



Best Duke Ever (Everly Sisters #2)

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Category: Historical

Description: Sometimes good needs a little push into love.

The somewhat wild and impulsive Lady Lenora has never been left alone. Until now. Upset with her family, Lenora exercises her independence in looking for a husband only to have her best friend assert himself as her wingman. When the wingman becomes the trainer, in kissing, Lenora only has moments to decide her future fate.

The good and upstanding Edward, Duke of Langston, has been in love with his best friend for years. Pining. Miserably. While she remains utterly clueless. When he finally takes his chance to get close to her and teach her about passion, he can only hope the fire inside of him doesn't burn her.

Will a little push into scandal help Edward find love?

If you like lightning fast reads of women manifesting their independence, then you'll adore Eliana Piers' duology regency romance stories about the Everly Sisters.

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“You’re fuming.”

“I am not.”

“Tell that to my throat. I’m choking on the smoke you’re emitting.”

With a huff, of...what some might call smoke...Lenora crossed her arms over her chest.

“Here.” Edward, Duke of Langston, pulled a wrapped treat out of his pocket and held out his hand. “Have this petit four. It should assuage your rage. Tame your flame.”

“I’m not raging. And my flame doesn’t need taming.” But she took the small confection anyway.

“There you go. Those always seem to make you feel a little better.”

She would have harrumphed, but she didn’t want to lose even the tiniest of crumbs should one fly out of her mouth. So instead, she gave him a mocking tilt of the head.

Edward officially had two modes, stoic and smug, and right now, the smugness exuding from him was so strong it practically had a fragrance. And it almost overrode his default bergamot scent that she had come to expect and inhale in his presence.

She cast him a furtive glance to view his profile. Yes. He was smug all right. Tight lips with just a hint of a curl in one corner. Hands in his pockets. Rocking back on his heels. Staring out at the dancers, yet paying her all his attention. She knew that to be

true because she could feel it.

“If you continue staring at me, people might get the wrong idea, Lenora.”

And then she did harrumph.

“That’s not your most becoming sound.”

“I’m not trying to sound becoming at the moment, Edward. I’m frustrated.”

“I know—”

“I’m not fuming.”

He shrugged his irritating shoulders, but before he could defend his position, she plowed on with a winning argument. “It’s different.”

The small curl she had caught earlier was a full fledged smirk now.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“No. I do not want to talk about my lying sister and libertine father.”

“Well—”

“And I do not want to talk about how she should have trusted me with the secret of his astronomical debt, nor do I want to talk about how angry I am with my father for his reckless decisions in the midst of grieving the loss of his wife. She was my mother. I’m not out and about gallivanting at night making terrible life-threatening decisions, am I?”

” Her hands gripped her upper arms hard, turning her cold knuckles white.

“And I most certainly do not wish to speak of my sister marrying in Gretna Green without me.” She sniffed. “Her only sister.”

In such a discreet fashion as to make Lenora wonder if it was intentional, Edward dragged a finger over hers, down her upper arm.

“Dance with me.” It was an instruction. He wasn’t even looking at her. Still. Yet she knew she had more of his attention than any of the men she had ever danced with.

Begrudgingly she let him entangle his fingers in hers, pulling her onto the dance floor just as the first strains of a waltz began to play.

Countless times Lenora had danced with Edward. And each time had felt just as familiar as the last. It was a place of comfort to have his arms around her. His attention undivided. His listening ear opened. And his words of—generally sage—advice at the ready.

If she wanted to open up about anything on her heart or mind, she knew that she could, or if she wanted to dance in silence, that was equally welcomed.

They had been friends for so long that Lenora could hardly remember the first time she had met him. He was a confidant. A point of safety and refuge. And one of her best friends.

And really, she did want to tell him all of her thoughts and feelings about the whole ordeal with her sister. But it felt so raw.

She had just read the note from her sister a couple of days ago. By now, surely the two were married. But to think that Seraphina had married Sebastian, Duke of

Ravenshire, was preposterous.

Sebastian had caught her own eye earlier in the season, but any time Lenora mentioned interest in him, Seraphina had forbidden her to have any contact with him. At first Lenora had thought it was just his horrendous reputation amongst the ton, but now that the two were eloping, she knew better.

Well, she still didn't know anything, but soon enough she would query Seraphina until all her questions were satisfied. But it didn't really make a difference because regardless of how many questions were answered, there was only one answer that mattered. And that was that Lenora was now alone.

She had always had Seraphina. Even though she was two years older than her, Seraphina had taken her everywhere. Done everything with her. Ran through the fields on a summer day. Built a fort out of old logs. Learned to bake cookies together. Taught her how to dance.

And just recently their mother had passed away leaving their father lost in his grieving and talking about traveling to get away from it all. All of it, which Lenora had just recently been made privy to know included a debt that Seraphina had paid somehow.

Seraphina was going to get married. Leaving Lenora all alone. The last thing she wanted in life was to be left alone.

It had been a distraction—a pleasurable one—to consider garnering the attention of Sebastian. It was like a small challenge amidst so much pain that she couldn't resist.

The thing was, Sebastian had made a bit of an impact on her, and she was having a hard time getting over him. The man wasn't just handsome, he was drop your fan, bat your lashes, sashay past him good looking. All actions, by the by, that Seraphina had

prohibited.

“She should have told me,” she said on hushed tones.

“Yes. She should have.” Edward’s hand gave hers a tight squeeze.

“I would never leave her out of something so monumental.” She blinked hard, holding back her tears.

“I know.”

The music came to an end.

Blinking hard to back any further annoying tears, she said, “Now. Go dance with my cousin Mirabelle. She’s a terrible wingwoman.

I think she brought a book this evening and hasn’t had a partner all night.

I’m going to freshen up.” Lord only knew how flushed her cheeks might be, or how red-rimmed her eyes might look.

“I’ll find you later.”

She mumbled back, “I know. You always will.”

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“How long have you been in love with her?”

Edward tripped over his foot at Mirabelle’s bold question. “What? I-I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Denial. That was a tried and true form of answering a question one had no intention of actually answering.

“What’s she doing right now?”

“I have no idea who you’re referring to.”

“You know.” She gave him a pointed look.

“I don’t know—”

“I may be a spinster nearing thirty who will soon have to ensnare a man into marriage, but I’m not oblivious to love. Especially when the attention is directed at my cousin who I’m an acting chaperone to. She did ask you to dance with me, didn’t she?”

Denial would be a fool’s play at this point, so Edward nodded.

“It’s not the first ball that she’s made that request of you.”

He shook his head.

“So then you might as well answer my questions.” Mirabelle gracefully twirled and when she met him face to face again, tilted her head. “How long?”

If Edward had a free hand, he'd be wiping the lower half of his face right now. Less than a handful of men knew of his true feelings, and he had been working diligently to keep them at bay.

"Far too long," he caved.

"How long, precisely?"

"About five years."

"Precisely since her debut?"

"Precisely. The first time I saw her, I fell for her."

"Hard not to. She's precisely a delight." Mirabelle smiled.

"That she is." His eyes darted to find her, but they didn't have to roam far. Tracking her movements had started the second she left his arms on the dance floor.

"What's she doing now?" Mirabelle repeated her earlier question.

"She hasn't quite made her way out of the main room. She's distracted." He grunted the last word.

"By a man?"

"Yes," he grumbled. "What the devil is she doing now? Oh my God."

"What's happening?"

"She dropped her handkerchief on the floor for the Duke of Thornhaven to pick up."

“Did he pick it up?”

“No.” He tried and failed to stifle a laugh. “A footman just bent down and handed it back to her, thinking he’s being helpful.”

The two chuckled together.

“How come you’ve never made your move?”

He was in it now, may as well open up to the woman. Perhaps a cousin’s perspective could help him get over his feelings. Or at least manage them better.

“Let’s just say that she’s never dropped a handkerchief for me to pick up.”

“I see.”

“The woman wears her heart on her sleeve, so I know she’s not interested. And I have my pride.”

“Don’t we all. Until we don’t.”

“I’m afraid to know what you mean.”

“How long are you willing to continue on like this? Pining.”

“Ah, yes. That’s what I thought you were hinting at.” He wanted to scratch a nonexistent itch on his chin, but the dancing prohibited it. Instead, he found Lenora again.

“Bollocks. That woman is mad. She’s practically embracing the man she’s standing so near to him, lingering, waiting for a dance invitation.”

“She’ll be waiting a while. Gabriel is a bit clueless.”

“Are you on a first name basis with the duke?”

Mirabelle shrugged.

“Oh my God. She just accidentally bumped into Gabriel then lifted her hand to stabilize herself. Instead of the duke reaching out to steady her, she knocked into a passing footman who lost his tray of petit fours. That’s sad on so many levels.”

Mirabelle hid her chuckle by dipping her head.

“This woman is relentless. She just left her fan on the table right in front of Gabriel’s eyes, and now she’s walking away.”

“Please tell me the same footman is retrieving it for her?”

“It’s uncanny. He is.”

“She does tend to pick up puppies in her wake.”

“I resent that.”

“You’ll get over it, pup.”

Edward grunted his disapproval. “I’m not a puppy.”

“Then show her that.”

“That’s your advice?”

“Yes. But that’s not my only advice. I actually have two pieces to offer you, and you can choose which one is more palatable.”

“So gracious of you.”

“I thought so.” He moved her around on the floor a few steps before she continued. “My suggestions are as follows. One, tell her how you feel and see if she might feel the same.”

“An unlikely choice.”

“Two, help her find the right man so that she stops making a fool of herself. Or worse, chooses incorrectly and ends up miserable. You know that she spoke about trying to get the attention of the Duke of Ravenshire? What was she thinking?”

“You do know that Sebastian eloped with Seraphina, don’t you?”

“What?” Lost in shock, Mirabelle stood still for a fraction of a second. “Oh. That bears some investigation on my part. At a later time. Right now we have work to do.” She patted his shoulder in a sororal fashion. “What are you going to choose to do with Lenora, duke?”

It only took him a second to answer. “I’ll do exactly what I have to.”

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“O w,” Lenora muffled her squeal as the Duke of Thornhaven stepped on her toe to slide past her. If he didn’t notice all the efforts she was going to earlier, she certainly didn’t want him to see her now and show her pity.

An arm brushed against her shoulder. Wasn’t anyone conscientious of their surroundings anymore? But then she felt a gentle, steady touch at her waist. Discreet as always. All the same, a tingle ran up her spine. She knew who it was.

“Do you want a balm for that injury?”

“My toe will be fine.”

“I wasn’t talking about your toe.”

She whirled to face Edward. “Botheration!” she hissed at him.

“I’d say. You went to extreme lengths to catch Gabriel’s attention.” His gaze was vexingly straight ahead at the many dancers on the floor. “You did catch one man’s eye though.”

“I did?” She hadn’t meant to catch Edward’s attention with her antics.

That was a strange thought to let permeate her mind.

A ribbon of awareness circulated through her.

Edward was an incredibly handsome man. And if she didn’t know exactly what type

of man she wanted, her eyes might be swayed by him.

Him and his dark hair, smirking lips, and broad shoulders. A quiver echoed within her.

“Yes. But obviously that poor footman doesn’t stand a chance.”

Oh. He meant someone else. That made more sense. But, well, that was a weird sense of emptiness that blew in her chest.

“Ha. Ha. That footman was only doing his job. He’s not interested in me—”

A tray—the very tray from the very footman of whom they were speaking—appeared before her.

Without a word, she took a treat and plopped it in her mouth.

“That was not a coincidence, Lenora.” The way Edward whispered into her ear felt like he was sharing more of a dark secret than it was.

She scrunched her shoulders up toward her neck. “Doesn’t matter. I have other things to do right now, so if you’ll excuse me.” Then she turned to leave.

“Actually,” a light finger tapped the small of her back and a spark shot through her, “I have a proposition for you.”

“A what?” A proposition? That sounded salacious.

She craned her neck back to see his profile in an attempt to read his expression, which of course was nonexistent.

But he couldn't be suggesting something with him.

A proposition was not a proposal. Though the two words sounded similar.

Inwardly, she shook her head at the odd thoughts.

"You're looking for a husband."

"A dance at the least. Preferably two followed by a courtship."

"I'll get you a dance—"

"We already—"

"Not with me." He cleared his throat. "With someone else." She watched him scratch the back of his head and then rake his hands through his hair. If she didn't know better, she'd say he looked a touch nervous.

"With who?"

"Who do you want to dance with?"

"Edward, what are you doing?"

"I'm helping you. You want a husband—dance. And I'd rather you find a good one."

Something warm filled her chest. And then her cheeks felt heated.

Edward was the last one to voice his emotions, which was a huge reason why he made a good, reliable, stable friend for her.

There was no drama between them. She brought it all, and he calmed her down. It was the perfect match. As friends.

“That’s very kind of you to say, Edward.”

As his eyes scanned the room, he asked, “Right. Well, what are you looking for in a man?”

Oh.

Hmm.

That was a good question. One that she had answered many times to herself, but never aloud to a man. And certainly not Edward.

But...what harm could it do? He wanted to help her, and she knew she could trust him. So, she went for it.

“It’s really quite simple. He must be daring. I want to feel a thrill when he looks at me. Holds me. I want to know in my heart that he’s for me.”

Edward shifted in his stance, tugged at his cravat, and then stuffed his hands in his pockets. “Anything else?”

“Not much. Do you think you can manage that?”

“I’ll try.”

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Try he did. But after four dances, Lenora was rethinking Edward's help.

True to his word and eerily close to her own, he had set her up with some daring gentleman.

One was engaged in some political reformation.

One was pursuing a career in art. One had traveled extensively to exotic locations.

And one was experimental in the sciences.

All of which were whispered in her ear by Edward moments before the dance invitation was extended.

Oddly enough, those whispers were more thrilling than the dances.

After the fourth dance finished, Lenora sought a small reprieve, but just as she left the main room and headed down the hallway, a hand reached out and snatched her, dragging her into a side room.

"What the blazes—"

"It's just me," Edward whisper-shouted as he pulled her into a small study and locked the door behind them. "Where are you going on your own?"

"I'm fine."

“Any man could have followed you and taken advantage of you by snatching you into a dark room.”

“Like you?” she propped her hands on her hips as he dropped his hold of her.

“I would never take advantage of you.”

“Well maybe I want someone to take advantage—”

“Lenora—”

“Edward.”

“What’s wrong? Did you not enjoy any of those dance partners? I can find more for you.”

She heaved a sigh. “They were fine.”

“Fine means boring to you.”

“Yes. They were boring. I’m sorry to say that.”

“I’ll find more.”

“Maybe I’ll find my own. In fact, dances sound boring. If my father and sister can act recklessly, I ought to try it too. Maybe I want to have an assignation instead of a dance. That sounds far more thrilling.”

“Don’t be reckless.”

“I’m not. I’m an adult. I can make my own choices.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t treat me like a child. I’m three-and-twenty and can make my own choices.”

“You’re right.”

“And another thing—wait. You think I’m right?”

“Yes.”

And there it was again. Edward’s uncanny ability to calm her down. Instantly.

The low rumble of his voice filled the space. “You’re old enough. Smart enough. Strong enough. You can make your own choices and live with the consequences.”

“What consequences?”

She felt his eyes drilling into her soul.

“Consequences such as a ruined reputation.”

“Being found here with you would result in that consequence.”

“I’d never let the rumors start, Lenora,” he growled. “If we were found like this, I’d tell them I was asking you to marry me, and then we would wed. There would be no scandal.”

Her insides shook. Her palms sweat. And her legs squeezed together at his possessiveness. She had never seen Edward so rattled. Had never seen him rattled at all. Not even once.

When he regained control of his tight lips and furrowed brow, he looked down at her. And she swore he was studying her lips. But the room was only dimly lit, so she couldn't be sure.

“But those weren't the consequences I was talking about.”

“Oh?”

“If you seek out an assignation, you could end up...pregnant.”

Her hand rushed up to grab her neck as something exploded within her. The deep timbre of Edward's voice, so close to her, alone in this room. The idea of an assignation. Pregnancy. Her legs were turning to mush.

“Are you alright, Lenora?” He stepped back to give her air, eyes scanning about, perhaps for a drink of any kind that might be tucked away.

“I'm fine,” she croaked out.

“I can—”

Her free hand darted out to his lapel and pulled him in closer. Whatever he was about to do, she didn't need. She needed him . Closer.

“I want a baby,” she whispered, not even sure why she was admitting that in this moment. Of course she wanted a baby and a family. Edward already knew that about her.

His eyes flared with something. Something she desperately wanted to understand, for she had never seen his eyes look so dark.

“It’s best not to speak of such things unless you’re with your husband.”

“Alright, Edward. I won’t say it again.” Not one to normally retreat so quickly, she thought she might have felt more frustrated to back down. But not here. Not now. It was as if she knew she were poking a beast if she continued discussions with him on having a baby.

“But just so you know, I wouldn’t have done that with anyone. I would have only...kissed.”

His palms flattened against the door, framing her face. “You might think that you would have stopped there.”

“I would have.”

“You don’t know that though, do you?”

“Not from personal experience. But even though I’ve never been kissed, I know I would have stopped there.”

Edward’s eyes looked crazed. Like something she had never seen before. Like he wanted to consume her.

And then he did the wildest thing. He dropped his hand from the door only to bring the pad of his thumb to her bottom lip while his fingers caressed her jaw. It was the exact gesture she would expect from a man just before he kissed her. But she didn’t have any proof to think that.

“There are so many different kinds of kisses though, Lenora. How do you know you would have stopped?”

Wrapping her fingers around his wrist heated her insides. More than ever before, there was a large fire inside of her.

It was almost as if it were a...thrill.

Then two words popped out of her mouth, “Show me, and I’ll know.”

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“I can’t show you.” The four most difficult words to ever leave Edward’s mouth were strained.

She didn’t know what she was asking for.

Mostly because she didn’t understand the depths of his feelings.

How if he started to kiss her he would be the one unable to stop.

But not unable to stop in this moment, he wouldn’t be able to stop as in for all future references.

As in, having kissed her once, he knew he would want to kiss her forever.

She couldn’t possibly know that, never mind feel the same way.

“Yes, you can. I’m asking you to.” Her voice was a breath on his jaw.

So innocent. So naive.

Needing distance, he started to push himself away from the door. “I can’t.”

But her hands were too quick, and both of them fisted around his lapels. “Edward, there’s no one I trust more than you. I want you to show me the different kinds of kisses. What if I do find myself in a situation where I’m unprepared.”

She had a point. He didn’t want her to find herself unprepared. Then again, he also

didn't want her to find herself prepared. Especially if it was for another man.

"Please," she spoke on tiptoes, trying to meet his gaze.

"Fine. I'll show you one."

"Five," she bartered back.

"Two."

"Four."

"Three." Three? What was he thinking? He couldn't kiss her three times and not walk away unscathed. But the hope in her eyes...he always couldn't walk away from them.

"That's my final offer."

"I'll take it."

Damn it. He was really going to kiss her. His stomach folded itself in half while his throat clenched around a giant lump.

What was the minimum he could offer her while keeping his sanity? He took a deep inhalation and braced his hands against the door again. It would be for the protection of his heart that he not touch her.

"One," he leaned in and pressed a soft, slow kiss to her cheek. He could feel the gentle puff of air release from her lips, and it tickled its way across his jaw.

Damn. He was in trouble. He needed to stick to his plan. He dipped his head and brushed his nose against hers as he ducked to the other side. Heart hammering.

Thump.

Thump.

Thump.

“Two.” His lips found her other cheek and lingered. Infinitesimally longer than the previous kiss. Or so he thought. He couldn’t be sure. Time was a meaningless concept.

“Edward,” Lenora’s hoarse whisper was almost his undoing. He needed to stick to the plan. If ever there was a moment he needed to just stick to the damn plan, this was it.

“Three.” He lifted his chin and pressed a chaste kiss to her forehead. There. He had done his duty.

“Edward,” Lenora pleaded. Her voice was gravelly. “That was not three different kisses.”

“Yes, they were. One on the cheek—”

“Edward.” Her voice was more demanding. “That was just three kisses on three different places. You must show me more than just how my grandmother might kiss me.”

“Trust me. Those were not kisses from your grandmother.”

“Then show me—”

He couldn’t stop himself if King George himself had sauntered into the room. His lips swept across hers. Lightning shot through him, and one of his hands gripped

around her neck. When she gasped, he crashed his mouth against hers.

Her hand was already in his hair. Gripping. Tugging. Pulling him closer. He dragged his tongue along the seam of her lips. She opened.

The most intoxicating taste of whiskey was on her tongue. Their tongues whirled around each other, dancing.

Her moans clutched at his heart.

When he pulled back to kiss down the column of her neck, she mumbled, “Oh my God, Edward.” And then she arched her back into him.

She was so willing. So ready. So responsive.

Damn it. He tore his lips from her body. To look her in the eye meant that he would probably see shock and horror. He averted his gaze for a second before he found the courage to confront her.

Her eyes were dark. But not in anger like he might expect.

Damn. Was that arousal he saw? Desire? He had never questioned his interpretation of her emotions before, but this was surreal.

“Edward,” his name was a plea dripping off of her lips. “I never knew.”

“Knew what?” He asked though he could predict what she was going to say. His passion was obvious for her, so here he stood. Heart on a platter. Served up to her. Completely at her mercy.

“I never knew I could feel this way about you.”

The words slammed into him. His shoulders curled inward at the impact. And her hands were fastening behind his neck. What was she saying?

“You were always my best friend. But this—” she blew out a breath “—is more than friendship. My body wants you.” She pulled him close, pressing her body against his.

“I’ve never ached like this before. Like only you can fix it.

Edward...” she moaned, lifting a leg up his thigh. “Please, Edward. I need you.”

Damn him to hell.

There was no willpower left.

“If I give you any more, Lenora, you’re mine.”

“I think I always have been.”

Hungrily he kissed her. Deeply. Ravenous. Even hearing her commit to him, he couldn’t believe he’d have more of her in the future. It was like he needed to taste all of her now, even though that was an impossibility.

“Edward, I want you...More...Inside.”

“I’ll be careful. But I’m not opposed to giving you a baby.”

Her moan was so loud he reached up to cover her mouth. When she stopped, he lifted his fingers.

Eyes flaring with hope, he witnessed her surrender. “Only from you, Edward.” Her words were a prayer. A benediction. A promise. Everything he had ever dreamed of.

“For now, don’t be gentle.” Her eyes were fire and they lit up his being.

Hefting her skirts up around her waist, he dropped his falls and lifted her to straddle his waist. Then he used the door as leverage to keep her up.

Slowly he placed himself at her entrance while her head hung heavily against the door. He pressed into her with just his tip, and he felt every last shudder of her body as he eased himself in.

One of her hands fisted his hair while the other dug its nails into his neck.

“Edward,” she panted, “you feel so good.”

“You’re perfect, Lenora. Just wrap yourself around my cock and squeeze—damn it, you feel good.”

The mantra of his name filled his ears as he thrust into her.

“Don’t be gentle with me, Edward.”

“I won’t be gentle, but you have to be quiet, my love.”

“I can’t,” she whimpered.

“Yes, you can,” he grunted out on another thrust. “Bite down on my neck,” he instructed, tugging down on his collar.

Once her teeth were locked on him, there was no stopping the momentum from building. He thrust into her until she squeezed him dry.

Best damn night of his entire life.

But it wasn't over.

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“I just need a moment.” Lenora was panting in Edward’s ear, still waiting to catch her breath.

What had she just done? Obviously it was the most amazing experience of her life.

And she wanted to repeat it ad infinitum.

That, she knew without a doubt. It was as if her heart had at long last caught up to her mind.

After so many years of friendship, trusting him, knowing him, relying on him, she had finally allowed herself to be thrilled by him.

And...

Oh.

My.

God.

What a thrill that had been.

But she needed a moment to understand what had just happened. To compose herself. To somehow head back into a ballroom full of people. Including her cousin.

Oh my stars. What would Mirabelle say? Would she even tell her?

Normally, Lenora would tell her sister Seraphina everything, but since she wasn't here that wasn't possible. She and Mirabelle were close enough that it wouldn't be cause for concern to discuss this with her.

"Are you alright, Lenora?" His hand caressed her face as if his fingers had always tenderly stroked her cheek.

This was her best friend. The man who knew how to calm her down. The man who could always dance her cares away. The man who shoved treats in his pocket for her. The calm one. But right now she felt anything but calm.

The reality of what just happened, or parts of it, started to crash down on her.

"I just...um...need a second." But she wasn't actually sure if a second would be enough time to gather herself. And where she would gather herself she didn't know. But she had to get out of that room. Had to breathe. Had to remember who she was in relation to Edward.

"Wait—"

But she dashed out of the room. Wild. No concern for her hair or her dress or the flush that surely pervaded her cheeks.

Less than a few seconds later, she could hear footsteps coming around the corner behind her. Of course he would follow. She tugged on a door, opening and closing it to throw him a red herring. Then she slipped into a different room across the hall, hoping he didn't see her.

Her breaths were coming in quickly now. Her heart hammering. Her chest heaving. Palms were sweaty.

She just needed a minute.

To think.

To breathe.

She pushed herself against the door, locking it. Her head rested against the hard wood as she focused on her breaths and closed her eyes.

“To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?” A deep voice rumbled in the darkness.

Lenora froze. Palms to the door. Eyes flickered open.

Of course.

Wouldn't that just make sense...it was Gabriel, Duke of Thornhaven.

Exactly when she didn't want him to notice her, he finally had.

And all she had to do was unlock the door and leave.

And she would have.

Had she been thinking clearly.

Had her brain not been frazzled by the mind blowing pleasure she had just received at the hands, mouth, and cock of Edward. Her best friend.

But her brain was frazzled from the mind blowing pleasure she had just received at the hands, mouth, and cock of Edward. Her best friend.

So she wasn't thinking clearly.

So she didn't unlock the door and just leave.

Gabriel stood up from the chair he had been slouched in. Was that a book in his hands? She watched him return the unidentifiable object into the inside pocket of his jacket.

"Um..." Where were the words she needed when she needed them?

"Yes?" He took a step closer.

Her feet were working faster, though not necessarily smarter than her mouth, and they sidestepped Gabriel's approach.

Now she stood near the middle of the room while his back was to the door.

"What are you doing here?" He asked none too gently.

"I-I..."

"I asked you what you're doing here. It's a simple question."

Yes. It was. It was of the simplest variety, yet her brain felt like it was wading through mud. And all she could think was, what were words doing buried underneath all that mud?

Gabriel reached out his hand toward her.

In hindsight, he was probably making some small gesticulation to prompt her to answer the aforementioned question.

But in the moment, Lenora's heart turned to fire.

Fire claimed by Edward, and she wanted no hands on her except his.

So when Gabriel—in all probability with exceptional innocence—started by calling her name, “Lady—”

She misunderstood and shouted. “No!”

It took less than a second for the door to crack open with a loud bang.

“Lenora!” A disheveled, sweaty, glowing, and altogether too handsome Edward bellowed at her.

He turned toward Gabriel and drew back his fist.

“Wait!”

But it was too late. Edward threw the punch and the unsuspecting Gabriel fell back a half step, rubbing his jaw.

“Edward. Wait.” She tried again. “This isn't what you think.”

“I'll say,” Gabriel muttered.

“She's mine,” Edward growled. “My betrothed. Don't even think about laying a finger on her.”

Slowly, Gabriel brought his hands up in defense. “Upon my honor, I had no intentions—”

“I don’t want to hear another word from you or your honor.” Edward’s words charged ahead while he turned around to find Lenora.

“My love, are you alright?” The panic, vulnerability, and love in his eyes was overwhelming.

This was her man. Her best friend. Her calm. Her thrill. Her everything. In that split second it was all clear to her.

She had loved him all along, as her best friend. And now knowing this other side of him—this passionate and possessive side—there were no hurdles to fall further in love with him.

“I’m f-fine,” she stuttered. “I’m more than fine.” She threw her arms around him. “Edward, I love you.”

At her words he picked her up and dropped to his knees. “Lenora, are you sure?”

“As nice as this performance is, I think I’ll just take my leave now—”

“You had better,” Edward said gruffly without giving Gabriel a passing glance.

“And if you see my cousin, Mirabelle, please tell her I’m fine. I’ll be out soon.”

Gabriel nodded awkwardly and exited the room.

“Edward,” she said, rubbing her head into his neck. “I love you. I don’t know how I didn’t see it before.”

“Perhaps I didn’t let you.”

“Or perhaps I’m a fool.”

“You’re no fool, Lenora.”

“Only a fool for you, Edward.”

“I love you Lenora. Please, say you’ll be mine.”

“Forever.” She kissed him. “And ever and ever.”

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“I can’t believe you eloped and got married without me.” Edward stood beside Lenora, who had her fists on her hips, while she tapped her foot on the front steps outside her country house.

“Is that really how you’re going to greet your eldest and dearest sister?” Seraphina flashed a cajoling yet authoritative smile, as only an older sibling can do.

“Now, now, Lenora. Put your claws away. We talked about this and decided that Seraphina must have had good reason to leave us all in the dark.” Mirabelle cradled one of the barn cats and scratched him behind his ears.

“I’m not a child,” Lenora whispered loudly into Edward’s ear.

“I know, my love. Let’s just hear what she has to say.” And he put his hand on the small of her back to ease the tension he knew was there.

“What’s this?” Seraphina gestured to the closeness between them.

“I guess we all have secrets, don’t we?” Lenora pushed her lips out. And didn’t Edward just want to wrap his mouth around hers—but no. Now was not the time.

“I can attest to us all having secrets.” Sebastian’s deep male voice rang out as he rounded the carriage. “Which secrets are being shared as we speak?”

“Look at my little sister and her...”

“Betrothed.” Lenora filled in with pride, and Edward couldn’t stop the grin from

breaking out on his face.

“Lenora!” Seraphina gasped. “This is wonderful news.” As she raced up to her sister, Edward beamed with happiness for his love.

“Congratulations, Edward.” Sebastian clasped one hand around his and clapped him on the shoulder. “Well done, man. You couldn’t be marrying into a better family.”

“I know.” Normally he might have just humbly accepted the congratulations, but there really was no competing with his pride at the moment. “She’s the best, isn’t she?”

“I might argue you on that one, but I’ll let you have your moment,” Sebastian laughed.

“Yes. Well, shall we go inside for tea?” Mirabelle offered.

“Where’s father?” Edward watched as Seraphina’s eyes glanced around almost as if she expected him to pop up out of nowhere.

“He’s decided to travel for the foreseeable future,” Lenora answered.

“After you left, his grief almost turned to numbness.” She slipped her hands around his arm and continued, “Then Edward came into the picture and father took off, thinking he’d be alone soon.

He has some grieving to do. Fortunately, we have the best cousin in the world.

” She grabbed Mirabelle on the other side of her.

“She’s been my chaperone while I waited for your return. ”

“And I’ll continue to be when Seraphina moves out and you two await your wedding day.” Mirabelle gave the beaming couple (the younger of the two) a knowing look.

“As you should, Mirabelle. We don’t need a scandal in this family.” Sebastian lauded her decree.

“We aren’t the only ones who could cause a scandal, Mirabelle. Who knows? It might be you that has the biggest scandal of us all.” Edward loved the way Lenora’s lips twitched up in playfulness.

“I’ve accepted my spinster fate.” Mirabelle turned and led the way into the house. “Enough of this chatter. Let’s have tea.”

“Perhaps you and Gabriel will become better acquainted.” Lenora suggested archly.

“Doubtful. The man’s head is in the sand ninety percent of the time.”

“What about the other ten percent?” Lenora prodded.

And Edward was surprised to see a slight blush tint Mirabelle’s cheeks.

“It’s time for tea.” And with that, she pursed her lips together and led the motley four inside where they did in fact have tea. And did in fact divulge a few more secrets.

And this was only the beginning for Edward who felt his heart wrapped in love that he knew would last forever.

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“Darling, do you think...um...you should move over a bit?” Lenora placed a soft hand on Edward’s thigh.

“Why would I do that? We’re on our way to our honeymoon.” He nuzzled into the side of her neck.