lady Brandon should find some fault in our friendship. Will you be attending the opera next week?”

Phoebe nodded. “Mama insists that I should not miss it.”

“Of course.”

“By the way...” Her friend looked at her hesitantly. “Scarlett and I are going to the

park tomorrow to promenade. You should come with us, Evie. It is so much better with you.”

Evie nodded and smiled. “All right. I shall be there tomorrow.”

The two young ladies exchanged a few more pleasantries before Phoebe finally boarded her carriage, with her maid trailing after her.

Evie was still smiling when she closed the door. However, when she turned around, she could not help but let out a short scream.

Standing just a short distance from her was none other than Daniel himself. He crossed his arms over his chest and glowered at her.

“Going somewhere?”

Evie lifted her chin in defiance. “That is none of your business.”

“On the contrary, sweetheart, it is very much my business?—”

“I know, I know!” Evie threw her hands up in frustration. “My foolish brother left me in your care.”

He snorted. “Seeing as you are well aware of it, I shall ask you again— where are you going? ”

“Nowhere.” She glared at him. “With you breathing down my neck at every opportunity, how am I supposed to go anywhere? I will have no future, no prospects— nothing .”

“Good.”

Evie felt like exploding. The man was not only insufferable, but he was also determined to ruin her life!

“Good? What is so good about that?” she all but screeched.

“The more you stay out of trouble, the easier it will be for you and me.”

She could not believe what she was hearing from him.

“Why do you insist so much on getting in my way?” she asked him.

He only raised his eyebrow at her and replied coolly, “Because, apparently, you do not know what is good for you.”

“If you know what is good for you,” she seethed, “then you should know that you cannot control me, Your Grace!”

With that, she stomped off in the direction of her rooms and slammed the door shut behind her.

Even Colin had not meddled so much in her business. Besides, she had her grandmother or her maid to accompany her at all times, and her reputation was spotless.

But Daniel, it would seem, was hellbent on making her a spinster!

Evie could not, would not allow such a thing to happen!

The Duke of Ashton would soon find out that she was not like the other women he was used to ordering around. She was not going to allow him to walk all over her.

Even if his kiss made her weak in the knees just thinking about it.

Now more than ever, she was determined to thwart his controlling behavior.

CHAPTER 8

What the hell is wrong with me?

Daniel flung the sheaf of documents onto the cluttered surface of his mahogany desk, his usually cold features twisted slightly in disgust.

He had spent the better part of the day trying to make sense of everything, but then the memory of Evie draped over him, her breasts rubbing against his arm, her fingers trailing sleepily down his abdomen to his rapidly hardening manhood?—

Dammit!

He scrubbed a hand over his face and resisted the urge to groan—whether it was in sheer frustration or arousal, it did not matter.

Ever since he had woken up to find her in his bed, he had not been able to have a moment's peace.

And that kiss in the gardens that he told her to forget? Maybe he should start following his own advice, because aside from fantasies of dragging her body under his, it was all he could think about.

How many times had he slaked his raging lust with his own hand in the past week alone? He had already lost count. Not only that, but to his great chagrin, it was the only thing that seemed to work.

Alcohol had no effect on him. Even a dozen courtesans would not have been able to give him the slightest relief.

Not that he could even consider doing that at the moment. The mere notion of another woman who was not Evie touching him made him shudder in disgust.

If Ethan ever found out about it, he would be rolling on the floor, howling in laughter, and Daniel would have his friend's blood on his hands.

This cannot go on .

He stood up and grabbed his coat, passing by his butler, Barnaby.

“Will you need the carriage, Your Grace?” the man asked him.

Even in the face of his obvious displeasure, Barnaby stood stoically, his features devoid of even the slightest hint of emotion.

Daniel nodded briskly in response. “And have the kitchens prepare several baskets. I am heading off to St. Martha's.”

“As you wish, Your Grace.” Barnaby bowed and hastened off to carry out his instructions, as efficient as any butler could be.

After the man disappeared down the hallway, Daniel could not help but notice that although everything remained spotless, there was nary a soul to be seen. Indeed, if Barnaby was not expected to attend to the needs of the masters of Ashton Hall, he might have made himself scarce as all the other servants had.

And who could blame them? Daniel was well aware that the past few days had put him in a fouler mood than usual. Self-preservation was one of man's strongest

instincts.

But not Evie, though .

Even if he looked as if he would raze an entire town at the slightest provocation, she had absolutely no qualms about going against him.

Just that morning, she had informed him that she would be taking a turn about the park with Scarlett and Phoebe.

Informed , because she did not care one whit whether or not she obtained his express permission.

Daniel knew all too well that promenading in the park was simply a ruse for young ladies to watch and be seen, even if Evie had rattled off a long list of the benefits of moderate physical exertion and being out in the sun.

The thought of any other man watching her, maybe even daring to approach her, was enough to make his blood boil—and therein lay his problem.

It was none of his business whether she found a gentleman suitable to her tastes or not. In fact, it was the goal of every debutante to find a suitable match Season after interminable Season.

The marriage mart had never bothered him before.

Now, there was nothing more offensive to him, and it had everything to do with a blue-eyed debutante with a smile like sunshine and a spine of steel.

The excited shouts and laughter of children pierced through the otherwise dreary air on the edge of the slums of London when they saw the fancy carriage rolling up to

the surprisingly well-kept facade of St. Martha's Orphanage.

A woman who appeared to be in her fifth decade, her face lined with wrinkles and a lifetime of smiles, curtsied politely from the front door as footmen descended, carrying baskets of food.

"We were not expecting your arrival today, Your Grace," she said with an apologetic smile. "I hope that you will not find the children's enthusiasms distasteful."

"Of course not, Mrs. Thomas," Daniel assured her.

Mrs. Thomas, who had run the orphanage for the better part of the decade, nodded. "You have always been exceedingly generous, Your Grace. We are very much grateful for it."

"If you need anything, you must not hesitate to tell me," he told her. "Whatever the children need, Ashton Hall will be more than willing to provide."

"Thank you so much, Your Grace." The gratitude was heavy in her voice. Turning towards the children, she called out, "All right, everyone! Back inside the house!"

"Yes, Mrs. Thomas!" they all chorused, before breaking out into excited chatter as they obediently filed back into the building, Mrs. Thomas and Daniel following behind them.

As the children playfully headed back inside, he could not help but notice a slight figure lagging behind the crowd. The young boy looked to be no older than five, with overly large eyes set in a small face. The clothes he wore hung loosely over his body, as if they had been meant for someone larger.

"That is little John," Mrs. Thomas told him quietly. "He arrived here two weeks ago.

His mother had just died, and there was no one left to care for him.”

Daniel did not ask anything more. It was a sad fact that the most vulnerable were often overlooked by the rest of society. If it had not been for places like St. Martha’s and people like Mrs. Thomas, would their lives have even mattered?

Still, there was something in the boy’s haunted eyes that called to him. Daniel was familiar with that look. Had seen it all too often staring back at him in the mirror.

Suddenly, little John paused. Then, he slowly turned around and rushed over to Daniel, throwing his thin arms around his legs.

“Thank you, Your Grace,” he muttered hoarsely, before rushing off to join the others.

Mrs. Thomas looked pleasantly surprised by this as Daniel stood by wordlessly.

“Oh, heavens,” she murmured, wiping a tear from her eye. “He has not spoken a single word since he arrived. We all feared that he might be deaf or mute or both!”

But it was not the boy’s sudden speech that intrigued Daniel. The boy’s softly spoken words, clearly enunciated, belied something that might be even more tragic.

“Thank you, Your Grace.” Not “Thank ye, Yer Grace.”

It seemed to him that little John might not be just another poor orphan, after all, by his speech alone.

As Daniel pondered the possible implications of this observation, a cheerful voice jolted him out of his thoughts, accompanied by a friendly clap on his shoulder.

“There you are! I knew I would somehow find you here!”

Daniel frowned slightly as Ethan grinned at him and then at Mrs. Thomas.

“Ma’am, would you mind it horribly if I accompanied this sour-faced individual for a moment?” he asked her charmingly.

The head of the orphanage laughed and shook her head. “I would not mind it, Your Grace, but you are mistaken on one account, though—the Duke of Ashton is always a welcome presence here at St. Martha’s.”

“Mrs. Thomas must be the only woman who enjoys your perpetually dour countenance,” Ethan remarked, shaking his head. “Her and the Dowager Duchess.”

Daniel crossed his arms over his chest and looked at his friend with a raised eyebrow. “Is there any reason why you sought my company all the way here?”

Ethan merely grinned at him and slung his arm over his shoulder. “Why don’t we head over to the courtyard? A bit of fresh air might do you a world of good.”

Daniel did not protest as his friend dragged him off to the courtyard. Unlike most other orphanages in London, this one was mostly kept clean and even had a decent array of toys for the children to play with. There was even a swing and a tree house.

All of that, of course, was thanks to the patronage of the Duke of Ashton.

“Enough with this farce, Ethan,” he finally growled. “If I wanted fresh air, I would have gone?—”

“Gone where exactly, Ash? To Hyde Park?” Ethan dropped his smile as he mimicked Daniel’s stance and crossed his arms over his chest. “And speaking of the park, I heard that three certain young ladies are headed there right now.”

“That is none of my business,” Daniel retorted briskly and raised his eyebrow at his friend. “And neither is it yours.”

To his credit, Ethan looked slightly chagrined. Daniel even caught the slight flicker in his eyes.

“And how has that been going for you?” Ethan asked him with a knowing smile.

“I do not know what you are talking about.”

Ethan looked at him pointedly. “Oh, I know you do, Daniel. You do not need to live with Colin’s younger sister to keep an eye on her.”

“Do you know how many bastards I have had to forbid from ever stepping into Ashton Hall?” Daniel growled at him. “It is the very fact that Evie is Colin’s younger sister that has put her into an even more precarious situation. Every fop and dandy is asking for her hand in marriage, when we all know what they really mean to do is ask for her dowry!”

“And is that not the way of the marriage mart?” Ethan smirked. “Besides, she has the Dowager Countess looking after her. Evie is also smarter than you give her credit for. I trust she will not choose some insipid bastard who is only after her dowry.”

“Not while she is under my watch, no.” Daniel shook his head and started walking away from his friend.

“Where are you going?” the Duke of Sinclair called after him.

Daniel threw him an exasperated look over his shoulder. “To the park, of course.”

“But Evie will be with Lady Scarlett and Lady Phoebe,” his friend reasoned. “Surely

she does need another companion to maintain propriety. Besides, I have a feeling that she will not appreciate your presence there.”

A slow, cold smile spread across Daniel’s face. “The park is a public place and open to anyone who wishes to take a turn about its grounds, is it not?”

“I still think it’s a bad idea, Ash.”

What was a bad idea was leaving Evie and her friends—who did not know any better—unattended, to be ogled by every bastard who salivated after their most generous dowries. Of course, it hardly helped matters that they were not exactly bad to look at.

Evie, in particular, had garnered a great deal of attention ever since she made her bow, and Daniel knew it was not only because of her generous dowry.

It was the height of foolishness, indeed, if she was to be left to her own devices, and Daniel did not consider himself to be a foolish man.

Evie, however, was an entirely different story...

CHAPTER 9

“He is, without any doubt, the most infuriating man to ever walk this earth!”

Evie was clutching her parasol so hard that it shook a little as she vented to the two other young ladies with her.

“Even Colin was not so domineering, and to think he is my brother!” she continued, hating the way her voice turned into a sort of wail.

How embarrassing that I, a grown woman, could be reduced to such a state by an overgrown, controlling tyrant!

It was a fine afternoon in the park, and many of the ton were out to enjoy the mild weather, dressed in their promenading finery. A few of them turned to look at Evie, but Scarlett merely shot everyone a warning smile, and they soon decided that it was in their best interests to mind their own affairs.

“Dearest,” Phoebe sighed, patting her arm gently. “I am sure His Grace only means well. On the bright side, he appears to be doing his due diligence in keeping you safe from those who mean to prey on your kindness.”

“More like he is going above and beyond due diligence.” Scarlett chortled, delicately hiding a mischievous smile behind her gloved hand. “One would think that the Duke of Ashton means to keep her unwed until her brother returns!”

“I think he means to do exactly that!” Evie groaned in dismay. “Oh, please do tell

me—whatever am I to do with him?”

Both her companions shared a look before they sighed in surrender.

“I suppose you cannot do anything much beyond following his rules,” Phoebe murmured. “You are, after all, under his care and living in his residence at that...”

“Which is also a startling matter in itself,” Scarlett added. “Why, even my brother does not exactly live with Mama and me. He very much prefers his townhouse, and it is still considered acceptable.”

Of course, Evie was quite aware that she did not really need to live with Daniel for him to keep an eye on her. It was one of the things she argued about with Colin prior to his departure, but her brother had been adamant that it was for the best. That Daniel was someone he would trust even with his own life and that he was the most suitable guardian.

As if her grandmother was not formidable enough to scare off lesser men who dared to sniff around her!

But it was not the fact that he was so controlling that irked Evie—it was also the fact that she could hardly put him out of her mind.

Was she to have no respite from him at all? Must the man antagonize her even in her thoughts? Her dreams?

“Well, when a gentleman acts in such a manner, it could only be one of two things,” Scarlett pointed out. “It is either due to the obvious, which is that he desires control above all things, or...”

Evie frowned as she turned towards the redhead. “Or what?”

“Or that he actually desires you.”

At her friend’s words, she nearly choked. How was she to know that the redhead would be able to get to the heart of the matter?

But then again, Daniel did say that it was nothing more than a mistake. That they both should forget that it ever happened.

Evie could not even begin to grasp which was more mortifying—the fact that she had thoroughly enjoyed her first kiss, that it haunted her even in her waking hours...

Or the fact that the man who kissed her apparently dismissed it as nothing more than an error in judgment. A great error on both their parts.

“Well?” Scarlett looked at her expectantly. “Which one is it?”

“I... I...”

This time, both of her companions looked at her with renewed interest, and Evie wished she could come up with something— anything —to divert their attention.

How could she tell them about the kiss? Or that their interactions had an undercurrent of such passion?

Or it seemed like that from her side. With Daniel, she could never be sure. She could never deduce much from his cold expression.

She only knew that somehow, she could feel that she was not the only one so affected by it.

“Well, speak of the devil!” Scarlett smiled brilliantly as her gaze swiveled to two

gentlemen headed in their direction.

Evie followed her gaze, and her heart clenched painfully in her chest when they landed on the tall, broad-shouldered man, his physique oozing masculine virility.

Michelangelo's David could never compare...

Of course, the famed sculpture was simply carved out of marble, and the one before her was flesh and blood. It still did not make him any less a work of art, however.

No matter how horrible he was to her.

"Good afternoon, ladies!" the Duke of Sinclair greeted them, as charming as ever. "The flowers of the park pale in comparison to your radiance!"

Scarlett tittered. "Such a charming tongue you have, Your Grace. You do know how to make a lady blush!"

Being older than both Phoebe and Evie, Scarlett was easily more confident in her dealings with gentlemen, and she had no qualms about teasing them. She would even do the same to Daniel, although Evie had yet to see him reacting to any of her taunts with anything beyond a mild annoyance.

"Somehow, I do not recall giving you permission to go gallivanting about in the park."

Evie fought hard to control the delicious shiver that ran down her spine when that smooth, low voice whispered in her ear, his warm breath fanning her sensitive skin.

She turned around and glared at Daniel, who looked most displeased by her excursion.

“And I somehow do not recall being your prisoner,” she shot back at him haughtily.

“Hmph.”

Evie wished he would take a step back from her.

Or maybe not.

Maybe he can stand by her side as long as he wished...

The moment those thoughts crossed her mind, she wanted to bash her head against a rock.

Have I truly become so depraved because of this man?

He truly was a rake. A scoundrel of the very worst order.

“If you were my prisoner,” he continued in that rich, dark voice of his, “you would not be able to leave my room. I shall have you bound to my bed...”

Evie shuddered. Her breath came out in shallow gasps. Desire pooled unbidden in her belly.

She whirled around and glared up at him. “Very funny, Your Grace.”

This time, he stood back with a self-satisfied look that she longed to wipe off his face with a good slap.

Or maybe I should kiss that smug look off his face? Let him know that he is not the only one capable of doing the most shocking things—what is wrong with me?

Evie could not have wanted to go home more than she did at that very moment, except that her home, for the time being, was Ashton Hall and not Blackthorn Estate. There was truly nowhere she could run to keep herself safe from the decidedly devastating effect this man had on her will and logic.

She was about to stomp off to keep up with Scarlett and Phoebe when she felt a strong hand clasping her wrist.

“I meant what I said last night,” he told her darkly. “As long as you live under my roof, you must obey every word I say.”

She shook his hand off her person, and with a haughty smile, she told him, “You do not own me, Your Grace.”

Never mind that the implications of that word— obedience —sent a delicious thrill through her, she finally managed to stomp off to join her two companions, who were casually chatting with the Duke of Sinclair as they promenaded in a most leisurely fashion.

Evie did not need to turn around to know that Daniel was probably glowering at her.

Let him stay angry .

After all, it was most unjust if only she remained unsettled. Perhaps he should have a taste of his own medicine as well.

Daniel was indeed glowering, but not for the reasons that Evie was thinking.

Just ahead of them, he had spotted a group of the most irritating dandies to ever walk the soil of Hyde Park. At the head of the group was none other than Thomas Salsbury, whose eyes shone with a disgusting light the moment they fell on Evie and

her friends.

“Good afternoon, ladies!” he greeted them with the most absurdly foppish bow that Daniel had the misfortune to witness. “Especially to you, Lady Evelyn.”

To her credit, the little fool did not look so impressed by his gesture.

“Good afternoon, Lord Sidmouth,” she greeted him politely. “Lord Astley, Sir Stanley.”

The vile spawn, however, did not seem deterred by her aloofness. In fact, he only seemed to smile wider as he drew closer to her.

Much too close for Daniel’s comfort.

“I am dreadfully sorry to have missed the Horton ball the other night,” he sighed. “But you will be at the opera next week, I hope, My Lady?”

Daniel smirked as he crossed his arms over his chest. He knew very well why the imbecile was absent from last night’s ball. He just did not know how he was able to recover his audacity so quickly as to seek Evie out in the park the very next day.

Perhaps he is in need of another reminder of why he should very much keep away from what is mine... to protect.

He saw Evie open her mouth to reply, but he smoothly stepped before her, effectively putting himself in between her and the Earl.

“No, she will not,” he answered for her, glaring at the man.

Evie looked up at him in shock, and then vexation. “I beg your pardon, Your Grace?”

she hissed at him, her eyes spitting fire.

Daniel merely smiled coolly. “It seems that Thomas here has forgotten about that lovely conversation we had just the other evening.”

“That is Lord Sidmouth to you, Your Grace,” the idiot reminded him with a smile that made Daniel want to bash his face in with his fist. “I do not recall us being on such close terms that we can refer to each other by our first names.”

My fist is about to become closely acquainted with your skull .

“And as I recall, you are neither the father nor the brother of Lady Evelyn,” Thomas continued smoothly. “Which means that you are not in a position to dictate what she does.”

“Idiot,” he heard Ethan mutter under his breath.

Idiot, indeed.

If Daniel had not known for a fact that the man’s finances were in dire straits, he would have considered bankrupting him within the next week or so. Murder was also illegal and a largely messy business, especially when there were so many witnesses.

As it stood, he simply did something else that he hoped would keep the man up in a rage for several nights.

“Ah, but therein lies your problem, Lord Sidmouth ,” he sneered. “For I am to be her husband . Tell me now, am I still allowed to have no say in her affairs?”

Evie, however, was probably going to murder him .

CHAPTER 10

I must be dreaming—no, this is a nightmare!

Evie shook as she grappled with the words that had burst out of Daniel's mouth.

Surely, he must be jesting...

There was absolutely no way he would even contemplate that, let alone declare it so loudly in a public place like Hyde Park.

However, seeing the stunned looks on her friends' faces, as well as the confusion on Lord Sidmouth's face, confirmed what she had thought must have been a hallucination of the very worst sort.

"Y-you..." Lord Sidmouth trembled with what appeared to be barely restrained fury.

For a moment, Evie feared that he would drop all pretense at civility as he glared at Daniel with the fury of a thousand suns, and who could blame him? His adversary was smiling rather antagonistically at him, as if he derived some sort of pleasure watching his frustration.

Fortunately, the Earl of Sidmouth managed to gather himself, and with a gentlemanly and apologetic smile at Evie, muttered, "Well then, I must apologize for my approach, My Lady. I suppose congratulations are in order, unless His Grace wishes to keep this private?"

When Daniel smirked in response, Evie could not help but wonder why he seemed to be distinctly bent on riling the Earl.

“Of course not,” he replied graciously. “But you might want to count yourself fortunate to be among the first to know.”

Well, this is also the first time I have heard of it, and I do not count myself so lucky to be graced with such news!

Evie wanted to complain.

In fact, she felt a keen desire to hit the smiling devil before her, for all the good her puny attacks would do to his ridiculously muscular frame.

Meanwhile, Daniel stood there, as if he reveled in the chaos he had managed to sow with his one declaration. He truly was a devil—sly and manipulative and heaven only knew what else!

She saw the Earl of Sidmouth clench his hands into fists as he returned the smile with one of his own.

“Well then, congratulations, Your Grace,” he bit out. “I must be going now.”

He turned on his heel and walked away, his pack of dandies following after him. Most of them sported confused expressions, and some of them merely shook their heads.

Lord Sidmouth had some sort of reputation amongst the young fops, who looked up to him and aimed to emulate him. It must have been such a shock to them to find their hero suffering such a crushing setback by no less than the Duke of Ashton.

Evie, however, was not pleased with the day's turn of events.

"Well, well, well," she heard Ethan mutter as he shook his head in amusement. "This should be something Colin would be pleased to learn about."

Evie turned to the Duke of Sinclair. "He will not be hearing of this because His Grace"—she glared pointedly at Daniel—"will be rectifying this mess that he caused right now!"

She hated how her voice rose to a hysterical pitch at the end, but she was truly close to losing her sanity—and the one responsible for it merely looked at her wordlessly.

"I will do no such thing," he replied implacably.

"Well, you cannot ruin my reputation just because you dislike the Earl of Sidmouth!" she all but shrieked.

Daniel frowned as he crossed his arms over his chest. He raised his eyebrow at her.

"Well, do you like the Earl of Sidmouth?" he countered coldly.

"No, but?—"

"Ladies!" Ethan called over their brewing argument. "I declare myself rather parched and in need of refreshment. How about we proceed to the cake house?"

"A rather fine idea!" Scarlett piped up almost instantaneously. She turned towards Evie, who refused to move from her position. With a troubled sigh, she tugged at Phoebe's sleeve instead. "Let us go with His Grace."

Phoebe nodded quietly, throwing Evie a worried look before she left with Scarlett and

Ethan.

Desperation, however, was clawing frantically at Evie's insides. If Daniel refused to fix this situation, what was the rest of the ton going to say when he rescinded his proposal?

There was no way that he was going to marry her, and she was hardly prepared to consider the implications of marriage to him, of all people.

There had to be some way out of this. Perhaps they could break off the engagement a little later or?—

“Of course, I mean to rectify the situation,” he told her in a voice that sounded very much like that of an adult placating a child throwing a tantrum.

“Good,” she shot back belligerently, crossing her arms over her chest as she glared up at him. “And how do you intend on going about it, Your Grace?”

“I shall marry you, of course.”

She gaped at him. “Have you gone insane?”

He looked affronted by her accusation. “I assure you that I am in perfect control of my mental faculties.”

“Then why would you consider such an outrageous thing!?”

Daniel simply pressed his lips into a grim line and looked at her. “I believe this is a discussion to have in private.”

Evie opened her mouth to argue that no, she would very much like to discuss

something that could very well affect her future, when she noted that several of the passersby had begun to look at them in interest.

How could I have forgotten that gossip is the main source of entertainment of the ton?

She almost wanted to slap herself for her silliness, but then she decided that it would be in her best interest to follow what he said.

For now .

“Oh, good. They have not murdered each other yet!”

Evie glowered at Ethan, who sounded much too cheerful as he strode back to them with Phoebe and Scarlett on either side of him. Indeed, he portrayed the charming rascal with very little effort, while the two young ladies looked at her with concern.

“Any acts of physical violence should be considered in private,” Daniel replied with a smirk.

“Indeed, any physical act should,” his friend averred with an impenitent grin.

This statement, however, had the opposite effect, as Daniel simply strode off wordlessly towards the carriage.

Evie turned to her friends with a long-suffering look in her eyes and was about to walk with them to where Scarlett’s carriage awaited them when she heard a cold voice call out, “Well, what is taking you so long?”

She turned to find Daniel standing by the open door of the carriage with an impatient look on his face.

“Are you sure you will be all right with him?” Phoebe asked her anxiously.

Evie managed a weak smile to reassure her best friend. “Do not worry about me, dearest. His Grace might be many things, but I truly believe he is not capable of violence towards women. Besides,” she added with an attempt at levity, “if he does try anything, I shall make sure that he sorely regrets it!”

Scarlett laughed softly. “That’s the spirit. You know, Alice often said the exact same thing about the Duke of Blackthorn, and look at them now...” she trailed off when she saw the murderous look in Evie’s eyes.

“I shall go with Evie,” Phoebe told them quickly.

Ethan smiled at her. “And I shall accompany you. The more, the merrier, eh?”

Somehow, Evie had the distinct feeling that they were simply volunteering to prevent any unnecessary bloodshed on the ride back to Ashton Hall. It simply would not do for news of murder to break out immediately after the Duke of Ashton declared his betrothal to Lady Evelyn Fitzroy. After all, he could still be considered one of the most eligible bachelors in England, and she was the most sought-after debutante of the Season.

It was already a foregone conclusion that the rest of the ton was waiting on tenterhooks to see just who would manage to marry into two of the most prominent families in the kingdom.

I suppose no Society mama has ever considered this could happen .

After all, Daniel had never expressed the desire to marry. On the contrary, he seemed to be expressly avoiding any reference to matrimony.

Who would have thought that she would be the unfortunate young lady to receive his attention?

Somehow, that does not sound like a good thing . Not even remotely.

And her grandmama? What was she going to tell her?

How was she going to tell her?

Daniel certainly had a lot of explaining to do, and she could scarcely wait for them to get back to Ashton Hall so he could begin doing so.

The rest of the carriage ride was fraught with silence, interrupted only by Ethan's futile attempts at lightening up the mood. In fact, it gave the very impression of that particularly eerie calm before a storm.

Daniel, for his part, refused to explain himself while his friend and Phoebe were still within earshot.

Evie, on the other hand, alternated between glaring at him and staring out the window stonily.

It was easily the most uncomfortable carriage ride in his entire existence.

When they arrived at Ashton Hall, he alighted first and held out his hand to help Evie, but the fiercely stubborn lady expressly ignored him and exited the carriage on her own without even sparing him a glance.

"I shall, ah, escort Lady Phoebe back to her residence," Ethan informed them with an uneasy smile.

Daniel simply nodded at him. When he turned back to Evie, she had already started walking to the front door.

Ethan shot him a look that clearly said, Good luck, and please do not die.

Daniel simply smiled grimly at that. Of course, he had no plans of expiring so soon.

How could he bear to disappoint Evie when they had not even publicly announced their engagement yet?

But he agreed that the matter of their supposed engagement also needed to be addressed. If it was done so shoddily, he was sure that the Dowager Duchess would never forgive him, and the poor woman had already been through so much in her life. She certainly did not need the added disappointment of Daniel making a mess of his engagement—an event that she had looked forward to with much anticipation.

What is it with dowagers and their need to see the younger generation married off?

Daniel scoffed to himself as he followed Evie into the manor.

Suddenly, Evie came to a complete stop. She whirled around and glared at him. “Well?”

He raised an eyebrow in response. “Well what, my dear?”

“Well, we are now back in the privacy of your beloved Ashton Hall,” she shot back sarcastically. “Or are you going to pretend that nothing happened, like you always do?”

Daniel frowned at that. He disliked having his words flung back at him because it rarely ever happened. Now, a young slip of a girl who was barely two-thirds his

height and half his weight was slinging them right back at him like a damned trebuchet.

“Let us head off to my study, then,” he told her tersely.

“You better not skirt your way around this, Your Grace,” she warned him.

“Certainly not, sweetheart.” He smiled coldly at her, openly admiring the angry flush that rose to her cheeks. “I intend to make everything particularly clear.”

She looked up at him suspiciously.

Trust, it would seem, would not come easily in this union.

Daniel did not say anything more as he led the way to his study.

He had a feeling that Evie would have a great deal more to say, in any case, especially when she heard what he was about to say.

CHAPTER 11

He better have a good explanation for his outrageous statement!

“Oh, do not glare at me like that,” he sighed, as if she was the one being unreasonable, when he had all but declared before a flock of dandies that they were to be wed—and Evie knew that dowagers were perhaps the only ones worse than dandies when it came to gossip!

There is no mistake about it—he knew exactly what he was doing when he said that!

As if to further hammer in the fact that this man before her did not care one whit what others thought, he simply turned around and headed up the stairs to his study, as if it was only natural that she heeded his suggestion and followed him meekly.

Well, she had no choice but to follow him if she was to hear what he had to say, but to do so meekly was simply out of the question!

Evie stomped furiously all the way to the study.

If Daniel ever noticed it, he made no mention of it. He simply held the door open for her and then closed it once she was inside.

“Are you sure this is appropriate?” she chastised him, crossing her arms over her chest.

He merely shrugged his broad shoulders. “In your opinion, I have already done

something so grossly inappropriate. What does it matter if I add one more to my list of transgressions?"

I knew it! He is hardly repentant for his folly! How am I going to deal with the consequences of his actions if he simply refuses to cooperate?

"Well then, out with it," she muttered through gritted teeth. "Why did you make such a preposterous claim before Lord Sidmouth?"

He frowned darkly. "You keep mentioning him in my presence. Tell me then, do you like the man so much?"

"I did not say that," she shot back defensively.

"And you surely would not," he affirmed. "Once you learn of the more preposterous claims Lord Sidmouth made."

Doubt seeped into Evie like a devious snake, slithering down her spine like a cold chill.

Lord Sidmouth was the leader of a group of young gentlemen who may be rowdy at times, but generally enjoyed a good reputation amongst the ton .

But there are also a great many who enjoy a good reputation simply because they have not been caught yet , a small voice in her head reminded her.

"Why? What do you know of Lord Sidmouth?" she asked Daniel breathlessly. She took a step closer to him, close enough to see his vibrant green eyes turn a dark, stormy shade. "What are you hiding from me?"

"Nothing," he muttered harshly. "What need have I to hide such things from you?"

In the space of a few breaths, his cold wrath seemed to radiate from his body to fill the entire room. His lips thinned into a forbidding line, as if he meant to contain his rage.

Strangely enough, Evie did not fear him. She knew that his anger was not directed at her.

Quietly, she took one more step towards him and laid a gentle hand on his arm.

“Daniel,” she told him quietly. “You must learn to trust me to deal with my own problems.”

“It is not that I do not trust you. It is them I do not trust.”

She smiled a little at that. “Then you must trust that I am capable of handling things my own way.”

He drew in a harsh breath, and she could see the conflict in his eyes. For all the world, he seemed so cold and unperturbed by anything and anyone around him, but there were times when she truly believed that it was nothing more than a facade.

That Daniel cared far more than he showed.

“What will you do if you find out that Lord Sidmouth wagered that he would be the one to win your hand in marriage?” he bit out coldly. “That amongst the dandies of the ton, he would make the most successful match because as of this Season, there is no one whose dowry matches yours.”

Evie sucked in a harsh breath.

I knew there was something amiss with him! It seems that he is nothing more than a

charming snake, after all!

“That is disgusting!” she seethed.

“Exactly my sentiments.”

“Yes, but you did not have to do something so drastic!” she told him in exasperation.

“You should have said something else— anything! Oh, whatever are we going to do now? Colin is going to kill you!”

“He can try.”

Evie was wringing her hands fretfully, but when he made such a statement, she could not help but stop to glare at him.

“Violence is not the answer,” she reminded him primly.

Daniel merely smirked at her. “You were the one to suggest that your brother was going to bring down violence upon my head. What am I supposed to do, then? Stand still and take the blow?”

“Well, no, but?—”

“Then what is your problem?”

“My problem”—she glared at him—“is that you are taking all of this too lightly. Do you think this is all a joke?” Her voice rose as she remembered his actions at the park.

“My future is in jeopardy just because you?—”

Her apparent betrothal to one of the most elusive yet sought-after bachelors of the ton—one of the Wolves, for heaven’s sake—would have all their eyes on her as soon as

the news made the rounds. Even if Daniel were to take back his impulsive declaration, how could any gentleman want to marry her now?

It was madness . Pure and utter madness.

“Rest assured, sweetheart, I meant to protect you, and I will,” he told her, his voice dropping to a low growl.

“But you do not want to marry!” she cried out hysterically. “And how can I marry a man who does not want to be married?”

Daniel leaned back, raising an eyebrow.

How can he look so calm when we are talking about my future?

Evie wanted to beat at his chest, for all the good it would do. At least, she would be able to vent out some of her frustration, seeing as trying to make him see reason was akin to screaming at a brick wall.

“Sweetheart,” he drawled lazily. “Whether we get married or not, nothing is going to change.”

Evie looked up at him. “What do you mean?” she asked him suspiciously.

“For one, we are to live entirely separate lives after we are wed. You shall have your own rooms, and I shall have mine. I will not interfere in your business, and you are not to interfere in mine.”

Is he... suggesting a marriage of convenience?

Evie balked at the idea, but a part of her felt thrilled at the thought of it.

What Daniel was suggesting was that he was going to basically give her the freedoms a married lady would enjoy without burdening her with any of the responsibilities. She would have the protection of his name and status, as well as the wealth that went with it.

Not like I need any money, in any case. Colin has given me more than enough, and that does not even include my dowry...

No one else in the ton was aware of that, of course, and no one would expect it. After all, it was quite rare for an older brother to be so generous with his sister, particularly one who was to be the property of her husband after marriage.

“Think about it, Evie,” Daniel told her, his voice low and hypnotizing as he stepped towards her. “Both of us, by virtue of our status in Society, are expected to do our duties and wed. Would you not rather marry someone you know than someone you are not so certain you can trust?”

He was so close now that if she just raised her hand, she could lay it on his chest. Would she find his heart beating as fast as hers at that moment?

Who am I kidding?

Evie wanted to shake her head.

Daniel Stanton could never be so affected. Look at him—he is as cold and implacable as a block of ice!

“Well?”

His voice was so deceptively charming that she wanted nothing more than to nod her head like a chicken pecking on grains...

But, of course, she could not let him have his way so easily!

She narrowed her eyes at him in suspicion. “You speak of trust, Your Grace, but how can I trust you when you keep making my decisions for me? Will you also be like this once we are married?”

He chuckled softly, the soft vibrations from his chest dancing down her spine as her knees suddenly felt as if they were made of rubber.

Why do I keep reacting this way?

Evie wanted to put up a token resistance at least, but she found that she could hardly mount a decent defense against his heavy-handed tactics. Sometimes, it really felt hopeless trying to fight against a Wolf who probably never lost an argument.

But that did not mean she was not going to try.

Victory was at hand.

He could already see the hesitation in her eyes, the stormy blue-gray wavering. All it would take was one push and he would win this round.

Just like he always did.

He raised his hand and ran a knuckle over her cheek, his touch as light as the whisper of a butterfly’s wings.

“All that will change when you become a duchess,” he assured her. “Nobody orders my Duchess around.”

She looked up at him from underneath her lashes, and he had to fight the insane urge

to draw her into his arms and kiss away that stubborn line of her lips.

Instead, he let his hand trail down her jawline to the graceful arch of her neck, delighting in the soft gasp that escaped her lips.

“You can do whatever you want, whenever you want,” he told her, purposefully keeping his voice low.

Sometimes it was much better to use a softer kind of force. He found that it was much more effective.

She licked her lips, and he nearly groaned at the sight. “Anything?”

If he could drag her underneath his body and bury himself in her sweetness, he would give her a king’s ransom in fortune.

Anything... what a dangerous word!

“As long as you steer clear of my tower,” he promised her.

She laughed softly. “What are you hiding in that tower anyway? The corpses of your fallen enemies? Or a roomful of... of...” she trailed off, her cheeks turning a delicate shade of pink.

Of course, he knew what she was thinking, but still, her innocence was such a delight to behold.

“That is for me to know, sweetheart,” he replied.

She pursed her lips. “All right, so I am to stay away from this tower of yours. Am I allowed to pursue anything that interests me, then?”

“You shall have my full support as your husband.”

“And what if I meant to change something in the estate?” she pressed. “Will I be allowed to make them?”

“Ashton Hall is outdated, anyway,” he told her. “You can do whatever you want with it.”

However, her next question nearly made him choke on his tongue.

“What of heirs?” she asked him, her gaze dropping to his chest shyly.

He tilted her chin up with his finger, forcing her to meet his gaze. A teasing smile touched those seductive lips of his.

“Why, Lady Evelyn Fitzroy,” he murmured. “Have you been thinking of making babies with me?”

Just as she was about to open her mouth to voice out a token reply, he took a step back, his features once more an implacable mask that no emotions could breach.

“There will be no such thing,” he said coldly.

Evie blinked in confusion.

Did I just hear that right? He does not want heirs?

“I shall have no heirs,” he reiterated as if to hammer his point in. “So I would advise you to be prudent in dealing with your lovers in the future. There shall be no one left to inherit the title of the Duke of Ashton.”

Her mind reeled as his words sank in. He wanted no heirs... and then, he advised her to be thoroughly discreet with her lovers as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

I truly believe he has lost his mind!

It was the very purpose of the marriage mart for the finest families in England to be able to produce heirs to carry on their titles. For the wheel to keep turning in perpetuity.

And now, Daniel—a duke, no less—was declaring before her that he wanted no such thing! In fact, from what she could gather, he was intent on ending the Stanton line.

It was so preposterous that she would have laughed in his face and called him out on his bluff if he did not look deadly serious.

He truly means it . He truly means to end the Stanton line!

“You advise me to be careful with my... future lovers,” she muttered. “Does that mean you will entertain lovers yourself? No one can tame the Wolf, then?”

The disgust had barely rolled off her tongue when she felt him grab her by the waist, holding her flush against him. She struggled briefly in his grasp, but that only served to heighten her awareness of the hardness that was now pressed against her belly.

“You should be grateful that I am willing to be so considerate of my wife’s needs,” he told her in a low growl. “You would not want me to turn my appetites to you now, would you, my sweet?”

It was supposed to be such a menacing threat.

Why then did she feel thrilled?

CHAPTER 12

The battle has been won.

Despite the stubborn tilt of her chin, Daniel was observant enough to note the softening in her stormy blue-gray eyes. Her lips, luscious as freshly picked cherries, were slightly parted, beckoning him to have a taste.

A rather dangerous idea .

“You may tell your grandmother and the Dowager Duchess the news,” he told her gently. “I gather that they would be most pleased to hear this news, considering it has been their primary aim to see us wed.”

“Yes,” she choked out. “But I do not think they were thinking we were going to marry each other .”

Daniel shrugged. “What does it matter?”

Those tempting lips of hers thinned into a line of displeasure, and he could not help but sigh inwardly. Most young ladies harbored fantasies of a great romance and ended up sorely disappointed. It was better for Evie to have no such expectations, so her hopes would not be dashed on the rocks in the end.

“I suppose it truly doesn’t,” she muttered.

He nodded. “You go see Lady Wellington and the Dowager Duchess. I shall go on to

the Archbishop to secure a special license.”

“A special license?” Her frown returned in full force. “Whatever for?”

He smirked and tapped the tip of her nose, his smile deepening when she wrinkled it in response.

“There is no reason to delay it, is there?” he asked coolly. “I gather that your dear friend, the Earl of Sidmouth, shall not waste another breath to report everything to the scandal sheets. After all, his sister works there.”

“You do not say!” she gasped, her eyes wide. She peered closely at him, and he thoroughly wished she did not do that.

Did she not know how close he was to dragging her to the sofa and having his way with her?

They had hardly announced their betrothal, and he was already thinking of indulging in his husbandly rights—the very same ones he assured her he would not force upon her.

Unless she asked, of course.

He smiled and nodded instead, pushing those thoughts to the back of his head.

“Unbelievable!” Evie breathed. “How did you know these things, anyway?”

“Well, when one stays up all night, one is bound to notice a great many things.” He shrugged.

“I suppose so,” she muttered, biting her lower lip.

He had to stifle another groan at the sight. This habit of hers was truly pushing him past the limits of his vaunted self-control.

“Don’t do that,” he muttered in a hoarse voice.

She blinked up at him in confusion, her eyes wide. “Do what?”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “You know what.”

He tightened his hold on her waist until she was close enough to feel the hardness in his breeches. To know what she was doing to him. To see how close he was to losing all control.

When Evie let out a soft gasp, it took everything within him not to simply bend down and take her mouth in a searing kiss.

“Evie,” he growled. “Do you have any idea what happens to a man who has been pushed beyond the limits of his control?”

She shook her head and laughed nervously. “I do not think I do—not that I have ever done that. Push a man to his limits, I mean. Well...”

“Then you better not start now.” He smirked at her. “Lest you find out the hard way...”

And he was hard for her. Nearly bursting out of his pants with lust and desire.

He frowned as he looked down at the tenacious yet sweetly innocent creature in his arms. No woman had ever affected him as much as she did, and worse, she was not even aware of it.

Even the way she breathed , her chest rising and falling in a rhythm that weakened his resolve with every passing minute, made him want to tear open her gown and bury his face in those soft mounds.

Would she welcome his advances, then? Would she arch her back and beg him to take her over and over again?

As he slanted his mouth over hers, a soft knock sounded at the door.

“Your Grace.”

It was Barnaby.

He closed his eyes and drew back slightly. He should have counted it as a blessing that the fortuitous timing of his faithful butler stopped him from doing something foolish.

Why, then, was he inwardly cursing the man?

“I... I think I should leave now,” Evie murmured, ducking her head in what appeared to be embarrassment as she pulled away from his embrace

Daniel merely nodded. “All right. You may go to your grandmama and the Dowager Duchess. I shall be with you shortly, once I have finished conducting my business.”

She turned to leave, but then she stopped and looked at him with her chin raised haughtily.

“You seem to have forgotten one thing, Your Grace.”

“What could I have forgotten?”

She pursed her lips. “I still haven’t accepted. You must ask me to marry you. Nicely .”

“Very well then,” he continued in a tone of extreme nonchalance. “Marry me.”

She wrinkled her nose in distaste. “A question would have been nice. I do not take kindly to being ordered about, Your Grace.”

“Do forgive me,” he muttered without the slightest hint of contrition.

If he was to marry her, then he had to learn to acquiesce to her wishes on occasion, too.

He cleared his throat and walked over to her with the solemnest expression he could muster. He took her much smaller hand in his and held it up between them as he looked into her eyes.

“Lady Evelyn Fitzroy,” he murmured. “Will you do me the honor of becoming my wife of convenience?”

Her response was a brilliant smile. Thankfully, she had been sufficiently appeased by his display—even if his heart thudded strangely in his chest.

It is only the lust talking . Nothing more.

“Of course I will, Your Grace,” she responded sweetly.

If her limpid gaze made his normally sharp mind falter, that smile seemed to cause an odd warmth to spread across his chest.

Even if it looked fake as hell.

He immediately dropped her hand. “Does this mean that you will do anything I ask if I do so nicely?”

“Of course not.” She sniffed. “You may rely on your lovers to do that for you.”

I cannot believe I did that!

But she actually did it—she had managed to wrangle a rather decent proposal from one of the Wolves.

Heat rushed to her face as she dashed out of the study, pointedly averting her gaze from the matching looks of shock on the faces of Daniel’s butler and secretary, who had both been waiting for him at the door.

Was it from embarrassment or excitement? Evie was not too sure, as she was giddy with both .

“My dear, you must be careful, or you will run into the wall,” a maternal voice teased her.

Evie looked up to find her grandmother looking at her with a mischievous twinkle in her blue eyes. Even at her age, Lady Wellington still stood with her back ramrod straight, her elegance undiminished. However, when she smiled, Evie never failed to feel the warmth of her affection.

“Grandmama,” she choked out. “I thought you would still be at Lady Gardiner’s tea party.”

“Oh, it was dreadfully boring.” The older woman sniffed scornfully. “You know how the Countess likes to put on such airs, when her scones are never any good.”

Evie could not help but giggle as she linked her arm with her grandmother's. "Heavens, Grandmama! But surely, the tea must have more than made up for it."

Lady Wellington made a face. "She tells everyone with an ear to spare that her tea is the finest from India, but I know good tea, and it certainly was not that ." The older lady sighed and patted her hand affectionately. "But enough about my dismal experience this afternoon. Do tell me about your promenade, my dear. Have you had a wonderful time at the park this afternoon?"

Evie stiffened at the mention of the park. Had her grandmama already heard of her engagement?

As much as she believed Daniel's prediction that Lord Sidmouth would waste no time spilling the news to the scandal sheets his sister wrote for, she had been hoping that the Earl might have been a little too embarrassed to shout the news to the high heavens. After all, it had not been so long ago that he was so certain he would be the one to marry her.

But even if Lord Sidmouth would not care to speak of it so freely, that does not mean that his companions would refrain from doing the same thing.

Her heart sank.

"Grandmama, I apologize that you had to hear the news from someone else," she began in a quavering voice. "And believe me, it all caught me by surprise as well. Everything just happened so fast and?—"

She could hardly finish her sentence.

Her grandmother, however, looked extremely bewildered. "Whatever do you mean, dearest?"

Evie looked up in surprise. “Do you mean,” she rasped, “that you have not heard it yet?”

“What am I supposed to have heard?” The older woman looked at her in concern. “Evie, darling, you are scaring this poor old woman?—”

At that point, Evie inwardly cursed Daniel for foisting the task of informing her grandmother and the Dowager Duchess of Ashton of their apparent betrothal on her.

What an absolute gentleman he was proving to be!

“What poor Lady Evelyn means to say,” a laughing voice interjected, “is that she has found herself currently betrothed to my most charming nephew.”

Both of them turned to find the Dowager Duchess of Ashton walking serenely into the parlor. The corners of her eyes were crinkled in delight. She bustled over to Evie and hugged her warmly.

“Well done, my dear,” she whispered. “I must say, he certainly took his sweet time with it. I was beginning to think he would never work up the courage for it!”

Evie nearly choked at her words. If there was anything that Daniel did not lack, it was courage.

And the sheer audacity to do whatever he wanted.

“Is that true, dearest?” her grandmother gasped. “But I did not know that you were courting!”

I honestly had no idea of it either!

Evie felt as if she might burst into tears. Or laughter. Or both.

“Ladies,” a low voice admonished them. “I beg you, do be gentle with my bride. She tends to be shy.”

Evie narrowed her eyes at Daniel, who had chosen just that precise moment to casually stride into the parlor. He had already taken off his cravat, and the first few buttons of his linen shirt had already been undone. With his sleeves folded back, and his hands in the pockets of his breeches, he looked the very picture of gentlemanly ease.

And she could not help but admire his forearms.

“Fret not,” he told her softly, his hand pressed gently to her back. “I shall take things from here.”

“You better,” she mumbled under her breath. “If it was not for you, we would not be in this particular dilemma! And I am not your bride.”

“Not yet, you mean.”

He shrugged his shoulders and smirked devilishly at her. The man certainly was aware of the effect he had on her and was unscrupulously using it to his full advantage!

“I, for one, do not consider this to be a problem at all,” he added. “On the contrary, it should solve both our problems rather easily.”

His green eyes locked onto hers, sending a frisson of heat down her spine that pooled low in her belly. He was standing so close to her now that it was hardly appropriate, but did she really have to think about it right now?

A soft cough swiftly dispersed the haze that clouded her better judgment, and Evie would have jumped away if Daniel had not held her still.

The Dowager Duchess was looking at him with a raised eyebrow. “I suppose you two lovebirds might have a great deal you wish to discuss in private, but us old ladies would like an explanation if you will.”

“I might also need a glass of wine to go with it,” Lady Wellington added.

“I second that!” the Dowager Duchess declared. “Maybe make it two for me.”

Barnaby, who was ever at his masters’ beck and call, quietly left and returned with a tray of wine glasses for everyone. Daniel and Lady Wellington each took a glass, while the Dowager Duchess took the two that she claimed she needed. When Barnaby held the tray out for Evie, she realized that she was meant to take a glass herself.

A faint fragrance rose up from the burgundy surface, enticingly tickling her nose. A closer inspection would reveal that the smooth surface was marred by faint ripples from the trembling of her hand.

Evie rarely ever drank wine, and certainly not when she had not had dinner yet.

But if the situation calls for it...

Without saying anything more, she brought the glass up to her lips and downed the entirety of its contents. The liquid burned a path down her throat, but pride kept her from coughing.

There was no way she was going to give Daniel Stanton the satisfaction of seeing her choke on a glassful of wine.

It was too late that she realized that the wine was not meant to bolster her courage, nor fortify her grandmother and the Dowager Duchess for their news. When she finished her drink, both of the older ladies were looking at her in shock.

“Oh dear,” she heard her grandmother say fretfully. “I had not thought that dear Evie would be so nervous.”

“You have to forgive my betrothed,” Daniel cut in with a hint of laughter in his voice. “But it is, of course, normal to be in a celebratory mood in anticipation of our nuptials.”

At that moment, Evie wished that somehow, somehow, the ground would just open up beneath her feet and swallow her whole.

Why oh why did she keep making a fool of herself before this man?

CHAPTER 13

Is the thought of marrying me that awful that she would need to down an entire glass to get through the mere announcement of it?

Daniel's fingers tightened around the fragile stem of his glass, even as he maintained a calm and unaffected smile, even going so far as to fake his amusement at the sight of Evie downing an entire glass of wine.

How could he not have known that she needed the liquor to bolster her courage?

But how could he blame her as well? If he had been in her place, he might have finished off the entire bottle himself. In fact, he might even want to continue numbing himself once they finished with this farce.

"Oh, I knew it!" Lady Wellington crowed. "Saw that spark last year with my own two eyes!"

"Grandmama, you could not have!" Evie protested.

"Oh, nonsense!" The Dowager Countess shook her head and patted her granddaughter's hand. "That was precisely why I put you two to work together on the treasure hunt."

Caroline turned towards Evie with a wide smile. "Us older ladies can spot these things from a mile away," she told her confidently. "That is why I had the servants move your things to the room closest to Daniel's."

Both she and Lady Wellington shared a look, as if they were congratulating themselves on a job well done.

“Well, your efforts have been wasted on that account,” Daniel announced. “She has already claimed my rooms for her own.”

Both older ladies gasped.

“You do not say!” Lady Wellington choked out, turning to her granddaughter for an explanation. “Well, Evie, dear, what have you to say for this?”

“Grandmama, I?—”

“There is no need to chastise her, My Lady,” he interjected smoothly. “She simply prefers my rooms. Naturally, I shall let her keep it. I already had the servants move my things to the tower.”

“The tower,” Caroline muttered under her breath.

It was so soft that Evie and Lady Wellington failed to catch it, but Daniel had spent most of his life observing other people. It was a habit that was hard to break and one he had no intention of breaking anytime soon.

“Well, that is rather odd, but I suppose it is still appropriate,” Lady Wellington managed, although she did not look too convinced by his explanation. Her eyes swiveled back and forth between him and her granddaughter, as if she might pry any more information about this sudden news.

Daniel was not going to give her the opportunity to see through their ruse.

“Now that we have dispensed with all of that,” he announced, “the wedding will be

taking place this week. I shall leave the preparations to you ladies.”

The Dowager Duchess was none too pleased with this particular arrangement. “This week? Why, that is hardly enough time to inform anyone?—”

“I do not want to have the whole ton showing up at my doorstep for my wedding,” he warned her darkly.

She pursed her lips. “I understand, but?—”

This time, it was Evie who surprisingly stepped in.

“Your Grace, His Grace has assured me that he will obtain a special license for us to marry posthaste,” she reassured the older lady with a calm smile. “I, for one, agree with him that a more intimate ceremony would suit us far better than a grand one. After all, is not our union what truly matters? A few close friends and family would make for a lovelier celebration, I should think.”

The Dowager Duchess looked at her helplessly. “If you say so, my dear,” she conceded with a sigh. But then she added sharply, “He has not acted inappropriately towards you, has he?”

Define inappropriate ...

A lovely rose hue tinted Evie’s cheeks, but she bravely rallied again. “His Grace has only ever acted with utmost propriety towards me. Please—you need not worry on that account, I assure you.”

“Very well then.”

The sharp look the Dowager Duchess gave him, however, told him that she would not

let this matter rest easily.

Daniel returned it with yet another of his smiles. “Now that we have all that settled, perhaps I should go get that special license.”

“Are you sure you will be able to manage it?” Evie asked him. “The Archbishop of Canterbury rarely accepts these petitions...”

He smirked at her. “Oh, you of little faith.”

It was a little galling to know that his betrothed did not have much faith in his capabilities.

Very well then. Perhaps I should prove her wrong on that account...

It took only a matter of moments to have a letter drafted in his study. It took another hour for said letter to make it to the residence of the Archbishop of Canterbury. Nearly three hours after that letter had been sent out, Daniel was ushered into his private office with much deferential bowing and scraping.

Moments later, he left with the special license safely in his hand.

But before he could return home, he had to make one last stop...

“Good god, Ash! Has no one ever bothered to tell you to knock?” Ethan exclaimed as Daniel burst into his study without prior announcement. “Most would send a card beforehand, you know?”

“Come off it,” Daniel scoffed in response. “I am not one of those desperate mamas begging you to take their daughters for a turn about the park. And there is no need to act so surprised.”

Ethan simply laughed as he poured another glass of brandy and handed it to Daniel. “You are late, by the way.”

Daniel took the proffered glass and was immediately reminded of a certain lady who downed an entire glass of wine before him just that afternoon. More vividly, he recalled the drop that lingered on her bottom lip before her tongue delicately swiped at it.

“And what made you think that I was coming over, anyway?” he muttered gruffly.

Ethan shrugged and sat back on his chair, casually propping his feet up on the hardwood desk. “Because you made a hell of a mess back at the park and you needed my insight to sort things out?”

Daniel smirked and drank the entire glass of brandy. He poured himself a new one as he sat back in the seat opposite his friend. “I would have much rather have gone to Hudson, but that damned recluse lives so far away.”

“And that is precisely why he stays there,” his friend replied, wrinkling his nose. “One would think that he is purposely avoiding his friends.”

“Well, if living closer affords him to be more accessible to your schemes?—”

“Hey!” Ethan cried out in mock affront. “I resent that!”

Both men shared a look and shook their heads, laughing. Daniel refilled their glasses and sat back with a somber look.

“I have already obtained a special license,” he said softly. “We shall be married in a week.”

“That fast?” Ethan asked with a raised eyebrow. “I was not aware that the Archbishop had become so free with handing out special licenses.”

Daniel smiled humorlessly at his friend. “Everything is a lot easier when you know a lot of things about people.”

The Duke of Sinclair’s eyes widened. “What did you—on second thought, do not answer that question,” he amended quickly when he saw the sinister glint in Daniel’s eyes. “I do not think I would want to know.”

“You never know when such information might come in handy, you know,” Daniel replied with a shrug of his shoulders. “Heaven only knows that out of the four of us, you are the most likely to need a special license. Eventually.”

“I shall have you know that I am far too wise to be outsmarted by their cheap tricks!” Ethan scoffed. “But really, your time at the gaming hell starts showing when you do crazy things like this.”

“It should make sense, seeing that I own it now,” Daniel snapped.

Ethan did not reply to that. He just looked pointedly at him and poured himself another glass.

Daniel felt like kicking himself for his quick temper. It was not like his friend was scorning him for his past. Far from it. Ethan only reminded him that it was all behind him right now.

And how far he had risen from it all.

“At least I offer the highest wages—both at Ashton Hall and the gaming hell,” Daniel muttered.

“I doubt you came here just for me to tell you what a good man you have been,” his friend pointed out to him wryly. “But you, of all people, know better than to put little Evie in such a position. If Colin was here?—”

“Evelyn is already a grown woman, and she does not need a bunch of men dictating to her how she is supposed to live her life,” Daniel put in bluntly. “Besides, I could not let her marry that oaf after I...”

He immediately shut his mouth when he realized that he had just volunteered information that he had not meant to. Ethan was his friend—and among the very few he actually trusted—but for one who dealt with a great amount of secrets, it was strangely uncomfortable to reveal his own.

“You mean you could hardly allow her to marry the Earl of Sidmouth after that kiss?” his friend asked him with a raised eyebrow.

Daniel’s hand immediately tightened on his glass. “Who else knows?”

“I did not know, Ash. It was simply a guess, and a lucky one at that.” Ethan raised his glass to Daniel and smiled self-deprecatingly. “You know what they say about broken clocks—it still gets the time right twice a day.”

“You certainly give yourself too little credit.”

“I could never compare to you.” Ethan laughed.

Daniel scowled at him. “Well, this marriage is nothing like what you are thinking, so you had best put those thoughts to rest.”

“Whatever type of marriage it turns out to be, you still have to tell Colin about it,” the Duke of Sinclair pointed out. “You cannot just marry the lady and not inform her

brother about it. Just because you are his friend, though, does not mean he is going to like it. Or you.”

“Colin will understand once he learns of the precarious situation Evie is in,” Daniel muttered. “And he should know, seeing as he was the one that mostly put her in that position by announcing to everyone just how generous her dowry was.”

“A dowry like that would propel any young lady to the height of popularity—not that little Evie needs it.”

Daniel narrowed his eyes at his friend. “You had best keep away from such thoughts about my betrothed.”

“You have hardly announced your engagement to anyone other than the man who once intended to marry her, and now you are acting like a jealous husband.” Ethan chuckled.

“I have already sought the approval of her grandmother and obtained a special license from the Archbishop of Canterbury. That should give me more rights than anyone to tell you to back the hell off .”

Ethan put his hands up defensively. “Hey, you need not be so quick-tempered about it. Besides, you still have to inform Colin, and he should have as much authority as to whether you could marry his sister or not.”

“He has handed that authority to me in his absence.”

“Yes,” his friend replied in exasperation. “But I doubt Colin intended for you to actually marry Evie when he did that. At least write him a letter, won’t you? It will not do any of us any good if he returns to find out that you have married his beloved baby sister.”

“You make it sound like such a bad thing.” Daniel scowled. “And I told you, she is already a grown woman.”

Even I have been made painfully aware of that ever since I woke up to find her in my bed...

CHAPTER 14

Daniel was right.

She had initially thought that he must have been exaggerating when he said that news of their supposedly secret engagement would soon spread through the ton.

But it did. Like wildfire .

“What a vile woman that scribe is!” her grandmother sneered as she tossed the pamphlet that had made its way into Ashton Hall early that morning. The words Lady Spalding’s Society Papers were neatly printed at the top on the very front of it, a delicate flourish highlighting the scandal writer’s chosen nom de plume .

Noone could be sure who Lady Spalding really was, although she caused a great deal of grief amongst the ton , mostly due to her incendiary writing. No one was spared from her scathing remarks. It seemed that Lady Spalding herself lived to antagonize just about everybody, and this time, she had turned her sights on Evie.

“You must pay no heed to this bored scribbler,” Lady Wellington advised. “Gossips tend to speak of others chiefly because their own lives are dreadfully drab in comparison. Those who write such drivel and hide behind anonymity are even worse, for they cannot even muster the courage to show their true nature!”

Evie smiled as she reached out for the pamphlet with a trembling hand. What distinguished Lady Spalding from other gossip columnists was that she had no qualms about naming her targets outright. There was simply no “Lady E” or “Mr. B”

with her—she wrote it out for everyone to read and make no mistake as to who she was writing about.

For example, that morning's column read, It has come to the attention of this writer that Lady Evelyn Fitzroy is apparently betrothed to a certain elusive bachelor—one who goes by the title of the Duke of Ashton—who is the target of every matchmaking mama's dreams and schemes. Some would say that a Wolf like him would have to have a taste of his bride long before he asked for her hand...And who did he ask, this writer wonders. With her brother away, it all seems to be happening too fast for propriety...

What was apparent, however, was that this sister of the Earl of Sidmouth possessed a great talent for tarnishing reputations.

"She must have a great deal of time on her hands." Evie managed to smile weakly.

"She is a jealous harpy, that is what she is!"

Scarlett walked into the parlor of Ashton Hall with a scowl on her face, while Phoebe chose to keep her composure. There was, however, a flash of indignation in her eyes on behalf of her best friend.

"Lady Spalding has gone too far," she said, her normally pleasant tone tinged with scorn. "You must forgive us for our tardiness, Evie. I had to physically keep Scarlett from scouring all the printing presses in London in her quest to root out the scribbler."

The redhead sat down on the sofa huffily and helped herself to a biscuit. "I would have been successful, too, if you were not too kind."

"You young ladies exert too much effort," Lady Wellington said with a rueful shake

of her head. "If us old ladies do not do anything, it would be the shame of our generation!"

"That is hardly necessary, Grandmama." Evie chortled. "You did just say that Lady Spalding is merely in dire need of entertainment."

"Well, she should not seek it at the expense of others," Phoebe remarked, with her nose scrunched up in disapproval. "It is most unkind."

"Your friend is right," Lady Wellington sighed. She reached out and took Evie's hand in hers. "Do not worry overmuch, my dear. We shall take care of this."

Evie simply smiled gratefully at her grandmother. As the Dowager Countess of Wellington, she possessed a certain standing in Society, and a great many of the ton still pandered to her, hoping to get in her good graces. If she said she would root out Lady Spalding, she had but to exert a little effort.

"I wonder, though," Scarlett mused with a small smile. "If Lady Spalding has considered that she has bitten off more than she could chew this time. To go against the Duke of Ash..." she trailed off and shuddered. "She must be extremely brave or extremely foolish."

"Bravery entails a certain stupidity at times," Phoebe muttered. "Her popularity must have gone to her head."

"Quite right, my dear." Lady Wellington laughed. "Very well, I shall leave you younger people to talk amongst yourselves. I am certain there are things you wish to discuss that you would not want my poor old ears to hear."

Evie smiled affectionately at her grandmother as she left the parlor. Once she was out of earshot, Scarlett immediately leaned closer.

“So, tell me, what does your Duke intend to do with Lady Spalding?” she asked, her eyes glittering with excitement.

“Nothing absurd, I assure you.” Evie balked. “Once he has acquired a special license, we shall be wed within the week. And he is not my Duke, mind you.”

“He will be once he has that special license.” The redhead snickered, reaching for a sugar cookie. “I, for one, cannot wait to see how he will deal with that dreadful Lady Spalding.”

“Such animosity!” Phoebe remarked with a slight laugh. She stirred a sugar cube into her tea and sipped at it calmly. “One would think that it was your name she had written on today’s column.”

“She wrote about Evie, and that is already bad enough!” Scarlett protested vehemently. “And she did write about me once or twice. I have not forgiven her for that yet.”

“That is because you are forever getting into trouble,” Phoebe sighed. She turned towards Evie. “Which also reminds me that I have yet to write to my sister about the recent turn of events. I was waiting for you to inform them of the matter.”

Evie smiled warmly at her best friend. “Thank you so much for that, dearest. I have been meaning to send a letter to Colin as well. I doubt he will be able to make it in time to attend the wedding, though.”

The brunette reached out and clasped her hand. “Do you not want to wait for him, at least? I am sure the Duke of Ashton would be willing to wait a little longer...”

“Yes, but if we did that, then my reputation will be in complete tatters by the time Colin arrives,” Evie sighed. “And by then, he will be even more furious that we have

allowed it to get this far.”

“In that case, we will have to find a dress for you soon.” Scarlett frowned. “Do you have anything in mind?”

Evie shrugged casually. When she was young, she had dreamed of how she wanted her wedding to play out. Now, she found that most of that hardly mattered.

“I suppose anything will do,” she replied. “As long as it does not go beyond the bounds of propriety.”

“What propriety?” her redheaded friend scoffed. “It is your wedding, and you are to be a duchess. Propriety will be whatever you decide it would be.”

“Scarlett does have a point.” Phoebe hid a smile behind her cup. “Things are different when you become a duchess. Whatever you decide to wear to your wedding will simply become the new fashion.”

Scarlett grinned widely. “Exciting times ahead, I should say. Lady Spalding will be choking to take back her words once you are married.”

“Or maybe not,” Evie quipped. “Perhaps she would simply come up with something else to throw at me.”

“She would not dare. Not if she wants to make an enemy of your husband.”

Evie set her cup down. “I do not know. His Grace might not bother with an annoying fly like Lady Spalding anyway.”

Daniel already knew her identity and had expressed no desire to go after her. Besides, he had better things to do than rooting out a petty gossip writer.

It would be a poor waste of his talents .

Evie choked back her laughter.

No, Daniel would never...

“Well, any gentleman can be pushed to do the most drastic things for the object of their affection,” Scarlett pointed out. “One need not go far to search for an example—there is the Duke of Blackthorn. Everybody was so certain he was averse to marriage, and well, look at him now.”

“The only problem is that the Duke of Blackthorn is not like the Duke of Ashton,” Phoebe pointed out primly.

“It all depends on dear Evie’s performance.” The redhead smiled mischievously. “I think that your best chance at happiness in this union—as unholy as it might sound right now—is for you to simply seduce your betrothed!”

“As if I would ever do that!” Evie gasped, horrified.

Seduce Daniel? Was she mad? Looking for a way to humiliate herself?

How did one go about seducing one of the renowned Wolves?

Such a ploy was only going to end in miserable failure, and Evie had no plans of being miserable or a failure in the near future.

All she wanted to do was survive this blow to her reputation, rebuild it by conveniently becoming the Duchess of Ashton, and live out the rest of her life in peace.

Even if it was going to be boring. She had no desire to live on the edge, in any case.

“Why not?” Scarlett persisted. “Do you not find him attractive enough? I do not care much for his wolfish allure, but?—”

“It is not that,” Evie cut in quickly.

Not find him attractive? She had never been so attracted to a man before that it was almost embarrassing!

But finding someone attractive and outright seducing him were two entirely different things, not to mention that her friend was suggesting she seduce the Duke of Ash himself—a man capable of reducing numerous women to tears with merely a withering glare.

Evie shuddered inwardly.

I have no desire to join their ranks, thank you very much!

“Then whatever is the matter?” Scarlett asked, her curiosity sufficiently piqued.

“Well, I suppose you might not have noticed, but there is the matter with the Marchioness of Cobham,” Evie muttered.

“Oh.” Scarlett pouted. “That one.”

Evie nodded. “Precisely.”

If Daniel had all the charm of a fallen angel, then the Marchioness was like the embodiment of sin itself. Seduction in the flesh.

How was she supposed to compete against that ?

“Well, all the more reason you should at least try!” Scarlett persisted. “You will never know the outcome unless you do.”

“I do not know, Scar.” Evie bit her bottom lip. “Abject humiliation is not something I particularly look forward to.”

“You can start tonight during the fireworks display!” the redhead continued excitedly. “You will be there, will you not?”

Fireworks.

Evie shuddered to think of the multicolored flowers shooting into the sky.

Crackling flames... the sound of wood popping from the extreme heat... her eyes watering from the smoke and heat and imminent death...

“Evie?”

She blinked her eyes and found herself sitting back in the parlor of Ashton Hall. Sunlight filtered through the gauzy curtains, and the soft fragrance of tea wafted up to her nose.

There was no fire. No smoke. Only Phoebe and Scarlett looking at her in concern.

“Apologies,” she muttered, shaking her head. “I was lost in thought for a moment. What was it again?”

Her friends did not seem too convinced, but they knew better than to press her for more details.

Phoebe smiled gently at her. “I was saying that even if you have no desire to seduce your betrothed at Vauxhall tonight, you should at least come, if only so that you might meet Mr. Turner.”

“Mr. Turner?” Evie repeated.

Her best friend nodded. “Mr. Bernard Turner himself.”

Evie smiled weakly. “I believe you are making a rather convincing case, dear Phoebe.”

“You will not come for your betrothed, but you would jump at the chance to meet your favorite painter.” Scarlett shook her head. “If the Duke of Ash heard this, would he not be hopping about in rage?”

“I would not attempt anything foolish if I were you,” Phoebe warned. “His Grace does not seem to be one who takes jokes lightly.”

Evie nearly choked on a scone.

You have absolutely no idea just how right you are ...

As her two friends argued about how she could best capture her betrothed’s interest and, eventually, his heart, she could not help but ponder over the most recent information she had received.

Perhaps it would not be so bad, after all . Besides, it has been so long, and the fireworks are way up overhead...

She had initially thought to skip the fireworks display at Vauxhall because she particularly despised anything that had to do with fire, but now she had been given a

very good reason to make an appearance.

Two, actually.

CHAPTER 15

Daniel was not one for fireworks—although the whole ton usually came out in all their finery every chance they got to watch gunpowder light up the sky in grandiose displays.

Of course, there was nothing greater than an aristocrat's ego, and every dandy came out of the woodwork to parade about the grounds in all their regalia, never mind that it had rained the night before and the mud was likely to stain their polished boots. Their excited chatter filled the air like a flock of self-absorbed magpies, stifling the atmosphere with their entitlement.

Daniel would have shut himself in his study or the tower had he not heard that Evie would be out to enjoy the display with her friends.

On the surface, it was simply a night of revelry for the members of the beau monde . A chance for everyone to mingle a little bit more freely. Such opportunities were necessary to keep the marriage mart turning.

Daniel, however, was far more aware of the darker side of these things. Of what transpired in the shadows.

“Things truly change once one is betrothed,” Ethan had laughingly remarked when he quickly made himself scarce after Barnaby had sent word that a carriage had been prepared that night for Vauxhall.

Daniel recalled wanting to launch his glass at his friend's laughing face then.

As if that bastard does not know just how vile these supposed gentlemen can be .

In any case, his friends were well aware of how little he thought of these fine young men of the ton , and they were not at all ignorant of his disdain for them. One might even go so far as to say that they share that very same contempt.

“... grateful that the House has put the bill on the table...” he heard the elderly Lord Milton drone on from beside him.

The doddering baron was already well into his eighth decade, and if Daniel were to be asked, it would have been best if he spent the night in peace in his estate. Unfortunately, Lord Milton was the best example of a fool who refused to learn.

He was also a widower, and even in his ripe, old age, he was still desirous of yet another marriage.

The impressionable young misses of Society, however, had no plans of becoming his Baroness. No lady in her right mind would want to spend the second half of her life looking after an old lecher, but Lord Milton still persevered, and Society’s mamas continued to fight to keep their daughters out of his reach.

Lamentably, he was not the only one of his ilk, although it would have been better for the whole world and womankind in general if his kind were to perish.

“By God, who is that ravishing creature?”

Daniel had very little to no interest in whoever was the latest darling of the Season. In any case, Lord Milton thought anyone in a skirt was ravishing . One could wrap a yard of cloth around a pillar and he would probably propose marriage to it.

Daniel angled his head slightly in the direction of the Baron’s gaze, his eyes

narrowing slightly when he caught sight of a delicate figure wrapped in layers of diaphanous, midnight-colored silk. The beads scattered all over the bodice glittered like a thousand stars.

Her dark brown hair was piled up into luscious curls atop her head, but a lone lock hung enchantingly down the side of her neck to rest lightly on her shoulder. Her eyes were wide and thickly lashed, like those of a fawn walking into a pit of vipers.

What the bloody hell was Evie doing, coming into Vauxhall looking like a moon goddess descending upon the earth?

“Excuse me,” he growled, pushing past the Baron, who shrieked slightly in indignation at being so handily displaced.

Daniel did not care, though. All he cared about was getting to Evie.

And just for looking at her like that, he was willing to pluck the old man’s eyes out of their sockets. If anyone else did the same, then perhaps the gentlemen of London could all learn to live without the sense of sight.

Daniel pushed past the throng of bodies and a group of mamas eagerly pushing their daughters towards him. He did not even hear Lord Milton mutter, “Well, I suppose the rumors are true then...”

He needed to get to Evie, and he needed to do that before he lost his mind and wreaked a carnage that Lambeth had never seen before.

Of all the shenanigans Scarlett has pulled me into, this has to be the worst one.

Vauxhall Gardens was largely considered a rural area, but at that moment, the air felt far more oppressive than in the most crowded ballrooms of London. She wanted to

claw her way out of the quagmire of bodies that seemed to crowd her, making her dizzy and lightheaded and extremely likely to empty the contents of her stomach onto the moist grass underfoot.

I am going to be sick. Disgustingly, embarrassingly sick!

“Evie! There you are!”

She whirled around to catch a glimpse of a flash of red and green. She saw Phoebe and Scarlett strolling towards her, arm in arm. One wore a slight smile, and the other wore a brilliant grin, their eyes lit up with mischief.

“Why are you standing here like a simpleton?” the redhead teased her. “Did you see him? I thought I saw him right over there!”

As Evie turned in the direction her friend was pointing, she heard a distinctly low, masculine voice growl from behind them, “Just who is there?”

All three young ladies jumped at the sound of his voice. Phoebe looked noticeably uneasy at his appearance, but she regained her composure quickly. Scarlett barely even flinched, smiling openly at him.

“Why, Your Grace!” she enthused. “We did not expect to see you here!”

Evie saw him raise an eyebrow. She could tell that he was not pleased to find them discussing another man.

And why should he care about that? Did he not make it clear to me that we were free to be with whomever lovers we chose?

“Oh, we were just talking about Mr. Bernard Turner,” Phoebe supplied, shooting Evie

a look of concern.

“What about him?” Daniel snapped, irritation clear in his tone.

“Well, I never thought you would ask such a thing!” Scarlett gasped dramatically, her hand flying to her chest as if she might collapse from the shock. “Were you not aware that your betrothed paints? Of course, since Mr. Turner is renowned for his artistic talents, she also wishes to learn from him.”

As she talked, Daniel’s eyes seemed to grow darker by the moment.

Please do not say anything more, Evie wanted to implore her friend. Can you not see that the more you talk, the greater the likelihood that we shall have a painter’s blood on our hands by the end of the night?

She felt his hand on her back, steadying her. Her chest loosened, and she breathed a little easier, although it felt as if his entire palm was branded on her skin.

“Why did you not say anything?” he asked her, his voice a gentle whisper against the delicate shell of her ear.

Warmth rose to her cheeks, and she shook her head. “It is nothing worth mentioning,” she replied lightly. “It is just a hobby, nothing more.”

“It appears to mean more to you than you are letting on.”

“I assure you it is nothing like that at all.” She laughed a little. “My brother is the real painter. I have no talent, truly. I just enjoy playing around with colors, that is all.”

She truly wished he would drop the matter. She derived no enjoyment from having to discuss her dreams with someone who may very well laugh at them. However, her

friend misguidedly seemed to think that she was in dire need of reinforcement.

“What do you mean ‘that is all’?” Scarlett burst into laughter. “Playing around? You were even considering becoming a spinster and making your own money from it!”

A woman making money was unheard of amongst the gently bred ladies of Society. Becoming a spinster to spend the rest of her life painting was nearly blasphemous!

If Evie could have sprung and covered the redhead’s mouth, she would have. Instead, she wanted to melt into the ground in embarrassment.

The sight of Daniel scowling further cemented her belief that attending this event truly was the worst idea.

And the fireworks display had not even started yet.

Daniel turned towards her. “Is this true?”

“Is what true?” she echoed listlessly.

“Do you really want to meet Turner?”

Did she want to meet the Mr. Bernard Turner? Evie wanted to laugh outright. There was nothing she wanted more!

Unfortunately, she had never felt bold enough to seek an audience with a man of his talent.

She had dreamed that perhaps, one day, she might be capable of producing a masterpiece that would be enough to capture the interest of art connoisseurs and Mr. Turner himself. A masterpiece so great that they would be willing to look beyond her

gender and truly appreciate it.

“Of course, I want to meet him.” Evie nodded shyly, her voice barely above a whisper. “But I thought that I should?—”

But she hardly finished her sentence when that hand at her back gently but firmly steered her away from her friends. A few of the revelers who had been watching their exchange moved away from them as if they were nothing but butter and Daniel a hot knife.

He said nothing except a low, “Come.”

“Where are we going?” she asked him helplessly.

“Did you not want to see the painter? Well, I am taking you to meet him.”

“But,” she protested in exasperation, “I have hardly accomplished anything yet. I?—”

“You are going to meet him, not audition for him,” he pointed out.

Evie balked slightly at that.

He does have a good point there. If I am to simply meet Mr. Turner, I will not need to impress him with my skills. Not for now, at least.

“If I say you will meet him, then you will,” Daniel said firmly. “And if you wish for him to teach you, then he will do that as well.”

“Daniel... you cannot just order people about like that. It is just not right .”

He looked at her, his eyes softening slightly. “Sweetheart, you seem to forget that I

do not always do what is right. I will, however, do all that is necessary.”

“I hardly think this is necessary!”

“It is because you will be my Duchess. Your slightest wish will be a necessity.”

There was simply no arguing with him. He was set in his ways.

She looked back at her friends helplessly, hoping that they might at least step up and rescue her from this immensely compelling man who seemed to hold the entire world in the palms of his hands.

Scarlett simply winked back at her and mouthed, “Best of luck!”

It would seem that Evie was on her own this time.

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CHAPTER 16

Is there actually something or someone he cannot access?

Evie felt as if she were in a daze. When Scarlett had mentioned that Mr. Turner would be in attendance tonight, she had not exactly thought out how to meet him properly. For her, it was already enough to be in the same place as him—a painter she admired as a master of his craft.

Never had she thought that she would actually be meeting him. Be introduced to him. Talk to him .

What am I supposed to say? How am I supposed to act?

“There is no need to be nervous.”

She glanced up and found Daniel staring at her with a neutral expression, his face devoid of any emotion.

It was so easy for him to say that when she knew he was apathetic to most of the world. How could he possibly understand the excitement coursing through her now?

Evie scowled at him. “I am not nervous.”

“Forgive me. It must have been my hand that was trembling.”

He was teasing her! Here she was, her heart almost beating out of her chest, her knees

knocking together, and he still had the gall to tease her!

Daniel Stanton truly was the most attractive, infuriating man alive!

She wanted to hit him. Was it considered appropriate to smack one's betrothed in public? Perhaps not, but the temptation to retaliate was too great to resist.

She pinched his arm, and he did not even flinch. She rolled her eyes at that. Was he impervious to pain as well? Perhaps even if she hit him outright, it would have the same effect as a gnat fighting against a giant.

But gnats can sting . Maybe if I hit him right in the eye...

"Mr. Turner, I suppose you have not met my betrothed," she heard him say calmly.

"Lady Evelyn Fitzroy."

All at once, thoughts of vengeance flew out of her mind as she beheld the artist whose works she had admired for so very long.

Mr. Bernard Turner himself.

The painter looked to be no more than in the third decade of his life, with an open smile and wrinkles at the corners of his eyes. He wore a dark blue jacket, and his cravat was tied rather sloppily, as if he had put it there as an afterthought. This was a man who cared very little for appearances, choosing instead to capture the beauty around him with his brush.

Truly a man worthy of admiration. Nothing more.

"My Lady." Mr. Turner smiled politely at her. "It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

“The pleasure is all mine,” Evie croaked. “I... have great admiration for your works. Your technique in Swallows in Flight is absolutely exquisite. I have never seen such delicate strokes in my entire life.”

“Ah!” The painter’s eyes twinkled with delight. “One with an eye for details. Impressive.”

“Of course,” Daniel remarked with a raised eyebrow, as if she could not possibly be anything else.

If he said she was impressive, then she was certainly the most impressive amongst womankind, and anyone who dared suggest otherwise was a fool.

Evie wanted to roll her eyes at that one.

Can he ever be wrong?

She felt that she was not going to like his answer to that question.

Suddenly, a shrill whistle pierced through the night air as a brilliant light arced into the sky. When it reached the zenith of its ascent, it exploded into scattered flowers of multicolored lights, crackling as they went.

Evie’s blood ran cold as the gathered audience gasped in awe.

The fireworks display had begun.

“No,” she gasped, her eyes closing as she fought to keep the images at bay. “No!”

Flames licking at her skin, her dress, her hair... All around her, the air was thick with smoke, smothering her lungs and her cries for help... Her eyes watering from the heat

and the smoke, her senses clouded except for the clear popping and crackling of wood as the fire devoured everything in its path to get to her...

She could not get out.

It had been half a decade, and she was still trapped in the burning house and there was no one in the whole wide world who could get her out to safety.

Daniel had seen that look before.

On the faces of men who had crawled away from the brink of death. On the faces of women who had survived the direst of circumstances and lived on with the scars. On the faces of children who had known the cruelty of the world before they felt the affection of a mother.

But never on the face of a gently bred young lady celebrated by Society.

“No...”

It was a moan. A plea.

“No... please...”

A cold chill ran down his spine when he saw her squeeze her eyes shut, her hands coming up to her ears to block the sounds of a million explosives launching themselves into the sky in a dizzying array.

Gunpowder was first valued for its capability to turn the tides of war. Now, the aristocracy used it to satisfy their insatiable need for entertainment.

Except that some of them were more horrified than entertained.

He reached out for Evie, but she managed to slip past him as she ran away from the crowd and the dazzling display above them.

He cursed under his breath.

Damn it!

It was so easy to lose her in a crush like this, but Daniel had more experience than most of his acquaintances in maneuvering his way through a thick crowd.

He wove in easily, following her as she made her way to a cluster of trees, the thick foliage providing a canopy that blocked out the arcing lights overhead.

He found her huddled at the foot of one of those trees, trembling like a fawn startled by a hunter's gunshot. His heart clenched at the sight of her—so fragile and broken—and before he could even register what he was doing, he had pulled her delicate frame to his chest, running his hand through her hair and whispering soft, unintelligible words to soothe her.

Eventually, her sobs ceased, and her breathing evened out, interrupted only by the occasional hiccup.

“You must find me laughable right now,” she wept. Her lower lip trembled even as she managed to pout. “An absolute laughingstock.”

Daniel would have laughed at how adorable the display was if he did not feel as if a knife had been brutally inserted into his chest and twisted with deliberate slowness.

“I do not know what came over me. I think it's the smell of smoke,” she continued. “I have been like this ever since... ever since that night .”

That night .

Those words echoed hollowly in his heart.

More than half a decade ago, Colin had ended his Grand Tour of Europe when the news that an entire wing of Blackthorn Estate was badly burned reached them. It would have hardly mattered to him, but his parents had both perished in the fire, although there had been no other casualties.

Daniel had thought it strange, back then, that not even a servant died, but the Duke and his Duchess never made it out.

Whenever anyone talked of such a tragedy, they mostly forgot that there had been one other survivor who lived to tell the harrowing tale of that night.

Evie had survived that fire, but Daniel had never learned how she managed to get out when the fire razed what should have been her rooms as well.

Judging from her current state, she did not manage to do so easily. There were scars that were invisible to the naked eye but were no less as horrifying—and these were the scars she now bore.

“I swear that I shall never let anything bad happen to you,” he promised her softly, holding her in his arms as if she were a child. “But, sweetheart, if you open your eyes, you might see that there is a sense of beauty in the display, and you might find some inspiration for your paintings.”

She choked on a laugh. “You truly think I can paint.”

He looked at her with a raised eyebrow. “If you say you can, then you can. I would like to see anyone who dares try to say otherwise.”

She tilted her head to look at the fireworks, her body stiff as a board. As flowers of light burst in the night sky, he could feel her relaxing in his arms, her body becoming more pliant. Warm .

“You are right,” she whispered. “It is very beautiful, indeed.”

Nowhere near as beautiful as you .

Her eyes were wide with wonder, as if she was discovering beauty for the first time. Her lips, slightly parted, seemed to invite him for a taste.

Or a feast.

Daniel groaned inwardly at the direction of his thoughts. He already knew that he would not stop at a taste. He would crave more of her, devouring her until not even her soul remained.

They sat there for some time—her, enjoying the fireworks for the first time in half a decade, and him, simply enjoying her awed delight.

“That... that was not so bad,” she admitted shyly. “I think I might have enjoyed it?—”

Suddenly, a look of horror flashed across her face, and he worried that she might have remembered something else when she said something that provoked his ire.

“Oh my God, Mr. Turner!” she gasped, scrambling out of his arms.

He pinched her chin with his thumb and forefinger and tilted her face up to meet his gaze.

“You are not to utter another man’s name in my presence,” he growled threateningly at her. “ Ever .”

Her brow furrowed. “Or else what?”

“Or else you will have a man’s blood on your hands, sweetheart,” he said coldly. “Is that what you want?”

Evie, however, simply rolled her eyes and jerked her chin out of his grasp. “Goodness,” she muttered. “I never knew you were so dramatic!”

Daniel was not joking. Sheer bloodlust was rushing through his veins right now, and if she dared to defend the man again, he was going to head back and break every bone in that bloody painter’s body.

Starting with his hands .

“But you see, I just embarrassed myself!” she moaned in abject misery. “I randomly left in the middle of our conversation, and now he will never want to teach me. He must think me the veriest fool alive?—”

“He would not dare,” he growled. “Not if he knows what is good for him!”

“Daniel,” she sighed in exasperation. “You cannot just threaten everyone to make them bow to your wishes.”

“Who said I was going to stop at threatening?”

She gave him a look that told him she absolutely forbade him to do whatever he had in mind. She was far too softhearted, and he had seen far too much of the world to ever be as kind.

“Do not worry overmuch,” he reassured her. “I shall take care of it. Before this night is over, that damned Mr. Turner will be begging to teach you whatever you want.”

She looked at him suspiciously. “Well, thank you... I suppose.”

“You suppose?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

Laughingly, she turned her face back to the fireworks. “That depends on how you will be able to convince him, of course—if you can even do so without resorting to violence.”

“Oh, you of little faith,” he murmured, his gaze softening as he continued to watch her upturned face.

This time, there was no fear in her eyes, no trembling of her lips. Instead, there was a slight smile, her eyes wide as she took in the display before her.

He took that opportunity to lean in and whisper into her ear, “See? Only good things happen to you when you listen to me.”

She turned slightly towards him, her face so near to his. Her lips only a breath away.

“Will you listen to me, too?” she asked him. “From time to time?”

If she continued to look at him like that, he might be tempted to promise her that he would lay the world at her feet.

It was a dangerous, dangerous game they were playing, with both of them circling each other warily as their attraction flared hot and fierce between them.

He allowed a small smile to tease the corners of his lips. “It depends.”

“It depends on what?”

“On whether what you are asking is within reason.”

“Oh.” She did not sound the least bit disappointed. “Kiss me,” she told him instead.

Daniel pulled back slightly, his eyebrows snapping together in a frown. “You do not know what you are asking for, sweetheart.”

She trailed her finger down the side of his neck to his chest. Damn it, the woman was a natural-born seductress. Just where the hell did she learn how to heat a man’s blood like that?

As if a single look from her does not have me hard and aching to bury myself into her wet heat...

“You are my betrothed, are you not?” she asked him, her voice a sultry whisper. “Kiss me, Daniel.”

Had he been in his right mind, he would have refused her. Had he valued his friendship with her brother a little more, he might have pulled away from her.

But Daniel had decided that when it came to Evie and even her littlest demands, he was hardly sane nor grateful.

If she had asked him to burn the world for her, he would have asked her how hot she wanted it.

What was a kiss compared to the destruction of the world?

If she wanted that, then they would both burn for it.

CHAPTER 17

He was furious.

Or maybe not.

His arms tightened around her until she let out a soft gasp. It was then that she felt the hardness prodding at her belly, and a heated awareness flared within her.

He was not furious—he wanted her. Perhaps as much as she wanted him.

She felt his fingers on her chin, tilting her face up to his, and her breath started to come out in little gasps of excitement .

Dear God in heaven, she was thrilled . Her whole being absolutely thrummed with it, vibrating with the need for him to possess her. To make her thoroughly his so that it would leave no one with any doubt as to who she belonged to.

It was scandalous. Absolute madness.

But Evie had never wanted him more than she wanted anything in this whole world—even if he told her and showed her over and over again why she should not.

His lips came down on hers, hard and cold at first. She had learned not to expect gentleness from him. She did not want gentleness, anyway.

She wanted his raw, undiluted passion.

She let out a soft moan of approval as she threw her arms around him, standing on her tiptoes as she met his kiss with equal fervor.

His hands trailed from her back to span her ribcage, his fingers digging into the softness of her flesh as if he meant to imprint himself on her very skin. She felt him stroke the underside of her breast, growling in irritation at the fabric that stood between them.

It was quite as well, for she wanted to be rid of the entire thing, too.

“You have been a naughty girl, Evelyn.” His low, gravelly voice skated across her skin, seeping into her blood like a drug. “You should be punished.”

She should have been wary. She should have taken that for the threat that it was. Instead, she pressed her body to his harder, like a shameless wanton.

“If your brother and grandmama saw you right now, begging for me to kiss you, what would they say?”

Heat flooded her cheeks. They would be horrified, naturally.

But she could not stop. Would not stop.

She felt his hand grab her wrists and pin them hard against the trunk behind her. She could feel the rough bark scraping her skin, and instead of feeling fear, she was thrilled.

All the gentlemen she met had treated her with courtesy—whether it had been real or not. Only Daniel had ever shown her the real side of him. The Wolf that prowled the edges of Society.

And now, she was the fawn that had wandered into his territory.

“Look at you,” he murmured, his eyes dark with lust. “I should tie you up before you do anything more foolish.”

She tilted her chin up and gave him a slight smile. “Well, why don’t you?”

If it was possible, his eyes grew even darker. This close, she could see the black overwhelming those green orbs, and she knew she was facing his true nature—not that thin veneer of civility he put on for the public.

Evie gasped as the hand that held hers over her head tightened and his lips swooped down on hers in a punishing kiss, obliterating any thought of resistance she might have had.

His teeth scraped against her lips, his tongue plunging boldly into her mouth. She tried to kiss him back, but he had dominated her completely until all she could do was open herself up to him.

Gladly. Willingly.

She felt his hand yank at her neckline, exposing her soft flesh to the world. Almost immediately, his hand covered her breast, kneading it until she moaned into his mouth. When she did, she felt him pinch the turgid peak, eliciting a gasp from her.

It was a wholly new sensation, one that shot straight between her legs. She had never felt anything like it before. It was pure pleasure tinged with pain.

And she loved every second of it .

He rolled her nipple between his fingers, toying with her, leaving her gasping and

moaning, her back arching as she unabashedly pushed her willing flesh into hand.

She wanted more of it. Dear God, she wanted all of it . Everything that he had to show her. Every scandalous, forbidden desire she ever had but could never voice.

She wanted ruination at his hands, a devastation that would claim her body and soul.

She wanted him .

Daniel had never met a woman more submissive, more pliant to his demands.

Evie had every right to be scared—he was not a gentle man by any means, and his pleasures could be somewhat... thought-provoking. There had been others far more experienced than her who balked at his requests.

But not, Evie, his little fawn.

Even as he pinched and tweaked her nipple, she continued to gasp in delight.

He wished she did not, though, for it only served to push his desire to greater heights.

He impatiently dragged her skirts over her thighs, feeling his mouth go dry at the sight of the silk stockings covering her shapely calves. Higher the dress went with his hand until he came up to the juncture of her thighs, the downy curls on her mound whispering against his fingers.

“Has anyone ever touched you here, little fawn?”

She looked up at him, her eyes wide. And then, she shook her head.

“Have you never touched yourself?” he murmured. “Never pleased yourself?”

The look in her eyes was almost embarrassed. "I do not know how..."

This was her most intimate spot, where nobody else had ever touched her before. That knowledge filled Daniel with a fierce possessiveness.

He smiled as he deftly slipped a finger into her slick folds, watching her eyes go wide, a gasp escaping her parted lips.

"Oh, dear God!" she exclaimed.

His smile widened all the more. "That is right, sweetheart. I am your god, and I shall make you feel a pleasure you had never known before."

His words were blasphemous. If the Archbishop of Canterbury heard him, he would probably seize back the special license he had issued earlier that day.

Or maybe not.

"You like that, don't you?" Daniel laughed softly. "You like me touching you, owning your pleasure like this."

She nodded. "Yes... Dear God, yes!" she gasped.

He found that little bundle of nerves and rubbed it, watching the play of emotions on her face. Delighting in the strangled shriek that burst from her throat.

"So wet, my little fawn," he crooned. "Open your legs wider."

She nodded as she fought to comply with his request. He grabbed her leg and hooked it over his hip. In this position, with her hands pinned over her head, she was rendered mostly immobile and open to his advances.

His finger traced the seam of her drenched core, and she mewled, wiggling against his hand, eager for more. Who could have known that his innocent, little fawn could be so greedy? That she would brazenly part her legs for him and ground herself against his questing fingers?

Daniel found himself pleasantly surprised and very, very much aroused.

“You are not to drop your leg or close it,” he ordered in a low voice. “You may not scream as well, lest you attract attention and someone else sees you with your legs wide open for me.”

No gentleman would ever talk to a lady in such a manner, but Daniel had never been a gentleman. He did not play by the same rules they did, so it was only to be expected that his desires were... different.

He sawed his finger through her weeping slit, watching her quickly come undone. He pressed against the pearl of her desire, and she became a sobbing mess. When he clamped his mouth on her exposed breast, sucking on her stiff nipple, his teeth scraping against it, she shattered on his hand with a strangled gasp.

Her body sagged against him, but he was not done with her. Not yet.

With his fingers, he wrenched yet another climax from her until she sobbed helplessly into his shoulder, her entire frame trembling with the fierceness of the sensations that coursed through her.

He waited until her breath evened out, but even then, she wobbled dangerously on her legs, clutching at him for support.

“Dear God in heaven,” she murmured, looking a little dazed. “What was that ?”

“That, my sweet, is what happens when you push a man too far.”

The sultry look she shot him made him want to take back his words. Somehow, he felt that she was only going to attempt more of the same.

“Are you all right?” he asked her.

“I am not sure I could walk properly for a good long while,” she joked.

He shot her a look, and she immediately sobered up.

“Never provoke me like this again, Evelyn,” he warned her.

Tonight would go down as yet another event that should never have happened.

I should have stopped at a kiss!

Better yet, he should not have kissed her at all. He should have known by now that her lips contained a drug far more potent than anything he could get from the black market with shady deals and exorbitant amounts of money.

When she ran off into the woods, he had followed her mostly out of a need to keep her safe. The shadows were not exactly a good place for women, especially wide-eyed innocents like Evie.

“But what if I want to?” she asked him, pouting like a petulant child.

His lips thinned into a grim line. “Then I highly advise you not to consider that line of thought.”

He felt her stiffen at his side. He could see the light in her eyes dimming, and he

wanted to kick himself for causing that .

“In that case,” she told him flippantly, “I thank you for your assistance with my... situation earlier. You need not accompany me. I can walk on my own.”

Walk on her own? The woman could hardly stand on her legs after the climax he wrenched out of her!

His little fawn was stubborn to her wet, dripping core.

He said nothing as he took her back to her friends, only to find just Scarlett alone in the crowd, standing precisely where he and Evie had left her and Phoebe earlier to talk to Mr. Turner.

The redhead looked at Evie, and then her gaze knowingly flicked to Daniel. He only stared stoically back at her, silently warning her to keep her mouth shut.

I swear that damned vixen says the first thing that spouts off the top of her head!

He was not about to trust Lady Scarlett with any of his secrets, but Evie adored her. But then again, Evie always thought the best of everyone. She had even given that bastard Sidmouth the benefit of the doubt when he had been ogling her and her dowry since the start of the Season.

“Are you all right, my dear?” the redhead asked Evie. “You look a little... pale. Shaken up. You know what I mean.”

His betrothed managed a shaky smile. “I am fine. The fireworks just scared me a little, that is all.”

“Oh.” Scarlett nodded empathetically. “These things can be extremely overwhelming,

would you not agree, Your Grace?”

Daniel only scowled at her.

Evie immediately rushed to his defense. “Fortunately, His Grace has been most considerate by helping me through it all.”

A slow smile spread across the redhead’s face. “I am sure he was most solicitous— as your betrothed, of course.”

A delicate flush rose to Evie’s cheeks, and she looked away as Daniel glared at her friend. He did not particularly like it when someone made his little fawn uncomfortable. Or blush.

Only he was allowed to do that.

This friend of hers frequently forgot herself and overstepped her bounds.

“Do not worry overmuch, though.” Lady Scarlett laughed lightly, seemingly reveling in her friend’s discomfiture and his growing irritation.

She should pray that she and Evie remain friends for a long, long time .

“No one noticed you were missing,” she added. “Besides, you were not the only couple missing.”

Her eyes lit up with mischief, and Daniel was reminded of a crafty fox. Once again, he reminded himself that this was a woman who should not be underestimated.

She was dangerous, mostly because she was audacious to a fault—annoyingly so.

If she knows what is good for her, then she had best keep Evie out of her schemes. Otherwise, I cannot be faulted for taking drastic measures.

As Evie's betrothed, of course.

Maybe if he kept telling himself that, he would eventually believe it.

CHAPTER 18

Men liked to say that women were the most complex, vexing creatures alive, but Evie had the distinct impression that they were simply projecting those very same characteristics on the fairer sex. Indeed, there was nothing more confusing than a man who was hot one moment and then freezing cold the next.

At least with Colin, he was pretty much consistent. Daniel was an entirely different story altogether...

Right after they arrived home after the fireworks show at Vauxhall, he had muttered a brusque “Good night” before stomping off to his tower, leaving not only Evie but also her grandmother and the Dowager Duchess thoroughly perplexed.

The next few days after that were hell for the servants.

Daniel seemed to find something wrong with everything—his coffee was not bitter enough or hot enough. He found a speck of dust on an antique vase he had never cared for before. He would snap at Barnaby for the slightest thing. His valet could not prepare his clothes fast enough...

All of that, on top of the rushed wedding preparations, had the servants scurrying about anxiously, jumping at the mere sight of his shadow or the sound of his footsteps. As a result, more mistakes were made, and Daniel grew even more irascible.

It was madness.

It was also absolutely unnecessary, and Evie was of the mind to tell her betrothed precisely that—if he would talk to her, at least.

The past few days, he had communicated to her in nearly unintelligible grunts and one-word responses that she feared she would be driven out of her mind. He was making her crazy—and not in a very good way.

Which was why she was looking forward to spending the rest of the afternoon enjoying tea with her friends—even if all they wanted to discuss were the details of the wedding.

Evie sat quietly, sipping her tea as her grandmother and the Dowager Duchess debated about the best flowers to festoon the wedding breakfast with.

“The ceremony will be held in the drawing room,” the Dowager Duchess pondered. “I was thinking that a spray of myrtles here and there would be lovely.”

“Yes.” Lady Wellington nodded in agreement. “For love and marriage. And violets, too—for faithfulness.”

Evie nearly choked on her tea when her grandmother mentioned that. After all, Daniel had already stipulated that they were both free to entertain their own lovers outside of their union—provided that they were both discreet, of course.

Phoebe, however, shot her a worried look as she delicately wiped her lips with her napkin. She was spared from further questioning when Barnaby announced the arrival of Madame Dumosse.

“Madame Dumosse?” Lady Wellington looked rather surprised. “But we had not commissioned anything from her since the start of the Season...”

Their questions, however, were answered when the premier couturier in London sailed into the parlor with a huge smile on her face. A bevy of assistants trailed after her, each one of them holding boxes of different sizes.

“For Lady Evelyn Fitzroy,” Madame Dumosse announced in her pleasantly accented voice. She motioned for one of her assistants to approach her with the largest box and turned towards Evie. “His Grace commissioned your wedding dress just last week. It is the most beautiful creation of the atelier, to date.”

Evie frowned slightly at that.

Last week? But we had not even ? —

“Oh, what perfect timing!” Scarlett clapped her hands excitedly, seemingly oblivious to the confusion on her friend’s face. “Quick, Evie! Let us see it!”

“His Grace certainly is generous.” Lady Wellington smiled in approval.

“Indeed,” Evie murmured, still in shock. She had not even thought to buy a dress specifically for her wedding.

“Well, you did not think that Daniel would have allowed you to walk down the aisle in any dress, did you?” The Dowager Duchess laughed.

The lack of response from Evie told her that she did exactly that.

Most brides had months to prepare before their nuptials, but with her own so close, she barely had any time to prepare.

“Not exactly just any dress.” She smiled sheepishly. “I have a beautiful gown that I have yet to wear?—”

“ Non! Non! ” Madame Dumosse gasped, a hand to her heart as if Evie had just uttered something sacrilegious. Or treasonous. “How could we allow a duchess to walk down the aisle in ordinary garb?”

“It is not exactly ordinary?—”

The gown she had in mind was specially commissioned from Madame Dumosse at the start of the Season, and she had saved the beautiful ice-blue dress for a more... special occasion. However, the couturière reacted as if she had just announced she was going to get married in one of her old morning dresses. It truly was laughable.

“His Grace really should not have...” she trailed off helplessly.

“Nonsense!” Madame Dumosse smiled at her. “This is a show of His Grace’s affection. Why, I had never had a man barge into the atelier to demand anything for his betrothed! Most would even beg me to stow away my finest fabrics before their wives arrived!” she added with a mischievous wink.

Indeed, it was most generous of Daniel to have commissioned a dress especially for her and at the height of the Season, at that. No doubt about it, Madame Dumosse and her seamstresses must have worked day and night to finish the gown, not to mention all the other commissions they must have set aside to finish this particular dress at such a tight deadline.

If it had been her business, Evie would have been left in tears at such a request.

Daniel does not make requests . He makes demands, and he always, always expects them to be fulfilled.

In any case, he must have paid quite a premium for it. No businessman in his right mind would throw away half his clientèle for the demands of just one client, unless

they knew that taking such a risk would more than make up for it—and Evie believed that Madame Dumosse was a particularly shrewd businesswoman. She had to be to become one of the most sought-after couturières in all of London.

At Scarlett's enthusiastic urging, she slowly lifted the cover of the box that had been held out for her. A layer of tissue paper covered the dress wrapped carefully within. When she lifted the tissue paper, a collective gasp rang out in the room, and Evie felt her heart stop.

Inside the box was simply the most beautiful dress she had ever seen—and she had not even lifted it yet. The fabric looked as if someone had gathered the moonlight and spun it into cloth. Crystals encrusted the bodice in delicate, lacy patterns, almost as if someone had collected the stars in the sky and sewn them into the fabric.

“Oh, that is lovely!” Phoebe breathed in awe. “His Grace is a man of great taste.”

“He is, indeed.” Madame Dumosse nodded in agreement. “In fact, he was the one who chose the fabric.”

Even Evie was surprised. “He did?”

The couturière smiled. “He said he wanted his bride to be garbed in moonlight.”

“That is... very romantic,” Scarlett muttered. “And so unlike the Duke.”

“Hush!” Phoebe chastised her softly. “That is not very nice.”

“But I am rarely nice.” The redhead grinned back at her. “Much to my mama's dismay, I'm afraid.”

The other ladies burst into laughter at her blunt honesty, and even Madame Dumosse

promised her that she would make just as beautiful a dress for her for her own wedding.

“Of course, you must be betrothed first.” Evie chortled. “After all, one cannot have a wedding trousseau without a wedding.”

“Speaking of the trousseau...” Madame Dumosse smiled at Evie as she turned and waved a hand towards her assistants. One by one, they opened their boxes to reveal numerous stockings and dresses, lacy underthings and the like.

“My word!” Lady Wellington gasped. “Does His Grace mean to change my granddaughter’s entire wardrobe?”

The Dowager Duchess only laughed. “It would seem so, Lavinia. That young man,” she murmured, shaking her head. “It seems I worried for nothing.”

Evie could only shake her head. “I worry that he might empty the coffers of Ashton Hall just for a wedding trousseau!”

“Oh, far from it.” The Dowager Duchess smiled with a twinkle in her eyes. “But I shall leave it up to you to discuss that with him.”

But how was Evie going to be able to discuss anything with him at all when he hardly talked to her? One might even say that he was going to great lengths to avoid talking to her at all.

Evie could only shake her head inwardly at that.

Whatever she envisioned her marriage to be, she certainly did not want her husband to avoid talking to her. Most wives in the ton might think this most ideal, but she would not countenance such an arrangement!

One of these days, she meant to have a very lengthy conversation with him—one that she would not allow him to evade.

Daniel had never encountered a more difficult endeavor than to avoid someone currently living under his roof.

Ever since the night at Vauxhall, he had been doing his damndest to make sure that he was never with Evie alone, having discovered for himself that in her presence, his self-control was practically nonexistent.

The woman was a living, breathing temptation. Seduction made flesh.

And he was the pitiful sod who was so unable to resist her.

If any of his previous paramours heard of it, they would laugh themselves silly and perhaps suggest a nice sojourn in Bedlam.

His train of thought was interrupted by a soft knock on the door. Daniel looked up, half-afraid that he was going to find Evie before him.

It would not do well for me to deflower the bride before the wedding night .

He laughed harshly to himself.

Fortunately, it was just Caroline. She stood in the doorway with a wistful smile on her face.

“Come now, you are usually so eager to talk,” he muttered. “Whatever are you standing there for, smiling at me like that?”

The truth was that Daniel was so used to observing people that he found it thoroughly

disconcerting when people just looked at him without saying anything, as if he was the one being scrutinized.

“I was just wondering how greatly you have changed,” the Dowager Duchess mused, before laughing softly and shaking her head. “You have been so adamant against taking a wife, and now, here you are, gifting your betrothed with a wardrobe fit for a queen.”

She deserves so much more . After all, it is no easy feat to be married to me.

“I take it that my order has been delivered,” he said dismissively instead, shrugging casually.

Caroline simply crossed her arms over her chest and looked at him with those unnervingly knowing gray eyes of hers. This woman, who—for all intents and purposes—was supposed to be his distant aunt, was the one who could see through his facade.

Most of the time, anyway.

“I also think that you had it delivered at precisely the right moment,” she pointed out with a raised eyebrow. “Madame Dumosse would have never thought to intrude at an hour most suited for entertaining guests.”

“Perhaps she is busy,” he countered offhandedly. “She is, after all, one of the best modistes in the city—or so you keep telling me.”

“I am glad to see that you have been listening to me.” Caroline smirked. “And how could the woman be too busy when you have her working on Lady Evelyn’s trousseau alone?”

Daniel tightened his grip on the document he had been pretending to peruse. Sometimes, this “aunt” of his got a little too close to the truth.

Too close for comfort.

“I think it was a splendid gesture, though,” she continued without waiting for his reply. “Lady Evelyn was rendered speechless—in a good way, of course. Perhaps there is hope for you, after all.”

Laughingly, she turned around and walked out of his study, leaving him to ponder her words.

What hope was there for a man like him?

And that trousseau? It was the least he could do for Evie, now that she had to spend the rest of her life with him.

He groaned and ran his hand through his hair. The document he had been pretending to be so engrossed in was thrown aside in frustration.

In a few more days, Evie would become his wife. He could only hope she would not come to regret life with him in the future.

CHAPTER 19

How strange... I had thought that I would feel so much more on my wedding day.

Evie blinked as she allowed Jane to help her out of bed and assist her with her morning ablutions.

Ever since she came to terms with the fact that she had to marry—and marry well—she had looked forward to her wedding with a sort of giddy excitement and a healthy dose of trepidation. Before Colin married Alice, the only example she had before her of a ton marriage was that of her parents.

Unfortunately, their union was not one that would inspire romantic dreams and fantasies in a young girl.

Since then, she had thought that she would marry a gentleman who was not only agreeable but whose company she could at least tolerate without devolving into a heated argument.

And look at me now, about to marry a man who barely even talks to me.

It was hardly the sort of marriage she had envisioned for herself.

On the other hand, she did not feel a sense of dread like she usually did when she thought of her future husband. Daniel might be unpredictable at times, but she knew deep down that he would never hurt her. He had even offered himself on the altar of matrimony to save her.

She could hardly imagine any of the gentlemen of her acquaintance doing the same.

She could only hope that he would not end up regretting his decision in the future.

She sighed inwardly as Jane helped her into her wedding dress and arranged her hair. Evie had thought that wedding preparations would last interminably, but her dexterous maid was done within the hour, and when her grandmother and the Dowager Duchess finally stepped into her chambers—or Daniel’s chambers—she was already in the act of putting on her gloves.

“My dear, sweet child, you look absolutely beautiful,” her grandmother murmured as she pressed a light kiss to her cheek.

The older woman’s eyes were misty with tears, and seeing her grandmother so emotional, Evie felt as if she might burst into tears at any moment, too.

Fortunately, the Dowager Duchess stepped in to gather her into a hug—carefully so as not to wrinkle her dress—no less as warm as the one she received from her beloved grandmama.

“Marvelous! Simply marvelous!” The Dowager Duchess beamed at her as she stepped back and admired the lavish gown that had been created just for that day. She affectionately patted Evie’s cheek and smilingly said, “No need to be so anxious, dear child. It is your wedding day, after all!”

Evie wanted to laugh out loud at that.

That is even more reason to be anxious!

However, she had no opportunity to say anything contrary to the matter as a slight commotion, followed by feminine laughter, alerted her to the arrival of her two

friends.

Scarlett bustled in with a wide smile, looking at Evie with admiration and approval. The redhead, who was normally garbed in the most eye-catching fashions, was dressed far more simply that day. She usually gravitated towards dresses that accentuated her vivid coloring, but for the wedding, she had chosen a muted rose-colored dress. Although it did not clash with her features, it was far less flamboyant than her usual fashion.

Phoebe wore a pretty lilac gown, her cap sleeves embroidered with tiny blue flowers that gave her a rather refreshing look. Her hair was also done simply and adorned with blue flowers.

“Well, that is a rather impressive-looking dress you have there, Lady Evelyn!” Scarlett declared in open admiration. The redhead peered closely at the crystals that had been sewn into the bodice, her eyes growing wide. “You must be wearing the worth of an entire mansion on your body!”

Evie blushed at those words. “Do not be silly.”

“You do look very beautiful,” Phoebe told her. “Like the moon.”

“Look at her!” Scarlett rolled her eyes. “With all that embroidery on her, the heavens can only think that the Duke of Ashton means for his bride to outshine the sun!”

Lady Wellington laughed and shook her head, while the Dowager Duchess looked on smilingly in approval.

“You young ladies will have your turn soon,” Lady Wellington told them with a twinkle in her eyes. “The right gentleman will come—you will see.”

Evie saw a light flush creep up her best friend's cheeks at those words. A most suitable match, a happy marriage—were these not the very things that made a young woman's heart flutter?

However, these were rarer than a white crow for a young woman of the ton .

“Oh, I do hope you are right, Lady Wellington!” Scarlett quipped cheerfully, her eyes shining. “Heavens only know when these gentlemen will present themselves!”

“Oh, they will soon enough, I assure you.” The Dowager Countess chuckled. “One only needs patience...”

And a whole lot of luck! Evie inwardly added.

The scene in her chambers was the very picture of feminine joy and hope—a young lady surrounded by the love and laughter of her family and friends as she got ready for her wedding.

How could they know that this was a marriage of convenience? That this was a ploy to save her reputation and keep the Earl of Sidmouth from getting his greedy hands on her dowry?

Or that she was the bride that Daniel himself had chosen simply because Society dictated that he marry even when he had no desire to?

They were simply two people caught up in their own circumstances and found marriage to each other to be the most convenient solution to their problems.

But still, surrounded by her grandmother, the Dowager Duchess, and her two closest friends, perhaps Evie could pretend for a while that this was indeed a love match and that she was walking with excitement to the man she was going to marry.

One must have hope for the future, she thought to herself as she tried to bolster her courage. After all, as long as there is hope, all things can be endured and made possible...

Amongst the conditions stipulated in the special license that Daniel acquired was that they could be married in a small, private ceremony in the gardens of Ashton Hall and not in the highly fashionable St. George's, Hanover Square, where anyone may look in on them.

For this, she was grateful. It truly would have been quite hard to maintain one's composure with everyone in the ton looking in and speculating about their marriage.

Especially when the groom looked so foreboding that one might have mistakenly thought that he was attending his own execution instead of a supposedly joyous event like his wedding.

However, when she walked down the aisle on her grandmother's arm, her hands clutching the bouquet of flowers a little too hard, she saw something flash in his eyes. Saw his lips curl just the slightest bit into a genuine smile.

For Evie, that had been more than enough to give her the courage to take the last few steps to reach him.

"Take care of our Evie, Your Grace," her grandmother told him with a soft smile as she handed him her hand. "I shall entrust her happiness to you now."

"I shall spare no effort on that matter, My Lady," he replied solemnly as Evie looked at him in slight surprise.

She had not expected him to even respond to that, which caused her to inwardly sigh. Was he not taking things too far by making such vows?

But her grandmother simply smiled and nodded. “Good.”

The rest of the ceremony passed by in a blur. The words spoken by the minister seemed to be nothing more than a buzz in Evie’s head as she struggled to maintain the dignity of a woman about to become the Duchess of Ashton.

Fortunately for Evie—and she had Daniel to thank for that—there was no one else in the gardens with them, save for her grandmother, the Dowager Duchess, Scarlett, Phoebe, and Daniel’s two other closest friends, the Dukes of Sinclair and Wolverton.

“Your Grace, you may now kiss your bride.”

As soon as those words were spoken, Evie felt a slight tremor running through her—not out of fear, but a sense of excitement. A thread of longing wove through her, and she hoped that it did not look too obvious as she turned her gaze to her husband.

Husband .

The word settled in her, warm and comforting—two words that could hardly be used to refer to Daniel.

She felt his arm reach out for her, gathering her close to him. His other hand gently tilted her chin up.

“Kiss me, wife.”

Heat sparked within Evie at those words. How softly they were uttered, but with the sheer dominance that she had come to expect from him. They wrapped around her like silken bonds, compelling her to not only raise her chin but to also part her lips in anticipation of what was to come.

She saw the flash of satisfaction in his eyes, saw the hunger lurking in those green depths before his lips descended on hers. Whatever thoughts might have been running through her head, whatever concerns she had entertained, they all disappeared at that moment.

All that mattered to Evie was that she was standing there with Daniel and he was kissing her once more, after days of barely being able to get more than just a monosyllabic response from him.

The burst of applause from their guests startled Evie, painfully yanking her back to reality.

When she looked at Daniel, the hunger she had seen lurking in his eyes was gone, replaced by a stoic coldness that was almost as jarring as the sound of applause.

She forced herself to smile despite the pain that lanced through her heart.

In any case, she was the Duchess of Ashton now, and duchesses did not cry.

At least not in public, in full view of their guests.

He was not stupid.

He had seen the yearning in her eyes that mirrored his own, felt the sweet surrender of her lips when she welcomed his kiss with soft eagerness.

If it had not been for the applause, he could have gone on and on to bloody eternity kissing Evie.

Maybe even more than kissing—except that what he had in mind could not possibly be done out in public.

For all his... unorthodox tastes in the affairs of the bedroom, Daniel was not an exhibitionist, nor did he relish the thought of anyone else laying eyes on his wife like that.

He would much rather gouge his own eyeballs out first. Or anyone else who dared to look.

What the hell is wrong with me?

Daniel clenched his hands into fists as he affected a neutral look as he and Evie were swarmed by congratulations and well-wishes.

From the corner of his eye, he could see Caroline looking at him with a slight smile.

Well done, those gray eyes seemed to tell him.

He only smiled sardonically back at her.

Ever since he came to Ashton Hall, Caroline had been prodding him to find a suitable match—one that would make him happy, whatever that meant. Ever since Colin had married Alice, she had been relentless in her pursuit of his marital happiness, despite his vehement objections on the matter.

She should be satisfied now . She does like Evie, after all.

To her and the rest of the world, he had married Evie due to his strong feelings for her. The gossips, once eager to tear Evie's reputation to shreds, were now shouting from the rooftops that they had always known that there was great affection between the cold Duke of Ashton and Lady Evelyn Fitzroy.

Only he and Evie ever needed to know the truth behind their marriage.

They all had their parts to play in this. He only hoped he could hang onto his sanity long enough to play a damned convincing act.

He glanced at Evie, who was smiling happily as Scarlett and Phoebe congratulated her. Already, he could feel his restraint slowly slipping through his fingers.

CHAPTER 20

When Evie dreamed of her wedding, she did not think that she would be married by a special license in one of England's oldest and finest estates, nor did she think she would actually marry one of her brother's closest friends.

And not just any friend, but Daniel Stanton.

She stole a glimpse at him over her glass of celebratory champagne, her breath catching in her throat as she beheld him in his full wedding regalia.

Was there ever a time he did not cause her breath to hitch in her throat? Evie could not recall such a moment.

For that morning, he had worn a dark green jacket, which was a departure from his usually more somber and austere garb. A flawless emerald the size of a robin's egg winked from within the folds of his snowy white cravat.

Despite the more festive clothing, nothing could detract from the harsh beauty of his features. The jacket only seemed to emphasize his broad shoulders and brought out the vivid green of his eyes.

It could not be helped—she had married a devastatingly handsome man with the power to dissolve any woman's resistance with a single smoldering, broody look.

Hers, especially.

From across the room, he seemed to notice her looking at him. A slight smile touched the corner of his lips, and he raised his glass slightly in her direction.

Get ahold of yourself!

Evie inwardly admonished herself as her knees knocked together, suddenly, inexplicably weakened with a single glance and a smile that was both secretive and hinted at many, many dark and forbidden things.

Or did it really? Perhaps she was only reading too much into these looks. After all, they had hardly talked in the days leading up to the wedding. Somehow, that did not exactly convey the message that he wanted her as much as she wanted him.

Unfortunately.

“My dear, are you all right?” Phoebe peered at her in concern. “You look a little... flushed.”

Evie tamped down the frustration and yearning that simmered just beneath the surface. She managed a reassuring smile for her best friend and shook her head.

“No, no, nothing is amiss,” she told her.

“Well, in that case, you should probably mingle a bit more with your other guests, instead of looking at your husband the whole day,” Scarlett teased her. “Although I do not blame you—he is an exceedingly fine-looking man—but you have the whole of tonight and the rest of your lives for that.”

If Evie had felt a little heated earlier, her cheeks were now burning.

“Do not tease her so,” Phoebe chastised with a knowing smile. “It is a good thing for

the bride to at least like her husband.”

“Yes, yes.” Scarlett laughed. “But do spare us unfortunate souls who have yet to find our matches!”

The young ladies burst into giggles at her theatrics, and Evie finished her glass of champagne. It was much too early for her to be drinking, but since it was her wedding, some things could be overlooked.

Besides, it was just the thing she needed to boost her courage and do as Scarlett suggested. As a bride, it was only proper that she attended to their guests.

Unlike the ceremony itself, to which only close friends and family had been invited, there were slightly more people on the guest list for the wedding breakfast. Appearances must be made, after all, even if the Duke of Ashton did have a reputation for holding most of Society in scorn.

That has to change .

If there was anyone who could improve the reputation of the Duke of Ashton, then it should be his Duchess. Thus, in the next half hour, she applied herself most assiduously to the task of greeting the guests and establishing herself as the most gracious of duchesses.

To a baron with finicky tastes, she said, “Lord Horace, do have some more of this fine hot chocolate. I assure you, it is to die for.”

“Lady Wilmington.” She beamed at a countess. “I absolutely adore what you have done to the gardens of Wilmington Hall. Exquisite, I tell you!”

“Oh, Miss Warren, you must tell me where you got your bonnet,” she enthused. “It is

the prettiest thing I have ever seen.”

Poor Miss Warren, who had never been praised her entire life, could only stammer her profuse thanks as Evie convinced her to come over sometime in the future for tea. By the time she had moved on to the next guest, half of the room was laughing and smiling more freely.

As Evie looked on with a smile at her handiwork, she helped herself to a cup of the hot chocolate she had exhorted Lord Horace to try.

“I had never thought that His Grace would be capable of hosting such a lively event, but it appears I was mistaken.”

Evie turned around to find Mr. Bernard Turner looking at her with a most affable smile. For that morning, he had chosen his clothes far more carefully, and his cravat even looked... all right.

“Mr. Turner!” she gasped in shock.

“Your Grace.” He bowed with unexpected poise. “Last time, our conversation was unfortunately cut short. If you will, I would like to be able to talk with you at greater length. It is so rare that I find a kindred soul who shares an interest in these little hobbies of mine.”

Evie laughed. “Mr. Turner, if these are just little hobbies of yours, then I must prepare to be awed by the things you consider with greater seriousness!”

“Such a glib tongue you have, Your Grace.” Mr. Turner joined in her laughter, wagging his finger at her. “Why, I am convinced that perhaps you might have a way with words, as well as with paints!”

“My good sir, you have yet to see my feeble attempts. You cannot possibly say that I have a way with paints.”

She could not linger with Mr. Turner, as she still had other guests she must attend to, but by the time their conversation ended, she had managed to get an invitation from him to paint together.

She had to fight back the urge to gasp in wonder as she walked away.

Painting with the Mr. Bernard Turner?

Evie could scarcely believe her good fortune!

And she knew very well who she must thank for that.

“You invited her favorite painter to your wedding breakfast?” Ethan shook his head with a look of surprise. “Careful, Ash. One might think that you care a great deal for your new bride.”

“But, of course,” Daniel drawled. “Is not a groom supposed to care for his wife?”

“I have to applaud your restraint, though,” Hudson muttered. “After all, he is still a man, and even if you do not see her that way, your Duchess can be quite charming.”

Daniel shot his reclusive friend a pointed look, but Hudson did not seem to notice it. Or care.

Good. It had better stay that way.

His grip on his glass tightened as his eyebrows drew together just the slightest bit, the dark frown noticeable only to those who knew him best. He did not know where this

reaction came from—all he knew was that he did not like anyone looking at Evie that way.

Even if it was one of his oldest friends, a man he would trust with his life.

When it came to Evie, nothing really made sense anymore. She had thrown his entire world upside-down and inside-out from the moment she crashed into it.

Nothing was the same ever since, and he was still grappling with the ramifications of that.

However, he did not have very long to dwell on his thoughts because his new bride rushed over to him, her eyes wide and sparkling with some undecipherable light. Her cheeks were flushed most delectably, and her breasts were heaving from her excitement.

If they had not been surrounded by a roomful of guests, he would have snatched her into his arms and had his way with her.

Out in the gardens. In broad daylight.

A slight cough from Ethan jolted him out of his lurid fantasies and back to reality, where the object of those said fantasies was looking at him as if she just discovered that he hung the moon and the stars in the sky.

Damn it, what the hell is wrong with me?

“Mr. Turner is here,” she breathed in wonder. “It was your doing.”

Daniel did not even bother to deny it. Her enthusiasm was just so that he could not even suppress the slight smile that tugged at his lips.

“My wedding gift to you,” he told her softly.

Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw Hudson shoot Ethan a glance, and both of his friends quietly excused themselves.

Daniel snorted at that. At least they knew to do that.

“I cannot believe it!” She beamed at him. “Thank you so much!”

She threw her arms around him with such force that if Daniel had not instinctively braced himself, they might have toppled over. They were slightly out of the line of sight of most of the guests, but if they did fall over, it would have attracted some attention.

He ran his hands down her sides, finding a great deal of pleasure in the slight shudder that ran through her at his touch.

“Thank me with a kiss,” he murmured.

The shocked look in her eyes made him want to take back his words and curse himself. However, before he could do anything else, Evie had braced her delicate hands on his shoulders, stood on her tiptoes, and pressed her lips to his. She might have meant to kiss him so innocently, but there was nothing innocent about Daniel.

Not at all.

With a groan, he crushed her to him, his lips angling over hers as he devoured everything she was willing to offer him and more. He kissed her hungrily, his tongue plunging boldly into her mouth as she welcomed him with a soft moan.

Bloody hell, what is she doing to me?

With a mere kiss, she had him painfully hard with want, his desire a thick haze that clouded all logic.

She was like a flame that taunted him, dancing and flickering before him. How could he resist when it was she who now pressed herself so closely to him?

Where was his vaunted self-control when he needed it the most?

When he finally drew back from her, Evie let out a little growl of protest, and it took everything in him to keep from pressing her against the wall and hiking her skirts up to her waist.

Does she not recognize the danger she is in? Does she not realize that she should stay away from men who look at her a certain way?

Even if that man was him.

“Evie,” he groaned. “We need to see to our guests.”

The hurt look she gave him almost made him capitulate.

She gave a childish pout. “Do we have to?”

He sighed. “You know that we have to.”

If she had burst into tears, he might have thrown out the lot of them and indulged in his husbandly privileges. Fortunately, Evie had the good sense to not try because heaven only knew he did not have the fortitude to resist her.

“Fine.” She sniffed. She wriggled out of his arms and smoothed out her hair and dress.

She was about to walk back to where their guests were happily chatting and helping themselves to the feast spread out before them when she stopped and glanced at him over her shoulder.

“Shall I be expecting you in my chambers tonight?” she asked him, with a coquettish look in her eyes.

“No,” he said tightly.

“No?” Her eyebrows snapped together, and he knew that he better think about his next words.

“No,” he said with utter finality, his voice gravelly. “I cannot make the same mistake over and over again, because the next time I do, I will not stop until I finish inside you, and I cannot do that.”

A stubborn tilt of her chin. “Why not?”

“Because then, you might get pregnant, and I cannot allow that.”

The admission left him drained, but she had barely scraped off the first layer of the darkness that shrouded him. If she learned more, would she still look at him the same way?

Or would the affection in her eyes harden into cold derision?

“You know, I do not understand you at all.” She glared at him. “You claim that you married me to save me, but then you are merely condemning me to a life devoid of love and passion, after showing me just how much pleasure we could have.” She pressed her lips into a grim line. “Your Grace, I have known you to be cold, but I never thought you could be this cruel.”

He clenched his hands into fists at his sides before he could be tempted to reach out for her.

“And therein lies our problem, Evelyn,” he told her. “Pleasure might not be the only thing I show you.”

And you might learn to hate me for it even more.

“Just let it go.”

She smiled sadly at him. “As you wish, Your Grace.”

She left him with her head held high, her back ramrod straight. They had barely been married for an hour and she already possessed the aura of a true duchess.

Caroline was right—Evie would make a fine duchess. He just wished that he had not made her that way. That he was not the one to harden her heart and steal the sunshine from her smiles.

But if it was the only way to spare her from any further pain that he might inflict on her, then he supposed he could learn to live with it. Just as he learned to live with everything else.

He must .

CHAPTER 21

It was the most dreadful inconvenience to have to walk back to one's own wedding breakfast on wobbly legs, as Evie soon found out to her great discomfort. Fortunately, no one seemed to have missed her in her absence, and as soon as she walked back into the party, she was whisked into a flurry of greetings and well-wishes and the like once more.

She supposed this was much better than having to make sense of what Daniel truly wanted. In that aspect, she truly was at a loss. There was no mistaking the hunger in his eyes when he kissed her—that much was true—but then, he distanced himself once more and pushed her away.

What was he so worried about? They were both married now, and although it was highly unusual for couples to actually have a deep affection—and maybe desire—for each other, it was what everybody secretly wanted and hoped for. Otherwise, why would the esteemed members of the ton continue in their aimless search for love outside of marriage?

And they say that women do not know what they want. How dreadfully troublesome is it to have to convince one's husband on certain... matters.

“Your Grace, I must congratulate you on such a beautiful wedding,” a sultry voice penetrated through her confusion. “You must forgive my lack of etiquette for showing up without an invitation. His Grace and I are... well, you could say we are old acquaintances.”

The woman who spoke stood before her, the very picture of allure, with her dark hair pulled up in a simple yet elegant fashion. She appeared to be slightly older than Evie, with a smile that hinted at seduction and dark eyes that spoke of forbidden secrets. Her attire, although still within the bounds of propriety, still had a lower neckline than Evie or the other ladies might have worn.

The Marchioness of Cobham truly was a beautiful woman.

Jealousy, cold and insidious, slithered in Evie's veins as she recalled the look the Marchioness had given Daniel that one time at the ball. She knew that the Marchioness and her husband were more familiar with each other.

Certainly more familiar than I am with him .

But a guest, even one who had not been invited as the Marchioness was, must still be treated with courtesy.

"Oh no, Lady Cobham, you must not say such words. I cannot have you feeling unwelcome here at Ashton Hall." Evie smiled back at her, even though the words grated on her. "Not in my own wedding, at least."

The Marchioness looked at her with some surprise, and then a slow smile formed on her lips. "His Grace has always been aloof, you could say. We—the Marquess and I—never expected him to find someone so young and... bright ."

That somehow does not sound quite right...

But then again, it was not inappropriate either, although Evie thought it was a highly unusual thing to say to a bride and at her own wedding.

"Ah... Thank you, Lady Cobham," she managed with a polite smile.

“In any case, I am happy that my old friend has finally found happiness.”

The Marchioness smiled at her in that mysterious way of hers once more, before she politely excused herself to join her husband. Evie could only stare after her as her mind replayed that rather odd and unexpected conversation. Truly, she did not know what she should make of it.

Or if there was any point in looking into it any further.

“Evie.”

She turned around to find Scarlett and Phoebe looking at her concern, their lips pulled into tight smiles.

“I saw you talking to the Marchioness of Cobham,” the redhead began. “If she said anything?—”

“She was not causing trouble of any sort, I assure you,” Evie quickly corrected her friend.

Scarlett was known for her boldness and her impulsiveness. Evie could not have her hotheaded friend going after the Marchioness just because of a few cryptic words.

“You do know that His Grace and the Marchioness...” Phoebe trailed off. The distrust was still clear in her eyes, the disapproval in the grim line of her lips.

It was very rare for the brunette to show scorn for anything, as she had always been so polite and proper.

For Phoebe to regard the Marchioness so spoke volumes of her loyalty as a friend, and it warmed Evie’s heart, even as she grappled with her enigmatic conversation

with Lady Cobham and how Daniel turned her away just earlier.

Evie smiled and reached for their hands. “I am truly blessed to have friends like you who watch out for me at every turn, but I assure you, she did not mean to cause trouble of any sort.”

At least nothing that warranted the sort of confrontation Scarlett was going to unleash on her. The Marchioness did keep referring to Daniel as her “old friend,” and Evie did not particularly like the sound of that.

In any case, I am the Duchess now . And he is my husband.

“Well, whatever ploy she has in her head barely matters.” Scarlett sniffed disdainfully. “ You are the Duchess of Ashton now, Evie. Can you imagine that? Duchess!”

Phoebe smiled. “Scarlett is right.”

“I suppose the gossips would not be too happy to hear about it,” Evie sighed in mock dismay. “After all, they have all been breathlessly anticipating my downfall.”

“Not if your husband has anything to say about it.” The redhead smirked with a raised eyebrow. “I swear, that man derives as much pleasure as I do from proving all those nasty naysayers wrong!”

Phoebe looked at her helplessly. “What did your mama tell you about swearing, Scar?”

Scarlett simply grinned at her impenitently. “How fortunate then that she is not within earshot at the moment!”

They burst into laughter beneath their gloved hands, with Phoebe shaking her head at Scarlett's antics.

Evie could only smile as she watched her two friends. How fortunate they were to not have to marry such a complicated man as the Duke of Ashton. The unmarried young ladies of the ton and their mamas might look at her with envy for managing to wrangle a proposal from a duke, but only Evie herself truly understood the dilemma in such a union.

Daniel had told her that they were to maintain their distance in private, even if they must act as if their marriage was truly a love match when in public.

However, if there was one thing that her husband had yet to learn, it was that Evie herself did not exactly like to be told what to do and how she should do it.

Daniel is simply going to have to find out the hard way .

Weddings were usually held in the morning to allow the bride and the groom to retreat to their home or leave for their honeymoon.

For Evie and Daniel, there was no such thing, although sometime towards the end of the wedding breakfast, he had subtly dismissed the guests as if he could not wait to have his bride to himself. The guests had laughed politely and then left, eager to spread the word that the Duke of Ashton was the most enthusiastic of bridegrooms and his new Duchess had to be the most blessed of all women to have secured such an attentive husband.

And that she might even require the services of a discreet physician in the morning as a result of his excitement—whatever that meant.

“Reformed rakes truly make good husbands!” Lady Merlon had remarked in

astonishment before she left. “And it would seem that Wolves are the very best of the lot!”

Indeed, Evie would not be surprised if young ladies all over London started to consider marrying a Wolf.

If they only knew how difficult they can be!

Evie laughed inwardly and shook her head bitterly.

She knew just how stubborn Colin was. But Daniel? He was ten times more so. A hundred, even!

They might all look at her with envy for making what was now purported to be the match of the Season, but how could they know that the new Duchess of Ashton was lying in her bed all alone while her husband locked himself up in his tower?

Even if I tell them, they will never believe me!

She let out a groan as she rolled over onto her back and stared at the luxurious canopy above her. Ever since she had moved into Daniel’s rooms, the servants had gone out of their way to furnish the vast expanse of it according to her tastes.

The dark and dreary upholstery had been replaced with pale blues and golds. The heavy velvet curtains were thrown out in favor of lace and light blue satin. Softer carpets in soothing hues were laid underfoot.

Naturally, even the bed linens had been changed to suit the rest of the room, so instead of the oppressive black she had woken up to on her first morning in the estate, she stared up at a canopy of icy blue embroidered with silvery flowers.

However, even that most gentle color could not give Evie the peace of mind that she sought. Nor could it lull her to a dreamless slumber so that she might forget—at least for the night—that she was now married to Daniel.

Or that she, as his wife, was now entitled to certain privileges.

He should have been right here with her. In her rooms. In her bed .

She bit her lower lip, a warmth rising to her cheeks as she recalled how he had kissed her just that morning. It almost felt as if she was standing too close to a fire, but strangely enough, the warmth did not frighten her.

Instead, it pooled low in her belly, reminding her of the way his hands had held her, his fingers digging into her flesh as she pressed herself to his hardness...

Evie groaned and rolled over, squeezing her eyes shut in misery and frustration . Brides should be excited about their wedding nights. Her own grandmother had not been so forthcoming with the knowledge, fearing that Evie would succumb to hysterics before the ceremony could be completed.

“You will find out for yourself,” her grandmama had told her hastily, looking rather uncomfortable. “Your husband will guide you through it. I am quite certain, however, that he will not fumble his way through it like an untried youth.”

Indeed, her grandmother must have expected too much of her new grandson-in-law, for not only was he not properly educating Evie on this most important aspect of a relationship between a husband and wife, but he was also actively avoiding it!

This cannot go on . I shall have to make him see reason!

Evie stood up and grabbed her robe, her feet whispering against the soft rug

underfoot. The distance between the rooms she occupied and the tower was not small, and once more, she inwardly berated Daniel for being so difficult.

If she had to marry him, then she would become his wife in every sense of the word.

CHAPTER 22

Evie...

Her name echoed over and over in his head, like a mantra that he could not get rid of.

Daniel had never found a woman he could not resist until Lady Evelyn Fitzroy-Stanton came into his life and upended the order he fought so hard to maintain.

She was like a fire in his blood, a dancing flame that lit all desire within him. Ever since she had moved into Ashton Hall, he had existed in a state of agony. Indeed, to want her as fiercely as he did and yet keep his hands off her was a particularly exquisite torment that showed no signs of abating anytime soon.

He tossed back the glass of brandy that he had been nursing and turned towards the dying embers in the fireplace, his eyes narrowing slightly when he recalled how Evie hated fire.

And he hated how she had been so fearful of it.

The feeling of holding her frail, shivering figure in his arms as the fireworks exploded overhead was something he could not wash away from his memory anytime soon.

Suddenly, he heard a soft knock, and the door to his rooms in the tower creaked open. He turned around, his breath catching in his throat when he beheld his young wife, his Duchess, peering into the room, dressed in nothing more than a diaphanous robe

and a nightgown that left little else to the imagination.

As if the inability to stop thinking about her is not enough . She has to come into my room wearing only that.

He was caught between wanting to thank Madame Dumosse for crafting such a masterpiece and never using her services in the future.

“What are you doing here, Duchess?” he asked softly. “Should you not be in bed at this hour?”

The word bed conjured up images of naked limbs—his and hers—entwined on the silken sheets. Of her soft moans filling the air as he drove into her sweet, wet heat...

He shook his head and inwardly berated himself, but it was too late. His cock had already noticed her presence, and now it had become hard with want.

Thankfully, he had only been in the process of changing out of his clothes and he still had his breeches on. One look between his legs, though, and Evie would be left with no doubt of his yearning for her.

“Well, I see you are not yet asleep either, so I wished to have a talk with you,” she informed him.

He could feel his blood thrumming, singing with the keen desire to draw her into his arms. To drag her underneath him and devour her. Possess every delectable inch of her until there was no question as to who she belonged to.

“It is barely the first day of our marriage, and already you are breaking my rules, Duchess,” he growled, stalking towards her, eyeing her like a wolf would eye his prey.

He watched as Evie shivered slightly and smiled to himself. But then, she gave a little shake of her head and looked straight at him, her eyes narrowing.

“You have set your own rules, so I wish to impose some of my own as well,” she declared with a haughty tilt of her chin.

How could a woman who barely reached his shoulder and was practically half his weight stand up to him, when lesser men had quailed? If anything, it only served to whet his appetite even more.

He smiled at her as he stalked towards her. “Well, what did you have in mind?”

He could be lenient, he decided. After all, he had no desire to make this an unhappy marriage for her, even if he could not fulfill all of his husbandly duties. Evie would have everything she wanted out of this union—the glory of becoming the Duchess of Ashton, the endless wealth at her disposal... She could commission a yacht to sail on the Thames the very next day and he would not even bat an eye.

Just not himself.

If he succumbed, then there would be no going back. For either of them.

She looked up at him and licked her lips, causing him to groan inwardly at the sight. Here he was, trying his damndest to rein in his lust, and she was methodically dismantling it with every second she spent in his room.

“We have to spend time with each other!” she exclaimed, the exasperation clear in her voice. “We cannot be one of those couples who despise each other!”

He stepped closer to her, and to her credit, she did not waver, did not step back. She held her ground, which told him that she was quite serious about this.

“Last time I remembered, you do despise me, Duchess,” he reminded her with a bitter laugh. “You always have.”

“No, I do not .” She rolled her eyes at him. “Oh, I certainly found you annoying—make no mistake about that. I still do, mind you.”

His breath hitched in her throat at the sound of her laughter, the brightness of her smile. Who the hell needed a candle when she could light up a whole room with her smile alone?

“Go back to your room, Duchess,” he warned her darkly.

He had no business thinking about her like that. Not when she was in his room and he was fighting every desire to keep her.

But then, she peered over his shoulder, at his bed of all things. He saw her beautiful eyes widen as they took in the dark sheets on the massive four-poster bed.

“What are those?” she choked out, pointing at the silken ribbons that dangled lazily from each post.

Nothing you should be asking about.

“Do you really want to know?” he snapped at her.

Can she not see that she should not be here?

At the merest hint of his displeasure, men scurried away from him in fear. Why was Evie, so much smaller than him, practically impervious to any of that?

“Well, I asked you, did I not?” She sniffed, thoroughly incensed by the tone he used

with her.

Unlike him, she had grown up pampered, having never known hardship all her life except for the fire that nearly claimed her life more than half a decade ago at Blackthorn Estate. Colin and Lady Wellington had indulged her in every aspect, hoping to erase any lingering trauma that might have resulted from that fateful night.

But perhaps what Evie truly needed was someone to be brutally honest with her. Someone who could show her that the world was not all sunshine and rainbows and that not all people were good.

Not even the ones she thought she knew best.

Daniel walked over to her and leaned down to whisper in her ear, “Those four ribbons at the post can be used to tie you up—one for each limb so that you will be spread out before me without any hope of escape.”

He heard the soft gasp that left her and smiled to himself.

That’s it, my sweet. I am not the romantic gentleman you imagined me to be. I am a creature of depravity, and you would do well to stay the hell away from me.

“That other one,” he continued in the same low, silky voice. “I could use that to blindfold you so that you will be completely at my mercy as I take you over and over and over again...”

Her breaths now came out quick and shallow, her eyes wide as she stared at the bed before her. He had dropped all pretense now. He had shown her his darker side—the one that no one dared to speak of.

She should be fearful of him. She should want to run away.

And for as much as that should relieve him, he felt a keen sense of loss that Evie might never be able to accept him fully for his proclivities.

This is for the best .

“This is why you should leave,” he told her with finality. “A man like me with such dark passions should never corrupt someone like you.”

He thought he heard her whimper.

He thought he felt her shudder with fear. Disgust. Revulsion .

But then, she turned around to face him, and the look in her eyes nearly caused him to stagger back.

Mirrored in her blue-gray eyes was the same dark longing that he knew was lurking in his own gaze.

She knew she should be scared. She knew that her first instinct—had she been a normal, rational being—should have been to turn around and run as fast as she could.

But the heat that pooled low in her belly would not let her. The deep, dark desire that swirled in his vivid green eyes pinned her to the spot.

How could she leave when all she ever wanted at that moment was for him to show her the very things he had kept from her?

“Show me.”

The look of surprise on his handsome features would have been comical if she had not felt so insanely attracted to him. Her burgeoning curiosity, the fire that simmered

in her veins, turning her blood molten...

Evie did not want to leave. Not at all.

“You do not know what you are asking for,” he muttered hoarsely, even as he reached for her, his hand delving into her hair.

“On the contrary,” she replied with a smile that looked bolder than she felt. “I do not think I have wanted anything more.”

Daniel let out a sound that was halfway between a groan and a cry of exhilaration. His fingers dug into her scalp, tilting her head back as his lips slanted over hers in a kiss that threatened to steal her soul.

He has already stolen my mind. I might as well give him the rest of me .

Evie kissed him back, her lips moving over his as she followed his lead.

She might have very little knowledge of the affairs of the marriage bed, but what she lacked in experience, she would make up for in enthusiasm.

His teeth scraped against her lips, his tongue plunging into her mouth to boldly explore the depths within. He kissed her as if he was a starving man in the desert and she was the oasis he had stumbled upon.

Evie opened up to him, pressing herself to him. Offering herself as if she was a feast, inviting him to devour her.

“You are going to be the death of me,” he groaned against her mouth.

She smiled slightly, still breathless from the force of his kiss. “I should hope not,” she

quipped in an attempt at lightheartedness. “You have many more things to teach me, husband, and I shall not countenance becoming a widow until I have learned them all.”

“Colin was right to not leave you unattended,” he muttered harshly. “Your mischief certainly knew no bounds.”

Evie made a noise at the back of her throat to let him know that she did not want to talk about her brother. Not when she was in his arms, being kissed to an inch of her sanity. Not when they were standing so close to his bed and she was practically offering herself to him.

He laughed hoarsely at her impatience, and then, in a rough voice, he ordered, “To the bed.”

Evie nodded, trembling with excitement as she stumbled to the bed. How embarrassing that she should lose all grace and poise before him.

However, those fleeting thoughts vanished when she felt his fingers running down her spine, caressing her as he unerringly nudged her towards his massive bed. He leaned close to her, his warm breath fanning the sensitive shell of her ear.

“Do you trust me?” he asked her.

Evie bit her lower lip and nodded.

“If anything becomes too much for you,” he warned her, “just tell me. It might damned well kill me to stop, but I will. For you.”

But she did not want him to stop. Not now at least.

“Are you sure about this?” he asked her again.

Evie nodded, more resolutely this time.

And then, her vision went black.

CHAPTER 23

He had only meant to scare her a little. To show her that he was not the gentleman she had thought him to be.

Who would have thought that his sweet little fawn would willingly walk into the Wolf's den?

When he covered her eyes with the blindfold, it had taken every drop of his remaining self-control not to take her right then and there.

The silk black ribbon contrasted with the pale dewiness of her skin. It stood out like a slash of darkness against the light, reminding him of their differences.

To him, Evie was sunshine and innocence and all things good and pure.

He was the complete opposite of all of that.

“Are you afraid?” he asked her softly.

You should be.

She shook her head, the motion sending waves of her dark hair cascading over her silk-encased shoulders. Daniel narrowed his eyes at the sight. He would need to remedy that.

He grabbed a fistful of the silken sleeve of her robe and slowly dragged it off her

shoulder to reveal the gauzy lace beneath it. The sight of her curves through the gossamer fabric elicited a growl from the back of his throat.

What the hell was Madame Dumosse using to make these nightdresses? A spider's web?

He felt her shiver at the low sound that rumbled in his chest and smiled against her skin.

“You have been a very naughty girl, my Duchess,” he crooned into her shoulder. “Wantonly breaking every rule I set. Your insubordination will not go unpunished this time...”

A soft whimper escaped her, exciting him even more, if such a thing was even possible. With a soft grunt, he pulled at the laces just underneath her gorgeous breasts, and the garment easily slid off her shoulder. Impatiently, he yanked it off her sweet body, sending it pooling around her feet.

Evie was now standing before him wholly naked. The shadows danced and flickered over her luscious curves, her dark hair cascading down her back, contrasting starkly with her pale skin.

His member throbbed almost painfully at the glorious sight before him, eager for a taste of her.

But not yet. Not tonight.

He nudged her closer to the bed, and she stumbled along. If it had not been for her guiding him, she might have fallen, blinded as she was by the ribbon that now obscured her vision.

“Lie down on the bed,” he instructed her.

She nodded again and groped at the velvet sheets before she crawled into his bed. The sight nearly brought him down to his knees and made him burst out of his breeches.

Evie lay down on the bed. Instinctively, she moved to cover her chest and the tuft of curls between her legs, but he let out a warning growl, and she immediately desisted.

He watched as her breath came out in soft, little gasps, her breasts heaving as she awaited his next move. She was surprisingly compliant tonight, and he found her submission all the more titillating.

“I am nothing like your other gentleman suitors,” he whispered harshly as he climbed into bed with her. “I will do such bad things to you. Things that you have never imagined I am capable of doing...”

She let out a soft mewl as he grabbed her wrists and pinned them over her head.

“You are going to do exactly as I say,” he continued. “But if you ever feel the need to stop me, just say so.”

He watched as her breath hitched in her throat, felt the slight tension in her body, and drew back just a little. If she told him to stop right now, he would—even if it would damn well kill him.

“Are you done warning me yet?” she groaned, her voice tinged heavily with frustration. “Or is this your chosen method of torture for my flagrant disobedience?”

A wicked smile spread across his lips as he laughed softly, darkly against the side of her neck.

“So impatient, my Duchess,” he crooned. “Very well then. Let us start your lessons...”

She could feel her breath hitching in her throat, her skin tingling at the slightest whisper of his touch. How she craved it— all of it.

All of him .

“Now, before we start, we need to set some rules,” she heard him say.

Rules?

Evie’s mind whirled. She was already close to bursting out of her skin and he wanted to talk about rules ?

“We are going to need a word—a sort of code, if you will,” he continued. “Once we... start, it can get very hard to say something intelligible.”

Dear God in heaven, is he going to reduce me to a blubbering mess?

She had no doubt he was capable of doing so if his kisses were anything to go by. The merest feel of his lips on hers was enough to liquefy her brain and all rational thought in it. If he were to go further...

“I need you to decide on a word that you can use, should the situation become too much for you.”

“Like what word?” she said impatiently. “Stop?”

He chuckled. “That is too vague, sweetheart. Imagine if you said don’t and stop in close succession... I would not know what to do.”

He was being decidedly wicked, and Evie could feel it.

“What do you suggest then?”

“We can start with colors,” he whispered as his fingers skated over her bare skin. “Red if you want me to stop. Green if you want me to go on...”

Green, green, green!

“And what if I do not say anything?”

“Then I shall take it as a sign to carry on,” he replied, trailing his lips from her jawline to the side of her neck. “Sometimes, it can get very hard to speak once one is in the throes of pleasure.”

Pleasure ...

Her whole body thrummed with the delicious possibilities. Possibilities that Daniel would no doubt make a reality that very night.

“All right,” she murmured breathlessly. “Green .”

It was exhilarating, not quite knowing what was going to happen to her. Merely trusting that he would take good care of her. Make her his wife in every sense of the word.

But somehow, Evie felt there had to be something more to the consummation of their marriage. She could not understand why the ton spoke of it as a woman’s duty to submit to her husband. Could not understand the deep, dark desires that slumbered in her heart, only to be awakened by Daniel’s touch.

All she knew was that she wanted him—whatever that was.

She felt something soft and cool wrap around her wrists and realized that Daniel was tying them up with expert, masterful movements. The bonds were neither too loose nor too tight, providing just the right amount of restriction to her movements without hurting her.

His lips found hers once more, coaxing her to open up to him as his tongue slipped into her mouth with the same unerring boldness she had come to expect from him. This time, however, he lightly nipped her lower lip, and the slight sting caused her to gasp. The sound turned into a soft mewl when he gently sucked on it, and the pressure in her lower belly began to unfurl.

Evie felt him slow down, and she softly gasped out, “Green.”

His hands trailed down from her shoulders to her breasts, gently squeezing and kneading the soft flesh in his palms. She had never been touched so intimately before, and the thought of Daniel doing all sorts of things to her while she remained in the dark heightened the sensations she was feeling.

She let out a soft whimper when he tweaked one turgid peak, her body bowing off the bed as she moaned, “Green.”

His touch became more insistent, pinching her nipples lightly as he played with her breasts. When she felt his hot mouth envelop the stiff peak, she cried out in sheer pleasure.

“Oh God, Daniel!”

She swore she could hear his slight laughter as he sucked and rolled her nipple with his tongue. Evie felt as if her entire body had turned into liquid heat. As if she had

transformed into a creature of pure desire, to cater to his every whim.

For so long, Evie had lived in fear of flames. She could not even stand the lit fireplace, no matter how cold the winters got.

Now, however, she found herself bursting into flames wherever he touched her, and she reveled in it.

How could they just perceive this as a marital duty?

She felt his fingers at the apex of her thighs, felt him toying with the curls that guarded her womanhood, and she immediately clamped her legs together.

“Shh,” he murmured against the now sensitive skin of her breast. “Open yourself for me, Duchess. Spread your legs like a good girl...”

His words wove through the haze of her consciousness like a spell. Her earlier resistance melted, and her thighs fell open, revealing her most intimate flesh to him as she quivered on the bed in nervous excitement.

He turned his mouth to her other breast, nipping the aroused peak as his hand slipped past the curls on her mound and into her wet heat.

“Daniel!” she cried out. “Oh dear... oh my!”

“Do you like it, Duchess?” he murmured. “Do you like my touching your wet heat?”

“Yes! Yes!”

“Red or green?” he teased her.

“Green!” she moaned. “Dear God, green! ”

He laughed softly as he continued to tease her with his mouth, his teeth, his tongue, and those oh-so-wonderful fingers. She was quaking on the bed now, her legs falling so wantonly open, her hips bucking to meet every delicious stroke of his fingers.

When he found purchase on a spot, she let out a shriek of delight. He took his cue and deliberately began circling it with his finger, pushing her closer to the edge of something unfathomable and wonderful at the same time.

“Do you feel that, Duchess?”

Evie could hardly comprehend what he meant. She was so lost in the sensations he was wreaking on her body that she could hardly focus on his words.

“Can you feel how wet and ready you are for me?” he murmured, lightly nipping her nipple.

She was tossing her head from side to side, her breath coming out in shallow pants and moans. Her wrists were still tied over her head, her hips straining against the hand he used to press her down onto the bed while his other hand rubbed her center in languid strokes that he seemed to time to her needy whimpers.

Then, she felt it—felt the finger at her entrance.

Like most young ladies of the ton , she had absolutely no idea just what happened in the marital bed—or the pleasure her body was capable of. Her education in this matter, she entrusted wholly with her husband, who was now showing her in the most ardent means possible just how much ecstasy could be had between a man and a woman.

With his finger pressed to that pearl between her legs, he gently pushed into her entrance, drawing a shocked gasp from her lips as he unlocked yet another point of pleasure.

This one, however, was much deeper, but the sensation was no less than everything Daniel had done to her thus far.

“Damn,” he swore softly. “I can feel you squeezing my finger so sweetly...”

Evie did not know what he meant—only that she was feeling as if she was teetering on the edge of something .

As to what that something was, she had absolutely no idea.

His finger began to move, sliding in and out of her, igniting a deep-seated heat that was akin to the most pleasurable ache imaginable. All the while, she could feel the pad of his thumb on that button, pushing her to even greater heights.

“Daniel!” she heard herself cry out, her voice dripping heavily with her need. “Oh, Daniel, please... do not stop... I am begging you.”

“That’s right, my little Duchess,” he growled. “I love it when you beg me to do such nasty things to you.”

“P-please...” she wheezed. “Daniel... it feels so good!”

All of a sudden, the languid pace of his fingers disappeared, and he started to thrust into her in a frenzy, igniting a flame in her that grew wilder and more out of control. When his mouth clamped on her nipple, sucking it harder than he had before, Evie exploded with a wild scream, her body bowing off the bed as Daniel continued to pump his finger into her, wrenching such unimaginable pleasure from her in waves .

When he finally drew his finger out of her, smearing her wetness over her thigh as he drew her into his arms, she was shuddering.

Spent.

Gloriously so.

Daniel gently untied the silken bonds around her wrists and took the blindfold off her.

“Dear God, what was that?” she murmured, blinking dazedly up at him.

He smiled and pressed a soft kiss to her forehead. “That, my sweet Duchess, was another encounter with feminine pleasure.”

“Oh.” She snuggled into his chest, her eyes wide as she contemplated what had just happened between them.

“You must be feeling spent,” he told her in a guttural voice. “Go to sleep.”

He pressed her head firmly down, but Evie could only frown.

“You said feminine pleasure,” she began.

“Yes, I did.”

“What about your pleasure, then?”

He stiffened at her words. “I derive great pleasure from wrenching those delectable moans from you, my sweet.”

Her brow furrowed even as her cheeks flushed. “But that cannot be all.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Are we not supposed to... you know...” she trailed off, blushing further.

“Evelyn,” he warned in a dark tone. “What did I tell you about not provoking me?”

She looked up at him with wide eyes, and he sighed.

“Are you not even the least bit tired?” he asked her, his hands gently stroking her hair.

She shook her head and placed her palm on his chest. She could feel his strong heartbeat. The smooth warmth of his skin.

When her fingernail scraped against his nipple, she heard his sharp intake of breath.

“Daniel,” she told him softly. “I want all of you .”

He growled and rolled over, pinning her to the bed. His eyes were dark and wild with lust as he peered down at her nakedness.

“You do not know what you are asking for,” he muttered hoarsely.

She smiled up at him, her hands sliding into his hair. “On the contrary, I have never wanted anything more...”

CHAPTER 24

It was as if something snapped within him.

They were just words, and Daniel had never been one to put his trust in the words of people, but Evie was looking up at him, her eyes wide and trusting, smiling up at him as if he was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen.

How could she possibly know that in her moment of surrender, she was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen?

Do not look at me like that, he wanted to tell her. I am only going to hurt you. Disappoint you. Ruin you .

But it was too late for that now. She might never realize that she had stolen not only his breath but also his soul at that moment.

He wanted her—had always wanted her—more than his next breath.

He slanted his lips over hers, unleashing all the hunger and desire he felt for her at that moment. The longing he had suppressed over the past few weeks roared out of him that for the space of a breath, he feared that it would be too much for Evie, that his appetites would overwhelm her.

But she had thrown her arms around him, her lips molding to his as she gave as much as she took.

“I am going to have to tie you back up,” he told her hoarsely.

Evie smiled up at him. “By all means, Your Grace.”

He groaned as he reached for the ribbons on the posts overhead. He could not have tied her wrists fast enough, taking care that the bonds were not too tight that they would hurt her, merely restricting her movements.

When he returned to kissing her, Evie squirmed just a little bit beneath him, struggling against her bonds just the slightest bit. Then, he felt her leg move against his hardness, and it tore a harsh breath from him.

“You have been a very naughty girl, Duchess,” he warned her, narrowing his eyes at her.

“True,” she admitted without any hint of remorse. “But I am your Duchess.”

“Damn right you are!” he growled.

He disposed of his breeches while Evie watched, bound to the bed. Her eyes were wide with wonder as they roved over his form, devouring him hungrily as he had done to her earlier. When her gaze dropped to the member jutting between his legs, he raised an eyebrow at her.

“Do you like what you are seeing?” he teased her.

She flushed and mumbled something under her breath as she looked away. After all that he had done to her, she was still an innocent.

But not for much longer.

After tonight, things were going to be different—he could feel it. It was not as simple as him taking her maidenhood. There would be no going back from this.

It should have alarmed him. For most of his adulthood, he had exerted fierce control over every aspect of his life, having been powerless for most of his youth.

Evie would never know how much power she exerted by surrendering herself to him.

He kissed her again, his fingers dipping into her folds to find her wet and ready for him once more. She arched into his touch with a soft cry, pulling slightly at her bonds.

“So beautiful,” he murmured as his lips drifted to her breast. He sucked on the rosy peak, delighting in the unabashed moan that tumbled past her lips. “So wet and ready for me.”

She writhed beneath him. “Daniel,” she moaned. “Oh, please...”

He circled her pearl with his finger, and she threw her head back, his name escaping from her throat in exultation. When he slipped into her tight entrance, her walls clamped around his digit, and he let out a low growl of approval.

“Duchess...”

Her eyes, glazed over with desire, fluttered open.

“This is going to hurt,” he warned her.

“I know...” she murmured. “I’ve heard Lady Wendell talking about it after she came back from the country with the Viscount...”

“I wish there was some other way to spare you the pain,” he muttered hoarsely.

She shook her head. “You have already shown me so much... Daniel... let me do this for you...”

He groaned and kissed her again, his leg nudging her thighs apart as her words pierced through his soul.

He was going to take her. Take all of her as she had asked him, never mind that he would end up corrupting this bright creature of innocence and light, tainting her with his darkness.

He nudged at her opening, carefully watching her face for any signs of pain or discomfort. He had never bedded an untried maiden like Evie before, and he feared that he would not know how to be gentle with her, not when his desire for her raged in his veins.

“I trust you, Daniel,” she told him softly. “Make me yours.”

He groaned and surged into her, her words reaching a part of him that he had long thought was nonexistent.

Beneath him, Evie gave a soft cry, stiffening slightly as he slid into her tight channel.

Bloody hell, she is so tight!

It took all of his self-control not to tear into her like the beast that he was. She deserved so much more than the base rutting he had indulged in in the past.

Evie was different. She would always be different. Special in that wonderful way that only she could be.

She relaxed into him, and he slid deeper inside her, his muscles straining as he held himself from plunging into her. When he finally reached her maidenhead, he stopped.

Her eyes, which had been shut, opened in confusion. “Is something amiss?”

“No, nothing,” he ground out harshly. “Everything is...”

Exquisite. Perfect.

She was all of these things, and he would be damned if he ruined everything for her tonight.

“This is going to hurt, darling,” he warned her.

She nodded and licked her lips. “I am ready.”

He watched her intently, watched the shadows play across her face in the final moments of her innocence. After tonight, after he claimed her, she would be a woman.

His woman.

The knowledge filled him with such pride, and he surged into her, tearing past her maidenhead to sink fully into her.

Evie’s sharp cry of pain lanced through him as surely as if someone had stabbed him with an actual dagger. He truly wished there was some other way—at least one that would not cause her so much pain.

“I am so, so sorry, Duchess,” he murmured, raining soft kisses on her sweaty brow.

“Oh God, I am so sorry...”

He gathered her into his arms as he let her adjust to his size. There was nothing that he wanted more than to pump into her until they were both spent, but she needed him to rein himself in. Trusted him as much.

She was so frail and so small, so delicate in the face of his rampaging desire.

“I-it does not feel so bad,” she managed with a slight smile.

“Does it still hurt?” He looked at her with concern.

She bit her lip and shook her head. “It feels... full .”

He groaned at her choice of words. The things she was doing to him!

He bent down to take her breast into her mouth as he slipped his hand between them, unerringly finding that small nub that had made her cry out in pleasure only moments ago.

“Oh!”

Her soft cry trailed off into an unmistakable moan. Encouraged by her reaction, he continued to tease that little bud with gentle circles, drawing out her desire once more as he sucked on her nipple.

“Daniel!” she gasped. “Oh, Daniel!”

He could feel her getting wetter, could feel her tight channel accommodating him and squeezing him until he could hardly think straight.

Slowly, he pulled out, before thrusting back in. The soft moan that tumbled past her lips was all the encouragement he needed.

He started to move inside her in long, languid strokes, flicking her little pearl with his finger as he did so. In a matter of moments, Evie was writhing on the bed underneath him, the tips of her breasts flushed with arousal and the evidence of his attention.

“Daniel... dear God...” she moaned loudly. “Oh... oh my...”

She was coming undone at such a rapid rate, her head tossing from side to side as he plunged himself into her slick, hot passage. He could feel her release coming, could feel her clenching around him in the most pleasurable manner possible.

“You can let go, my sweet,” he urged her, snapping his hips against hers as he felt himself hovering over the edge of his own release. “I am right here with you.”

“Daniel...” she moaned. “Oh my God... ah!”

He felt her walls spasming, grasping him tight as he roared in one final thrust. Gathering her into his arms, they hurtled over the peak together as he spilled into her endlessly.

They lay together intertwined, their harsh breaths the only sound that filled the room after their intense lovemaking.

Lovemaking .

He had certainly never thought of it that way before.

He gazed down at the woman in his arms, and when she looked up at him with slumberous eyes, he let out a groan.

Evie was looking up at him with all the affection in the world.

She was spent—utterly and deliciously so.

She felt as if her bones had melted away in the face of the passion that raged between her and Daniel.

Somehow, as she lay there on his bed, in his arms, he had managed to untie the silken ribbons that had bound her to his bed.

Not that I would ever want to leave anytime soon .

She turned towards him with every intent to snuggle into his chest when a sudden soreness between her legs caused her to let out a slight gasp.

“Do not move,” he ordered her softly. “This is but your first time, and you will be feeling sore.”

She smiled up at Daniel, noting the tense lines of worry that marred his forehead.

“Have you been sore before, too?” she asked him.

He let out a slight laugh and shook his head. “No, Duchess.”

She smiled happily.

Duchess—I think I like the sound of that.

She felt the bed dip and sway a little as Daniel got up.

“Where are you going?” she called out to him.

He cast her a glance over his broad, muscled shoulder. “I will be back soon. Behave a

little for me, my sweet.”

His voice was a low growl, hinting at dark pleasure.

Evie felt herself becoming hot and aroused all over again. Was it possible to want a man as much as she wanted her husband? All the other married ladies she knew did not seem to feel the same way she did.

She could have asked Alice, but her brother had whisked her new sister-in-law off to France the moment they were wed.

Maybe I should ask her when she returns ...

She saw Daniel coming back to the bed with a basin of hot water and a soft cloth in his hands. For a moment, she admired the way the candlelight cast shifting shadows on his shoulders, on the muscled planes of his abdomen... and on the length between his legs.

“You keep looking at me like that and I might forget that this is your first time and punish you for your insolence,” he warned her.

The threat in his voice was unmistakable, but instead of feeling frightened, she felt desire coil low in her belly.

“I told you to behave, did I not?” he muttered, wringing the excess water out of the cloth. “Lie down and do not move.”

Evie obeyed, closing her eyes with a soft sigh when she felt him gently wiping her thighs with the warm, wet cloth. Although she wanted him to... do those things to her again, she had to admit that she was feeling a little sore.

“How are you feeling right now?” he asked her gently.

Evie smiled as she looked up at her husband— her husband —with his eyebrows drawn together in a dark frown.

“I feel like a wife,” she said simply and happily. “The most fortunate of all brides.”

He shook his head and finished cleaning her up before returning to the bed and drawing her into his arms once more. Pressing a soft kiss to her forehead, he murmured, “I always knew you were trouble from the very first moment I met you—but you are my trouble.”

“Yours and no one else’s,” she agreed.

“Damned right,” he muttered, his arms tightening around her.

She laughed and nuzzled into his chest. “What happened to us keeping our own lovers?”

The sound that reverberated in his chest was a low growl that promised violence.

“You had better not consider it, Duchess,” he warned her. “If you do not want the blood of another man on your hands.”

Evie grinned as she threw her arm over his chest and snuggled into his embrace. “I would not even dream of it, husband .”

As they lay there together, Evie felt her eyes grow heavy as sleep slowly crept over her. With Daniel gently stroking her hair, it was not long before she drifted off to sleep.

And dreams of the life that now lay before them...

CHAPTER 25

What the hell?

Daniel grimaced as the pounding began to grow ever louder. He was quite certain that he had not drunk as much at his own wedding to warrant a raging headache, and besides, he could not recall the last time he was so drunk that it resulted in a hangover.

Daniel Stanton never had hangovers.

A soft moan of complaint sounded from beside him, and a warm body curled into his.

Evie...

Almost immediately, the whole world fell away, and all he wanted to do was wake her up to him thrusting into her from behind.

But then that thrice-damned pounding was still going on like the devil himself was banging on his door .

His eyebrows snapped together in a dark frown as he carefully extricated himself from Evie's embrace, moving so quietly so as not to disturb her sleep. He had put her through so much last night, and she had been so beautiful that he could barely keep his hands off her.

Or inside her, for that matter.

He swept his breeches off the floor, where he had left them last night, striding towards the door with every intent to murder anyone who dared to intrude on their peace.

He opened the door, only to find the face of the one person he should have been expecting.

Colin —and he was brimming over with such animosity that it was a miracle he had managed to restrain himself from pounding the door into dust.

His friend's gaze flicked over to the bed behind Daniel, his eyes narrowing with rage when he saw that the bed was still occupied.

A cold fury surged within Daniel, and he immediately closed the door behind him, effectively hiding his wife from view. He did not care if Colin was Evie's brother—she was his wife, dammit, and he would not have anyone looking at her when she was in such a vulnerable state.

As soon as the door clicked shut, however, Colin wasted no time and swung his fist at Daniel's cheek.

Daniel simply smirked at his friend and wiped the blood that had trickled from his lip with his thumb.

“Damn you!” Colin raged at him. “I cannot believe I let you , of all people, watch over Evie for me, only to have you corrupt her?—”

Daniel's eyes narrowed at his friend. He might be able to take anything from Colin—even his blows—but he would not have him speak of Evie in such a disgraceful manner.

Even if he was her brother. Especially since he was her brother.

“I would very much prefer if we take this to my study,” he told him coldly. “I would not want my wife to be disturbed by the ruckus.”

Colin let out another furious roar and swung his fist, but Daniel caught it this time.

“Your wife?—”

Daniel cut him off with an icy glare. “You know the way to my study. I do not want Evie to be disturbed by your... tantrums .”

Colin clenched his fists at his sides and seethed inwardly as he turned on his heels and stomped off in the direction of the study. Daniel thought he very much looked like a sullen child.

Once they reached his study, Daniel walked over to the liquor cabinet and took out a bottle of brandy and two glasses.

“I am not in the mood to drink,” his friend grumbled.

“Fine with me.” He shrugged nonchalantly.

Nonetheless, he poured two glasses. He knew Colin would take one either way.

“I understand your anger,” Daniel told him calmly. “But you have to believe me when I tell you that I meant well by marrying her.”

“I entrusted my younger sister to your care,” his friend seethed. “I did not say that you could marry her!”

“You told me to protect her, and I did,” Daniel pointed out.

“Then kindly explain this to me!” Colin angrily tossed a wad of papers onto his desk.

Daniel raised his eyebrow and picked them up. They were scandal sheets— Lady Spalding’s Society Papers.

Written in satirical prose, that morning’s edition detailed how a duke’s bastard son had seduced one of the Season’s most impressionable young ladies to make a reputation for himself amongst the ton . However, his “most peculiar tastes” appeared to have condemned the poor young woman to a life of hell, bound to him in unholy matrimony.

His mouth pressed into a grim line as a fury unlike any other seized him. He crumpled the paper in his fist and tossed it into the fire.

It would seem that the Earl of Sidmouth and his sister had not gotten his last message clearly enough.

“I am going to end him,” he swore vehemently. “But before that, I will make sure that he suffers greatly for this!”

“I should never have left her in your care,” Colin grumbled. “I should have just chosen Hudson. Or Ethan, even.”

The thought of Evie placed in another man’s care, even his own best friends, filled Daniel with icy fury.

“I would watch my next words if I were you,” he growled at his friend. “You forget that you are in Ashton Hall, not in Blackthorn Estate.”

Colin looked at him belligerently. “If anything happened to me, Evie would never forgive you.”

“And you had better pray that she continues to think well of you,” Daniel retorted. “Because I would not countenance anyone hurting her, especially her own brother.”

His friend looked at him in shock, before shaking his head. “You have gone insane, Ashton, and I will not have you dragging Evie into your madness. Whatever happens, I am taking Evie back to Blackthorn Estate.”

Daniel glowered at him. “You would not dare.”

Colin simply tilted his chin, arrogance stamped clearly on his features. “I am a duke—I can weather any scandal that they throw at me, but I will not condemn my sister to a life of misery.”

A life of misery .

Was it truly what her life would be like with him?

If she chose to stay with him, she could never have children, because Daniel would never allow such a thing to happen. His darkness would inevitably swallow her, too, stealing the light and joy from her eyes until she was reduced to nothing more than a shell of her former vivacious self.

Just like his own mother had been.

And for all that he had put up with in his entire miserable existence, Daniel knew that he would never be able to endure having Evie suffer at his side.

He has returned!

Evie could hardly hold in her excitement as she rushed to Daniel's study after Jane had told her that her brother had arrived just that morning and was currently in her husband's study, discussing... well, whatever it was that gentlemen discussed amongst themselves.

She also knew her brother's temper, and she knew that Colin would not be pleased to find out that she had married Daniel behind his back. However, she was certain that all matters could be smoothed over once explanations had been made and Colin saw that she was indeed happy with Daniel.

Exhilaratingly so.

Thus, she paid no heed to the solemn look on Barnaby's face as he stood guard outside the study and simply pushed her way in. In any case, the faithful butler had always looked as if there was a perpetual funeral at Ashton Hall...

"Colin!" she cried out with a wide smile as she ran over to her brother to hug him. "When did you arrive? Why did you not send word that you were coming? How is my new sister-in-law?"

However, Colin remained unmoving, his gaze as cold as a frozen lake in the dead of winter.

That was when she glanced over at Daniel, who was standing behind his desk, and her gaze fell on the cut on his lip—the same lip that had kissed her so passionately and brought her so much pleasure last night.

His cheek also sported the beginnings of an awful bruise and was even slightly swollen.

And then, her gaze dropped to her brother's knuckles.

“Barnaby?” she called out, her voice much colder than when she had rushed in.

The butler appeared immediately by her side. “Yes, Your Grace?”

From the corner of her eye, she saw Colin flinched at how the butler addressed her.

He will have to endure it, then . I am the Duchess of Ashton now, and there is nothing he can do about it.

“We require some ice wrapped in a towel,” she said in a clipped tone.

“As you wish, Your Grace.”

As soon as the door closed behind Barnaby, she whirled on her feet and faced her brother, who was looking back at her stubbornly without an ounce of remorse for what he had just done.

“Colin Fitzroy!” she cried. “How could you do this to him?”

Her brother—whom she adored greatly—did not even bother to glance at Daniel. “Nothing he did not deserve,” he muttered.

“You will apologize,” she seethed. “ Now .”

“The hell I will!”

The look on his face would have been comical if Evie had not been so angry with him and her husband was not sporting a bruise on his cheek and a cut lip.

“You will not swear in my presence!” she admonished him furiously.

“And you are going to pack your bags and return to Blackthorn Estate immediately ,” he shot back.

Evie stood back and folded her arms over her chest, glaring at him.

“In case you have not noticed,” she spat at him. “I am married now. You cannot just make me leave with you!”

“And in case you have not noticed,” he retorted. “I do not care what he did. You are returning to Blackthorn Estate even if I have to haul you bodily all the way back!”

“You would not dare!”

“Watch me,” Colin challenged her, his blue-gray eyes stormy with anger that matched her own. “I will be expecting you tonight!”

With that, he stomped out of the study just as Barnaby appeared at the door with the ice and the towel she instructed him to bring. The poor butler did not even look the least bit fazed as Colin angrily strode past him.

Evie accepted the items from the butler and told Daniel to sit down as she tended to his injuries.

“Colin has gone too far this time!” she muttered angrily. “Why can he not just discuss this properly like a civilized gentleman?”

Daniel did not even wince as she held the ice to his face. She was certain that it must have hurt. That bruise looked rather ugly on his handsome features, and it broke her heart to see him injured.

“Colin is right,” he told her calmly, as if it was not his face that had just gotten

mauled by her brute of a brother. “Evie, you deserve so much better than what I have to offer.”

She shook her head. “What are you saying? I do not?—”

Her words were cut off when he placed a finger on her lips.

“I should not have stolen away your right to decide who you wanted to marry,” he admitted. “Nor should I have prevented you from marrying a loving husband and becoming a mother to all the children you could possibly want.”

“Daniel!” she cried out, stomping her foot in frustration. “You are not making any sense. Did Colin hit you that hard?”

He laughed softly, mirthlessly. “I shall see who I need to blackmail to make sure we can get this marriage annulled. I am so sorry, Evie—more than you can ever possibly imagine.”

He grasped her wrist and gently moved the ice away from his face, before he stood up and walked out the door. He never even looked back at her.

If he did, he might have seen how her heart now lay shattered on the floor.

CHAPTER 26

Evie did not know how long she had been sitting there on the floor of Daniel's study, wishing that he would come back. Hoping that this was nothing more than a horrible nightmare that she would soon wake up from.

Her numb hands still held onto the towel and ice he had gently pushed away before he left her.

When the door finally creaked open, the cold and the wetness had already seeped into her morning dress.

“Oh, my poor, sweet child!”

It was the Dowager Duchess—or Aunt Caroline, as the older woman had instructed Evie to call her after the wedding.

Could she still call her that now that Daniel intended to end their marriage?

The tears she had been holding back finally burst out of her when the older woman gathered her gently into her arms. She did not say anything, simply rubbing soothing circles on her back as Evie wailed.

“Aunt Caroline, h-he does not want me anymore...” She hiccupped miserably. “H-he wants to annul the marriage?—”

“Oh, Evie!” the older woman sighed sadly. “Daniel is a fool—most men are,

unfortunately, even the good ones. But if you think he neither wants nor needs you, then you could not have been more mistaken, my dear child.”

“B-but he said so himself!”

“And like I said, most men are fools.”

Evie let out a bitter laugh. “My brother is, too. I don’t think I shall ever forgive him.”

“Do not worry about the Duke of Blackthorn for now.” Caroline smiled with a mischievous glint in her eyes. “Your grandmama is currently downstairs, trying to make him see reason, although I would not object if she took a bludgeon to his head to do so!”

“Serves him right.”

She could always count on her grandmother to do what needed to be done. At the moment, Evie did not trust herself to not want to run her brother through with a rapier.

Or shoot him.

Fortunately, she was a poor shot who did not even know which end of a pistol to point.

“I know everything feels a little overwhelming right now,” the Dowager Duchess murmured, stroking her hair gently. It reminded her so much of how she had fallen asleep in Daniel’s arms last night, and Evie burst into a fresh round of tears.

“Daniel is a good man,” Caroline continued, the cadence of her voice a soothing balm to Evie’s terribly wounded heart. “Even after all that he had been through, all that he

had suffered... Why, he would have been well justified if he had thrown me out of Ashton Hall!”

Evie gasped and drew back from the older woman. “Why would he do such an awful thing?”

Even more worrisome was why she would say such a thing.

The Dowager Duchess looked at her sadly and tucked a lock of her hair behind her ear affectionately.

“Because, my dear, Daniel is not truly my nephew as we had the world believe—he is the illegitimate son of the late Duke of Ashton.”

Evie sucked in a harsh breath at the shocking revelation. It was so absurd, but in a strange way, it made a lot of sense.

Daniel never acted like all the other titled noblemen who had been born knowing their place in Society. No, there were times he most often acted like a ruffian, and she had simply chalked it up to just another aspect of his insufferable behavior towards her.

“I shall see who I need to blackmail to make sure we can get this marriage annulled.”

His words echoed hollowly in her head. She had initially thought that he simply meant to bribe or coerce his way into getting what he wanted. She did not think that he would actually blackmail someone into securing an annulment.

“Daniel might have been the son of a duke, but his childhood was far more miserable than you can imagine,” the Dowager Duchess told her in a sorrowful tone. “His mother was a maid in the estate that the former Duke took a fancy to, but like many

of us in the ton , our marriage had already been arranged by our parents. Before we were wed, his father sent his mother away with a pittance to ‘provide’ for her and the result of his dalliance.”

Provide? More like he meant to silence her with a meager amount!

Evie had never met the former Duke of Ashton before, but in her heart, she had already developed a keen dislike for the man who threw out a poor woman who was carrying his child.

“Many years into our marriage, we realized that I was barren,” the older woman sighed despondently. “I could not bear children, no matter how much we tried. We had consulted countless physicians, and I had to endure the endless tonics and herbs that were forced upon me in the hope that I might conceive a legitimate heir, but alas! It truly was not meant to be. It was then that his father recalled his dalliance with his maid and that she had already been with child when he had sent her away...”

“So, he sent the poor maid away, and when he was in need of an heir, he wanted them back?”

Evie was dumbfounded. She had heard all sorts of sordid tales, but she had never imagined that Daniel and his mother had actually been the victims of such a heartless man.

“Precisely. You have to understand, my dear, the old Duke was not a very nice person...”

Oh, he was definitely not just “not nice” — the man was a coldhearted beast!

“And did he find them?” Evie asked her.

The only ray of hope in this tragic tale was if the Duke had actually found them and provided handsomely for them. It was not unheard of for noblemen to have paramours and children out of wedlock, but they were provided for, and some were even educated to the same standards as their legitimate heirs.

Unfortunately, Caroline shook her graying head. “By the time he found them, poor Ann had already died, and Daniel was already a young man who wanted nothing to do with the man who shunned him and condemned him to a childhood of poverty and misery.”

Evie’s eyes widened in horror. “What do you mean?”

“Ann, Daniel’s mother, managed to hold onto the son she bore only for a few scant months before the Duke’s money ran out. After that, she could no longer provide for the babe, so the moment he was weaned, she surrendered him to an orphanage in the hope that they might be able to at least feed him.”

Evie gasped, her hands flying to her mouth in horror. She could only imagine how horrible it had been for Daniel.

Orphanages were the last resort for children of the very poor or the deceased. They were mostly overcrowded with hardly enough to feed all the children in their care, relying solely on the mercy and charity of others.

“You can only imagine how he reacted when the former Duke summoned him to bestow this ‘great honor’ of a title on him.” Caroline laughed in derision.

“I gather he was not pleased about it?” Evie smiled a little.

“Oh, not only that, but he also spat in the man’s face and told him to shove his title up where...” the older woman trailed off, her face turning red. “In any case, the boy was

quite rude, and rightly so! If it had been me, I might have taken a vase to his head as well!”

Despite her heartbreak, Evie could not help but chortle at the older woman’s recounting of how the former Duke tried to entice his mostly forgotten son to take on the mantle, years and years after he all but scorned him for his lowly birth.

“But he is the Duke of Ashton now,” she murmured. “That means he must have accepted the title and his father’s offer.”

“On the contrary, it was I who convinced him to take his birthright.”

Evie looked at the older woman in astonishment. “You did? B-but how?”

She knew firsthand just how stubborn Daniel could be. He would never have accepted anything from the former Duke without a good reason.

“I was already old, and if Daniel refused the title, it would have passed on to a distant cousin who would have made a mess of things,” the Dowager Duchess scoffed. “Seeing as I had no children of my own, I took it upon myself to approach him and propose an arrangement that would benefit the both of us.”

Evie raised an eyebrow at this. “Meaning?”

The Dowager Duchess smiled, seemingly pleased with herself. “You have to know that by the time his father started recognizing him, Daniel had already made a name for himself—although not in the way most gentlemen did. While the ignorant fool wiped away his inheritance, his own son had acquired a great wealth for himself. When my husband died and Daniel still refused to accept his inheritance, I personally went to see him and pleaded with him to have mercy on me.”

She took a deep breath and continued. “I was a childless widow, and whoever inherited the titles and estate of the Duke of Ashton could very well throw me out without a shilling to my name. Thus, I proposed that we come to an agreement—Daniel would accept his inheritance under the pretense that he is some distant nephew of the Duke of Ashton, and I would enjoy his protection for the rest of my days as his aunt.”

The Dowager Duchess reached for her hand with a sad smile. “Daniel would never acknowledge being his father’s son, but he took pity on me on the account that I had suffered the former Duke’s existence for the better part of two and a half decades. In a sense, we were comrades in arms. Survivors of my husband’s selfishness, if you will.”

Evie smiled at her. “You are not wrong, of course.”

Caroline smiled and patted her hand. “Knowing him for as long as I have now, I can assure you with utmost certainty that he cares for you, my dear—more than even he realizes, I would say. I can only hope that he comes to his senses before it is too late.”

As much as she wanted to believe the older woman’s words, Evie also knew that there was nothing that could change Daniel’s mind once he had already set it to something. He was so strong and resolute, and it had been one of the things she had admired about him.

“I cannot do anything about it, Aunt Caroline,” she told the older woman brokenly. “He has already refused me— again . How could I possibly stay here any longer?”

The older woman looked at her with great sadness in her gray eyes. “I know, my dear child. Sometimes, I wish I could take a stick and beat some sense into him, but Daniel is a grown man, and he would have to come to these realizations by himself.”

But what if he never did? What if Evie left and he truly forgot about her?

Pain unlike anything she had ever known ripped through her.

How could Daniel so easily turn his back on her when she would go to hell and back for him?

The Dowager Duchess must have seen the doubt and pain on her face, for she squeezed her hands in sympathy and reassurance.

“He will come to his senses,” she promised Evie. “You will see.”

Such beautiful words, imbued with so much hope...

Evie only wished that she had enough left in her to be able to grasp onto it and never let go.

Instead, she smiled sadly at the Dowager Duchess. “Aunt Caroline, I will never forget your kindness during my entire stay here in Ashton Hall, but I am afraid that I must return to Blackthorn Estate.”

She swallowed past the lump in her throat. “I c-cannot stay here—not while Daniel is in the process of securing an annulment. I-If any of you need me, I shall be at my brother’s residence...”

It would not only hurt her to see him, to be so near and so distant at the same time. It would be a devastation capable of shattering her entire world, but with such agonizing slowness that even breathing would be a torment.

“Will you at least consider all the things I told you, Evie?” The Dowager Duchess looked at her with such sadness that she felt as if her heart would break all over again.

“I do not know, Aunt Caroline,” Evie whispered brokenly. “All I know is that I need to get out of here—at least for now.”

The older woman patted her cheek gently. “If you ever need anything, please do not forget that this old woman will always be here for you.”

“Thank you so much, Aunt Caroline... for everything.”

Evie finally managed to get up from the floor with a little help from the Dowager Duchess. It was rather laughable, really, that she should require assistance from a woman who was nearly three times her age, but her legs had already failed her.

Now, she had to look towards a future without Daniel in it, and it was so bleak that she wanted to crumple back to the floor in a heap and just carry on crying.

But she was Lady Evelyn Fitzroy-Stanton, and she could no longer stay on the ground. She would not linger where she was apparently not wanted. She would return to Blackthorn Estate and nurse her broken heart if need be.

Maybe with enough time, she might even learn to live without it.

CHAPTER 27

Among the many rules that he established for those he had previously had a liaison with, these two were of paramount importance to Daniel—they were never to seek him out in his place of residence, especially in broad daylight, and he was never to seek them.

Standing outside Cobham House, he had already broken one of them.

I have broken far more for Evie . What is another one, really?

“Y-Your Grace!” the butler stammered when he opened the door and found Daniel standing before him with the coldest expression known to mankind.

“Inform the lady of the house that the Duke of Ashton is here to see her!” he snapped at the poor man.

“B-but your card?—”

Daniel leveled his frigid gaze on the man, and the butler turned as white as a sheet hung out to dry. He was also fluttering in such a manner that a soft breeze might even knock him out.

“There is no need for a card, Wesley,” a husky voice called out from the back. “His Grace is an old acquaintance of mine.”

The Marchioness of Cobham stood before him in a burgundy gown with a

decolletage that was much too low and a bodice much too tight to actually be considered proper. A small smile played on her lips, her dark eyes shining as she regarded him.

“Do not stand there at the door, Your Grace.” She laughed lightly. “Do come in. Otherwise, the gossips will label me as a most ungracious hostess, in addition to my other less-than-savory epithets.”

Daniel did not even give the butler a passing glance as he strode through the door and followed the Marchioness into the sunny parlor. When she saw the slight frown that marred his brow, she let out a low laugh.

“You disapprove of my choice of decor?” she asked him with an arched eyebrow.

He turned to glare at her. “I did not come here to discuss your decor. You may damn well do whatever you want.”

“Oh?” She smiled. “Then, pray tell, what are you here for?”

“I need to know who you have been talking to,” he snapped. “Specifically, who you have been talking to about me .”

Lady Cobham stiffened, her eyes narrowing on him. “I do not know what you are insinuating, Your Grace. You, of all people, should know that there is hardly anyone who would talk to someone like me.”

There were those self-righteous idiots who would give a woman like the Marchioness a wide berth, if only because she made no pretenses. She was audacious and brutally honest to a fault, and while some might find such a woman to be abrasive, she was a titled noblewoman, and so she was still afforded the deference that was her due.

“I meant if you have been talking to anyone about my... parentage .”

The word left a bitter taste in his mouth. Ever since he had been old enough to recognize that he was mostly alone in this world, he had not given any importance to his origins. It was only for the sake of Caroline—and then, Evie—that he upheld appearances as the distant cousin who was fortunate enough to inherit the titles and supposed wealth of the late Duke of Ashton.

In truth, there was hardly any wealth when Daniel finally assumed the title. The coffers were empty, and Caroline was already struggling to maintain the glorious reputation of one of the oldest families in England.

“And why would I do that?” Lady Cobham looked properly offended. “I am no gossip. You know how I despise such dealings.”

He looked pointedly at her. “So, you did not talk about our... time together? You have not been talking to Lady Spalding , have you?”

She laughed airily. “Good heavens, no ! Your Grace, did you truly think me to be so nostalgic as to reminisce about what we have rightfully left in the past? And with such a vulgar scandal writer, at that. You offend me, Your Grace.”

“Just answer the question, Georgiana.”

“Of course not.” She bristled. “I am happy with the life I have now. I have a husband whom I have grown to adore more than life itself. We might not be compatible in everything, but...Why would I risk all of that?”

Her eyes softened visibly when she spoke about the Marquess. It was clear to him that she spoke sincerely about her affection for the man.

“I am well aware that you have found your happiness with your bride,” she continued, pouring each of them a cup of tea. “I saw no reason to disrupt all that. Why should I risk my reputation and make a cuckold of my husband before the eyes of the ton ?” She paused and then added, “Perhaps someone saw me in the wedding breakfast and thought?—”

“Of course, someone thought something,” he gritted out. “That was precisely the reason why you were not invited to the wedding, Georgiana!”

The Marchioness paled and pressed a trembling hand to her lips. “Dear God in heaven!” she gasped, her eyes wide. She shook her head as if to clear her thoughts. “I apologize for my carelessness, Your Grace. I truly do.”

Daniel ran his hand through his hair in frustration. Taking his anger out on the poor woman would do him no good.

“You are forgiven. It is no fault of yours that there are simply those who would think the worst of everyone,” he grunted.

She nodded, although she appeared to have lost most of her usual sensual confidence. “I hope you find whoever is behind this Lady Spalding nonsense.”

Oh, believe me, I already know where to call in these debts .

He stood up. “Thank you, My Lady. Worry not, I know how to take care of these things.”

“I am quite certain you do,” she murmured into her cup.

He nodded subtly at her. “I shall be on my way, then. You do not need to see me out the door.”

She gave him another smile—more friendly than sultry as she waved him away. “My door is always open to my friends—my true friends.”

As Daniel walked back to the carriage, he looked up at the bleak sky. Overhead, the clouds had begun to gather. In the distance, thunder rumbled, a portent of a downpour.

Rain would not be the only thing coming down upon London in the coming days.

There were those who had apparently been enjoying too many carefree days that they had forgotten just what he was capable of.

It was about time he paid them a visit to remind them just who they had dared to offend.

How quaint—even the weather seems to mirror what I am feeling right now.

Evie stared out the window at the gathering clouds overhead. Just a few days ago, it had been exceptionally sunny. She could still recall the warm sunlight that danced on her skin on her wedding day. Now, the clouds were rolling in, and there was even the faint rumbling of thunder in the distance.

“Evie?”

She looked up from her position on the window seat to Alice, who was standing before her with a cup of hot tea.

“Here.” Her new sister-in-law handed her a cup with a sympathetic smile. “You need to at least drink something. You have not eaten since you arrived.”

Nothing, not even her favorite dishes, could entice her to eat. Colin had even tried

bringing her her favorite sweets from the new confectionery shop down Oxford Street, but she would not even talk to him.

All she wanted was Daniel, but he did not want her—at least not as much as she wanted him—and it hurt.

“Thank you, Alice.” She smiled at the brunette, accepting the cup. She looked down at the dark liquid swirling in it, allowing the freshly brewed tea to warm her cold hands.

Everything seemed so cold now, so bleak. It was like all the world was leached of color in the span of a few hours.

“Your Grace.”

Both of them looked up at the butler, and Evie realized that he was referring to Alice, not her. She looked back down at her cup with much bitterness in her heart.

“There are guests who wish to see you.”

Alice looked at the butler in confusion. “But I was not expecting company?—”

“We are not guests, we are family ,” a bold voice announced.

A flash of red and Scarlett sailed into the parlor as if she owned the entirety of Blackthorn Estate, with Phoebe trailing quietly after her. Both of them sported looks of surprise when they saw Evie on the window seat with Alice.

“Evie?” Phoebe called out with a soft smile. “You must forgive us for rudely staring, but we did not expect to see you here...”

At the sound of her best friend's gentle voice, Evie felt her lower lip tremble, and then the floodgates burst open as her friends looked at her with shock and helplessness.

"He has ruined everything!" she sobbed. "Everything was wonderful, and he ruined it all! "

"That... that fiend!" Scarlett burst out furiously, rushing over to her. "What did that useless Duke of Ash do to you, dear? Why, you must allow me to teach him a lesson! He should know how to treat his wife better—it has not even been a week since you were married!"

"N-no, it was not Daniel." Evie hiccupped.

"I am afraid she is referring to my husband," Alice sighed in disappointment. "I mean to have a word with him after all of this, I assure you."

She looked so fierce that for a moment, Evie felt some sympathy for her brother, but it all vanished in an instant. Just earlier, she had heard her grandmama giving Colin the dressing down he sorely needed, but he still refused to admit he did anything wrong.

As if he was well within his rights to storm into his sister and her husband's home out of some misguided brotherly overprotectiveness! Perhaps he had already forgotten that it was he who had entrusted Evie to Daniel in the first place!

"Why? What did your fool of a brother do?" Scarlett demanded with her hands on her hips.

Tears streamed hot and fast down Evie's cheeks as her friends all gathered to comfort her, bringing her tea and biscuits and even a daintily embroidered lace handkerchief

to wipe her tears and snot.

“E-everything was going so well,” she spoke haltingly. “D-Daniel a-and I w-were just beginning to f-find happiness, and t-then he c-came and ruined it all!”

Alice rubbed soothing circles on her back as Evie fought to steady her breathing through her sobbing. She knew that she looked a rather disgraceful sight right now, but her friends only regarded her with kindness, sympathy, and a bit of rage on Scarlett’s part.

“Brothers,” the redhead scoffed with unbridled disdain. “They think they can order us about, when goodness knows what kind of tomfoolery they have been up to!”

At her words, Alice bit down her smile as a telltale blush spread across her cheeks.

“Dearest, can you not talk this out with your husband?” Phoebe encouraged her softly. “Surely the Duke of Ashton will listen to you. We have seen the way he looks at you, and I think Scarlett will agree with me when I say that he will listen to whatever you say.”

“Truer words have never been spoken.” Scarlett nodded in affirmation. “Evie has the man wrapped tightly around her little finger. He would burn the world for her if it dared to even look at her the wrong way.”

Phoebe smiled at their outspoken friend. “I thought you did not like him that much.”

“I did not at first,” Scarlett admitted. “But then I saw how he and Evie looked at each other, and I knew that it was a foregone conclusion. That man would leap off a cliff if Evie told him to.”

“Well now, he does not even want to talk to me,” Evie told them despondently. “He

even says that he will have our marriage annulled. I am not even sure this is possible since we...well...it was consummated. But then again, he can blackmail anyone to do anything so..."

"There are only a handful of marriages that have ever been annulled," Alice assured her. "I am sure that even if he were to try it, he would be met with very little success."

"You must not have heard the things he is capable of," her younger sister sighed. "To marry Evie, he obtained a special license so they could be wed within a week at Ashton Hall."

Scarlett crossed her arms over her chest and smirked. "Jumping into marriage and then demanding an annulment right after? Is he not afraid that the Archbishop of Canterbury would regard him as a fool?"

Phoebe peered into Evie's eyes with great compassion. "His Grace has never struck me as an impulsive person. Why would he want an annulment after he had been so set on marrying?"

Evie knew the answer to that, but it was not something she could tell anyone. These were things that only Daniel and the Dowager Duchess of Ashton had the right to disclose.

Because he thinks he does not deserve happiness . Because he thinks he has no right to a future with me, even if there is nothing in this world I want more than him .

"I think I might know the answer to that."

Scarlett reached into her reticule and pulled out a wrinkled copy of that morning's publication from Lady Spalding . She threw the paper onto the floor with a look of

utter contempt.

“That heifer nearly ruined Evie’s reputation when she wrote that the reason behind their hasty marriage was because the Duke of Ashton had already seduced her.” She snorted. “She is up to her usual tricks again, but this time, she insinuated that he is actually the bastard son of the former Duke, not his distant nephew.”

Alice frowned at the scandal sheet. “Why exactly did the Duke wish to marry so quickly, then?”

“Because he wished to protect me,” Evie told her mournfully. “Because the Earl of Sidmouth wagered that he would be the one to win my hand and acquire my dowry for himself.”

“What an utterly contemptible person!” Phoebe gasped, horrified. “In that case, the Duke is justified in his actions, even if they were a bit extreme.”

“I would have to agree, though.” Alice shook her head. “I know the Earl of Sidmouth, and he is not as nice a person as he pretends to be. If he meant to marry Evie, then he would find a way to do that, even through underhanded means.”

“But what do we do now?” Scarlett groaned.

“I will need to talk to Colin,” Alice said resolutely. She squeezed Evie’s hand in reassurance. “It will all turn out well, my dear—you’ll see.”

“Thank you, Alice, everyone.” Evie smiled weakly at the ladies around her. “But I think I would like to retire to my room now. It has been an exhausting day for me...”

“All right.” Her sister-in-law smiled sadly at her. “I shall have your supper sent to your room later.”

Evie nodded in gratitude to the brunette and muttered her excuses to her dearest friends.

She appreciated their efforts to cheer her up, she truly did. However, it was far more painful to sit there and have them comfort her when she would much rather be alone.

Evie climbed into bed and drew the covers over her head. Just last night, she had fallen asleep in Daniel's arms to the sound of his heartbeat. Now, she was all alone in her old bed.

She had never felt as cold as she did then.

CHAPTER 28

I am going to kill him!

Daniel fumed as his carriage careened down the road, his hands clenching the edge of the seat hard enough to leave holes in the expensive velvet upholstery.

And after I am done with that, I am going to throw his carcass where the sun will never reach him!

The Earl of Sidmouth was not only pretentious, but he was also dreadfully predictable and admirably stupid. Even after the warning from Daniel, he still managed to crawl back into the same club night after night, wasting what little money he managed to scrape off the bottom of his empty coffers or borrow from those foolish enough to “invest” in his schemes.

But then again, Lachesis had always opened its doors not only to upstanding members of Society but also to those who hovered around its edges. The not-so-polite company if you will.

After he was done with him, Daniel swore that no gambling hell in London would be foolish enough to accept Thomas Salsbury and his coin—no matter how shiny it was.

If he is foolish enough to remain in London, that is.

Daniel alighted from the carriage and strode into the club, his cloak flapping ominously behind him.

“Your Grace, we were not expecting you tonight?—”

The manager of the club hurriedly fell into step with him as he walked in. However, one look at Daniel’s stormy countenance told the man that the club’s owner was not here tonight to talk business. Immediately, the man perceptively took a polite step back and stood silently, awaiting his next order.

Daniel smiled coldly. “Clear out the club,” he told the man softly. “But the Earl of Sidmouth must remain wherever he is right now.”

The manager summoned the staff, and in less than a quarter of an hour, the bustling rooms were cleared out. Someone from the staff approached the manager and whispered something in his ear. Then the manager turned to Daniel.

“Your Grace, the Earl is in the Room of Spades,” he informed Daniel.

Each one of the private rooms of Lachesis was named after a suit in the deck of cards. It took not only an exorbitant amount in addition to the club’s notorious membership fees, but also occupying one of these rooms required a certain prestige.

The only way that Thomas Salsbury would be able to play in one was if somebody had invited him.

I think that we need to reassess the club’s members . Lachesis seems to have been far more lenient lately.

He walked into the Room of Spades to the sight of Lord Sidmouth being held down by two of the club’s burliest staff, who were wearing such forbidding expressions that would make any dandy soil his breeches.

“Unhand me, you degenerate scum!” the nobleman raged. “Do you know who I am?”

“They do not care,” Daniel told him silkily. “And neither do I, but you have crossed the line far too many times.” He smiled dangerously. “Lord Sidmouth, I do not know if you are simply stupid or stubborn to the point of stupidity.”

Thomas Salsbury paled at the sight of him, and Daniel smiled even more when he saw the man sagging into the chair as if he had lost all the strength in his limbs.

He sighed and sat down on the chair opposite the poor man, who looked as if he was about to wet his breeches.

“I thought I had made it perfectly clear that you are to refrain from seeking or talking about my wife ,” he drawled softly. “If you knew what was good for you.”

“You will find that I do not respond well to threats, Your Grace!”

Daniel smirked. “Perhaps I must clarify myself even more so as to be understood—you will leave, Lord Sidmouth, on the first ship to the Americas, and you will take your very talented scribe of a sister with you to start a new life there.”

“No!” the Earl gasped in horror. “Your Grace?—”

“You will find that my patience for your antics has all but run out,” Daniel sneered. “I only thought to spare you because I was busy making arrangements for my wedding. Now, I have a great deal of free time and can do as I please.”

“Please, Your Grace!”

“Oh, so you do not want to leave?” Daniel drummed his fingers on the table with an air of nonchalance. “Well then, your sister can write about your own demise in that charming little paper of hers. Oh, right...” He smiled insidiously. “I forgot that she is only capable of writing scandals and not obituaries .”

“What about Lady Evelyn! Does your wife even know what you are capable of!?”

Thomas Salsbury was grasping at straws now, but he had done the worst possible thing—he had mentioned Evie’s name, and it ignited such a cold, dangerous fury in Daniel that he was tempted to tear him apart with his bare hands.

“Do not,” he spat out, “ever let me hear her name coming out of your mouth, you pathetic waste of air! And for your information, she is the Duchess of Ashton, and you will address her properly by her title, or I will rip your tongue from your mouth and shove it down your throat!”

The Earl visibly shrank back, sniveling like the cowardly fool he had always been. Thomas Salsbury might have thought himself an exceptionally capable gentleman when he claimed that he would be able to marry Evie simply for her dowry, but before Daniel and the very real threat of dismemberment, he was reduced to the worm he had always been.

Not even fit to fertilize the gardens of Ashton Hall .

“I take it that you find my suggestion to your liking, then,” Daniel said softly. He reached into his jacket pocket, drawing out two tickets before tossing them at the Earl. “I have paid for your fare. I hope you enjoy your travels, Lord Sidmouth.”

The Earl reached out for the tickets with trembling hands, clutching at them as if they were a lifeline.

Which they were.

Daniel had no qualms about ruining the man’s entire life. Thomas Salsbury might think that nothing was worse than death, but there were ways to make living even worse, and Daniel could make them all happen if he wanted to.

“Thank you, Your Grace,” the Earl gasped, holding the tickets close to his heart as if he were afraid that the dangerous man before him would change his mind.

Daniel merely waved his hand at him dismissively.

“I just have one question, so humor me,” he said softly. “Why did you ever do such a stupid thing when she is already married to me? What did you have to gain by doing such a thing?”

The Earl of Sidmouth hung his head in shame and defeat. Only one soft word emerged from his lips.

“Revenge.”

Daniel raised his eyebrow at that. As if the man could be any more stupid. He really should stop underestimating the idiocy of the rest of the world.

Except Evie, of course. Evie was exceptionally smart, although given to such idealistic notions.

Fortunately, he was there to take care of everything else for her.

“Take him away,” he told his staff with a wave of his hand.

The Earl was finally carted away, with snot and tears running down his face, while Daniel continued to sit there as if in deep thought.

Moments later, he heard the manager clear his throat.

He looked at the man sharply. “What is it?”

“Your Grace, ah... it appears that the, erm, that the Earl of Sidmouth has... well...”

“I did not hire you to stammer in front of me,” Daniel sighed in obvious displeasure.

The manager swallowed audibly and nodded frantically. “It appears that the Earl of Sidmouth has wet himself,” he finally managed to choke out.

“Then rip out the carpet and change the chairs.” Daniel stood up and straightened his jacket. “Keep in mind that we run a reputable establishment—we do not tolerate such unsanitary conditions.”

“Yes, Your Grace!”

He walked to the door and then paused and looked over his shoulder.

“Do kindly review the members of the club as well. I believe that there are those who do not need to remain on the list.”

“As you wish, Your Grace.”

In the next few days, there would be an uproar from those that the club would inevitably close its doors to, but that was the price of running a business.

After all, he could not just accept whatever filth came to his front door.

Ashton Hall was empty when he arrived—and not just empty in the sense that it was unoccupied, no.

It was as if all light and laughter had been leached out of his estate. As if not even a speck of joy lingered in its halls.

It was then that he realized that Evie was gone, and with her she had taken all that remained of his humanity.

“Oh, you have arrived.”

He turned to find Caroline standing behind him with her head tilted slightly. Her gray eyes studied him intently, and in them he saw a softness, a sadness that he had never before encountered in his childhood.

It was sympathy, and up until then, Daniel had always thought he had no need of it.

“You look like you could use a nice cup of tea,” she said with a soft smile. “Follow me to the parlor, then.”

He smiled bitterly as he nodded and followed the Dowager Duchess to the parlor, his heart clenching in his chest when he realized that he would not see Evie in that room again.

“Well, do not stand there looming over me,” Caroline remarked. She indicated the seat opposite her. “It is rude to stare.”

Only she would ever call him out for his breach of etiquette. Well, Evie used to, but she was no longer here.

“I suppose your business was concluded well.” Caroline poured two cups of tea and handed him one.

He watched as the tendrils of steam rose from the dark brew and twisted into the air before disappearing. How very like Caroline to think that a cup of tea would solve all the world’s problems.

Daniel would have vastly preferred a bottle of his strongest liquor and hoped that it would be able to at least numb whatever it was that seemed to have gripped him so painfully.

“Everything has been taken care of.” He nodded. “The vermin will be taking itself out.”

The Dowager Duchess wrinkled her nose delicately. “Well, yes, I suppose that is for the best, although your methods are a bit harsh.”

“It was either that or I ruin him before the whole of Society.”

Or I wring his puny neck and throw him to the wild animals.

“I suppose exile would be a better choice.” Caroline grimaced. “At least he could still go gallivanting about, making something of himself in a new land. Lady Spalding might not be too happy about that, though.”

“I do not care what makes her happy.” He shrugged. All he really cared about was Evie, and now she was gone.

He felt a warm hand clasp his, and he looked up to find Caroline looking at him with a great deal of affection.

“You know, I have always wanted you to find your match not only because I felt that it is your duty to carry on your father’s name,” she told him softly. “I wanted you to make a happy life for yourself out of the darkness of our generation.”

She sighed and shook her head sadly. “While we cannot take back all that has happened to you in the past, my dear boy, I have always hoped that you would fare better than the rest of us—if only so I could spite your father.”

He laughed a little at that. “He truly is not one that would inspire a woman’s affection.”

“More like he is more adept at inspiring enduring contempt!” she agreed with an enthusiastic nod. “But for you, I had hoped better. I had hoped there would be more . That you would find the happiness we never did—and it was dear Evie who brought you all of that.”

“But she is gone now, Caroline. I have hurt her too much, and I know I will only hurt her more?—”

“Did you know that you have this dreadful habit of thinking for everyone else?” she sighed in exasperation. “Evie is a woman with her own mind and heart. Do not think for one second that you will be capable of making her own decisions for her.”

He smiled bitterly, recalling the many times his sweet, little spitfire had stood toe-to-toe against him, looking him in the eye and calling him out for the idiot he was.

“Things will turn out well, as long as one is willing to make amends,” Caroline told him softly. “Even the best love matches are not perfect, my boy. As long as you and your dear Evie are determined to work things out, you will find a way.”

Hope—something so novel and alien to Daniel—soared crazily in his heart. However, he had long been of the opinion that hope was nothing more than an illusion for dreamers.

“Your Grace.”

Both of them looked up from their cups of tea to find Barnaby standing at the door to the parlor.

“There is a Mr. Turner here to see the Duchess of Ashton,” the butler announced with some discomfort.

Mr. Turner. In all the events that had unfolded, Daniel had all but forgotten his wedding gift for Evie!

“Shall I tell him that Her Grace is currently indisposed?”

Daniel shook his head and stood up. “No, Barnaby, that is not necessary. Tell Mr. Turner I shall see him in my study. I shall tell him about the Duchess myself.”

Before the wedding, he had arranged for Mr. Turner to give Evie some painting lessons, knowing how much she admired the artist. It was to be his wedding gift to her.

Now, he still wished for her to have her beloved painting lessons.

I hope that painting with Mr. Turner will at least soothe the pain I have caused her .

Colin would never allow him to see Evie in the near future, and Daniel feared that he would only cause her more pain if he arrived at her doorstep too soon.

With this, she could find some comfort in doing something she had always loved.

It was the least he could do.

CHAPTER 29

There had to be a rule somewhere that guests were forbidden to drop by in the week after a wedding—especially those who came without prior notice.

However, even his usual cold glares and scowling could not move the two men who now occupied the sofa in his study, try as he might.

Guests really should know when their presence is not appreciated. Friends all the more so.

“I thought that it was customary to leave newlyweds alone in the days after their wedding,” he remarked glacially.

“Apparently, Colin did not get the notice.” Ethan snickered but promptly shut his mouth when Daniel glared icily at him.

“Neither did you, it would seem,” he shot back.

He was truly not in the right mood to be dealing with his friend’s remarks, however well-intentioned they were. All he wanted to do was drink himself to intoxication—or at the very least, numb that damned feeling that seemed to have seized his chest ever since he left Evie in his study that morning.

Even the thought of exiling Thomas Salsbury to the Americas hardly gave him the satisfaction anymore.

Perhaps exile was much too lenient . But if I did even more, Evie would have some words to say about it.

And he really did not want to cause her any more undue stress than what he had already caused her.

“And he was right to do so,” Hudson told him pointedly, his low voice barely a rumble as he looked at Daniel with a raised eyebrow. “More or less, you coerced the lady into marriage for your devious purposes, without being forthright with her.”

Daniel winced inwardly at his words but chose not to say anything. He simply poured himself another glass and downed it, relishing the burn down his throat.

Hudson was the most reclusive of their group, and for him to come out at such a time spoke volumes of how much his actions had affected all of them.

Daniel groaned and ran his fingers through his dark hair. “That is the worst part of it—that he was actually right . I admit I should have informed him beforehand of my intentions to marry Evie.”

Ethan simply raised an eyebrow at him and then accepted a glass of brandy.

“I should have been honest with her, as well,” Daniel added with a sigh. “That might be my greatest regret in all this.”

“Well, acknowledging one’s own faults is the first step to recovery.” Ethan grinned at him.

Daniel did not know how many glasses he already had but still poured himself another one.

“I do not know if there will be any way to recover from this,” he said with a grimace. “I might have hurt Evie far too much to ever make it up to her.”

“You have the rest of your life,” Hudson grunted. “You owe her that much.”

And Daniel knew that damn well. He knew that even if he spent the rest of his life making it up to her, it would never be able to compensate for the hurt he had caused her.

The look in her eyes in his study still haunted him in a way that nothing ever did.

Not even his own mother’s death in his arms had quite the effect on him.

At least Thomas Salsbury and his odious sister will not be able to bother her anymore .

With the Earl and the bane of Society’s existence carted off to the Americas by the next morning, Evie would never have to worry about that poor excuse for a man haranguing her. He had made sure of it.

Ethan sighed. “I think you still have not learned your lesson in all this, though.”

“What lesson?” Daniel laughed bitterly. “Thou shalt not covet thy friend’s sister?”

“Do you know how blasphemous that sounds coming from you?”

“I have never professed myself to be a religious man,” he scoffed at his carefree friend.

Living off scraps, he had learned early on not to rely on the mercy of others or God. He had known better than to rely on others for his survival.

And he had managed well enough on his own until Evie crashed into his life, and all of a sudden, there was nothing in this world he wanted more than her.

But in his selfishness and arrogance, he had destroyed all of that.

“You might not believe in God, but you should at least have some hope that some good will come out of this,” Ethan told him softly.

Daniel smiled bitterly.

“At the very least, he owes her an apology,” Hudson remarked coolly. “That is if he can muster up the courage to beg for her mercy in Blackthorn Estate.”

“There is no hope for me now,” Daniel sighed. “It is over. My only wish is that Evie will live well after this.”

Hudson raised an eyebrow. “How is she supposed to live well when you mean to annul the marriage after only a day? Do you not think that the ton would hesitate to drag her over the coals for this?”

“They would not dare!” Daniel growled. “I would like to see the first one to speak out against her.”

“You do not wish to remain married to her,” his reclusive friend continued. “But what will you do when she finds another man who will marry her?”

Daniel felt his chest clench painfully at Hudson’s words. He had meant to annul the marriage so that Evie could find someone better suited for her. Someone who could give her what he could not—children, a family.

A happy life.

He would never be able to give Evie that. Not when he had given his life to ensuring that the Stanton line would end with him.

Ethan shook his head. “You do not want to remain married to her, but you cannot stand the thought of her marrying someone else. Even I would tell you that is simply preposterous, Ash.”

“What does it matter what I want?” Daniel bit out harshly. “It is over—there is nothing that can be done about it now.”

His two friends shared a look, and Ethan let out a soft sigh of disappointment. Hudson was still very much aloof, but his fingers around his glass had tensed up considerably.

“Let him be, Ethan,” Hudson finally said.

As much as Daniel wanted to believe that things could be made right again, that he could undo all the hurt he had caused Evie and spare her from more of it, he knew that he could not. The only thing that he could do was make sure that she would never experience it again.

Unfortunately, that meant that he would have to remove himself from the equation.

Whatever it takes to ensure her happiness going forward, I will do it—even if I have to spend the rest of my life in misery.

Sleep does not come easily to one with a broken heart.

Ever since Daniel had walked out on her in his study in Ashton Hall, she had felt a kind of tiredness that seeped deep into her bones. However, try as she might, she could hardly get a wink of sleep, even when she had Jane bring her a cup of her

favorite chamomile tea and warm milk with a bit of honey.

Evie stared up at the canopy of her old bed in Blackthorn Estate, biting her bottom lip. A few weeks ago, she would have wanted nothing more than to be back at home, away from Daniel and his overbearing tendencies. Her brother might have a streak of overprotectiveness a mile wide, but at least he did not meddle in her business all the time.

Now, she would give anything to have Daniel show up at their front door.

Or her window.

Or anywhere, really.

But I know better than to expect such things .

A tear slid down the corner of her eye.

Colin and Lady Spalding had effectively driven him away from her. They had both ruined the greatest happiness she had ever known, and as much as she loved him, she would never be able to look her brother in the eye without wanting to hit him.

Or cry—which was worse, really.

Evie wanted to be strong. To show her brother that she was capable of making her own decisions and loving a truly complicated man like Daniel Stanton, but Colin was unfortunately stubbornly set in his ways. Alice might have been able to exert some pressure on him, but then, it had been much too soon into their marriage for it to have a much more significant effect.

A soft knock sounded at her door, and she frowned a little.

I thought I had instructed Jane that I did not want to be disturbed for the rest of the night?

Before she could say anything, the door swung open slowly to reveal her new sister-in-law in a plain mint-colored dress, her lovely dark brown locks done up in a simple style that gave her a refreshing, youthful look.

“May I come in?” Alice asked her softly.

Evie had not felt like rising from the bed for a good week or so, but she made an effort to at least prop herself up on some pillows as she tried to smile at her sister-in-law.

“Of course,” she managed.

“Jane told me you did not eat your dinner,” the brunette murmured sadly. “Is there something you at least want to eat? I can tell the kitchens to make it for you.”

Evie shook her head with a sad smile. “That is very kind of you, but... I do not think I have quite the appetite for it.”

Or anything, really.

A broken heart was truly something—it had robbed her of sleep and any appetite. She could not even be tempted by her favorite pastries, and even the sight of pudding made her want to gag.

“I mean to have a talk with your brother.” Alice reached for her hand in a gesture of reassurance. “Your brother... is a stubborn man.”

Evie smiled weakly. “That is a mild way of putting it.”

Alice laughed. "All right, he is an incredibly stubborn man."

"But you love him?"

Evie watched as her sister-in-law's eyes softened.

"More than anything in this world," Alice murmured.

Evie had no idea what love was.

She thought she did, once. She thought she had read everything there was to know about it. She listened to her grandmother tell stories about it and watched Alice and Colin as they came together in what the ton called the "match of the Season."

Still, it did not prepare her for just how slowly she had learned to care for Daniel. How she had not even realized how much he had come to mean to her until he was gone and she was left reeling from the shock and devastation.

Questions roiled in her mind as her heart roiled in pain.

Was it truly so easy for him to let go of me?

Does he find everything as unbearable as I do now?

Does he miss me as much as I miss him?

"I know that it seems as if everything is rather bleak and hopeless right now," Alice spoke softly. "But things will get better. They always do, Evie."

Evie bit her lower lip as she stared down at her lap. How were things supposed to get easier? Would this crushing pain in her chest eventually go away?

Or would she simply find ways to live with it?

She balked at the idea of such an existence. Could it even be called living if one continued to exist merely for the sake of doing so?

“He thinks that he is doing me a great disservice with our marriage,” she told Alice in a harsh breath. “That our marriage was a mistake and that he would make it right with an annulment.”

“There have only ever been a handful of annulments over the last decades,” her sister-in-law comforted her. “It might not be as easy as the Duke of Ashton makes it seem.”

Evie shook her head. “Even then, he has made it clear that our marriage is over.” She looked up at Alice sadly. “You see, he has only ever wanted to protect me, and with Colin telling him these things and Lady Spalding writing about us...” she trailed off as an intense wave of anger washed over her.

She had never been so furious with another person as much as she was with the gossip writer at that moment.

What right did she think she possessed to make assumptions so freely about her marriage with Daniel and then inform all of London about it with her scandalous writing?

The woman certainly had no shame!

Worse, Evie knew that Lady Spalding would have undoubtedly heard about the events that transpired earlier that day and come morning, would gleefully splash the tale across her notorious scandal sheet.

The Earl of Sidmouth and his sister truly were a pair of hateful siblings!

“You must pay that scribe no heed,” Alice told her. “She is simply someone whose life is so dreadfully lacking in entertainment that she must seek it in the lives of others.” She gazed soulfully into Evie’s eyes and added, “What you must do is hold your head up high, my dear Evie. Do not prove her right.”

“Yes, yes, you are right,” Evie sighed as she smiled weakly. “But not tonight, I am afraid. Tonight, I would much rather just sleep...”

Alice nodded. “You have had a rather tiring day. Some sleep would be beneficial and clear your mind.”

If I could even manage even a short nap...

But Evie managed a weak smile, and after a few more words of solace, her sister-in-law left her to her thoughts.

As soon as the door closed behind her, Evie simply sank into her bed and pulled the covers up to her chin as she allowed the tears to flow freely once more.

Earlier that morning, after her talk with the Dowager Duchess, she had thought that she had no more tears left to cry.

Now, it seemed as if she would be crying for eternity.

Daniel, where are you? Can you really stay away from me for so long?

She turned in her bed and sobbed quietly.

Come back... come back... come back...

It was a long time before she managed to sleep at all.

CHAPTER 30

“Well, have you talked some sense into her?”

Alice let out a choked scream at the sound of her husband’s voice.

She glared pointedly at him. “Well, you are certainly one to talk, my dear, considering that it was your impulse that has led us to this situation right now.”

Colin—sweet, handsome, fiercely overprotective, magnificently stubborn—frowned at her. “What do you mean by that?”

“I meant,” she replied in exasperation, “that if you had not dragged us all the way back to London just so you can knock your friend’s door down and demand that he return your sister or you will drag her out of his residence, we would not be in this situation today.”

“You make it sound like I did something wrong.”

“Well, your heart was in the right place?—”

“Then, what is the matter?” he demanded. “Why does Evie insist on barricading herself in her rooms and refusing to talk to me?”

Alice looked up at her frustrated husband and reached out to cup his face in her hand with a smile. “By any chance,” she murmured. “Did you ever think to ask Evie her opinion on this matter before you barged into Ashton Hall this morning?”

“Why would I need to do that?” he asked her, confusion visible on his features. “Evie hated Daniel. She did not even want to be left in his care when we departed for our honeymoon.”

Any other person would have been intolerable in his stubbornness, but she still found him woefully endearing. Alice had to pause and wonder if it was indeed marriage that had given her this newfound forbearance, or if her love for this man had made her more... tolerant of his flaws.

Probably both.

“That is because your sister actually cares for him,” she told him softly. “And right now, to her, you are the one who disrupted their marital bliss.”

“Marital bliss?” he echoed in disbelief. “How can those words be used with Daniel and Evie, my sister? ”

She sighed. “I know it beggars belief, my darling, but that is precisely what happened in this case. Do you think the Duke of Ashton would have lain with her if he... did not find her to his liking?”

She felt the warmth rushing up to her cheeks. Should she really be talking about the private affairs of others? And to her husband of all people?

But she knew that it was not for lack of intellect that her husband failed to comprehend the furor he had caused, but because he simply refused to believe it.

Yet.

“You know very well that despite his reputation, your friend is rather... selective of those he chooses to associate with,” she spoke slowly. “And if you, one of his closest

friends, had left your sister in his care, then she would be the last person he would ever think to be entangled with!”

“Well, I had certainly hoped so!” Colin burst out in indignation. “As it turns out, I was sorely mistaken on that aspect!”

“Then, knowing what you do know about both their personalities, you should know that marrying each other was not something they would have taken lightly.”

He looked most adorably flummoxed at that, and Alice had to resist the urge to lean in and give him a kiss.

“You mean to say that they truly care for one another?” he choked out. “That Daniel Stanton—the bloody Duke of Ash—cares for Evie?”

Alice crossed her arms over her chest. “Why do you find it so incredibly hard to believe?”

“Because this is Daniel we are talking about!” he argued. “God, Alice—the things he does... how could Evie want the same? You have heard of his reputation, but even that barely scratches the surface!”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Oh, you are one to talk, Duke of Thorns. I remember my own father having those very same misgivings when I wanted to marry you!”

He looked thoroughly abashed, but Colin Fitzroy had always been quick to recover.

“As I recall,” he declared with an arrogant tilt of his head, “your father was ecstatic when I announced my desire to seek your hand in marriage.”

“And then, he was none too pleased after everything that went down at your

grandmother's house party.”

She sighed and placed a gentle hand on his arm. “The point of the matter is that Evie truly cares for the Duke of Ashton,” she told him softly. “Believe what you will of their marriage, but I can see that they genuinely care for each other, and now, in her eyes, you have ruined her happiness.”

Pain flashed across his blue-gray eyes, and Alice felt her heart ache for her husband. He truly was a good man who had his sister's best interests at heart.

However, even with the best intentions, people can still mess up.

“Do you think she will ever forgive me for this?” he muttered harshly.

Alice smiled up at him and pressed a soft kiss to the corner of his mouth. “You are siblings, my love, and you care for each other. As long as you make the proper amends, I do not see why dear Evie could not find it in her heart to forgive you.”

“But I have already given her her favorite pastries, and she refuses to even look at them!”

She gave him a pointed look. “Your sister is no longer a child that she should be so easily persuaded by sweets.”

“Oh yes, she was simply persuaded so easily by Daniel Stanton. ”

“Colin Fitzroy!” she chastised him with a reproving look.

“What? It is true! You said it yourself!”

Alice sighed. “Just promise me that whatever happens after this, you will not get in

their way.”

He looked at her innocently. “I do not understand what you are saying, dear wife.”

“And by that, I mean that you will revoke your instructions to the butler to throw out his card should he come to call.” She sniffed, looking shrewdly at him. “Do not think I do not know for one second what you have been up to.”

“Dearest wife.” He grinned at her. “I did not tell the butler to throw out his card—I told him to throw the gentleman himself out.”

“Even worse!”

He laughed softly and gathered her indignant form into his arms, pressing a soft kiss to the top of her head.

“But Daniel is no gentleman,” he told her with that certain glint in his eyes that never failed to make her weak in the knees. “And you know that neither am I.”

She let out a slight squeak when he easily swept her up into his arms and strode off in the direction of their rooms.

“I think I have had enough of discussing the relationship between my best friend and my sister,” he declared as she wrapped her arms around his neck and leaned her head on his shoulder with a smile.

As he closed the door and proceeded to steal her breath away, Alice could only hope that things would turn out well for her sister-in-law. After all, she was still a hopeless romantic, and even against all odds, she believed that true love would always find a way.

But that did not mean that it did not take its own sweet time navigating the twists and turns of heartbreak along the way.

It was now up to the Duke of Ashton to make his next move.

The breakfast hall was enveloped with tense silence when Evie sullenly walked in with a sullen expression. She wore a plain gray gown, and Jane had done a great job of pinning her hair into a simple style, allowing a single lock to hang down her shoulder.

With a bit of rouge on her cheeks, she looked refreshed, if not for the fact that her blue-gray eyes were dull.

“Good morning, darling!” her grandmother called out to her cheerfully. “Come, sit beside me. The cook has prepared your favorite honey cakes, and the eggs are done just the way you love them.”

Evie’s gaze flicked to the selection of food on the table, but her favorites still did not inspire her appetite.

“There is also your favorite hot chocolate,” the older woman continued, as if she did not take note of her granddaughter’s gloomy disposition.

Evie simply nodded slightly as she took her place beside her grandmother, watching silently as she placed a slice of honey cake and an egg on her plate. The sight of food frankly made her stomach turn, but since she had resolved to make an appearance today, she was going to play the act to the very end.

The truth of the matter was that she had hardly slept a wink at all. Instead, she had tossed and turned in bed until she saw the first rays of sunlight filtering through the gap in her curtains and heard the sweet birdsong heralding the start of a new day.

But breakfasts in London were always held much later than in the country estate, and by the time she went down to the breakfast room, the rest of her family had just begun to dig into their meal.

She picked at her food as her grandmother and Alice discussed the latest happenings over breakfast. From the corner of her eye, she could see Colin observing her keenly. When his gaze dropped to her plate, she felt a surge of vexation.

Is he going to take issue with my lack of appetite as well?

Fortunately, her brother did not comment on her dispassionate attitude towards the honey cake she barely scraped with her fork, or else she might have violently thrown the utensil at him.

But the truth of the matter was that not only was she dreading any sort of conversation with Colin, but she was also at the edge of her seat, wondering when the butler would bring in the silver tray bearing the correspondences for that day—as well as that morning's scandal sheet.

Lady Spalding would be more than happy to announce to the rest of the ton that after barely one day of marriage, the new Duke and Duchess of Ashton were now living in separate residences.

She stabbed at her cake as she thought of the Earl of Sidmouth and his hateful sister.

No wonder she has remained a spinster. How could anyone want to associate with a woman who would spill her vitriol at whoever she pleased as if they were the cause of her misery?

But the meal passed by in relative peace, and when the dreaded silver tray was finally brought in, no scandal sheet was on it.

Evie frowned slightly. Had Colin perhaps instructed the staff to remove it from the tray?

Fortunately, it was her grandmother who voiced the same question.

“Oh, no Lady Spalding today?” the Dowager Countess of Wellington remarked with some surprise. “I did not know that woman to miss a single day to make fun of her peers.”

“Make fun of her peers?” She heard Colin snort. “More like she simply wants the rest of us to share in her misery.”

Her brother expressed her exact sentiments, but Evie was not about to give him the satisfaction of thinking that they shared anything.

“You did not think to throw it out, did you?” their grandmother exclaimed.

“As much as it bewilders me why you would continue to read through that filth, I did not,” Colin replied indignantly.

Lady Wellington simply smiled at her grandson. “Why, to know more about the enemy, of course!”

“Well, I doubt you will be able to do any more reconnaissance between those hateful lines of her scribbling,” Colin declared as he set his cup down. “I have it on good authority that a small printing shop has just been shut down early this morning.”

Evie frowned. Somehow, she did not think that a minor inconvenience would deter Lady Spalding from writing. If anything, it should only make her want to retaliate and woe unto anyone who crossed her path.

“I also heard some incredible news this morning,” Alice added as she gazed serenely at Evie over her cup. “Phoebe just informed me that the Earl of Sidmouth has left with his sister before daybreak.”

“Left?” Lady Wellington echoed. “Do you mean they hastened to their country estate?”

Alice shook her head. “Not from what I heard, Grandmother. It appears that they boarded a ship to the Americas.”

Now, that piqued Evie’s interest.

It was so unlikely for a gentleman to just uproot himself and board a ship to an entirely new country—and with his sister at that.

This has Daniel’s fingerprints all over it! He did say that he had warned them. It seems that he has finally had enough of those two.

“That should not be unusual.” Colin snorted. “The Earl of Sidmouth is penniless . It is one of the reasons everyone refuses to marry his sister, after all. She has practically no dowry, in addition to having no talent or at least a good temperament to make up for it.”

“Colin!” Alice gasped, but Evie did not hear much disagreement from her.

“Oh dear.” Her grandmother shook her head in disbelief. “He probably owes a great deal of people a great amount of money for him to be leaving so quickly.”

Evie wanted to laugh at the whole sordid turn of events.

More like he owes somebody more than just money!

For the first time since she left Ashton Hall, Evie felt a small smile hovering at the corner of her lips.

Indeed, Daniel had taken the trash out in a very effective manner this time, and she had no complaints about it.

CHAPTER 31

Evie sighed despondently as she set aside the brush she had been attempting to wield for the past hour or so. She had no appetite for food or any of her usual hobbies, and she did not relish the thought of promenading in the park, where people might gawk at her and speculate even more about her tenuous relationship with her husband.

I should be with my husband right now . Instead, I must contend with their whispers and gossip, not to mention the possibility of an annulment.

Even if Colin were to offer half of his fortune, would anyone still dare to marry her knowing she had once been married to the Duke of Ashton himself?

Her brother might be hopeful enough to believe that there would be other suitors to come, but Evie more or less had a grasp of the ton, and they were far more likely to place the blame for the failure of their marriage on her head.

Never mind that she would much rather stay married to Daniel, but he had not even sent word to her in all this time.

Is he truly going to let me languish here without saying anything?

She turned away from the blank easel and sat down on the window seat, staring bleakly out the window instead.

What was left to paint when it seemed as if all the color had drained from her life?

“Your Grace.”

She turned to look at Jane and managed a weak smile. “Please convey my gratitude to the Duchess, but I would much rather stay in my rooms today, as I am currently indisposed.”

Her maid looked at her so sorrowfully that Evie felt as if her heart might break all over again. In all their years together, Jane had never looked at her with such pity.

I suppose I do look rather pitiful now .

“Actually, it is not Her Grace that wishes to see you,” the maid murmured. “You have a guest, Your Grace.”

“A guest?”

Evie stood up, her heart pounding wildly in her chest. Could it be him? Had Daniel finally come for her after he settled the accounts with Lord Sidmouth and everyone else?

“A Mr. Turner, Your Grace,” Jane replied politely. “He claims an acquaintance and that he is here to offer guidance.”

The hope that soared dizzily in Evie’s heart crashed down.

“Oh.” She smiled bitterly and shook her head. “I do not suppose I am in the condition to be entertaining callers at this time, Jane.”

“He also said that you were going to say that,” the maid replied with a bewildered look. “But he also said to tell you that he was sent by His Grace.”

“Colin?”

The maid shook her head. “Your husband, Your Grace—the Duke of Ashton.”

Your husband.

It was Daniel.

Daniel had sent Mr. Turner to her.

Evie tilted her head to the side and smiled at Jane. “Perhaps I should get ready to meet Mr. Turner, then.”

Mr. Turner looked as he always did, although Evie felt as if she had aged decades since they last met.

When she walked into the parlor, he stood up, and the sight of his stained cuffs made her smile a little.

“Please forgive me for my lack of hospitality, Mr. Turner,” she apologized. “I have been... currently indisposed.”

There was a twinkle in the artist’s eyes as he looked at her with a sympathetic smile.

“Your Grace is much too polite,” he said kindly. “His Grace had mentioned that I might be able to lift your spirits with a few lessons.”

It was as if someone had taken a knife, plunged it into her chest, and then cruelly twisted it.

“His Grace?” she managed to choke out.

Mr. Turner nodded. "I sought you out at Ashton Hall, as His Grace has previously asked me to discuss painting with you and maybe exchange a few tips."

"He said so?"

"His Grace is quite supportive of your passion for painting."

Evie sat down as if in a trance. "Yes, it would appear so."

Mr. Turner smiled as he sat down opposite her. "Now, you must forgive this old man's bluntness, but your maid has informed me that you are currently... not given to painting at the moment."

Evie could not help the hoarse laugh that escaped her lips. Mr. Turner's manners truly were a little rough around the edges, but the aristocracy had always made adjustments for the idiosyncrasies of artists.

"I am truly sorry to disappoint you, Mr. Turner, but she was, indeed, correct," she admitted with a sad smile.

The artist looked at her with a compassionate smile.

"Well, let this be your first lesson then, Your Grace," he told her with a conspiratorial look. "Never hold back what you are feeling at the moment."

Evie looked at him in confusion. "What do you mean, Mr. Turner?"

"I find that when I am at my least constrained, I produce the works that I am proudest of," he confided in her. "Whatever emotions you are feeling, do not let them hold you back. Paint as you feel if you will, Your Grace. Do not paint simply because it is what you think others would like to see."

She smiled bitterly at him. All her life, she had been bound by rules and etiquette. While her grandmother and brother had given her more leeway than most young ladies of the ton were allowed, there were still times when she felt trapped in the role she had to play in Society.

Most certainly, nobody had ever told her to let go of what she was feeling and to paint her grief as she saw fit.

But could she really do it? Could she put a name, an image to the darkness she was currently in?

“Whatever emotions you are feeling, Your Grace,” Mr. Turner told her. “You can release them all on the canvas and find that it will not judge you, whether you are right or wrong, or whether it is proper or not.”

He stood up and reached for his hat. “I suppose I have disturbed you long enough for today. I hope that we can have many more of these conversations in the near future.”

Evie stood up and nodded to the older gentleman. “Your words have provided me with a great comfort, Mr. Turner. I do look forward to seeing you again in, say, a week?”

The artist smiled brilliantly at her. “I would like nothing more, Your Grace, and—dare I say—I look forward to all the wonderful things you will create in the meantime.”

She laughed hollowly. “I do not know if I will be capable of any masterpieces at the moment, but I will do as you advised me today, if only so that I may indulge myself and unburden my thoughts for a moment.”

“Then my visit has been all the more worth it, Your Grace.”

She saw the artist at the door and thanked him once more for coming to see her, despite her earlier reluctance. In return, he reminded her of their next lesson and even managed to extract a promise from her that she would at least try to put her brush to paint tonight.

Later that night, when all of Blackthorn Estate had gone to bed, Evie summoned the courage to light her lamp, flinching slightly as she watched the flame flicker and dance before her.

After the tragedy that had claimed the lives of both her parents and an entire wing of the estate, Evie had always feared the flame. The very thought of it licking at her clothes at her skin used to make her recoil in sheer terror.

Tonight, as she watched it sway to and fro, confined in the glass casing of the lamp, she was entranced.

She had felt fire before—in Daniel's arms as he kissed her fiercely. Passionately. As if he meant to devour her, body and soul.

She had felt the scorching heat of his touch as it slid along her curves, delving into her deepest secrets until she cried out in pure, undiluted pleasure.

She had felt the warmth of it washing over her when he tenderly brought a wet cloth to wipe the evidence of their arduous lovemaking between her thighs.

When he gathered her into his arms and wrapped her up in his embrace as she drifted into slumber.

She no longer feared the flame, for in her mind, Daniel had become the fire that burned through her soul and heart, incinerating all of the prejudices and fear she felt before.

And now that he was gone, she felt confused. Cold. Empty.

How could he easily give her up like that? How could he turn away from everything?

She could not believe that he could be so unfeeling—she refused to.

Evie sighed as she dipped her paintbrush into the paint and swirled it. Now that Daniel had decided to cut their ties, it felt as if she had been thoroughly burnt.

She laughed mirthlessly when she thought about how he was referred to as the Duke of Ash, for after the searing heat of all that they had shared, there was nothing else left of her.

Not even the embers remained.

Only ashes and dust.

Daniel sat staring into his fireplace with a gloomy look in his green eyes. The tips of his fingers held a glass of brandy, which he would occasionally swirl and take a sip of.

He heard the distinct, light footsteps of his butler from behind.

“Has Mr. Turner gone to see the Duchess?” he inquired softly.

“Yes, Your Grace,” Barnaby replied. “He was able to secure an audience with her just this afternoon.”

Daniel smiled a little at that. At least she did not turn away his gift.

He had hurt her—perhaps irreparably—and this was but one of the ways he could

hope to make amends. He had seen how her eyes lit up when she spoke to the artist, when she spoke about her art. She had downplayed her talents before him, but that night in Vauxhall, he had been keen on gaining enough of her trust to see her works.

Now, he doubted he would ever have that pleasure in his life.

Maybe not until she would be brave enough to showcase her works. If she did, then he would purchase them all and hang them in his study, his private chambers—his goddamned tower even.

Because that would be all he would ever have of her.

That and the memories that still lingered like the scent she left on his sheets.

And the hole in his heart that he had never acknowledged until she filled it with her light.

Now, he was all alone in the darkness once more.

He truly did destroy everything he ever came to love.

CHAPTER 32

Evie had once thought that a person with a broken heart would never be able to survive. Her own father certainly had not, so when her mother decided to burn down an entire wing of their estate in her maddened grief, he had managed only to secure Evie's safety before he walked into the fire himself to join her.

Colin had told her the tragic tale of their parents just before his wedding to Alice, and Evie had been rightfully horrified to know the truth behind what was the most traumatizing thing to ever occur to her.

She had been but a child back then, caught up in the tangled lives of her parents and the dark secret that lurked in her beautiful mama's heart—a secret that devastated their family and left Evie and Colin orphans.

“Evie? Evie, dearest, are you all right?”

Evie blinked, and all at once, she was back in the sunny parlor of Blackthorn Estate, surrounded by Alice, Phoebe, and Scarlett, who were all looking at her with concern written all over their faces.

After nearly a week of hiding in her rooms, furiously working on her paintings and flinging her emotions onto the canvas, she had managed to emerge from it all.

She could recall the shocked look on her grandmother's face, as well as those of Alice and her brother, when she stumbled into the dining hall one evening, dressed for dinner with her hair done up neatly and elegantly.

However, as much as she presented the facade of the Evie they once knew, she knew that she had been irreversibly changed on the inside—and not just because she had lost her innocence.

In the past few days, she had bid goodbye to her childish dreams of romance and embraced reality with the eyes of a woman who had seen what her younger self had not beheld.

Evie liked to think she was stronger for it, but it still took one step at a time. Perhaps in another fortnight or so, she might deign to venture outside for a turn about the park—in her carriage, of course. She was not so brave as to promenade.

“I... was in my head for a moment,” she murmured with an apologetic smile. “What did I miss?”

Her friends did not look convinced, so she smiled a little brighter.

“We were just talking about the new opera singer,” Phoebe told her with a gentle smile. “Word has it that her arias are simply divine and she has the voice of an angel.”

Evie pretended to at least be a little interested. “How... lovely.”

She had no interest in stepping outside of Blackthorn Estate at the moment, and going out to see an opera, no matter how talented the singer, was presently inconceivable.

Besides, what was she going to do if she met Daniel at one of those events? There were many amongst the ton who went on with their lives separately from their spouses, but Evie was not one of them.

Perhaps she did inherit her father’s passion and her mother’s tenacity to hold on to

her past affections.

A curse, if there ever was one!

But people can learn to live with their own burdens, and Evie had resolved to do the same. She had her weekly meetings with Mr. Turner, and she lacked for nothing. She no longer hoped for the same things as she did in her youth—she simply wished to live the rest of her life in peace.

Perhaps, if she had learned to be content early on and not dared to grasp at the impossible, she would not have been in the situation she was in right now.

“If you wish to hear her sing, then maybe we can have Colin invite the lady for a private show,” Alice suggested. “It will simply be us and Grandmother.”

Evie shook her head and smiled at her sister-in-law. “That would be too much of an imposition, and I really do not have an ear for music, I’m afraid.”

The past few days, Alice had been most solicitous, and Evie did not wish to further burden her. It was already enough that her honeymoon had been cut short when she and Colin rushed back to London to “rescue” Evie from Daniel’s clutches. She could not afford to have the new Duchess bend over backward on her account—she adored Alice too much.

Perhaps more than she did her own brother.

“Whatever you need, dearest, just let me know.” Alice winked at her over her cup. “Even if you want your brother out of sight, I can manage.”

“Oh, no doubt you will!” Scarlett snickered mischievously at her best friend. “Ever since you married, the Duke of Blackthorn has been most thoroughly managed!”

“Scarlett!” Phoebe was absolutely scandalized, her face red from embarrassment.

“Oh, you will understand soon enough when you are married.” The redhead grinned at her.

“And now, thanks to you, I shall gain enlightenment much sooner,” Phoebe grumbled with a shake of her head. “Truly, Scarlett, do you know no shame?”

“None, whatsoever!”

Phoebe hung her head at the redhead’s irreverent grin. “Mama will be so disappointed to know that most of my education had been received prior to my wedding.”

“Oh, do not fret, dearest sister,” Alice remarked wryly. “Mama was not much help on my wedding day either!”

The ladies all burst into laughter, and even Evie managed to smile a little wider.

There were moments when the heartbreak seemed to break her spirit. Moments when she felt that dying would have been much better than living.

But there were also moments like these when she felt as if she could perhaps hang on for a little longer. Mostly, when she painted, she could actually recall how it felt to live again.

Evie lived for these moments. These tiny pockets of sunshine that she could find in everyday life.

One step at a time .

How cruel was it that heartbreak could happen in an instant but learning to live on

would probably take her entire life.

“Your Grace, Miss Jane has sent word that Her Grace has been eating her meals now.”

Daniel looked up from the document he held in his hand, his green eyes bleary from overwork. All of a sudden, there was a shift, and his gaze landed on his butler, who was standing before him with nary an expression on his stoic facade.

“Has she... has she gone outside?” he inquired.

Evie was like a sunflower with her face and her smile always turned towards the light. He could not bear the thought of her holed up in her rooms.

It tore through whatever remained of his heart.

“Miss Jane says that Her Grace has taken a tour around the gardens this morning.”

That was a blessed improvement from her self-imposed isolation in her rooms, and Daniel nearly cried out in relief.

In a few more weeks, when he would finally manage to quash all the rumors that surrounded them, Evie would be able to promenade in Hyde Park as she used to. He did not care who he had to threaten or how much he had to pay to get it done, but he would.

He would craft and mold the whole world to suit her if that is what it took.

“His Grace, the Duke of Blackthorn, also wishes to relay a message to you.”

Daniel arched an eyebrow at that. He could not imagine what his old friend had to say

to him after everything that happened with Evie.

“What did my good friend, the Duke of Blackthorn, wish to say to me?”

The butler looked uneasy and cleared his throat—wholly unnecessary, Daniel was certain.

“He told you to leave Her Grace alone,” Barnaby replied. “Although the wording was not quite as polite, I’m afraid.”

Daniel laughed harshly at that. He was quite certain Colin had a great many words for him, none of which could be uttered in polite company, and he deserved them all.

“Do you want me to relay your response, Your Grace?” his butler asked him.

Daniel waved his hand dismissively. “There is no need for that, Barnaby.”

There was nothing he could say that Colin would heed anyway. The man was as stubborn as a mule, and he knew that better than anyone else.

“Also, you have a guest, Your Grace.”

“I am most certainly not in the mood to entertain callers, Barnaby,” he replied sarcastically.

“I did not come to call on you, Ashton,” a cold voice intoned from the door. “I came to see if you have come to your senses. Apparently, you have not.”

He looked up to find Hudson standing in the doorway, a broad shoulder leaning against the frame.

“You came all the way to check up on me?” Daniel sneered. “Some recluse you have become.”

“I came to see just how stubborn you are and if that same stubbornness has killed you already.”

His friend pushed off the doorframe and stalked towards him like a panther prowling in the jungle.

“You must be disappointed to see that I am still alive, then,” Daniel replied with a casual shrug. He glanced briefly at his butler, who bowed politely before quietly exiting the study.

“Cut the crap, Ashton,” Hudson grunted. “It took you less than a day to get a special license to marry her. It would not take you this long to get an annulment. If you truly wanted to sever ties with your Duchess, you would have done so already.”

“Annulments take time, you know?”

“Not,” Hudson sneered, “if you did it the day after the wedding.”

Daniel glared at him. “I was not aware that we were working under time constraints,” he shot back sarcastically.

If he annulled the marriage the day after the wedding, where would that leave Evie? He had barely finished cleaning up the mess that bastard Sidmouth and his sister left with her last publication. If he were to annul the marriage so soon, Evie’s reputation would suffer another blow.

“I do not want her to suffer anymore because of my mistakes,” he told his friend softly. “I have already done enough damage, don’t you think?”

“Well, you sure as hell aren’t doing anything to fix it.” Hudson glared icily at him. “You know that you have it in your power to fix all this. You just refuse to do it.”

Daniel clenched his hands into fists. “Do you think I am not aware of that?” he growled. “Do you think that I enjoy knowing how much I have hurt her? That she could barely hold her head up high in Society after that blasted scandal sheet came out?”

The truth was that he wanted nothing more than to rush over to Blackthorn Estate and take Evie back to Ashton Hall, where he would properly make amends for all the hurt he had caused her.

However, he also knew that being with him would only make it worse for her.

“I swore that I would never have children,” he admitted harshly. “I swore that his line would end with me.”

And Evie wanted children. A family.

She had so much love to give, so much happiness she could bring to the world. If she remained married to him, his darkness would consume them both until there would be nothing left of her light.

He would take and take and take until there was nothing left of her.

“Then you are a fool, Daniel,” Hudson murmured, sounding tired. “You are a fool for letting a foolish man—a dead one, at that—dictate your future and your happiness, and by doing so, you have damned her with you.”

Daniel watched as his friend stood up with a cold expression on his face.

“If you had known this was going to happen, then Colin was right—you should have stayed the hell away from her.”

It was the most that Hudson had ever said to him in recent times, and the truth of his words gutted him.

As he sat there alone in his study, his head in his hands, Daniel honestly wished that he at least had the decency to leave Evie alone.

But he damned well did not, and that was his greatest sin.

CHAPTER 33

“Y ou look as if you need some rest.”

Daniel looked up from his documents and glared icily at the Dowager Duchess, who serenely took the seat closest to his desk. In return, she simply smiled back at him.

“Caroline,” he seethed. “I am currently not in the mood to play along.”

“Oh, I would not dream of it, my boy. I know better than to poke the bear, so to speak.”

“So, you should be well aware that I do not want to see anyone right now.”

Last night, it had been Hudson. Now, Caroline was intent on seeing just how far they could test his patience.

Truthfully, he was losing his grip on both his tolerance and his sanity.

“Well, I had the most delightful afternoon at Blackthorn Estate,” she said with a slight laugh. “The new Duchess is a nice young woman. Your friend is certainly very lucky.”

If Colin still considers me a friend .

They had not spoken since the day Colin returned from his honeymoon and demanded that he return Evie to Blackthorn Estate, and as much as his pride refused

to admit it, he missed his old friend.

Well, not as much as he missed his sister . But that was another point entirely.

“ Your Duchess was there, too,” Caroline continued breezily, seemingly aware of the forbidding expression on his face. “She looked much better than the last time I had seen her, but I suppose you already know that.”

“What do you mean by that?” he demanded.

“I meant,” she clarified with a stern look. “That you still have her maid in your pocket and that you have been keeping watch on her from afar.”

It would seem that she was done beating around the bush. That was well and good, for Daniel was tired of playing games himself.

“So what if I do?” He shrugged. “I merely wanted to make sure she was all right.”

“So you do care for her.”

More than you can ever imagine, he wanted to say. Instead, he bit back the words and chose not to say anything more that might only serve as ammunition for Caroline.

“Well, let me tell you something your spies failed to tell you,” she huffed. “The poor dear looks visibly well, but I can tell that she has hardly been sleeping. She smiles, yes, but only out of politeness and nothing more. There is no laughter in her eyes and in her heart.”

Daniel sucked in a deep breath at her brief summation of Evie’s current state.

She reached for his hand and squeezed it. For the first time, he did not pull away from

her touch.

“We both know that if ever there was a person made of sunshine and laughter, that is our dear Evie,” she said softly. “But, Daniel... the woman I saw today could not possibly be her.”

Daniel sucked in a deep breath and stood up. “I think I have had enough of this conversation,” he announced.

The older woman only looked up at him sadly and then hung her head. It seemed to take a great effort for her to rise from her seat.

“In that case, I shall make myself scarce,” she told him.

“There is no need for that,” he snapped, grabbing his coat from a nearby hanger. “I will leave.”

“Where are you going?”

Where none of you may harangue me about how badly I messed up.

“Out,” he said instead.

He did not care to elaborate as he strode past her, calling for Barnaby to ready his coach as he did so.

In times like these, there was only one place he could go to clear his head.

The handsome carriage that rolled up to the front door of St. Martha’s Orphanage never failed to attract whispers from its neighbors. While other carriages had been subjected to vandalism and maybe even robbery at times in the area, even the

residents of one of the poorest areas in London knew that there were just some people they could not afford to offend, and the Duke of Ashton was one of them.

So, whenever his carriage showed up in their area, they stuck to their whispers and their curious gazes, but never made an attempt to harm the coach and the footmen who usually accompanied it.

Mrs. Thomas greeted Daniel at the front door with a kind smile on her face.

“Your Grace, we were not expecting you today,” she greeted him, wiping her hands on her apron.

Daniel nodded. “I hope that I am not disrupting any of your activities today, Mrs. Thomas.”

“Oh, no, no, no!” She laughed. “Your visits are always a delight to us. You have to forgive the ruckus, though. The children are just about done with their lessons, and you know how excited they can get outside of the classroom.”

Education was one other thing that Daniel prioritized at St. Martha’s Orphanage. If these children were ever to be given a brighter future beyond its walls, then a proper education would be most helpful, indeed.

He had hired tutors to teach the young ones to read and write, to do their arithmetic, as well as classes in basic etiquette and deportment.

“I hope that their teachers have not acted?—”

Mrs. Thomas shook her head. “They would not dare harm the children, Your Grace. I made sure of that.”

Daniel smiled tightly and nodded. Most teachers still regarded corporal punishment as a fine method of discipline, but he had never agreed with that. He knew a great many children who had been harmed simply because it was harder to learn under duress.

“I shall be in my usual spot,” he informed her.

Mrs. Thomas nodded. “Very well, Your Grace. I shall send someone with some food in a while.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Thomas.”

“No, Your Grace. Thank you .”

After the woman left, he walked up to the lone bench under a great tree in the corner of the playground. As he walked past the door, little bodies streamed past him, laughing joyfully as they spilled out into the playground with their toys.

Soon, the air was filled with the cheerful sound of their chatter as they called and played amongst themselves. By the door, a matronly woman kept watch over them as a mother would.

They were orphans—every single one of them. Children whose parents had passed away or had given them up to the establishment, since they were incapable of providing for them. They were the most vulnerable population in society, and yet the easiest to overlook.

Mrs. Thomas and her staff took them in and provided them with food, clothes, shelter, and the affection that was necessary to nurture their broken souls. Daniel provided all the money that was needed to cover such an expensive undertaking, and in return, he would always have his worn bench under the tree in the corner of the

playground.

He stared at his hands, worn from toiling and scrabbling to survive. He would make sure that these little ones would never have to experience the horrors he had to go through.

Suddenly, a ball rolled over and bumped into his shoe. Daniel looked up to find a group of children running over to him, their eyes bright, their cheeks rosy with health.

He picked up the ball and held it up for them. “Is this yours?” he asked them.

A little girl stepped forward and nodded. “We were playing with it. We’re sorry for disturbing you, Sir.”

He smiled a little. “You were not disturbing anything. Here.”

He held the ball out to her, and she jogged up to him. She took the ball from his hands and then peered curiously up at him.

There was something in her eyes—the brightness and curiosity, perhaps—that reminded him once more of Evie, and the sharp pain lanced through his chest once more.

“You look sad,” she murmured, her brown eyes softening.

How very perceptive of you .

“I... I lost someone I care for,” he admitted softly. “Deeply.”

“Oh.” Her eyes clouded over with sympathy. “I lost my mama when I was little, too.”

She reached out to pat his shoulder, and with a most solemn face, she murmured consolingly, “There, there... I am certain it will get better with time.”

No, it won't .

“I am afraid that it will take a long, long time to get better.”

“Why?” she persisted. “Did they go to heaven already?”

“Good grief, no!” Daniel burst out.

If Evie died, was there even a point of living?

“Are they... sick?”

Daniel fought the urge to laugh.

Such morbid questions for such a small girl.

But then, how could he forget that these children were the ones who had been through the greatest misfortune? And yet, they still looked at the world with eyes filled with hope.

It was truly a wonder.

“She is not dead or dying,” he told her.

“Oh.”

He watched as relief flooded her little face before she burst into a wide smile, and he noted a missing front tooth.

Charming.

“Then, in that case, you can always get her back!” She beamed up at him.

“What do you mean?”

She leaned in closer to him and confided in a soft voice, “Sometimes, Johnny and I fight a lot, and it always feels like I’m losing my friend.” She hung her head down. “He can be very annoying, you know.”

Daniel chuckled. “I suppose it does.”

She nodded with utmost seriousness. “But when I talk to him, it always makes things better.” She pursed her lips and pouted. “Saying sorry can be really hard, though.”

“Do you always have to say sorry?”

She shook her head. “Not always. Sometimes, he does, too. But saying sorry makes it all better, even if it is hard.”

“I suppose it does.”

“I do not want to not be friends with Johnny,” she told him with wide eyes. “Saying sorry is easier than losing a friend. Mrs. Thomas always said so.”

“Yes!” the other children chorused in agreement.

Why the hell am I getting advice from a bunch of children?

Daniel inwardly shook his head, even though he found himself thoroughly amused.

Evie would have loved to see this . She would probably take their side, too...

His smile faltered when he thought of her, and then he looked at the little girl before him.

Bright eyes and a toothy smile that saw all the goodness in the world.

If he and Evie had a child, they would probably look just like this little girl before him, with innocence shining in their eyes.

What if we do have a child?

Unlike all the other women he had lain with in the past, he had always made sure to stay in control. That no child would ever come out of such a union.

With Evie, there was none of that.

Suddenly, the thought of her round with his child did not seem so bad. Having children with Evie and raising them with her. Growing old with her...

It sounded like heaven on earth.

He did not think of his father or his petty revenge on a man who had been dead and buried in the ground for years.

All he thought of was Evie, and how wonderful it would be to have a family with her.

She could be carrying his child at that very moment.

And I had turned her away. I cast her out just like my father threw my mother out.

Remorse and a deep self-loathing filled him.

How could he do that to Evie, when he swore that he would never be like his own father?

“I... I need to go,” he muttered, standing up so quickly that he almost threw the little girl off balance. “Need to take care of something.”

“Are you going to say sorry to your friend?” she asked him curiously.

For the first time since Evie left, Daniel smiled.

“Yes... yes, I am.”

The children burst into cheers as he rushed out of the playground. He ran past Ms. Morgan, who was carrying the basket of food that Mrs. Thomas had promised him.

“You are leaving, Your Grace?” the spinster asked him in surprise.

He nodded. “Yes, Ms. Morgan. And please, relay my thanks to Mrs. Thomas as well. Tell her that I am happy with how you have all taught the children.”

The woman turned red and stammered her thanks as Daniel patted her shoulder and strode out the door.

For the first time since his childhood had beaten it out of him, Daniel felt hope.

And it was pointing towards Blackthorn Estate.

CHAPTER 34

Daniel half expected the faithful butler of Blackthorn Estate to throw him out the moment he stepped foot on the front porch. To his surprise, the man even ushered him inside despite the sharp disapproval in his gaze.

Fantastic. Now, I am even judged by the servants.

But it was just like Evie to inspire loyalty simply with her kindness alone, whereas Daniel preferred to pay his staff handsomely for it.

He was led into the drawing room, and to his surprise, he found Alice seated on the sofa, with Colin standing behind her, his hand placed protectively on her shoulder. His old friend glared coldly at him, while the new Duchess of Blackthorn simply gave him a slight smile.

“Took you long enough, Duke,” she said softly.

“Darling, why are we even bothering to show him in?” Colin grunted.

Alice simply reached up to pat the hand on her shoulder as if she was reassuring an indignant, little boy and not her grown man of a husband.

“Do not be difficult, dearest.” She smiled up at him. “You promised .”

Daniel did not know what kind of promise she had managed to extract from his friend, nor did he care to find out. All he wanted was to find Evie and grovel at her

feet if need be.

“You can be angry at me,” he told Colin. “You can hit me again if that will make you feel better. You can stop talking to me and disregard our friendship for the rest of our lives, but you will not stop me from talking to Evie.”

“Oh, so now you want to talk to her?” Colin snapped.

Daniel looked at him pointedly. “It was your fine suggestion that I stay away from her if I recall correctly.”

“For her own good!” his friend fumed. “Seeing as how much you have hurt her?—”

“Colin.”

All it took was one word from Alice and he reined himself in. Love truly worked wonders, even on a man as defiantly stubborn as Colin Fitzroy.

“I have sent Thomas Salsbury and his sister away,” Daniel told them harshly. “I have shut down the printing press that colluded with her to spew that vile gossip about Evie.”

Alice smiled serenely. “Somehow, I knew you had a hand in these recent happenings.”

“I have taken care of everything ,” he admitted. “All except one.”

Colin glared at him and raised his eyebrow. “The annulment?”

“ Colin! ” his wife warned him.

“An annulment so soon would ruin Evie’s reputation,” Daniel told him coldly. “I could not risk that. Besides, the last time we spoke, she did not care for one.”

“She does not know what she wants!” Colin roared.

“And you clearly do not know what your sister wants,” Daniel responded just as fiercely. He turned his gaze to Alice, who chose to stay quiet during all of this, save for her warnings to her husband. “Am I correct, Duchess?”

The young Duchess smiled at him and casually sipped her tea. “I have always thought it so vexing when men think they can make decisions for us women.”

With a few well-placed words, she had effectively chastised both of them for daring to do what they thought was good for Evie without taking her opinions into consideration. Alice Fitzroy was going to be quite the formidable Duchess, indeed.

Just like Evie was going to be.

“Am I to assume that you have properly learned your lesson, then?” she continued, regarding Daniel with a slight smile. Even Caroline in her prime was probably not as impressive.

“If by ‘lesson,’ you mean that I will take Evie’s opinions into consideration in the future, then, yes ,” he admitted. “I will not hesitate when it comes to her safety, though.”

Alice set her cup down. “I think that should be good enough for me. It remains to be seen whether dear Evie will find it acceptable.”

“I think not!” Colin protested.

“Oh, shush!” Alice gave her husband a reproachful look. “Evie deserves to hear what her husband has to say. Whether she chooses to stay with him is entirely up to her, and you will not interfere in it .”

“But—”

Alice pressed her fingers to her temples and looked at him in exasperation. “Have you seen Evie?” she demanded. “Have you seen how she walks around, pretending to smile for our benefit?”

“I know, darling,” Colin wheedled. “But surely, he is not the answer.”

“Perhaps,” she sighed. “But it is up to Evie to decide.”

She stood up and looked fiercely at Daniel. “If you dare to hurt her again, I will not forgive you, Duke.”

Daniel stood up and bowed politely to her. “I shall not waste your kindness this time... Alice .”

Her eyes softened, and she waved him away with a tired smile. “Evie likes to paint in the gardens around this time. She usually sets her easel up by the gazebo, under the shade.”

Daniel had been to Blackthorn Estate far too many times to not know the exact spot Alice mentioned.

“Thank you so much,” he muttered hoarsely.

And then, he turned on his heel and rushed to the gardens.

Why is it so cold?

Evie wrapped the shawl around her shoulders as she stepped out of the mansion and into the gardens with her brushes and paints tucked under her arm.

She recalled how her mama loved the gardens so much, how she would spend nearly all her time tending to the bushes and the flowers. She would have her tea in the gazebo and stare off into the distance.

She never knew then just how unhappy her mama had felt in her marriage. How her heart had longed for another despite how arduously her papa loved her.

Did you sit here and not feel the sun on your skin, too? Evie wanted to ask her.

But her mama was gone. She had chosen death, to be with the man she had foolishly given her heart to, even when she had an entire family who loved her.

Evie never thought that she would ever have something in common with the woman who once put her daughter's life in jeopardy when she chose to immolate herself in her own home.

She had never felt the sheer helplessness of heartbreak—until Daniel.

“Dr. Jennings said that it would be good for Your Grace to go out often,” Jane murmured. “Fresh air is always good for the body.”

Evie nodded, frowning a little as the slightest breeze made her hair stand on end and made gooseflesh spread all over her arms. When did she become so fragile?

“I would like some tea please, Jane,” she said quietly.

Her maid nodded and stepped back quietly. “I shall be back soon, Your Grace.”

After Jane left, Evie slowly unfolded the leather roll-up case that held her brushes. Her hand hovered each one as she decided which one she was going to use, her mind wandering all the while.

Mr. Turner had returned for their lesson just yesterday, and although he did not say much about the paintings she had created out of the depths of her despair, she could tell he approved of them.

“Not all of our works have to be for everybody, Your Grace,” he had told her then. “Some of them, we do for our own souls.”

Indeed, it had felt cathartic to release all her emotions onto the canvas. Red paint bled into the pristine white surface as she unleashed her anger. Gloomy black blossomed where her despair erupted. Black and white and all the shades of gray tangled with her confusion.

She had painted in streaks and bursts, wielding her brush like a rapier at times as she slashed and pierced at the canvas. Now, as her brush hovered over the blankness before her, she hesitated.

She had used several canvases to paint her emotions, but would there ever be enough space for all her grief?

At times, it threatened to swallow even the whole world, and all she could do was stare blankly for hours on end, brush in hand, wondering how she would ever be able to give it a form so that she might release it from her chest and finally unburden herself.

Like love, grief seemed to expand, taking up all the space in her heart.

Unlike love, however, it had nowhere to go, and so it stayed with her, tormenting her from within.

Perhaps it is not a color or formless like my other emotions . Perhaps grief is all the memories that once shone so brightly in my mind...

It was the chandelier sparkling brightly overhead, the elegant music that played, as Daniel held her in his arms while they twirled on the dance floor. It was that stolen moment in the moonlight when she first tasted his lips. It was in the subtle tilt of the corner of his lips, the gleam in his eyes that she knew all too well...

It was all of these things and more.

She could paint and paint and paint every vivid recollection, and hopefully, the pain would fade in time.

Or at least become tolerable enough for her to go on living with it.

Evie smiled sadly as she used her brush to mix the paint to capture the exact shade of the jacket Daniel had worn when he insisted on dancing with her.

She had been so annoyed with him back then, and how he had scared off all her suitors.

What I would give to have him glowering at me once more!

But it had been a week, and although he had sent Mr. Turner to her, she had not heard from him at all.

Perhaps it was not a wedding gift but a parting gift, after all.

She blinked back the tears as she swirled the paint-drenched brush across the canvas, bringing to life all the heartache and misery she felt.

She painted the darkness in his hair, and her fingers longed to run through it once more. She painted the broadness of his shoulders and the comfort and security she once felt in his arms. She painted the slight smirk and felt her breath hitch in her throat at the sight.

She painted him as she saw him that night at the ball—incredibly handsome, stoic, domineering, and protective beyond measure.

She was so absorbed in her art that when she heard the sound of grass crunching underfoot, she did not even bother to turn around.

“Just put the tea in the gazebo, Jane,” she murmured distractedly. “I shall have it once I am finished.”

Instead of her maid voicing her acknowledgment, however, it was a familiar, heart-wrenching, low voice that drifted to her ears.

“Your art is magnificent.”

Evie stiffened, her brush hovering in midair as her heart clenched painfully in her chest. The tears she had been holding back slid down her cheeks.

No. She shook her head. This is all just my imagination. He cannot possibly be here.

How many times had she dreamed of him coming to her?

For the first few days, she had lain in bed, hoping that the next time Jane entered her rooms, it would be to tell her that he had finally come for her. She had spent hours in

the parlor waiting for the butler to announce that he had come for her.

In the end, it was never him.

Why did her mind play such cruel tricks on her this time?

“Turn around, Duchess,” he called out to her in that aching hoarse voice that tormented her even in her waking hours. “Turn around so I can properly tell you how dreadfully sorry I am and what a bastard your husband has been to hurt you so.”

Her fingers trembled, and the brush dropped to the grass, barely making a sound.

Slowly, she began to turn around, and her tears rolled hot and fast down her cheeks.

Standing before her, at last, was the man her heart had yearned for through all the grief and rage and confusion.

He had finally come.

CHAPTER 35

Daniel felt his heart stop at the sight of her, standing so magnificently amidst the blooming flowers. Even the tears that streaked down her cheeks were like diamonds that fell from eyes the color of a stormy blue sky.

My Duchess—how could I have hurt her so?

Pain seized his chest, and he nearly staggered towards her. Never again away from her. Even if he had to crawl on his hands and knees, he would always find his way back to her.

“Your... painting is magnificent.”

She raised an eyebrow at that and smirked. “The first painting you compliment and it is of your likeness.”

Daniel wanted to kick himself for that inane comment. He had meant to compliment her skills—not his likeness.

She turned around and wiped her hands on a rag before tossing it back on the table. “I never thanked you for sending Mr. Turner to me, by the way, so... thank you .”

Her voice was cold and so aloof that if he had not seen the tears streaming down her cheeks, he would have thought that her heart had truly turned to ice.

“I hope you liked my gift,” he murmured. “The student seems to have surpassed the

master so quickly.”

She shrugged and started putting her brushes aside. “Regarding your gift, I like it well enough. I may not be as talented as Mr. Turner, but it is a good way to pass time after—” She stopped, her eyes softening. “After everything that happened.”

You mean after I spoke of breaking our marriage a mere day after our wedding.

“Have you come about the annulment?” she asked him in a broken voice.

He shook his head and reached for her. “No. Never that.”

She laughed scornfully. “Is that not what you wanted?”

“I thought I was doing what was best,” he replied hoarsely, his hand reaching for her. “Please, Evie.”

She stepped back, out of his reach, shaking her head as she stared at his hand, the resentment clear in her eyes.

“How like you!” she cried bitterly. “You marry me, claiming that it is for the best. Then, you cast me aside, claiming that it is for the best. How can I trust you when you keep changing your mind?”

At that point, Daniel knew that all the pretty words in the world would not matter for Evie, whose heart he had so callously broken. All his manipulation and coercion would fall short because she would not so easily believe whatever he had to say to her now.

His hand dropped to his side. “You are right. I have made a mockery of everything,” he told her softly. “I thought I knew what I wanted, but all along, what I wanted the

most, what I wanted more than even my next breath... it has always been you, Evie.”

They stood there, facing each other in the afternoon sunlight. In spite of her tears, Evie stood with her chin held up defiantly.

This time, he would be the one to lower his head. Before her, he could only acknowledge his mistakes and what it had cost them both.

For the first time, he must confide to another person what was truly in his heart. He had to lay himself bare before her if only to win the smallest chance that she might believe in him again after everything he had done to her.

“Before you, I was shackled to my prejudices,” he admitted hoarsely. “My mother abandoned me in an orphanage because she was unable to care for me, and my father only acknowledged my existence when it became convenient for him to have a son, even one out of wedlock.”

He looked up and found her staring stonily at him, so he continued. “I made a vow that even if I assumed the title of the Duke of Ashton, I would never give him the satisfaction of continuing his line. I was determined to end it with me.”

“So, it has been your decision all along to remain childless,” she ground out. “It had nothing to do with any limitations on your part.”

He smiled sadly at her. “You should know better than anyone that there are no such limitations on that aspect.”

She bristled at his words. “Even now, you can afford to make such scandalous jokes.”

“That is because you have freed me, Evie,” he implored her. “Because of you, I am no longer tethered to the past and my bitterness. I want to become a man worthy of

standing by your side for the rest of our days, to become the husband you truly deserve.”

She shook her head and angrily rolled up the case containing her paintbrushes. “You do not understand what you are saying,” she bit out. “And if you do, then you probably do not mean it, anyway.”

But he did mean it. All of it and so much more.

He wanted nothing more than to lay the world at her feet. To be the one who made her laugh and moan with pleasure. To be able to watch her belly swell with the lives they would create together. To be with her all the days of their lives together.

“I do mean it,” he said softly. “All of it, my darling. I want you and the life we will build together. When I think of you and the children we might have, I no longer think of heirs or my desire for vengeance on a miserable man long since buried—I only think of you. Of us .”

She turned away from him, but this time, Daniel had learned his lesson and learned it well. This time, he was not going to let her go.

This time, he reached out to clasp her hand in his, determined that even if she should push him away, he would never give up on her.

This time, he would be her Daniel, the husband she needed and deserved.

He was never going to leave her again.

Hope was truly the most astounding thing.

When all seemed lost, it was all she could hold on to. Now that she had grasped it,

she could not put her faith and whole heart into it.

She looked at Daniel, seeing the regret and hurt in his vivid green eyes, and her hands clenched into fists.

Not for himself, but for me, she realized with startling clarity. He is hurting for me.

“Why?” she demanded softly. “Why do you come to me with your pretty words and promises? Is it guilt that brings you to my door? I had not thought you capable of it.”

The moment the bitter words left her mouth, she knew she could not take them back. Daniel was a proud man, unbent after all that he had gone through in his childhood.

She did not expect to see him standing there, unwavering before her.

“Because I love you,” he said simply. “I love you through all your hurt and sadness, your anger and resentment, just as I love you through all your joys and laughter. I love you through all the bad and the good, all your fortunes and misfortune. There has never been anyone before you, nor will there be anyone after. I will love you solely, wholly, and truly beyond even my dying breath.”

Her breath hitched in her throat. Tears stung her eyes at his softly worded declaration.

But it is too late for us . I am so far gone in my sadness and despair that I cannot even begin to see hope for us.

“But what if I am no longer all of those things you claim to love?” she asked him. “What if I have become so irrevocably changed that I cannot possibly be all these things?”

He smiled at her, drawing her into his arms. “You think my love such an inconstant

and fickle thing? You could change by the hour and I will love you still. Tenacity—” He chuckled. “Tenacity is something I learned very early on.”

His hand stroked her back most soothingly as he pressed a soft kiss to the top of her head. “You will not be so easily rid of me, Evelyn Fitzroy-Stanton. I am yours whether you care for me or not. There are no such conditions for my affections.”

She breathed in his familiar scent, her fingers unconsciously digging into his chest as her hand curled over his heart. The steady beat beneath her palm was exactly as he had professed—constant and unwavering.

“But what about your revenge?” she asked him.

He laughed softly. “I have you and the life we will live together before us. What do I care for a miserable old man who has long since been buried?”

Her heart soared crazily at his words as she looked up and regarded him with a smile. “What makes you think that I will agree to this pretty picture you have painted for me?”

“It is you who paints the pictures, my love.” He grinned at her. “I have no talent beyond my great admiration for all that you are.”

She laughed and poked at his chest. “Who are you and what have you done with my husband, the Duke of Ash?”

He clasped the hand she had laid over his heart. “I am yours, and I always have been. I do not see how I could be anything else.”

“Rogue!” she softly admonished him, lightly slapping his chest.

He leaned in and whispered in her ear, “Come back with me to Ashton Hall, and I will show you just how much of a rogue I can be.”

Her eyes widened at the dark promise in his voice. The way his breath caressed the sensitive shell of her ear had her shivering even under the warm afternoon sun.

And through all that, she could feel his hardness pressing into her belly—the clearest evidence of his desire for her.

She looked up at him and smiled jauntily at him. “And if I refuse?”

“Then I most certainly hope that your brother can learn to tolerate my presence in his residence. Although,” he added with a thoughtful look, “I daresay he might kick both of us out after he hears how loudly I can make you?—”

“Hush!” she reprimanded him, heat rising to her cheeks. “Have you no shame at all?”

“Not when it comes to you, apparently.”

He truly was a rogue and an unrepentant one at that. However, that mattered very little to Evie, for he was her rogue and no one else’s. He could be as naughty as he wanted to be, and she would only love him all the more for it.

“Come back to Ashton Hall, my Duchess,” he coaxed her, his voice low and soft as he whispered in her ear. “Come back with me, and I shall make you the happiest of women, for that is the only way I can find happiness for myself. All my days shall belong to you, as all your nights shall belong to me... ”

And she wanted it. Dear God in heaven, she wanted it all!

She looked up at him, at the desire that swirled in his eyes. Evie leaned into him as

his mouth slanted hungrily over hers in a kiss that robbed her of reason and any remaining resistance.

She kissed him back with all the pent-up yearning she had endured in the days of her loneliness.

There would be no more of that now.

“For the love of God, please do not stand there defiling my gardens!” an incensed voice pierced through the air. “If you must, then take your display of affections back to your own residence, you scoundrel!”

Evie jumped at the sound of her brother’s voice, but Daniel only tightened his arms around her, shielding her from her brother’s censure.

“Does this mean that you have no objection to my taking my wife back to our conjugal home?” Daniel asked him with a raised eyebrow and an impenitent smirk.

Evie frowned up at him and murmured, “Darling, I do not think we should provoke him further.”

His eyes absolutely lit up when she called him that, his smile growing wider and more unabashed.

But Colin merely waved his hand dismissively at the both of them. “Of course, I have not forgiven you, but we have the rest of our lives for me to torment you for marrying my beloved sister behind my back. Rest assured that the moment you mess up again, I shall take her back posthaste, and you will never see her again.”

“That will never happen,” Daniel told him solemnly. “I would rather take my own life before I allow Evie to suffer even the slightest grievance.”

“Oh, for the love of God, go!” Colin groaned. “Before you make me sick!”

Daniel laughed and smiled at Evie. “It appears that we have overstayed our welcome, dear wife. Let us go back home.”

Home.

At that one word, Evie felt all the sadness and the anger, the helplessness and resentment, fade away. She leaned into his arms and smiled back at him.

“Yes, dear husband . Let us head back home.”

CHAPTER 36

The journey from Blackthorn Estate to Ashton Hall took half the time it normally did, much to Evie's amusement, and even in the carriage, Daniel could not stop holding her and kissing her.

"Must I restrain myself in my own carriage?" he growled in complaint.

Evie looked up at him from under her lashes, thoroughly pleased when he seemed to waver beneath just her gaze.

"Yes, because you might scandalize the footmen, and my reputation would be all but ruined," she explained gently.

"I think I pay them well enough to keep their damned mouths shut!"

She placed a hand on his heart. "A short delay will only make our reunion sweeter, I should think."

He frowned at her. "Since when did you become so good at playing coy with me, Duchess?"

"Me? Playing coy?" She laughed, poking his chest with a finger. "Let me remind you, husband, that it was your delay that caused this separation."

His gaze softened as he captured her offending finger. "I have hurt you," he murmured hoarsely. "And for that, I shall never forgive myself."

“You have a good many years to make up for your mistakes.” She smiled up at him, then leaned in and whispered in his ear, “You must make good use of them.”

“Oh, I wholly intend to!” he swore, taking her fingertip into his mouth and sucking on it lightly.

When she let out a soft gasp, his gaze darkened, and he swirled his tongue around the delicate digit.

Rogue! I have married a man without scruples, and now I must endure the torment of his teasing!

“You were saying?” he prompted her with a naughty grin.

Evie gathered her composure and glared at him in reproach. “I was thinking that we should probably inform the Dowager Duchess of our reconciliation,” she grumbled, mildly embarrassed to find that he had so easily managed to scatter her wits.

“Caroline can wait,” he scoffed. “Right now, I must properly welcome you back to your residence.”

The carriage came to a halt, and fortunately, the footman was discreet enough to knock and announce their arrival instead of simply opening the carriage door and exposing them.

Evie laughed and pushed Daniel away as she rearranged her clothes and her hair, but he continued to watch her with eyes dark with desire. Inwardly, she trembled, knowing full well what awaited her.

Once she had decided she was ready, he nodded subtly and stepped out of the carriage first. Evie put her hand in his, fully expecting him to help her down.

Instead, to her great surprise, his hand closed over hers and, with a firm tug, sent her hurtling into his chest with a surprised shriek. Daniel did not even change his expression as he threw her over his broad shoulder, her rump hanging in midair.

“Daniel!” she cried. “Put me down this instant!”

“Never,” he replied much too cheerfully.

“Think of the servants—” she protested.

“They know very well when to avert their eyes.”

It was true, though—from the moment Barnaby closed the door behind them, the whole manor was surprisingly empty . As if every living soul had scurried away upon their arrival.

He could not have told them to disperse, could he?

“Stop moving around,” he warned her.

He delivered a sharp slap to her bottom, enough to jolt her out of her thoughts yet gentle enough to not actually hurt her.

“I cannot believe you are doing this!” she grumbled. “This is most undignified!”

“Oh, I plan to do more undignified things to you later,” he drawled. “After all your teasing in the carriage, you should be punished for your insolence.”

The thinly veiled threat made Evie flush as her core clenched in response.

Dear Lord, I have not even been back for five minutes and I already want him so

much!

She did not have long to dwell on that thought and her embarrassing lack of restraint when it came to him, for he had already shouldered the door to his tower open and closed it behind him with a firm kick. He set her down, dragging her body along his hardness until she let out a soft moan, and then he kissed her thoroughly.

“Take off your clothes,” he ordered her roughly. “And get on the bed.”

His voice had the effect of turning her insides into liquid heat.

Nobody had ever ordered her to strip off, and Evie found it strangely thrilling.

She stepped back and showed him the row of buttons at her back. “I may need help with these.”

In all the years that Jane had helped Evie out of her dresses, the maid had never been able to dispense of her buttons as fast as Daniel did at that moment. He even loosened her stays for her.

She smiled up at him in thanks and then let the dress slide off one shoulder slowly, glancing shyly up at him from beneath her eyelashes. She watched as his desire roiled in green eyes until they darkened to almost black. Slowly, she pushed the dress off the rest of her body, letting it fall with a slight rustle around her feet.

Next to go were her stays. Evie sighed as she took off the restrictive garment, freeing her breasts for his bold perusal.

She had barely started on her stockings when he picked her up and threw her onto the bed, his much larger body covering hers as he kissed her. Evie threw her arms around his neck, kissing him back with as much passion. His thumb flicked the rosy peak of

her breast, and she let out a breathy moan, her body instinctively arching into his touch.

“I am going to teach you a lesson today, Duchess,” he growled, nibbling on the delicate skin of her shoulder. “Do not tease me again. You will not like the consequences.”

Evie gasped as his fingers pinched her nipple.

Oh, I like it very well, indeed!

In fact, she just might make a habit of being naughty just to see how far she could goad him.

She gave him a sultry look, eliciting from him a feral growl that reverberated from his chest down to her drenched core.

“Wicked, little thing,” he rasped against her breast. “Let me show you what happens when you insist on testing my patience.”

She let out a breathy laugh that trailed off into a moan.

She was definitely in trouble now.

Daniel was thoroughly convinced that the woman beneath him was a temptress of the highest order. A succubus with the smile of an angel who claimed his heart and soul.

He had initially thought to restrain himself, reminding himself that aside from their wedding night, Evie was wholly untried in the carnal arts. He dared not push her further than what she was comfortable with.

But with every sultry look, every slight undulation, she tested his limits. His wicked, little Duchess had to know just how her soft mewls affected him!

His hand plunged into the nest of curls between her legs, and he nearly groaned when he found her wet for him. She was so responsive to his every touch, and that in itself was already quite maddening.

He grabbed her hands, intertwining his fingers with hers before pinning them over her head. Her blue eyes opened wide, and he sucked in a harsh breath.

Had it been any other day, he might have been able to draw things out. He would have wrenched cry after cry from her lips as he drove her over and over to the edge.

But they had spent more than a week apart, and his hunger for her was an all-consuming flame he could no longer suppress.

And neither could she.

He let out a low groan when her fingers found him hard with his desire for her. Slowly, tentatively, she wrapped her delicate hands around his rigid shaft, her eyes widening as she explored him.

When her fingernail grazed the tip, he let out a loud hiss.

Immediately, her hands stilled, and she stared at him with wide eyes. “Did I hurt you?”

Daniel wanted to laugh at such an innocent question.

Yes and no .

He was hard almost to the point of pain, and her touch had driven him ever closer to the edge.

“Open your legs for me,” he rasped against her throat.

Outside of bed, Evie seemed to delight in thwarting him at every turn, but here in his arms, she was pliant. Obedient.

Did she have any idea how powerful she was in her submission?

He sank into her in one full stroke, a gasp tearing from her lips. He latched onto her breast, the same breast that his child would one day feed from.

The thought of Evie nursing his child caused his desire to burn ever hotter, and he drew back, only to slam into her tight channel once more.

“Daniel!” she cried out, her fingernails digging into his back.

He smiled as he teased the rosy peak of her breast with his tongue and his teeth, while his hand trailed over her abdomen, down to the thatch of curls between her legs. When his finger traced the hardened nub just above where they were joined, Evie jerked her hips, a long moan escaping her lips.

He thrust into her again, watching her slowly come undone as he worked his finger over her bud to the tempo of his hips.

The feeling of his rigid length sheathed fully inside her was more than he could bear. He could feel his own climax building within him as her walls gripped him ever tighter.

Daniel rocked into her, taking his cues from the way her breath hitched and the

moans that escaped her even as she clutched at his shoulders.

With his other hand, he tilted her chin up, his eyes meeting her stormy ones, now clouded with the passion of their intense lovemaking.

“I would have you look at me as you shatter,” he grunted as his hips ground into hers once more.

Evie nodded, even as he could see the battle she was fighting to keep her gaze on his as he thrust into her.

Almost there...

Her channel pulsed around him, and with a roar, he thrust into her once more, sinking himself to the hilt into the core of her being just as she cried out in their joint climax.

Daniel leaned his forehead against hers, their eyes meeting as he spilled his seed into her, as her walls rippled around him to milk every last drop from him. Their breaths mingled as they continued to look into each other's eyes, as wave after wave of sheer pleasure washed over them.

In all his years of existence, Daniel had never maintained eye contact with his paramours. It was only with Evie that he desired such a connection.

A union of both their souls as well as their bodies.

Moments later, when he had softened and his heart was no longer threatening to leap out of his chest, he pulled out of her, eliciting a soft cry of complaint. In response, he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her into his embrace, kissing the top of her sweat-lined forehead.

“Did I please you?” she murmured, tracing light patterns over his chest with a finger.

He groaned and grasped that mischievous hand, pressing a soft kiss to her wrist. “If you pleased me any more, my beloved Duchess, I might just expire from sheer pleasure.”

“I should certainly hope not!” She balked. “After all, how will I ever...” she trailed off, shutting her mouth quickly as if she had only realized what she was about to say.

But Daniel understood.

With a low growl, he moved and pressed her down into the mattress once more. “Finish your sentence, Duchess.”

She looked up at him, her gaze softening even as the first stirrings of lust caused those beautiful blue-gray orbs to darken.

“If you die, how will I ever know so much pleasure?” she whispered softly. “How will I ever be able to carry on without you?”

“I shall not have you talk of death or dying,” he warned her.

She opened her mouth as if she might protest, but he covered her lips with his own, his leg nudging hers apart. Her eyes widened in shock.

“So soon?” she gasped.

“Why are you complaining?” He smirked at her as his fingers slipped into her honeyed slit, drawing a pleased cry from her. “Already, you are dripping wet for me once more.”

Evie shuddered beneath him, her fingers digging into his shoulders as his fingers teased the little bud between her legs.

Was there ever a woman on earth who was as responsive as his beloved Duchess? He doubted he would ever find one, and in any case, he had absolutely no desire to.

He and Evie, they fit perfectly. As if both their bodies were made to be joined in exquisite bliss.

“Daniel...”

He smiled as he kissed her lips. Perhaps, this time, he might be able to go slower. He might be able to draw her pleasure out longer until she was writhing beneath him, begging for release.

Or maybe not .

Her hand had found his arousal once more.

He leaned his forehead against hers and gazed deeply into her eyes.

“I love you,” he murmured softly. “My Duchess.”

She smiled up at him in reply and pressed a soft kiss to his lips.

“ My Duke .”

He groaned as he sank into her once more, losing himself in the ecstasy that her body offered him.

It would be a long, long time before either of them ever managed to get any sleep...

EPILOGUE

Daniel never cared for the opera, nor did he care for the new singer who supposedly whipped up the entire city into a frenzy.

But Evie had been talking about it for close to a fortnight, so when the program was finally announced, he had his usual box ready to receive them, as well as their friends.

Unfortunately, that also meant that he would have to see her brother again.

He and Colin might be old friends, but the latter would never cease to remind him that Evie was his sister.

As if I need any reminder that the woman I love is actually related to this buffoon!

“Darling?”

He looked down to find his beautiful Evie smiling up at him. “What is it, my sweet?”

“You promised you would be nice tonight,” she reminded him. “I know that look in your eyes. You are not planning to goad Colin into a fight, are you?”

He smirked and leaned down to whisper in her ear, “Are you willing to bear the punishment on behalf of their misbehavior, then? In fact, we could do it right now. I could just bend you over these chairs and...” he trailed off and let her imagination run with his words, watching with satisfaction as she turned a most adorable shade of

pink, knowing full well the things that his words evoked in her.

Seducing his wife was definitely one of his favorite pastimes—second only to making love to her for hours on end. For a pampered noblewoman, he had found out that she was blessed with an endurance that matched his.

It certainly made the nights at Ashton Hall all the more titillating.

“They would never be as bad as you,” she muttered, lightly swatting him with her fan. “You are a scoundrel of the very worst order.”

“True,” he agreed with a smirk. “But I am your scoundrel, and you like me anyway.”

“Oh, for the love of God, keep your hands to yourself in public, Ashton!”

Daniel pursed his lips and heaved a sigh of frustration as he straightened up. His arm, however, remained draped protectively over Evie’s back as he turned to his best friend with an arched eyebrow.

“Might I remind you that this is my box and I can do whatever the hell I want in it?” he warned Colin darkly.

“Might I also remind you that Evie is my sister and she will never forgive you if you threaten me again?” his friend challenged him.

“Your sister is my wife.”

“Well, I can always take her back to Blackthorn Estate if you so much as hurt her!”

He heard Evie heave a sigh of frustration as she stepped between them and shot her brother a warning look.

“Colin, do behave yourself, or else I will have Alice throw you out of the theater,” she admonished.

Alice could only shake her head. “I swear he does it on purpose just to get out of the opera.”

Evie smiled at her sister-in-law in sympathy. “Daniel does not care much for the opera either.”

“And yet he gleefully accompanied you tonight,” Alice remarked laughingly. “He has even paid for an entire box. I am afraid that if it was not for me dragging your brother, I would never be able to admire Miss Donatella’s singing tonight.”

“Of course not, my lamb.” Colin turned towards his wife with a most charming grin. “It is just an opera—I would accompany you to the gates of hell if you were of a mind to bring the devil himself to heel.”

“She has already brought you to heel, and that is a far more significant accomplishment, in my opinion.” Daniel snickered, which invited another round of protests and teasing in their small group.

Moments later, Phoebe and Scarlett arrived, followed by Ethan, and the entire box became even livelier, much to Daniel’s irritation. However, he looked at Evie and found her smiling as she chatted with their friends and family.

These people should pray that they remain friends with her .

Otherwise, he had no qualms about throwing them out of the box and enjoying the rest of the evening with his Duchess—well, as much as he could enjoy anything in a damned opera, anyway.

“Oh, look!” Scarlett pointed to the audience below them excitedly. “There is that dreadful Miss Bowen—rumor has it that the line of her suitors extends from her papa’s office down to the street. She claims that he will not accept anyone but a duke or a prince, though!”

“That is... quite ambitious of her,” Ethan remarked with a rakish smile.

“You might not know it, Your Grace, but she might have set her sights on you .” The redhead laughed airily, especially when she saw the clear discomfort on his face.

“I do not think I can bear Miss Bowen’s attention, though.” Ethan shook his head, his gaze flicking to the young lady who sat quietly through all of this with a polite smile on her face.

Phoebe was Alice’s younger sister and Evie’s closest friend. Daniel knew her to be extremely polite and proper, with not a single hair out of place.

Interesting , he thought to himself with a small smile.

“I have not seen the Earl of Sidmouth, though,” he heard Ethan remark with a twinkle in his eyes. “His sister does love the opera, although I have caught her many times looking everywhere but the stage.”

“And you will not see him again,” Daniel replied ominously. “Not for a very long time.”

Fortunately, Thomas Salsbury had enough wits to take him up on his offer. The night Daniel offered him the ticket, he had packed his bags and his sister, leaving for the Americas on the first ship the following morning.

He heard that the Earl’s sister was not too pleased about his decision, though, but was

left with no choice on the matter.

Both siblings had caused too much trouble in the ton, and nobody actually missed their absence. In the days that followed, the printing shop that had churned out Lady Spalding's Society Papers leaked out that it was Lady Miranda Salsbury who was behind the scandal sheet and that she had left with unpaid debts and so did her brother.

"I should say good riddance to both of them," Colin scoffed. "The lady was a nasty gossip, and her brother was a gentleman who could not keep his word. If they had stayed longer, the rest of the ton would have gone after their heads."

"So they left because they were destitute?" Alice looked at her husband and shook her head. "Or because they have offended so many already?"

"More like they offended some one ," her husband mumbled, to which Daniel shot him a sharp glare.

He would go to great lengths to protect Evie and exact revenge on any who dared to hurt her, but these were things he did not want his wife worrying about. As much as it might gall him, he knew her compassionate heart would be appalled if she heard that he had dealt harshly with the two siblings who dared to write such a disgraceful article about their marriage.

In fact, he already considered it a great leniency that Thomas and his sister would be able to make a new life for themselves in another country a whole ocean away.

Fortunately, the matter was summarily dropped when the opera started. Everybody in the box took their seats, with Evie seated behind Daniel. Almost immediately, his hand sought out hers in the dim light, his roughened fingers naturally intertwining with her more delicate ones.

His wife tilted her head slightly in his direction and smiled. In return, he pressed an openmouthed kiss to her knuckles, eliciting a sharp intake of breath from her.

It was a promise of things to come much later, when the opera ended and they were back in Ashton Hall.

As he turned his gaze back to the stage, Daniel could not help the smirk that formed on his lips ever so slightly.

Married life was not as bad as he thought it would be.

Evie had long realized that her husband enjoyed teasing her and keeping her in a perpetual state of arousal. He often spoke words that lit a slow-burning fire within her, usually hours before he would finally take her to bed.

As she thought of what lay in wait for her back at home, she could not help but squeeze her thighs together as her toes curled inside the new shoes that he had purchased for her to match her gown for that night.

As the much-vaunted Miss Donatella let loose her talent in an aria that reverberated throughout the theater, Evie found herself subtly twisting in her seat as Daniel began to seductively stroke her finger.

She sighed as the fire simmered low in her belly. It truly cannot be helped, for she had married a man who was insatiable—and she would have it no other way.

She loved Daniel for all that he was, and while Lady Spalding had derided his... peculiar predilections, she had found great pleasure in them.

His dark nature, his overprotectiveness... these were just a few of the things she loved about him. Oh, he might try to hide his true nature from her, but she knew .

She knew that he had a hand in the Earl of Sidmouth's disappearance, and although she might not agree with his actions, she understood why he did the things he did.

Besides, he already did the Earl and his sister a great favor by sending them away. She knew of a great many more who might not have been as kind as her husband.

The audience burst into applause as the curtains fell to reveal a new scene. The performers' voices rose in perfect pitch, but all Evie could think about was Daniel and the way he was enacting his seduction merely on her hand.

It was maddening.

Halfway through the second act, he pressed a soft kiss to her knuckles and whispered in her ear, "Come with me, Duchess."

Evie nodded with far too much enthusiasm than was normal.

"Where are you going?" Colin asked her, his brow furrowing when he saw Evie standing up.

She gave him a small smile. "I need to go out for some air. It is rather stifling in here."

"I will go with her," Daniel announced softly, before anyone could protest.

He stood up and held his hand out to Evie, and she slid her own gloved one into his with a smile.

Quietly, they both stood up and left the box.

Daniel hastily pulled her into one of the many rooms that had been provided for

guests of the opera to refresh themselves. Once inside, he closed the door and locked the door behind him as his lips slanted over Evie's with fierce passion.

Evie replied by throwing her arms around his neck and kissing him back just as eagerly. There would never be a time she would grow tired of his kisses.

Or the way his hands would boldly caress her body through her clothes.

A frustrated moan bubbled up her throat, and she heard him laugh huskily as he pressed a soft kiss to her neck.

"I cannot wait for all of this to be over," she groused.

"Who was it who wanted to hear this Miss Donatella sing so eagerly in the first place, hmm?"

"Well, she does sing rather well..." Evie contemplated with a soft smile.

"But you would much rather be back at home?" he supplied helpfully.

She looked up at him with a broad smile and nodded. "Yes, my love. Home."

She watched his eyes darken as his lips slanted over hers once more. Unexpectedly, a burst of laughter from the other side of the door made her jump in surprise.

Daniel sighed softly and pressed a soft kiss to her temple. "Later," he promised. "I shall have you singing in our bed."

She laughed and leaned her head against his chest. "I can hardly wait for it, husband."

She was still smiling as they gingerly parted and he helped her fix her hair and

clothes.

It looked like it was going to be another sleepless night for the both of them, and she would not have it any other way.

The End?

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The Dowager Countess of Wellington was well-known for her house parties—and the many love matches that resulted from them. Her last house party had resulted in the marriage of her grandson, the Duke of Blackthorn, to Lady Alice Barkley, the eldest daughter of the Marquess of Brandon. It had also set the stage for the marriage of her youngest grandchild, Lady Evelyn Fitzroy, to the Duke of Ashton.

Thus, when the invitations were sent out two weeks prior to the date of her next house party in the country estate of the Duke of Blackthorn, it whipped the ton into quite a frenzy. After all, there were still two dukes who remained unmarried, although both of them had rather daunting reputations.

CHAPTER 1

OCTOBER 1812

The air was thick with the scent of illness, pervaded with the heavy fragrance of liniments and medical concoctions. The curtains had been closed, lest a draft should find its way into the sickbed and its frail occupant.

Alice had become so familiar with the pervasive atmosphere of her father's bedchamber that her mother had often complained that the scent of medicine had begun to stick to her clothes. It was with this same familiarity that she now approached her father's bed.

The Marquess of Brandon had once been an impressive figure in her life. Her heart clenched painfully in her chest to see him now reduced to a fragile invalid dwarfed by his enormous four-poster bed.

"Papa," she called out to him gently. "Papa, it is I, Alice. I have come."

"Alice..."

The sound was soft, almost a whisper, followed by a fit of hacking coughs. Alice immediately hastened to her father's side and handed him a glass of water.

The Marquess took a few sips before he sighed and lay back on the pillows that had been used to prop him up.

“My dear child, where have you been?” he asked her.

She smiled tremulously at him. “You already know where.”

He nodded. “The library.”

“Yes, Papa, the library.”

Her father had always known that the library was her favorite place, second only to her rooms. Yet, he had always asked her where she was, as if he meant to learn more about her. As if there was anything of note to her day beyond the mundane.

“My dear girl,” the Marquess rasped, his eyes bright with affection for his eldest daughter, “I am afraid that your papa cannot wait any longer.”

Her heart pounded painfully in her chest as she reached out to clasp his hand. That strong hand that had held her up countless times as a child was now so frail and bony, as if a single harsh squeeze would shatter the fragile bones and ligaments under the paper-thin skin.

“Do not talk like that, Papa,” she told him softly. “You still have many more years ahead of you.”

He shook his head. “Let us not delude ourselves further, Alice. This body of mine can hardly sustain me anymore. I only wish for you and your sister to be settled before I pass.”

She hung her head at his words. “It is only the autumn wind, Papa. You will get better come spring...”

“You must marry, Alice,” her father cut in through her paltry excuses. “For your sake

and your sister's. While I delighted in your antics, I cannot indulge them any longer."

Her heart sank at his words. Her dear, kind Papa had always—as he had just said—indulged her hobbies. She supposed she should be grateful—most fathers in the ton would not countenance such frivolity in their daughters.

As a well-bred young lady—the daughter of a marquess at that—she was expected to fulfill her duty to her family and marry. To secure the necessary connections that would secure their position amongst their peers by securing a good match.

In all honesty, the Marquess had already been quite patient with her. She was now in her third Season and without any prospects at all. Even her own Mama had been fretting for most of the summer.

Why must I marry? Alice wanted to cry out. Why must Society force women into such a dreadful thing as the marriage mart, expecting them to be docile creatures while the men did as they pleased?

She wanted to rebel against her father's charge, but she knew deep down in her heart that this was the sad reality for a young lady of the ton.

And as it turned out, her father had run out of patience. He could not wait any longer.

"All right," she conceded. "I shall endeavor to find a suitor this Season."

The Marquess shook his head sadly. "I am afraid I cannot wait that long, Alice. You have a week to find yourself a husband of your choice, or I shall have you betrothed to one of my own choosing."

"A week?" Alice gasped in shock. "Papa, how could I ever find a husband in that amount of time?"

Even the most renowned beauties took at least a fortnight to secure an offer. How much longer would it take for someone like herself! She was no great beauty, and while she excelled at dancing, she was equally as bad at music. Her dismal skills at the pianoforte had become something of a joke amongst the ton.

And now, her father meant for her to secure a match within a week? He had to know that was impossible!

But looking at her father, as frail as he had become, she was all too familiar with that steely resolve in his blue-gray eyes.

“A week then,” she murmured, hanging her head. She lovingly traced the blue veins that were now so prominent on his frail hand. “I shall secure an offer within a week. If not, then I shall rely on you to select a kind husband for me.”

“That’s my brave girl.” Her father smiled at her before a fit of coughing wracked his thin frame once more.

She pressed her lips into a grim smile. “I shall not fail you, Papa.”

“I know you will not, dearest. Now that we have dispensed with that, I think I shall rest,” he rasped, giving her hand another squeeze with none of the strength he possessed just a year ago. “Let your mother know that whatever you require, you may have it.” He smiled at her fondly. “I look forward to your good news, my dear.”

“You shall have it within the week, Papa,” she assured him.

She pressed a soft kiss to his papery cheek and quietly left him to rest. Once she had closed the door behind her, she leaned against it and closed her eyes.

There was nothing like illness to remind a man of his mortality. When her papa fell ill

early that spring, they had thought that he would recover in no time, as he always did.

Now, it was not the case.

Her father was right—they were all running out of time, and Alice, as much as she hated to admit it, had probably squandered most of it herself.

Securing a good match for herself would significantly buoy her father's spirits as well as pave the way for her sister.

The only question was, where was she supposed to find this fabled man that she could tolerate being married to?

Alice slotted the book onto the shelf with an expression that was a curious mix of irritation and desperation. She had tried reading it for the better part of an hour and gleaned nothing at all from its pages, speaking to her great distraction ever since her father made his demand that morning.

“So, if I am to understand all of this, you must find a suitor and have him ask for your hand in marriage, or the Marquess will select someone for you?” Her best friend, Scarlett, wrinkled her nose. “That does seem worrying.”

“Tell me all about it!” Alice groaned, leaning her forehead against the bookshelf in abject misery. “If I cannot find a man tolerable enough to marry in two years, how will I ever find one within the week?”

“That does sound absolutely Herculean,” Alice's younger sister, Phoebe, remarked. “And quite unusual for Papa, if I may say so myself.”

The three of them—Alice, Phoebe, and Scarlet—were in the library of Brandon Estate, discussing Alice's current dilemma.

“Well, Mama tells me that the Viscount Wiltshire has just entered the marriage mart,” Scarlett supplied helpfully. “And according to her, he is possessed of one of the finest estates in all of England, has a rather impressive income, and is exceedingly handsome to boot.”

Alice glanced at her best friend warily. “And why is it that you have not set your sights on him yet if he is as wonderful as you claim him to be?”

The redhead simply smiled sheepishly. “I find him dreadfully boring, you know. Oh, he is a wonderful man, I am sure, and he will make someone very happy, but?—”

“And there is always a but .”

“But he is just not who I see myself with a decade down the line.” She gave a little shudder. “I daresay he would drive me mad within a month. A fortnight, even!”

Ever since she had made her bow three years ago, Scarlett had been the most sought-after young lady in all of London. Her residence in Grosvenor Square had suitors lining up all the way down the street, and every mama bewailed the fact that her daughter could not be half as popular as her.

Fortunately for most of the marriage-minded young ladies of the ton, Scarlett possessed no desire to marry at all and was glad to entertain suitors but never encourage them—or their delusions, as she liked to call them.

Alice had no doubt that if her best friend was ever of the mind to marry, she would be most likely betrothed within a week.

“Well, it is absolutely impossible for me,” she sighed in resignation. “I just hope that whoever Papa selects is someone I can tolerate for the rest of the foreseeable future...”

The three young ladies collectively sighed, but none of them felt the dread more than Alice did.

“Well, you know what that means, then.” Scarlett pursed her lips. “That means that you have one week—exactly one week only—to do everything that you want. To be all that you want before you turn into a boring Society Lady.”

Alice’s brow furrowed. Her best friend was right. As soon as she married, she would not be able to guarantee that her husband would find her “antics” as charming as her beloved Papa did. No gentleman would allow his lady wife to gallivant about, indulging in her hobbies, unless those hobbies of hers benefited him socially at the very least.

“So... what are you going to do about it, Alice?” Phoebe asked her softly, her eyes wide. “I do hope you will not do anything too wild?—”

“There is one thing I have always wanted.”

Both her younger sister and her best friend turned towards her in surprise.

A mischievous smile bloomed on Scarlett’s beautiful face. “Well now, do tell us all about it, dear! Is it something absolutely scandalous?”

“You could say that.”

The redhead gleefully clapped her hands together. “Now, you have my curiosity all piqued. What is this scandalous thing you want to do?”

Phoebe, however, did not look too convinced that this was something they should be considering, let alone discussing it out loud.

“There is this book...”

“Another book?” Scarlett rolled her eyes dramatically. “Why did I ever think it could be anything other than a book?”

“A rather rare and forbidden book.”

“Now, this gets interesting! Why did you not say that in the first place?”

Alice blushed a little. “Well, it is a French book, and you might have an idea how the French can be so... so...”

She supposed she did not need to elaborate for her best friend.

Scarlett looked at her pointedly. “But, darling,” she reminded her, “you do not speak French. Not well enough to read an entire book of it.”

“But there is a private translation,” Alice insisted. “I heard some gentlemen whispering about it in Lady Milton’s ball!”

“But who would possess such a scandalous book?” Phoebe exclaimed, evidently scandalized.

Alice took a deep breath. The next words left her mouth in a rush.

“The Duke of Thorns.”

“The Duke of Thorns?” Scarlett shrieked. “Are you talking about borrowing a scandalous book from the Duke of Blackthorn?”

Alice nodded. “I remember hearing Mama and Lady Haversham talking about it just

before my first Season. They were absolutely scandalized, I tell you. They say..." She dropped her voice and looked around to make sure nobody else was eavesdropping. "They say he came across it during his Grand Tour and had successfully translated it. Of course, I had thought that it was mere gossip, but then I heard Lord Crandall talking about it with the others."

The two other young ladies fell silent. Scarlett, in particular, was looking at her as if she could not believe what she had just heard.

"Alice," she said slowly, "we are talking about the Duke of Thorns—the man is a recluse, and that is just the beginning of it! There are all sorts of sordid rumors about him. Why, he is even part of that pack of Wolves that Alexander warned us about!"

"Wolves?" Phoebe gasped and shuddered. "Why are they called that? Do they eat people?"

"Oh, absolutely." Scarlett grinned mischievously. "Rumor has it that they absolutely love devouring young maidens whole."

Phoebe turned pale, although Alice doubted that her younger sister actually understood the insinuation.

Instead, she just laughed and reached out to reassuringly clasp her younger sister's hand. "Scarlett is just teasing you, my dear. They are not beasts at all—just men with a certain reputation."

"That is true!" The redhead laughed. "They are all rogues, the lot of them—well, the three of them who are still in the social scene, anyway. No young lady's reputation is safe with any one of those Wolves, so you had best stay away from them as well, my dear."

Phoebe nodded her head and bit her lower lip. “Now that you put it that way, it does make sense that only a scoundrel like that would possess such an obscene book...” She turned towards her older sister. “The Duke of Thorns sounds like a horribly dangerous person, Alice. I hope you would not get involved with a man like that at all.”

Alice just nodded, but her sister’s words sparked something in her.

Danger . Perhaps that is what she had been missing. Why she had all but forsaken her usual hobbies.

Her latest forays simply did not hold the same thrill that they once did.

She needed an element of danger in her life. One great adventure she could embark on. A daring tale that she would be able to tell her grandchildren when she had become nothing more than a boring Society Lady as Scarlett had feared.

A slow smile spread across her lips. “I think I know exactly what to do this weekend.”

“Oh no, Alice, you can’t! You absolutely cannot be thinking of getting so close to that horrid Duke of Thorns!” Phoebe exclaimed.

“Phoebe is right.” For once, Scarlett looked serious. “He might not even be part of the Wolves anymore, but there is still something about him. They are still talking about the fire in Blackthorn Estate from five years ago. No one truly knows what he is capable of?”

But Alice only cut off her best friend’s tirade with a raised hand.

“Well, man or monster, no one is going to stand between me and a rare book!” she

declared.

Even if that man is probably the most enigmatic member of the Wolves.

CHAPTER 2

“ I still do not think that this is a good idea at all, Alice!”

Alice averted her gaze from Phoebe’s worried one. Her sister had just cause to be worried—the Wolves were not personages to be trifled with, after all.

Even the one who had chosen a life away from the eyes of the ton.

If anything, that should make him all the more dangerous . After all, heaven only knows what the man has been occupying himself with in all that time!

“Do not worry too much about it, Phoebe.” She smiled at her younger sister instead. “We are not going into Blackthorn Estate or engaging the Duke of Thorns at all. We are merely conducting some reconnaissance...”

“Reconnaissance prior to theft!” Phoebe hissed at her. “If Mama finds out about this?—”

“Mama should never find out about this,” Alice told her younger sister firmly. “Besides, what harm is there in simply taking a look? If His Grace did not want anyone looking in, then he would not have countenanced an open gate, would he?”

Phoebe opened her mouth as if to argue but then shut it as she looked out the window of the carriage contemplatively. Meanwhile, Alice simply let out a sigh of relief.

It would be disastrous if her mama was ever to find out what she was thinking of

doing. Unlike her father, the Marchioness of Brandon did not find her eldest daughter's antics charming at all—which was only understandable, as she was currently responsible for ensuring that her two daughters found good matches and married well enough to maintain their current standard of living.

“Phoebe is right, you know,” Scarlett told her with a worried frown. “The Wolves are not to be trifled with.”

“I daresay that he might be a little annoyed at having strangers gawking at his estate, but nothing more,” Alice replied, shrugging her shoulders in as nonchalant a manner as she could.

As much as she wanted to appear so carefree, she could not help but feel a thread of apprehension at the thought of crossing one of the famed Wolves, and the Duke of Thorns at that.

Fortunately, Scarlett did not say anything more on the matter even as she continued to look pointedly at Alice. It was clear that while Scarlett might not agree with her friend's admittedly harebrained scheme to steal a priceless and obscene book from the collection of a known rake, she was still going to stand by Alice and support her. For Scarlett's steadfast loyalty, Alice was grateful.

“Well, we are here.”

Alice smiled as the carriage slowed to a stop before the wrought-iron gates of an estate that might have looked impressive in its prime. Now, it simply looked forbidding. An apt residence for someone who was feared to have become more beast than man.

Phoebe nervously twisted her handkerchief in her hand as she eyed the estate. “Now that you have seen it, can we please go back home?”

Alice, however, found it all the more intriguing.

“Wait a moment. I wish to take a closer look,” she told her younger sister.

Phoebe let out a mewling sound of despair as Alice merely patted her sister’s hand reassuringly.

She fixed her bonnet as she descended from the carriage. She paused slightly and turned towards the two young ladies who remained inside.

“You may stay inside if you wish,” she told them.

She was not so callous as to turn a blind eye to their fears. She also did not know how she would be able to explain to her mama or Scarlett’s if one of them ever succumbed to the vapors.

“What nonsense!” Scarlett scoffed instead. “Of course, I am going with you!”

“I do not wish to be left alone,” Phoebe chimed in, biting her lower lip. “And if this beast of a duke does intend to devour us, I gather that we stand a better chance with our numbers!”

“That’s the spirit!” Alice smiled proudly at her sister.

“And right now, it feels like it is about to leave my mortal body.” Phoebe shuddered.

Alice let out a little chuckle, sounding much bolder than she truly felt. Before her lay Blackthorn Estate with its immaculately kept grounds and imposing facade. Half a decade ago, a significant portion of it had been engulfed in a horrible fire, claiming the lives of the previous Duke and Duchess.

It was now their son who resided there—a known rake with a penchant for collecting obscene books.

If he had been just another dissolute dandy, then perhaps she might not have felt that foreboding deep within her gut.

If he had been just another foolish nobleman, traipsing around the Continent, casually throwing around his wealth, before coming home to spend even more of it, perhaps she might not have felt that cold shiver running down her spine.

Alice felt as if there was something else lying behind that imposing facade, a dark beast that slumbered away from the public eye.

And she was the one with the plan to just prod it with a proverbial stick.

“I suppose we have seen all there is to see,” Phoebe squeaked from behind her. “That should be enough reconnaissance for one day.”

“I think I have had enough reconnaissance to last me a lifetime,” Scarlett mumbled in reply.

Just then, they saw a tall man with such broad shoulders stalk out from gardens. His long strides, sure and strong, took him back to the front door of the manor while his dark red cape billowed ominously behind him as if he was some sort of malevolent demon. Even from a distance, Alice could make out the strong line of his jaw.

Unbidden, her eyes drank in the broadness of his shoulders, down to his muscled forearms, until she noted that something vividly red dripped down to his long fingers.

“Oh, dear Lord, is that blood ?” Phoebe moaned from behind her in horror. “I knew it! I knew that he eats people!”

Her heart pounding in her chest, Alice was amazed she still managed to stand her ground.

“Oh, do not be absurd, Phoebe,” she reassured her younger sister. “Even if he was up to devouring humans, I doubt he would do so in broad daylight!”

At that moment, the man turned to face them, his eyebrows snapping together in a dark frown.

“Run!” Scarlett breathed, tugging at Alice’s wrist. “We’ve done it now! He’s seen us already!”

But even as she felt her friend tugging insistently at her wrist, Alice could not help but gaze back at him. The tall gates of Blackthorn Estate rose between them, perhaps the only thing that stood between her and the beastly Duke. The wind whipped around them, stinging her eyes.

Only then could she bear to look away.

She shook her head as she hurried back to the carriage after Scarlett and her sister, feeling strangely bereft as she did so.

By the time they reached the carriage, Alice’s chest was burning for air. She clutched at the wooden frame as she fought to catch her breath.

“We are never going back there again!” Phoebe declared, breathing heavily and looking pale as a sheet.

“I... absolutely agree!” Scarlett nodded in support. She glanced meaningfully at Alice, her brow furrowed. “I forbid you from ever going to that horrible place again, Alice! Best friend or not, we are never setting foot in that cursed estate again!”

Well, technically speaking, we did not really set foot on the estate, as we were standing outside of it...

Alice did not say anything else as she inhaled lungfuls of air. The Duke of Thorns had looked every bit as fierce as the rumors said. She could feel the heaviness of his stare even from a distance, could feel his mere presence commanding her to stay rooted in her spot.

Logic should have told her that she should stay as far away from him as possible.

It was just too bad she could hardly refuse such a challenge.

Long fingers, both strong and graceful, wrapped themselves lightly around her neck. Behind her, the wall stood like an impenetrable force, trapping her heated body between its unyielding facade and a warm hardness that pervaded her senses.

“Do you like it when I hold you like this?” A deep voice, soft and mesmerizing, held her in its thrall as much as the hand wrapped around her neck did. “You like this... I can feel it.”

She gasped when she felt the warm roughness of a tongue touching the sensitive shell of her ear.

“I can taste it.”

Alice woke up with a gasp, her body drenched in sweat as she twisted in her nightclothes. Her heart pounded wildly in her chest, so loud that it drowned out her thoughts. Liquid heat snaked down her shuddering frame to pool low in her belly.

She wrapped her arms around herself but found herself wanting something more .

She shook her head.

What is wrong with me?

She had never felt such things before—except maybe that time she spotted Lord Grayson trysting with Lady Cartwright in the moonlit gardens last year. Even then, it had not felt as intense as it did now, and she had managed to brush it off the moment she stepped back into the ballroom—unlike now, when she had to concentrate to steady her wildly beating heart.

She looked out the window to find the moon still shining brightly in the sky, casting its soft light on her carpeted floor. Quietly, she made her way and opened the glass panel, allowing the wind to cool her flaming cheeks.

She clenched her hands, her fingernails digging into the windowpane as she stared out into the night sky. She had so very little time left before her freedom slipped completely from her grasp.

She would make sure she would not waste a minute of it.

Tomorrow, she would go into Blackthorn Estate to retrieve—borrow—the coveted translation of Marquis de Sade's infamous work.

It had to be tomorrow or never at all.

CHAPTER 3

I cannot believe I made it into Blackthorn Estate!

Alice grinned to herself as she tugged at the hem of her apron and wondered—not for the first time that day—if it was truly the best course of action to borrow a plain dress from her lady’s maid. Louise had been hesitant to comply with her request at first, knowing just the sort of shenanigans her mistress usually got into, but Alice’s persistence had eventually worn down the maid’s defenses.

“Now, to find the book itself,” she muttered to herself.

If one were to house a collection of the most scandalous books, then she deduced it must be in a library, for where else should one put one’s books?

But then again, if these books were not meant for the eyes of others, then the Duke of Thorns could very well have hidden them someplace else...

Alice frowned to herself. If the Duke had indeed concealed his outrageous collection someplace else, then it was going to complicate her search a bit. However, the more she thought about it, the more it made sense.

Of course, he would not display it someplace for all the world to gawk at. This book had a reputation of its own, after all. It was one of a kind.

Besides, its contents were much too scandalous to be perused outside of one’s bedchamber—or so she had heard. She would find out soon enough when she got her

hands on it.

But to do that would mean she would have to go into his bedchamber...

At the thought of rifling through his personal belongings, she felt a familiar warmth creeping up her cheeks even as a strange heat began to coil in the pit of her belly. Was it fear? Apprehension?

Somehow, it felt nothing like it.

It was more of a thrill. An excitement of some sort.

Focus, Alice!

She shook her head as if to clear her wayward thoughts. This was not the time to be indulging her often-winded train of thought. Not when she had a more important mission to accomplish.

And certainly not while she was in the lair of a beast.

She pressed her lips into a determined line as she crept down the mostly empty hallway, grateful for the thick carpeting underfoot that muffled her footsteps.

She had never had the privilege of exploring Blackthorn Estate prior to this particular excursion, but fortunately, Alice had studied several books on architecture once when she had been fascinated by it. She had learned then that there was a pattern to most houses, even the grandest ones.

She just prayed that Blackthorn Estate did not deviate too far from that particular blueprint.

Or that its fearsome, reclusive owner had not actually hidden the book someplace

else. If he did, then all her efforts would be in vain, and she would never be able to get her hands on it...

“Oh! There you are!”

Alice froze when she heard a nasal voice calling out from behind her. Her heart pounding in her chest, she dared not turn around for fear of revealing her face to whoever it was that had caught her sneaking about in the direction of the bedrooms.

However, this particular maid would not be deterred, and when her fingers clamped around Alice’s wrist, her mind veered in sheer panic.

“What are you doing about here at this hour? You should be in the kitchen!” the maid admonished her. “More hands are needed here—hey!”

With every ounce of strength she had left in her, Alice twisted her wrist out of the woman’s grasp and fled down the hallway. She barreled into the first door that she had noticed was slightly ajar, slamming it shut behind her and turning the lock for good measure.

I’ve been caught! Dear God, what do I do now?

She closed her eyes as she leaned back against the door. She took in big gulps of air as she fought to steady her wildly beating heart.

It was over now. Her mission was a failure. She would have to give up any desire of ever finding that book and succumb to her fate?—

“Well, well, well... what do we have here?”

Her mind blanked at the sound of a deep voice. The sound of it wrapped around her senses like silken bonds, holding her in its thrall.

It was only then that she realized that she was not alone in this room, after all.

Her eyes darted to her right and saw the man she had seen from afar just yesterday. Only this time, he had dispensed of his cape and shirt. The corded muscles of his arms flexed as he folded them over his bare chest.

Alice flushed and dropped her gaze, landing squarely on the crotch of his breeches, which were smeared once again with something vividly red.

Was it blood? Phoebe cannot possibly be right—there were no such things as cannibals in London. If there were, then she or Scarlett would have heard of it...

“You are not supposed to be here,” he told her darkly.

Alice looked up to find his stormy, blue-gray gaze bearing down on her. His lips were pressed into a grim line, making no attempt to hide his displeasure.

“You have ten seconds to tell me who you are and the purpose of your unwarranted visit before I kick you out of this room,” he threatened her.

Alice bristled at his tone. In spite of the rumors swirling around this estate and its master, he was still just a man. She would not cower before him. Would not give him the satisfaction of it.

Defiantly, she raised her chin and met his gaze. “I am your new maid, Your Grace.”

He chuckled mirthlessly. “My new maid, huh? Even I cannot pretend I have not heard such drivel before.”

He stalked towards her, and Alice would have taken a few steps back if her back was not already pressed against the door. She sucked in a deep breath as he continued to approach her, leering at her as a predator might appraise its next meal. He was so

close now that she could see the rise and fall of his chest, feel the intense heat radiating from his skin. If she raised her hand, she would be able to touch him...

“Wrong answer, little lamb,” he growled. He picked up the hand she had raised unconsciously and turned it over in his, raising a single dark eyebrow. “These are not the hands of a maid.”

Alice quickly withdrew her hands from his grasp and inwardly cursed herself for her folly. Of course, he would know just from a single look that she had never done manual labor in her entire life. How could she have been so stupid as to give that all away?

The man said nothing more, merely turned away from her as he stalked over to a table that held a decanter and a glass. He poured himself a drink, and Alice watched, mesmerized, the way the muscles in his back bunched and flexed, every line as sleek and powerful as that of a panther.

“Tell Ethan I thank him for the gift, but I am not in the mood for company tonight,” he told her dismissively. “You may leave.”

Alice gaped at him.

Tell Ethan what?

Did he think that she was a...?

“I beg your pardon!” The incensed words flew out of her lips before she could stop herself. Almost as soon as she spat them out, she cursed herself inwardly.

Fortunately, he did not seem to catch on to her mistake. If he did, then he appeared not to care about it as he turned around slightly, an eyebrow still arched as he regarded her contemptuously.

“You are here to share my bed, are you not?” he drawled. “Ethan is getting rather predictable in his old age, it would seem, and so lacking in creativity. You are the third one he has sent this week, but I am afraid I have no use for you. I will make sure you are paid, however.”

Alice just gaped at him as he turned around and walked back to her. He really thought she was a strumpet!

“A pity, though,” he continued in a softer tone as his eyes roved over her form in an appreciative manner. “I have to admit you look much better than the ones he had sent before...”

She watched as he raised his hand as if he might caress her cheek. Her breath hitched in her throat, her skin itching to know what his touch would feel like...

Fortunately, her modesty belatedly managed to kick in, and she angrily slapped his hand away.

“How dare you touch a lady so intimately!” she reprimanded him.

“A lady?” he scoffed. His hand reached out to cup the back of her head, his eyes blazing dangerously. “What sort of lady would go about traipsing into a man’s private rooms?”

He had a point there that Alice was not willing to concede.

“In addition to that, you are in my estate,” he told her with a dark grin. “Everything in Blackthorn Estate belongs to me—including you.”

Dear God in heaven, the Duke of Thorns is a Wolf!

Scarlett was right—he was every bit the rake she warned Alice he would be, with

none of the veneer of civility that most gentlemen in her acquaintance possessed. He was danger made flesh. A beast trapped in the body of a man.

“Tell me, then,” he whispered silkily, his warm breath fanning the sensitive shell of her ear. “If you were not sent by my dear friend to entertain me, then who are you, and what is your purpose?”

Alice pursed her lips. There was no point in denying it now. She had already been caught—literally and figuratively.

The best that she could do was come clean. Maybe then he would be kind enough to actually let her borrow the book.

“I meant to borrow something from you,” she admitted.

He raised an eyebrow as if he did not believe her. She did not blame him either—it sounded so absurd that it was downright laughable.

“You meant to borrow something from me?”

She did not know if she should feel incensed at the dark amusement in his tone.

“Fine!” she huffed. “I actually intended to steal it from you!”

Colin could not recall a time when he had been so aroused and so tempted to laugh at the same time. Looking down at the fascinating creature trapped between his body and the door, he was sorely tempted to just let his mirth bubble up from his throat.

“Steal from me?” he murmured.

The sheer audacity of it! Or was it foolishness? Maybe both?

The young woman—lady, she had claimed—bit her lower lip in a way that sent a bolt of lust shooting directly to his groin, a feeling that he had long buried along with the charred remains of his parents, half a decade past.

If he had accepted Ethan's previous "gifts," perhaps he would not be in such a dilemma right now.

As if to make things worse, he watched as her anxious eyes flitted from his face down to his crotch.

Is she aware of just how much I want to strip her naked and have my way with her?

If the young lady had been unaware of it before, she might quite possibly not be now. His erection could not have been more obvious if it stood up and waved for her attention.

"What's that?" she choked out, pointing at the bulge in his breeches.

Colin should have been mortified. Instead, he wanted nothing more than to introduce his hardness to her. To sink himself into her warmth.

"Is that blood?"

The horror in her voice cut off his train of thought, and he frowned as he glanced at his aching crotch again.

This time, he could see what she was pointing at—and it was not blood.

Not at all.

But he was sorely tempted to burst into laughter.

“That is none of your business,” he told her implacably. “And what is it in this estate that you so badly want to steal, My Lady?”

When she raised her eyes to him again, Colin fought the urge to let out a strangled groan.

Those eyes—those eyes were going to be the death of him if he was not careful enough.

And Colin had been very, very careful thus far.