



Corrupted by the Wicked Duke

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Category: Historical

Description: "I may be a brute, but you are the one begging me, my lady..."

Born a commoner, Duke Thomas despises the ton. So when that little vixen, Lady Frances, approaches his sister, he knows she must have some ulterior motive...

Francis was ecstatic to find a new friend in the Duke's sister. If only His Grace would stop glaring at her, every time she visits. Making her shiver with a most confusing need...

Desperate to get it out of her system, Francis proposes a deal: She will give him etiquette lessons... and he will teach her what it means to be a woman. A woman Thomas cannot resist ravishing completely...

Total Pages (Source): 25

CHAPTER 1

Frances looked out over the passing townhouses and tried to take a deep breath. Tried being the operative word. The stays of her corset were snug against her shift and left little room for air to actually get into her lungs to feed her brain.

“Stop fidgeting, Frances. It’s unbecoming,” her father chided.

“So is passing out in front of your peers.” Frances twisted in her seat, hoping to dislodge a wayward stay that decided to break free from its guard and jab her in the ribs.

“Blast these stays,” she said while digging her fingers into her waistline, hoping to find some wiggle room.

“Careful of your words, child. We can’t have the Lady Staunton hear such talk.” Her father sat up and fumbled with his pocket.

With a knowing smile, Frances reached into her reticule and pulled out a handkerchief.

“Ah, thank you, my dear,” her father said while wiping his glasses, one of his tells that he was nervous about something.

“Come now, Papa, you know I would never speak like that in polite company.”

Polite being another functional word. There was nothing remotely polite about the

majority of people they were about to dine with. Thankfully for Frances, her dear and newly married friend, Nora, would be in attendance and would give her some reprieve from the judging eyes of the ladies of the ton.

At five and twenty, Frances was practically a pariah and the subject of much gossip. Not that Frances minded. She knew her prospects dwindled with each passing season, and because she was a hopeless romantic at heart, she couldn't bring herself to take the first hand that was offered.

Her father taught her better than that. "Never take the first offer, Frances," he would lecture her as she grew up. Ever the shrewd businessman, most of her father's lessons came in the form of business tactics.

Unfortunately for Frances, that meant being at the older end of the marriage mart without any real prospects in the vicinity.

The Baron snorted. "Polite company, eh? What am I then?"

Frances' smile grew. She reached across the carriage and grabbed his hand. "The most prestigious and dashing lord in all the land," she said with a wink.

"Cheeky." Lord Lounton sat up and smoothed out his greater coat.

"But Frances, I've been meaning to talk to you."

Frances worried her bottom lip. Her father has been starting a lot of their conversations with this phrase lately, and they hadn't been the most uplifting of talks.

"There's going to be someone new at dinner tonight." He placed his glasses back on his nose before quickly removing them to clean them once again.

“Oh?” she murmured with a tilt of her head. No one new had been invited to Lady Staunton’s since Lord Dashed married his daughter’s governess three years ago. It had been the talk of the ton for months, and definitely made for some interesting dinner conversations.

“I see your mind working, child, but you must listen to me.”

Frances balked at her father’s words.

“Whatever do you mean by that?”

Her father sat taller and ran a hand through his thinning gray hair. In this light, Frances could almost make out the features of a younger Solomon Ambrose, the Baron of Lounton, one with the business world at his fingertips and the love of his life by his side. But with a jolt of the carriage, the mirage escaped her, and she once again saw the tired man fighting to keep his finances afloat while trying to manage his quick-witted yet dutiful, daughter.

“Frances,” he said with a knowing look, “you have a tendency to talk too much and befriend even the poorest of characters. And this Duke Pilton is not someone I wish my only child to entertain,” he pleaded.

“The Duke of Pilton? I don’t think I’ve had the pleasure of meeting a Duke Pilton in our recent outings.”

“And nor will you now,” her father quipped. “Listen carefully, Frances. I’m as serious as I’ve ever been. We are almost to Lady Staunton’s, and I want to make sure you stay away from Duke Pilton.”

Frances sat back and stared at her father. His normally bright blue eyes were darker, and the lines above his brow became more prominent.

“I’m not sure I understand. If he is a Duke, shouldn’t I at least be trying to catch his attention, since...” Her eyes dropped to her hands in her lap. Frances didn’t know how to continue. She knew her father’s pride, and talking about financial hardships was untoward even amongst relations.

“Yes, yes, yes, normally, yes. I would love to see a prospect such as a Duke take an interest in you. However, for the sake of your, uh, delicate nature, I implore you to keep your distance from this particular Duke. I hear he is an absolutely ruthless rake who thinks very little of his fellow man. There even a rumor floating around he would sabotage his competition in order to get ahead. I would hate to think how he would treat a proper lady such as yourself.”

Frances’ snort was perfectly timed with her father’s concern over her delicate nature. She may have been raised the way a proper lady should have, but she was far from delicate.

“Frances,” her father’s words snapped her from a particular scandalous memory involving her now maid, Dorothy, and a young groomsman playing a riveting game of Buffy Gruffy. A smile tugged on her lips when she remembered Dorothy’s wide eyes when the groomsman asked for a kiss when she couldn’t correctly identify the occupant in the chair.

“Are you listening?” Her father’s voice was now rushed. The carriage jerked to a stop — they must be at Lady Staunton’s summer home. “It’s not just me, my child, but the ton . Everyone has been talking, and I will not have you caught up in any more talk. This family has had enough heartache; I will not see you associating with such a brute as well.”

Frances took a deep breath which, thanks to her stays, was more like a slight hiccup of air. “I think I can handle the ton , Father,” she said with a shake of her wrist. “How is it that I’ve never met this Duke? I don’t remember hearing any gossip about a long-

lost son.”

“Not much is known which, I admit, is part of the problem. The peerage practically froths at the mouth for a mysterious duke. What I do know is he inherited the title from a distant relative with no kin. He ran a shop of some sort, and the Duke in question is known to be a ruthless businessman.”

Frances gathered her skirts and did her best to school her features. She couldn’t help but be a bit interested in this mysterious duke. She always loved meeting new people, the more mysterious the better. Digging into what made people behave the way they did was always an interest of hers.

“Frances, I mean it. This is not some lost puppy you can rehabilitate and groom into a hunting dog like you tried to do with that poor Pomeranian — who, by the way, was not meant to be a foxhound. You almost got the scoundrel trampled to death.”

Frances’ attention turned to the coachman opening the door. “Come now, Father, that little pup had more to offer than being someone’s lap dog. Don’t you remember, it caught that rabbit that was eating all the flowers in the garden?”

“And he brought it into my bed!”

Frances couldn’t help but laugh at the memory. Solomon stepped from the carriage and offered his daughter his hand.

“I’m serious, Frances. I don’t like what I’m hearing about him, and I don’t have time to go into more detail with you now, so please, just give your poor, decrepit father a break, and listen to me?”

Frances regarded her father’s hand. “Oh, all right. I’ll keep my distance, but I make no promises if he approaches me. After all, it would be rude of me to ignore an

introduction to a duke.”

Her father and she were ushered through the main hallway and then into the drawing room where she was whisked away in a flurry of feathers, fans, and giggles in the form of her friend, Nora.

“Oh, thank goodness, you’re finally here. I’ve been dying to talk to you about the new duke.” Nora rushed Frances to the corner of the drawing room, without giving Frances a chance to excuse herself. However, looking back, her father was already deep in conversation with Sir Bradley of Loughlin, a business partner. Knowing her father, he was now lost to her until it was time to depart. Once Solomon started talking business, it would take an act of divine intervention to steal him away.

Frances poured herself a small cup of punch from the cart nearby. It was always watered down, but after the insufferable carriage ride, it felt nice to be able to move her arms without a stay stabbing into her side.

“So, have you heard?” Nora was practically squealing. “I hear his family lost everything in a fire, and he ran into the fire to save his younger sister,” Nora swooned. “They say he carried her out like a Greek hero from those plays my mother used to drag me to.”

It took everything in Frances’ power not to roll her eyes at her dear friend. While Frances was known to be a romantic, she could admit, she wasn’t as fanatical about it as Nora.

“Careful, Nora, you’re practically drooling. I don’t think your husband would appreciate you fancying the new Duke.”

Nora looked over to where her husband stood in a group of men, patting each other on the back and engaging in conversation. “No, I suppose not. And I’m not drooling,

I am very much enamored and satisfied by my husband. There is no truer match for me quite honestly.”

Nora’s face was the epitome of wedded bliss. Frances began to wonder if she would ever feel that way.

“Do I need to give you a moment to compose yourself, Honora?” Frances asked, using her friend’s Christian name, knowing Nora’s distaste for it.

Nora nudged Frances in her aching ribs. “Oh, hush,” she giggled. “Back to the subject at hand, we were talking about the Duke. Have you heard anything?”

Frances shook her head. “I know nothing about this newfound Duke, but from what I’ve been told, he is not someone I should be associated with.”

Nora’s eyes widened, and Frances realized her mistake. Nora could be like a bloodhound, and any form of gossip was her prey.

Her fan flew in front of her face as her voice dipped into a whisper, “What have you heard?”

For the first time that day, Frances took a much-appreciated deep breath, feeling her shoulders relax. They may no longer be the young girls chasing each other around their parents’ drawing rooms, but there was something about being in the company of a good friend that made being around pretentious and gossipy peers manageable.

Placing her cup back down onto the cart, Frances opened her mouth to respond when a very unladylike squeak escaped Nora’s lips. Frances followed Nora’s line of sight and unfortunately could no longer blame the jabbing of her stays for her lack of breath.

This must be the new Duke of Pilton.

To say he was standing in the doorway would be a grave understatement. He seemed to take up the entire space. The room felt as if it was pushed into a vacuum where nothing moved, and there was no sound, no air. Everything was still. When the man moved, only eyes followed him. He didn't just walk into the room, he commanded it. It was as if this were his home, and they were all pieces he could move around as he wished. Frances couldn't look away. Never before had she seen such a force enter a room and overwhelm all of her senses at once.

Her eyes tried to take every nuance of his gait: the way his coat moved against his tall frame, how his long legs carried him further into the room in just a few steps. Her fingers itched to reach out and touch the dark hair that fell just over his collar, brushing the errant piece that dared to flop onto his forehead. She chanced movement and balled her hands into tight fists at her sides so as not to embarrass herself.

Goodness. What is coming over me?

Frances drank in his sun-kissed tanned skin that looked as if he spent the day riding horseback through the fields. The audacity of her thoughts brought her back to her senses.

Frances could feel her cheeks heat and quickly turned. She was standing there like she'd never seen a man before. Granted, she'd never seen one like this before. She's been around countless men of various stations in her life, and she'd never once envisioned them riding a horse... bareback, wind flowing through his hair?—

Stop it! She chided herself. Heavens, it was as if she was some young chit in her first season.

The Duke in question made his way further into the room, and Frances allowed

herself one more cursory glance. There was a small woman at his heels, who couldn't be more than sixteen or seventeen. Based on her complexion, she must be the younger sister Nora mentioned. She had the same tanned skin and dark hair. While her brother looked as if he ran his fingers through it several times before entering, hers was neatly styled in curls that framed her round face.

"Is that the sister?" Frances asked, dipping her head in the girl's direction.

Nora nodded. "Jenny. I met her at a luncheon yesterday. She seems nice but very shy. I didn't get much out of her; poor thing looked as if she was afraid to touch anything."

"Would you introduce me?" Frances went to grab Nora's hand, but her motion was halted by a feeling of being watched.

She looked back at the girl but instead of finding the wide-eyed timidity of the young woman, she was met with a broad chest clothed in a stark white shirt and a cravat. Her eyes drifted up and found darkened green pools staring right back at her. Once again, Frances could feel her cheeks heat and cursed her fair complexion for giving away any sense of decorum.

There was a small part of Frances' brain telling her she should be offended by the level of brute force this unknown man was projecting over her. She should be marching right up to those eyes and demanding what their problem was, not caring if they belonged to a duke, polite society be damned.

However, there was something in those eyes that Frances locked onto. His eyes zeroed in on her, and she felt caught in his snare, like the rabbit in the jaws of her dog. Something told her she should not move or breathe without his approval. Her mind was at war with her body. She was always known as a headstrong girl, one to push the envelope of what is socially acceptable for a young woman, but there was

something in this man's stare that compelled her to give in to society's rules, no, his rules, and not move. Her body didn't want to move; she wanted his attention, craved his attention. She was afraid the slightest breath would break the connection, however aggressive and unwarranted, and that thought alone kept her rooted in place, staring back at him.

"Good evening, friends and honored guests!" Lady Staunton's voice broke the spell Frances found herself under. She reached down and picked up her cup of punch, thankful for the coolness of the liquid as it poured down her now dry throat. She may have been around a lot of men, but none of them ever affected her this way.

Thankful to get a reprieve from whatever spell the Duke placed on her, she took another sip of the punch.

"Well," Nora asked.

"Well, what?"

"I thought we were going to go introduce you to his sister."

Frances' mind went blank. She did say that. She turned to allow Nora to lead her to the girl, all the while feeling she was about to walk off a cliff.

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CHAPTER 2

Frances let her eyes wander around the room and saw the Duke in conversation with the Lady of the house. Knowing Lady Stanton's penchant for conversation, Frances knew the girl would be free from the shadow of her protective brother for quite some time.

"Miss Bennet, do you remember me?" Nora asked with a nod. Nora approached the girl as one would a hurt kitten. She held out her hand to gently touch the girl's hands fidgeting in front of her. Frances half expected the girl to yelp and run away.

"Oh, yes, I, um... yes. Yes, I do. Honora, correct?" The girl couldn't keep her hands still.

"Please, call me, Nora, all my friends do."

With that, Miss Bennet's face lit up, and her shoulders relaxed. "Please, call me Jenny then."

Nora gestured to Frances, who offered her hand. "Miss Jenny Bennet, may I introduce to you one of my dearest friends, Miss Frances Ambrose."

Jenny curtsied which had Frances reaching out to steady her. "Oh dear. No need to curtsy to me."

Jenny's eyes dropped to the floor, and her fingers played with the drawstring of her reticule. "I'm terribly sorry. I'm new to all of this," she said while gesturing to the

room. "I fear I will never get the hang of all these rules."

Frances commiserated with the young woman. "No need to apologize. We grew up with them, and we still have trouble following them to the letter," Frances said with a little wink.

"And if anyone were to skirt the rules of polite society, it would be Frances," Nora added with a nudge into Frances' ribs.

"Honora! Don't say such things! You're giving off the wrong impression," Frances hushed Nora. "I assure you, I am very well versed in etiquette and what is expected of myself. I know how to conduct myself quite adeptly in society," she said with a sniff.

Nora, nonplussed, continued, "Remind me again whose idea it was to steal some of Sir Benton's brandy at last year's summer party?"

Cripes. Frances had forgotten all about that night. "Well, I would've gotten away with it if you would've been able to hold your liquor. One drop, and you were ready to burst into the gentleman's club and demand membership."

The two women lost themselves to their giggles. They were so caught up in their memories, that they barely noticed the slightly horrified look on Jenny's face.

Frances coughed, "I think we're scaring young Jenny, Nora."

"I fear you're right." Nora looked over Jenny's shoulder and saw her husband looking back at her, apprehension written clearly across his terrified face. Apparently, their reminiscing was drawing unwanted attention. "I think it's time I go play dutiful wife. I see my husband is stuck talking with Lord Stevens. If you'll excuse me, I'll be back soon." With that, Nora was off to save her husband from the longwinded elderly man who loved to tell tedious tales of his time at court.

Frances gestured to the punch bowl. “Come. Would you like some punch? Dinner won’t start for another hour; Lady Staunton likes to give her guests plenty of time to talk and acquaint themselves before sitting for the meal.”

Jenny politely took Frances’ offered elbow, and together, they made their way to the cart in the corner. All the while, Frances felt a presence at her back. Looking down to her side, she could just see the Duke in the corner of her eye, his eyes on her. Trying to shake off the uneasy feeling, she brought her attention back to Jenny.

“Are you liking the Mayfair?” she asked as she poured some punch into two glasses.

“Yes. It is very different than the town where we’re from.”

Jenny’s eyes clouded at the mention of her town, and Frances couldn’t help but feel protective of her. This poor girl seemed so lost, isolated. Stealing a glance at Duke Pilton, she could see why. Even standing there, listening to Lady Staunton blabber on about some mundane topic, he seemed tightly wound and ready to fight at the slightest movement. He didn’t seem like a gentle and kind guardian for a young girl coming up in society.

“Forgive me for asking, but how is it you ended up here?”

Jenny gave a quick glance in her brother’s direction which intrigued Frances.

Are they hiding something?

“My parents owned a store, and Thomas, er, the Duke, my brother —”

“Pilton, you would call him Pilton.”

Jenny’s face reddened. “Ballocks. See? I keep forgetting what to call him while we’re

outside of our home. We were so removed from the peerage while growing up.” Jenny quickly swatted at a stray tear that fell. Frances discretely handed Jenny a napkin from the punch cart, not wanting to embarrass the girl any further.

“Our job was to mind the store and only the store. We had no use for titles, etiquette lessons, or what to call people. He was always just Thomas to me.”

Thomas.

Frances liked the sound of his name. Thomas.

She found herself looking right past the girl and at the profile of Thomas. Frances nearly lost her breath. Using his Christian name out loud was considered inappropriate, yet even just thinking it made her blush.

Using her fan to wave away the thought, she took a sip of the punch before asking, “What changed?”

None the wiser to Frances’ wayward thoughts, Jenny toyed with the napkin in her hands.

“When my parents died, I was a young girl, so our aunt took us in. However, she died recently. We were managing well enough until one day a man came into our store saying he was a solicitor of some sort — I honestly wasn’t paying attention. All I know is one day my brother was running a store, and the next, we’re moving into a townhouse in London, and I’m to address him as Your Grace or Pilton.” Jenny rolled her eyes. “It feels so odd to think of him as a Duke.”

Frances could only imagine a young Pilton taking on the responsibility of a small child, let alone a business — although he did seem capable of handling such responsibilities. However, to then find out he inherited a title that would throw him

and his sister into the throes of the ton without any preparations. Frances would've been terrified.

The hairs on her neck rose, and once again she felt eyes watching her. She glanced over Jenny's shoulder and found those same blue eyes as earlier staring back at her.

"Speaking of your brother, how is he handling this new world?" Those eyes still had an effect on her, but she was getting used to their attention. She raised an eyebrow in the form of a challenge. If he wanted to stare at her for no good reason, she was going to stare right back. She was never one to hide behind a fan, and she wasn't going to start now.

Jenny smiled into her cup. "You've noticed his demeanor? I'm not surprised." Frances returned her attention to Jenny, tilting her head in encouragement for the girl to continue. After all, it would be rude for her to assume she knew the Duke well enough to call out his character flaws. Plus, she was always one for a good mystery, so the more she knew about him, the more she could put the pieces together and figure out the presence that seemed to have locked in on her.

"He's not as bad as he seems. He wants nothing to do with the ton. He would be happy to just assume the title of Duke and live out the rest of his days in our country estate."

It was then Jenny laughed. "Country estate. I can't believe we have a country estate!"

Frances couldn't help but feel endeared to Jenny. She was so full of youthful wonder and na?veté. She could look around this party and see a world of possibilities whereas Frances only saw a room full of pomp and circumstance.

"So, he is not one for the ton ?" Frances led Jenny around the drawing room, nodding her acknowledgment to the lords and ladies who occupied chairs, chatting about the

latest gossip and states of affairs. She needed to move. Her mind blamed it on her body's stiffness from the poking stays and long carriage ride here, but there was a small part of her that recognized it was her reaction to a certain pair of eyes that studiously followed her. She felt as if she was under a microscope being dissected. It unsettled her. Yet, if she was being truthful, there was a part of her that found it exhilarating.

She was ever mindful of the Duke and his watchful eyes. Frances felt an invisible thread connecting them. Wherever the two women moved to, he would move to be across the room from them. One would think he was trying to keep his distance from Frances, but Frances felt it was more than that. It was as if he wanted to keep her in his eyesight. But why?

“Oh no, he could definitely do without. In fact, he's here because of me.”

Frances cocked her head. “How so?”

“Well, I turned seventeen this year, and now that we're a part of the peerage, I considered it proper that I have an official debut.” Jenny's eyes once again fell to the ground, a tell-tale sign of embarrassment Frances quickly picked up on.

“You suggested it?” They had made their way back to the punch cart and settled onto a settee that was just vacated.

“Well, yes. I've been reading about it,” Jenny's checks slightly darkened at the admission. “I love to read,” she acknowledged while brushing a curl that fell from a pin. She tucked it behind her ear. “The dresses, the dancing, the chance of finding one's true love on a starlit night.” Jenny sighed into the chair.

Frances chewed on her bottom lip — a terrible habit, she knew, but one she couldn't help when her mind ran from her. It wasn't long ago, she had the same expectations

for a dinner party. Now, she was happy to get through a night without a damned lord stepping on her new slippers.

Frances looked across the room and once again found his gaze locked in with hers. Curiosity was getting the better of her, and her father's words echoed in her head. "You have a tendency to talk too much and befriend even the poorest of characters. And this Duke Pilton is not someone I wish my only child to entertain. " Unfortunately for her father, telling Frances not to do something was the exact reason why she would.

Frances couldn't tell if she liked the attention or not. The Duke's eyes seemed to darken, and his brows furrowed, causing a shiver to run down her spine. Maybe she did.

"His Grace didn't expect you to debut?" Frances asked, finally tearing her eyes away from his.

"I think his exact words were, 'You're an idiot.'" Jenny laughed in spite of herself.

She didn't seem one bit offended at her brother's name-calling.

"Yes. I've noticed he seems a bit... intense."

Jenny smiled. "That's an understatement. I know he's doing this for me, but he's not making it easy. You should have seen us at Lady Donton's luncheon yesterday. Neither one of us knew how to act, which made him angry and frustrated and made me want to cry. I've read books on etiquette, but all of it leaves my senses as soon as I'm met with real life situations."

Frances patted Jenny's arm. "I know how that feels."

I'm feeling it right now if I'm honest with myself. Thanks to Dorothy sneaking in dime novels, Frances has read her fair share about lusting young Dukes and the wanton women they fall for. However, no reading had ever prepared her for the rush of emotions she felt when her eyes collided with his.

"How about this? Would you allow me to call on you this week, and I can help you prepare for your upcoming debut?" The words left Frances' mouth before she fully comprehended what she was offering.

Jenny's eyebrows rose. "You would do that?" Apparently, I'm a glutton for punishment.

"Of course, I would! And I promise to be on my best behavior. I fear Nora's stories of me may have given you the wrong impression. I was raised with the best tutors. However, I must admit, I was also raised around my father's staff while he was away on business most of the time. So, some may say I have some rougher edges than most, I like to think I have lived the best of both worlds. Do you think His Grace would mind?" For reasons unknown to her, Frances held her breath.

Jenny's brows scrunched. "Doubtful. He's been so busy acclimating to his new role, I'm sure he'll welcome a distraction for me. Besides, we're here now. I might as well know what I'm doing, so I don't make fools of us both."

Lady Staunton's voice broke through the chatter of the dining room.

"For this evening, I think it would be fun if we mixed things up a bit in honor of our new guests. Since my dear husband is away, Your Grace," she called while reaching an arm out to the now wide-eyed Duke, "would you do me the honor of escorting me to the dining room and sitting next to me?"

Pilton took a deep breath, wiping his hands on his trousers, an action Frances found

both odd and endearing. Not once had she ever encountered a duke who seemed even slightly unsure of himself. She must've imagined the gesture.

He offered her his elbow, and Lady Staunton slipped her arm through. "Wonderful! Now, let us eat. Oh! I almost forgot. With the Duke sitting next to me, I think it would be fun to have us sit alternately tonight. What do you say, Your Grace?"

The man barely moved his head in agreement as she pulled him into the dining room.

"I feel for His Grace; Lady Staunton can be somewhat of a gossipmonger and chatterbox," Frances mused as she paired off with Jenny to walk into the dining room.

"His Grace will be just fine," Jenny whispered back. "It is Lady Staunton I fear for. Although, if her drink needs to be chilled, my brother could just stare at it to cool it down."

Frances tried to disguise her laugh as a cough and failed miserably.

Unfortunately for Frances, her amusement was short lived when she walked through the doors and was directed to the empty chair left of the Duke. She looked around frantically. An unmarried daughter of a baron should not be sitting next to a duke; surely, there had been a mistake. But, alas, thanks to Lady Staunton's insufferable tendencies to change things up in the name of spontaneity, it looked like Lady Staunton's drinks wouldn't be the only thing affected by the Duke's presence tonight.

Frances made her way to her seat, noticing how the Duke's shoulders stiffened when she stood behind her chair. Well, this should be fun.

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CHAPTER 3

O f course, the blasted girl from the parlor had to sit next to him.

Thomas could barely control the rage coursing through his blood. Wasn't it bad enough he had to watch her and her minion flitter around his sister, most likely getting as much gossip out of her as they could? Now, he'd have to sit next to her for the duration of dinner.

He had been a part of polite society for less than a month, and already, he was done with it. His fingers toyed with the silverware beside his plate. He was meant to be productive with his time, not sit and eat five courses with people who wouldn't know what a good day's work meant if it bit them in the ass.

Thomas rolled his neck. He missed the dirt and grime that collected on his hands, the tired muscles that let him know he actually accomplished something with his time.

He would give anything to be back in the store and not sitting in this stifling dining room, forced to make small talk with idiots while this blasted cravat slowly choked him. He would thankfully balance out a hundred ledgers if it meant he could leave before the soup was placed in front of him.

"Ah. The soup has arrived!" Lady Staunton's squeaky voice grated on his nerves.

Blast it.

"It smells delicious, Lady Staunton." The sultry voice came from his right.

His hand tightened on his knife, his knuckles turning white around the metal. He refused to look at her. He had been looking at her all night, watching her as she and her friend circled Jenny. He lost track of how many times he had to talk himself out of storming over to them, demanding they leave his sister alone. But he knew that would only embarrass Jenny more, and after the disaster that was yesterday's luncheon, he promised to behave himself.

"White soup is a favorite of ours, isn't it, Your Grace?"

Thomas looked up and met the pleading eyes of his sister, who was seated across from the girl next to him.

"What?" Thomas took a breath, trying to shake off the curious glance from the slight woman seated next to him. "Oh. Yes. Soup. It's very good."

There were some snickers around him, causing his hackles to rise.

"My dear brother, you haven't even tried it yet," his sister remarked, her eyes alight with amusement.

That's when he heard it — a soft laugh from the girl to his left. Before he realized it, his head turned and was met with a sunburst. Thomas shook his head to clear his vision. He must've had too much drink in the parlor.

In the parlor, the chit was too far away for him to get a good look at her. Now, seated right next to her, looking into her amused eyes, he felt an unwelcome shift in his breeches. The girl had the most engaging eyes he'd ever seen. Brown on the outside with amber radiating like the rising sun on the inside. There was a heat in his chest that he wasn't familiar with and therefore did not care for. Forcing himself to look anywhere but at her eyes, he focused on her hair. Her blonde hair was swept up in soft curls around her face with a blue ribbon cascading down her back. Much to his

surprise, her gentle features drew him in. He always fancied more mature features on his conquests, but there was something about the softness of her features combined with the velvet of her voice that intrigued him. He convinced himself it was so he could learn her tells — knowing your adversary's slightest movements could be the deciding factor in winning an argument — but if he were honest, it was out of pure, lustful interest.

His sister's subtle cough brought him out his trance.

“Miss Ambrose, have you had the pleasure of meeting my brother, the Duke of Pilton?” Thomas couldn't help but note her implication in her introduction.

“Your Grace, may I introduce Miss Frances Ambrose, daughter of Baron Lounton.”

The girl next to him smiled and nodded her head. “Duke Pilton. How do you do?”

His sister's introduction brought him fully back to the reality of his current situation. Beautiful eyes be damned. It was his experience that the most beautiful were also the most cunning. Now that he had a name, he could do his research and find out what her angle was in regards to his sister. No doubt, she saw her as a way to get to him. Thomas had to swallow the bile rising in his throat. That's all these people care about — rising above their station.

Miss Frances' eyes bounced between his and Jenny's.

“Pleasure,” he murmured.

“Oh, I'm terribly sorry,” Lady Staunton interjected. “Where are my manners? I should have made proper introductions before we sat down. Please forgive me, Your Grace.”

Thomas could only manage a slight smile before ducking his head to try the soup. Maybe if he ate slowly, people would leave him to his meal and allow him the solitude he craved.

Miss Frances leaned slightly towards him, and the smell of vanilla and lavender invaded his senses. “I, too, enjoy a good white soup. My father’s cook has a secret ingredient she uses that makes the almonds pop. She refuses to tell me what it is though.”

Probably almonds. The urge to roll his eyes was strong, but over the years, he learned the art of passiveness and aloofness. Draw your opponent in and fool them into a false sense of security. Two could play this game.

Thomas remained focused on his soup, hoping his indifference would persuade the girl to take her conversation elsewhere.

“I guess it would be more almonds,” she chuckled. “It’s usually the easiest answer that is the correct one.”

Thomas could feel her eyes on him, and it unsettled him. During his time as shopkeeper, he learned the first person to cave in a business dealing was the one who lost. And he rarely lost. He has stared down some of the most menacing men, and yet, feeling those hazel eyes inspect his profile almost became too much for him. There was a growing need to pursue a conversation with her, if only to learn her true intentions with befriending his sister.

“Do you enjoy riding, Your Grace?”

Thomas breathed through his nose. Why was she still talking to him?

“No.” He picked up his spoon and pushed the soup around.

“I do. We have a stable, and I used to ride all the time, but I haven’t been ri—” her voice died away as he leveled a glare in her direction.

Her lips snapped shut.

He felt her shift away and return to her soup.

Good.

Frances was ready to tear her hair out.

She always considered herself a poised and perfectly engaging dinner guest. She prided herself in being a friendly face in the crowd, one who welcomed others and was always up for a good conversation. Her friends even joked that she could strike up a conversation with a tree and learn the squirrel’s name that dropped its seed.

Frances pushed her spoon back and forth within the soup. She lost her appetite which was a shame because she really did love white soup. Blasted man. They only formally met seconds ago, and yet, he was acting as if she picked up his soup and drank from his bowl.

It seemed her father was correct if his dinner manners were any indication he was not someone she would like to be around. Her eyes drifted to his setting next to hers. He held his spoon like a knife, its handle resting on the table. The dolt probably doesn’t know how to use a spoon. The thought made her snicker.

“Something funny Miss Frances?”

Frances used her napkin to cover her grin. “Forgive me, Your Grace. It seems my musings got away from me.”

She chanced a glance in his direction and found dark oceanic eyes staring back at her. His dark brows furrowed over eyes that had gone nearly black. “Musings,” the word dripped from his lips.

“I’m sorry, Your Grace, have I offended you in some way?”

Duke Pilton looked straight ahead, not even bothering to address her question. She watched as he slowly brought the water glass to his lips. Her eyes narrowed in on his throat, watching his cravat move as he swallowed the cool liquid.

Frances snapped her head back to the course in front of her. What has come over her? What was it about this man that had enraptured her thoughts? First, she sought out his eyes in the drawing room; now, she was watching the damn man swallow. She was starting to feel as if she needed to lie down; she must be coming down with something. She was not thinking clearly.

Her eyes caught the amusement in Miss Bennet’s eyes across the table. “You must forgive my brother, Miss Frances; I fear his manners are less than desired.”

Frances offered a slight smile in gratitude. At least brutish behavior wasn’t hereditary.

“I prefer not to be talked about as though I am not here.” Duke Pilton leveled a glare at his sister.

“My apologies, Your Grace, but Miss Frances did ask you a question. It would only be polite to answer.” Frances watched the exchange with acute interest. Jenny’s eyes were pleading with her brother’s, begging him to be at least civil.

The Duke let out a heavy sigh and turned her way. “I must apologize, Miss Frances. To answer your question, no, you have not done anything to offend me.”

Frances dipped her head in acceptance of the apology.

“ Yet...” he snipped.

“ Yet?”

Frances didn't acknowledge the soft groan coming from across the table. “I beg your pardon, Your Grace, but what do you mean by that?”

Duke Pilton leaned towards her, his voice a raspy, irritated whisper. “You can't fool me, Miss Frances. I saw the way you approached my sister as if she were fresh chum in the water.”

Frances' eyes widened in shock. “Your Grace, I don't know who to be more offended for. Myself, for you implying that I am a shark, or for your poor sister, whom you've compared to a bloody chunk of meat floating in the ocean.”

The Duke's lips slipped into a sardonic smile. “I concede your second point but not your first. Let me be very clear, Miss Frances; my sister is not here for your amusement.”

Frances could only stare at him. Her mind raced through her time in the drawing room with his sister. “I admit to approaching your sister, with the proper introduction from Lady Wellington, but I assure you, I did it with the purest of intentions of welcoming a new member of society.”

His snort stoked the fire that was growing in her belly. The audacity this man had to imply he knew her intentions without fully knowing her was preposterous. Well, if he could make snap judgments, so could she.

“Since we are basing our opinions off of our first and only interaction, then it is only

appropriate for me to deduce that you are indeed a brute and an intolerable man, much to the agreement of your peers.”

The Duke’s eyes narrowed, but if she wasn’t mistaken, she sensed a hint of amusement. It was then Frances noticed her voice had risen above the whisper she intended. Embarrassed, she took a deep breath to regain her composure. She picked up her water glass, hoping the cool liquid would quell the fire still raging in her. Glancing around the table, she thankfully only saw a few sets of curious eyes on them — one of them being her father’s, and he did not look thrilled.

Well, the ride home will be interesting.

She knew what she had to do, and it was moments like these when she credited her station for allowing her to lie through her teeth in order to appease the ton . It was a disgusting habit, one she didn’t utilize often, but for the sake of her father, she learned the art of the apology one doesn’t mean.

She tilted her head to the space between the two of them, letting her eyes drop, hoping to give off the appearance of remorse. “My sincerest apologies, Your Grace. I fear I have spoken out of turn. I should not have said those things. I would like nothing more than to forget this and move toward a more appropriate conversation.” She didn’t want to look at him, but she knew that eye contact was the final necessity of a sincere apology, regardless of its truth.

Frances lifted her eyes, expecting to see acceptance of her apology in the Duke’s eyes. Instead, she was met with blue steel.

“Hmph.” His eyes barely met hers before he turned back to his cooling soup.

Frances’ cheeks began to redden, and small beads of sweat were forming along her hairline. This is not going well.

With a deep breath she managed a smile. “Your sister tells me you were a shopkeeper.”

The Duke sat in silence for a moment, looking distressed. “What else has she told you?”

“Only that your parents passed when Jenny was young, and your aunt took you in.”

The Duke rested his hands on the table, his long fingers stretching out before balling into tight fists. “And is that not enough to satisfy your thirst for gossip?”

Frances felt her cheeks heat. “Your Grace, I assure you, I have no ill intentions towards you or your sister. The world is hard enough as it is, I wish only to be a friendly face. Truly.”

He didn’t respond; he just sat there flexing his hands. They looked strong. Capable. She could envision him lifting large crates and carrying goods from dusty shelves in the back to the store front for customers to peruse. Her heart fluttered. There was a small voice urging her back to her sanity, but all she could do was watch his hands open and close. Long fingers stretching before being pulled back into a tight fist, his veins pulsing.

Frances took a drink of her water. She felt lightheaded and hot all of a sudden. I really should pay attention to what they put in the punch before dinner.

“Miss Frances, are you well?” The Duke’s words held a mocking tone as he reached a hand in her direction. She did not appreciate his mockery.

“Yes, I’m all right, thank you, Your Grace . Just a bit warm in here tonight; there’s a lot of hot air about.” She rose an eyebrow, hoping he caught on to her insinuation. “I fear the combination of that paired with too much of Lady Staunton’s punch caused

me a brief moment of distress.” She needed to take her mind off his hands. They shouldn’t even be on the table which gave her an idea.

“Your Grace, in my conversation with your sister, she mentioned her desire to be more prepared for her official debut. I had offered her my support, and if I may, I could call on her this week and help her adjust to this new life.”

His hands stilled. “And what would you, pray tell, get out of this arrangement?”

Frances’ brow furrowed. “Nothing, of course. I would be willing to do this for anyone in need.”

Once again, a snort escaped his tight lips that sent all of her etiquette lessons out the window. Her station be damned.

“Your Grace. I could be of great service to your sister; this cannot be easy for her, and there are a lot of rules and expectations that come with living this life.”

“And you are the one to help her?”

Frances nodded curtly. “I am. I assure you, I know my way around a friendly conversation and how to conduct myself respectfully in society.” Unlike someone else sitting at this table.

He continued to sit there, his one brow raised in question. Frances continued on. “For instance, it is rude to sit at a table with one’s hands on the table.”

The Duke cocked his head to the side, taking her in. “What is going to happen? Are my hands offensive to the ton ?” he quipped. The hands in question moved about to punctuate his thoughts. “Ridiculous. These rules and expectations are nothing more than the peerage making themselves feel important.” His words clipped and

defensive.

Frances watched as his waving hand brushed against the water glass which fell directly onto her lap.

She sat stunned. A first in her life. If she wasn't dying of embarrassment inside, she would call out to her father to note the date for future reference so that she could, indeed, sit speechless. Her thoughts cleared when she felt a pressure in her lap that confused her. Was she moving her arms without knowing it?

Her eyes dropped to her lap, expecting to see her own hands wiping up the liquid. What she saw stole her breath. The large, capable hands that enraptured her thoughts were now blotting the wet spots with a napkin.

His hands. His hands were on her lap. His hands were pressing down on her lap. Blood rushed to her head, and she heard nothing but the crashing waves of panic in her mind. All she could manage was a small squeak of surprise as he continued to soak up the pooling water.

The more he dabbed, the faster her heart raced. She should push him off. She should say something, but all sense left her body. The only thing she could do was feel a curious pressure building within her stomach, causing an entirely different feeling further below.

She heard a cough from the far end of the room. Her eyes quickly scanned the table to find all conversation had stopped, and they were now the center of attention. Her sitting there with a duke's hands in her lap. Oh. My. Heavens. She had seen couples rushed to the alter for less offensive situations.

She took a deep breath and cursed her luck. She moved a hand to cover his. She had only a moment to register the size difference between their hands, how hard and

coarse his hand felt, before he snapped his away. His eyes connected to hers, his blue eyes wide and unblinking. Eyes locked, leaning close enough for their breaths to mingle. Duke Pilton was the first to move, realizing the predicament he put them in.

“Miss Frances, I did not mean to spill the water on you. It’s the shopkeeper in me that cleans up spills immediately. Some habits die hard.” His voice was gruff and cold.

Frances was pretty sure the gasp that came from Lady Staunton meant this was sure to be relayed to every person in the peerage by morning.

Frances wished she could laugh the predicament off, but she was busy trying to regain control of her breath. This time, she could not blame her stays for the lack of air.

“It is fine, Your Grace.” Her voice came out as a whisper. She cursed herself for sounding so mild when he seemed unaffected by their display. With a brush of her hand, she waved off his apology. “Accidents happen, and it is but water. It’ll dry. We’ve all had mishaps. Shall we continue with dinner?” she asked, hoping that conversations would resume once they found out it was a mere accident and not a scandal.

The moment of silence was terrifying. Would they make her marry the Duke because of a water spill? Surely not. Hopefully not. Please God, no.

It was Nora’s voice from somewhere to her left that started the conversation up again, saving Frances from further embarrassment. She made a mental note to send her friend flowers for getting her out of this.

As conversations flowed around her, Frances sat, processing the evening thus far. She felt the Duke’s presence as he leaned into her. Looking over her shoulder, as if to call a footman, he whispered, “I truly am sorry for spilling the water.”

His warm breath on her neck sent a shiver down her entire body. It was as if every sensitive nerve in her body was awakened with his words. “It seems my sister and I are both in need of your services, Miss Frances.”

She chanced a glance at him and found his eyes in line with hers. Her breath caught in her throat, and the sight of his hands in her lap flashed in her mind. Once again, she found herself without a voice. She nodded in agreement, and that was the last they spoke that night.

What she agreed to, she could not say, but she felt it was more than just etiquette lessons.

CHAPTER 4

“I cannot believe this story. His hands were in your lap?” Dorothy’s face was flushed with excitement as she brushed Frances’ hair. Dorothy, her maid, was a few years younger than Frances and always seemed like a younger sister. And in times like these, she both loved and hated their relationship. She loved having someone to confide in, but the embarrassment of last night weighed heavily on her. Dorothy was one who loved to dwell on certain topics, especially if those topics included scandalous behavior.

“It was only a few seconds. I don’t understand why I need to rehash this over and over again.” Dorothy’s mouth dropped open, her eyes as wide as saucers. She met Frances’ glare in the mirror.

“Frances. The new Duke had his hands in your lap! I honestly don’t think we’re talking about this enough? What did your father say?”

Her father. Frances inwardly cringed at the thought of him. To say he was less than pleased with her behavior would be a gross understatement. “Well, he was quiet on the carriage ride back.”

Dorothy’s hand stilled. “Oh.”

“Oh,” Frances repeated.

Her father, like her, was not known for his silence. He was always talking to someone, making connections, and looking for the next business venture that would

finally give the family the boost they needed to secure their finances once and for all. It was never a good sign when Lord Solomon Ambrose, Baron Lounton, was quiet.

“We left shortly after dinner. I barely had enough time to say goodbye to Nora before my father made some excuse and dragged me out by my arm. I felt as if I were a child again when he pulled me out of Lord Stellon’s house to scold me for pushing the boys.”

Dorothy laughed. “I remember that story. You came home crying about how the boys were pulling your curls, so you shoved the one, and Lord Stellon caught you. Mama felt bad because it was my brother who had taught you to defend yourself. She made your favorite biscuits for an after-dinner treat.”

“Which you had to sneak to me because Papa sent me to my room directly after dinner.” Frances smiled at the memory. If it weren’t for Dorothy, her brother, and the other children whose parents worked for her father, her young childhood would have been very lonely.

“It seems once again my untoward behavior has gotten the better of me.” Frances stared back at her reflection in the mirror. It’s not that she woke up each morning intending to cause trouble, she just happened to have a proclivity for it. Trouble always seems to find her.

There was a knock at the door. “Miss Frances? Lady Honora Wellington, Lady Marie Stellon, and Miss Sarah Hornsby have arrived. They are awaiting you in the morning room.”

“Thank you, Stephens, I will be down shortly.”

Stephens paused in the doorway. “The correspondence you had sent this morning has been delivered.”

“Thank you, Stephens,” she said with a nod.

Frances returned to her reflection, avoiding Dorothy’s questioning eyes.

She waved her hand. She was not going to tell Dorothy she sent word to Jenny asking when an appropriate time would be to visit. “It’s nothing. Some correspondence to our solicitor for Papa.” She took one more look at her reflection and groaned, “We should go. I’m sure Nora filled them in on the mess from last night, and it’s all they will want to discuss.”

Dorothy squealed. “I can’t wait. Come, we must make haste.” Dorothy grabbed Frances by the hand and led her to the morning room.

Frances could hear low murmurs followed by giggles as Stephens opened the door for her. Three women who were by her side for every dinner party, dance, or social gathering since she was ten were together in the same room, giving her the same devilish grin. Dorothy followed her in and made her way to the tea cart to prepare the drinks.

“Well, have at it,” Frances opened her arms wide. “I’m sure Nora has informed you all about last night. What have you got to say?”

The women sat and looked at her. Nora sniffed. “I’m not sure what you’re talking about Frances or what you’re implying about my ability to hold my tongue, but I recounted nothing about last night.”

The color drained from Frances’ face as she rushed over to her friend. “Oh, Nora. I am so sorry. I —”

Her apology was interrupted by a fit of giggles from the women. “I’m sorry,” Nora laughed. “I couldn’t help myself. Of course, I told them all about it. How could I

refuse? It was just too good of a story!”

Frances ignored their outburst and joined Dorothy at the tea cart. “Would anyone like tea, or shall I just assume you’d rather gawk at me all morning?”

“Come now, Frances,” Marie countered, “it’s all in good jest. I only wish I could have been there to witness it.”

Frances poured hot water into the teacups her mother received as a gift from her father on their wedding day. “Ah yes, how was the theater? Did you and Sarah have a pleasant time?”

Marie bit into a biscuit, moaning at their sweetness. “It was a wonderful evening,” she said between bites. “Viscount Gloushire was there. I hear he’s looking for a new wife.”

Frances groaned. She heard the intention of the sentence. As the only unmarried woman in their group, outside of Dorothy, her friends gave the marriage mamas of the ton a run for their money. They were forever dropping prospective matches in her path, and so far, all of them have been dull. Was it too much to ask for someone who matched her intelligence, one with whom she had engaging conversations as well as tender moments? Her friends did. How? She had the faintest idea. By the goodness of God, all of her friends have found love matches with their husbands, a rarity in the business of marriage.

“I think after last night, our little Frannie may have her sights set on a duke.” Dorothy handed a cup to Sarah before taking a seat near the window.

Frances rolled her eyes. She has always been grateful her society friends adopted her maid into their little friend group, but in times like these, she seriously questioned their choice. “Dorothy, you weren’t even there,” she huffed. “Nora, please tell them

that what happened last night was nothing more than some spilled water and a bumbling apology.”

Nora held her hands up. “I’m sorry, dear friend. I wasn’t privy to your conversation from my end of the table. However, what I saw was your whitened face and a brooding Duke Pilton with his hands in your lap.”

Frances rubbed her temples and contemplated adding something stronger to her tea. Surely her father wouldn’t mind; he most likely was doing the same thing after last night.

Sarah patted Frances’ knee. “I’m sure it wasn’t like that, Frances. You may be lax with us, but we all know that in society, you are the one most likely to play by the rules.”

Frances reached out and took Sarah’s hand. “Thank you. All I need is this to turn into something it’s not.”

“I agree,” Marie chimed in. “From what I hear, he is a brute and simpleton. I would not want to be tied to such a man.” Frances’ eyes narrowed on Marie. She didn’t like her quick judgment about the Duke, even though Frances was guilty of the same first impression. Bickering notwithstanding, there was something about the devilish man that begged for more inspection. She felt it in the way he leaned into her; there was more to the Duke than his intimidating persona.

Frances tsked. “Marie, do not speak so ill of a man you do not know, especially a duke. He didn’t seem like a simpleton; he’s a little rough around the edges, but nothing some time with the peerage wouldn’t cure.”

“Oh Marie, I heard that about him, too.” Sarah sat straighter while eating a biscuit, completely ignoring Frances’ scolding. “I heard he worked in a shop in St. Giles, and

his aunt died of nefarious means, and all of a sudden, he's a Duke."

The women started talking over each other, each adding a more ridiculous tidbit of misheard information. While Frances enjoyed these teas as much as her friends, she liked them more when she wasn't a part of the gossip and scandal.

The conversation made Frances' head throb. "Ladies, please," she said while raising her hand to quiet the pecking hens. "There is not one thing truthful about any of that other than the fact that his aunt did recently pass on." Frances didn't feel it was her place to share the Duke's story, but she felt the need to defend him.

"After his parents died, he took over their shop, and their aunt took them in. It was after she passed, a solicitor showed up and proved his inheritance. I think it nothing more than divine timing. This is all new to them, and I think we should be extending our support, not our judgments."

Frances took a breath and looked around the room. Owlsh eyes projecting shock and interest peered back at her. "Well," Marie started, raising her eyebrows in a comical manner. "Seems like someone knows an awful lot about our mysterious Duke."

Deep breath, Frances. "I don't know what you're implying Lady Stellon but I fear I wouldn't appreciate its candor." The women shared knowing smiles that had Frances' blood boiling once more. "Why are you all looking at each other like that?"

"You like him," Nora had the audacity to declare with a sly smile.

"What? How preposterous. How could you arrive at that conclusion based of me saying his aunt passed? Something you yourself learned from Jenny." This was ridiculous. Frances' heart was racing, her mind reeling, and sweat was starting to form across her brow.

Why was her body reacting to Nora's comment this way? She felt as if they had uncovered some deep, hidden truth about her. Do I have some sort of misguided feelings for him? No. I only had one conversation with him and a horrible one at that. Yet, her mind couldn't stop replaying the look in his eyes when her hand touched his. Even now her lap tingled with the memory of him pushing down — Nope. I refuse to think about that.

"Frannie," Nora continued, "I was there. You were the only one who was able to get more than one word out of him."

"We spent our time bickering!" This conversation exhausted her. "He thought we had ulterior motives for speaking with his sister, and after this conversation with you lot, I can see why he might think that. Plus, he didn't give me details about his family, Miss Bennet did. All he did was act like a big oaf and accuse me of fishing out information for my own amusement."

Marie shot her finger into the air. "Ah-ha! So he is a brute!"

Frances fell back into the settee and stared at the ceiling. Why did she put up with these women? "That's not what I meant. I mean, he was in a way, but I don't think that is the whole of his character. Yes, he was a bit stand-offish and defensive, but wouldn't you be if you were thrust into our world without a single warning? Look at us now, we are doing exactly what he accused us of wanting to do, talking and gossiping about his family."

The women exchanged a look and immediately became interested in anything but meeting Frances' eyes. "Now what?" Frances sighed. She really was rethinking her friendships. Maybe there was a quiet barn mouse she could befriend instead. She would have to make her way to the stables later today to look.

"Oh, it's nothing," Nora patted Frances' knee. "It's just, well, some of the best love

stories start with bickering.”

“This conversation is over. I need some fresh air; how about a walk?”

Frances tried to stand up, but Nora pulled her hand back down, causing her to fall back into the settee. “Forgive us, Frances, you are right. We are hearing wedding bells where there are none. Besides, Duke Pilton isn’t the only eligible bachelor. Sarah, weren’t you just saying Lord Gloushire is rumored to be looking for a wife?”

Sarah nodded into her tea as Stephens walked into the room.

“Miss Frances, a letter has arrived from you from Froudrigh Manor.”

Frances accepted the correspondence and tucked into her skirt.

“Froudrigh Manor? How do I know Froudrigh Manor?” Nora’s eyes furrowed in concentration. Frances silently prayed that her friend wouldn’t realize where the letter came from. Once her friends found out she sent a card to call on Miss Jenny, she wouldn’t hear the end of it. In her defense, she didn’t realize Miss Bennet would respond so soon.

“Wait! I know,” squealed Sarah. “That’s the Duke’s residence!”

“You said that letter was to your solicitor on behalf of your father!” Dorothy could barely contain her amusement.

Frances hated being caught in a lie, but she hated being the target of gossip and giggles more. “I extended my support to Jenny to help her acclimate to the ton and prepare for the season, that is all.”

Marie examined her gloves. “I’m not so sure about you calling on Miss Bennet,

Frances. I feel she is a lost cause. I mean, how refined can one be coming from such a humble background?"

"Marie! Why would you say such a thing?" Nora scolded.

"What?" Marie looked around the room. "Come now, I can't be the only one thinking it." When no one responded, she continued, "They're commoners." She dragged the word out with disdain dripping from the syllables. "She seems a bit too green, and I'm sorry, no amount of time around the upper class is going to refine that many rough edges on that man." The women sat in stunned silence. "I'm sorry, Frances, but someone had to say it."

He was right. The blasted man was right. There was nothing polite about this society. Their so-called civility was based solely on judgments and opinions. They would rather keep a man down than help him succeed, especially if that meant that person's success might hinder theirs. Her eyes landed on Dorothy, who sat completely still in her chair, and her heart sank.

"No, Marie, no one had to say that." Frances rose and brushed the wrinkles from her dress. "I think that is all for today, ladies. Dorothy and I need to prepare for the day. My father has some business engagements tonight, and I will be visiting Miss Bennet tomorrow. Thank you all for coming by, but we must get to our responsibilities."

The women all murmured their goodbyes, Sarah and Nora both jabbing Marie in the ribs for her retort. As the women left, Frances and Dorothy returned to her bedroom.

Dorothy immediately began tidying up the vanity of various hairpins and combs. "Dorothy? I do hope you did not take any offense to Marie's implications about commoners." Frances could do nothing but wring her hands. While there had never been a question of whether or not Dorothy was welcome to stand in and offer a thought or two during their morning tea, every once in a while, the topic of class

reared its ugly head and would make things uncomfortable. Unfortunately, it usually came from Marie. The daughter of a viscount, she had regard for the finer things in life than the rest of the ladies and often forgot her manners when it came to classist chatter.

“You know she adores you and your friendship,” Frances offered.

Dorothy smiled absently as she closed a drawer with her hip. “I know. There is no point dwelling on it. Thank you for allowing me to sit with you; it’s always the best part of my day.”

Frances enveloped her maid in a hug. Dorothy let out a little snuffle before breaking away. “Enough of this,” she said wiping a stray tear. “What of the letter? What does it say?”

The damn letter, she almost forgot.

Frances pulled the note from her skirt and sat on her bed. “It’s from Miss Bennet. She accepted my card and is excited to see me tomorrow. Goodness, I don’t think I’ve ever seen so many exclamation points in a correspondence letter.”

“So you’re going to go?”

Frances looked up at Dorothy, who was leaning into the post of Frances’ bed. “Of course, I’m going to go. Nothing has changed, Dorothy. I couldn’t care less what Marie or anyone else thinks of Duke Pilton or Jenny. She is kind and in need. Besides, I’ve always enjoyed helping people, you know that.”

“People, wild animals...”

Frances couldn’t help but laugh. “It’s true. What can I say, I have a bleeding heart

when it comes to helping those in need.”

“It’s your bleeding heart that makes you so special, Frances. Anyone who meets you knows that. It would take a truly heartless person to see your generosity as anything but genuine.” Dorothy’s words were a soothing balm on Frances’ strung-out nerves. Unfortunately, the truth of the matter was not everyone saw her generosity as genuine. There was one big ugly mark on her record, and its name was Duke Pilton.

“I hope you’re right, Dorothy, but I have a sinking feeling that there is someone of importance who disagrees with you.”

And thanks to her generosity, she was willingly walking into a lion’s den. Helping wild animals, indeed.

CHAPTER 5

Frances peered out the carriage window and waited for her footman to come around. Froudrigh Manor stately stood on the other side of the carriage, ten, maybe twelve steps away. Yes, she counted the steps as she watched Duke Pilton's footman welcome their carriage. So, few steps, yet they felt so daunting, so imposing. Was he in there? The thought was enough to have her morning tea turn in her stomach. Surely, he wouldn't bring up the incident at the dinner party. But what if he does ?

Her carriage door opened, and she slipped her hand into her footman's hand, slowly stepping out onto the road. Regardless, if the duke was in residence, she was about to go in, ready or not.

"Welcome to Froudrigh Manor, Miss Ambrose. Miss Bennet is waiting for you. Please allow me to show you to the drawing room."

Frances followed the footman through the double doors and into the drawing room where she found Jenny paging through a book.

"Miss Bennet, may I present Miss Frances Ambrose?"

"You came!" Jenny slapped her book shut, ran over to Frances, and gathered her in a big hug. The gesture took Frances by surprise. "Oh my! What a welcome! Good morning, Jenny."

Jenny took a step back, "I was so happy to receive your card that I had to respond straight away. Simmons said it was the fastest turnaround for a correspondence he has

ever had. Although, that's not really saying much since the previous duke was close to eighty and just sat in his library all day. Do you read? I would show you the library, it is extraordinary, but there is a certain smell that accompanies it, I think due to the previous duke." Jenny's face was flush with excitement.

Frances stood with her arms held in front of her, still semi-embracing Jenny, not really sure what to make of the information that was just thrown at her.

Jenny dropped her hands from Frances' hold and looked at her feet. "I'm sorry, I ramble when I'm nervous." She tucked a curl behind her ear, stepping to the side. "Goodness, I haven't even let you fully into the room. Please, come, sit down. Would you like some tea? Simmons put this cart in the room for us; wasn't that nice of him?"

Frances smiled, taking a seat next to the cart. "I would love some tea, thank you." Relaxing into the chair she took in her surroundings. There was an energy that radiated off of Jenny that naturally drew Frances to her. She shone like a beacon in a darkened, drafty old drawing room. It looked like it hadn't had a proper cleaning in ages although if the previous duke mostly lived out of the library, there would be no real need to give much attention to the other rooms.

"I'm sorry if I'm a bit forward; this is all so new to me. Just the fact that I have a person to bring me tea is unfathomable." Jenny paused to look at Frances. "You must think I'm an absolute dolt to be fascinated at the prospect of tea."

Frances reached out to Jenny, motioning her to sit next to her. "Come now, I think no such thing. If anything, it is refreshing. We take too much for granted in this life; you are nice reminder to be grateful for the privileges we have."

Jenny averted her eyes and played with the hem of her glove at her wrist. Frances recalled the night of the dinner when Jenny would fidget when nervous. I wonder if

her brother has any sort of tells. Frances bit her lip. No. She would not think of him. She was here for Jenny, not the Duke.

“To be honest, I feel a bit awkward about it. I’m so used to preparing my own meals that to have someone not only prepare them but serve them to me feels a bit pretentious.”

Frances couldn’t help but laugh. She grew up in the peerage and thought the same thing. How many times had she snuck extra biscuits or tea, so she didn’t have to call on Dorothy to bring some up for her? No point in making someone get her food when she was perfectly capable of getting it herself. Unfortunately, Dorothy’s mama always rushed her out of the kitchens if she caught her in there, hence the sneaking food.

“Oh, Miss Frances, I am so sorry. I didn’t mean any offense!”

“None taken, I assure you. Please, call me Frances; no need for formalities between us. I think we shall become great friends.”

Jenny preened under Frances’ compliment. “I do hope so. Truth be told, I thought I’d have more friends than I do now, but if it’s not me making a fool out of myself, it’s my brother’s sneers that chase people away.”

Frances’ throat dried at the mention of the Duke. Jenny’s overwhelming personality washed away any nervousness about encountering the Duke as soon as she entered the drawing room. Unfortunately, now the prospect of seeing him today consumed her once again.

“Speaking of the Duke, will he be joining us this morning?” Frances tried her best to temper the curiosity in her voice.

Jenny waved her off. “Oh, no. He left early this morning without a word to me which is no different than his usual pleasant disposition. I heard Simmons tell the staff he wouldn’t return until late this afternoon. Lucky for us we will have all morning to enjoy each other’s company without any interruptions from him.”

Frances’s heart gave a lonely thump. She expected to feel relieved he wouldn’t be there to once again accuse her of ill intentions, no doubt. Yet, she couldn’t help but feel bereft at the thought of not seeing him. She tucked that away to examine later and focused on the young girl in front of her.

“Tell me, Jenny, you must be excited for your debut. The first ball of the season is in two weeks.”

Frances barely finished when Jenny’s eyes teared up. “Excuse me, Frances, I seem to be a range of emotions this morning. I’m so embarrassed. I cried in front of you at Lady Staunton’s as well.”

Jenny took the offered handkerchief from Frances and dabbed the corner of her eye. “It’s like I told you at dinner, I’ve read all the books, but when the time comes to engage with other peers, I lose all sense and stand there with a silly grin on my face, afraid to move.”

Frances stood and poured some tea, using the time to plan the best way to help young Jenny.

“I think you don’t give yourself enough credit, Jenny. You know what I was thinking when I first came in here?”

Jenny covered her eyes and groaned. “Oh, please no. I can only imagine. I practically threw myself at you and rambled on about our library’s odors.”

“I thought you are the most engaging, bright, and fascinating young woman I’ve ever met.”

Jenny peeked through her fingers. “You must be joking.”

Frances shook her head. “I am not. I’m a very serious person,” Frances continued, comically sticking her nose in the air. Jenny laughed at the spectacle.

“In all seriousness, I am being honest. There’s this light about you Jenny. I wasn’t lying when I said it was refreshing. All the pretenses you mentioned? The pomp and circumstance? That can be taught, and even then, it’s mostly just having the confidence to act a certain way. There really is no trick to it. It doesn’t come from a birthright, or years taking etiquette lessons, no matter what anyone tells you. If someone tells you that, it’s because they are threatened by you, and they need to make you feel smaller. So, take heed, if anyone questions your upbringing, just know that you must be doing something right.”

Jenny sat, completely enraptured. “Is that how it really is?”

“No,” Frances said with a smirk. “Well, yes and no. It’s true I believe a person needs more confidence than etiquette lessons or birthright, but having those two things in combination with the confidence doesn’t hurt. And lucky for you, you have all three.”

Jenny shook her head, “I know next to nothing when it comes to etiquette.”

“You know more than your brother.” Frances’s hand flew to her mouth. Good heavens! Apparently, Jenny also knew more than Frances. “I must apologize. I did not mean to talk ill of your brother.”

Jenny was too busy doubled over in laughter to hear the apology. “Oh, Frances, you never have to apologize for speaking the truth where my brother is concerned. I have

said worse about him in his presence.”

Frances found Jenny’s laughter contagious and couldn’t help but join in. “I guess I should reconsider my offer of helping you with etiquette lessons.”

Jenny sobered at the thought. “No, oh, please don’t. I like you. You don’t make me feel like a commoner playing dress-up. I would very much appreciate any support you could give me.

“Very well,” Frances said through her giggles. “I suppose we should begin with knowing when to speak our minds and when to keep thoughts to ourselves. I think I need a reminder of that myself.”

Thomas stepped out of the carriage and cracked his neck. He would need to see about getting a new carriage. This one was run down and didn’t allow much leg room. He’s been warding off a leg cramp for the past three miles.

Thomas was met at the door by his steward, Simmons. He and the other servants came with the title. “Good evening, Your Grace.”

“Ah, Simmons. Is dinner ready? I haven’t had a bite to eat since this morning.” After the trials of the past few days, Thomas was eager to get out of London and away from prying eyes. He spent the day at his family’s old store.

Once he discovered he was a duke, he hired one of his oldest friends to manage his family’s store. He couldn’t decide if he was content or angry to see him handling the store so well.

Thomas walked past his steward, handing him his jacket. “I’ll be in the library.”

“Your Grace?”

Thomas stopped and turned. “Yes? Oh right. The smell. Haven’t had a chance to air it out I see. I’ll be in the drawing room then. Let me know when dinner is ready.”

“Your Grace, Miss Jenny and Miss —”

Simmons was cut off by a pair of squeals coming from the drawing room. Thomas threw a glance at Simmons before opening the door to find two women on the floor, rolling in fits of laughter.

Slightly annoyed his much-anticipated quiet night was now interrupted by fits of giggles, he cleared his throat hoping to quiet them.

Both women stopped their laughter and looked up at him from their spots on the floor. Jenny’s face was bright red with streaks of tears running down her cheeks. She looked so young and full of life, it brought an ache in his chest. It was a reminder of why he left the store and all he knew behind. It was for her. He wanted so badly to leave the struggle and worry behind them and offer his sister a better life. She was why he was currently biting his tongue so as not to say anything that would sour her jovial mood.

The girl currently curled into a shaking ball of mirth next to Jenny turned her back to him, most likely embarrassed by her behavior.

“Brother! It’s so good to see you! Guess what?” Jenny asked between her hiccupped laughs. “I am to have etiquette lessons.”

Thomas raised an eyebrow. “Is that so?” He made his way over to the desk with the snifter of brandy on it. “Tell me, sister, what lesson are you on where it is socially acceptable to lie on the floor giggling like hyenas?”

“First, I’m a shark, and now, I’m a hyena?”

Thomas froze. It can't be. He slowly turned to see steely hazel eyes looking up at him. It never occurred to him that the heap of giggling nonsense next to his sister was Miss Frances.

"Your Grace." Her throaty voice vibrated through him.

Her face was flush, her eyes bright. Her hair was mussed with soft waves of golden silk framing her face. Her dress rumpled and wrinkled, probably from rolling on the ground. Everything about her appearance should have been reprehensible, yet he found it oddly arousing. He took a drink, not trusting his voice just yet. Only when the cool liquid settled in his stomach did he reply.

"Miss Frances. If this is how you conduct your etiquette lessons, I must consider finding someone else to help Jenny." He cursed the way his voice sounded strained. Damn this woman and whatever hold she had on his baser instincts.

Jenny rolled her eyes. Obviously, the etiquette lessons weren't taking.

"Oh stop. Frances was going over some of the dances with me, and I accidentally stepped on her dress, causing us to fall. It was quite amusing; I'm sure you would have loved to have witnessed my clumsiness." Jenny raised her hand, indicating her brother should help her up. With a sigh, Thomas grabbed her by the elbow and hoisted her up. Jenny moved to the settee and not so graciously plopped down onto it. "Tell me, brother, how was your day?"

Without thinking, he reached down and offered his hand to Frances, who still sat on the ground quietly watching him. His focus was still on Jenny when he felt the slight hand slide into his. So delicate. Thomas looked down into her hazel eyes and once again couldn't find his words. He pulled her up, and as she stood, her chest brushed against his sending an all too familiar shock through his body. Get it together, man. You don't even like this damned woman.

Thomas took a step back, wiping his hands on his breeches. "It was fine. I don't want to interrupt the etiquette lessons. I feel there is more work I need to attend to."

"Nonsense, stay. I'm sure you could learn a thing or two. Frances wouldn't mind, would you, Frances?" His sister's head lolled on the back of the settee, her eyes closed. She was still trying to find her breath. Thomas looked at Frances, curious for her response. He may not know why she affected him like she did, but judging by the rise of pink in her cheeks, he was not the only one affected. Unfortunately, for him, her interest was probably founded in wanting gossip or to change her standing in the ton. To catch a duke as a husband was a boon for women of age in the marriage mart. The lust he felt quickly evaporated, leaving a sour taste in his mouth.

"No bother to me. It would be an honor to sit with Your Grace." Her words dripped with disdain but were spoken so eloquently that the untrained ear would have missed their true meaning. She smiled sweetly as she fluffed out her dress before gracefully sitting down in the chair. The facade of a lighthearted companion melted away, leaving a proper daughter of the ton. It was such a smooth transition, Thomas would've missed it if he wasn't paying close attention to her. She definitely knows what she is doing. I was right to keep an eye on her.

"Wonderful!" Jenny sat up and rang the bell, calling for Simmons. "Simmons? Would you mind bringing in more refreshments? Miss Frances and I are parched from our dancing."

Frances let out a soft laugh, "I'm not sure you could call what we did dancing." Thomas noticed the way her eyes softened when Frances looked at Jenny. Maybe her motives were true, and she was only looking to help and not fishing for information? Thomas shoved the thought away. He was a good judge of character, even if being in London heightened his fighting instinct.

"So, tell me, Miss Frances, other than dance lessons, what other areas of etiquette

have you touched upon today?”

“We mostly focused around what is expected of her at her debut, Your Grace.”

“Ah. How exciting.” Thomas couldn’t keep the sarcasm from his voice although if the truth must be known, he didn’t try.

“It is, Your Grace. For a young woman with great possibilities such as your sister, it is a very exciting time. Not only is she beautiful, but she is intelligent and well spoken. You should be very proud.” Frances’ tone reminded Thomas of an old schoolmarm, and it grated on his nerves. Surprised, Thomas realized he preferred it when Frances had some bite to her. She was performing now, pretending to be the epitome of grace and gentle upbringing. And he hated every bit of it.

“My sister? Well spoken? Are we talking about the same girl?”

Jenny scrunched her nose and stuck her tongue out in her brother’s direction. “Ah, yes. That’s the Jenny I know.”

Frances watched the exchange, unmoving — her posture straight and her voice level. “Yes, well, I’ve only had a day, but I have no doubt, by the time of the start of the season she will be the diamond of the first water.”

Jenny gasped. “Do you think so?”

Frances’s face broke out in a radiant smile. Thomas shifted in his seat, pulling at his cravat. Where is Simmons with those blasted drinks?

“Jenny, confidence, remember? That’s your greatest strength. Walk into that room like you belong there because you do. No one can take that away from you. You’ll win them over with your kindness and wit. And don’t worry, we’ll work on your

uncanny ability to tell your life story in one breath,” she added with a wink.

Jenny sighed, and for the first time since moving to the townhouse, she seemed comfortable in her surroundings. Could that be because of Frances? This is what he had wanted all along, for Jenny to be supported and taken care of. Had Frances provided the soft landing spot she had so desperately needed after a childhood of loss and struggle?

Thomas rubbed his forehead. The stress of the day and these deuced thoughts were giving him a headache.

“Your Grace? Are you well?” Frances’ voice drifted into his head. He couldn’t tell if it was helping the pain or causing it.

“Yes. I’ve been seeing to business.”

“Oh? Were you out on business?” Thomas tried not to read into her question. It was just a simple question about his day; she wasn’t asking for his itinerary.

“What concern of it is yours?” Thomas bit back a curse. He hated that this woman had any effect on him.

Frances slowly shook her head. “You are not implying what I think you’re implying, are you?”

Thomas raised his eyebrows, mockingly. He knew he was being too harsh with her, but he had had too much experience with people hiding their true nature to get what they wanted. She might be pleasant to look at and spoke all the right words to make one feel at peace, but he refused to be taken for a fool.

“Your Grace. I thought we had moved passed this at the dinner party. I am not

looking for any gossip. What has happened in your life to cause you to distrust a simple question about your day?"

The audacity of this woman with her flushed cheeks, shining eyes, and sinful lips that she was currently biting. How dare she question a duke? Thomas stood with more force than he intended. "I think I shall retire for the night. Jenny, good night. Miss Frances, I assume you know you're way out?" On a turn of his heel, he walked out of the drawing room. However, he had no intention of going to sleep. What he needed was a stiff drink and some quiet.

CHAPTER 6

Frances sat, shocked, which at this point was ridiculous. Every time she conversed with Duke Pilton, he accused her of scavenging for scraps of information. “I’m at a loss, Jenny. Do I come across a certain way? I have never had someone react to me before without just cause.”

Jenny was no longer sitting up but slouched down with a pillow over her face. She muffled a response, but Frances couldn’t understand a word. “Jenny. Please. I’m serious. I’m going to develop a complex of the mind if I continue with him.”

“It’s not you, Frances. He wasn’t always like this, but these past few months have been extremely difficult. It’s the only answer I have.”

Frances stood, once again brushing the wrinkles out of her dress. No. She couldn’t accept that answer. They all had struggles; life was ever-changing and throwing obstacles in the way. It was no excuse to treat someone with such hostility and vitriol. There had to be something else. She needed answers, and there was only one person who could give them to her.

“Jenny? I think I will retire for the evening. Could you find Simmons and have him call for my carriage?”

“Where is Simmons? He never did bring the refreshments. I’ll go look for him.” Jenny made her way to the door and turned. “Meanwhile, please don’t sit here and ruminate over my brother. He’s not worth it. Feel free to pick up the book I was reading; it is quite good.”

Frances waited until she heard Jenny's footsteps disappear down the hall. She had no intention of sitting around and ruminating about anyone. She was going to settle this dispute once and for all. Now, to find a duke.

She found him in the library. He was standing in front of a window that looked out over a small garden. His muscular arms strained as he pulled up the heavy pane. Standing in the doorway, she took in his physique. She never gave herself the chance to fully take him in, most likely because she hated to admit he was gorgeous. Tall, with an athletic build, one could tell he did manual labor. Yet he had the poise and posture of a refined gentleman of the ton. Quite the paradox. His dark hair curled over his collar, and she had a momentary lapse of judgment when she wondered what it would feel like in her hands.

"I want an answer." Frances inwardly sighed in relief because her voice came out stable and strong. Not like her stomach which was currently turning and flipping to the point of nausea.

The Duke quickly turned, a look of shock on his stupid beautiful face. This would be much easier if he were ugly.

"Miss Ambrose! You should not be here. Where is Simmons?"

Frances closed the door behind her and locked it. They were going to have this discussion whether he liked it or not.

"What are you doing?" Duke Pilton rushed to the door with long strides, causing her to back up against it, blocking his access to the lock.

"Do not think for one moment that I can't pick you up and move you out of the way." Frances blushed at his comment. "This is highly inappropriate. If someone were to walk in on us, our marriage banns would be announced tomorrow!"

Frances smiled. “Well, it’s a good thing I locked the door, isn’t it?”

The Duke’s eyes flew open in horror. “Are you mad, woman?” His face reddened in anger, but Frances swore she could see a hint of amusement in his eyes. It was a flash but enough to embolden her to ignore his question.

“I have noticed, Your Grace, you like to accuse me of a lot of untoward behaviors. I feel like I am owed an explanation. We’ve met only twice, yet you have concocted this opinion of me that has greatly offended me, and I would like to know why.”

The Duke paced back to the window. “And you wish to do this now?”

Frances shrugged and leaned back against the door. “Seems like a good time to me. Simmons is fetching my carriage although he seems to have gotten lost. Jenny went to go find him. You might want to reevaluate your staff.” Frances sniffed. “And what is that smell? It smells as if something died in here.”

The Duke ran his hands up and down his face before he ran them through his hair. An action that fascinated Frances. It was as if the aura of His Grace was being peeled away with each swipe of his hands and replaced with roguish masculinity. She rather fancied him this way. Everyone characterized his “roughness” as a blight on his character whereas Frances found it exhilarating.

“That’s exactly what happened in here. Pretty sure the old duke was in here several days before anyone found him.”

Frances cocked her head. “That’s horrific! Why are you in here then?”

“Because it has brandy. And books. And once I get these windows opened and the furniture replaced, it’ll be my favorite room.” He paused, “Why do you ask so many questions?”

“Why do you avoid so many questions?” she countered.

Duke Pilton took a very deep breath and released it. “I know people like you. You come off engaging and friendly. You say the right words; you know how to work a room. You find the most fragile of us and suck them dry of information to use to boost your social standings. Well, I refuse to allow my sister to fail for your amusement.”

Frances did not let his words penetrate her resolve. She would not cower to him and give in to his bait. She pushed herself off of the door to stand her ground. “I will not be judged on others’ actions. Until I do something that warrants this hostility, I expect to be treated with respect and dignity.”

Duke Pilton guffawed. “Respect and dignity? Those are nothing but oxymorons when it comes to the ton .”

“Nonetheless. Like it or not, you and your sister are a part of society, Your Grace. It is unfortunate that there are fortune hunters and gossipers amongst us, but until I start partaking in those pastimes, which I don’t, I demand you treat me with respect.”

The Duke’s eyes darkened, and his head dipped in concentration. Frances felt the energy in the room shift; she feared she may have taken it a step too far. Duke Pilton sauntered to her like a lion stalking its prey, quietly, purposefully.

“Making demands of a duke.” His words, just above a whisper, settled over her skin like fine silk. Words escaped her, and she was left with only her pure stubbornness not to wilt under his gaze. The toes of his boots brushed up against the hem of her dress as he leaned in, causing her to stagger back into the door. He placed his hands on either side of her head, effectively caging her in. Alarm bells went off in her head. She definitely had pushed him too far. She should apologize, she should duck out from underneath his arms, she should do... something .

She was woefully outmatched. It was at this moment the significance of locking the door weighed on her. Stupid, stupid, stupid girl. How many times had her father and tutors drilled into her not to be alone with a man without a chaperone? Standing here, in between the Duke's arms, her back against the only way out, she finally understood the danger.

Frances paused; there was also something lurking underneath her fear. Something warm, exciting, something she felt the need to explore.

His hooded eyes dipped to meet hers. "Is that where we are now, Miss Ambrose? You're making demands of me?" Her palms were sweaty, and her knees knocked underneath her, yet she still refused to cower. She bit her lip to steal her nerves, keeping her eyes locked on his.

But he was no longer looking into her eyes, and his focus fell to her lips. More precisely, the lip she was currently chewing on. A small movement caught her eye, and a wide red tip emerged between his lips, licking his bottom lip. The movement captivated her thoughts. Through the chaos that was whirling in her mind, she thought she heard him mutter something about her mouth when she felt his lips push against hers. The force of his kiss pushed her further into the door. Her eyes widened in surprise before her instincts took over, and they fluttered shut.

She let out a soft groan, and he stilled. When she opened her eyes, she found blue fire staring back at her. She had just been kissed by a man, who was still looking at her like he could devour her. Her lips felt tingly; her heart was pounding. The same part of her brain that sent off alarm bells was shouting at her to push him away. Slap him. Leave!

But she couldn't. Her feet were rooted to the ground. The tingle spread from her lips, down into her belly where it settled into firm resolve. The Duke shifted to step away, and her heart dropped. What do those damned Americans say? In for a penny, in for a

pound.

If she was going to kiss a Duke in a dusty, smelly old library, then she was going to really kiss him. She reached up on her toes and pulled his head back to hers. She planted her lips to his and felt the sharp intake of surprise. She locked her gaze in on his, challenging him to push her away. She half expected him to come to his senses and push her away. One of them should remain levelheaded, but it was not going to be her. If he wanted to start something, he could finish it. The thrill of just how he would finish something like this was enough of a reason for another throaty groan to escape her.

She saw the change in his eyes. He took the bait. His hands found their way to her face, and while they cupped her cheeks, his tongue pushed through her barrier and into her mouth. He invaded her senses. His was now everywhere around her, in her. The heady scent of sandalwood flooded her nostrils as she tasted the brandy on his exploring tongue. His roughened hands, the ones that felt so strong under hers just two nights ago, now held her so gently. She was completely lost to his ministrations, and for once in her life, she didn't feel the need to take control.

Following his lead, she moved her hands into his hair, reveling in its softness between her fingers. How could this man be both soft and hard, intimidating yet gentle, judgmental and open? He was a mystery Frances enjoyed being caught up in.

"Frances?" Jenny's echoing voice could be heard in the hallway. The Duke jumped back, straightening his cravat before reaching to adjust his breeches. Frances noted the movement with curiosity while trying to quiet the pounding of her heart.

"I should go," she whispered. Her voice breathy and soft.

"Frances, are you still here?" Jenny's voice continued from further down the hallway. "I found Simmons. There was an accident in the kitchen he was seeing too, but your

carriage has pulled up.”

The Duke just nodded and reached behind her to unlock the door. Frances had to restrain her body from leaning into his arm. She knew the feeling of embarrassment would settle over her as soon as she left, so she wanted to stay in this moment as long as she could. Her body was still humming, and her hands felt empty, but reality was waiting for her on the other side of the door.

She nodded her goodbye and rushed into the hallway. She found Jenny in the drawing room. With one final breath to get her breathing back under control, she entered the room.

“Sorry, you were gone awhile, so I went looking for you. You said my carriage is ready?”

Jenny turned, taking in Frances’s appearance. Frances’ fingers itched to straighten her dress or hair, but she felt that would only solidify any implication she was anywhere she shouldn’t have been.

“Um, yes. Let me walk you out.” Jenny smiled, but Frances couldn’t help but notice some hesitancy on her friend’s behalf.

“Thank you. I hope you’ll allow me to continue to visit. I meant what I said earlier; I would love to help you.”

Whatever plagued Jenny’s expression before disappeared, and her shoulders relaxed. “I would love that, Frances. Would you be able to come by at the end of the week?”

Frances’ eyes betrayed her and looked past Jenny’s shoulder down the corridor to the Duke who had stepped out into the hallway. “Yes, I would love to come back. Send word on when you’d like me to visit, and I’ll be here.”

Jenny squealed and enveloped Frances in an all-consuming hug. “Wonderful! I will send word as soon as I can.”

Frances said her final goodbye and made her way into the carriage. She sank back into the plush seat and brought her fingertips up to her lips. If she closed her eyes and held her breath, she could still feel his lips on hers.

The further they drove from Froudrih Manor, the more the weight of her actions weighed on her.

She kissed a duke and not just any duke — one that she was certain didn’t like her.

Embarrassment crept up her spine which had her sinking further into the seat. What must he think of me? The thought of him thinking she was some inexperienced want-to-be-harlot throwing herself at dukes had her stomach churning.

What if he tells someone?

Frances pushed out a heavy sigh. She shouldn’t worry about what happened. She wouldn’t tell anyone, and she highly doubted the Duke would go around announcing his participation. Based on his reaction to any of her questions, he was quite good at keeping secrets.

She closed her eyes and counted to ten, a trick her father taught her to do to control her thoughts in times of strife. Unfortunately for her, her mind wandered back to the library. Her breath picked up as she recalled the way he held her, the way he looked at her, and the way he tasted.

Frances finally understood what her friends had been talking about all these years when they spoke of their husbands. The warmth that pooled in her body, the racing of her heart, the way their breath intermingled. If only there was a way to experience

more without the eyes of the ton watching her. She would love to experiment with more of those feelings.

Blue steel eyes flashed in her mind. The Duke undoubtedly experienced his fair share of those feelings. The way he kept her body at attention screamed experience. An idea sparked in her brain, one that sent her conscience running to ring that damned alarm bell again.

CHAPTER 7

Frances had spent the last few days pacing in her room. She was certain Dorothy picked up on her odd mood, but thankfully, she didn't needle Frances when she lied and said she was fine. She was far from fine. Fine wasn't even on the horizon.

She was going back to visit Jenny today. Her stomach was a chaotic mixture of excitement and nerves. It is one thing to remain resolute in her decision ever since the salacious idea formed in her head the other night. It was an entirely different thing to convince the man she intended to proposition to agree. She had resolve, and her upbringing, and if those two failed, she had her stubbornness. She hoped that was enough.

She intended to use the carriage ride to their house to finalize exactly what she was going to say to the Duke. Unfortunately, every time she came up with an opening line, her brain replayed their time in the library, and she found herself gazing out the window with a silly grin on her face.

Once again, she found herself standing outside his residence wondering if he was home. It would be her luck to become so worked up, and the brute wouldn't even be there. And, yes, she still thought of him as a brute. He might be her means to an end, but he still riled her. Which is why, she rationalized, he was the perfect solution to her problem. There would be no chance of it developing into anything more.

Simmons ushered her into the drawing room where she once again found Jenny reading. "Good morning, Jenny. Reading again, I see."

Jenny smiled, not lifting her head. “I know, a dreadful habit I’m told.”

Frances waved her off as she sat. “Whomever told you that probably couldn’t read.”

“My brother.”

“I rest my case then.”

Jenny threw her head back in laughter. “That is why I like you, Frances. May I be honest with you?”

Frances sat forward in her chair. “Always.”

“When I first saw you and Lady Wellington that night at Lady Staunton’s dinner party, I assumed you two were going to be dreadful to me. You both looked so prim and proper. You knew how to stand, how to smile. You appeared to be levels above me.” Jenny closed her book, putting it on the table next to her. “My brother prepared me for our entry into society by telling me that everyone was out to see us fail due to our upbringing. I was to keep my guard up, especially around women.”

Frances grimaced. “I thought this was about how you like me?”

Jenny chuckled. “It is! I promise. He had me so worried that I would make a mistake, and everyone would laugh. I was so afraid, I didn’t want anyone to talk to me, but then I didn’t want to be a wallflower standing by myself either.” She looked up from her hands. “He had me so confused,” she continued, rolling her eyes. “But then you came up to me. You were so kind to me when you didn’t have to be. You and Lady Wellington immediately made me feel comfortable. And you know what the best part is?”

“I can’t even fathom a guess,” Frances replied dryly.

“That,” she said, pointing her finger at Frances. “Your sense of humor. You make me feel like I don’t have to give up the things I like, like reading, or change my entire personality just to be considered a member of society. I can be me... albeit a toned-down version for polite company, of course,” she said with a laugh.

Frances relaxed into the chair. She rather liked Jenny, and she hoped she wasn’t steering her in the wrong direction. The truth was her brother wasn’t far off; this society was ruthless and not for the faint of heart. They could easily chew Jenny up and spit her out into their embroidered handkerchiefs without blinking an eye.

Jenny was tenacious and determined, two traits she would need to withstand the pressures she was willingly walking into. She has seen too many girls crumble under the weight the ballrooms put on women, and she would hate to see Jenny lose her luster because of it.

“I fear my father may disagree with you. He most certainly wished I was a bit more soft spoken when it counted, but unfortunately for him, I was born with curiosity and the ability to talk to anyone. Growing up, he considered me quite the hoyden; I was a bit too carefree and boisterous.” A movement over Jenny’s shoulder caught Frances’s eye. Just outside the window, she saw the man, who had had free rein of her thoughts for days, turning to come up the stoop. He was home.

She brought her attention back to Jenny. “Although he really shouldn’t be that surprised; I get my affinity for conversation from him.”

Frances heard the main door open as Simmons welcomed the Duke home. Her pulse raced.

The door to the drawing room opened, and she took her last full breath of the day. Here we go.

He could tell she was here even before he saw her, before he heard her. She had occupied his every waking moment since she left the library four days ago. It was just his luck that sweet woodruff was planted just underneath the library window that was now stuck open, and the scent of sweet vanilla wafted in with the morning breeze. Her scent. He had every intention of ripping it out, but he always found something else to do with his time.

Walking through the foyer, he heard the gentle tones of the two women talking, a surprising change of pace from the last time he encountered the two of them together. Before their friendship started, he had hoped being around the ton would quell some of his sister's more spirited traits. However, there was nothing in his encounters with Miss Frances that suggested she was the one who would help with that.

No, not Frances Ambrose. She played the role of delicate and pristine societal darling, but under the ruse of gentle upbringing laid a hellion waiting for someone to come unleash her inhibitions. His hands balled into fists at his side. His body vibrated at the memory of her body pushed up against his. He knew she was innocent, that much was certain, but the way she leaned into him, her hands threading through his hair, gave him the impression there was more to her than the guise of modest maiden she showed to the world.

Which was exactly the reason why he remained so busy this week. He was not looking for trouble or a distraction, and Miss Frances was both of those to a tee. He walked into the foyer, hoping a quick greeting would suffice, but when she looked up at him from her chair, he found himself walking toward the chair across from her before he realized it.

She tilted her head and gave a slight smile. "Good afternoon, Your Grace."

"Good afternoon, Miss Frances. You look well."

He watched her eyes flash with surprise before settling into her usual aloof persona. There was something about how quick she was to hide behind the wall of propriety that made him want to tear it down.

“What is on the docket for today’s lesson, sister?” His words were spoken to his sister, but his eyes remained on Frances.’ His mind warred with his body. He was supposed to only pop in for a quick greeting, but the way her body challenged his was too good to pass up. It’s been a while since he played the game. Usually, his tastes didn’t require much chase, but he was curious to see how long she could keep the game up. Surely, she had to be affected by their dalliance, even more than he.

He’d heard some talk of her around the ballrooms. She hadn’t been associated with anyone in particular with no prospects of note within the past several years. Most of the ton had written her off as a spinster which was a shame. If they stopped and really looked at her, they would see what a jewel stood before them. Even if he truly didn’t trust her, she was beautiful by the ton’s standards and well-spoken. A worthy opponent he could see himself taking pleasure in if the opportunity arose.

“We were just talking about what is expected of me at the upcoming ball.” Jenny’s voice was light and full of wonder. “I’m both excited and terrified. Although, with Frances’ help, I’m no longer worried about tripping over my feet while I dance. Now, if only I learn not to trip over my tongue, I’ll be fine.”

Thomas couldn’t help his grin. “Are you able to help my sister with the placement of her tongue, Miss Frances? We can’t have her tripping over it.” He knew he was pushing the boundaries of propriety, but his sister was lost in her own world of dance steps and ballgowns, so she wouldn’t pick up on his innuendo. Miss Frances, on the other hand, turned a beautiful shade of pink. Come on, love. Take the bait.

Frances found her skirt oddly interesting at that moment. “It just so happens elocution lessons are a favorite of mine. I would be happy to help Jenny become more

confident in her speaking patterns if she sees fit,” she said as she smoothed out her skirt. “I can even help Your Grace if you need help with your elocution.” Her eyes flickered up to meet his. There was a spark of defiance in them that heightened his senses.

There she is.

She showed no signs of embarrassment or hesitancy, the exact opposite of how she acted when he spilled the water. Instead, she sat there, head held high, waiting for his next move.

“Yes! If Frances is helping me adjust to the ton, she should definitely help you. I actually think you need it more than me.”

“Ah, see that’s where you’re wrong, dear sister. Whereas you need a proper introduction into society, I get mine just by existing,” Thomas explained with a smug smile. He didn’t envy the women and their role in society. The thought of dressing up and being paraded around for others to weigh and measure one was depressing. He might have countless people counting on him while others tried to swindle him out of money and business, but he didn’t have to prove himself worthy of romantic notions in order for him to have a home and security.

“Oh, men,” Jenny huffed. “You have it so easy.”

Thomas leaned back in the chair and crossed one long leg over the other. His gaze was back on Frances’. He liked the way she followed his every move. He knew he intimidated women, most men, too, but she refused to cower to him. Maybe that was why he was so intrigued by her. What would it take to make her succumb to him? Dangerous thoughts, better stick with the conversation at hand.

“That I cannot deny, dear sister. However, I feel I am a lost cause. I’m afraid the ton

has already found me lacking and has branded me a brute.”

“Nonsense,” Frances claimed. “There is always hope, Your Grace. Even for a brute such as yourself. I think under all that bluff is someone who wants to do right by his sister, even it means engaging in a civil conversation with other people at a dinner party.” She raised an eyebrow, effectively throwing down the next challenge.

“You think so, Miss Frances? You think you’d be up for the challenge of changing the set impressions of the ton for a man such as myself?”

“If anyone can do it, it’s Frances.” Jenny piped up from her chair in the corner. “And if she is going to help you, I suggest she start with your clothing and your dancing.”

“What is wrong with my clothing?” His eyes darted between the two women who were now sharing a knowing smile. “What? My tailor said I looked dashing.”

Jenny’s laughing irritated him. “Your tailor? I’d hardly call Jimmy from the shop a tailor.”

Frances raised her hands. “No need to bicker. Your Grace? I can help with both your dancing and your fashion.”

Thomas shook his head. How did he go from toying with Miss Frances to becoming offended about what these women thought of his clothing?

“Wonderful,” Jenny clapped her hands. “It’s settled. Frances, you’ll spend half your time with me and the other half trying to teach my brother not to step on people’s toes, literally and figuratively.” Jenny laughed at her own joke.

“Jenny?” Frances turned her attention to his sister. “All of this talk of dancing and ballrooms reminded me: weren’t you going to show me the dress you bought for the

ball? Why don't you go put it on, and we can practice dancing in it?"

Thomas grimaced; he was hoping to continue the banter he and Frances had going before his sister ruined it. But he had no desire to watch his sister parade around in her newest ballgown that most likely cost more than he'd care to know.

Jenny jumped up from her chair, "Oh yes! Wait here, I'll fetch Marie to help me put it on." His sister raced out of the room to track down her maid.

"Well," he said, clearing his throat. "I guess I'll leave you to my sister."

"Actually, Your Grace, may I have a word with you?"

An odd feeling settled over him. Was she going to denounce their behavior in the library? She should. Hell, he should. The thought disappointed him more than he wanted to admit. However, knowing the society they both were a part of, he understood the need for her to reclaim some ground. Nonetheless, he was not looking forward to watching her build her walls back up.

"The floor is yours, Miss Frances." He crossed the room over to the bar cart and poured himself a snifter of brandy.

The air around her faltered for a second before a calm settled over her. "I have a proposition."

"A proposition?"

"Yes." Frances took a deep breath. "A lesson for a lesson. I help you, and in turn, your sister, with whatever you both need to feel prepared for the season, and you help me with..."

“With...?”

“With learning what it is to be a woman.”

Thomas blinked. “I fear you have lost me, Miss Frances. How could I help you know what it is to be a woman?” He took a sip of his brandy, feeling he was missing a larger part of this conversation.

Frances stood, pink rising in her cheeks. She licked her lips and began nibbling on her bottom lip — a move that immediately had his mind reliving their time in the library.

“I was hoping, in exchange for my etiquette lessons, you would help me with lessons in...” Her hand gestured between the two of them while her head nodded in the direction of the library. She took a deep breath while Thomas took another sip.

“... how it is to be with a man,” she finally rushed out.

Thomas spit out his drink. Well, that was not what I was expecting.

Frances stood stunned as the amber liquid ran down her cheeks onto her dress.

“You spit on me.” She knew she sounded ridiculous, but honestly, this situation felt ridiculous. She never imagined herself propositioning anyone — let alone a cranky duke — to take her maidenhood, and she definitely had not foreseen one spitting his drink on her after she did so.

“You just asked me to sleep with you, but I barely know you.” The Duke looked positively incredulous.

Whether it was nervousness or embarrassment, Frances fought a bubble of laughter. “

That is your issue? Your Grace, I'm not asking you to throw me over the settee and..." Frances waved her hands in front of her face. She didn't even know how to finish her sentence without blushing. Maybe this was a mistake?

"Good God, woman, you can't even say the words. What makes you think you're of any mind to ask such a thing?" Finally regaining some sense of composure, the Duke handed Frances a napkin to wipe her face.

"I'm five and twenty, far past the age where most would consider me marriageable." Frances sniffed. "My prospects are looking grim, and I figured what better way to know what it's like than to just get it over with. To be honest, I never really expected to even kiss a man, and then the library happened." Frances shrugged. "It gave me an idea. I help you and your sister be welcomed into the ton, and you help me remove this burden hanging over me. Simple as that."

The Duke huffed out a laugh. "Simple as that. Nothing is as simple as that. " He narrowed his eyes. "Why me?"

"Why not you? I have something to offer you, and you have something to offer me." She raised an eyebrow. "I thought you ran a store. Surely you understand how a business deal works."

The Duke leveled his eyes on her. The intensity of his stare robbed her of the know-how to do the simplest, most natural act: breathe.

How does he do that to me?

Nonchalantly, he wiped his hands on a towel before folding it neatly and setting it down on the bar. His movements were smooth and calculated. Frances found herself once again mesmerized by his hands. His long fingers moved in such a precise way that her frantic mind settled. Her face tingled with the memory of how those fingers

held her head when they kissed.

“Tell me, Frances... I’m assuming it’s favorable I call you Frances since you just propositioned me to do a very personal act that would require us to be very familiar with each other.” The Duke tilted his head to the side, keeping his focus on her.

She fought not to fidget, but his stare set off her fight-or-flight instincts. Only when it came to him, her body and her mind could never agree on which one she should be doing.

“Yes, of course. And I think it would only be fair I be allowed to call you by your Christian name.” Frances’ heart pounded so loudly, that she was sure he could hear it from where he stood. She just asked a duke to deflower her and if she could call him by his Christian name. There was no coming back from this.

The Duke continued his walk towards her as he considered her request. “Fair? Hmm. I guess it would be.” The Duke reached her and slowly began to circle her. He was every bit a predator stalking his prey. “Are we just talking sex, or is there more to your conquest?” His whispered words tickled her ear and sent shocks of electricity down her spine.

“More?”

He stepped in closer, and she tensed when she felt his chest push against her back. Her head began to swim with lustful thoughts she never knew existed.

“Of course, there’s more,” he purred. “While I very much enjoyed our little tête-à-tête in the library, I think you would enjoy a lesson in kissing.”

Frances dropped her head in embarrassment. That was her first kiss; of course, she came off like an inexperienced dolt.

The Duke tsked as he finished his circle and stood in front of her. “Now, now, Frances, I mean no harm in that observation. Didn’t I just say I enjoyed it?”

Frances raised her eyes to meet his. Suddenly the weight of this conversation crashed down on her, causing her to rethink this whole plan. “I think I made a mistake.” She moved to turn, but he grabbed her by the waist.

“Don’t be rash. Let’s think this through.” His voice was soft, but instead of being reassuring, his voice conjured feelings of danger and insult.

“Are you making fun of me?” There was only so much embarrassment Frances could handle.

“On the contrary, Frances, I am very much intrigued by this. I just don’t think this is what you want.” He put up his hand to stop her interruption. “Let me clarify, I do not think I am who you want. I’m not known for my kindness, and girls like you need to be dealt with accordingly.”

It was in her nature to rebuke his condescending words however she knew nothing about this topic. He clearly had the upper hand, and that was exactly why she needed him.

“Please. Don’t make me beg.”

“Ah. Begging.” The Duke smiled devilishly. “Yes, that would be another lesson. One I would be very good at giving.” The Duke reached out and ran one finger up her cheek and back down, tracing the pulsing vein in her throat. Her eyes fluttered shut to let the sensation take over her body. She opened her eyes at his heavy exhale.

“No. You’re too innocent. I cannot do it.” The Duke took a step back, taking his divine finger with him.

Without thinking Frances grabbed his wrist to hold him in place.

“It has to be you. You won’t tell a soul; you keep your business to yourself. There is no one else in society with that sort of loyalty. Others may see it as suspicious, but I see it as respectful. Please. Thomas. ”

His breath shuttered at the sound of his name. “I —”

“Here I am!” Jenny burst through the parlor doors, twirling in a long, soft pink ball gown that accentuated her tanner skin to perfection. “I just love this color, don’t you? And it’s so light and breezy, I feel as though I’ll just fly away.”

Thomas and Frances jumped at her interruption, both dropping their hands to their sides.

“You look marvelous, Jenny.” It took every ounce of willpower Frances had to look at Jenny and focus on the spinning girl.

“Well, I have things to see to, so if you’ll excuse me, I’ll leave you two ladies to your dresses.” Thomas tugged at his cufflinks, adjusting his sleeves. He crossed the room without another look at her.

Frances felt tears prick in her eyes. He denied her. She had made a fool of herself in front of the duke, one whom she’d be seeing a lot because of her agreement with Jenny.

“Oh, and Frances? I look forward to our first meeting. It is at the tailor, is it not? You and Jenny said something about my wardrobe needing improvement?”

Frances only managed to nod her head in agreement before the door closed.

He used my Christian name.

CHAPTER 8

The next few days passed in a blur. Once more, she found herself keeping her thoughts to herself and didn't divulge to Dorothy. She kept her conversations about her comings and goings to her dealings with Jenny. Anything that happens with Thomas (what a thrill to even say his name) was just for her.

She sat at the breakfast table with her father, lazily buttering a biscuit, when her father knocked over his cup of tea.

"Damn it. Oh, excuse my language, my dear. I'm out of sorts this morning," her father said while blotting the spilled tea.

Frances took in her father. His clothes seemed a bit rumpled, as if he slept in them. "Are you well, Papa? Do we need to call for the physician?"

Solomon waved her off. "What? Oh, no. Nothing of the sort. Just going over some business deals in my mind, and I wasn't paying attention to where my cup was."

Frances went back to her biscuit. She always enjoyed the morning, when the day was new, and the world was still quiet. From her spot at the table, she could hear birds chirping and see the dew sparkle in the morning light.

Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap.

Frances looked away from the window. "Papa? Are you sure everything is all right? You seem anxious this morning."

Solomon stilled his tapping fingers. “I hear you’re visiting Duke Pilton and his sister again today.”

Frances nodded. “Yes. Jenny and I are getting along. She is a very sweet girl. I’m taking her to the modiste today to pick out some ribbons to match her dress.”

“Ah. That sounds nice. Will it be just the two of you? Or will Duke Pilton be joining you?”

Frances sat taller in her chair. “The Duke will be joining us. Jenny thinks his tastes in clothing are questionable and asked if I would help spruce him up a bit. We’ll be making a quick stop at the tailor next door.”

Solomon’s eyes lightened up with intrigue. “Is that so? You’ve been going over there quite a lot recently. Am I to believe that someone has finally caught my daughter’s beautiful eye?”

Frances let out a laugh and scrunched her nose. “No, Papa. Nothing of the sort. Our relationship is purely platonic. I am being a friend to Jenny, and he is just there.”

If she didn’t know any better, she would think her father looked a bit disappointed at her explanation. Surely, he wasn’t expecting her to set her sights on a duke. A baron’s daughter was no match for a duke, even if he did come from a humble background. He was still a duke, he’d most likely marry a daughter of another duke or maybe an earl.

Frances rubbed at the ache forming in her chest. She refused to dissect why the thought of the Duke with someone else caused her heart to sink. She had to be careful. She had an agreement with the Duke, one that would let her experience something she most likely would never get another chance to experience. She shouldn’t muck it up by allowing feelings to get in the way.

“Miss Frances?” Thankfully Simmons’ interruption stopped her heart from running away from her. “The carriage has pulled up and is ready for you.”

“Thank you, Simmons. Papa? I must be going. I promised Jenny I would be there promptly at nine.” She rose from the table, and after placing a kiss to the top of his head, she went outside to the carriage.

Today would be her first lesson with Thomas, and she had no idea what to expect.

“I think this one matches the lace eyelets of the dress beautifully.” Frances picked up a rose-colored ribbon. “And it will accent your hair nicely.”

Jenny took the ribbon from Frances and held it close to her hair. “I wish I had your color of hair.”

“You must be joking.” Frances rolled her eyes. “Your hair is beautiful, so shiny and soft. Plus, with my hair and coloring, I’m more prone to freckling.”

Jenny shrugged. “Are freckles so bad?”

Frances chuckled. “I don’t think so, but then again, I’m not known to follow every expectation of the ton to the letter. And neither should you.”

“Well that I can do. I’m certain I will forget when I’m supposed to dance, laugh, hide, or eat.”

Frances took the ribbon and handed it to the modiste to place with the other ribbons they picked out for purchase. “It’s quite easy. You should have no problem with suitors approaching you for a dance. Have them sign your card, and when the song comes on, dance with them. If they say something witty, laugh. If they say something rude, either bat your eyes like you don’t understand, or...” She leaned into Jenny.

“...pretend to trip over your dress and kick them in the shins.”

Jenny giggled into her fan. “You are too much, Frances. I wish I had your candor.”

“It comes with age,” Frances replied.

“If that’s the case, then that explains my brother.”

Frances felt her cheeks heat with the mention of Thomas. She walked over to a dress hanging near the counter and pretended to inspect the ruffles along the neckline. “Speaking of your brother, how is he fairing lately?”

Jenny wandered through the dresses. “As grumpy as ever. He was never talkative, but since arriving in London, he barely speaks to even me. I think the most he speaks to anyone is when you’re around.”

Frances’ hand stilled on the dress. “I’m sure that isn’t true.”

“It is. Which is fine. Most of his words come out at grunts or groans when I’m around. I’m starting to think he’s more animal than human.”

Frances considered that for a moment. “Was he always like that? I would think it would be hard to run a business with primitive language.”

Jenny laughed. “No. While he was never very personable, I remember him being able to hold a conversation without rolling his eyes or huffing at my quips. He was much more manageable when Father was alive.”

“You remember your parents?”

“My father, yes. My mother, no.”

Frances cocked her head, “I didn’t realize they passed at different times.” So much heartbreak for one family.

“Yes, Mama passed shortly after my birth. Our father raised us in a small apartment above our store. Thomas was always at the store with him. He would run deliveries when he was younger, and when he became older, he assisted Father with ledgers and deals.” Jenny frowned at the golden gown in the window. “It’s where he felt most comfortable, I guess. He gets numbers. It’s probably why it’s so easy for him to throw himself into the business side of the duchy. Personally, I find it rather dull.”

“I’m so sorry, Jenny. I lost my mother when I was very young, and I really don’t remember her either. I remember her scent, or at least, there’s a scent my memory associates with her. Vanilla. It always calms me.”

“Vanilla?” Jenny looked up from the dress she was looking at. “Hmm, yes. I like that scent as well.”

The salesgirl brought Frances the bag of ribbons. “I think we’ve had enough melancholy for one morning.” She glanced at the table clock on the counter. “We should move next door; His Grace should be there by now.”

Jenny smiled and took the offered bag of ribbons and Frances’ hand. “I can’t wait to see what you picked out for him. Anything has to be better than that green monstrosity he brought with him.”

Frances laughed as she stepped out into the street. The warm sun felt nice on her face. Freckles be damned. She used to carry a parasol everywhere, but it never stopped the freckles from forming. She imagined she’d be walking around without a parasol more often. The sun felt glorious.

“Oh no.” Jenny stopped as Frances reached for the door of the tailor. “They forgot to

put the rose-colored ribbon in the bag. You go on inside, I'll be just a minute."

Frances watched Jenny disappear back into the modiste. She really shouldn't go inside the tailor without Jenny. Then again, she was technically Jenny's chaperone, and the shopkeeper is most likely in there with the Duke. It's not like she would be all alone with the man.

With a quick glance around, she took a deep breath and pushed the door open. The tailor's shop was darker than the modiste. She was used to light colors and floral scents. Here, dark wood surrounded her while the scent of sandalwood and leather filled the air.

Add a hint of brandy, and it would smell just like Thomas.

"Anyone here?" Frances stood by the door, waiting for someone to come forward. Stealing her spine, she walked further into the store. "Duke Pilton? Are you here?" Silence.

Tell me the damned man forgot to come. Or maybe he didn't want to come. She couldn't tell which one was worse. That he purposefully didn't show because he changed his mind, or he wasn't interested in her, and he forgot.

She made her way into the back of the store and walked through a curtain. She found herself in a small room with two doors on either side and a mirror in front of her. There was rustling coming from the curtain to her right. Realization of where she was dawned on her and she spun on her heel to retreat back to the main area.

"Johnson, is that you?" Thomas' gruff voice barked out from behind the curtain. "This blasted cravat isn't working. Why do these bloody things exist?"

Thomas barged out of the curtain, tugging at the material wrapped around his neck.

“Miss Frances?”

“Duke Pilton.”

“Where’s Jenny?”

Frances couldn’t help but stare at his neck. She knew it was preposterous to stare at something so common as a neck, but she couldn’t tear her eyes from his. She never really considered one’s neck. But his was enticing. His was thick with a strong vein that ran along it. And his Adam’s apple... is that what they call it? Why is it called an Adam’s apple?

“Frances!”

She blinked. Was she just staring at his throat and questioning the name of his Adam’s apple?

“Hmm?”

“Where’s Jenny?”

“Oh. Um, the modiste forgot to put a ribbon in the bag, so she went back to get it. She should be right back.” Hopefully . This room was way too small, and the Duke was way too large. She shouldn’t be here alone with him. As much as it excited her, she knew it wasn’t the time or place for her first lesson.

“Did you see Johnson?” Thomas looked strained. “The tailor. Did you see him when you walked in?”

Frances shook her head. “No. There was no one out front, so I wandered and ended up back here.”

“Hmph.” Thomas turned and stepped toward the mirror. He continued his fight with the cravat, murmuring to himself.

After a quick listen to see if anyone was outside the main curtain, Frances stepped in front of Thomas. “Here. Let me do it. I used to help Papa with his all the time. He didn’t like the way his steward did it.”

Her fingers shook when she took the silk in her hands. It didn’t escape her that this was the first time she stood this close to him on her terms. “The trick is to keep the material wide, so when it lays, it gives a slight ruffle on the edge. More pleasing to the eyes.”

“Hmm.”

Frances raised an eyebrow. She wanted desperately to look up into his eyes, but she also knew how dangerous that could be. “At a loss for words, Your Grace? Usually, you are quick to respond.”

Silence.

After finishing the knot, she ran her hands up around the neck of his tailcoat to fit it nicely with the newly knotted cravat. It wasn’t until her fingers brushed his hair which curled over the collar that she realized how close they were.

“Did you know that you bite your lip when you concentrate?”

Frances’ hands stilled as her eyes drifted ever so slowly up to meet his. Piercing blue eyes stared back at her. “Your bottom lip.” A fingertip ran across her bottom lip, eliciting a soft groan from her.

“Do that again.” Thomas demanded.

“Do what?”

The whispering touch moved to cup her cheeks. “The groan. Do it again.”

Frances’ mind whirled. What did he mean? How was she supposed to — Thomas’ lips crashed down on hers, forcing another groan from her. This time, he met hers with one of his own.

That sound. That glorious sound was music to her ears. He pushed her up against the mirror, still cradling her head in his hands. Explosions of excitement and curiosity burst throughout her body. She couldn’t touch enough of him. She didn’t know where to put her hands, so she settled them in his hair.

She held on tightly, never wanting this moment to end. Her nails raked against his scalp, causing Thomas to growl against her lips. He likes that. The thought she could affect a man such as Thomas in this way emboldened her.

She felt his knee push against her legs, effectively separating them, and she let him. His one hand left her hair and traveled down her body, cupping her breast. His lips followed, trailing hot, open-mouthed kisses down her throat, stopping to suck a sweet spot on her neck. Her head tipped back giving him more room to explore.

Heat pooled in her body. Instinct had her pushing her body against his, writhing against his leg. She willingly handed over the reins to Thomas, excited to see where he would take her.

In her bliss, it took her a minute to realize he stopped his kiss. “We shouldn’t do this here.”

Frances heard the words, but her brain was still misfiring from what his hands were doing. “What?” The word came out breathless.

“Anyone could walk in. This is not the place for this kind of lesson.”

Frances couldn't comprehend what was happening. How was he able to go from hot to cold so quickly? She felt as if an inferno was coursing through her body.

His hands cradled her head once again and tipped it back, so he could look into her eyes. “I see your confusion. I want nothing more than to continue this particular lesson. But taking you in what essentially is a closet is not on my syllabus for our lessons.”

With that he disappeared behind the changing door. “I recommend you return to the front of the store before someone comes to find you back here,” he called from behind the door. “I imagine Jenny should be out there.”

Frances' eyes flew open wide.

Oh no, Jenny. She had to be back by now!

Frances pushed through the curtain that led back to the main room. “Jenny?” Her voice croaked. Clearing her throat, she called out again, “Jenny, are you here?”

“I'm here!” Jenny's voice drifted from the front of the store. “Sorry, I've never been in a tailor's shop before. It's so dark and moody. No wonder my brother didn't mind coming here.”

Frances made her way towards Jenny, praying her hair wasn't telling of her dalliance with Thomas. “I was looking for the shopkeeper; he may be in the back helping your brother with his clothing.”

“Ah ladies,” a soft male voice snuck up behind them, “I'm sorry for my delay. I was out back receiving a shipment. I was waiting for Duke Pilton to finish dressing. Miss

Ambrose, you have exquisite taste. I admit, when I received your correspondence with suggestions, I had my doubts that a woman would understand the complexities of men's attire, but the fit and colors you suggested are remarkable."

Frances bit her tongue. She spoke three languages, played several instruments, and this man was doubting her intelligence to pick out colors. "Thank you, kind sir. It is amazing that us women know anything about men's clothing. Usually, we're too busy putting on four layers of our own clothes to pay attention to men's fashion," she said mockingly.

The tailor nodded knowingly, completely missing her tone. "Very true. If you'll excuse me, I'll check in on His Grace."

Jenny snickered and pulled Frances to her.

"Did you see Thomas? Was he able to find something that fit him better? He's always griping about the cravats."

Frances swallowed and chewed her lip. "Um, yes. I think so. He definitely found something that fit him nicely."

Me.

CHAPTER 9

Frances sat opposite three smirking women, and she did not like it. She had a feeling they had something up their sleeves, but she had hoped inviting Jenny would quell their intrigue.

“Frances, it’s been a week since we’ve seen you last. What have you been up to?” Nora lazily played with the spoon in her tea, but it was all a ruse. There was nothing playful about Nora’s demeanor. She was fishing for something.

Frances took a sip of her tea. She nodded to Jenny at her side, “I’ve been spending time with Jenny. She’s come a long way from Lady Staunton’s dinner party.”

The three women opposite her shared a smile.

Frances let out an exaggerated sigh. “What?”

“Is it safe to assume the Duke was in residence each time you met with Jenny? My husband has said he hasn’t seen him at the club recently. Always has the excuse he’s acclimating to his new role by working at home.”

Frances leveled a glare at Marie.

“Yes, he’s there,” Jenny eagerly offered. “Frances has agreed to help him as well. You should see the outfits she picked out for him. He’s looking more like a duke every day.”

Frances looked up at the ceiling, wishing the ground to open up and swallow her whole. She didn't need to look at her friends to know what they were thinking.

"Is she now? How thoughtful of you, Frances." Marie's words dripped with insinuation.

"It is thoughtful of me, Marie. I'm more than happy to help His Grace. In helping him, I am helping Jenny." She reached out to touch Jenny's hand. She had hoped the gesture would remind her friends not to take the conversation into an untowardly direction with Jenny there.

Her friends could no longer control their giggles. Lord save me.

"Why are they laughing? Are they laughing at us?" Jenny asked.

Horried, Frances turned towards Jenny. "Heavens no! They like to think any man I talk to should be considered as a marriage contender," she said with an eye roll. "But I assure you, Jenny, I would never put our friendship in jeopardy to pursue your brother. Plus, I have no intention of pursuing anyone. I'm happy with my status in life." She glared at her friends. "I mean that. I'm all right with the reality that my life may be one of spinsterhood."

"I'm sorry, Frannie, but I must warn you, there is a lot of talk about you visiting the Duke's estate as often as you do. It's only natural people would assume your intentions," Sara offered.

"I'm well aware of people's assumptions, but I promise you, the only time I speak to the Duke is when Jenny is in the room, and she can attest it is all above board. Isn't that right, Jenny?"

Jenny remained silent next to her.

“Jenny? Go on, tell them.” She nudged her elbow into Jenny’s side.

“Well...”

“I knew it!” Marie yelled from her chair.

“Jenny! What are you saying?” Frances’ cheeks were starting to heat. Did she see something? It was so easy for Frances to lose any sort of decorum when it was just Thomas and her. She might have seen them in the parlor or the tailor’s shop. Dread swept through her body.

“I don’t know, Frances. There were a few times when I came in, and it was just the two of you. Like, when I went to try on my dress., it was just the two of you in the room...” Jenny trailed off, but the damage was done.

“Just the two of you, hmm?” Marie was all smug.

“For moments, really.” Frances had to get control of this situation, and quickly. All she needed was rumors to get out, and she really would become a spinster, a ruined one.

“Jenny,” Frances chided, “you must be careful about what you say and how you say it. It is very easy for people to misunderstand, and then you’d be changing your brother’s life, and he’s already had so much upheaval. You don’t want him, or yourself, caught up in any scandal.”

Jenny looked at the women sitting across from them. Frances watched her take them in, their interested eyes holding her captive. They were practically foaming at the mouth for more information.

“I’m sorry, you’re right.” She turned to Sara, Nora, and Marie. “She’s right, I was

only speaking in jest to fit in. They were barely alone when I tried on my dress, and my brother is not one for conversation. Now looking back on it, I actually feel bad I left her alone at all with him.”

The women laughed and began talking about Nora’s upcoming garden party. Frances hoped it was enough to stop any rumors from starting.

“Now, when the food is served, and there is something you want but it is not in front of you, you could either pass your plate to someone who is closer, or if a manservant is nearby, you can ask him to fill your plate.”

Jenny sat opposite Frances while Thomas sat to her right at the head of the table.

“Your Grace? If there is meat in front of you, cut and serve yourself. Then the polite thing to do is offer it to the women if any are seated next to you.”

Thomas cut the lamb in front of him and held the plate to Jenny as an offering.

Frances cleared her throat.

Thomas glanced at Frances and questioned her with his eyes.

Frances raised an eyebrow and cocked her head.

“Oh. Jenny, would like some of this lamb?”

Frances smiled.

Jenny took the lamb, “Thank you, Your Grace.”

While they sat cutting their food, Jenny spoke up, “I find it amusing that you two are

able to communicate without speaking.”

Both Frances and Thomas’ eyes collided with each other’s first before turning to Jenny.

“What do you mean?” Thomas asked.

“Oh, I mean nothing by it. Frances and I have similar conversations with our eyes, especially when we hear something outlandish, and it would be uncouth to speak our thoughts out loud. I thought it was component of only female friendships. I assumed one would have to be very close to communicate without words so efficiently.”

“Well, I suppose one could consider it as one step above grunts which the Duke is so well known for,” Frances joked. “It’s just more evidence of how far he has come along,” she added with a wink.

“I do not appreciate being spoken about as if I’m not here,” Thomas said while chewing on a piece of lamb.

“Please do not talk with your mouth full. And speaking of talking, dinner is an excellent time to have conversations with those around you. Jenny, you’ll want to use this time to strike up a conversation with a dashing young man who has caught your eye. I’ll give you some tricks later on how to change the seating arrangement to make sure you sit next to someone of worth.”

Thomas raised an eyebrow at her comment.

“Is that what you did at Lady Staunton’s dinner party?”

“No. Our first meeting was out of pure luck. Truth is, I shouldn’t have been seated there.” Looking across the table to Jenny she continued, “Normally, when seated at a

dinner party, it goes by a rank of sorts. A duke and a baron's daughter would rarely be seated next to each other. But by dumb luck and Lady Staunton's spontaneous seating change to man-woman-man, I was seated next to His Grace and across from you."

So much has changed since that first night, and it's only been a few weeks.

"Let's get back to our lesson, shall we?"

She reached for her glass of water the same time Thomas reached for his, and their hands brushed. Warm vibrations flew from fingertips up her arm. She met Thomas' eyes, and the world around her faded away. She could stare into his eyes, and only his eyes, for the rest of her life and be happy.

"Frances?" Jenny's voice broke in. "What were you going to say?"

"Hmm? Oh right. Back to the lesson." She folded and refolded the napkin in her lap, trying desperately to remember what she was going to say. She could feel Thomas' eyes on her. Once again, she was reminded of that first night, walking around Lady Staunton's parlor with his eyes on her. Only now, she knew what power those eyes held.

"As I was saying, you'll want to strike up conversations with those around you." Frances tried ignoring the heated stare coming from Thomas and failed miserably. "It's your, um... it's your time to let everyone know how well you... use, um, words. How you word, er, talk. How well you talk."

Goodness, she couldn't form a coherent sentence when he was looking at her like she should be the next course.

When Frances finally looked up from her wrinkled napkin, she found the amused

Jenny smiling back at her.

“I’ll have to remember that,” she said with a smirk. Jenny glanced at the clock on the mantle. “Oh, I have to go. I told Nora I’d meet her to take in some shops today. I offered to help her with some last-minute purchases for her garden party. It’ll be the perfect opportunity to work on how well I word, I mean talk,” she added with a wink.

Frances inwardly groaned. She wasn’t going to live that one down. Damn that blasted man for having such an effect on her. Even now, with his sister speaking, he was looking at Frances.

With a slight nod of the head, Jenny retreated through the doors, leaving Frances alone with Thomas.

“You should not be looking at me like that when people are around!” Frances’ words rushed out breathlessly.

Thomas grinned. He looked like he was enjoying watching her unravel. It only frustrated her more.

“And how am I looking at you, Frances?” His voice was like velvet on her skin.

“Like you’re hunting me and about to eat me as if I were your prey.” She needed to remind herself that she was the one that propositioned him. But whenever she was alone with him, she couldn’t help but feel at a severe disadvantage.

Thomas pushed away from the table and pulled her chair away from the table. Reaching down, he picked up her hands to help her stand.

“I think this is ample opportunity to introduce our next lesson.”

Frances' eyes flew open. "I don't remember having our first lesson."

"Consider the library our first lesson. You tested well, I think you're ready to advance."

Frances swallowed. "H-here? Now?"

"Why not? Jenny said she was leaving. I told Simmons and the rest of the staff not to bother us during our dinner lessons. No one should come in here unless I call them." He tilted Frances' head to look into her eyes. "I have no intention of calling them, unless you want me to?"

"No!" The word rushed out of her mouth. She didn't recognize her own voice. Needy. Insistent. Ready.

Thomas cocked his head. She felt as if she were stripped bare by his stare. He leaned down and planted a gentle kiss at one corner of her lips, then the other. She was struck by how gentle he kissed her. Her brows furrowed, her body was on fire, and he was moving too slow.

She began chewing her bottom lip before his finger traced along her bottom lip. "That poor lip. Always being chewed on."

He cradled her head in his hands and tilted her head back, opening her up for the kiss she truly wanted to receive.

He pushed his tongue forward, and she opened her mouth willingly. Her hands went from his chest up into his hair where she once again raked her fingernails across his scalp, hoping to unleash the pent up beast inside of him.

He backed her into the table, and with one hand, swiped the dishes from the top. A

surprise squeak escaped her lips as he lowered her onto the table and continued to ravage her mouth.

More. She wanted more. She needed more.

Her hands came down and snuck underneath the lapels of his jacket. Thomas' eyes opened in shock. "I'm a quick study." Frances was ready to shed the proper Miss of the ton. Thomas allowed her to test these new feelings without repercussions, and that knowledge was intoxicating.

He dragged his lips down her throat and sucked on her slender neck. She arched her body into his, her hands gripping his shoulders.

"More, please more." Her voice was raspy.

"Ah, I see you've mastered begging. What a good student you are," he said between nibbling that sweet spot and kissing it.

"Tell me, Frances, what else should I give attention to?"

Frances was letting out soft gasps and whimpers, nothing coherent.

He smiled against her chest. "Come now, Frances, if I need to use my words while sitting at the dinner table, you need to use words when I have you on the dinner table."

"I don't, I don't know. Too many feelings... I'm hot all over." Frances' mind was disconnected from her body. She couldn't form sentences, only moans, breathless begging, and whimpers.

"Shhh, here. Let me help. Do you want me to kiss you here?" He placed a chaste kiss

on her neck. “Or here?” He moved lower and kissed the exposed skin at the top of her gown.

“ There! ” The surprise of his movement sent the fire coursing through her veins straight to her core.

“See? That wasn’t so hard. Now. Should I continue kissing here, or should I push down your gown and expose more to explore?”

Frances nodded furiously up and down.

“Tsk. Tsk. Miss Ambrose. Remember your words.” The man was positively insufferable.

Frances let out a groan. “Push the dress down. Please.”

The words weren’t fully out of her mouth when he shoved the gown down to fully reveal her breasts. Frances only had a second to feel the cool air hit them before he took a perfectly pink nipple into his mouth. Massaging the other breast, he continued to kiss and suck, playing to the rhythm she set with her hips and moans.

“You are the most delectable dessert, Miss Ambrose.”

“Thomas,” she whimpered.

“I wonder...” Thomas made his way back up her body to her mouth. Frances mewled at the loss of his mouth on her breasts. “Are you willing to go to the next course in your study?”

Frances stared up at the man hovering over her. Never in her life did she feel both vulnerable and safe at the same time. He had exposed her to her very core, both

figuratively and literally. She knew then that she would give him anything he asked for.

“Yes, Your Grace. “

His hand reached down and rucked up her gown and petticoats, leaving the bottom half of her body bare except for her stockings.

“ Thomas!” Reflex had her grabbing his hand. “What are you doing?”

“Do you trust me? Say the word, Frances, or if not, say it, and I’ll stop.” His forehead, slick with sweat, rested against hers. Blue eyes staring into hazel ones. The question played over in her head. Did she trust him? Could she trust him? Frances didn’t need to contemplate it. She knew.

“Yes, Your Grace.”

His pupils blew wide as he slammed his lips to hers in the most animalistic way. His wandering hand worked its way up her leg, massaging and tickling as it moved up. He found the opening in her drawers and dipped his finger inside. He groaned when he ran one finger through her wet curls.

“You’re wet,” his voice straining.

“I — is that ok?” Frances hated that she knew nothing of the delicacies of intimate acts, and it embarrassed her.

“Yes, of course.” His finger started rubbing the sensitive nub at the center of her sex. Ignoring her yelp of surprise, he continued. “It’s your body’s natural reaction and will help your body accept the next step.”

The... mmm... next... st-step? Oh! Thomas!” She never felt sensations such as these before. There was something in her core. Something strong, unrelenting. The more his finger toyed with her sex, the more she moved against him.

Unable to control the crashing waves of pleasure racking her body, she closed her eyes to focus.

“Look at me Frances.” At the Duke’s command, her eyes flew open. “Just breathe and let your body go. I have you. Trust me.”

Frances shook her head and gave into the building storm within her core. With one flick of his wrist, the storm unleashed, sending her over the edge. Thomas swallowed her scream with his mouth.

Frances’ body melted into a puddle on the table. She was too swept up in the emotions that Thomas released within her to consider adjusting her clothes. She was content to lay there forever.

Thomas righted her clothing and helped her sit up.

“Are you ok?”

Frances blushed. “I can’t believe we just... that I... Is it normal to feel completely sated and blissful?”

Thomas laughed loudly. “Word of advice, if you don’t, the man has done you a complete disservice.”

Frances looked around at the mess Thomas created when he pushed the dishes off to the side.

“Look at this mess. And we didn’t even have dessert.”

A sly grin formed on Thomas’ lips. “I did.”

Frances cocked her head, “How so?”

Thomas brought the finger he used on her. Without breaking eye contact, he sucked on it, moaning. “I told you, you were delicious. Keep this up, and you’ll be ready for the final exam in no time.”

“And I told you, I’m a quick study. I’ll be ready for it.” She was, now more than ever, determined to see this through. Nothing was going to get in her way.

CHAPTER 10

Thomas sat at his desk, trying to focus on the book in front of him. The smell of vanilla wafted in through his window. The sweet scent sent his mind to the dining room, and he groaned. He couldn't stop replaying the dinner lesson with Frances in his mind. And quite frankly, he didn't try to stop. When he ate breakfast, when Jenny talked to him, when Simmons helped him dress, all day, every day, he couldn't get her vanilla scent and sweet taste out of his mind. At night when he closed his eyes, he saw her hazel eyes bursting with elation when he found her wet. The way her body molded to his when she pushed up against him. Damn, he was getting hard thinking of her.

One moment stood out to him. And it was the one he was thinking about now.

She trusts me.

That moment shocked him the most. How someone so delicate, so proper, so gentle, would so willingly hand over control of her body amazed him. He never considered how empowering it was to have someone's trust.

He had earned many people's trust when he was a shopkeeper, but this felt different, and he didn't know why. Frankly, he didn't care. All he knew was Frances went from a giggling friend of Jenny's to an enigma that completely consumed his thoughts.

"Your Grace?" Thomas looked up to find Jenny standing in the doorway.

"Jenny. What is it?" Talking to Jenny took an effort he didn't have.

“I have something rather delicate to talk to you about.”

Thomas raked his hands through his hair. If this was about one more petty dispute between two farmers and where cows were allowed or not allowed to roam, he was going to throw something.

“Come in then.”

Jenny sat in the chair in front of his desk, her hands fidgeting in her lap.

“Well? What is it? I have important things to do.” And important things to replay in my head.

Jenny pushed out a deep breath. “Remember when I took tea with Frances, Miss Hornsby, Lady Wellington, Lady Stellon...”

Thomas waved her on. “Yes, yes, I don’t need a damn headcount. Get on it with.”

“Well, there is some talk about town about you —”

“That’s nothing new, Jenny. Now, really, I must get back to work.” Thomas nodded to the door before focusing back on the book he had been staring at for the past hour.

“You didn’t let me finish. There’s talk about you and Frances.”

Thomas’ head snapped up, his eyes narrowing on his sister. “What?” he grounded out.

“There is some speculation about her intentions when coming here,” Jenny offered.

“Her intentions? What does that mean?”

Jenny began to fidget again, glancing at the door, most likely looking for the quickest escape route.

“Some people are assuming she is coming here to, um, entice you into marrying her.”

Thomas growled into his hands. “I hate this town.”

“She was the first person to really welcome me here, and I hate to hear rumors about her, but...” Jenny shifted in her seat.

“But. What?” Thomas snapped

“I fear I aided the rumor.”

“WHAT?” Thomas yelled. “What did you say and to whom?” Thomas jumped from the chair, slamming his hand on the desk.

“It was when we were at tea. I mentioned there were a couple of times when you two were left together. I didn’t mean anything by it. I just mentioned it off-handedly, but Marie was there.”

“Marie?”

“Lady Stellan. I don’t like her. She seems manipulative and cold. I honestly don’t know why Frances is friends with her.”

“So you thought adding more fuel to fire in front of this Lady Stellan was a good idea?” Thomas was fuming. This was why he hated London and polite society. These people exchanged gossip as currency, not caring who they took down in the process.

“No! Of course not. Like I said, it was an accident. I didn’t know she would say

anything outside of the group. Thomas, I'm so sorry."

"Don't apologize to me ! It's Frances that will be ruined if this rumor goes too far."

Jenny rushed to him. "I think I managed to aid in some recovery."

Thomas huffed out a breath. His head was throbbing, and he desperately wanted to get his hands on something, anything, that he could hit. It was moments like this he missed his old life. There was a club by the shop where he could spar with other patrons.

"When I went shopping with Nora the other day, someone in a shop mentioned it. I quickly chastised her for perpetuating a terrible rumor. The woman looked downright embarrassed. You would have been proud of me. I mimicked your cadence and smugness. I think I scared her."

"Nonetheless, you must be careful. I know this is not the first time your mouth has gotten you in trouble. Take heed of your words, Jenny. Frances has been kind to us; she doesn't deserve a scandal."

Jenny squared her shoulders. "I admit my involvement in this however you must own up to yours."

"Mine?"

Jenny smiled and her body relaxed. "Thomas, I'm not going to pretend you're an idiot and explain it in detail. But I will say, if I have to control my mouth, you need to control your eyes."

She patted him on the shoulder and left Thomas staring at her retreating back.

Frances sat, looking at herself in the mirror. Did she look different? She felt different. If someone had told her she would let a duke lay her down across a dinner table and touch her in the most intimate of places, she would have laughed in their face. And it would not have been a lady-like laugh.

“Miss Frances.” Dorothy entered after a knock. “Your father is downstairs and asked to see you.”

“Thank you, Dorothy. I’ll be right down.”

Frannie turned to leave but hesitated. “Is everything all right, Frannie? You’ve been very distant as of late. Did I do something to upset you?”

Frances chewed her lip. She always confided in Dorothy, ever since they were young children. Dorothy knew all of her secrets, well almost all of them. But just as she needed the Duke to keep their tryst a secret, so must she.

“No, of course not, Dorothy. I’m sorry I’m spending a lot of time with Jenny lately. She’s coming along and shows so much promise. She really will do wonderfully this season.”

“Are you worried about your prospects with fresh blood in the water?”

Frances smiled. “Why must everyone compare the ton to shark infested waters?”

Dorothy shrugged, “The comparisons are endless, I’m afraid. How much time do you have?”

“Oh Dorothy, I have missed your sense of humor. But don’t fear, all this talk of dancing and balls has not changed my mind as to where I currently stand in the ton’s eyes. If I shall become a spinster, then so be it. I enjoy my friendships and my

standing.”

“Speaking of friendships —”

Frances raised her hand. “Stop. I know what you’re going to say, and the answer is no. No, I am not pursuing the Duke for marriage. I am helping both Jenny and the Duke with acclimating to the climate and pressures of the ton .”

Dorothy lowered her head. “I meant nothing by it, Miss. I just don’t want to see you hurt. Although, if you want to pursue the Duke, I don’t see why he wouldn’t want you. But at the same time, rumors like this have a way of getting out of hand, and before you realize it, you’re ruined.”

Frances sighed.

“Your concern is appreciated. Truly. But one,” Frances put up one finger, “I can withstand unfounded rumors. And two,” she brought up another finger, “I gave up on marriage, so if I become ruined because of this, then so be it. I have resigned myself to a life alone.”

“You won’t be alone. You’ll have me.” Dorothy said with a big smile.

Frances returned the smile. “And I can’t imagine a better life. We can be spinsters together. We can save some cats from the streets and drink ale until we pass out.”

“You and your animals,” Dorothy chuckled. “Which reminds me, your father tripped over Minnie yesterday, and he swore he was going to take the poor dog outside and shoot it if it wouldn’t leave his study.”

Frances shook her head. “He’s all talk. I think he secretly loves that dog, but I’ll try to remove the nuisance from his sight. Do you know where Papa is?”

Dorothy stood to the side of the door. “He is in his study. Would you like me to prepare your room for your nighttime ablutions for when you’re done with your father.”

“Yes, please, Dorothy. I would appreciate that.” She passed Dorothy at the door and gave her a hug. She found comfort in knowing she had people who cared about her, but she was really getting tired of having to defend her relationship with the Duke. Of course, her actions spoke louder than her words. She is adamant they are just friends, but does a friend touch another friend like that ?

It doesn’t matter. Duke Pilton wasn’t for her; he was an end to a means, and that was it. If anything, she should thank him. It was because of her time with Thomas that she was even more comfortable with her standing. She wanted to experience this particular part of life before she was shelved by the peerage. After she and Thomas fulfilled her request, she’d happily live the life of a spinster.

Her cheeks heated with the memory of his wandering fingers. The excitement and elation she felt that day crashed down on her again. She felt as if she was about to burst. She stood outside her father’s study, counting her breaths to calm down. She needed something else to focus on.

With a knock on the door, she pushed it open before he answered.

“Good evening, Papa. Dorothy said you wanted to see me?”

“Ah, yes.” Her father gingerly rose from behind his desk and met his daughter by his very well-worn Chesterfield sofa where their dog lay, comfortably snoring. “Come sit, my dear. We need to talk.” He shooed the dog from the sofa and patted the seat next to him.

Her heart plummeted to her stomach. He knows about my affair with the Duke. She

shook the thought from her head. Impossible. They had been careful. Hadn't they?

She sat down with her father by her side. "Is everything all right, Papa?"

He took her hand. "I have some bad news. I know you've noticed my absentmindedness and overall mood these past few weeks. The truth is I've been waiting to tell you this until it was absolutely necessary, and I feel the time has come."

Frances rubbed her hand over his. "Papa, you're scaring me. What is it? Are you sick?"

"No, fit as a fiddle as it were. We've hit a few bumps these past few months where my business is concerned. I had some hope for one of my ventures to go through, but I just informed it did not work out as planned."

"Oh, Papa, I am so sorry." Frances knew her father was a proud businessman, and if he was admitting failure to her, there must have been a terrible blow.

"Thank you, my dear." Solomon tightened his grip on his daughter's hands. "I fear we'll have to cut back on some expenses this Season. We'll have to cut back a lot, actually."

"Is that all? Papa, we can do that. I'm sure Dorothy and I can repurpose some old gowns and spruce them up with ribbons and such that we have here. Please don't worry about me; the only man I want to impress is sitting across from me."

She placed a soft kiss on his cheek. "We'll make it work." She went to stand, but her father grabbed her wrist and pulled her back down.

Her father smiled, but she saw no consolation in his eyes. "Is there more?"

Solomon sucked on his bottom lip. “I don’t think I fully and properly explained the situation we’re in. My darling, we are broke.” He paused for the words to sink in. “I’ve gone over everything, and, unless we come into some money, and fast, we may not be able to continue living as we are. Or anywhere near it.”

Frances sat stunned. Her mind whirled with the consequences of her father’s admission. Where would they live? What about Dorothy and the other servants?

“Which brings me to a rather sensitive topic. You know I’ve never pressured you to be anything other than yourself. I would love if you could continue living your days by your will, but I fear that is no longer the case.”

Frances rubbed her temple. “I’m not following you, Papa.”

“Duke Pilton.”

Frances glanced at her father quizzically. “What of him?”

“Well, you are often with him. And word around town is you get along with him, and he seems fond of you. Perhaps there is something there you can explore? Marriage to a duke would certainly go far in getting us out of our current predicament.”

Frances could scream. Has the damned town planned her wedding to the Duke? No one ever paid attention to her, yet now, all of a sudden, a grumpy duke comes along, and she is the belle of the ball.

“Papa! I will not marry Duke Pilton!”

“And why not?” Solomon had the audacity to look shocked. If she wasn’t a spinning whirlwind of emotions right now, she would have found it endearing. He really believed any man would be lucky to have her, yet he would allow her to live in

spinsterhood and not consider it a blight on the family.

Frances shook her head. “Because he is a duke! A baron’s daughter is no match for a duke. The ton would go into apoplectic shock at the news. Not to mention there is nothing between us to warrant a match.”

The image of bodies writhing, hands wandering, and hot kisses flashed in her mind. Frances shook the heat from her body. No. She would not let herself confuse what she was doing with the Duke for anything less than him paying her a favor.

“I stand by my earlier statement. I will find a way to help. Dorothy and I will go through my dresses tomorrow, and I’m sure the next big deal is right around the corner for you, Papa. We will get through this.”

“You don’t understand how business works, Frances.” Her father shot back at her.

Frances sat up straighter. Her father rarely raised his voice at her.

“This is not some game. We need more than saving small change on silk ribbons and ruffles will give us. We need to think on a larger scale. I’m looking into some new deals, but my standing within the trade has faltered due to my missteps. I am doing my best to right it, but I need you to consider marriage. If not to the Duke, then to someone in better standing than us. Which, honestly, shouldn’t be hard to find.”

Frances closed her eyes and willed the tear that was about to fall to stay behind her eyelid.

She took a deep breath and pushed it out. When she opened her eyes, her father had moved to the bar cart and was pouring himself a brandy. She rose and crossed the room to her father. “I will consider it, Papa. But I have faith in you and your business. You’ve gotten us out of tough spots before. Plus, I think you’re forgetting how

resourceful I can be when I need to be. Please don't let this weigh too heavily on you." She leaned in and kissed his cheek. "I must retire. I have Nora's garden party tomorrow." She walked to the door, stepping over the snoring dog. She'd leave him there; her father needed a companion. "Good night, Papa."

Solomon followed her to the door and kissed her forehead. "Good night, my dear."

As Frances made her way to her bedroom, she replayed the conversation with her father in her mind. If only she could marry Thomas, life would be easier. If she was the manipulative sort, she could easily trap him into marriage, but she felt dirty just thinking it. Besides, she stood firm that a duke and a baron's daughter were no match. She would have to be naïve to think what they were doing was anything more than a friend helping a friend.

Pursuing anything with Thomas would muddy the water and confuse her.

Frances sat at her dressing table once again. She brushed her hair while thoughts of Thomas intruded her mind. His words replaying in her head gave her the same thrill as the first time she heard them. Even now, her body swayed to the rhythm his commands demanded of her .

She didn't know bodies could move like hers did with him. He commanded her, and her body reacted on instinct. A familiar tingle started in her core, and her eyes drifted closed.

She wanted to relive that moment when she felt completely lost to her body's sensations. There were no societal rules or judgment. Just two people exploring and sharing the most intimate of practices.

Frances opened her eyes and stared at her reflection. The weight of the conversation with her father slowly dismantling the memory. Her quest to become a woman was

now second. A new priority entered the game. Her father's situation is much worse than she first thought. While a growing part of her wished she lived a different life, so she could pursue Thomas, she knew she had to set her sights a little lower. And thanks to Thomas' own brand of lessons, she was gaining confidence in herself. She could feel her body move differently, and she was even more engaging in her conversation. These could be tools for her to use in pursuit of a match. Thomas' lessons were proving to be a greater help than any elocution lesson she had.

She was more prepared now. She was ready, and she was determined to use those skills to land herself a husband.

CHAPTER 11

“Remind me again why it was absolutely necessary for me to come to this?” Thomas stepped out of the carriage and reached to aid his sister.

“Because, dear brother, it is time we put all of Frances’ lessons to the test.” Jenny’s enthusiasm was more annoying as of late. The more she and Frances prepared, the more excited she became to show off her new knowledge.

Thomas looked toward the small gathering of peers standing by a grove of flowers. I don’t think there is enough liquor in all of London for this.

“Oh, look, there is Nora; we must go to her first.”

Jenny slipped her arm through Thomas’ arm. “Remember, no matter how excited we are, we must remain in control of our emotions.”

Thomas rolled his eyes. “I doubt Frances intended that direction for me.”

Jenny looked up at her big brother and grimaced. “No. I suppose not. Nonetheless, I am curious to see how you’ve progressed with polite society. Nora told me her husband approached you at the club a few nights ago, and you just looked at the poor man and walked away without saying a word.”

“I had nothing to contribute to the conversation, so I left.” There should be nothing wrong with that. Thomas was of the mind if you have nothing to say, don’t say anything for the sake of petty conversation.

Jenny tugged on his arm. “What would Frances say to that?”

“Hmph.”

“A grunt? Are we back to that now? I hope Frances arrives soon to remind you of our agreement.”

Thomas schooled his face, but he couldn't ignore the fact whenever his sister mentioned Frances' name, he became hyper aware of everything around him. It was as if he willed the world to stop moving at the mere mention of her name, so he could pick up every detail concerning her. Which was preposterous. He has never felt that way towards any woman. He convinced himself he was worried about the girl's reputation. His concern had nothing to do with any growing feelings he was definitely not having regarding her.

It was far easier to remain aloof. Which brought him back to his current situation. “Where is Nora? I would like to give my greetings and find a drink.” He swatted at a fly. “Why must this be outside?”

“Because it's a garden party.” Jenny laughed. “Come, Nora is just this way.”

Jenny navigated him through the party, nodding her head in acknowledgment of friends and peers. Thomas was quite surprised with his little sister. He often thought of her as a young child, but even he had to admit, the lessons with Frances paid off. She moved smoothly through the throngs of curious eyes and whispering murmurs with ease.

“Ah, Miss Bennet, so nice of you and His Grace to join us.” Nora reached out her hands to Jenny and both women kissed each other's cheeks in welcome.

Jenny looked up at Thomas, tilting her head indicating it was his turn. When he

remained silent, she nudged his arm.

Thomas sighed.

“Thank you for having us, Lady Honora. It is our pleasure to be here,” Thomas grumbled.

Nora stood, staring owlishly at Thomas.

He looked down at Jenny who was smiling proudly back at him. This was ridiculous. He may be a man of few words, but he had some decorum. Didn't he?

“Well, if you will excuse me, I am parched from our ride over here. I am going to find some refreshments. May I get anyone a drink?”

Jenny nodded no while Nora's mouth fell open. She continued to look at him as if he grew a second head in her presence.

Deciding to leave her to whatever was going on in her head, Thomas turned and pushed his way through a crowd. Thomas bristled at a group of young girls who giggled and chirped nonsensical murmurs as he walked past. He really hated parties, but his new position as Duke required him to be present enough to make connections. Which was utter nonsense.

“Ah, you there,” Thomas pointed to a steward holding a tray of colorful drinks. “Brandy,” he barked.

The steward dipped at the waist and turned to retrieve the drink from a bar cart.

Now that Thomas had found his drink, he was left standing awkwardly by himself. He glanced around to see who he could suffer through a conversation with. He

refused to admit he was looking for soft golden hair and hazel eyes.

He landed on a slightly older gentleman who looked vaguely familiar. Curiosity got the better of him and he approached the man.

“Duke Pilton! How are you, Your Grace?” The jovial man reached out his hand. Thomas looked at the hand and exhaled a long, exasperated sigh. He really hated parties.

In these past few months, he has been introduced to more people than he has known his entire life. How was he supposed to keep names straight?

“I’ve been well, thank you.” There was an air of familiarity about this man that tickled Thomas’ brain, but he could not place him.

“Frances tells me the etiquette lessons are coming along nicely with Jenny. She enjoys spending time with her. I’m sure you’ve noticed the amount of time they spend together.”

Frances’ father . He could see the resemblance now. They both had the same shape of hazel eyes, but where hers were bright and challenging, his looked tired and strung out.

“Yes. Jenny speaks highly of Miss Frances. She has been an immense help to Jenny and me.”

Lord Lounton leaned in with interest. “Yourself, Your Grace?”

“Yes.”

Both men continued to look at each other.

“How is Frances helping you, Your Grace?”

Oh, right. Conversation. Connections.

“It seems I have a bit of a reputation for being brutish and short mannered with those I come in contact with. Frances has been helping my conversational skills.” Thomas looked around at the party. He was itching to look at his timepiece. However, considering this was Frances’ father, he found himself pushing through his instinct and brought his attention back to the man standing in front of him. “Oh, and apparently my clothing was offensive to the female variety, so she and my sister teamed up to address my wardrobe.”

Baron Lounton barked out a laugh and clapped his hands together. “Those women. They mean well, don’t they? Frances was always one to help a friend in need. She is a very caring and well-spoken young woman. You couldn’t have picked a better match... for Jenny, that is”

Thomas narrowed his eyes at the Baron. Is he insinuating there is something going on between Frances and me? Thomas had to tread carefully. He had no intention of aiding in the ruination of Frances.

“ Yes, she has helped Jenny immensely. I imagine the two are around here somewhere practicing Jenny’s conversation skills on some poor unsuspecting earl.”

The Baron’s outburst of a laugh startled Thomas. “She was always one to over prepare, Your Grace. Actually, she is right over —” His hands pointed to a vacant rose bush. “Hmm. Where did she go?” His eyes scanned the garden for his daughter.

“Ah, there she is. Looks like she’s talking to, who is that? Oh. The Lord Lornington or is it Benson? I’ve always had trouble telling the two apart. They are old friends of Frances’. Both are good men from good families.”

Lounton's voice took on a curious note, but Thomas was no longer paying attention to him. He was now solely focused on the slender arm entwined with a man's as they towards the refreshments.

"Sir, your brandy?" The young steward returned with his drink.

Without looking, Thomas grabbed the drink and downed it in one gulp.

Frances thanked Lord Lornington for retrieving her parasol she dropped into the bushes below when she was chatting with Nora and Sara.

"No need for thanks, Miss Ambrose; it was my honor to help a woman in need." Lord Lornington smiled down at her as they walked arm in arm towards the refreshments.

Frances tried to hide her grimace. Dropping a parasol was hardly damsel in distress territory, but she decided to play along.

"Yes. Where would I be without protection from the sun?" she preened.

Lornington patted her arm in a patronizing way that grated on Frances' nerves. She knew she should use this time to brush up on her own conversational skills.

It had been awhile since she spoke with a member of the opposite sex in the hopes of pursuing something more than friendship. However, Lornington was not the one she wanted to practice on. He always treated her as if he was doing her a service by befriending her because she was a Baron's daughter.

He began talking about his horses, but Frances was only half listening. Goosebumps ran up her arm. Someone was watching her, and she had a pretty good idea of who it was.

She brought her attention back to the man escorting her. What was he yammering on about? Oh. Horses.

In her defense, she tried to interject with her opinions, but he steamrolled over all of her attempts. With her luck, God would divine this was the moment she would convince someone to look at her as marriage material, and she'd be stuck with this idiot for the rest of her life.

Luckily for her, once they made it to the table, Lornington was called away by some friends. He left her to peruse the desserts in his absence.

“Miss Frances? How are you today?”

She looked up from the display of macrons to find the friendly eyes of another old friend. “Lord Benson, it is so good to see you! I’m well, and yourself?”

“I’m well, thank you. I saw you were walking with Lord Lornington.” He always shared her annoyance with the presumptuous Lornington.

Frances wrinkled her nose and made a noise of disgust causing Benson to laugh.

“Yes. He retrieved the parasol I dropped. He was just telling me about his horses. Fascinating creatures,” she replied.

“You always did love animals. Do you still have that dog you rescued?”

Frances smiled; she forgot Benson was there when she persuaded her father to let her keep the stray. “I do. Minnie. Although, he is very old now. Barely moves. Lays in my father’s study most days. I fear his hunting days are over.”

Benson chuckled. “Minnie? Isn’t your dog male?”

Frances shook her head vigorously. “Oh yes. It’s short for Minion.”

At Benson’s quizzical look, she continued. “Um, Satan’s Minion. My father named him,” she said merrily.

“That name sounds about right. I remember the horrified look on his face when you convinced him to let you keep him and train it as a hunting dog. To know the mongrel is most comfortable with your father means the old man has come a long way where the dog is concerned.”

Frances couldn’t help but laugh while she poured punch into a cup. “Yes, I suppose you’re right. Papa likes to complain about him, but I think he fusses over the dog more than I do.”

Benson’s laughter died down before hers. “Um, Frances, you seem to have a shadow.”

Frances looked up from her glass. “Hmm, what do you mean?” But she didn’t need to ask or follow Benson’s eyes, which were currently looking just past her shoulder. She knew who he was looking at. Thomas .

Frances smiled into her glass. “Then I guess I shall move out of the sun. I don’t want to freckle any more than I already have. Thank you for the conversation, Benson.” With a nod of her head, she set down her glass and picked up the parasol. She spotted her father and decided to wander over to him.

On her way, she was intersected by Nora. “Frannie, you’re here!” Nora placed a kiss on Frances’ cheek. She threw a quick glance over her shoulder and gestured for Frances to follow her. “Look, I know you hate to be pushed towards a potential suitor, but do you remember when Sara and Marie went to the theatre and met the Viscount Gloushire? Well, he’s here, and I would love to introduce you to him.”

Here we go.

“That sounds lovely, Nora, thank you.”

Nora looked at her, her mouth falling open.

Frances placed a finger under Nora’s chin and pushed up, effectively closing her mouth. “Nora. Don’t be so surprised. While I am happy to continue living as I am, there’s nothing wrong with looking at some options. I’m curious if there are any good men left or if my friends snatched them all up.”

“I think I’ve been out in the sun too much for today. You are the second surprise of the day for me.”

“Oh, poppycock, I hate coming into second. Who beat me to it?” Frances joked.

“Duke Pilton.”

“Oh?” Frances’ breathing stopped. She hated how just hearing his name affected her.

“He actually thanked me for the invite and said it was his pleasure to be here. Can you believe it? His pleasure.” Nora’s voice was full of wonder and amazement.

Frances’ cheeks heated. “Yes, yes. Stop saying his pleasure.” She knew something of his pleasure, and it was not for polite conversation in the middle of a garden party. It didn’t help that she could feel his eyes on her.

“I’m glad he was able to hold a polite conversation. He is a duke; it’s the least he can do.” Frances did her best to sound aloof, but she was failing.

She needed to ignore him. There was a new priority in her life; she couldn’t let

Thomas distract her. Her family's livelihood depended on it.

"Enough talk of Duke Pilton — where is Lord Gloushire? I'd love to meet him."

"Is that my name I hear?"

Frances turned to see a tall man, slightly older than her, standing by the rose bush.

"Ah, yes, Lord Gloushire, your ears must have been ringing. I was just telling Frances here how I should introduce you. Miss Francis Ambrose, may I introduce the Viscount Gloushire."

"How do you do, Lord Gloushire?" she asked with a slight nod of her head.

"I'm well except for this errant bee that keeps buzzing around me." He swatted at the annoying insect.

"Oh, no! You mustn't swat at them." Frances reached out to stop the Viscount's hand from smacking the bee. "That'll just anger them. Best to leave them to the flowers, and we find somewhere else to stand." Once she realized that she was still touching his arm, she dropped her hand.

Nora couldn't contain her glee. "Oh dear, I must go tend to my husband. Lord Gloushire? Would you be able to entertain Frances? I'd hate to leave either one of you alone to fend off a dastardly bee by yourselves."

Frances raised an eyebrow at her friend. "How kind of you, Honora."

Nora scrunched her nose in mirth. "Oh, I know," she said, ignoring Frances' jab. "One of our favorite places to walk is around our pond. There aren't any rose bushes, so maybe you'll be safe there."

Nora was off before Frances could respond.

“May I escort you, Miss Frances?” Lord Gloushire extended his arm in front of him, letting her lead the way.

“Thank you, Lord Gloushire, I would love to.”

As they walked toward the pond, Frances found that conversation with the Viscount came effortlessly which was refreshing since most of the conversations she had been involved with lately had been equivalent to pulling teeth. There were no pretenses with the Viscount: he was easy to talk to and quite the listener.

“Lady Wellington tells me you have a fondness of animals”

Frances nodded. “I do. From big to small, I am fascinated by them all.”

Gloushire smiled. “I should introduce you to my daughter. She is forever bringing rabbits and other vermin into our home.”

Frances snickered. “Rabbits are not vermin, My Lord. They’re adorable.”

“Until you find them eating your unmentionables,” Gloushire replied dryly.

Frances covered her mouth to hide her laugh. She failed. “Oh dear! That sounds horrible!”

“It was!”

Both of them laughed, enjoying each other’s company. They continued their walk around the pond, talking about music, books, and other appropriate topics. She couldn’t help but notice how vastly different the Viscount was from the Duke.

“I must thank you again for saving my life back at the rose bush.” Gloushire nudged her shoulder as they walked.

“The bee would not have killed you,” she chided and nudged him back.

Lord Gloushire faced her in mock horror. “How would you know? Were you conspiring with it?”

Frances pursed her lips. “Of course not. I, sir, am a lady; we do not conspire with insects lesser than us,” she said with a false air of prudishness.

“Oh, forgive me, Madam. I would never assume you mix company with beings lesser than you whether they be insect or man,” he replied.

The two shared another laugh. Frances took a step and faltered amongst the rocky terrain, but Lord Gloushire’s arms caught her waist to stabilize her. “Careful, it seems the ground is uneven here.”

Frances looked up into his earnest eyes. Green, not blue. “Um, yes, thank you.”

Once she was righted, he tucked her hand into the crook of his elbow. “If I’m not being forward, I would feel better if we walked arm and arm, so I can assure your safety.”

Frances looked around to see plenty of people milling around in different pairings. Nothing untoward could happen out in the open, so she nodded and kept her arm entwined with his. Yet there was something that felt wrong with the gesture.

She was at a loss for words. She felt a change in his demeanor since her slight slip, and she couldn’t tell if she was comfortable with the change or not.

“You mentioned a daughter before; you’re a father?”

He nodded. “Yes, of two young children: Michael and Violet.”

Frances smiled. “What beautiful names.”

“Thank you. My late wife picked them out.”

Frances continued their walk in silence.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t intend to bring the mood down.” Lord Gloushire kept his eyes on the ground.

She rubbed his arm. “You did nothing of the sort. It has been brought to my attention that I ask too many questions. I don’t want to seem overbearing.”

Lord Gloushire chuckled. “I wouldn’t dare to assume that. I’ve enjoyed our conversation. Plus, you saved me from a wayward bee. If you hadn’t gotten me away from that bush, who knows what state I would be in.”

Frances chuckled. Other than the change in demeanor, she did enjoy her walk with Lord Gloushire. He was polite, funny, and would answer her questions with actual words instead of grunts. Frances chanced a glance at Thomas. She didn’t need to look around to know where he was. She could feel his eyes watching her every movement from where he stood on the terrace.

He looked angry. And it set something off inside of her.

“Well, I fear I must bid you adieu, Miss Frances. I told our nurse I would return for the children in time for dinner. Thank you, again, for saving my life.”

Frances waved him off. “It was nothing.”

He took a few steps and turned back. “Miss Frances? May I call on you?”

Frances swallowed. This is what she wanted. A viscount would be an excellent match for her and would indeed help her family. Yet, words failed her. She only nodded her approval.

With a slight tip at the waist, he turned and left.

Frances watched him leave, trying to dissect the feelings swirling around inside her. She couldn't help but feel she was doing wrong by Thomas which was absurd. Neither one of them had any rights over the other. She was free to pursue a relationship with anyone she pleased. Reclaiming her resolve, she straightened her spine and twirled her parasol in her hand. In fact, she had such a lovely time with the Viscount, she wondered who else she could talk to. After all, a girl needed her options.

CHAPTER 12

He had his arms around her waist.

Thomas threw back a brandy and signaled for another one. After watching Frances parade around the garden party like a bee flitting from one flower to the next, he had to get out of there.

There were too many people at the club in London who would try to strike up a conversation with him, and he was in no mood to put on airs. He needed a space where he could drop the pretenses of Duke and just be Thomas. It was how he ended up at a tavern a street down from his old store.

He kept replaying her every move in his head. The way she laughed with that Benson boy, how her hand captured Gloushire's when he was swatting at air. The way the bastard wrapped his arms around her then proceeded to keep her arm tucked in at his side. And she let him.

He downed the next drink, relishing in the burn as the liquid settled in his belly.

"You might want to slow down. It's unbecoming for a duke to show such slovenly behavior. What would the ton say?"

A smile crept along Thomas' face. "I'm sure it's nothing they aren't already saying."

Thomas leaned back from his hunched position as one of his oldest friends occupied the barstool next to him.

Jonathan Spike grew up with Thomas, and together, they had been through everything two friends could go through. When they were twelve, he was the one who dared Thomas to steal his father's ale which they drank until they got sick in the alleyway behind the store. They chased girls together, they had each other's backs when the Michaelson twins needed to be put in their place; Jonathan was there through it all. He was there when Thomas' mother died, his father died, and then his aunt. He was the first one to toast him as Duke Pilton.

“Ah, come now, I'm sure it's not all bad. Word has it you've made quite the impression on polite society.”

Thomas huffed out a laugh. “And where have you been that you know the inner thoughts of polite society?”

Jonathan leaned with his back against the bar, his elbows propped up on the bar, holding him up. “I've been around,” he said with a wink.

“What rich dowager did you trick into thinking you were something of worth to dally with?”

Jonathan placed his hand over his heart. “I'm offended,” he said mockingly. “I don't have to trick anyone into anything, old friend. I can't help it if all I do is show up and the women flock.”

Thomas rolled his eyes.

“Now, don't keep your old friend waiting, what brings you back to the grittier side of life?” Jonathan swung his legs around to face the bar and signaled to the barkeep to bring him a brandy.

Thomas just shook his head and took a sip of brandy.

“Come now, I know you love to put on a show for others, but you can’t fool me. I know there is a talkative chap under all those layers of brutish ass.”

“I’m not in the mood, Jonathan. I came here for peace.”

The door to the tavern opened, flooding the bar with bright white light. Two men walked in already rowdy. So much for peace and quiet.

“Well if it isn’t our good ole friend Thomas Bennet?” Thomas closed his eyes in resignation. He did not need this now.

“Careful, Sean. That bloke is a Duke now. You better address him properly.” The voice of his childhood nemesis slurred.

“Ah, right. What is it? Lord Pissant?” Sean Michelson said to his snickering brother.

Thomas exchanged a look with Jonathan who shook his head. Right. Don’t engage.

Sean came up behind Thomas and clapped him on the back. “I’m surprised to see you here, old chap. Kicked out already? I was certain you would have charmed your way into the beds of countless ladies by now.”

Thomas tightened his hand on his glass.

“Naw, Sean. You know our good friend here has the personality of the devil himself. No woman worth her salt would climb into bed with him,” Sean’s twin, Daniel spat.

Sean sat down on the other side of Thomas and leaned in. The stench of liquor and sweat made Thomas’ stomach roll. “That’s not what I heard. I heard he found himself a sweet little tart up there.” Thomas’ hackles rose. “But from what I was told, she is just short of being shelved which sounds about right. Only a woman who was

desperate would allow him to come within a hundred yards of her.”

Daniel snickered. “Maybe there’s something wrong with her, eh? I mean, if she was good and proper, she wouldn’t be interested in him. Maybe she’s made her way around the ton, and he was just next on the conquest list.”

Thomas rolled his neck, cracking it.

“Well, that sounds familiar now, doesn’t it Tommy boy? Isn’t that what happened with Shelby? Bet you she’s kicking herself for finding something better than a shopkeeper. If she only knew that poor shopkeeper became a duke, she’d probably still be in his bed. But I hear she’s doing just fine now. Tis a pity, though. She was a good lay, wasn’t she Tommy?”

“I thought so,” chimed Daniel.

Thomas felt Jonathan’s hand clamp down on his other shoulder. Rage was starting to bubble within his core.

“That is one, among many things, you and I differ on. I like my partners to be willing participants and enjoy themselves. Not just lay there and be rutted,” Thomas said. Turning to Jonathan, Thomas threw some coins down on the bar. “Jonathan, I think it’s best I take my leave.” Thankful the room didn’t spin when he stood, he made his way to the door with Jonathan at his back.

The Michelson twins whooped in laughter. “Ah, Sean, you’ve gone and hurt the poor Duke’s feelings.”

“Yeah, I bet you’re right Danny,” Sean added before standing and calling out, “Go crawling back to your willing strumpet. And when she’s drained your coffers, make sure you send her our way. I don’t mind if they’re willing or not.”

Jonathan bumped into Thomas as he stopped. “It’s not worth it, Thomas, just let it be.”

Thomas knew better, but the thought of sweet Frances anywhere near the likes of them had him pushing Jonathan out of the way and charging Sean.

Sean’s back cracked against the edge of the bar from the force of Thomas’ body crashing into his. They both tumbled to the ground and rolled. Sounds of crashing glasses and splintered wood echoed throughout the bar. From the corner of his eye, Thomas could see Daniel and Jonathan exchanging blows by the door.

Thomas forgot how well the Michelson twins fought while drunk. Where most men would be hindered by the alcohol, it seemed to give the twins superhuman strength. Thomas ended up underneath Sean, who managed to get one good strike to his eye.

Thomas needed to think fast before his eye swelled and he lost his depth perception. A broken brandy bottle lay just out of reach of Thomas’ hand. Sean gripped Thomas’ throat, robbing him of breath.

Daniel and Jonathan’s scuffle brought them closer to Thomas and the blasted bottle. Daniel’s boot accidentally kicked the bottle closer to Thomas’ outstretched hand. Finally making the purchase, Thomas swung the bottle up and cracked it across Sean’s head. Sean fell off of Thomas, clutching his head while Thomas shook the spots from his vision.

When enough cleared, he pounced on Sean landing blow after blow. Thomas no longer saw a man beneath him but a means to an end. He would make sure there was nothing left of this degenerate, so Frances would never have to meet such filth. With each punch, years of pent-up rage coalesced in his veins and powered his punches. He didn’t ask for this life, to be a young shop owner, a caregiver for his sister, a bloody duke.

He didn't feel arms lifting him off the bloody mess beneath him. He didn't hear the shouts of people trying to stop him. The only thing that controlled him now was his rage, and it felt glorious.

Jonathan dragged him out of the tavern and into the alleyway behind the bar.

Thomas heaved out breaths, his vision going blurry as he swayed. Now, in the light of day, his rage settled and returned to the dark corners where Thomas kept it. Sliding down the outside wall of the tavern, Thomas rested his head on his knees, willing the contents of his stomach to stay there.

A handkerchief was pushed into his hand. "Just like the good ole days, eh?"

Thomas looked up and smiled at Jonathan's cracked lip. The smile had him wincing in pain. He forgot about the bruise forming around his eye. It should develop into quite the shiner come tomorrow.

"Indeed."

The two sat in compatible silence while their breathing evened out.

"Although, I remember it hurting less when we were younger," Jonathan said, rubbing his shoulder. "Damn brute smashed my shoulder into the corner of the bar."

"I thought I was the one who was supposed to go soft with my new life. It sounds like you're no longer keeping up with our old ways either."

Jonathan rested his head against the brick wall. "I've been helping maintain your store. Takes more work than you led on. Thanks for lulling me into a false sense of security with that. Oh, the store runs itself. Just make sure the shelves stay stocked, and you'll be fine." Jonathan mimicked Thomas' voice.

“If I find out you’ve run my store into the ground, I’ll do much worse to you than I did to Sean in there.”

Jonathan didn’t respond. Thomas looked up from the ground and threw a questioning look at his friend.

“Who is she?”

Thomas groaned. “You think they hit a mark? There’s no one.” Thomas rubbed his rib. He’d have to have Simmons wrap that when he gets home. Struggling to stand, Thomas slid back down the wall. A few more moments here won’t hurt.

“Bugger off with that. Those two have said worse to you in church on a Sunday, yet you went after them like a crazed gorilla. Who is she?”

Thomas closed his eyes, resting his head against the wall. “Her name is Frances. She’s a friend of Jenny’s. Just that a friend.”

Jonathan chuckled. “Ha! Ow!” He grabbed his rib. Guess Daniel hit as well as his brother.

“Serves you right.”

Jonathan cocked an eyebrow. “They mentioned Shelby, and you barely batted an eye, yet you once claimed you loved her. You were heartbroken when she left you for that rich cad.”

“I was not heartbroken,” Thomas interjected, defensively.

Ignoring his remark Jonathan continued, “If this girl is just a friend, then she must be some friend. ”

Thomas felt the warming sensation of his rage begin to embolden him. He almost forgot the pain in his ribs and hands.

Jonathan laughed, this time a bit more quietly, most likely due to the pain in his abdomen. “There he is. The dastardly duke I know. See? You have never gotten so out of sorts over a woman. Now tell me again who she is, and this time don’t insult my intelligence with lying. We’ve been through too much for that.”

Thomas considered his options. He was bigger than Jonathan, but he knew from experience Jonathan was quick. “Bloody hell,” he growled. “She’s a baron’s daughter, and she is Jenny’s friend. I didn’t lie about that.”

Thomas paused. How could he describe their predicament without her sounding like an all-out strumpet like the twins accused her of being?

“She’s annoying.”

Jonathan barked a laugh. “You think everyone is annoying.”

“I don’t know. She doesn’t scare easily, and she looks like she should. It intrigued me.” He shrugged, grimacing at the pain it caused. “The first night I saw her, I thought she was another Shelby, sniffing around Jenny as a way to get to me and what it means to be a Duchess. She caught me glowering at her, and she just... ignored me.”

Jonathan sat up. “Damn. That is impressive.”

“She ended up sitting next to me at dinner, and I was so annoyed at her for not being intimidated and leaving us alone. Then I found out Jenny invited her over to be Jenny’s etiquette teacher of sorts.”

“From the way you’re speaking of her, I reckon you have benefitted from some of these lessons as well.”

Thomas ignored his friend’s jab at his character. “She’s intelligent, proper yet quick-witted, well spoken —”

“Everything a duke looks for in a woman,” Jonathan threw in. “Forgive me, but what’s the problem?”

Thomas sighed. “She’s too damn innocent, Jonathan. I’m set in my ways. I just want to be left alone.”

“Ah. I see.”

Good. Maybe now, he’ll drop it.

“But you’re wrong.”

Thomas groaned and tried his luck at standing again. His head stopped throbbing. If he could make it to the street, he was sure he could get a hackney back to London.

Jonathan kicked Thomas’ leg out from under him. Thomas landed on his ass, spewing a slew of curses. “Bloody hell, what did you do that for?”

“Because I can’t stand yet, and we’re having this conversation.”

Thomas was too tired to argue. Plus, over the years, he had learned to let Jonathan speak his mind. He would tire himself out eventually.

“Life dealt you shite cards, and you’ve been alone for most of it already. You changed when your father died. Don’t look at me like that. I’ve seen you through

every stage, remember?”

Thomas tipped his head back to stare at the darkening sky.

“You were never personable, but taking on the store hardened you. And after running it for a few months, I understand why. People are horrible.”

“I’ve been trying to tell you that for years.”

Jonathan smiled. “Then came Shelby. She had us all fooled. But if it’s any consolation, I heard she got the clap, and that rich chap left her.”

Thomas considered that. Did that change how he felt about her? He was ready to propose to her when she left. He’d never admit it to anyone, but he was devastated when she did, calling him a pathetic and lowly shopkeeper. Hearing about her downfall should’ve brought some sense of retribution, but he felt nothing.

“I no longer have use for her or anyone from my past.”

“You wound me, old friend. Does Frances care about your past — that you are, and I mean no offense, basically a commoner?”

Thomas lifted a shoulder. “We don’t talk about our pasts, much to her chagrin. But she doesn’t care for the rules and opinions of the ton. She puts on airs of a delicate wallflower, but she also does what she can to skirt around the rules when people aren’t looking. She’s quite remarkable in that sense.”

Thomas could see the devilish grin spread across his friend’s face. “And what rule, pray tell, is she skirting when people aren’t looking?” Jonathan’s eyes widened at Thomas’ silence. “You damn bastard. Tell me you stole the innocence of a wallflower!” Jonathan’s laugh croaked out of him as he held his side.

“It’s not like that. And no , I haven’t. Although...”

“What? Do you want to?” Jonathan scooted closer to Thomas. “Tell me you are developing feelings for the girl.”

“No.” I don’t think I am. “No,” he said more resolutely. “And she propositioned me .”

Jonathan sobered immediately. “You jest. Now, I’ve heard it all.”

“She was helping Jenny with learning how to act, dance, behave, and all that, and Jenny suggested Frances give some attention towards me, refining my character to the sparkling personality you see before you now.”

Jonathan snorted. “She’s clearly not spending enough time with you,” he murmured.

“She approached me one evening saying she’d help soften my edges under one condition. That I help her experience all the splendors of being a...”

“Go on, don’t leave me guessing.” Jonathan was enjoying this way too much for Thomas’ liking.

“... a woman,” Thomas gritted out. For once, Jonathan was blissfully quiet. “I wanted to turn her down, but damn it, there is something about her that attracts me. It’s just lust, I assure you. I’m hoping whatever is going on between us will burn itself out, and I can go back to the quiet life I wanted. Besides, if today is any indication, my work is almost done. She made quite the impression on several men at the garden party we were attending.”

“Is that a hint of jealousy I detect?” Jonathan howled when Thomas stuck a finger into his ribs and dug in.

“Hey! No need for that. Is it so wrong to want her? You’re a duke for Christ’s sake. You can have anyone you want.”

Thomas sneered and looked around at the dirt and grime of the alley. This is where he came from, who he was at his core. They came from different worlds. He couldn’t defile her in that way.

Jonathan sensed his friend’s mood and clapped Thomas on the shoulder. “Right, then. We should get you back. I don’t need the peerage throwing me a ball for keeping you away from London for too long. I’m in no shape to woo all those dowagers with my charm.”

The two men leaned on each other and hobbled towards the main street. Once Thomas was secured in a hackney, he reached out to shake Jonathan’s hand. “Thank you for having my back in the tavern.”

“Always brother.” He held onto Thomas’ hand. “One more thing before you go.”

Thomas nodded.

Dropping his hand, he stuck it in his pocket. “I’m far from the perfect man to offer romantic advice of any sort.” Thomas groaned. “So, have your fun with this girl, but you know firsthand the feeling of being the one who is left behind. If it is truly lust, make sure you both know it and move on when it’s time.” With that, Jonathan nodded to the footman to pull away.

Thomas sank back in his seat. Of course, he would make sure Frances understood when it was time to end their affair. They had a clear agreement: he would prepare Jenny for the ball and make him more manageable around the ton in exchange for showing her the ways around the bedroom... or dining table.

He hated to admit that she was becoming a fixture not only in Jenny's life but his as well.

Thomas sat up or tried to.

Wait. Why did Jonathan say to make sure both of them knew it was just lust and to understand when it was time to move on? Was he insinuating Thomas had more feelings for Frances than he let on? That was ludicrous. Thomas was well aware of his true feelings for the girl, wasn't he?

CHAPTER 13

Frances sat in her parlor, rolling her tired ankles under her dress. She couldn't remember the last time she walked that much at a garden party. Talking to people was exhausting. Maybe Thomas was onto something by intimidating everyone from talking to him.

She did have fun, though. It was exhilarating to be part of conversations instead of flittering around them. Still, even though she enjoyed herself, a small part of her felt at a loss.

"Miss Frances?" Dorothy entered the room. "Lord Gloushire is here to see you."

Frances sat up. "Oh, I almost forgot. Yes, of course, let him in."

Lord Gloushire entered behind Dorothy, who now stood near the window.

"Lord Gloushire, so good to see you." Frances rose at his appearance.

He crossed the room and sat in a chair across from her. "I hope I'm not interrupting your day," He said.

Frances waved him off. "I'm about to go to visit Jenny later this morning, but I have some time before then. Would you like some tea?" She signaled to Dorothy to pour a cup.

"No, thank you, Miss Frances. I'm on my way to attend to some business, but I knew

your house was en route, so I wanted to stop by.”

Frances chewed her bottom lip. He seemed nervous. She could tell he was trying to sound nonchalant, but his fingers were tapping on his knee while the other bounced.

“Forgive me if this feels as though it is coming out of the blue, but I have a proposition to make.”

“Oh,” Frances squeaked.

“I know we only just met, but I think we got along smashingly, don’t you?” Gloushire reached up and tugged on his cravat.

Frances barely managed to express her agreement when he continued, “And there’s no point in dragging things out when we can both help each other.”

Frances swallowed. Why is it hot in here all of a sudden? “Help each other?” Her eyes flew to Dorothy for guidance.

“Yes. I hate to be forward, but I know of your father’s unfortunate business deal that fell through. I can help you.”

Frances’ eyes opened wide. Oh no. He wasn’t about to do what she thought he was going to do.

“Marry me.” The words rushed out as one word.

He absolutely did it. No. She couldn’t possibly be hearing this correctly. “E-excuse me?” Frances brought her hand to her thudding heart. Good heavens, she was going to faint. She was actually going to faint.

“Miss Frances, are you all right?” Dorothy came running to her. “Here. Drink this water.” Dorothy stood between her and the now-standing Viscount. She shoved a cold glass into Frances’ gloved hand. Her big, rounded eyes spoke volumes. She was just as shocked as Frances was.

“Thank you, Dorothy. I’m fine now. It is just a bit warm in here, isn’t it?”

“Yes, Miss, it is. I’ll open the window right away.” Dorothy scooted over to the window and pushed it open. The gentle breeze did nothing to cool Frances.

“I’m sorry, Miss Frances, I didn’t mean to startle you.” Lord Gloushire offered his handkerchief to her.

“I must admit, the suddenness of your proposal surprised me.” She blotted at the sweat beading around her temple.

Lord Gloushire sat next to her. “I wanted to speak with you before you went Duke Pilton’s.”

“You knew I was going to there today?” Frances looked back at Dorothy, who shrugged her shoulders just as baffled by his admission as she was.

“Yes.” He stood and paced in front of her. “I’m doing this all wrong. There is word around town that he’s fond of you.”

Frances groaned into her water glass. If she heard that one more time, she was going to scream. “I think you mis?—”

“I have not. Whether it’s true or not holds no consequence to me. I like you, Miss Frances. I think you like me. We paired well yesterday, to that you agreed. I could help offset some of your father’s missteps, and in turn, well, I’m not sure how else to

put this, but my children need a mother, and I think you would be the perfect fit.”

No amount of etiquette training could school Frances’ current facial expression. “A mother? Me?” She could feel a laugh bubble up within her, and she willed it back down. Laughing in the face of a viscount was frowned upon.

“I know. I just laid a lot at your feet, but all I’m asking is that you consider it. Nothing has to be announced; we can take our time if you’d like.”

Frances toyed with the handkerchief in her hand and fumbled with her words; nothing seemed like the appropriate response. “All right, Lord Gloushire. I will think on it.” There. That should suffice for now. Absently, she tucked the handkerchief into the pocket of her dress.

He smiled and exhaled a breath. He offered her his hand, and she stood. “Thank you, Miss Frances. I promise, if you choose me, you and your father will be taken care of. We could be happy. Plus...” He pulled her in closer to whisper. “... you could save me from all the warring insects out to destroy me,” he said with a jovial grin.

She couldn’t help but laugh at his earnestness. “Shouldn’t the man be the protector of the household?”

“I’ve always believed in partnerships, Miss Frances. We shall divide and conquer.”

Frances nodded her approval. “Noted. Thank you for stopping by. I shall consider your proposal.”

Lord Gloushire raised her hand to his lips, placed a chaste kiss on it, and left.

Dorothy rushed over to her. “Oh my goodness, Frannie, are you going to accept?”

Frances sat in disbelief. “I should, shouldn’t I? I mean, he’s right. Marrying a viscount will go a long way in helping Papa get out of the mess he made. And I’ve always wanted children. Although, I always thought they’d come from me.”

Dorothy patted Frances’ shoulders. “You can still have children. I hear Lord Gloushire is not far into his thirties. And from what I hear, he is a good father to his existing children. I presume you would have a good life with him.”

“Yes. I would,” Frances said absently.

“But it’s not him who you’re thinking about, is it?”

Frances met Dorothy’s knowing look. “You know me too well, Dorothy. You also know that pursuit is a fool’s errand. The more reasonable match is the Viscount. Regardless, my decision will have to wait. I told Jenny I would stop over today to help aid the Duke with his dancing. It seemed the last time she tried, he stepped on her dress so much it tore.”

Dorothy went with her to the door to help fasten her summer coat. “Frannie, I hope I’m not speaking out of turn, but please be careful.” Frances leveled a look at her maid. “I don’t care what people think, and I know you don’t either. I just don’t want to see you hurt.”

Frances took Dorothy’s hand. “Thank you. He’s just a friend, really. My time is mostly spent with Jenny, and she’s present when he’s there.” Mostly.

Frances knocked on the door. It was odd there wasn’t anyone to greet her. Usually when Jenny invited her to call, one of the footmen was outside waiting for her.

The door opened, and Frances gasped. Instead of Simmons, Thomas stood in front of her. “Duke Pilton! I wasn’t expecting you... Your eye! My heavens, what happened

to your eye?”

Thomas spun on his heel and retreated into the library. Forgetting all decorum, Frances rushed in behind him. “You’re limping! What on earth happened to you? Were you in an accident after the garden party?”

Thomas threw back a glass of brandy and slammed it down onto his desk. He glowered at her before easing down into his chair.

“Here, let me help you.” Frances reached out to help guide him down, but he shrugged off her assistance.

“I don’t need help,” he growled.

Frances stood stunned. Men were giving her a serious headache today.

“I think you do. Your eye is a disgusting mess, you’ve acquired a limp, and you can barely sit. If you don’t get help soon, you’ll need a coffin.”

“Leave me be, Frances. This is what men like me do. We get into quarrels; we walk it off. Just go. Jenny isn’t here. I’ll have her send word when she returns.”

Frances stood next to him, refusing to budge. If he wanted to act like a hardheaded ass, so could she.

“Did you not hear me, woman? I said leave!” His gruff voice vibrated through her, but she refused to back down.

“You forget, Duke Pilton, you do not scare me. Now tell me what happened, or I shall —”

Thomas exploded out of his chair and towered over her. “You’ll what?”

“ Thomas? I’m home! Did Frances stop by? I completely lost track of time. Oh. I’m sorry, am I interrupting something?” Jenny stood in the doorway, looking at both of them with a curious stare.

Frances didn’t need to look at Jenny to know she was, in fact, not sorry. Frances refused to be the first one to move.

Thomas huffed and glanced at his sister. “As you can see, she is standing right here.”

“Ah. I see your mood has not improved. Well, this dancing lesson shall be fun then. If you two are finished here, we can move into the parlor. I’ll have Simmons move the furniture, so we can get started with the lesson.”

Thomas turned back to Frances who was still standing there, staring up at him.

“After you, Miss Frances.”

Frances refused to address the sharp pain in her chest at his use of Miss . “I hope that cut underneath your eye doesn’t bleed. You’ll have to pay to have my dress cleaned if you bleed on me.” She turned with a flick of her hair and stormed out of the room.

Frances watched Jenny hobble over to the sofa.

“We’ll move on to the waltz.” Frances stood in the center of the room, her hand stretched out towards Thomas, who stood sulking by the doorway. “Are you coming?”

“Go on, Thomas. It’s time you step on someone else’s toes.” Jenny sat on the sofa, rubbing her aching foot.

Thomas begrudgingly moved towards Frances. He looked as if he was walking towards the chopping block.

“It’s an easy dance; basically, you’re making a box with your feet. You know the shape of a square, don’t you?” Frances raised an eyebrow, challenging him. For some reason, this approach got the most reaction from him.

He didn’t offer a response, but he grabbed her waist and tugged her towards him. Refusing to look at her, he grabbed her arm and stood there.

“Well, first things first, you need to loosen up.”

Ignoring Jenny’s snicker, Frances shook their adjoining arm to prove her point. “The purpose of dancing to be able to flow with the music. You can’t do that if you’re a statue.”

“This is absurd. I don’t plan on dancing with anyone.” He was being positively insolent.

“You never know, Your Grace. The peerage will expect you to produce an heir, last I checked you needed a woman for that, and being a part of the ball scene is a way to get one.”

“Or a garden party,” he murmured.

Frances cocked her head, “What was that?”

Thomas sighed. “Nothing.”

“Very well. Now, as I was saying, drop your shoulders while keeping your back straight. You want to have good posture, but you can’t have your shoulders by your

ears.”

“I know how to dance,” he stated.

Frances swallowed a retort. Thomas was usually apprehensive at the beginning of her lessons, but he would drop the facade by now. Something changed, and she’d bet her life it had something to do with his black eye.

“Your sister’s feet would disagree.”

“She’s my sister,” he complained. “Who wants to dance with their sister?”

“I am not your sister,” she retorted.

“No. You’re not.”

Frances watched him swallow, his cravat bobbing. A simple, natural movement that always warmed her body despite how awful he was behaving.

Frances licked her lips. “Then you can dance with me. So, dance.”

Frances felt Thomas grip on her waist tighten. Thomas looked over at his sister, nodding to her to begin playing the pianoforte they had been using.

When the music started, Thomas literally swept Frances off her feet. Startled by his power, it took her a few steps to catch up.

After the first couple of missteps, she and Thomas found their rhythm.

He can dance. The thought shocked her although it shouldn’t. Thomas was astute and a quick study with everything they had covered.

Thomas took the simple box step and led her into the turns of the dance. Their eyes connected during the first turn. Together, they twirled around the parlor, their bodies moving in perfect time with the soft, swaying notes of the melody. With each step, Frances became more lost in the moment.

His hard eyes softened as the dance progressed. His grip gentled on her hand, yet the arm placed on her back became firmer as he pulled her in closer. Breathless, she leaned into him.

It was then she noticed a small drop of blood escaping the cut on his face.

“You’re bleeding.”

Thomas stopped, reaching up to dab under his eye.

Frances patted her pockets; she usually had a handkerchief in there. She pulled one out and began gently dabbing his cheek.

Thomas moved his cheek. “Tis nothing. I don’t want to ruin your handkerchief. I have one I can use. Thank you.”

As she pulled away, Thomas grabbed her wrist. “Wait. Whose handkerchief is this?”

Realization hit Frances. Both their eyes locked in on the embroidered initials of Lord Gloushire.

“H-he stopped by this morning,” Frances whispered, her hand still held out in front of her, his hand a vice around her wrist.

Thomas’ eyes narrowed on hers, the spell of their dance crashing down around them.

“This lesson is over.” Thomas turned and marched out of the room.

Frances and Jenny exchanged a look before Frances took off after him.

“What have I done to deserve this treatment?” she yelled at his retreating back. “Stop ignoring me.” Thomas turned, glowering at her.

“You have no right to demand anything of me,” he spat.

“You have no right to get mad over a handkerchief. Why should it matter who it came from?”

“IT DOESN’T!” He bellowed.

Frances stepped back; his attack startled her. Thomas raked his hand through his hair. “Forgive me of my outburst.”

Frances tucked a curl behind her ear. “Does this have to do with what happened to you after the party yesterday?”

Thomas avoided her eyes. “I wish not to talk about that.”

Frances risked a step closer to the sullen man and touched his bruised cheek. Thomas’ eyes closed. His hand covered hers and caressed it. His calloused fingers, from years of hard work, sent a spark of electricity through her body with each stroke.

Without warning, he pulled her into the hallway closet. He pushed her up against the closed door and claimed her mouth. Her mind raced to keep up with his movements. One moment, they were arguing in the hallway; the next they were in this darkened closet doing unmentionable things. She loved it. Nothing about him was gentle. He

nipped at her mouth while his hands grabbed at her dress, bunching it up. He grabbed her leg to hold it up around his waist as he stepped into the space he created.

One hand kneaded her buttocks while the other toyed with her peaked nipple through her dress.

His hands were rough and demanding. His true nature did things to her she didn't have the vocabulary to describe. She wanted more, needed more. She grabbed onto his shoulders and let him lead the way. She sent up a prayer that he was leading her down the same path their previous time together had taken them.

The memory of that night encouraged her. Her hands left his shoulders and trailed down his body. Her fingertips grazed the hardened muscles of his chest and found the waist of his breeches. His mouth moved to her favorite spot on her neck, and she sighed. He growled and bit her neck, hard. She moaned, and he sucked harder. She was burning up.

She mumbled curses as she fumbled with his belt. She had no idea what she was doing, and he was taking too long. She was about to rip the damned breeches off him when his hands stopped her. Confusion clouded her mind.

"We shouldn't." He held their hands clasped together between their heaving bodies, his forehead resting against hers. Her leg dropped from his waist.

"It's fine. I'm ready." Frances didn't care how needy her voice sounded. She was needy.

Thomas shook his head. "No. It shouldn't be done like this." Thomas stepped away and adjusted his breeches.

"What, what do you mean?" She took a step toward him, reaching up to cup his face.

“Please Thomas, I’m not afraid. I want this.”

Thomas refused to look at her. “This is wrong.”

Frances dropped her hand as if she were burned. “Excuse me?”

“I will not take you in a closet.”

Frances couldn’t make out his features in the darkened closet. She couldn’t tell if he was being a gentleman or an ass. Does he no longer want me?

“It makes no difference to me —”

“Well, it should,” he forced out.

“I forgot you have a bias against closets.” Frances tried to lighten the mood. He wasn’t the playful sort, but she hoped she would convey that she could handle the next step in their lessons with grace.

“You should go.” He bit out.

“I...” Frances started but stopped. Tears threatened to fall. Swallowing her pride, she adjusted her dress and stepped out of the closet. With a quick glance around to make sure no one saw her, she made her way to the door.

Waiting for her carriage to arrive, she brought out Gloushire’s handkerchief she still had in her possession. She chewed her lip, trying to understand the events of the past twenty-four hours. She met a man, who proposed marriage the very next day, and somewhere during that time, the Duke sparred with someone. Was she being naive to think the two could be related? Although, there was no way for the Duke to find out about the Viscount’s proposal. She left mere moments after the Viscount left her

home.

She rubbed her hands over her face. The Viscount. She still didn't know if she'd accept his proposal, but if she did, it was even more imperative Thomas followed through with their original agreement. Because if she had to spend the rest of her life with the perfectly respectable Viscount, she feared she'd never taste the true power of passion again.

She refused to let that happen.

CHAPTER 14

Lady Staunton's ball was the first of the season and therefore, the reason behind Frances' current headache. "Oh, I know! What if we twist the braid and weave it into the curls that are cascading down from the crown of your head?" Dorothy's not-so-subtle yank had Frances wishing for her bed. Any man who complained about what he needed to do to prepare for a ball was going to get a slipper up his... ow! "Dorothy! My head is attached to my body!"

Dorothy shot an apologetic look at Frances in the mirror. "Sorry. I know how important the first ball of the season is, and you seemed so out of sorts lately. I just want this night to go perfectly for you."

Francis massaged her temples. There was only one thing that would make the upcoming ball perfect, and it had nothing to do with the style of her hair and everything to do with a certain man who had been ignoring her for the past week.

"That's enough for one night, Dorothy. I don't think my scalp can take much more."

Dorothy excused herself and left Frances alone with her thoughts. A soft knock came, and Stephens entered. "Miss Frances? A letter has arrived for you from Froudrih Manor."

Frances' eyes snapped to the little white envelope in his hand. She wasn't planning on seeing Jenny for another day to help with last-minute preparations for the ball.

She murmured her thanks to Stephens as she took the envelope and ripped it open.

Her heart sank. It was from Jenny asking her to come tomorrow morning. She almost laughed at herself for thinking it could possibly be from the Duke. Ever since the closet, he had done his damndest to avoid her. When he was there, it was only for moments before retiring to that smelly library to work.

She hated to admit it, but she missed him. She missed the way he challenged her, intrigued her; hell, she missed the way he angered her. She'd give anything to bicker with him. Instead, in the rare instances she had encountered him, he had been... pleasant.

Frances groaned flopped onto her bed and groaned into her pillow. She may have done her job too well when it came to him. People were now talking about how Duke Pilton had been more forthcoming and agreeable to talk with. Ugh. It shouldn't bother her; that was her job. She should be proud that she was able to turn the big oaf into someone who could hold a conversation with actual words instead of just grunts and eye rolls.

But she was bothered. She missed the gruffness of his voice when he was annoyed, the way his eyes flashed with defiance, or the way his lips curled into a smirk right before he was going to deliver a crushing blow to whomever he was talking to. He was a worthy adversary, and now, he was becoming the perfectly respected duke. She wanted to punch someone.

The next morning, Frances made her way over to the Pilton estate to meet Jenny. She was escorted into the parlor and took her normal seat across from the window that faced the street. Frances took a deep breath and relaxed as the smell of vanilla wafted into the parlor on the soft breeze

The parlor door swung open.

"Good morning, Jenny," Frances said as she watched people walk outside the

window. “I hope you don’t mind, Stephens offered me some tea before you came.”

“That’s his job.”

The deep voice held her body hostage. She couldn’t move, think, or breathe; she just sat there, waiting.

The Duke crossed the room and slammed the window shut. The thump of the pane hitting the sill broke the spell she was under.

“Why did you do that? It’s a lovely morning, and the smell was delightful. What kind of flower is it?”

Thomas shrugged his shoulder and made his way to the door.

“You’re leaving?” Frances turned in her seat, not trusting her legs to hold her up.

Thomas stopped with his hand on the door handle. “Jenny should be down shortly,” he mumbled and left.

Frances sat stunned. Her cheeks flushed and her feelings were hurt. He acted as if he wanted nothing to do with her. Was she too forward in the closet? No. That could not be. With the kind of agreement they had, it would make sense that removing one’s bottoms would be the next step. She had her leg wrapped around him for heaven’s sake.

Jenny came bouncing in a moment later.

“Hi Frannie! Thank you so much for coming over today. I know we said we’d meet tomorrow, but I couldn’t wait to tell you what I heard. Frances?” Jenny waved her hand in front of Frances’ blank stare when she didn’t respond. “Frances, are you

well?”

Frances didn't have the strength to pretend but managed to blink her eyes to prevent any rogue tears from falling. “Yes, Jenny, thank you,” her voice cracked. “Just overwhelmed with all the planning. What were you saying?”

Jenny scowled and glanced at the door. “Are you sure? I saw my brother pop in before I came in. He's been in a peculiar mood this past week. Did he say something to you?”

Frances just shook her head. “No. He just came in to close the window and said you'd be down shortly.” Frances was desperate for information, but she could not bring herself to inquire about the Duke.

“We've finally been having beautiful weather, and he insists on closing every window Simmons opens. Who knows why?” Jenny waved the thought away with her hands. “Anyway, guess what?” Jenny knelt at Frances' feet and took her hands in hers.

“People can't stop talking about my brother's transformation, and it's all because of you .” Jenny's eyes were bright, and she was beaming with pride for both her brother and her friend. “No one thought it could be done, but you managed the impossible!”

Frances swallowed the lump that formed in her throat. She wasn't in the mood to be congratulated. She felt as if she was losing her grasp on everything.

“You act as if I taught him to fly.” She barely got the words out; her voice shook. Her eyes dropped to their clasped hands, and she willed God for strength to get through this conversation.

“You might as well have. He's a completely different person, well, outside these

walls. Inside, he's as moody as ever. But hopefully that'll be someone else's cross to bear, thanks to you."

Frances' ears perked up. "What do you mean by that?"

"That's what I wanted to tell you. Being the new Duke, he was already on the top of every mama's list, but now that he is somewhat personable, girls are tripping over each other to get his attention." Jenny's eyes focused on her. Her smile faded slightly. "It seems you have tamed the beast."

Frances felt sick. The walls were closing in on her; she couldn't breathe. Her eyes darted to the window. He closed the window; there was no air. Frances jumped up; she needed to get outside. The quick movement caused the room to spin, and she tumbled back into the chair.

"Frances! Are you all right? Simmons! Frances, what is wrong?" Jenny stood up, reaching to stabilize Frances in the chair.

Frances pushed Jenny's helping hands away. "It's nothing. I wasn't feeling well this morning, but when I received your letter, I was worried you needed to see me regarding the ball. So I came first thing this morning."

"Oh, Frannie. I am so sorry. I didn't mean to imply it was of absolute necessity that you come today. I was just so excited and proud of you and my brother; I couldn't wait to tell you."

"Well, you could have," Frances snapped.

Jenny opened her mouth and then closed it.

Frances took another deep breath. Spots danced in front of her eyes. "I'm sorry,

Jenny. I spoke out of turn. I should go. Please forgive me.” Frances tried to rush past Jenny, but her friend grabbed her hand.

“Of course, Frances. Let me help you out to your carriage.”

Frances twitched at the connection. She couldn’t bear to be touched right now.

Simmons arrived and called for her carriage to be brought around. The carriage had barely stopped moving when Frances clamored inside.

Jenny peered in through the window. “Would you like me to escort you home? Or Thomas? I’m su?—”

“NO! I mean, please don’t bother the Duke. I’m fine, really. The weather is getting warmer, and sometimes it can be too much. Please do not tell your brother. I-I don’t want to inconvenience anyone. I’ll meet you at the modiste tomorrow morning like we had planned.”

Jenny stood outside the carriage, not convinced she should let Frances go alone. “All right. Please send word when you get home. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

The carriage pulled away. Through her tears, Frances saw Jenny turn on her heel and stomp towards the house.

Thomas watched as the carriage pulled away. He let go of the curtain and sat at the desk in the library, the damned smell of vanilla still coursing through the window that was still stuck open. The upside to the window being stuck open was the musty, dead smell was gone. The downside was the room that was supposed to be his escape was now his own prison thanks to one woman.

She was everywhere he went; he was unable to escape her. If he didn’t smell her,

Jenny was talking about her, or people were inquiring about her. It was now well known the secret to the Duke's newfound personality was Miss Frances Ambrose.

Which was the stupidest concept ever. He was still Thomas Bennet, the pig-headed shopkeeper from the other side of town who wanted nothing to do with the ton. It was just now he had her annoyingly sultry voice in his head chastising him whenever he wanted to roll his eyes or make a snide comment to someone.

Thomas ran his hands through his hair. Blasted woman. She had no right to occupy so much of his mind. They were not meant to be; it was as simple as that. She was raised with champagne and balls. Thomas was brought up on bar fights and stocking shelves. His title didn't change who he was or where he came from. He may be able to act like a Duke, but everyone knew the truth. The peerage was nothing but who could play the game, and thanks to Frances, he now knew the rules.

The door swung open and slammed into the wall. Thomas' head snapped up, and he found his sister standing tall, as if she was about to duel.

"What is the meaning of this?"

"I should be asking you the same thing," Jenny huffed and stormed in. "Frannie ran out of here like her dress was on fire. What have you done?"

Thomas looked down at the ledger in front of him. "I am not her keeper, dear sister. I have no idea why she left in such a manner."

Jenny pursed her lips. "Don't play coy with me. You may have refined some edges, but I know you better than anyone. If someone's upset, chances are you're the culprit."

Thomas flicked an imaginary speck of dust off his desk. "I wasn't around her. You

were. What did you do?"

Jenny sat in a chair opposite Thomas and rested her elbows on his desk. "That's just it. We were talking about the ball, and I mentioned how the tide is turning regarding your place in the ton, and she went as white as a ghost." Jenny leaned in, narrowing her eyes at him. "Why do you think that is?"

Thomas sighed, his hands in tight fists. "What do you mean the tide is turning?" He hated it when his sister talked in riddles.

Jenny straightened. "Well, exactly what it's intended to mean. Frances has done her job. While you haven't completely won over the peerage, you're damn close."

"Watch your tongue." Thomas raised his eyebrow. "Apparently, you still have work to do."

Naturally, Jenny stuck her tongue out in response.

"I told her that by being the new duke, it was obvious the mamas would have their eyes on you, but now, so do the daughter's. You should have a very interesting ball this week. And now that you have somewhat of a personality, people are holding me in a higher regard as well."

Jenny was about to continue, but Thomas held up his hand. "Stop. You talked about my marital prospects with her?" Thomas was outraged. "What right do you have to talk about my prospects? I'm not looking for a wife."

"I just —"

"I don't want to hear another word. I thought you understood you were not to perpetuate gossip." Thomas nodded towards the door.

“I never said you were looking for a wife! I thought you’d be proud of your accomplishments,” Jenny offered.

“Proud? Since when do I care about any of this? In fact, I think I should stop spending time with Miss Ambrose.” There. Thomas needed to distance himself from her. He couldn’t control himself around her. It took every ounce of strength he had not to give into lustful thoughts when he just saw her in the drawing room.

Jenny’s mouth fell open. “Why? We’re doing so well. The ball is next week.”

Thomas smoothed his jacket. “I didn’t say you couldn’t see her. Just as you said, people have noticed my ability to be civil; Miss Ambrose’s work is done in regard to me.

“You mean Frannie’s work. Why are you calling her Miss Ambrose all of a sudden.” Jenny leaned in. “Did something happen between the two of you,” she whispered conspiratorially.

“Jenny. Enough. Stop this nonsense at once. Nothing has happened. I am done with lessons, and I am done with you. Please close the door on your way out.”

Jenny stood and cocked her hip. “Has everyone gone mad? I’m going to speak with Simmons; there must be something in the water.” She stopped before she got to the door and turned slightly. “One last bit of gossip before I go. You’re not the only eligible bachelor people have their sights on. Viscount Gloushire is making the rounds.”

Thomas was losing what little patience he had for his sister. “And why, pray tell, is this important information for me to know?”

“Because while you might not be looking for a wife, he is. And word around town he

has his sights on a certain blonde friend of mine.”

She turned and marched to the door, slamming it shut behind her.

Thomas took a deep breath and cursed. Once again, the damned smell of vanilla invaded his senses. Thomas stood in front of the stuck window. Placing his hands on the pane, he used all of his might to slam it shut. The pane shook under the force. He stepped back, waiting to feel relief for finally closing the window that had been stuck open since they moved in.

Instead, he felt defeated.

CHAPTER 15

Frances looked out the window in the morning room. A storm was coming. Dark clouds were building up just over the horizon. For a moment, she watched wispy white clouds dissipate as bigger, black ones loomed over the distant houses.

“Frannie, are you even listening?” Marie’s frustrated tone cut into her wandering thoughts.

“Hmm? What were you saying?”

Marie let out an exasperated sigh. “Really, Frances. You have been so distant lately.”

“Marie,” Nora’s soothing voice cut in, “this time is stressful for everyone. Plus, she’s been spending most of her time helping Jenny and Duke Pilton; maybe she is thinking of all the preparations she still has to do for herself. You could offer your help instead of snipping at her.”

Marie sniffed. “I’ll admit, Jenny is more tolerable, now that she has learned to control her ranting, but whenever I see the Duke, I can’t help but see a wolf in sheep’s clothing. Sorry, Frances, but I still believe he is a lost cause, and you should just move on from him.”

Frances’ heart crumbled at Marie’s remark. If she only knew how true her words were.

“I heard Lady Weatherby has her eye on him for her daughter Constance.” Sarah

noted. “I think they would be a lovely pair. She’s a bit quiet which he would most likely appreciate.”

He’d hate that . Frances squeezed her eyes shut and rubbed her temples. Her mind fought her heart and refused to stop replaying their times together. Their most heated moments led to the most exhilarating and passionate moments of her life. She couldn’t see him with someone so meek as Constance Weatherby; he would be bored within minutes of meeting her.

“Frances? I hear you and the Viscount got along very well at my party. Word is he has called on you several times already. Anything you wish to tell us?”

Frances chewed her lip and shook her head. “He called on me the day following your party. We’ve seen each other around town, nothing formal other than your party and the morning after.”

“And?” Nora prodded which meant she already knew the answer to what she was asking.

“And... he brought up the idea of marriage.”

Her friends all let out excited gasps that had Frances’ eyes threatening tears. She didn’t want their excitement over the Viscount. She wanted nothing but one particular thing, and she only wanted it from one man.

“Oh, Frances, that is wonderful!” Nora clasped her hands. “I can see the two of you being truly happy!” Frances knew Nora meant it. She had always wanted the best for Frances and Nora, no doubt, saw the Viscount as the right match for her.

“I agree. You two would make a handsome pair,” Marie noted with a slight sniff.

Frances bit her tongue. The more she was around Jenny's genuine heart, the more she realized how condescending Marie really was in her tone. She couldn't help but sneer at Marie's remark.

"Maybe he'll propose to you at the ball?" Sarah sounded hopeful. "How remarkable would that be?"

Frances swallowed the bile that rose in her throat. That sounded like her worst nightmare come to life.

"Oh, look at her! You must be so nervous at the thought! You shouldn't worry, Frannie. We'll help you with whatever you need to prepare for the wedding."

"Nora, I haven't said I would accept." Frances sighed at how sullen she sounded.

"Why wouldn't you? It's not like you have a line of suitors knocking down your door," Marie questioned.

"Marie," Nora chided, "it is no secret Frances never put marriage on a pedestal —"

Marie interrupted with a flick of her wrist. "Enough of that. It was always odd that she said she never cared about marriage." Marie gave a pointed look in Frances' direction. "Frances, you must admit you said that because you were worried about your lack of prospects. Now that you have a credible one, you can be honest with us. You were saying you didn't care for marriage because you were embarrassed, right?"

Frances' hurt turned into sharp anger. She stood. "Marie, we have been friends for a long time, and quite frankly, I can't remember why. No, I never lied about my feelings regarding marriage. Good prospects or not, I've always been happy with the way my life has been laid out in front of me. You insult my maid, my friends, my intentions; I think it's time you leave."

The woman had the audacity to look shocked. Both women stood staring at each other, each waiting for the other to back down. Frances was tired of being the one who played nice, so she stood her ground.

Marie's eye twitched. "Frances, you know I love you, and I thought we could be honest with each other. You know what I'm saying comes from a place of love."

"No, I do not know that. You find joy in nothing, everything is beneath you, and quite frankly, I tire of it. I'll call Stephens to have your carriage called."

Marie looked around the room for support and thankfully, found none. With a huff, she gathered her reticule and left.

"I can't believe you said that to her!" Sarah said in awe.

"If you ask me, it was about time one of us said something. She has become more incorrigible these past few months." Nora brought her attention back to Frances, who was back to sitting, staring out the window. "Sarah? We should be going as well; the ball is tonight, and I know we all have last minute preparations to do. Will you go call for our carriages to be brought around?"

Nora waited until Sarah closed the door, "Frannie? What is the matter? Are you nervous at the prospect of marriage? If so, it's completely natural. When my Edward proposed, I was completely stunned silent for a few moments."

Frances couldn't bear to look at her best friend. She was holding her emotions back with grit and stubbornness, and even those were starting to fail her. "It's not that, Nora."

"Do you not wish to marry the Viscount?"

Frances closed her eyes, resting her head on the back of the chair. “I do not know what I want.” Frances knew the words were a lie, but she couldn’t admit the truth. If she did, then she’d have to acknowledge she may have deeper feelings for the Duke which was completely unacceptable.

“I know you don’t know the Viscount well, but he is a lovely man and father.”

“Nora? Please.” Frances’ exhaustion was apparent in her plea.

“Very well.” Nora stood and gathered her belongings. “I shall see you tonight at Lady Staunton’s ball. Don’t worry, once this all gets sorted out, you’ll feel much better. It is just nerves, I’m sure of it.”

Frances watched her friend leave. She felt time slipping away from her. The talk around town was the Viscount was preparing to formally propose, and once that happened, it would be over for her. She only had one chance to feel the kind of passion she craved, but the person she hungered for wasn’t speaking to her.

Jenny held onto Thomas’ arm for dear life. If he couldn’t feel her shaking, he wouldn’t have known how nervous she was. Frances taught her how to control her emotions well. Frances. Thomas refused to acknowledge the ache he felt when he thought of her.

“I’m nervous,” Jenny whispered as they ascended the steps outside.

Thomas looked up at the darkening sky. Looks like we made it just in time.

“I know. If you shake any more, people will think you are having a fit. I’ll need to send you away.” Thomas glanced down at his sister and grinned. “Hmm, that might not be a bad idea.”

She slapped at his chest and giggled. “Stop. Someone might hear you and think you’re serious.”

They reached the entryway, and both stopped, looking towards the door where Lord Staunton’s steward stood.

“Are you ready?” Thomas asked.

Jenny took a deep breath, “Are you?”

“Not even a little bit.” He swallowed, his cravat rubbing against his throat in the way he hated. The memory of soft hands caressing his throat as they tied the silk stole his breath. He shook his head to clear the thought away.

“Then I suppose we’ll do this the way we’ve done every other hardship...”

Thomas raised an eyebrow as he peered down at his sister.

“Together,” she finished.

“Together,” he confirmed.

Thomas escorted his sister into the house and into the ballroom, and together, they made one round around the room. Jenny found Nora and Sarah by the refreshments, and Thomas was thankful to leave her with them.

“Duke Pilton!” A hard clap to his back caused Thomas to take a slight step forward.

Lord Fealton, the Viscount Gloushire, stood too close to him with a smirk on his face. Thomas regained his composure and squared his shoulders.

“Fealton,” he said with a nod.

“Good to see you out. I haven’t seen you at the club lately.”

“I’ve been busy.” Thomas looked around the room. Jenny’s gossip about the Viscount’s intentions with Frances had been confirmed by several peers. He hated that they would be a good match. The Viscount was a good man with a solid and proper background. The thought of them together laughing, touching, loving each other made Thomas’ teeth grind.

“Ah, yes. I heard Miss Ambrose has been helping you and your sister adjust to our way of life.”

Thomas took the slight, swallowing down a retort. Although, he couldn’t stop his mind from imagining the Viscount with a bloody nose.

“She is a remarkable woman, isn’t she?” Fealton looked across the dance floor.

Thomas followed Fealton’s gaze to where it landed on Frances. Her dress was the color of the sky on a clear day, and although he couldn’t see them, he knew it matched her eyes perfectly. Just then, she turned with a laugh, and the rasp of it clutched his heart and squeezed. The laugh brought a subtle tint of red to her cheeks, and he became immediately jealous of whoever made her laugh. Thomas stood stunned. She looked ethereal.

“She is.” It was the only response he could form. His mind was too busy memorizing her every movement, the way she gently swayed to the music, how her slight fingers curved around the cup of punch she held. The urge to go to her was undeniable.

The music changed, and the Viscount let out a small laugh, “Ah. That’s my cue. Please excuse me, Pilton; it is my turn to dance with Miss Ambrose.”

A rush of adrenaline shot through Thomas' veins. His head began to throb, and his hands were tight fists at his side. The closer Fealton got to Frances, the closer his rage bubbled to the point of explosion. She's not yours.

He was about to move towards them when he felt a slight tug on his arm. Jenny stood beside him. "It's just a dance."

Thomas breathed in deeply through his nose. "I didn't say anything."

"No, but your intentions are written all over your face. You're standing as straight as a rod, and if looks could kill, the Viscount would be a pile of ash right now."

Thomas shook off his sister's hand. "I don't know what you mean; I'm perfectly fine."

"Why do you assume I am an idiot?" Jenny sighed and picked at a ruffle on her dress.

Thomas scoffed. "You know I hate when you talk in riddles."

"Dear brother, I would have to be blind not to see the way you look at her." She held up a hand to stop his response. "And how she looks at you."

Thomas paused. "She doesn't look at me any differently than she looks at you."

Jenny's laugh brought unwanted attention to them. She quickly covered her mouth and nodded her apologies to those around them. "I'm sorry, but if she looked at me the way she looked at you, there would be a lot more gossip about us. She saves those kinds of looks for you."

Thomas licked his lips. He knew the looks his sister was speaking of. He saw them every time he closed his eyes. Her bright blue eyes that sparkled with challenge

whenever he managed to needle her. Her hooded eyes when he kissed her neck, and the way they fluttered shut when he moved down her body. Oh yes, he knew her looks very well.

“Very well then,” Jenny continued as if she were bored. “If she isn’t who you want, why don’t you ask another young lady to dance. There are many to choose from, thanks to Frances.”

“I don’t want to dance.” Thomas tried to relax his shoulders, but his sister was right. He was standing so straight his back was starting to hurt.

“You don’t want to dance?”

“No.” Thomas cracked his head from side to side, hoping to relieve some of the building tension in his shoulders.

“With anyone?” Jenny’s voice was light and airy. It pissed Thomas off.

“No.” Did someone turn on the heat? Why is it always so bloody hot at these things? Thomas could hear the faint roll of thunder in the distance. Escaping to the patio wouldn’t help him now.

“What if I said Frances has an opening on her card.” Thomas looked at his sister who was currently waving to Nora.

He knew he shouldn’t entertain his sister and certainly not the thought of going to Frances. He needed to distance himself from her. He had already made up his mind she was better off with the blasted Viscount.

Jenny sighed. “Ah. Well. I guess the Viscount could take the opening. Although, two dances in one night, how the ton will talk. Might as well get the marriage banns

ready.” The echoes of Jenny’s parting words reverberated in his mind for moments after she walked away.

It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter. She deserves better. She deserves him.

Thomas looked up and found the pair. Fealton’s one hand rested easily on the small of Frances’ back and traced small circles. Frances tilted her head to meet the Viscount’s eyes while he leaned in to whisper something that made her smile.

Thomas hadn’t realized his feet were moving until he was a few steps away from the couple. What the hell, like Jenny said, it’s just a dance.

CHAPTER 16

“ Y ou flatter me, Lord Fealton.” Frances scrunched her nose at the Viscount’s compliment on her dancing.

“‘Tis true. I was never comfortable dancing before, but you seem to make everything more enjoyable.” Lord Fealton leaned in. “And please, call me Derek.”

Frances’ breath caught in her throat. “Oh, I couldn’t do that. It wouldn’t be proper.”

“It will be.” He sounded most confident, and Frances couldn’t help but feel put off by his posturing.

“Possibly.” She smiled and looked around the ballroom, hoping for an escape. Lightning lit the sky outside, so she wouldn’t be able to request a break for air.

Frances chewed her bottom lip. The dance was going perfectly fine until he said that. It was just another reminder of what lay ahead of her. While she was enjoying the steps with the Viscount, it was just that, steps. This is what her life would be like, just going through the motions, nothing surprising, nothing exciting. No hallway closet trysts, no stolen moments in a library. No passion. The distressing thought caused her to misstep.

“Careful, Miss Ambrose.” Lord Fealton’s arms circled around her waist. “I say I am quite honored that the idea of a more formal relationship between us has caused you to swoon.”

“My apologies, I usually do my partner justice on the dance floor.”

Lord Fealton resumed the dance. “I have no doubt you would do your partner justice anywhere.”

And just as quickly as her aversion for the Viscount came over her, it left. He really did seem like a genuine and caring man. She couldn’t help but smile up at his compliment.

“Speaking of which, may I call on you and your father tomorrow?”

Frances never knew she could actually feel her color draining from her face. It felt as if all the blood pooled in her feet. Waves of nausea crashed in her stomach while dots danced in front of her eyes. This is it. He’s going to ask me to marry him tomorrow.

Frances licked her lips, and her pulse raced. She willed her mouth to form a word, but which one? “Yes” would seal her fate to the man before her. “No” would put her family in further jeopardy. Images of her father hunched over ledgers danced along while dark oceanic eyes called to her.

Her loyalty won. With a quick affirmative shake of her head, she bid the Viscount farewell and made her to the refreshment table. Just within reach of the punch, someone grabbed her spun her around.

“Duke Pilton, what is the meaning of this?”

He brought her wrist up and grabbed at the dangling dance card. Using the pen from his coat, he wrote his name on the open spot and then proceeded to drag her to the dance floor.

He ignored her futile attempts to get his attention or stop him. He just marched them

to the middle of the dance floor and turned to look at her. Curious eyes followed their movements with whispers and giggles.

“What are you doing?” she demanded.

“ We’re dancing. It’s a shame for all those lessons to go to waste. Wouldn’t you agree?” he asked with a tilt of his head, those dark blue eyes challenging her.

Frances’ mouth dropped open. For the second time that night, Frances’ heart began to race. But this time it was not out of shock or fear but from want and need.

He stood with his hand out, waiting for her to respond. She eyed him up and down and felt a thrill when he adjusted the belt at his waist and her eyes landed there. She took a step towards him, placing her hand into his. Within a breath, he pulled her in and swept her up into the dance.

This is what she wanted. She didn’t want a nice and easy life; she wanted passion and all the chaos it brought. She felt as if she were swept up in a storm at sea, and she never wanted to touch dry land again.

As the Duke twirled her, he held her tightly. They didn’t speak. For once they kept their mouths quiet and let their hearts dictate their dance. Lost to the music, Frances let herself imagine a life with Thomas. Quiet afternoons in the library, her reading while he worked. Passion-filled nights that would leave her feeling drunk and satiated. She envisioned the fights that would lead to more passion-filled nights. She even let herself picture little heads of dark hair and blonde children running through the grounds.

The dream began to fade with the music. As their movements slowed, Frances was overcome with emotion. Her heart wasn’t able to withstand this torture. She was about to fall apart, and she couldn’t do it here.

She straightened her arms and pushed the Duke away. Without a word, she turned and ran out of the ballroom, not caring about the murmurs in her wake.

Frances rushed past the steward at the front door and ran up the main staircase. From her many explorations of Lady Staunton's estate as a child, she knew there was a study on the second floor that would give her the privacy she needed. She ran up to the first door and found it locked, same with the next one.

"Cursed doors. Open up!" she yelled while jiggling the handles.

Tears streamed down her face. She rested her head against the door while sobs wracked her body. This cannot be how it is supposed to be.

A large hand turned her, and she found herself enveloped in a hug. The smell of sandalwood and brandy wafted over her, and she sank into Thomas.

His arms tightened around her, making her feel the safest she had ever felt which made the sobs come harder. He gently began to sway back and forth while his one hand cupped the back of her head and held it to his chest.

The movement helped calm her yet broke her all the same.

"What is it, Frances?"

She pulled away and took the offered handkerchief. Dabbing her eyes and sniffing, she couldn't bring herself to look up into his eyes.

"Our agreement is over. We're at the ball, your sister is fully accepted into society, and you..." A hiccup escaped her. If she wasn't already falling apart in front of him, she would've been embarrassed, but she couldn't find the pride to care.

“You... you’re...”

His finger lifted her chin, forcing her to look into his eyes. “I’m here. With you.” His finger traced her quivering lip. “There is nowhere else I’d rather be.” His lips replaced his finger in an all-consuming kiss.

Frances rose on her toes to meet his demanding lips. She opened and let his tongue entangle with hers. Oh, how she missed the way brandy tasted on his tongue. She moaned into his mouth.

He backed her up against the door while his hands raced over her body. It was as if he wanted all of her and didn’t know where to start. The idea of him being so overcome with want ignited something deep within Frances’ belly.

Her one hand found purchase in his hair while the other snaked under his coat and wrapped around his waist to his muscular back where she pulled him in closer. She, too, wanted, needed more.

A slight creak of the floorboards had Thomas pulling away.

“Frances,” he laid his forehead against hers. “Dammit, Frances. I can’t stop myself around you. We must stop this. I’m not the one for you.”

“Stop.” Frances didn’t recognize her own voice. It was one of determination, of resolve. For the first time since meeting Thomas, she was not a questioning, quivering, nervous girl. She was a woman who knew what she wanted, and it was time she got it. She held Thomas at arm’s length and looked up into his eyes.

“I’m tired of playing by the rules. I was correct when I said our agreement is over. The ball is happening downstairs, and you and your sister are both on your way to becoming very respected in society. Now, it’s time for you to fulfill your end of the

bargain.”

Thomas stared back down at her, his eyes questioning. “Frances. This is not the way.”

“No, you’re right. The correct way would be with a man whom I love on my wedding night. But that won’t happen. Please, Thomas, I begged once before, do not make me do it again.”

Thomas looked down the empty hallway. Their ragged breaths hung heavy between them.

“I don’t want you to regret this.” His hands raked through his hair. “It would kill me to know you would regret your choice.” He shook his head no. “I cannot. You ask too much of me.”

She pulled him in by his lapels. “The only regret I will have is never knowing what true passion tastes like, what it feels like. I feel those things with you , Thomas. And it is intoxicating. If I could, I would live off of those emotions alone for the rest of my life.”

Thomas’ eyes landed on her mouth “You speak of things you do not know.”

“Then teach me. Let me know. Once and for all, Thomas, put me in my place.”

Something flashed in his eyes that sent a bolt of electricity through her. He grabbed the back of her neck and pulled her in, devouring her mouth. “If you need to stop, you tell me. Understood?”

She barely shook her head yes when he grabbed her waist and threw her over his shoulder.

“Oh!” she squeaked. She couldn’t contain the giggles that bubbled out of her. Whether out of nerves or just simple excitement, she couldn’t decipher, but a warm sensation flushed through her system, leaving her lightheaded. Thomas turned and headed further down the hall, pushing open a door.

A few steps into the room, she was thrown down onto the softest bed she’d ever lain on. She brushed her hair that had fallen out of her coif and looked up at Thomas. The shadows from the storm outside danced around the man who was now standing over her.

In any other instance, she would be terrified, but with Thomas, she felt safe. Pure elation coursed through her blood. He looked dangerous, ravenous, and exactly like everything she wanted.

“I’m going to do my best not to hurt you, but it will hurt.” Thomas’ voice was strained. His body shook from the power that was simmering just under the surface

Frances shook her head. “I know. The girls have told me enough of what to expect from the actual act, but I trust you.”

Thomas exhaled a deep breath. “I’ll never know how someone as precious as you chose someone like me, but I’m not fool enough to question it.” He ripped off the cravat as he lay on top of her. Once again, he claimed her mouth, pushing his tongue to dance with hers. His hands pulled at ribbons and buttons, anything that would free her from the confines of her dress.

Frances had a momentary lapse of courage. She didn’t know what to do with her hands. Up? Down? Did she tear at him like he did to her? She understood the mechanics of what she was doing but not the details.

“Frances.” Thomas’ stern voice cut through her worries. “I can hear you thinking.”

Embarrassed, she bit her bottom lip. Catching the movement, Thomas nipped at her lip causing her to giggle.

“I, all of a sudden, feel very inexperienced,” she confessed.

Thomas smiled and ran his hand through her hair. “For someone so confident and outspoken in society, I find this side of you fascinating.”

Frances narrowed her eyes. “I’m glad I’m amusing you.”

Thomas eyes lit. “Ah. There she is. My prim and proper lady. The one who’s not afraid to act on instinct.”

“What has that got to do with anything?”

Thomas kissed her neck, tracing the column of her neck with his tongue, sending a ripple of pleasure straight to her core. “Everything.” He traced the other side. “This is no different, Frances. Follow your instinct. Put me in my place. I know you know how to that,” he said with a smirk as he moved his kisses onto her breast.

Frances’ hands found purchase in his hair as she arched her back, giving him more access to her body. “There are many ways to do this, my love. It can be all consuming and demanding,” he sucked in a nipple, causing her to gasp.

“It can be slow and gentle,” he kissed around the hardened peak. “It can be a bit of both,” he teased. His hand kneaded her breast as his lips moved further down her body. Frances’ skin began to heat. Blood rushed to her brain. His words became muffled by the sound of her beating heart echoing in between her ears.

When his mouth landed on the apex between her thighs, she let out a surprised moan. She tried to scoot away, but his arms held her hips in place. She looked down at him

curiously.

“Th-Thomas? Is this... no one has told me about this .”

Thomas placed another kiss. “No one else is here, Frances. It’s just you and me. The only judgment here is your instinct. Does it feel good?” This time when his mouth returned, he sucked her nub into his mouth. Frances’ eyes rolled shut, and her body instinctively pushed up against his mouth.

“Yes.”

She could feel his grin against her. “Do you wish for me to continue?”

She opened her mouth, but no words came out. She closed her mouth and tried to speak once more. After failing to speak again, she vigorously shook her head up and down.

“Come now, Frances, what did we discuss about using our words?”

Frances swallowed. “Yes, please, continue.” Her words were breathy and barely audible, but it was enough for him to fully engage his mouth onto her.

The initial shock and embarrassment disappeared and were replaced with a fiery longing for this man to be everywhere, all at once. She wanted to feel his weight on top of her again, but she wanted his tongue where it was.

She began to feel hot and frustrated. Little whimpers escaped her. She followed Thomas’ advice and let her body react on instinct. She raked her hands through his hair, pulling him closer. Her hips began to roll as a pressure began to build. It was similar to the time in the closet, but this was different.

Her mind was lost to her body. She had no control, she was chasing something, something only Thomas could give her.

“That’s right, my love. Let go.” His kisses and sucking kept time with her hips. His own moans vibrating through her sent her closer to her goal.

Thomas flicked her nub one more time causing Frances to grab Thomas’ head still as waves of ecstasy washed over her. She screamed out his name.

She lay there panting as Thomas kissed his way back up her body. He settled between her legs which now lay open; she wouldn’t be able to close them if she wanted to. Which she didn’t. The weight of him on her felt right. If she could bottle up this feeling, she would.

Thomas nibbled on her ear, causing little goosebumps to emerge on her arms. She squirmed from the sensation, and Thomas began to move away.

“No.” She stopped him. “I wasn’t lying, Thomas. I want more. I want you . Please.”

“Frances. Once we do this, there’s no going back. Your… husband will know you’re not a virgin.”

Frances shrugged. “I don’t care.” She pulled him down for a kiss. As she deepened the kiss, she could feel him reach between them to unbutton his shirt, his breeches. A giggle escaped her as he tried to keep kissing her through his ministrations.

Finally, he laid on top of her, his naked body resting on hers. She always thought laying with a man would feel different, unsavory even. But it was quite the opposite. Feeling his weight, his length, his everything on top of her, she felt complete. Happy. Content.

Her hands lightly ran up and down his back, tracing muscles. She felt goosebumps rise on his skin and felt like a queen. Thomas stared down in wonderment. “How do you do these things to me?”

Frances smiled. “I ask myself the same question about you.”

Thomas took a deep breath. “This will hurt. If it is too much, let me know, and I’ll try to stop.”

Frances shook her head and felt intense pressure pushing into her. She gasped and shut her eyes.

“Look at me Frances.” At Thomas’ command, she opened her eyes and looked into his. “Focus on me. You’re holding your breath. Let it out. That’s it. Relax around me. That’s a good girl.”

The pressure turned into a slight burn. Lightning flashed, and she could see the strain on Thomas’ face. She brought her hands up to cradle his face. “I’m all right, Thomas.” She kissed him. “Please, just go.”

Thomas’ teeth clenched as he pushed further in, letting out a groan when he was fully sheathed in her. “My god, Frances. You feel like heaven on earth.” He began to move, ever so slightly. With each thrust, the pain receded and was replaced with a feeling of fullness that had pressure building within her core again.

“Thomas, kiss me.”

“With pleasure.” Thomas leaned down and worked his tongue into her mouth as his thrusts became stronger and faster. Sweat glistened on their bodies as they moved in time with the storm outside, their moans matching the intensity of the rolling thunder.

Frances never knew it could be like this. For her, so much of her life was black and white, hot or cold. He ravished her body while handling her with great care. She got the best of both worlds in one man.

“Frances, I don’t think I will last much longer.”

Frances shook her head, not fully understanding what he was saying, but she trusted him. He moved faster while she held on to his slick shoulders, her own orgasm continuing to build. He growled into her neck when she raised her legs and wrapped them around his waist.

He reached up and took each of her hands in his and laid them above her head. Holding her there, he looked down into her eyes. “How did you manage do it?”

“Do what?” she asked in between sharp inhales.

“Completely tear down every wall I put up.”

Frances searched his eyes. What she found broke the dam that was holding her feelings at bay. Immense emotion crashed over her as her orgasm broke free. His followed soon after.

Her scream was partly out of exhilaration but mostly heartbreak. Tears mixed with sweat ran down her cheeks. Thomas’ thrusts slowed down until they stopped altogether. Once more, he rested his forehead against hers. Her eyes were closed, not wanting to open them to face reality. He kissed away each fallen tear which was then replaced by another tear.

“Shhh, Frances. Did I hurt you? I’m so sorry, my love.”

A sob escaped. She knew he used the term “love” offhandedly, but she couldn’t help

but feel the longing for it to be true.

He rolled off her and tucked her naked body into his side, allowing her head to fall to his chest. “We can rest here a bit. We need to get back to the ball before someone notices, though. It would be naive of us to think we left unnoticed.”

She sniffled against his chest, the hair there tickling her cheek. She stared out the bedroom window, watching as the rain slowed to a slight drip.

She knew what she had to do — for her father’s sake, for her heart’s sake. She took one more moment to soak in the afterglow of her first time. She knew it would never be like this again; how could it? There was no man like Thomas. No one who could command such actions from her body yet give her all the control to allow it to happen at the same time. She knew she loved him; it was no longer something she could deny.

But she was not one of the lucky ones who could marry out of love. Her duty was to her father, and Thomas’ duty was to his title.

Frances sat up, wiping the tears from her face. “Will you help me dress? I fear I won’t be able to rejoin the party with a disheveled appearance. If anyone asks, can you please tell them I took ill?”

Thomas just shook his head.

After they dressed, he escorted her down a back staircase that led to the kitchens. He left her there while he went and got her carriage pulled around for her. With a quick glance to make sure no one of note was present, he walked her outside and helped her into the carriage.

He closed the door behind her and stood at the window. “Frances?”

She leaned forward, “Yes?” She bit her tongue; she hated how hopeful she sounded.

Thomas’ smile didn’t reach his eyes. He shook his head and waved to the footman to go.

Frances sat back and allowed the tears to come. Tomorrow would be the first day of her new life, so she would take tonight and grieve the life she could not have.

CHAPTER 17

Frances once again found herself staring out the window of her morning room. Dorothy was behind her setting out biscuits and preparing the tea. Lord Fealton had said he would call today, and he was a man of his word.

Frances told Dorothy she was watching for Fealton to arrive, but in truth, she was staring out at a world she no longer felt a part of. It was amazing how one night changed her entire perspective of her life altogether.

The door to the morning room opened, and her father walked in. “Ah, Frances. How are you this morning?”

Frances tried her best to stifle a yawn.

“Goodness, child. It doesn’t look like you slept a wink!” Her father’s worried voice only made her feel worse.

“Dorothy? Do we have anything that could help her?”

Dorothy wrung her hands. She had heard Frances crying in the night. She checked in on her, but Frances would only cry.

“Papa, I’m fine. Just a lot of excitement last night between the ball and the storm. It was just a restless night.”

Solomon just stood there awkwardly. He was never good with her emotions. “Yes,

well. It was quite a storm; you're right there. I have men coming out today to clear away the broken branches lying across our walk. How was the ball?" He took the offered tea from Dorothy.

Frances took a deep breath to steady her breathing. Her throat was scratchy from her time with Thomas and the sobs that broke free later. She tried to clear her throat. "Um, yes. I did. I danced with Lord Fealton."

Solomon's eyes lit up, and he looked joyously between her and Dorothy. "Well, that's fine, then, isn't it! Did you hear that Dorothy?" Solomon looked positively reborn which made Frances' heart break all over again.

"Yes, My Lord, I did. It's wonderful news." Dorothy's solemn reply had Solomon sitting up.

"What's this? Why do the two of you look as if someone died? Did something happen at the ball last night, my dear?"

Frances shook her head. "No, Papa. In fact, Lord Fealton confirmed the last conversation I had with him. He asked to call on both you and I this morning to discuss a proposal."

Solomon whooped and clapped his hands. "That is wonderful news! Oh, Frannie, you did it!"

Nausea rolled through Frances' stomach. "Yes, it truly is grand news, Papa. I'm sure he'll be here this morning." Frances looked out the window one more time and sighed. "However, I think I'll retire to my room in the meantime. Dorothy? Will you come get me when he arrives. I'm going to try to freshen up a bit."

"Yes, of course."

Her father reached for her hand as she passed him. “Frannie, are you sure you’re all right? You know, if you don’t —” he stopped himself. She could see the war in his eyes.

She placed a hand on his cheek. “It’s all right, Papa. I’m just tired from a wonderful night. I’ll see you when the Viscount arrives.” She placed a kiss on his cheek and made her way to her room.

Frances woke to the curtains being drawn open.

“Is he here?” Her voice was groggy; she sounded as if she hadn’t spoken for days. Her eyes were gritty, and she was suddenly very aware of her growling stomach.

“No, Frannie, he hasn’t come.” Dorothy sounded troubled but continued with her routine.

“Oh, well, he must’ve gotten caught up with something. I’m sure he’ll be here.”

Dorothy looked to the door before sitting beside Frances on the bed. “Frances, you slept an entire day.”

Frances bolted upright. “What? You must be joking.”

Dorothy pointed to the window. Puffy white clouds dotted the crystal blue sky. The trees gently swayed, and all havoc caused by the storm had disappeared.

“Did Lord Fealton come? Why didn’t you wake me?” Frances ran to her dresser and began brushing the knots from her hair.

Dorothy’s gentle touch stopped her from ripping her hair out. “What? Is he downstairs now?”

“Frannie, you’re not listening. He didn’t come. You slept all day yesterday. I came up to check on you shortly after you left the morning room and found you completely passed out on top of your covers. You didn’t wake when I removed your dress and shoes. I tucked you back into bed, figuring I’d help you redress when he came. He never did.”

Frances turned to Dorothy. “I don’t understand. He said he would come.”

Dorothy shrugged. “Is it possible you misheard him?”

Frances’ mind was still muddled from losing a day. “I suppose. It does get rather loud between the music and people dancing. It is possible he said another day, but I honestly thought he said he’d call on us today, er, yesterday.” Frances rubbed her temples. This was all so confusing.

“What time is it?”

“Half past five in the evening.”

Frances groaned. “No wonder I’m famished. I slept almost two days away.”

“I’ll get a tray for you right away. Mama’s been worried about you, so she prepared some of your favorites for when you awoke. I’ll go get it for you. You may also want to check in with your father. He’s been worried about you.”

Frances nodded. She slipped on her shoes and a house coat around her shift and went in search of her father.

She found him in his study with the ever-dutiful Minnie at his feet.

“Papa?”

Solomon's grunt was barely audible over the sound of papers he rustled through.

"Papa?"

"WHAT?" he snipped. "Oh, Frances. I'm sorry, my dear. I didn't mean to snap at you."

She closed the door behind her. "Is everything ok?"

Solomon shook his head reverently. "Yes, yes. Nothing for you to worry about. Is Lord Fealton here?" Frances swallowed the lump in her throat that formed at the hope in his voice.

She shook her no. "I'm afraid not, Papa. It's late in the day. I must've gotten my days mixed up when we danced. If you'd like, I can write to him and invite him. The least it will do is show him I'm still interested in an arrangement. And we must remember, he's a busy man with two young children. I'm sure whatever is keeping him is a reasonable excuse for his delay."

"Yes, that's fine. Write to him at once. The sooner we are to a marriage the better."

Frances straightened her back. "Yes, Papa. I'll do what I can to help move our situation along."

Solomon stood staring at his daughter. A look passed over him, and his features softened. "I'm sorry, Frances."

Frances tilted her head. "For what, Papa?"

Solomon lifted his hands and let them drop. "For everything. For your mother passing when you were young. For not being here while you grew up. For putting the survival

of this family on your shoulders. This is not how I envisioned our lives when your mother told me she was expecting with you.” His voice broke on “mother”, and her resolve broke with it. Wiping away tears she walked to her father.

“Don’t be sorry, Papa. I know I was an outspoken, curious girl who was not easy to maintain. It could not have been easy. But you’re no longer alone in raising me. I am a grown woman, able to make my own decisions. I will see this through.”

She placed a kiss to her father’s warm cheek. “Now, come, I’m famished from sleeping my days away. Will you join me for a bit of supper?”

Solomon agreed and walked her to the door of his study but not before tripping over the sleeping Minnie. “Damned dog. Promise me, Frannie, when you marry, you take that blasted dog with you.”

Frances giggled. “I would never dream of separating the two of you.”

Jenny pushed through the door to the library, causing it to thud against a shelf of books.

“I know you have been officially welcomed into the ton, but don’t tell me you’ve forgotten the most basic of manners already?” Thomas’ voice growled from where he sat at his desk.

“What have you done?” Jenny’s voice trembled.

Hearing the contempt in her voice, he looked up from his book and at his sister. Her eyes were rimmed red from crying, and her cheeks were flushed from running.

He sprang out of his chair and rushed over to his shaking sister “Jenny! What has happened? Tell me, did someone do something to you?”

“You!” She pushed him away. “Only you didn’t do it to me , you did it to Frances! ”

The world stopped moving at the mention of her name. For three days, she was all he thought about. No amount of liquor, fighting, reading, sleeping, working could drain that woman from his system. She had invaded every fiber of his being, and he didn’t know if he welcomed it or not. The pain was excruciating to be sure, but he’d rather deal with pain than emptiness. Pain he was used to; pain he could use. The empty void that lay ahead of him scared him more.

“Frances? What of her? I haven’t seen her since our dance at Lady Staunton’s ball.”

Jenny shook her head in disbelief. “She was nothing but kind to you, to me ! She was the first one who truly accepted us, and you turn around and treat her this way!”

Thomas reached out and grabbed Jenny’s shoulder. He felt like shaking her until she made sense.

“What are you talking about, Jenny? Is Frances all right?” Images of Frances hurt, lost, broken overwhelmed his exhausted brain. He had to get to her.

“No. She’s far from all right. You ruined her!”

The words punched him right in the stomach. “What?” How would anyone know? He took them further into the house. No one was around when they were in the hallway or when they opened the door to leave. He checked the kitchens and the main hallway. Only the steward was there, and he paid him off. Although, the fear in the young man’s eyes was probably enough to know he wouldn’t talk, but Thomas learned a little coin went a long way.

“I don’t —”

“Don’t you dare lie to me, Thomas,” she bellowed. “Someone saw you in the hallway at Lady Staunton’s, and now, rumors are flying free, putting dear Frances’ name through the mud.” Jenny’s words became garbled with sobs. “You should hear some of the things they’re saying about her. Especially Marie. That postering witch is having her fun with Frances’ reputation. Now what will she do?”

“I wasn’t going to lie to you, Jenny.” Thomas’ voice sounded foreign even to his own ears.

This can be salvaged. I can fix this. I must fix this for Frances.

“She ran out of the ballroom after our dance.” True. “I wanted to check on her, so I ran after her.” Also true. “She asked me to tell everyone she wasn’t feeling well.” Truth by omission can still be considered truth, right?

Jenny eyed him. “If that is true, then fix this for her before word gets to the Viscount. This will most likely be her last chance at marriage and helping her father. Your word as duke will go a long way. I’m sure of it.”

Thomas grabbed his coat which he threw on his chair when he came into the library.

“Thomas?”

“Hmm?” He began to button his coat.

“Do you love her?”

Another punch to his stomach. “What?! Why would you ever consider that?”

“Because you can save her, you can have her, and all of this will go away.”

Thomas has been fighting that very thought for the past three days. But he always came up with the same answer. She deserved a man like the Viscount. Someone who could handle his moods with grace, who was kind and gentle. Who wouldn't dream of taking her virginity in the middle of a ball. He probably would've laid her down on rose petals or something equally pedantic. Thomas huffed. She would hate rose petals. If he could do it again, he would've crushed some woodruff and laid it about in small dishes to have the smell of vanilla fill the room.

"No. She belongs with someone better."

Jenny's laugh held no mirth. "Who is better than a duke?"

"No one. But when it comes to her, anyone is more suited for her. She deserves more." Thomas left his sister in the library. He couldn't hear her response. He had to figure out a way to stop the gossip mill from spreading. And in the ton, he knew he was facing an uphill battle.

CHAPTER 18

Frances held the letter in her trembling hands. No matter how many times she read it, she couldn't believe it. They'd been caught. She was ruined. She didn't know if she should laugh or cry.

How ironic was it that she finally gave in to the pressure to find a husband, and when she did, she ended up being ruined by another. This time last year, she couldn't get a man to look at her as marriage material for the life of her. Between then and now, she fell in love with a man she couldn't have and couldn't have a man who wanted to marry her.

"Let me read it. This can't be right. How dare he accuse you of something so untowardly." Solomon's outrage only made it worse.

"Papa, there's nothing to read. He writes that it has come to his attention that someone saw me in a compromising position with Duke Pilton, and he has to rescind his offer of a proposal."

"How dare he believe someone's word over yours. Over the Duke's! I'm reaching out to Pilton. He should be outraged this lie is tarnishing your name after everything you have done for him!"

Frances continued to stare out the window. They heard a creak from the floor that night. She just assumed it was caused by them. Someone was there. Her cheeks flamed. Someone saw them kissing. There was no use denying it.

“Frances,” her father’s voice whispered, “is it true?”

Frances chewed her lip. There was no sense in lying to her father. The truth was obviously out, and the only one it would hurt was her. No one would put any blame on Thomas; in their society, it was the woman who carried the weight of infidelity.

“Oh Frannie. I should never have placed this all on your shoulders. Do you love him?”

Once again Frannie could only sit there, chewing her lip. She feared if she tried to talk, only tears would come out. Just when she thought she cried her last tear, another bout would start, and she couldn’t stop.

“Why didn’t you tell me the truth when I asked about your feelings for the Duke?”

“Because I am no match for him. Nothing has changed.” The strength it took to say those words once more out loud sent her spiraling into another round of sobs.

When she opened her eyes, she saw her father kneeling before her. He cradled her head in his hands. “My sweet child. This world doesn’t deserve you. We will find a way out of this, I promise.” He dried her eyes with the handkerchief he pulled from his pocket.

Dorothy entered the room. “Miss Frances? Duke Pilton is here to see you.”

Frances and Solomon exchanged looks.

“Did you write to him?”

Frances shook her head. “No.”

“Let me meet with him first.” Solomon turned on his heel and started for the door.

Frances reached out and caught his arm. “No, Papa. Let me.”

“I will not have him cause you more pain. This family has been through enough. Duke or not, he should’ve known better.”

Frances allowed herself to smile. “Papa. I said I was a grown woman. He didn’t trick me or seduce me. In fact, it was I who propositioned him.”

Solomon looked distressed. “Frances.”

Frances shrugged with a watery smile. “It is the truth, Papa. Dorothy? Please let Stephens know we’ll accept the Duke in morning room.”

Frances and her father stopped outside the door to the room where Thomas was waiting.

Solomon took his daughter by the shoulders. “I’m going to wait right out here. If anything happens, I’ll be right in.”

Frances leaned in and gave her father a hug. “Thank you, Papa. I’ll be fine.”

Squaring her shoulders, she pushed through the door and was transported back to the first time she saw him standing in his library. Once again, he stood at a window, broad shoulders taking up the space between the panes as he peered out into the street. She licked her lips at the memory of how those shoulders felt under her hands.

“Duke Pilton? To what do I owe this honor?” She knew her voice sounded small, but it was the most she could put forth in her current condition.

At the sound of his name, he turned. Frances jerked back a step. There was something off about him. He looked as dashing as ever in his blue fitted topcoat with his dark hair curling over the collar. His long legs were clad in leather riding breeches, and his one foot was tapping impatiently in its tall riding boot. But there was a distance in his eyes she didn't care for.

“Miss Ambrose.” He moved to take a step but stopped. “I heard the news, and I have come to offer my sincerest apologies for the role I have played in it all.” His voice was short and succinct. It cut Frances to her very core.

Miss Ambrose.

A lump formed in Frances' throat. The man before her was not the man she fell in love with. Her Thomas had passion; even when they were arguing, emotion simmered under the surface. This man before her was the persona of a proper Duke; he was what society expected of him. She had done her job too well.

She shook off his apology. “I knew what I was doing, Duke Pilton. I am a grown woman who can accept her consequences.”

They stood on opposite sides of the room, like chess pieces waiting for the next move to play out so they could counter.

“Be that as it may, I have also come to offer my hand in marriage.”

Frances blinked. “I'm sorry, can you say that again?”

A dark eyebrow rose. “Now is not the time for games, Frances.”

Frances folded her arms across her chest. “Oh, now I'm Frances?”

Thomas growled and paced the floor. “My God woman, you can’t go on like this. Please, let me make it right?”

Frances didn’t move. She stood, watching the beast of man pace in front of her like a caged lion. “Oh, how I swoon at your romantic proposal.” Frances rolled her eyes.

Thomas stormed over to her and stood directly in front of her. “Frances. You are ruined.” She couldn’t help but cower at the word. “ Please . We can make this right. I can help your father; I can protect you with my name. You can be taken care of if you’d just let me.”

He’s doing this out of duty. Not out of love. Of course, it wasn’t out of love. It was foolish of her to think he would return her feelings. It was all just an agreement for him.

Resolve hardened over her broken heart. “I’m sorry, I cannot accept your offer.”s

Now it was Thomas who stood gobsmacked and blinking. “Can you say that again?”

Frances took a second to compose herself. It was hard enough the first time; she didn’t know if she could keep the facade up to repeat herself.

“She declined your offer, Pilton,” her father’s gruff voice sounded from the doorway.

Both Frances and Thomas’ heads swung to her father.

Thomas turned his attention back to Frances. “Why?” he demanded. “I am a duke, much better than a viscount. Tell me why I’m not a suitable match for you.” His eyes were wild and wide, blue fire that called to every cell in her body.

Solomon took a step forward at the Duke’s outburst. Frances solemnly put her hand

up to stop her father. She could do this. If she couldn't have the life she wanted with the man she loved, then she would make sure he would live the life he deserved. She could do that much for him.

"You are exactly right." She nodded. "You are a duke, and I am a baron's daughter. I knew from the beginning that our relationship would only be one of friendship. I understand now that is all it ever was... will be." Her eyes dropped. Her strength waning under his intense stare.

"Frances, look at me." He grabbed her shoulders and lowered his face until it was right in front of her. "Look. At. Me."

Frances couldn't bear another minute in his presence. It hurt too much. She didn't want to hear any more of duty or responsibility or what was right. She wanted peace. She squirmed against his hold, her eyes squeezed shut.

"Please, Thomas, just let me go. Let us go."

The words hung between them. He dropped his hands.

Frances opened her eyes but still couldn't find the strength to look up. Instead, she pushed past him and out the door.

Frances' eyes were swollen, her throat was dry, and her head was pounding. The slight knock at her door had her dragging the pillow over her head to drown out the sound.

"Frannie? It's Dorothy. Mama sent up some tea and bread. You should eat something."

Frances pretended to sleep, hoping Dorothy would get the message and leave.

“You can’t fool me, Frannie, I’ve known you for too long. I know you’re not sleeping.”

Frances sighed and pushed the pillow off her head. “Leave the food.”

Dorothy didn’t move from her spot beside the bed.

“I promise, I’ll be fine.”

Dorothy put the tray on the dresser and motioned for Frances to move over. She sat down on the bed and wrapped her arms around Frances. “I knew you had feelings for him.”

“I didn’t want to have feelings for him.”

Dorothy chuckled. “Best laid plans and all that.”

“I’m serious, Dorothy. He is everything I would normally find repulsive. He’s opinionated, closed minded, moody...” The lump in her throat closed off her airway. “He’s a horrible man,” she cried through tears.

Dorothy gathered her closer. “Oh, Frances. He offered you marriage; why didn’t you accept?”

“Because he is a duke —”

“Frances. You honestly think the man who has fought against every societal rule you introduced would care about what is an appropriate match?”

Frances wiped her tears with the back of her hand. “That’s just it, Dorothy. He has worked so hard to be seen as an equal in the ton. Marrying me would throwing away

all his hard work.”

“Isn’t that his choice to make?”

Frances peered up at one of her oldest friends. “I don’t like this side to you.”

Dorothy stuck her tongue out and giggled. “What? Wise?”

Frances sighed. “It doesn’t matter my feelings or what he truly wants. He doesn’t love me. He proposed out of necessity to help save my name. He has the ability to find someone he wants, so he shouldn’t be tied down to me because he was following through on a proposition I made him.”

“You propositioned him ?” Dorothy sounded shocked.

Frances cringed. “Oh, right. I didn’t tell you about the deal I made with him. Well, it doesn’t matter now. I put us in this situation, and like I told him, I can handle the consequences of my actions.”

“It’s not fair, Frannie. He was as much a part of the ruination as you were; how is he allowed to get away with punishment?”

A laugh bubbled out of Frances. “I’m a punishment, am I?”

Dorothy nudged Frances. “You know what I meant.”

Frances nodded solemnly. “I do. Which is why I needed to decline him. I refuse to let all his hard work go to waste. And Jenny. You should have seen her at the ball, Dorothy. She absolutely glided around the ballroom, garnering attention from every corner. She will do just fine this season. I would hate to be a blight on what will be a remarkable season for her.”

Dorothy shrugged. “I’m not sure, Frances. The Duke doesn’t seem like someone who would offer marriage just because someone expects him to. Maybe there is more to his feelings than he’s letting on.”

Frances shook her head. Happily-ever-afters were reserved for fairy tales and stories for children in leading straps. The world rarely worked in favor of love. Soon this would all blow over, and the ton would find new gossip to focus on, so she could go back to being a well-liked wallflower.

CHAPTER 19

Thomas knocked over the snifter of brandy. If there was anything left in it, he would have been pissed. There had to be more somewhere. He made his way out of his study and down the hallway. He knew where his feet were taking him, but he didn't want to acknowledge it. The library.

He hadn't been in there since he dismissed Frances in the parlor last week. He walked into the library and, despite closing the window that day, the smell of vanilla still hung in the air.

Thomas walked over to the bar and looked underneath. "Ah. There you are, you cheeky bastard. C'mere."

Thomas pulled out a full snifter of brandy and poured a splash in a glass... then a little more. Looking between the glass and the bottle, he pushed away the glass and drank from the bottle.

"If this the life of a duke, count me in."

Thomas looked up to see his old friend Jonathan standing in the doorway. Why are there three Jonathans? Thomas shook his head to clear his vision.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Thomas slumped into a chair, impressed his words weren't slurred.

"Your sister sent for me." Jonathan walked in and lounged on the sofa next to the

fireplace. “Now, I understand why I don’t see you as much. I thought it was because of all those responsibilities you like to yammer on about. But if I lived here, I wouldn’t want to leave either. Damn, this is comfortable.”

Thomas grunted and took another swig of brandy.

“I see your manners are as polished as ever. When will my gracious host offer me refreshment?”

“Sod off.”

“Tsk. Is that any way to greet your oldest and dearest friend.” Jonathan raised a hand to his chest in mock offense.

“I’m afraid my brother has no need for manners lately.” Jenny’s prim voice grated from the doorway.

“Jenny, leave us. I am in no mood for your candor.” Thomas rubbed his face in his hands.

Jenny didn’t acknowledge the sentiment and knocked Jonathan’s feet off the sofa, so she could sit. “You’re in no mood for anything. You’re acting like a foxed lout. It’s no wonder she turned you down.”

Thomas sank further down into his chair while Jonathan sprang up. “Oh ho! What was that? Our Tommy boy proposed marriage to someone? Was it the girl he fought over?”

“He fought over Frannie?” Jenny’s high-pitched voice rang in Thomas’ head, causing him to whimper.

“Ah, the elusive Frances.”

“Miss Ambrose to you,” Thomas grounded out while he pointed the bottle at Jonathan.

Jonathan ignored Thomas and leaned closer to Jenny as if they were two young schoolgirls gossiping. “Oh yes. Just over a week ago at Smith’s, down by your old store, we ran into the Michelson twins.”

Jenny groaned at the mention of the twins. “Ugh. Those are two people I’m glad I never have to see again.”

“Well, Sean was the typical ass and made a comment about Thomas’ fair maiden, Frances, er, sorry , Miss Ambrose, and Thomas went after him.” Jonathan sighed back into the sofa and placed his hands behind his head. “It was like the good ole days. It was fun, actually.”

Jenny shook her head. “I’ll never understand men. You do the most idiotic things.”

Jonathan eyed the bar cart and sauntered over to it. “We’re simple creatures, really. If we see something we like, we get it.” He held a bottle of whiskey. “If we can’t get it, we fight for it. If we lose, we move on. If we win, we’re happy. Simple as that.” He popped the stopper off the bottle and poured himself a glass. “It’s when we give up before fighting that we’re idiots.”

Thomas felt as if his head was going to explode. “Will you stop? You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Usually I’d agree with you, but even I can see what an ass you’re making of yourself in this situation.”

“What do you both want from me? It’s not a secret what I did with Frances. When I tried to correct our mistake and offered her marriage, she turned me down. There is nothing I can do.”

“Wow. I have heard bits and pieces but not laid out like that.” Jenny nodded slowly. “There is only one thing I can say, and it pains me to have to say it.” She looked remorsefully at Thomas before turning to Jonathan.

Finally, someone gets it.

“I agree with Jonathan. You are an ass.”

“What?!” Both men snapped. Jonathan out of glee, and Thomas out of disgust.

“That’s how you proposed marriage to someone you care about? I’m surprised she didn’t have you thrown out with the mornings rubbish,” Jenny tsked.

Thomas tore at his hair. “There’s nothing more I could have done. I was trying to fix it.”

Jonathan returned to his seat beside Jenny. “Please don’t tell me you told the girl that what you did with her was a mistake.”

Thomas reeled back in offense. “Of course not! I apologized for my role in her ruination and offered her marriage to make it right.”

Jenny and Jonathan sat, staring at him as if he had completely lost his mind.

“My God, it’s worse than you said.”

Jenny nodded, “I told you.”

Thomas was starting to think he actually did lose his mind. His eyes bounced between them. “What are you two talking about?”

Jonathan turned to Jenny, “Jenny, love? Will you give me a moment with your brother?”

Jenny raised her eyebrow at the term of endearment and excused herself, closing the door behind her.

Thomas began to speak when Jonathan cut him off. “Stop. My God man, just stop.” Thomas took in Jonathan’s worried stance. His voice held more emotion than Thomas was used to hearing from his normally carefree friend.

“Why do you do this to yourself? You always keep everyone at arm’s length, and even when you’re trying to do the right thing, you still keep your walls up.” Jonathan shook his head, defeated. “You’re a damn fortress. You make it so hard to care for you, and the one person who was able to get through your defenses, you treat the worse of all.”

Thomas sat flabbergasted. “I’m sorry, maybe it’s the drink, but what the hell are you talking about?”

Jonathan began to pace and held up a finger. “Your mother dies, you help your father with raising Jenny and running the store.” He held up another finger. “He dies, leaving you in charge of everything. You begin develop this...” Jonathan waved his hands trying to conjure up the right word. “... shell around you. Your walls. You probably use it as protection, but — and I can attest to this being your best friend...”

“Soon to be former,” Thomas interjected.

“As I was saying, as your best friend, those walls are darn frustrating. Even in our

best times, as soon as the moment is over, your walls come back up, and it's business as usual. I had some hope for you when I heard about this woman. I thought perhaps someone would be able to break through and make you a human. Instead, we get this.

”

Thomas looked down at his disheveled appearance. When was the last time I changed my clothing?

“I asked her to marry me. She said no.”

Jonathan pointed his finger at Thomas. “Ah! You asked her to marry you. Why?”

“Because I ruined her.” The words stabbed his heart. The thought of Frances hurting because he couldn't control himself around her was the cross he'd bear for the rest of his life.

“No, no, no.” Jonathan shook his head fervently. “ Why did you ask her to marry you?”

Thomas looked quizzically. “Because it is the right thing to do. Jonathan, really, how much have you had to drink?”

Jonathan let out an exasperated groan.

“Let's start over. Do you care for Frances?”

“Yes.”

“Do you love her?”

“No.”

Jonathan stood with his hands on his hips, staring disapprovingly.

“What? I don’t.” Thomas shook off the odd feeling that settled in his gut when he spoke the words. “This is preposterous. I care for the woman, obviously. She has been a good friend to Jenny and to myself. But she is clearly just a friend.”

Friend. That word felt like a knife slicing through his chest. That’s the word Frances used yesterday when describing their relationship.

“Just a friend? We’re friends. I don’t remember you and I ever copulating,” Jonathan said off-handedly.

“That’s low brow. Plus, you know what I mean.”

Jonathan shook his head. “I don’t. Explain it to me because I feel I am missing a big part of the picture.”

“She’s from this world, but I’m not. This…” Thomas opened his arms. “This is all a show to me. The people are fake and pretentious, and I don’t belong in it. She deserves someone who understands this world and plays the part perfectly. That’s not me.”

“Is she fake and pretentious?”

Thomas looked aghast. “Not at all. She’s the most genuine, intelligent, spirited woman I’ve ever known. In fact, she may be the only person I know who is true to herself and her values.”

“Present company excluded, of course,” Jonathan added.

Thomas rolled his eyes in response.

“She’s her own person,” Thomas continued. “She plays the part society wants her to, but she does it on her own terms. It’s something I’ve always admired about her.”

“So, if you don’t think you fit into this world of pomp and circumstance, and she doesn’t behave like she wants to be a part of said group of pomp and circumstance, why is it you can’t be with her?”

“Because...” The words trailed off. Jonathan was right. She always criticized the world she was brought up in, so why couldn’t she be a good match for him? He knew there was another reason. Wasn’t there?

“Becaaaauuuuse...?” Jonathan prompted.

Thomas replayed his proposal to Frances in his head. There was something he was missing.

“Just wait. I have to think.”

Jonathan sighed and sat on the sofa.

“Ah! I remember now. It’s because she is a baron’s daughter, and I am a duke.” He paused. “Which is just ridiculous. I would love her if she were a fisherman’s daughter. Why would I care about class or who is appropriate for me to marry” he murmured to himself.

Jonathan sat with a victorious smile on his face. “My god, Thomas, are you that blitzed you don’t realize what you just said?”

“Hmm? What? Oh, that I don’t care that she’s a baron’s daughter?”

Jonathan held out his hand, urging Thomas to continue, “...and?”

“And that I would lov— ohhh! ”

Jonathan snapped his fingers. “There it is.”

“I love her.” The words sounded foreign yet familiar falling off his tongue. Bloody hell, he loved the woman. “I love her, and I made her think I wanted to marry her out of duty.” He rubbed his face again. “You’re right, I am an ass.”

“See? I knew you could figure it out. So, what are you going to do?”

Thomas wandered over to the window with the woodruff just outside of it. He placed his hands on the pane and pulled up. He expected a fight, but the pane released, and it opened easily. The smell of vanilla wrapped around him like a warm blanket. “I have to fight.”

Jonathan jumped up on a holler. “Hot damn! Thomas and Jonathan fighting together again. I’m in. How can I help?”

Thomas took another deep breath of the vanilla wafting in on the summer breeze. “I’m afraid I need more of a feminine touch with this one.”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

Jenny’s head popped back through a crack in the door.

“Jenny, you little minx, have you been listening to my conversation with your brother this entire time?”

Jenny smiled. “Of course. I wasn’t going to miss the chance to hear it from the ass himself regarding his feelings for Frances.”

Thomas stood with his hands on his hips. “I’m getting really tired of people calling me an ass.”

Jenny and Jonathan exchanged a wink. “How can we help you, dear brother? I’m ready to have another woman around here. There’s way too much male ego in here.”

Thomas took a deep breath. He had no idea where to begin, but he never cared what society thought of him, and he wasn’t going to start now. And he would be damned if society stood in the way between him and the woman he loved.

CHAPTER 20

“Frances? You have a visitor downstairs.”

Frances opened her eyes to the curtains being drawn open. Dorothy was annoyingly spritely today.

“Ugh. Dorothy, no. Close the drapes and send the visitor away. I don’t wish to receive anyone today.” Frances burrowed further under the duvet.

She could hear Dorothy’s feet walk towards her bed, and within seconds, the cover was ripped from her hands. “Enough of this, Frances. You’ve wasted another day; it’s nearly four in the afternoon. You must move on. Miss Jenny is downstairs.”

Frances’ stomach dropped. She was not ready to face anyone, especially not Jenny.

“Well, tell Jenny I’m ill. I’m contagious. I’m —”

“You’re going downstairs. She’s your friend and a good one at that. She’s been defending your name whenever she can. You’re going to have to face her sooner or later, so you might as well get it over with.” Dorothy’s voice took on a matriarchal tone.

Frances sat up and weighed her options. Dorothy was holding her duvet hostage, so she couldn’t snuggle back underneath it. Frances eyed her maid. She probably could take her, but she had seen Dorothy get into scrapes with her brother. Dorothy was known to be feisty.

Frances groaned. “Fine. Please send word I’ll be down. But good luck trying to get my hair close to anything presentable. It hasn’t been properly done in days.”

“That’s because you’d rather lay around having fits of the blue-devils. It’s time for you to get back to the world outside your room.”

Frances made a face at her maid but knew she was right. This moping around was getting old even for her. If she was going to live with a broken heart, then she might as well learn how to do just that. First step, getting dressed and meeting with the sister of her unrequited love. Good morning, indeed.

Frances gingerly patted her head. It took Dorothy longer than expected to get the knots out, and Frances was sure she lost some hair in the process.

She stole a moment before opening the door to her morning room. She took a deep breath and pushed it out. Jenny was her friend. She did nothing wrong. In fact, it was Frances that did Jenny wrong.

She opened the door. “Jenny, it’s so nice to — oof !”

Jenny slammed into Frances’ body and wrapped her in the most crushing hug she’d ever received.

“Oh Frances, I am so sorry for everything!”

Frances could only pat her friend on the back and make little mewling sounds for air. “Jenny — air — Jenny! ”

Jenny pulled back. “What? Oh! I’m sorry. I got carried away. It’s been so long since I’ve seen you, and we didn’t part on the best of terms, and I feel just awful for that. Then the ball happened, and I didn’t get a chance to talk to you before...”

Frances was still doubled over trying to catch her breath. “It’s ok, Jenny. Please, let’s sit.”

Jenny glanced at the door before agreeing to sit. Frances moved to her favorite chair that faced the window when Jenny let out a scream. “No! I’ll sit there. Here, you sit on the settee, that way you can have some air to breathe.”

Jenny’s face had a frantic smile plastered onto her face.

“Jenny? Are you ok? Why do you keep looking at the door? Is someone else here?” Frances’ throat went dry. She could barely handle Jenny; she didn’t want to think of the heartache she’d feel if she had to face him .

“What? No.” Jenny’s voice was borderline hysterical. “I’m just...” She took a deep breath and settled into the chair across from Frances. “Sorry. My emotions are getting the better of me. So much has happened in such a short amount of time. I’m just so happy to see you.”

“There!” Frances pointed at Jenny before turning around to look out the window.

“What?”

“You keep looking over my shoulder. Is there someone out there?”

“Frances. Stop. There is no one there. Something must’ve caught my eye. It’s a beautiful day outside, not too hot. It’s the perfect day for walk.”

Jenny toyed with the cuff of her sleeve.

“Ah-ha! You’re playing with your cuff. It’s your tell. You’re nervous.” Frances pointed at the offending gesture.

Jenny stilled her hands and looked pointedly at Frances. “Frances? When was the last time you encountered another person?”

Frances sighed into the settee. “I’m sorry, I’m all out of sorts. So, catch me up. Am I still the belle of the ball?”

Jenny looked at the floor, once again playing with the cuff of her sleeve. “You can thank Marie for that. She won’t keep her trap shut about what she saw.”

The knife in Frances’ heart twisted. Marie . She knew Marie had a manipulative side to her, but she never thought she would go so far as to purposefully ruin a person.

“Frannie, may I ask you a question?”

Frances nodded, afraid to speak. Jenny’s tone turned from cordial to timid, and it made Frances nervous.

“Why did you turn down my brother?” Frances hated the hurt she heard in Jenny’s voice.

Frances bit her lip. She needed a moment to collect the swirl of emotions coursing through her body.

“It wouldn’t be proper for a duke to marry a baron’s daughter. There are more suitable choices for him. He worked hard to be seen as legitimate duke, and I don’t want to bring him down — and tied to a scandal at that. He’s been through enough; he deserves more.”

Both women sat in silence.

“You love him.” Jenny’s voice was just a whisper, but it knocked the air from

Frances' lungs.

Tears collected on her eyelashes before silently rolling down her cheeks.

“Frances, you must know my brother, of all people, could not care less what the ton thinks of him. If he offered you marriage, it wasn't out of necessity.”

Frances wiped the tears from her face and looked at Jenny. “He specifically said he wanted to make it right . It wasn't exactly the kind of proposal little girls dream of,” she said nonchalantly.

Jenny let out an exaggerated breath. “My brother has never been good with words.”

After a moment, Jenny gathered her dress and stood up. She offered her hand to Frances. “Come. It's too beautiful a day to stay inside. Why don't we go for a walk and get some fresh air. It'll do you some good. I'll go tell Dorothy. I'm sure she'll want to come as well. It's been too long since we've had some time together.”

Frances turned to look out the window. It did look like a nice day. Her only hesitation came from the number of people passing by. She knew she'd have to face them, but the thought of handling stares and murmurs this soon had her stomach turning.

Although, she was never one to back down from a challenge. It's what got her in this mess in the first place. Collecting her courage, she stood and followed Jenny out the door.

Arm in arm, Jenny and Frances walked through Hyde Park with Dorothy just behind them. So far, everyone she encountered was pleasant enough. The sun felt good on her face, and the warm breeze felt freeing after she had been cooped up in her bedroom for the better part of a week.

They rounded the corner, and Frances' feet stopped moving. Ahead of her were Marie and some women Frances wasn't familiar with.

"We can take the path to our left to ignore them, and it'll only add a few more minutes to our walk." Jenny began to move in the other direction when Frances stopped her.

"No. She has had enough say in my life; she doesn't get to dictate where I walk. Let's continue on."

Jenny's eyes lit up. "I think I finally understand the friendship between my brother and Jonathan."

"How do you mean?" Frances cocked her head as they approached the couple.

"Jonathan is a very old friend of my brother's. He's seen Thomas through just about everything including many brawls. They're always claiming they would fight anyone who got in the other's way. If I could, I would remove Marie from your sight, so you'd never have to witness her horrible person again. But I'm told that would be very unladylike of me. We've worked so hard to fool people into thinking I'm a proper young lady."

The women couldn't contain their giggles as they came within steps of Marie.

"Good afternoon, Marie. 'Tis a lovely day for a walk, is it not?" Frances smiled and was proud that she felt no nerves, only cool, rational distance.

Marie sputtered but recovered quickly. "Yes, it is a beautiful day. I must say, I'm surprised to see you out. I heard about what happened with the Viscount and the Duke." Marie sniffed, raising her chin. "It's such a shame it ended that way. But if I remember correctly, you are fine with the prospect of a lonely life." The women

behind her snickered to each other.

Frances was losing her hold on her aloofness but remained calm.

“Oh, Marie, you know Frances better than that. She is well liked amongst the ton , and she has many friends who like and respect her. One rumor from a silly busybody nobody takes seriously will not impede her future.”

Marie scoffed. “Well, the Viscount believed it.”

Frances laughed. “I have no disrespect for the Viscount, after all, he has a family to consider, but if he went running after one little story, then he would not be the man for me. I like a little chaos in my life. No run of the mill marriage for me, I’m afraid. Heaven forbid I become so bored in my married life that I would feel the need to interfere with other people’s lives.”

Marie’s face drained of color. “How dare you!”

Frances tugged on Jenny’s arm. “Come, Miss Pilton, we have better use of our time. Lady Stellan,” she nodded before walking off.

Jenny danced on her tiptoes. “That was fantastic! Did you see her face? I will remember that forever. This is the perfect start.”

Frances couldn’t help but smile; it felt good to put Marie in her place.

“Wait. What do you mean? A perfect start to what?”

Jenny coughed and looked back at Dorothy, who was looking over their shoulders with a goofy smile on her face. Frances looked between the two women in confusion.

“What are you two going on about?” She caught Dorothy’s eyes light up and turned to see what she was looking at. Only it wasn’t a what, it was a who.

Thomas.

No, no, no, no. I’m not ready.

Jenny turned, so she was facing Frances, and tucked a stray blonde curl behind Frances’ ear. After planting a kiss on both cheeks, Jenny turned Frances around and gently pushed her in the direction of the Duke.

Frances honestly didn’t know how she was walking; she was numb from the waist down. Her heart was beating so loudly, her ears hurt. Her vision was blurry. Yet, even through the haze, she could see the piercing blue eyes drawing her in.

She stood in front of Thomas, holding her breath.

“Breathe, Frances.” His command was soft, enticing. It lit a flame in her belly that she thought had been extinguished.

“I’m glad I ran into you today. You’re looking well.”

Frances blinked a few times as she reclaimed her wits. “Something tells me this wasn’t a chance meeting.” She threw a glance over her shoulder at two clearly eavesdropping women.

Thomas smiled, and Frances’ heart squeezed. He didn’t smile often, but when he did, he was captivating.

“No, I’m afraid it’s not.” He gestured to the path. “Will you walk with me?” Frances raised an eyebrow. “Jenny and Dorothy will chaperone us, of course.”

Frances looked at her friends once more before returning her gaze to Thomas. It hurt to be with him and know she couldn't be her honest self with him. However, being in his company was like a soothing balm to her aching heart. If she could only have him in this capacity, then so be it. It was better than not having him in her life at all.

She nodded and walked along his side, both content in listening to the birds and passing carriages.

Thomas cleared his throat. "I've heard some good news regarding your father."

Frances turned her eyes to him. She had locked herself in her room for the past few days, so she hadn't kept up with anyone, including her poor father. She'd need to rectify that as soon as she got home.

"Oh?"

Thomas nodded. "Yes. It seems he and I have a mutual acquaintance in the business world. And it just so happens, I knew this acquaintance needed your father's business expertise, so I put them in contact again."

Frances stopped Thomas from walking. "You didn't have to do that."

"I know." Thomas said, continuing his walk, causing Frances to jog to catch up.

She grabbed his arm to stop him from walking. "Why did you do that? If this is some way of 'fixing the situation', I assure you, you —"

"Frances." Thomas' voice cut through her rant. "When will you understand, I only do things I want to do. No one makes me do anything I don't want to do."

Frances looked at him skeptically. "That's not true. I got you dance."

“Did you?” he asked, his eyebrow raised.

Frances scanned their surroundings and leaned in. “ I propositioned you.”

“ Correct.” Frances smiled, triumphantly. “But I agreed to it. No one forces my hand, Frances. When I offer help, it’s because I want to help. If I agree to something it’s because I want it.”

Frances’ head began to swim. “You wanted it? You... you wanted me? ”

“Want.”

“What?”

“I want you. Not past tense. I want you.” Thomas said, still walking. The damn bastard dropped this news and then had the audacity to continue walking.

Once again, Frances found herself chasing after him. Curse his long legs .

“Will you wait a moment!” This time she stood in front of him to stop him from walking away. “You want me? That is the most ridiculous thing I have ever heard of?”

“Really? More ridiculous than a girl propositioning a duke she barely knows to do things that the illustrious ton deems acceptable for only a husband and wife to do?”

Frances blanched. “That’s beside the point.”

Thomas’ mouth slid into a devilish grin. “Then what, my love, is the point?”

All clear and conscious thought left her brain when he said those words, my love .

They sobered her immediately. “Thomas. We can’t.”

Thomas took her hand and placed it in the crook of his arm.

“Wh- what are you doing?” Frances frantically looked around to see if anyone was witnessing this behavior.

“I’m told this is the correct way to woo a woman.”

Frances blinked up at him. She must’ve heard him wrong. “Woo a woman?”

“Are you sufficiently wooed by this gesture?”

Frances laughed. “Have you gone mad?”

Thomas canted his head. “In a manner of speaking. It has come to my attention that during our last meeting, I was a rightful ass. I’m hoping to make up for it and do this the proper way.”

Frances was at a loss for words. “Uh, yes. If you were courting me, this would be a proper outing, I suppose. But Thomas, we discussed this. We are not a suitable match.”

“Why not?” Thomas’ voice was curious, playful even. “And the whole duke and baron’s daughter excuse doesn’t count.”

“It’s a perfectly logical reason.”

Thomas shook his head. “Not to me, and last I checked, I am a duke who doesn’t care for the inner workings or thought of the ton . If you were a scullery maid, I’d still want to marry you.”

Frances felt the ground drop out from underneath her.

“What did you just say?”

“Hmm? Oh, that I want to marry you? Really Frances, if I have to repeat myself over and over again for the rest of our lives, it will get tiresome.”

“Thomas. We —”

Thomas turned and placed his finger over her mouth. “Frances. We can try to reason our feelings away, but we’d only be lying to ourselves. You are a smart woman who isn’t afraid to speak her mind or get what she wants. It was the first thing that drew me to you. We’ve both endured heartache at young ages; why would we want to bestow more onto ourselves?”

Frances felt tears well in her eyes.

“Neither one of us gives much credence to other people’s thoughts about rules and such nonsense; why would we start now? I love you, Miss Frances Ambrose. And if I have to walk around this park a hundred times to prove to the ton you’re my rightful choice, then so be it. But I refuse to have anyone but us dictate if we are to be together or not.”

Words failed her. All this time she was certain his feelings towards her were platonic and based off their agreement. She was so caught up in what was expected of her that she never considered there would be a chance for him to see her in the same light she saw him.

“So, what say you? Shall we continue this walk. Start some juicy gossip for Lady Staunton to spread? She’s right over there with her corgis and has been watching us this entire time.”

Frances chewed on her bottom lip and saw Thomas' eyes catch the movement. He groaned. "Oh, to be that lip," he whispered.

Frances blushed and failed at keeping her giggle from escaping. "I would love to walk with you, Your Grace."

Thomas raised her hand to his lips and placed a kiss on the back of her hand. "Please, call me Thomas, I insist," he said with a cocky wink.

"I guess you can openly call me Frances, then."

Thomas shook his head. "No, there's only one name I will call you."

Frances cocked her head in question. "And what is that?"

"My love."

EPILOGUE

Frances stepped out of the carriage. Her hands were slightly damp within her white gloves, and she hoped no one could tell. She was nervous. Her father helped her find her footing on the rocky terrain before he let her hand go.

He stood there staring at her.

Frances touched her hair. “What? Is something amiss?”

Solomon smiled. “I don’t think I told you how beautiful you look today.”

Frances blushed. Her father was never forthcoming with platitudes, so she never knew how to receive them when he gave her one.

“Where did you find that dress?”

Frances looked up. “Do you like it? Dorothy’s mama found it in an old trunk. She had it cleaned and added some silk ribbons to the lace eyelets to it to make it more fashionable. But I think it fits quite nicely and is perfect for the occasion.”

“It was your mother’s.” He paused. “You look just like her. Absolutely breathtaking.” His voice was full of reverence and love.

Words failed her at his admission. She leaned forward and kissed his cheek. “Thank you, Papa, for everything.”

Dorothy touched Frances' arm. "They're ready for you, Frannie."

Frances broke free from the hug she gave her father and looked past his shoulder. Her eyes landed on Thomas' frame standing near the minister. As if he could feel her eyes on him, he turned. Warmth washed over her under his gaze.

Dorothy nudged Frances. "Are you ready, Madam," her voice teasing.

Solomon took Frances' arm and placed it in the crook of his arm. He said nothing, but his face was full of pride.

As they walked down the aisle, Frances was glad they opted for a small gathering. Jenny, Nora, Sarah, Dorothy, and Jonathan were there, too. The ton was delirious with contempt at not being invited to what was deemed the wedding of the season, but neither Thomas nor Frances cared. They didn't need the pomp and circumstance crowding a celebration that was just for them.

Thomas' eyes grew heavier with every step she took towards him.

"Ah, there is my beautiful wife." His voice was smooth as silk, and it sent a jolt of heat to her core.

"Not yet, Your Grace. I didn't sign anything. I could run away right now." She smirked.

"I wouldn't let you get far. Remember, I fight for what I want." He pulled her in for a kiss.

"Blech. Save it for later." Jenny's disgust garnered chuckles from the rest of the party.

Thomas handed Frances a pen. “We were never ones for doing everything according to tradition. Sign the license, so we can leave.”

“But what about the ceremony? The church? Don’t we have to go through a process of some sort?” Frances looked at the minister who looked like he had seen better days. Taking in the minister’s frazzled appearance, Frances turned back to Thomas.

“What have you done to the poor man?” she scolded.

Thomas held up his hands. “Nothing. I just asked nicely if we could skip the formalities and get to the legal part.”

Frances cocked her head in disbelief. “You are incorrigible.”

“You like it.” His voice dipped low, and Frances’ legs turned to jelly. She absolutely loved the rougher side of Thomas. “Will you always be this bossy?” she teased.

“If the situation calls for it.” His sly grin added flames to the burn growing in her stomach.

Frances held his attention before looking down and writing her name on the license. She held the pen out to Thomas. “Your Grace?”

He took the pen and scribbled a line, never once taking his eyes off of her. He threw the pen down and picked her up. With a quick turn, he marched them out of the church, leaving nothing but blank stares, gaping mouths, and a few awkward giggles in their wake.

Frances stood staring out over the vast gardens that encompassed the Duke’s country estate. Her mind was dizzy comprehending the land was now hers, too.

She felt Thomas behind her. His head dipped to kiss the juncture at her neck, and she shivered. Rolling her head to the side, she leaned back into him. “Mmm, that feels nice.”

Thomas smiled against her skin. “Simmons wanted to give you the tour, but I told him we had other matters to attend to.”

Frances smiled. “Oh, but a tour would be lovely. This is your first time here as well; aren’t you curious to see everything?”

“The only everything I want to see is the everything you have hiding underneath this dress.” His fingers lightly caressed her arms, up and down. His fingers trailed over her shoulders to the ribbons on the back of her dress. Releasing the silk, the dress fluttered down around her ankles.

“Thomas! We’re standing in front of a window.”

“Who is going to see? The horses in the stable? I assure you, they are well versed in this sort of activity.” Thomas grinned as her reached for her shift.

“Oh! You have horses!” Frances always loved riding.

“ We have horses, and I am going to need you to focus, love.” Thomas grabbed her chin to bring her focus back to him. He leaned down, pushing her naked form against the cool window. She jumped at the coolness of the window, but the warmth of his body remedied it. Once again, she melted into him and welcomed his heat. He lifted her legs around his waist as his kisses trailed down her neck.

Frances felt light as a feather in his arms. She scratched his scalp with her nails the way he liked it, enjoying the vibrations of his growl against her neck.

“I lose all sense of control when I’m with you, love.” He inched her further up the window, so her breasts were easily accessible for his mouth. He took his time worshipping each breast before moving to the other. Frances began to squirm against his body. The fire he started at the church was becoming a raging inferno in her veins.

“Thomas, I need more .”

Without stopping his attention to her nipple, he turned them and laid her on the bed. Once she was down, he looked at her. “Whatever I have is yours, love. I’ll give you everything you ever need.”

She reached up to bring him in for a kiss. “You. You’re all I’ll ever need. But right now, I’m looking for a more specific part of you.”

Thomas smiled cheekily. “Well, if the ton could hear the prim and proper Lady Pilton now.”

She let out a giggle. “ The ton can sod off.”

Thomas gawked. “Seems while you were teaching me etiquette, you may have picked up some of my bad habits.”

Thomas stood and removed his clothing with aplomb. He settled between her thighs and eased into her. She pushed her body up to meet his with a sigh.

“That’s fine with me. I like the rougher side to life. It’s more exciting.” Her words were stilted between breaths.

Thomas sucked on her favorite spot on her neck. “That, Your Grace, I can give you.”

“The best of both worlds,” she moaned as her orgasm crashed over her.

The End?

PROLOGUE

“Should we try to...talk to people?” Miss Emily Rutley asked her friend Lady Frances Johnson.

Frances’ wide-eyed look of horror spoke volumes.

“Yes, well,” Emily said, feeling only the tiniest bit defeated. It wasn’t that she felt any desperate need to go mix with the assembled members of the ton. She’d been fortunate enough to gather a small, close group of friends at the start of the Season and felt little need to expand that circle, especially when so many of the other debutantes felt it abidingly necessary to comment upon Emily’s height.

Did they think she didn’t know she was tall? Did they really, truly think she’d moved through life for twenty years not realizing that she was head and shoulders taller than most other young ladies?

And if it wasn’t her height, it was her age. Yes, twenty was a bit older than your average debutante, but she was hardly decrepit. And her sisters had needed her.

They still needed her, of course, though now they needed her for a different matter.

Now they needed her to marry.

Hence her interest—such as it was—in not continuing to linger near this wall with its hideous hangings.

But she couldn't abandon Frances, could she? No, certainly not.

"We'll wait for Grace," she said, even though she knew this was an excuse to remain safely at the edges of the room for a few minutes longer. "You know Grace always has someone new to introduce."

Lady Grace Miller was the shining star of the Season, a luminous beauty who not only was the daughter of a duke but who had (as rumors held it) a prodigious dowry. She was also, despite all this, another member of Frances and Emily's small group of friends.

According to the rules of Society, it hardly made sense, but, then again, Grace was just like that; no matter that the world had given her a dozen reasons to be petty, spoiled, or snobbish, she was genuinely kind and clever and sought kindness and cleverness in her friends instead of things like wealth and pedigree.

Not that Emily, daughter of a viscount, or Frances, daughter of a marquess, lacked pedigree, but nobody would claim that they were up to Grace's level of perfection.

"Good idea," Frances said, even though she looked faintly green at the idea. Frances was a lovely, charming, wonderful girl...who clammed up the instant anyone whom she didn't consider a close friend was within earshot.

"My goodness!" came a teasing cry from a few paces away. "If it isn't the very wallflowers I was hoping to see!"

This was Lady Diana Fletching, daughter of the Earl of Preston and the fourth in their quartet. Her dark green eyes gleamed with feisty humor, even as her expression held the lingering tension that suggested she'd just escaped her mother's clutches. The Countess of Preston was matrimonially minded to an aggressive degree, and Diana had no intention of marrying that Season.

None of Emily's friends were seeking marriage that year, actually. Frances was terrified of the prospect, and Diana preferred books to men. Grace, meanwhile, intended to have as much fun as she could before she settled down.

Only Emily approached the thing with any seriousness...not that this had helped her garner any prospects.

"Really, Diana," she chided gently, "you oughtn't call us 'wallflowers.' Someone might hear you."

Diana made a pointed, skeptical gesture at the wall. "And think I'm wrong?" she asked.

"And diminish our popularity," Emily corrected. "We needn't give others any reason to consider us undesirable."

To consider me undesirable, she amended mentally though she couldn't bear to say it out loud. It sounded far too self-pitying.

It was the truth, though. Although the others had no interest in marrying yet, they were all better poised for it. Diana's golden hair made her a beauty even if she didn't seem to know it, and Frances' diminutive figure lent her the kind of feminine stature that men supposedly found more appealing than Emily's willowy height.

Plus, there were her dratted curls, she recognized as she felt the telltale pull of one threatening to spring free from its pins. Fashion dictated that hair should be meticulously curled with a hot iron into neat, manageable waves. Emily's hair was a force of its own, constantly threatening to break free.

But Diana knew how Emily felt about all this; she didn't need to be told. She came to stand next to Emily, peering at her dance card.

“How’s your card looking this evening, Em?”

Emily sighed. “Not good. I’ve only two dances spoken for, and they’re both country dances. Hardly helpful for striking up conversations.”

Emily tried not to think too hard about just how far Diana had to reach up in order to deliver a sympathetic pat to her shoulder.

“We need Grace to come make introductions to some gentlemen,” Frances said, picking up the thread of their conversation. She stood on her toes to look out over the crowd; the effort still put her eyeline lower than Emily’s. “Where is Grace?”

Emily looked, too. Even at her height, though, there was no sight of Grace’s shining blonde head. “I don’t see her.

“Well, heaven knows she won’t be able to see us, tucked back here as we are,” Diana claimed, grabbing Emily’s hand. Emily grabbed Frances as Diana led them. They moved easily to the center of the ballroom as the pause between sets sent the rest of the attendees filtering towards the room’s edges.

Even Emily went to her toes to search, not that the height helped much. She was already taller than half the gentlemen here. But it felt as though it should help, somehow. Yet...nothing. A frown crossed her face.

“Do you see her, Diana?” Frances asked.

Before Diana could answer, a man spoke. “Excuse me.” The three girls whirled. “Have you seen Lady Grace?” asked the unassuming man, whose name Emily could not immediately place. “She and I are due for the next dance, but I’m afraid I cannot locate her...”

Something about the broad smile on Diana's face made Emily's confusion turn to worry.

"Oh, Mr. Cartwright—" Ah, yes, that was it. "—I am so sorry," Diana said earnestly. "Grace stepped on her hem and has had to hie to the ladies' retiring room. She bid us to make her apologies and asked if you would be so kind as to dance with Miss Rutley for this set, instead."

Emily tried not to look surprised by this.

"Of course," Mr. Cartwright said kindly. "Miss Rutley, if you would do me the honor?"

"Of course," she said. She looked back at her friends as he led her to the dance floor. Diana and Frances had bent their heads together and were whispering furiously, their faces masked in dismay.

Emily might have enjoyed doing the Allemande with Mr. Cartwright—who was soft spoken, occasionally funny, and rather handsome once she looked past his spectacles—were she not so worried. It was silly to worry over Grace's absence for a mere handful of minutes, but Emily was quite accustomed to worrying. Raising her sisters since their childhood had rendered the habit ingrained. As it was, she barely executed a proper curtsy to poor Mr. Cartwright before she bolted for the edge of the ballroom.

"Did you find her?" Emily demanded when she found Diana and Frances. She knew the question was pointless; they would not look so vexed if they had located Grace.

Diana worried at her lip. "I saw her earlier. Two dances ago now, I think? She was with the Duke of Hawkins."

Frances looked horrified. “Him? He’s old enough to be her father.”

The Duke’s age, however, was not what bothered Emily. “He’s also rather...forceful,” she said, thinking of the way the Duke looked at Grace, which had always struck her as being aggressive, somehow. “He hovers around Grace quite a lot and isn’t terribly gracious about it when she pays attention to other people.”

She hated to even suggest what she was suggesting. Diana immediately gathered the implication.

“You don’t think he would...?” she broke off, aghast.

“No,” Emily assured her, despite feeling no such assurance herself. “But perhaps he pressured her to accompany him for a walk?”

Frances bit her lip. “Maybe we should check the gardens?”

Emily felt instantly sick. Going unchaperoned into a garden was practically asking for one’s reputation to be obliterated, and she’d spent years carefully honing her sense of propriety, so she could make an advantageous marriage that would help her set her sisters up for happy lives.

But for Grace, she would do it.

“I think we should,” Diana agreed though even she sounded hesitant. “We shan’t go far from the house. Just far enough to call for her.”

“Surely anyone who...took her for a walk would release her once he knew we were looking,” Emily said, her voice less convincing that she’d hoped.

Still, they went. The strange turn of the evening was too much for Emily to wrap her

mind around, so she focused on the fervent hope that nobody would note their odd behavior. When she made fleeting eye contact with a dowager, the older woman raised her eyebrows curiously, and Emily felt herself flush to her hairline. She offered the woman a nervous smile, hoping she'd chalk the trio off as merely overwhelmed by the close heat of the room. It was hot inside in a way that made the cool night air feel like a slap.

"Are you sure?" Frances asked as Diana led them towards the stairs that led down from the empty veranda.

Her words were cut off by a scream, sharp and terrified. All thoughts of propriety, of reputation, fled Emily's mind as she bolted towards the sound, nearly turning her ankle when hard stone gave way to the soft lawn.

"Grace?" she called, her voice too frightened and breathy to travel far. They'd scarcely gone a few paces into the garden, and she already felt disoriented, the pounding of her heart in her ears making it nigh on impossible to hear anything. Even if she could hear, however, the scream had faded, gone as quickly as it had arrived.

Frances and Diana nearly crashed into her when she stopped; her height had served her well, for once, and she'd long outpaced them.

"I'm going back for help," Diana panted. She spun on her heel and raced back toward the house without even pausing to ask if the others wished to risk being found in the garden. Whatever was happening out here was far more important than idle gossip.

Frances slipped her hand into Emily's.

"Grace?" she called, her voice shaking. "Are you there?" Her fingers shook, too, where they held Emily's tight.

There was no response. Even so, the girls kept calling, kept straining their eyes to peer into the dark. By the time Diana returned with half the ton beside her, Grace's father, a whey-faced Duke of Graham, in the lead, Emily had come to fear that there never would be a response, not from Grace.

CHAPTER 1

THREE YEARS LATER

“ I never should have found them a governess,” Emily muttered to herself as she searched for her sisters. “Let alone one that encouraged independent thinking . I should have locked them in the cellar and let them out when they were five-and-twenty. Nay, thirty.”

Emily herself might only have been two-and-twenty, but she felt confident that the twins would require more time to become respectable members of Society who did not seek to sow chaos at every turn. The events of this evening were, she felt, ample evidence of that notion.

Tonight was, after all, only the twins’ second night out in Society; they’d debuted only days earlier. In advance of that debut, Emily had reminded them again and again (and again and again and again) to comport themselves in a manner that would not bring scandal down upon their house and name.

Amanda and Rose had managed the thing perfectly. They’d been pleasant and popular, had danced with a variety of gentlemen, and had avoided insulting anyone or speaking too outlandishly on any of their radical viewpoints. And Emily, who was apparently the worst kind of idiot, had patted herself on the back. A job well done, she’d considered it. Clearly the girls knew how to behave.

So, tonight, she’d only impressed the importance of propriety upon them once.

It had not been enough, apparently.

They'd given her the slip within ten minutes, their manner too coordinated to have been circumstance. They'd been retrieving their cups of punch when Amanda had made a distressed sound over her hem. She'd handed Emily her glass and bent to fuss with her skirts. Just then, Rose had spotted a friend. She'd needed to check her coiffure. When Emily had turned back to Amanda, she was gone. When Emily turned to ask Rose where Amanda had hied off to, Rose was also gone.

And Emily had been left juggling three cups of punch.

"Too clever," she grouched now as she searched the crowd for them. If her sisters had been as tall as Emily was, this would have been easy. Alas, Emily topped them both by several inches. The girls blended easily into the crowd.

"Too clever," she said again. "And can they use those powers for good? No. I should see about marrying Amanda off to some kind of intelligence officer. If we're lucky, that will improve the nation's security. If not, well, at least he'll have experience dealing with slippery characters."

Emily recognized that she was working herself into quite the state. And most of this had to do with irritation with her sisters. Could they never just listen to her? She was constantly trying her hardest—had been doing so since she was a child herself, really—to provide a good model for them and was always working to be proper and helpful and motherly though she knew she could never truly make up for the mother they had lost.

Emily would normally have commended the twins on knowing their own minds; Emily's dear friend Diana Young, the Duchess of Hawkins, was not the type to listen to the demands of others, and Emily adored her for that.

But all Emily wanted was to keep the twins out of trouble. Why couldn't they see that?

"Excuse me, excuse me," she muttered reflexively as she moved through the crowd, craning her neck to seek her sisters.

The small part of her that was not merely irritated, however, was tied in a sick knot of worry. Emily had never shared the events of that evening with her sisters—she didn't want them to carry around those sorts of fears—but searching for someone in a ballroom would always bring back the way she'd felt searching for Grace...searching, but never finding her.

It wasn't the same, of course. It wasn't the same!

But sometimes it felt the same.

She was so lost in these layers of feeling—annoyance upon fear upon grief upon utter frustration—that she didn't even see the man until she'd crashed into him hard enough that she would have fallen on her behind, right there in the ballroom, if he hadn't been so quick to seize her about the shoulders.

"Oof," she said.

Emily was the kind of well-bred young lady who had had the rules of comportment so sufficiently drilled into her that she had, in times past, reflexively apologized to bookshelves and settees after bumping into them. Yet she found that the word sorry died on her lips in the face of the gentleman's glare.

And his size. Emily was unaccustomed to looking up to meet a gentleman's gaze; it was far more usual that she had to look down. But this man was so tall that she not only had to look up, she had to tip her head back to do so.

Only to be met with fire when he glared back down at her.

“You really must watch where you are going,” he snapped.

Her mouth dropped open and, again, decades of propriety fled her mind.

“Excuse me?”

“I said,” he began tersely and Emily—shocking even herself, truly—interrupted him.

“No, no, I heard what you said.” Her eyes were wide. She surely looked like some gaping country bumpkin, but she simply could not help herself. The rudeness of the man! “I am merely shocked at what I heard.”

Now it was his turn to act surprised. “I beg your pardon?”

In the back of her mind, Emily recognized that this was likely the moment when she ought to retreat. She should play the demure young lady, as she always did. She could blame her initial words on the shock, could salvage this moment.

But the rest of her, the parts that had already been bubbling over with emotion, felt that if she had to bite her tongue one more time, she was going to scream .

“It’s just that the traditional response, after colliding with someone in a ballroom, is my apologies.”

The man frowned fearsomely down at her, but Emily found, oddly enough, that she was not afraid. He would likely be handsome, she imagined, if not for that scowl. He had thick, dark hair that waved pleasantly over his brow and intense eyes that were so rich a brown they were nearly indistinguishable from the black centers. But his eyebrows were a bit heavier than classical good looks dictated, and his determination

to use them to make himself intimidating did not help.

“You didn’t apologize either,” he pointed out, the tiniest note of sulkiness in his tone.

“But neither did I offer you...let’s call it advice about watching myself,” she pointed out reasonably.

This was, she decided, the moment when he should retreat. But perhaps this giant of a man was consumed by the same temporary madness as she, for he did not do so any more than she had.

“It was,” he said archly, “good advice.”

“Advice that you might likewise follow,” she countered.

“I was scarcely moving,” he returned. “Whereas you were surging ahead like this was a racetrack, not a ballroom.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Are you comparing me to a horse, sir? I feel if we are tallying poor behavior, that ranks higher than a misstep.” Strangely, she did not feel insulted, however. She felt rather...invigorated.

“You are being purposefully difficult, miss,” he retorted with a scowl. “I was doing no such thing, and you know it perfectly well. You are merely, for a reason I cannot divine, looking for some way to extend this peculiar encounter.”

“Could you divine, perhaps,” she asked, a hint of mockery in her tone, “that I am trapped in this encounter as your hands are still upon my person?”

His hands were, in fact, upon her shoulders. He looked at them for a long moment like they belonged to a stranger before snatching them down to his sides.

“I—my apologies,” he said stiffly.

“So you can apologize!” she exclaimed.

She was being ungracious, she knew, wretchedly so. But he had been ungracious, too, and highly irksome. And wasn't it quite enough that gentlemen got to go around, doing whatever they pleased with their lives, without also refusing basic politeness to young women they nearly knocked to the ground? Was that really too much to ask?

And, argued a tiny voice inside her—and frankly, Emily had a bone to pick with that tiny voice, too, come to mention it—she was enjoying this conversation just the tiniest bit.

“I can apologize,” the man said crossly, “when I have reason to do so. But no matter what you women seem to think, I am not on this Earth merely to make good on your conversational whims. I have things to do, miss, things that do not include being lectured on deportment. If you do not have better ways to spend your time, might I recommend watercolors? I have heard that ladies find that enormously diverting.”

Emily's mouth was open again. Of all the rude and condescending and self-important things...

Except then the full significance of his statement hit her. Goodness. She did have better ways to spend her time. Hadn't she been rushing for a reason? She needed to find the twins before one or both of them (why was she pretending; it was always both) did something indefensible, like setting fire to the building.

It wouldn't be on purpose, of course. The twins weren't malicious.

They just had a seemingly inexorable penchant for chaos.

So instead of continuing to quibble with the gentleman (even though she really, truly, deeply wished to do so) she raised her nose pertly in the air. This tended to have more effect on gentlemen who weren't quite as massive as this man, but was, she felt, still worth doing.

"You are quite right, sir," she said in a prim tone that suggested she did not think he was right, but rather that she thought he was awful yet merely not worth the time of telling him so. "I shall be on my way at once."

She sidestepped him neatly, feeling a rare rush of gratitude for her long legs, and swept past him, not even looking over her shoulder for a last glance.

He, she decided, was certainly looking over his shoulder after her. And as long as she did not check, she could continue to enjoy this fantasy.

Her ire, though intense, faded quickly as she caught a glimpse of the pastel purple of Rose's skirts. She was huddled in close to Amanda in a manner that always promised trouble.

"What are you two doing?" Emily asked in a furious whisper as she approached her sisters. Amanda quickly hid her hands behind her back. "What do you have there?"

"Nothing," Amanda said.

Emily counted it among her blessings that the twins were terrible liars.

"What do you have?" she repeated, putting more menace into her tone.

Rose sighed in disappointment as Amanda returned her hands to her front, uncapping them to reveal...

A frog.

Emily didn't know whether to laugh, cry, or groan. In the end, she did none of those things. Instead, she stepped closer, blocking the sight from the rest of the room. Her first instinct had always been to protect her sisters—and always would be.

“Why,” she asked, the question sounding vaguely desperate, “do you have a frog in a ballroom?”

“We found him on the veranda and didn't want him to get squished,” Rose supplied as if this were a reasonable answer.

“Why were you on the veranda without a chaperone?” Emily asked.

Amanda pouted. “Well, Emmy, you know you're not a proper chaperone, don't you? You aren't married.”

If Emily hadn't been terrified of losing sight of the frog— a frog! In a ballroom!—for a single second, she would have closed her eyes at that comment. Yes, despite her best efforts to fashion herself into a proper chaperone for her sisters, she remained unmarried. She knew Amanda didn't mean to be unkind by reminding her of this failure, but it did still sting a bit.

“Besides,” Amanda continued blithely. “There were plenty of chaperones out there. We went out there to talk to Lady Averton, after all.”

“Lady Averton is seventy-four years old,” Emily said, confused. What business could her sisters have with a woman some fifty years their senior?

“Yes,” said Amanda happily. “And she smokes . She had a cheroot. A cheroot, Emily!”

Emily stifled a sigh and began composing a mental lesson for the next day: Things One May Do When One is a Very Old and Very Rich Dowager but which One May Not Do When One is an Eighteen-Year-Old Debutante Who Wishes to Marry. It was part of an ongoing series of lectures that Emily had begun in a so far fruitless attempt to preserve her own sanity.

But now was neither the place nor the time.

“Right,” she said tiredly. She was so exhausted. Was it normal to feel this tired at her age? Certainly, it wasn’t. “Fine. Well, in the future, please put the frog somewhere that is both safe and outside. For now, let’s return him to the outdoors, so he can resume his happy, froggy life.”

“I have a partner for the next dance,” Amanda said, having the decency to at least look a bit abashed about this.

Emily turned to Rose, only to find the other girl had the same look on her face. “As do I,” she said.

“What were you planning on doing with the frog while—?” She cut herself off. Did it matter? She put out her hands, cringing slightly. “Fine. Fine. Give it to me.”

“Goodbye, little froggy,” Amanda whispered, pressing a kiss to its little head. Emily’s gorge threatened to rise, but she accepted the slimy package, careful not to let it escape her grasp in the transfer. The last thing she needed was for the blasted frog to get loose in the ballroom.

She struggled to keep a pleasant look on her face as her sisters’ dance partners retrieved them, trying hard to ignore the squirming movement from between her cupped hands. When her sisters were occupied with the quadrille, she heaved a sigh of relief before laughing at herself.

Oh yes. Now all that remained was the simple matter of smuggling a frog from a ballroom undetected. She shook her head. Say what one would about her sisters, but life was never boring when they were around.

CHAPTER 2

“T here’s nothing there, you know.”

Benedict frowned briefly as his friend Evan, the Marquess of Ockley, and resumed brushing at his jacket. Benedict knew nothing was there, technically speaking. He just merely wanted to...restore himself to order after the interaction with that dreadfully outspoken young lady. Sadly, however, no one had yet invented a manner of brushing off one’s mind, so fussing with his jacket would have to do as far as soothing actions went.

“You really missed your calling as a valet,” Evan went on, completely ignoring Benedict’s scowl. “There’s still time to change careers. Perhaps it will bring you joy.”

“You propose,” Benedict asked dryly, “that I give up being an earl to become a valet? Whose valet would I even be?”

Evan shrugged. “Perhaps you and your actual valet could switch places. Let him be the Earl of Moore, and you can be...what’s your valet’s name?”

“Well, I think I’d be allowed to keep my own name.” Benedict could not believe he was engaging in this absurd conversation. “I suppose I’d just be Hoskins.”

“Hm,” Evan mused. “Suits you.”

With a huff, Benedict reminded himself that he didn’t have enough friends to go about alienating any. “I daresay, Ockley,” he bit out. “it’s my name .”

“Just so,” Evan agreed affably, but the gleam in his eye gave him away.

Benedict sighed and stopped brushing at his jacket. “You,” he accused, “are being purposefully antagonistic.”

“I might be,” Evan agreed.

“Has anyone ever told you that you are dreadfully annoying?”

The instant the question left his lips, Benedict regretted it. For someone had been constantly complaining, in a good-natured way, that Evan drove her mad—his younger sister, Grace, who had been abducted and killed three years prior. Benedict knew that Evan hated discussing his sister, knew that his friend still harbored guilt over failing to protect her.

The pain Evan felt over his sister’s loss had been a wound that was torn open again the previous year, when it had come to light that Grace had not been killed by the late Duke of Hawkins, as had been long assumed. Instead, she’d been killed by a man named Theodore Dowling.

It was Benedict’s family’s connection, however tenuous, to Dowling that made him cringe the most...

In an effort to distract his friend from his painful memories, Benedict took up a new line of complaint. Evan loved to mock Benedict’s complaints.

“I cannot believe you dragged me to this...circus,” he lamented, waving an arm out over the crowd. “Remind me again why I agreed to do this?”

The look Evan shot him suggested that his friend knew precisely what Benedict was up to...but that he appreciated it, nonetheless.

“You are here,” Evan said, “because you want to marry this Season. Now, why you want to do that is beyond me, man; you’re young yet, and you have plenty of time to wed and bed one of Society’s darlings and get yourself an heir. But you have proven obstinate on this, as in most things, so here we are.”

“My father did not live a long life,” Benedict pointed out. “I may not have time to waste.”

“Your father was nearly fifty when he died,” Evan returned. “You are six and twenty. And unless you think falling off horses runs in families, I’m not sure you’re on the right path with that logic.”

Benedict shrugged. In truth, he had no real reason to suspect he should live anything but a long life. Even so, his father’s sudden death had taught him that things happened beyond one’s control. Procrastination was never a wise move.

Therefore, Benedict saw no reason to dally in getting himself a wife and heir. It was something he could check off his list of responsibilities easily enough. He just had to find someone appropriate.

“Don’t tell me about logic,” he grunted irritably.

When he looked back at his friend, Evan was peering at him curiously.

“Don’t bite my head off,” he said, “but you seem...slightly more peevish than usual. Might I ask why?”

“I am not peevish,” Benedict snapped. Then he held up a hand before Evan could reply. “Yes, fine, I heard it. I just had an unpleasant encounter with a woman is all.”

“Oh, yes?” Evan asked, looking intrigued. “Do say more.”

With another beleaguered sigh, Benedict recounted his spat with the woman.

“She really was very abominably rude,” he concluded.

“Indeed,” Evan said with mock sagacity. “It sounds very much like she was being abominably rude.”

“Do shut up,” Benedict responded irritably which only made Evan laugh aloud. “Stop laughing at me and try to focus on the matter at hand, will you? You know perfectly well that the Season is only slightly less chaotic than the madhouse, so I need to start meeting ladies posthaste, otherwise all the respectable ones will find themselves inundated by suitors.”

“Most of those are unlikely to be an earl, though,” Evan pointed out.

“That fact has somewhat less impact when coming from someone poised to inherit a dukedom,” Benedict observed idly, “but yes, fine, I take your point. Even so, there’s no sense in dallying. Help me meet some suitable ladies, so we can depart this absolute circus.”

“I don’t mind a ball, personally,” Evan commented offhandedly though he sighed when he saw Benedict’s baleful look. “Oh, yes, all right. Let’s get to business.” He raised an eyebrow as an idea seemed to occur to him. “Wait, I’ve got it—why don’t you ask the lady who’s put you into such a pique if she would like to dance?”

This time, it was Benedict’s turn to laugh. “I said suitable, Ockley. Harridans who accost people on the dance floor are not anyone’s definition of suitable.”

Evan mumbled something under his breath that might have included the phrase “keep you in line.” Benedict, the picture of maturity, pretended not to hear this.

“Fine,” Evan went on. “We’ll find you a lady more to your liking, then.”

“Christ, no, not that either,” Benedict said, earning himself a look of censure from a passing matron for his blasphemy.

Evan’s look was similarly startled though for a different reason.

“You’ve lost me with that one, I’m afraid, Moore,” he said. “I thought you were looking for a wife.”

“I am,” Benedict said, feeling as though he were really showing more patience than Evan strictly warranted at this moment. “But I am not looking for some love match —” He practically spat the words. “—like seems to be all the rage these days. I don’t need to give some woman the power to control my happiness, not like?—”

He cut himself off. The reason wasn’t important, anyway. What mattered was the outcome.

“I just need a reasonable young lady to make a suitable Society wife,” he said, his tone calmer. “One who will give me an heir and accompany me to the odd event. Then she can spend the rest of her time as she wishes. Needlepoint. Charity. I don’t know—whatever it is that women like.”

Evan had the oddest look on his face, but his voice was even as he said, “So you’re looking for someone who makes you feel entirely indifferent, then?”

Benedict nodded, pleased. Finally, his friend was starting to understand.

“Precisely. And I don’t see why such a thing should be difficult; it’s the way aristocrats have been marrying for hundreds of years. Why change something that works?”

The words felt slightly flat in Benedict's mouth, but he stopped that thought before it could go any further. Evan, likewise, seemed uninterested in a response.

"Right," he said. He held Benedict's gaze for one more moment before turning to look out over the gathered crowd. "Well, I suppose you're right that there are quite a few potential brides that fit that description here tonight. Do you see any that make you feel absolutely nothing?"

If this last question was a jibe, Benedict ignored it. Instead, he took the question in good faith, scanning his eyes across the collection of expertly coiffed young women.

His gaze caught upon a pair huddled off to one side of the dance floor, heads pressed together, giggling. It was the one on the left that drew his attention, for she was smiling amiably in a way that suggested simple contentment. Her dark hair was neatly swept back, and her gown was fashionable but not ostentatiously so. Women who adored fashion would likely want to go places to show off that fashion and might ask their husbands to accompany them. Benedict was, naturally, far too busy for that sort of thing.

She did look a tad bit young, he allowed, but wasn't that the way of debutantes?

"That one," he said, jerking his chin in the direction of the young lady in question. "The young lady over there in the blue."

Evan followed Benedict's gesture. When his eyes landed on the right woman, there was another quick flicker of something in his expression. But it was gone before Evan turned to face his friend again.

"Right on," he said. "Well, if you've noticed her, surely others have as well. You'd best go ask for a dance before her card is full."

This was sensible. Wise, even.

So why did Benedict still get the sense that he was being mocked?

Again, he chose to ignore whatever nonsense Evan was trying to impart through implication and innuendo.

“So I shall,” he declared. With a decisive nod, he started striding towards his desired partner.

As he went, he put firmly from his mind any thoughts of mysterious friends and quarrelsome young ladies and tried to convince himself that finally things were going according to plan.

CHAPTER 3

It was surprisingly (or perhaps unsurprisingly? Emily couldn't even tell anymore; this was the effect the twins had on people's minds) difficult to secretly remove a frog from a ballroom without letting anyone know what she was doing or compromising her own reputation.

By the time she'd managed the thing, Amanda and Rose had disappeared.

Again .

Mentally swearing (and lamenting that her dictionary of mental swears was sorely lacking), Emily searched through the crowds for her sisters— again —though this time she did manage to watch where she was going.

What she did not manage, however, was to find both sisters; when she located Rose, Amanda was nowhere in sight.

“Where is Amanda?” she asked as she approached her sister, the question somewhere between a demand and a lament.

Rose gave her a stubborn look.

That was never good.

While Amanda was, generally speaking, the twin far more likely to overflow with the kind of brilliant ideas that gave Emily a blistering headache, she could also often be

distracted by a different idea—a more appropriate one if Emily had anything to do with it—so long as it amused her. Rose, in contrast, was typically more likely to default to appropriate behavior unless Amanda was there to tempt her into chaos, but she was far more intractable when she put her mind to it.

“You are being far too controlling, Emily,” Rose accused, chin jutting out mulishly. “I simply don’t know why you feel you must act this way.”

And perhaps whatever devil possessed Rose when she got in this mood affected Emily as well, for though she knew every move to this argument as well as she knew her own name, she found herself engaging in it anyway.

“Because I’m your sister,” she said as she had a hundred times before. “I am trying to protect you.”

“Protect us?” Rose asked, rolling her eyes and tossing her head like she had a thousand times before. “From what? From enjoying ourselves? From having our own personalities?”

“No,” said Emily through gritted teeth. “From people who would try to take advantage. You know the world is not safe for young ladies?—”

“I don’t know that,” Rose retorted. “How could I know that when you’re constantly trying to keep us from ever experiencing anything?”

“That’s not what I’m trying to do.” It was highly inappropriate to quibble like children in a ballroom, but they both had the sense at least to keep their argument to heated whispers. Even so, the part of Emily that was always worrying about decorum—both for her own sake and for the twins’—fretted that glances had started to drift their way.

“You’re not our mother!” Rose hissed, and they both froze.

There it was. The place this argument always ended up, the hurdle it could never overcome.

Emily felt all the ire drop out of her, replaced by a heavy mantle of sadness.

“I know I’m not,” she said softly even as Rose tripped over herself to apologize.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Em; I’m being horrid,” she replied, lunging for Emily’s hand.

Emily squeezed her sister’s fingers. “You’re not—well, you are,” she amended, and Rose chuckled, the tension between them dissipating in a flash. “But I understand it. I shall try to be more...understanding.”

Even as she said it, though, she couldn’t stop her nose from wrinkling.

“I do not believe you,” Rose said, but there was no heat to her tone. “I have no doubt that you will continue to be your terrible, overprotective self.”

Emily had no suitable response to this—as she probably would continue to be protective though she refused to acknowledge Rose’s other descriptors—so she merely offered her little sister her arm. Rose looped her elbow through Emily’s.

“Will you please tell me where Amanda is, though?” she prompted after a moment.

“Incorrigible,” Rose chuckled. “Yes, very well—she’s dancing? Really, Emily, what did you expect?”

Emily assumed that question was rhetorical as, with Amanda, no expectation was too outlandish.

She could not resist, however, muttering to her sister, “You might’ve said that from the start, you know.”

Rose's mouth quirked with devilish amusement.

A couple standing across the room caught Emily's eye.

"My goodness!" she exclaimed. "What on earth is Diana doing here?"

She and Rose began to cross to the woman in question, who beamed and waved excitedly as soon as she saw them coming, leaning heavily on her husband's arm when the move upset her balance.

Diana Young, the Duchess of Hawkins, was in the advanced stage of pregnancy when a woman's shape defied conventional physics. Her husband, Andrew Young, the Duke of Hawkins, looked anxiously aware of this fact as he clung to Diana like he feared she would capsize.

"There you are, Emily," Diana cried, reaching out one arm to pull Emily towards her, so she could plant a kiss on her cheek. "And Rose, look at you! You look beautiful. Are you enjoying your debut?"

"Very much so," Rose agreed. And then, when Emily stepped on her foot, added, "Your Grace."

"Oh, stop it," Diana chided Emily. "I'm not going to stand on ceremony with your sisters ." To Rose, she said, "Keep calling me 'Diana.'"

Emily wanted to argue that the twins could only be aided by increased practice in decorum, but she didn't intend to argue with Diana in her current state...at least not while Diana's protective husband glared on like he thought his wife was made of glass.

Instead, she said, "Are you really meant to be out in a crush like this, Diana? I thought you'd already entered your confinement."

“No,” said the Duke firmly just as Diana replied, waving an airy hand, “Oh, it’s fine. Besides, confinement is boring.”

“But you have all those novels,” Andrew argued, sounding very much like a man at the end of his rope.

Diana smiled at him beatifically. “And I am as surprised as you are to learn that there is, in fact, a limit to my interest in enjoying sensationalized gothic fiction. And after a week of trying to relax and repose —” she said the words like they pained her. “—I have hit that limit. Besides, some physicians on the Continent believe activity is good for a mother-to-be. Thus, here I am.”

“Where did you read that?” Andrew demanded suspiciously. “You don’t read scientific papers. They’re not bloodthirsty enough for you. Was it a novel? You do know novels are fiction, Diana!”

Diana waved her hand again, entirely unperturbed by her husband’s increasingly frazzled air.

“One reads things,” she said simply. Then, before Andrew could retort—as he clearly looked poised to do—she grinned again. “Look! There’s Frances. Hello, darling.”

“Um, hello,” Frances said, a touch nervously. Frances had become somewhat more comfortable expressing herself around Diana’s husband in the year since their friend had wed, but Emily knew it was still a struggle. “Good to see you, Your Grace, Diana, Emily, Rose,” she said in order, with a nod to each member of their little circle.

“Good evening, Lady Frances,” Andrew said.

Frances furrowed her brow as she looked at Diana. “Are you sure you’re meant to be out, Diana?” she asked cautiously.

“You see!” Andrew burst out as though he could hold it back no longer. “I am not a madman, Diana. I told you it was highly irregular for you to come out in your condition, but you insisted that I was being absurd. No woman would think as I did; that’s what you said! And yet, here we have two women—your dear friends, no less—who seem inclined to my way of thinking.”

Diana scowled up at him. “I don’t know why you’re so bothered about this, Andrew, truly I don’t. I feel fine. And you don’t see me telling you when you need rest, do you?”

“Yes,” said Emily, Andrew, and Frances all at once. Andrew looked intensely smug at this; Frances looked mortified.

Rose, the only one who hadn’t spoken, looked highly entertained by this whole thing.

“I love Society,” she whispered happily.

“That was different,” Diana told her husband sternly. “You’d been shot.”

“You were shot?” Rose asked, aghast and visibly intrigued. Emily winced. She’d been hiding the gossip pages for weeks to stop the twins from learning about that as she’d no doubt it would excite their curiosity beyond manageable limits.

Fortunately, Andrew did not even glance at Rose. His stern gaze was fixed on his wife. “You don’t even like coming to balls, Diana,” he insisted.

“Ah,” she said, “but I am needed at this ball.”

Andrew sighed. “Explain.”

Diana practically vibrated with triumph. “Well, Emily is here chaperoning her sisters, is she not?” Emily wondered how on earth she was at the middle of this marital

debate but decided her best chances of escaping unscathed involved not putting forth that question. “But Emily herself is unmarried. What if she attracts a suitor? Then who will chaperone the twins? I’m clearly the logical choice, Andrew.”

Emily could think of approximately ten rebuttals to this, but she chose to offer the one that her sister was most likely to latch on to and save for later.

“I’m not going to attract a suitor, Diana,” she said.

Diana looked affronted. “I don’t see why not, Emily Rutley. You’re lovely, you’re clever, you’re from a fine family. There’s no reason why a gentleman shouldn’t admire you. You’re simply being difficult.”

Rose, watching her sister get scolded by an enormously pregnant duchess, looked as though she’d died and gone to heaven.

“I’m not—” Emily began, but Frances’ hasty tap on her arm halted her. She looked down at her friend, who nodded over Emily’s shoulder.

“Amanda is coming,” Frances whispered.

Emily turned. Indeed, Amanda was approaching them, her arm linked with that of a gentleman.

Emily felt the flash of relief that only truly struck her when both her sisters were present, accounted for, and not involved in any form of mischief. That relief lasted only a moment, however, for in the next instant she looked at the gentleman accompanying her sister.

“You!” she gasped.

It was the gentleman from earlier, the dreadfully rude one who had harassed her on

the ballroom floor. She was so shocked to see him that it was only when Frances cleared her throat quietly that Emily realized how dreadfully rude her own reaction had been as well. Flustered, she refused to make eye contact with the man, turning instead to her sister.

“Oh good, Amanda,” she said, forcing a smile onto her face, “I was looking for you. And here you are. Good, good.”

Despite also refusing to make eye contact with her friends, Emily couldn’t miss the highly intrigued look she was receiving from Diana.

“Yes, hello,” Amanda said, blinking at Emily like she’d grown a second head. “Emily, I would like to introduce the Earl of Moore, Lord Benedict Hoskins. My Lord, this is my sister, Miss Emily Rutley.”

Emily’s mind blanked, only her body drawing upon its years of training to drop her into the requisite curtsy. The Earl of Moore. The Earl of Moore .

If this dreadful gentleman was the Earl of Moore, that meant his mother was the Dowager Countess of Moore.

From the sharp way Diana sucked in a breath, Emily knew the connection was not lost on her friend, either.

The Dowager Countess of Moore had played a role, however obliquely, in the incident that had left Andrew shot and fighting for his life during the previous Season. Diana’s husband had taken a bullet to the shoulder after an altercation with a man named Theodore Dowling who, they had discovered, was the villain responsible for killing Lady Grace Miller, Diana, Frances, and Emily’s dear friend.

Dowling’s confession, made only moments before his death, had come as a shock, not only to Grace’s loved ones but to all of Society, who had believed the culprit

already punished. Indeed, Andrew's father, the late Duke of Hawkins, had been hanged for Grace's murder several years prior. This miscarriage of justice was not quite as horrifying as it could have been, given that Andrew and Diana had discovered proof of the late Duke's culpability in many other crimes, but it had still struck the ton with all the force of a boulder falling into a tranquil pond. The waves of gossip and speculation had lapped for months.

The question on everyone's tongues has been thus: how had Theodore Dowling (who had, in the end, turned out to be no gentleman at all, merely a pretender) gotten sufficient access to the upper echelons of Society such that he could come to encounter Grace Miller, let alone kill her?

The answer came to light, eventually, sending tongues wagging with new shock.

Theodore Dowling had been having an affair with the Dowager Countess of Moore. The woman had evidently been as duped as the rest of them, but still, Emily did not find it easy to forgive the woman her lack of good sense when it had cost the world Grace's light.

"How...nice to meet you, Miss Rutley," the Earl said with a perfunctory bow.

At his hesitation, too marked to be anything but intentional, fury rose inside Emily as inexorable as the tides.

How dare this man act like Emily was the problem when his mother had—had liaised with a murderer!

"I see you've met my sister," she said icily, not returning the pleasantry. "Perhaps you also know my friends, the Duke and Duchess of Hawkins?"

If Emily had been in the mood to give the Earl credit, she might have granted him some for the miniscule flinch that crossed his face.

“A pleasure, Your Graces,” he said, the greeting just long enough to be polite, and then his eyes were back on Emily.

She narrowed hers at him.

“Emily,” Amanda said, a note of warning in her voice, “His Lordship said that he would like to pay us a call during visiting hours tomorrow. Isn’t that lovely?”

“No.” The word came out of Emily like a whip.

“Emily!” Rose exhorted in an urgent whisper.

Emily knew she was being unladylike—possibly even irrational. The only accusation she could throw at the Dowager Countess’ feet was that of poor judgment and perhaps, insufficient discretion when it came to her amorous pursuits. Emily might be unmarried, but she was not naïve; she knew it was common, even accepted, for widows to have liaisons so long as those affairs were kept quiet.

And she could scarcely fault the Earl for his mother’s poor selection; for one, such things were not inherited, and for another, he’d chosen Amanda, who, despite her penchant for trouble, was one of Emily’s favorite people in the world.

But Emily had looked after her sisters for all their lives. Protecting them was a habit, one she had no intention of breaking. And she loved them too dearly to let any whiff of the trouble that had affected their lives—had ended Grace’s life and nearly Andrew’s, too—near her sisters.

Additionally, the man had been unforgivably rude.

“No?” the Earl asked, sounding almost amused. “I assure you, Miss Rutley, it is quite the done thing for a gentleman to pay a call to a lady after he enjoys a dance with her. If you’ve not had the experience to inform you of this, I should be glad to provide a

book. I can bring it to your house when I pay my call tomorrow.”

Emily’s mouth dropped open in shock. The gall of the man! He’d all but called her an unappealing spinster, right here in the middle of everyone!

Andrew seemed to agree that this went a bit far. “Now see here,” he said sternly.

The Earl tipped his head toward the Duke in a conciliatory manner though his eyes remained fixed on Emily’s. “No offense meant, I assure you,” he said in what was one of the most patently obvious lies Emily had ever heard. “The younger Miss Rutley here had merely informed me that her sister was serving as a slightly unconventional chaperone. It’s why she was so eager for us to meet, you see,” he added.

At this, Emily’s glance flickered over to Amanda who was looking...well, furious was too mild a term for it, Emily thought.

“A chaperone’s duty,” she said through gritted teeth, “is to protect her charges from unsuitable advances.”

“Emily!” This time the word came from Amanda, a low warning.

Emily ignored it. The Earl did, too.

“I cannot think why you should think me unsuitable, Miss Rutley,” he said, the words a challenge.

“I,” she returned, “cannot be held responsible for your inability to think.”

The Earl’s expression flickered briefly in a way that suggested he was amused by this exchange. Diana choked back a sound that said she was definitely amused by this exchange. Emily, decidedly unamused, kept her spine straight and her chin tilted up

as she looked the Earl of Moore directly in the eye.

It was Amanda who broke the fraught moment.

“Oh, you are awful !” she exclaimed, stamping her foot petulantly like an angry child. “I am positively sick to death of you, Emily!”

And then she turned on her heel and fled, Rose only steps behind her.

Emily felt a wave of misery overtake her though she could not quite call it regret. She hated angering her sisters, hated how often it was necessary. She hated it even more when she felt she’d gone about it in a manner that was...less than optimal.

For while she did not think the Earl of Moore had any business around her sister, she supposed she could admit that there might have been a better way to express her disapproval than by quarreling with the man in public.

This, she decided in an instant, was something else she could lay at the feet of the dratted Earl of Moore.

“Look at what you’ve done now!” she cried, dismay loosening her tongue and causing her to forget that, mere moments ago, she’d recognized the foolishness of fighting with him in the middle of a ball.

“Me?” He looked appalled. “I haven’t?—”

But she had neither the time nor the inclination to fight with him. Instead of waiting to hear the rest of his retort—which would, no doubt, have been nothing but nonsense, anyway—she stepped aside, ready to pursue her sisters.

And that would have been fine, except the wretched, terrible, awful Earl of Moore had evidently decided that he, too, needed to depart in precisely that moment—never

mind that he didn't have any furious sisters to chase after. They moved—together yet opposite—nearly crashing into one another for a second time that evening.

This time, however, Emily saw it coming. She jerked herself back before they could collide...

And her slipper lost traction on the polished ballroom floor. She careened backwards, her mind conjuring the half hysterical thought that perhaps it was destiny that wanted to see her flat on her bum in front of the ton this evening. How else could she explain that this had happened twice ?

Except once again, she did not fall. Once again, strong arms came around her, halting her progress towards the ground.

It was not her shoulders the Earl of Moore grasped this time, however. No, this time when he lunged to stop Emily from falling to the ground, he seized her by her waist, pulled her up firmly until she was pressed well and firmly against him.

Against the whole of him, she realized with a startled blink. Impossibly, her hands were pressed against his chest. What on earth were they doing there? His gaze bore into hers, intense and sharp and lit with something that was not quite animosity. Something about that gaze made Emily feel even more breathless than had the near fall.

“Oh my,” breathed Frances.

This seemed to jolt the Earl, at least, back into his senses.

“I beg your pardon,” he said gruffly.

“Right,” Emily replied which was terribly inane, but her mind didn't seem to be working quite correctly.

But then he blinked, and she blinked, and the severing of that hypnotic gaze was enough that she could gather a smidgen of her composure. She realized, abstractly, that she had only moments before her mortification caught up with her, so she hastily got her feet underneath her, tore herself out of the Earl's grasp, and —it was cowardly, she knew—refused to so much as glance at her friends.

“I must find my sisters,” she said stiffly. “If you all will excuse me. Good evening.”

And then she fled.