



Duke of Silver (The Suttons #1)

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Category: Historical

Description: "You will marry me instead. Whether you like it or not..."

Elizabeth's life is ruined. Caught in a compromising position, she has put her family on the line and her own future to ruin... Until the most imposing man of the ton shows up at her home...

Duke Alexander will not let his brother ruin the reputation he has worked so hard to build. Only when he is nowhere to be found, Alexander has only one choice: Marry the menace himself.

She agrees to marry him, but Elizabeth cannot stand her demanding new husband. Opposing him at every turn, though, she quickly learns the hard way. You do not want to provoke the Duke of Silver...

Total Pages (Source): 41

CHAPTER 1

“D on’t you ever get tired?” Alexander Hunton, the Duke of Sterlin, sighed heavily as he downed the remainder of his drink. The fine brandy did little to soothe his mounting irritation.

The ball had become insufferable—loud, oppressive. He had retreated to this quiet salon to escape, but his solitude had been unceremoniously shattered by the very last person he wished to see.

“Why ever would I get tired of your pleasant company, Your Grace?” Georgianna Proctor, the Countess of Winston, cooed as she batted her eyelashes with exaggerated delicacy. Her fan swung idly before her chest, her movements purposeful, as if to draw attention to her bosom.

The widow had been relentless in her pursuit, never missing an opportunity to press her attentions upon him. And now, her persistence was grating. His patience, though vast, had its limits, and she was drawing dangerously close to breaching them.

Before he could utter a word in response, Georgianna smiled slyly. “Besides, it is only a matter of time before our companies become... permanent.”

Alexander’s jaw tightened, his mind stalling on the audacity of her words. She had grown bolder with each passing day. Her insinuations now bordered on the absurd.

“You sound remarkably certain of this permanence,” Alexander said, his tone clipped, though he maintained the appearance of calm.

“Oh, come now, Alexander.” She chuckled, a sound that grated on his ears.

“Your Grace,” he corrected, his voice firm. He would not allow such familiarity, especially from her. Not tonight.

Georgianna’s eyes narrowed for a brief moment, the smile wavering as she assessed him. But it quickly returned, a glint of challenge lighting her expression. “Alexander,” she repeated, defying him. Her voice took on a mocking lilt. “We are not children, you and I. We both know what you want.”

What I want? He barely managed to keep his composure, though the irritation surged beneath his cool exterior. She knew nothing of what he wanted.

“And what is it that you want, Georgianna?” He leveled his gaze at her, his voice edged with a weariness he could no longer hide. If she had hoped for a different response, she was bound to be disappointed.

For the briefest moment, her confidence wavered, her smile flickering. But she recovered quickly. “Why, I thought I made my desires quite clear from the start, Alexander,” she said, punctuating her words with another insufferable giggle. Her fan swirled with increased vigor, drawing his unwilling eye to the deep rise and fall of her chest.

“And I thought I made my position on the matter equally clear from the beginning,” Alexander returned, his voice cold. The words were harsher than he had intended, but enough was enough.

Her eyes flashed, her jovial air cracking. “Your jokes are never-ending, are they?”

“I assure you, I make no jokes,” Alexander said evenly. “And you know that well enough. There is no possibility—none—of your wishes ever becoming reality.”

She lifted her chin, that familiar air of superiority returning. “Those are not words befitting a man addressing his future duchess.”

A sudden chuckle escaped him, surprising even himself. The absurdity of the notion was finally too much to bear.

“My dear Georgianna,” he began, and to his dismay, he saw a flicker of hope in her eyes.

“You are about as close to becoming the Duchess of Sterlin as old farmer John is to getting crowned the King of England,” Alexander added, his words having a cold finality that he had no patience left to soften.

The transformation in Georgianna’s face was immediate. Anger, raw and unfiltered, clouded her once coquettish features, her eyes darkening as the reality of his words sunk in.

“You are insufferable, did you know that?” she spat, her voice trembling with outrage.

“Only too well,” Alexander agreed, his tone unyielding, though the weariness of the conversation was beginning to show. He had endured her incessant attempts at securing his favor long enough, and it had grown tiresome beyond measure.

“You will not get away with such mistreatment,” she continued, her voice catching on the edges of emotion. The poised countess was unraveling before him, her mask of charm cracking under the weight of her frustration.

“Mistreatment?” Alexander’s brows furrowed, the word igniting a sharp flare of anger in his chest. “Mistreatment is your incessant advances, despite my making my feelings abundantly clear from the start.” His voice was low, almost a growl, as he

leaned forward. "I will not marry you, Georgianna."

I will not marry anyone, he thought, though the words remained locked within him. Marriage, for him, was not a question of when, but rather, if.

Her lips trembled, and a tear, thick with defeat, slipped down her powdered cheek. She quickly caught it with a lavender satin handkerchief, her composure wavering with each ragged breath.

Alexander's jaw clenched. Despite everything, there was a part of him that detested the sight of a woman in distress, especially if he was the cause. Yet, he knew no good would come from giving in to any shred of sympathy she sought to evoke. Not when her intentions were as transparent as they were.

"You are clearly not thinking straight," she muttered, her eyes flicking to the decanter sitting atop the polished side table next to him. "It is the liquor talking. It must be," she concluded, her voice thick with tears as more spilled over, staining her cheeks.

He glanced at the half-empty glass beside him and then back to her. "Do not flatter yourself that it is the drink that makes me speak this way," he said, his tone cutting through the air between them. "This has been my stance from the very beginning."

"After giving you everything, Alexander!" Georgianna's voice cracked, trembling with her emotion. Her words hung in the air, bitter and sharp.

"Georgianna—" Alexander ground out, forcing himself to hold on to the last shreds of his patience. His temples throbbed as her accusations sliced through him, but he refused to let his temper rise to match hers.

"No, Alexander." She cut him off with a shake of her head, dabbing furiously at her tears as she stood abruptly. "We shall have this discussion again when you are sober."

Her voice wavered, yet her determination was clear, her words punctuated by the fierce dabbing of her lavender handkerchief. “No is not your answer.”

“I have never been more sober. Or surer of anything in my life,” Alexander responded, his voice firm, each word measured.

Her eyes narrowed, that maddening look of disbelief crossing her features once again. She turned on her heels with a dramatic swirl of her skirts, making for the door. But at the threshold, she paused, casting a final glance over her shoulder.

“Do not be too sure, Alexander. Of anything.” Her voice held a dark, almost ominous tone. “For only fools remain obstinately confident and sure of the uncertain future.”

With that cryptic warning, she disappeared into the dim hallway, leaving the door half-open in her wake. Alexander stared after her for a moment, then let out a low, exasperated breath. He ran a hand through his hair, frustration brimming beneath his calm exterior. He reached for the decanter once more, ready to pour himself another glass, anything to stave off the lingering irritation.

Just as the amber liquid was about to fill his glass, a familiar voice interrupted his solitude.

“Alex, there you are! I have been looking all over for you, man,” came the voice of Colin Caldwell, the Marquess of Broughton. Colin’s head poked through the half-open door before he strode inside, his usual easy demeanor replaced by something more urgent.

Alexander set the decanter down with a sigh, his reprieve slipping away yet again. “Is everything all right?” he asked, noting the unusual agitation in his friend’s posture.

“I’m afraid there is trouble,” Colin replied, his brow furrowed. “It’s Percy, he?—”

“What happened to Percy?” Alexander shot to his feet, the words barely out of his friend’s mouth before the fear seized him. His hand knocked the decanter in his haste, sending it teetering precariously on the edge of the table. But he paid it no mind. His focus was solely on his younger brother.

A sudden, sharp image flashed through Alexander’s mind, unbidden. The memory struck him with the force of a blow—splintered wood all around him, the coppery scent of blood filling his nostrils. His brother’s desperate cries echoed in his ears, mingling with the haunting rasp of his father’s final words: “ Take care of them, Alex. Promise me... ”

It was a promise that had lingered, festering in his soul. A promise he had failed to keep.

And now, the thought of anything happening to Percy... God help him, he would be dead before he let history repeat itself.

“Relax, Alex. He is quite well, but I fear a scandal has arisen. He is said to have... compromised a lady,” Colin replied, his words calm, though the gravity of the matter was unmistakable.

Alexander exhaled slowly, relief washing over him at the realization that Percy’s life was not in immediate danger. “At least he lives,” he muttered, though the trouble that now lay before them was no trifling matter. He gestured for Colin to lead on, bracing himself for the inevitable confrontation.

As they entered the powder room, the sight that greeted them was nothing short of disgraceful. Percy lay slumped across a chaise lounge, his face flushed and his eyes glazed over, the unmistakable stench of alcohol permeating the air. His clothes were disheveled, and he reeked of carelessness.

“Oh, hullo there, Sterlin,” Percy mumbled, raising a feeble hand in greeting, though it barely lifted from his thigh. A hiccup escaped him, followed by a soft snicker from a nearby onlooker.

Alexander’s eyes flicked to the small crowd still loitering about, eager for any morsel of gossip the scene could provide. Of course, the lady in question was nowhere to be found—he had expected no less. A woman of any reputation would not linger after such an incident.

“Good heavens, Percy,” Colin muttered, his voice filled with disbelief as he took in the deplorable state of his friend.

“Let us get him out of here,” Alexander said, his tone firm, bordering on cold. He bent down alongside Colin, and together they hauled Percy to his feet, though he swayed precariously, his legs barely capable of supporting his weight. With an arm around each of his shoulders, they guided him, staggering and mumbling, toward the exit.

Once they had reached the waiting Sterlin carriage, Percy all but collapsed inside, his body limp with drunkenness. Alexander turned to Colin, intent on expressing his gratitude, but was surprised when his friend climbed into the carriage behind them.

“Are you coming with us, or do you intend to return to the festivities?” Colin teased lightly, though there was a touch of weariness to his voice.

Alexander shook his head with a faint smile before settling into the carriage. As they made their way back to Sterlin House, Percy continued to fill the confined space with his incoherent mutterings, his words slurred and devoid of sense.

Upon their arrival, Alexander and Colin dragged Percy out of the carriage, supporting his weight as they maneuvered him into the house. The butler appeared at once, his

expression fraught with concern, but Alexander waved him off, his voice sharp. “Fetch some tea, if you please. We must sober him up.”

Once inside the study, they deposited Percy into a chair, his head lolling to the side as he groaned softly. Alexander began to pace, his irritation rising with every moment. Finally, he stopped and turned to Colin. “What precisely happened?”

Colin folded his arms across his chest, his face somber. “It is said that Percy was found with a lady in that very powder room.”

“A... a pretty lady,” Percy interjected, his voice thick with intoxication, as if the memory were one of triumph rather than disgrace.

Alexander’s patience snapped. “Is that why you acted so recklessly?” His voice cut through the air, sharp and unforgiving. Percy blinked at him, the severity of his tone forcing him to sit up straighter, though his mind still swam with the effects of the evening’s indulgence.

“You do realize what this means, don’t you?” Alexander pressed, his anger barely contained.

Percy looked at him, his expression one of vague confusion, as though he were struggling to comprehend the situation. He turned to Colin, as though hoping for an explanation.

Alexander answered before Colin could speak. “Our family name, Percy, is now at risk. If we do nothing, the rumors will spread like wildfire, and we shall find ourselves ruined by mere association with your folly.”

Percy blinked again, his brow furrowed in a futile attempt to understand. “Good family name. Right,” he echoed, nodding slowly, though it was clear he was still too

far gone to appreciate the gravity of the matter.

“Who was the lady in question?” Alexander asked, turning to Colin with a steady breath.

Colin frowned in thought, then answered, “Lady Elizabeth Sutton. Niece of the Earl of Dowshire.”

Alexander’s jaw clenched at the name. Dowshire’s niece? Of all people, Percy had managed to embroil their family in a scandal with the niece of one of the most influential men in the realm. This was far worse than he had anticipated. The ramifications would be devastating, and their family’s honor now hung in the balance.

“Well, her father was the late Earl, and as he had no son, her uncle assumed the title upon his demise,” Colin explained, his tone measured but revealing the gravity of the situation.

Alexander’s gaze shifted to Percy, who sat slumped on the chaise, oblivious to the weight of his actions. “There is a clear distinction, Percy, between your escapades at the opera houses and your entanglements with gently bred ladies,” Alexander began, his voice carrying the firm authority of an elder brother. “With the former, you may escape unscathed, but the latter requires responsibility—something you’ve yet to demonstrate.”

Percy blinked, still slow to comprehend the severity of his actions, but Colin’s brow furrowed in surprise. “What do you mean, Alex?”

“Why, Percy must do the honorable thing by this Lady Elizabeth and marry her, of course.”

“Marriage? What marriage?” Percy suddenly sat up, his bleary eyes widening in alarm. The very word seemed to jolt him back to sobriety.

“The marriage you have brought upon yourself through your own recklessness,” Alexander responded coldly, unwilling to offer him any respite from the reality of his situation.

“Oh no. No, no, no.” Percy waved his hands, attempting to rise from the sofa but promptly staggered and collapsed back into the cushions. “I am not marrying anyone.”

“And I refuse to allow you to drag our good name through the mud, tarnishing our father’s legacy in the process,” Alexander said, his temper flaring as the familiar vein throbbed at his temple. “You made a mistake. You must take responsibility.”

“I would sooner die than walk to that bloody altar,” Percy muttered with defiance.

Alexander’s jaw clenched, frustration surging through him. Was this his doing? Had he been too lenient with Percy all these years, allowing him to indulge his every whim without consequence? Had he failed to teach him a proper sense of duty?

“What would Father say, Percy? Is this how you intend to disgrace his name in the eyes of society?” Alexander’s voice was low now, his anger tempered by a quiet plea.

“Do not use Father to blackmail me, Alexander,” Percy shot back, his face contorting with both guilt and anger.

“There is no blackmail here. I am merely reminding you of the honor you are about to destroy,” Alexander replied, his tone unwavering.

Percy’s jaw tightened as he ran a hand through his disheveled hair, letting out a

frustrated curse under his breath. “Fine,” he bit out, his voice terse with resignation.

“Excellent. Wedding bells at last,” Colin interjected, clapping Percy on the shoulder with a grin. “You’ve made the right decision, Percy.”

Percy scowled, his expression darkening as he forced himself to stand just as the butler returned with the tea.

“Have some tea and retire for the night,” Alexander said, his concern for his brother’s welfare slowly overriding his earlier anger. “You need to rest.”

“We shall call upon Dowshire tomorrow to formally request his niece’s hand,” he added, turning to the butler. “Prepare Percy’s room for the night.”

“There’s no need. I’m returning to my lodgings,” Percy mumbled, shaking his head. “And I do not need the tea,” he added when Alexander began to argue.

“It will clear your head, Percy,” Colin urged gently.

Percy’s eyes flashed with irritation. “Would you require ‘clearing’ after being forced into marriage against your will?” he grumbled, though his voice lacked true malice.

“Quite right,” Colin chuckled, unfazed.

“You’re simply doing the honorable thing,” Alexander said, laying a hand on his brother’s shoulder. “Let me escort you back to your lodgings.”

“I can manage that,” Colin interjected. “My carriage followed us back. I’ll see him home.”

Alexander glanced at Percy, who seemed content with the arrangement, before

nodding. “Very well. I shall collect you in the morning so we may call upon the Earl.”

“Will you allow me to have breakfast first?” Percy asked, his voice still groggy.

“Of course,” Alexander replied with a faint smile. “We’ll break our fast together.”

Percy gave a small nod before following Colin to the door. As he reached the threshold, he turned back, his expression softening. “Good night, brother. And I apologize for the trouble I caused tonight.”

“You’ve chosen to take responsibility—that is all that matters,” Alexander said, dismissing the apology with a wave of his hand.

After their departure, Alexander sank into his chair, the weight of the evening pressing down upon him. He had no illusions that the Earl of Dowshire would be anything less than agitated when they called upon him tomorrow. With a sigh, Alexander reached for a sheet of parchment and began to draft a letter, informing the Earl of their intentions to arrive in the morning. He hoped that by extending this courtesy, he might alleviate some of the Earl’s anxieties over the scandal that had already begun to unfurl.

CHAPTER 2

“ I promise, nothing happened, Uncle,” Lady Elizabeth Sutton breathed, her voice trembling as she hurried after her uncle, the Earl of Dowshire, into his study. Her heart pounded fiercely in her chest, the shock of the evening still clouding her thoughts.

The ball had descended into disaster, and now she found herself teetering on the brink of ruin. It scarcely seemed real, yet here she was—accused of being compromised, her reputation tarnished beyond repair. And all through no fault of her own.

“I simply wished for a moment of peace, some solitude in the powder room,” she continued, her hands clenching as she recounted the wretched series of events. “That is where he found me—drunk, incoherent. I did not know what he intended, and when I attempted to leave, he stumbled, fell, and pulled me down with him.” Her voice faltered, the memory of Percy Hunton’s weight crashing against her still fresh, still mortifying.

Her breath caught as the scene replayed in her mind: Percy, lost to his inebriation, collapsing upon her, sending them both sprawling to the floor. And that was how they had been found—herself struggling to free herself from his grip, their positions horribly misinterpreted by the bystanders.

“I believe you, child,” her uncle, Sebastian Sutton, said gently. His tone was soothing, though the worry in his eyes betrayed his true concern.

“But society may not be as understanding,” Aunt Petunia added, sighing deeply as

she sat beside the fire, her fingers clasped tightly around her embroidery. Her voice held a weight of resignation, knowing full well how swiftly rumors spread in their circles.

Petunia had come to London to serve as their chaperone for the Season, a duty she accepted but did not relish. Now, the grim reality of the situation had settled over her like a dark cloud.

“Percy Hunton is well known as a rake,” Anna, her cousin, added, her expression grave. “His reputation will only complicate matters.”

Elizabeth winced at her cousin’s words. She had heard of Percy’s reputation, of course, but had never imagined being entangled in one of his indiscretions. And now, it was her reputation that stood at the precipice.

“Is everything quite alright?” A soft voice broke through the tension.

Elizabeth turned to see her younger sister, Margaret, standing in the doorway. Margaret’s wide eyes were filled with concern, her delicate features mirroring the worry that gripped Elizabeth’s heart.

The weight of the scandal pressed down upon her like a crushing blow. This was not merely her own reputation at stake. Margaret was set to debut next Season, and Anna’s prospects hung in the balance as well. The scandal would taint them all, and the consequences could be devastating.

“Oh, what have I done?” Elizabeth whispered, sinking into the nearest chair, her composure shattering as tears welled up in her eyes. She could no longer hold them back. The warmth of her tears spilled over, tracing hot lines down her cheeks.

“Do not fault yourself for society’s absurd expectations,” Anna said gently, sitting

beside her and placing a hand on her arm. “None of this is your doing.”

“Are you unwell, Lizzy?” Margaret’s voice quivered with worry.

“All will be well, Margaret dear,” Petunia said softly, though her voice lacked its usual certainty. “Why don’t you fetch some tea for your sister? She needs it.”

Margaret lingered, clearly confused by the tension in the room, but finally nodded and left at their aunt’s suggestion.

“I swear, nothing improper occurred,” Elizabeth choked out once more, her voice thick with emotion. She felt Aunt Petunia’s hand press softly upon her shoulder, offering what comfort she could.

“We know, dear,” came the quiet voices of her family.

Elizabeth looked up at them through a haze of tears, her heart pounding with dread. “Do you not see what this means?” she asked, her voice rising as desperation crept in. “I have ruined us. My thoughtlessness has brought disgrace upon us all.”

She searched their faces, hoping to find some shared outrage, something that matched the turmoil within her. But they remained steadfastly calm, their understanding gazes only deepening her sense of isolation.

“Your prospects are as much in jeopardy as mine, Anna,” she said, her voice strained. “And Margaret... she hasn’t even had her debut yet! How will she fare in society now?” She turned to her uncle, her hands trembling as she spoke. “And our finances, Uncle. I know what a burden you already carry.”

Her father, the former Earl of Dowshire, had been reckless in his life, leaving the family estate encumbered with debt. Upon his death, Sebastian had shouldered the

heavy responsibility of the title and taken her and Margaret in. He had given them security, a chance at a respectable future, and now she had repaid him with scandal.

“I will find a way to make this right,” her uncle said quietly after a long pause. His words were spoken with resolve, though his brow was furrowed with worry.

“Do not torment yourself, Lizzy,” Anna added softly.

But Elizabeth could not bear their sympathy. It suffocated her, pressing down upon her until she felt as though she might scream. Anger, disappointment—anything would have been easier to endure than the overwhelming kindness they extended.

“You don’t understand,” she said, rising abruptly from her chair, her eyes wild with emotion. “I have undone everything—everything!”

Her words reverberated in the room, but still, they remained composed, offering nothing but reassurances. How could they not see the gravity of the situation? How could they be so calm when her world was collapsing?

“We will manage, Lizzy,” her uncle said softly, his voice calm and steady.

But Elizabeth could not find comfort in his words. She had ruined them, and no amount of well-meaning reassurance could undo what had been done.

“I will call upon Percy Hunton and convince him to marry me if I must,” she said, her voice trembling with resolve. It was the only solution she could fathom. If left unaddressed, the scandal would ruin them, casting a shadow over her family. Her uncle’s efforts to secure investments, vital to their already strained finances, would be all but doomed.

“You cannot do that,” Petunia interjected sharply.

“I agree,” Anna added, nodding. “Such a step would only add more fuel to the rumors.”

“But it’s the only way!” Elizabeth insisted, the desperation in her voice growing.

Her uncle raised a hand to stop the mounting tension. “I tell you what, ladies. Let us call it a night and see what tomorrow brings. We should allow the gentleman some time—perhaps he will come forward to do the honorable thing. Let us not leap to conclusions.”

Elizabeth shook her head, her heart sinking further. “If Percy Hunton is anything like his reputation, Uncle, he will not offer for me.”

“Do not be so pessimistic,” Petunia admonished.

“If he doesn’t, I will simply marry some old lord in need of a wife,” Elizabeth voiced in a moment of sheer desperation. She could think of no other way to clear her family’s name.

“Elizabeth Sutton, do not say such a thing!” Petunia cried, her hand flying to her chest in shock.

“Why, Aunt? If it is the only way to lift the stain from our name, then I must do whatever is required,” Elizabeth replied with determination, though her voice quivered.

“You will not sacrifice your happiness and future for this,” Sebastian said firmly, his grey eyes full of a promise she longed to believe. The tenderness in his gaze made her throat tighten with fresh emotion. He had always been more of a father to her than she deserved, and the thought of bringing him further grief filled her with sorrow.

Elizabeth nodded, though she could not find her voice. Emotion constricted her throat, and she did not trust herself to speak without betraying the tears she fought to hold back.

A soft knock interrupted the moment, and she looked up, expecting to see Margaret with the tea. Instead, it was the butler, holding a sealed missive.

“This just arrived for you, my lord,” he said, handing the letter to her uncle. “From the Duke of Sterlin.”

“Sterlin?” Sebastian echoed in surprise, quickly breaking the seal.

“The Duke of Sterlin? Is he not Percy Hunton’s elder brother?” Petunia asked, her voice equally filled with curiosity.

Elizabeth felt an odd surge of anticipation as her uncle’s eyes scanned the letter, his brow furrowing with impatience.

“I believe our situation has already been addressed,” Sebastian said with a sigh of relief.

“What does it say?” Petunia asked eagerly.

“The Duke requests an audience tomorrow morning. He will arrive with his brother. He will not allow your reputation to be sullied by his brother’s foolish actions,” Sebastian announced.

“Perhaps he has already convinced Percy to marry you, Lizzy,” Anna said, her eyes lighting up with hope as she turned toward Elizabeth.

“I cannot imagine any other reason for their visit,” Petunia added, her tone filled with

growing optimism.

Elizabeth, however, remained wary. “Nothing is certain,” she said quietly, still doubtful. Despite the promising words, her mind raced. Would this truly resolve everything? Could her family’s name be restored?

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CHAPTER 3

As Elizabeth prepared for bed, a soft knock came at the door. Margaret entered, carrying a small tray with a single cup of tea.

“I delayed your tea,” Margaret explained, her smile small. “You seemed rather occupied earlier.”

Elizabeth’s heart softened as her sister added, “Aunt Petunia told me what happened.”

“I’m sorry, Peggy,” Elizabeth whispered. The apology weighed heavy on her, knowing how deeply this affected her sister, too.

“If you apologize one more time, I shall... I shall...” Margaret trailed off, searching for a threat.

To Elizabeth’s surprise, a small chuckle escaped her lips, the first glimmer of levity in what felt like an eternity.

“I will ensure there is no cheese at breakfast tomorrow,” Margaret finished with a triumphant grin.

“No, you will not!” Elizabeth exclaimed, feigning horror.

Cheese had always been Elizabeth’s favorite, and she knew well how much Margaret disliked it.

“I shall simply tell cook we are done with cheese, and she will believe me,” Margaret shrugged mischievously.

“You deserve to be exiled for even thinking such a thing!” Elizabeth retorted playfully.

“I do not understand your love for what is, in essence, rotten milk,” Margaret teased.

“It is not rotten milk , Peggy. You simply lack the refinement to appreciate the culinary art that is cheese,” Elizabeth quipped as she reached for the tea.

“Chamomile,” Margaret noted with a nod. “It should help you sleep.”

Elizabeth took a sip, warmth spreading through her. “Thank you,” she said softly.

“I hope it all works out tomorrow,” Margaret added, her voice filled with quiet hope.

“It must,” Elizabeth replied, her thoughts heavy with the prospect of what tomorrow might bring. There could be no other outcome.

“I cannot wait for the wedding,” her sister bounced in excitement now.

“You are running too fast, dear,” Elizabeth said.

She couldn’t find it in her to share in her sister’s anticipation of her marriage. If anything, she was just as apprehensive as she was earlier.

This was not what she’d envisioned for her future.

She may have purposefully decided not to marry before her cousin, Anna, who was already considered a spinster at the age of three and twenty, but she still wanted to

marry for the right reasons, and in the right way. Not as a result of a scandal.

Peggy's excitement soon waned when she noticed Elizabeth's pensive demeanor.

"All will be well, Lizzy. You have to trust that it will be," she reassured.

"I caused great trouble, didn't I, Peggy?" Elizabeth sighed.

"You need to stop blaming yourself," she admonished. "We're here for you, Lizzy. And we understand. This happened through no fault of yours," Margaret added.

And Elizabeth wanted to find that reassurance they so generously gave her, but she couldn't.

Nothing seemed to remedy the reality of things for her right now. And neither was there any hope of society's unfair judgement changing.

"I am here for you, Lizzy. Don't ever forget that," Peggy's voice broke into her thoughts. Her younger sister gave her knee a small reassuring squeeze as she added,

"Now, have your tea before it turns cold."

"Percy!" Alexander's voice boomed through the foyer of his brother's lodgings the moment he entered. His steps were quick, filled with an urgency that only deepened as he made his way toward the dining room.

"I'm oddly famished this morning. Let us have breakfast and then leave," he added, his tone brisk, expecting his brother to be lounging somewhere, as usual.

"Your Grace," the butler's voice interrupted, hesitant but clear.

Alexander turned, his brow furrowing in irritation. The butler stood holding a small missive, his expression apologetic.

“His lordship asked that this be given to you upon your arrival,” the man said, extending the note.

Alexander’s heart sank. “Where is my brother?” he demanded, a cold sense of dread settling in his stomach. Percy was supposed to be here, ready to face the consequences of his actions, not leaving notes behind.

“I believe his lordship has departed on his intended journey, Your Grace,” the butler replied, his tone regretful.

“What?” Alexander tore open the letter with a sharp motion, eyes scanning the familiar handwriting, his face paling with each word.

I apologize once again for the troubles, brother. But do understand that I cannot marry. Not for anything. I hope in time that you forgive my foolishness, and that one day, all of this will be forgotten. And I implore that you make no efforts to look for me.

Alexander crumpled the letter in his fist, his breath coming in sharp bursts of fury. The silence in the foyer was shattered by his resounding curse.

“You bloody well ruined a lady, Percy. How can that be forgotten?” he shouted into the empty room, his anger echoing off the walls.

“When did he leave?” He turned to the butler, though he knew it was likely too late for any answers to matter. Still, if there was the faintest chance of catching Percy and dragging him back—by force if necessary—he had to try.

“Just before dawn, Your Grace,” the butler replied.

Another curse escaped Alexander’s lips. Percy would be far from England by now, sailing into the horizon, leaving Alexander to clean up the wreckage he’d left behind.

With a clenched jaw, Alexander whirled around and strode toward the waiting carriage. “We ride to the Dowshire residence,” he instructed the coachman, his voice cold with determination.

Upon arriving, Alexander was ushered into the drawing room. His eyes immediately swept over the company—a composed Earl, three ladies seated with varying degrees of apprehension on their faces. His mind raced. One of these women had to be Lady Elizabeth, the woman Percy had so carelessly compromised.

He bowed, though the storm inside him barely allowed for courtesy. “My lord,” he greeted the Earl, forcing his voice into something resembling politeness.

As his gaze swept the room, he took in the women. One older, clearly not the lady in question, and the two younger ones—both lovely, though it was the intensity in the blue eyes of one that immediately captured his attention. Her curtsy was graceful, elegant, and when she rose, Alexander realized he was looking into the face of Lady Elizabeth Sutton.

She was lovely, far more so than he had anticipated. Her pale complexion complemented by striking blue eyes and brown locks pinned neatly, rather than in the fripperies other women seemed to favor. She held herself with dignity, despite the tension in the air.

“And my daughter, Lady Anna Sutton,” the Earl continued, introducing the other young woman who gave a far less graceful curtsy, looking almost disinterested in the formalities.

Alexander barely registered her as he turned his attention back to Lady Elizabeth, whose gaze was now fixed on him, a flicker of hope in her eyes. Hope that he was about to crush.

“I expect the young lord will be joining us shortly?” Petunia Sutton, the matron, inquired, her gaze shifting toward the door.

Alexander’s chest tightened. He needed to tread carefully, though the truth would inevitably cause them pain.

“My brother shan’t be joining us,” Alexander said, the weight of his words hanging heavily in the room.

The atmosphere shifted as the ladies exchanged glances, and he could see the confusion begin to spread across their faces.

“Percy refuses to marry,” he said, the words sharp, cutting. “In fact, he is already aboard a ship, sailing far away from England as we speak.”

A collective gasp of shock filled the room. Lady Elizabeth’s face drained of color, the hope that had briefly flickered in her eyes extinguished in an instant.

“So you mean to say that your brother has jilted me,” Lady Elizabeth said, stepping forward with surprising composure, though the ice in her gaze was unmistakable.

Alexander forced himself to meet her eyes, though her stare was cold enough to burn. “Put that way, I suppose...” he began, but her voice cut through his words.

“Your letter indicated otherwise, Your Grace,” she reminded him, her tone sharp with accusation.

Before he could respond, Petunia spoke, sounding as though she was in disbelief. “Gone? How can this be?”

Alexander’s frustration simmered just beneath the surface. “I’m afraid I let my brother slip through my grasp.”

“Is your brother an eel, Your Grace?” Lady Elizabeth asked, her biting sarcasm catching him off guard. A snort came from Lady Anna’s direction.

The Earl cleared his throat, his posture stiff as he spoke. “Is there no chance of your brother taking responsibility for what he has done to my niece, Sterlin?”

The Earl’s calm, controlled fury was palpable, and Alexander could hardly blame him. He felt the same burning rage toward Percy, but there was nothing to be done. Percy had made his choice.

“I’m afraid not,” Alexander replied.

“Then why did you send that missive last night?” Lady Elizabeth asked, her voice cutting through the tense air. “I beg your pardon, but to give us hope only to dash it like this is most unfair. We do not deserve such deceit atop everything else we are enduring.”

Alexander met her gaze, his jaw tightening. “I did not deceive anyone, Lady Elizabeth. That was not my intention.”

“It still does not explain why you sent the missive reassuring us, only to show up now with news of your brother’s flight,” she pressed.

Her words, though carrying genuine hurt, began to grate on him. She was not giving him a moment to explain, nor did she seem to want to hear the truth. He understood

her anger, but the insinuation that he had deceived her was more than he could bear.

“I know my brother,” Alexander began, his voice firm, “but I cannot claim to know his every intention or plan.”

“Just as I am certain you cannot claim to know your cousin’s mind,” he added, his gaze briefly flickering to Lady Anna before returning to the fury in Elizabeth’s eyes.

“My cousin has the purest of intentions,” she retorted, her chin lifting in defiance.

“I have no doubts of that,” Alexander agreed, though his patience was thinning. “But sadly, I cannot say the same for my brother. Percy made me believe last night that he had resolved to do the honorable thing. And this morning, when I went to fetch him from his lodgings, I was greeted by a missive—his regrets.”

“Regrets?” Elizabeth echoed, disbelief dripping from her words. “So that is it? He compromises my future, my family’s standing, and simply leaves, as though it means nothing?”

Her anger was palpable, the weight of it pressing down on him, making him feel as though it was his fault, as if he had personally wronged her.

“Clearly, your brother has no honor, Your Grace,” she said, holding his gaze with such fierce intensity that Alexander felt as though she were accusing him of lacking integrity. The bitterness in her tone dug at him. He could feel the blame settling on his shoulders, and the truth of it stung. Perhaps, if he had kept a closer eye on Percy, if he had intervened sooner, this mess could have been avoided.

But Percy had been through so much—too much. He had deserved some freedom, some respite from the burdens of life. Alexander had allowed him that, and now, here was the consequence.

“My brother is a man of honor,” Alexander said, though his voice lacked its usual strength. “He wouldn’t have acted without reason.”

“A good reason for ruining people’s lives?” Elizabeth scoffed, her words heavy with disdain. “I cannot believe this.”

Alexander felt his irritation rising once again. Wasn’t she equally responsible for this situation? Surely whatever had transpired in that powder room had not been one-sided. And yet, she stood here, taking responsibility where Percy had fled. That thought alone cooled his rising temper. At least she was here, standing before him, facing the consequences of the scandal—where his brother had run away like a coward.

“Elizabeth, dear, calm down,” the Earl of Dowshire interjected, his voice gentle but firm. “Let us sort through this without raising our voices.”

Alexander nodded gratefully in the Earl’s direction, the tension in the room easing slightly, though Elizabeth’s fiery gaze remained fixed on him.

“Why are you here, Your Grace?” she demanded, her voice still sharp, despite her uncle’s attempt to diffuse the situation. “Since your brother has run away, what use is your visit to us?”

Her words struck him, and he swallowed, steeling himself for what he was about to say. It was the only path left, and though it was far from what he had ever envisioned, it was necessary.

“I have come to take responsibility for my brother’s actions,” Alexander declared, his voice steady, though a gasp echoed through the room.

Lady Petunia and Lady Anna exchanged shocked glances, while Elizabeth stared at

him, her eyes wide with disbelief.

“I beg your pardon?” Lady Elizabeth whispered, her voice barely audible, as though she could not comprehend what she had just heard.

“Did we hear you correctly, Sterlin?” Dowshire asked, his brow furrowing as he leaned forward, scrutinizing the Duke.

“I shall marry your niece in my brother’s stead, Lord Dowshire,” Alexander said, his authority clear.

CHAPTER 4

“In light of the fact that there is no other option, I give my consent,” Sebastian said, and Elizabeth could hardly believe her ears.

She stood, frozen, as her uncle’s words echoed in her mind. It was one thing to learn that the man responsible for her ruin had fled, abandoning his duty. But now, she was being handed over to that man’s brother instead.

“Wait. You cannot simply say that, Uncle,” Elizabeth protested, her voice rising in desperation. “I cannot marry the Duke. He didn’t... I—”

“May I have a word in private with your niece, Lord Dowshire?” Sterlin’s voice interrupted her, firm and unwavering.

Sebastian hesitated, clearly torn. Elizabeth’s heart raced. How could her uncle even consider this arrangement? How could she marry a man who wasn’t responsible for what had happened?

“Lord Dowshire?” the Duke prompted again.

With reluctance, Sebastian nodded, gesturing for Petunia and Anna to follow him out of the room. Elizabeth felt a surge of panic as they left, leaving her alone with the Duke. The door remained open, but it was small comfort. The reality of the situation loomed large.

The moment the others were gone, Elizabeth rounded on him. “Is this some kind of

joke to you, Your Grace?" she demanded.

The Duke remained composed, his expression unreadable. "I just offered to save your reputation and that of your family by taking responsibility for my brother's actions. How is that a joke, Lady Elizabeth?"

"Do not make it sound as though you are doing us a favor," she snapped, though inwardly, she could not deny the truth of his words. He was doing her family a favor, an enormous one, in fact. But the thought only stoked her frustration further. How could she be grateful when this was never the life she wanted? She hadn't asked for this.

"As you wish," he replied, unruffled. "But our marriage would be one of convenience, of course. I will not be accepting your dowry, and your uncle shall receive a monthly stipend from my estate."

Elizabeth recoiled at his words. "We do not need your charity," she replied hotly, her pride bristling at the implication. Was it so obvious to him, the state of their finances? Her uncle had been discreet in his efforts to secure investments, but apparently, word had spread.

Sterlin's eyes met hers, calm and unwavering. "This is not charity, Lady Elizabeth," he said, his tone dry. "The funds are to cover whatever damages this scandal will bring upon your uncle's business. I suspect it will be some time before society is willing to engage in business with him again."

Elizabeth's breath caught in her throat as the Duke's words hit their mark. The room felt suffocating, her chest tight with the realization that she had no choice but to accept this proposal. As much as her pride flared, as much as she wished to rail against the injustice of it all, she knew the truth.

Accepting it, however, was far more difficult than she could have imagined.

“I understand and accept the monthly stipend,” she said, standing as tall as her trembling frame would allow. “But you must take the dowry. It is only proper.”

“I do not want it,” he replied with a casual shrug, and the ease with which he dismissed her only fueled the irritation she had been struggling to suppress.

Before she could voice her frustration, however, the Duke continued, his tone brisk and authoritative. “I shall secure a special license as soon as possible. The wedding shall be a small affair. Now, do you have any further demands?”

Elizabeth’s hands clenched at her sides. The way he spoke—so decisive, so dismissive—ignited a fire within her. Did he think she had no voice in this? That she was to be led like a lamb to the altar without so much as a say in her own fate?

“You cannot just waltz in here and make all the decisions,” she snapped, stepping closer to him, her heart pounding with indignation.

Sterlin, however, did not flinch. Instead, he took a deliberate step toward her, closing the distance between them in a single, fluid motion. The suddenness of it startled her, and instinctively, she took a step back. Annoyed with herself for betraying even the slightest hint of anxiety, Elizabeth attempted to hold her ground.

But the Duke advanced once more, until she found herself pressed between his imposing figure and the end table against the wall. His gaze never wavered, locking her in place, his presence overwhelming and commanding.

Elizabeth swallowed, the nearness of him unsettling in ways she hadn’t anticipated. His proximity was unnerving, his eyes dark and unreadable as they bore into hers.

“Oh, but I did ask you, Elizabeth, if you had any further demands,” he said, his voice low, almost dangerous in its intensity.

Her breath caught, but she quickly found her voice again, weak as it was. “I do not recall giving you leave to address me so informally,” she whispered, barely able to meet his gaze.

“I do not need it,” he replied, his tone smooth, almost predatory. “Not when I intend to make you my bride.”

Elizabeth opened her mouth to protest, to retort, but no words came. Her mind betrayed her, scattering her thoughts like leaves in the wind. She found herself uncharacteristically speechless, her usual composure crumbling under the weight of his presence. And, despite herself, she couldn’t help but notice just how striking he was—his features sharp and undeniably handsome, his gaze magnetic and commanding.

“Now, Elizabeth,” he repeated, his voice a quiet rumble as he leaned in closer, the air between them charged with a tension she could not ignore. “What is it that you want?”

His face hovered mere inches from hers, his breath warm against her skin. There was something inscrutable in his gaze, something that drew her in even as her mind screamed to pull away. It was in that moment, as she struggled to maintain her composure, that a wild, irrational thought crossed her mind: perhaps society had mistaken the brothers. Perhaps it was Alexander, not Percy, who was the true rake.

“I want a say,” Elizabeth finally managed, pulling her thoughts together with effort. “I want a choice in this whole affair. To be asked,” she added, her voice firm with indignation. She refused to tolerate any more of his domineering commands.

“Very well,” the Duke replied without hesitation. “Will you marry me, Lady Elizabeth Sutton?”

Elizabeth blinked, her breath catching. She searched his face, expecting to find some trace of mockery or sarcasm. But as ever, he remained unreadable, his gaze steady, his tone devoid of jest. And she, flustered and overwhelmed, felt her pulse quicken.

“Yes,” the word escaped her lips before she could even fully comprehend it, her voice breathless and barely her own.

“Good,” he said simply, stepping back from her, retreating from the space that had felt so suffocating just moments ago.

As soon as he departed, the air seemed to shift in the room. Elizabeth stood there, staring after him, still processing what had just transpired.

“Well, that certainly took an unexpected turn,” Anna’s voice broke through her thoughts.

Elizabeth returned to the drawing room, her mind still reeling, while her uncle went to see the Duke out, likely to finalize the arrangements. The thought of it all being truly settled sent a fresh wave of anxiety through her. Finality with the Duke... She could hardly imagine it.

“But it is for the best,” Aunt Petunia chimed in, her tone reassuring. “And I am relieved to know that your future is secure, dear child.”

“And thank goodness he is handsome,” Anna added with a wry smile.

“Handsome?” Elizabeth let out an indignant snort. “I’ll tell you what he is. Exasperating. That is what he is.” The frustration from their encounter still simmered

inside her, especially when she recalled how he had cornered her by the end table.

“Well, you had best grow accustomed to his exasperating company, as it will be quite permanent now,” Anna replied, her voice full of teasing amusement.

“You make it sound so ominous, Anna,” Elizabeth muttered, though she couldn’t deny the sinking feeling of uncertainty that had taken root within her.

“Reality is ominous, darling,” Anna said with a shrug, ever the realist, never one to soften the harsh truths.

“Oh, I am all too familiar with how unfair reality can be,” Elizabeth sighed, feeling the weight of it pressing down on her.

“Clearly not enough, if you think your future husband merely exasperating,” Anna teased, her words light but holding with the same dry humor that Elizabeth had always found both comforting and irritating in equal measure.

“Oh, you silly girl,” Aunt Petunia interjected, shaking her head at Anna’s jesting.

“Do not let her trouble you, Lizzy. Once you’re married, she’ll have no one left to torment,” her aunt added, her voice warm with affection.

“Why, but I shall still have you, Auntie,” Anna quipped with a grin. “And Peggy too, of course, until she marries and moves away as well.”

“You are going to marry too, Anna,” Petunia said firmly, though her tone was light, as if the notion were as certain as the sun rising.

“”I am three and twenty, Auntie. Wake up from your delusional dreams. Society already deems me on the shelf,” Anna laughed, her voice filled with that spirited

confidence she always carried. “Besides, if I am to marry one of those dandies who parade about as gentlemen, I’d rather remain gloriously unmarried. A more sprightly spinster you’d never meet!” She added with a proud lift of her chin.

Elizabeth managed a smile, though it felt faint. How she wished she could be as indifferent to her fate as Anna seemed. Her cousin had always been brazen, forward, unconcerned with the opinions of others. It was part of what made her so unpopular among the gentlemen—her refusal to be meek or submissive, her unwillingness to conform.

Elizabeth, on the other hand, had harbored a secret hope that Anna might eventually change her mind, that she would one day marry and that they would still find their happiness. Elizabeth had even made a quiet vow not to marry before Anna did. Yet now, she stood on the precipice of marriage, not for love or companionship, but out of necessity—forced away from the path of spinsterhood she had once imagined walking alongside her cousin.

“I will wager my favorite parasol that you will one day change your mind and enter the parson’s mousetrap, Anna,” Aunt Petunia teased.

“Only a parasol? How cheap of you, Auntie,” Anna shot back, her eyes twinkling. The room burst into laughter, the lightness momentarily lifting the heavy cloud that hung over Elizabeth’s heart.

But then, the door opened, and Sebastian returned. His face was solemn, and the laughter quickly faded.

“May I have a word, Elizabeth, dear?” he asked, his tone gentle but serious.

A wave of dread washed over her, the temporary reprieve of humor evaporating. What could it be now? Had the Duke changed his mind? Was she to be jilted yet

again?

Nodding, Elizabeth rose and followed her uncle from the room, her heart pounding in her chest. She was surprised when, instead of leading her to his study, he guided her through the French doors and onto the terrace, where the cool air greeted them.

“I thought we might both benefit from some fresh air,” Sebastian said, offering her a small smile that did little to ease her nerves.

Elizabeth nodded, though her thoughts swirled with uncertainty.

“I wanted to speak to you, Elizabeth, to offer my sincerest apologies,” her uncle began, his voice low and filled with regret. “I fear I have failed you—as your guardian, your uncle, and most importantly, as your father.”

Elizabeth’s breath caught. “Oh, whyever would you say such a thing, Uncle?” she replied, shocked by the depth of his self-reproach.

“You are anything but a failure. You have been more than Peggy and I could ever ask for,” she continued, her voice soft but earnest. She could not bear the thought of him blaming himself for the turn her life had taken.

“But look at you now, Elizabeth. You are about to marry a man you barely know. This was never what I wanted for you, or for Margaret.” His voice trembled slightly as he spoke. To him, they were not just his nieces—they were his daughters, and the thought of seeing them sacrificed to circumstance tore at him.

“It is not your fault,” Elizabeth said, her voice quiet yet firm. “If anyone is to blame, it is I for being so reckless.”

“You couldn’t have predicted that a drunken gentleman would stumble into that

room, nor that someone would misunderstand what they saw,” Sebastian said, his tone filled with the quiet resolve of someone trying to ease the burden of guilt from her shoulders.

“I suppose,” Elizabeth murmured, giving a little shrug. “But at least now, with the Duke’s offer, our family can walk in society with dignity intact. He has done the honorable thing, even if his brother would not.”

Sebastian sighed, his expression still troubled. “The road ahead will not be without its obstacles, Elizabeth. But no matter what life brings, I want you to know you will always have my support. Always.”

His hand found hers and gave it a gentle, reassuring squeeze. His love and care were clear in his every word, and it brought a rush of warmth to her heart.

“And you will always have mine, Uncle,” Elizabeth whispered, leaning her head gently against his shoulder. “Father would have been proud. And very much grateful,” Elizabeth said softly. “Thank you.”

“There is no need for gratitude between family,” Sebastian dismissed with a wave of his hand, though his expression remained kind. “Despite the unfortunate circumstances that brought us here, I am honored to have you and Margaret in my life.”

Elizabeth’s heart swelled with affection.

“In the end, I feel comforted by the fact that you are marrying the Duke instead,” her uncle said, his tone thoughtful. “It may not seem so at first glance, but he is a man of great honor. He will do right by you, Lizzy.”

He reached out and patted her hair fondly, as he so often did when he sought to

comfort her, but the weight of his words pressed heavily upon her heart.

I pray you are right, Uncle, Elizabeth thought silently, her unease clinging to her despite her uncle's reassurances.

CHAPTER 5

Alexander would be damned before he let his father's legacy fall apart. He had made a promise—a promise to protect their family, to safeguard their name. And though he had failed before, perhaps cleaning up after Percy would grant him some redemption. Perhaps this was his chance to fulfill that vow after years of bitter self-recrimination.

Marriage. The very notion was a violation of the promise he had made to himself—never to marry, never to tie himself to someone in such a permanent way. But if this was the price he had to pay to protect the family honor and repair the damage his brother had wrought, so be it.

Lady Elizabeth was unlike any woman he had encountered before. Her temper, her sharp wit, her refusal to be cowed—qualities that in another might have been off-putting, but in her, they only seemed to fan the flame of her magnetism. She possessed a spark that made her impossible to ignore. She was a fire—dangerous, yet captivating. He couldn't deny that he rather liked her spirit.

"The Marquess of Broughton is waiting for you, Your Grace," the butler's voice interrupted his thoughts as Alexander entered his home after the tumultuous meeting at the Dowshire residence.

Alex nodded and made his way to the study, where Colin was already helping himself to a glass of brandy.

"I thought I might go grey waiting for you," Colin said with a smirk, pouring another glass and handing it to Alexander. "I've heard about what happened with Percy."

Alexander took the drink with a grim nod. He needed it more than he realized. The weight of the day pressed heavily on him, and the liquor offered a momentary reprieve.

“I should have known he had a motive when he insisted on returning to his lodgings last night,” Alexander said bitterly, yanking at his cravat, the frustration boiling to the surface once more. “He’s always been sly.”

“He has,” Colin agreed. “But how did the family take the news, now that it seems there’s no way to salvage this?”

Alexander downed his brandy, the burn in his throat a welcome distraction. “They were shocked, naturally. But I had to clean up after Percy, as always. So, I suppose they’re in a calmer state now.”

“What do you mean, you ‘cleaned up’ after him?” Colin’s brow furrowed as he reached for his own drink.

“What else could I do?” Alexander said, his voice tight with frustration. “I offered to marry the lady, of course.”

Colin nearly dropped his glass. “You did what?”

“Do you see my brother here, ready to take responsibility?” Alexander shot back, his tone clipped. “It is either that or allow the family name to be dragged through the mud for eternity. I couldn’t let that happen. Not again. Not after everything.”

Colin shook his head, disbelief etched on his face. “Alex, you don’t have to bear all of this alone. You are not a failure. I’ve told you that a thousand times. You couldn’t have saved everyone.”

Alexander's chest tightened, the familiar bitterness clawing at him once more. "Percy's lost something he'll never get back," he muttered. "But the others... the others lost everything."

"And you?" Colin's voice softened. "What about you? Don't you think you've lost enough? Don't you think you deserve to let go of this burden, this guilt?"

Alexander snorted, the sound bitter in his throat. "My existence is to take care of my family. Percy is all I have left. I failed the rest of them. I cannot fail him too."

Colin's gaze was steady, concerned. "Percy is a grown man. More than capable of taking responsibility for himself. It's time to let him live his own life, Alex."

Alexander knew what Colin was getting at. His friend had always tried to lighten his load, to make him see that the weight he carried was too much for one man to bear. But Colin didn't understand. He didn't know the promise Alexander had made. He didn't know what failure truly tasted like.

"And what are you suggesting?" Alexander asked, his voice cold. "That I rescind my offer to Lady Elizabeth? Leave her to deal with the consequences of my brother's actions?"

"That's not what I'm saying, and you know it," Colin replied, his voice steady, his concern evident. "I just don't want to see you destroy yourself over something that was never your fault."

Alexander turned away, staring out the window, his jaw clenched. Colin's words tugged at him, but he couldn't allow himself to listen. He'd made a vow, and he would keep it—no matter the cost.

"I'll need to obtain a special license for the marriage," Alexander said, changing the

subject with finality.

Colin sighed, giving him a knowing look. “Well, at least I’ll still get to hear those wedding bells,” he said with a faint smile, though the concern in his eyes lingered.

“You know... For a sworn bachelor, you certainly seem to be getting excited over a wedding,” Alexander remarked lightly, glancing at Colin with a smirk.

Colin chuckled, leaning back in his chair. “Excited? Perhaps I just enjoy watching others fall into the parson’s trap, so I don’t have to.”

Alex raised a brow. “Don’t you think it’s high time you entered the trap yourself?”

“Oh no,” Colin waved off the suggestion with a laugh. “I still have my freedom, thank you very much.”

“And I don’t?” Alex countered, his brow arching in amusement.

“Well,” Colin began with a grin, “you are getting married.”

They shared a good-natured laugh, but as the afternoon slipped by, Alexander found Colin’s company an unexpected relief. For a few fleeting hours, he forgot the weight that hung over him, the responsibilities that had accumulated like stones on his back. It was only later, as the evening grew quiet and Colin took his leave, that the reality came crashing back down on him. His impending marriage, the promise he had made to his father, the looming responsibility—it all felt suffocating, pressing in on him as he retired for the night.

He was on his way to his chambers when the butler interrupted him with a rather unexpected announcement.

“Your Grace,” the butler said, his tone careful. “There is a late-night caller for you.”

Alexander’s brow furrowed in confusion as he entered the drawing room, only to tense at the sight of his guest. Georgianna Proctor.

“What are you doing invading people’s homes at this hour, Georgianna?” he asked, though he was hardly surprised. If there was one thing he had learned about the widowed Countess over the years, it was her persistence. Especially when she wanted something.

“Such a warm welcome, Alexander,” she replied smoothly, her back to him as she seemingly admired the ornate clock on the mantel.

Alexander sighed inwardly, willing himself to muster some patience. She was a guest, after all, despite the hour. “If you are lost, I can summon a coachman to point you in the right direction,” he said, ignoring her attempt at pleasantries.

“Oh, there’s no need to trouble anyone,” she said, finally turning to face him. “I know precisely where I’m going.”

“Going?” He raised a brow. “Am I to presume you’re still on this supposed journey of yours, then?”

“But of course,” she said with a thin smile. “How quickly I reach my destination depends entirely on you, Your Grace—and the answers you give me.”

“I thought I had already given you my answers, Georgianna,” Alexander replied, his voice steady but firm.

“And I told you I wasn’t satisfied with them,” she countered, stepping closer. “But tonight, I’m not here for those particular answers.”

Alexander narrowed his eyes slightly, waiting for her to explain herself. His patience was wearing thin.

“I’ve heard certain news,” Georgianna began, her voice carrying a new edge of seriousness. “Disturbing news, in fact. And I’ve come to confirm its veracity.”

“Pray tell,” Alexander said, crossing his arms. “What is it you’ve heard?”

She didn’t hesitate. “That you made an offer for Lady Elizabeth Sutton after that dreadful scandal,” she said, her words slow, as though testing his reaction. Her expression, however, betrayed the faintest hint of apprehension. “Is it true your brother has fled England, and you intend to marry the girl in his place?”

Alexander felt a surge of irritation, though he kept his composure. He was surprised at how swiftly the news had spread. He had made the offer only that morning.

“News doesn’t remain private for long in society, does it?” he muttered.

“What kind of Countess would I be if I didn’t have eyes and ears everywhere?” she retorted with a small snort, attempting to mask her unease.

“Spies, you mean,” Alex corrected, his tone dry.

“If that’s your preferred term,” she shrugged, unbothered by his remark.

Georgianna’s gaze sharpened as she pressed forward. “So, is it true, Sterlin?”

He let the silence linger for a moment, deliberately goading her. “What happened to calling me Alexander?” he asked with a smirk.

“Are you marrying the girl, Sterlin?” she demanded, refusing to be drawn into his

teasing now, her voice hardening with impatience.

“Haven’t your ‘eyes and ears’ already answered that for you?” he asked, meeting her gaze coolly.

“I prefer my answers directly from the source,” she said, her chin jutting forward defiantly.

“Then that rather defeats the purpose of having those ‘eyes and ears’ in the first place, don’t you think?” Alexander said, his voice dry with a hint of amusement.

Georgianna sputtered, momentarily thrown off balance. But, in true form, she quickly regained her composure, smoothing her expression with the grace she always managed to summon.

“Are you purposefully refusing to answer my question?” she asked, her tone cutting, but he could sense the underlying tension.

“Why ever would I do that?” Alexander countered, his voice deceptively calm. “Yes, Percy is gone. And I’ve decided to do the honorable thing in his stead.”

“Why?” Her voice cracked just slightly, and for the first time that evening, she sounded genuinely hurt.

“Have you any family, Georgianna?” he returned, the question heavy with meaning.

She shrugged, her response indifferent. “If you count my dead husband, then I suppose.”

Alexander’s lip quirked in an almost rueful smile. Of course, she wouldn’t understand. She was playing a game—one she had mastered. But the gravity of his

decisions was beyond her, and he had no desire to explain himself further. He owed her nothing beyond the barest civilities shared between peers.

“What happened to us, Sterlin? Why are you doing this?” Georgianna pressed again, her voice edged with something that almost resembled vulnerability.

Alexander’s patience, already wearing thin, snapped. “Listen here, Lady Winston,” he began, his tone firm, leaving no room for ambiguity. She grimaced at the sudden formality, but he didn’t care. It was time to end this once and for all.

“There was never an ‘us’ to begin with,” he said, his words deliberate. “I do not know at what point you chose to interpret my basic civility as something more, but I assure you, there was no special sentiment attached to it. I will say this clearly: there has never been an ‘us.’”

For a brief moment, Georgianna looked genuinely taken aback, as if she hadn’t expected him to be so blunt. But it didn’t last long.

“You think you can fool me with this marriage of yours?” she scoffed, her voice regaining its usual edge. “The rest of society, perhaps, but not me. I know you, Alexander. Far more than you give me credit for.”

The air between them thickened, and Alexander’s irritation flared again. This woman, with her persistence, her inability to accept the truth, had pushed him far beyond his limits.

“You should leave now,” he said, his tone sharp with finality.

But Georgianna was not easily deterred. She stepped closer, her green eyes gleaming with challenge. “Your marriage will not keep me away,” she vowed, her voice a dangerous whisper. “You may think you’re securing your future, your family’s honor,

but you will not shake me so easily.” Her lips curled into that familiar, insufferable smile. “Give my felicitations to your future bride, Alexander,” she added, dipping into an exaggeratedly graceful curtsy.

She lingered in the act, her gaze tilting up to meet his, her hand hovering just above her bosom in a way that had captivated men—but had no hold on him.

Alexander clenched his jaw, his eyes narrowing as he fought back his anger. He knew her games, and he knew her tactics.

CHAPTER 6

“Where is Uncle?” Elizabeth asked as she entered the breakfast room the following morning. The sun streamed through the tall windows, casting a warm glow over the scene. Her aunt Petunia and Peggy were already seated, enjoying their morning meal, while Anna was helping herself from the sideboard.

Elizabeth joined her cousin at the sideboard, selecting a plate and casting her eyes over the spread.

“He was summoned to the House of Lords by Lord Chamberlain,” Petunia replied, buttering a piece of toast with measured precision.

As Elizabeth moved toward the table, she couldn’t help but smile widely at the sight that greeted her. Right in the center was a decadent cheese platter, arranged with care and gleaming invitingly in the morning light.

“I see you haven’t been to the kitchens yet, Peggy,” Anna teased, recalling her sister’s mock threat to banish cheese from the menu the previous night.

“Consider it a wedding present,” Peggy said, her eyes twinkling with amusement.

“Do you never tire of cheese?” Petunia chuckled, shaking her head in mild disbelief.

“She never did,” Anna laughed as she sat down, her plate piled high. “Lizzy constantly smelled like cheese growing up. She was always eating it.”

Elizabeth smiled fondly at the memories. Anna, two years her senior, had always taken a playful jibe at her childhood obsession, while Peggy, four years her junior, had teased her mercilessly as well.

“You must have been a stinky child, Lizzy,” Peggy teased, casting a glance at the cheese platter with mock disgust.

“Cheese smells glorious, ” Elizabeth said, taking a generous portion of the mild cheddar and inhaling deeply before heaving a satisfied sigh.

“Perhaps Father should have offered a cheese factory as your dowry,” Anna quipped, earning laughter from both Peggy and Petunia.

“Indeed,” Peggy guffawed, just as the quiet morning was interrupted by a commotion from the hallway.

“Oh, my babies are back!” Anna exclaimed with delight, already knowing the cause of the noise.

“No wonder the house has been so peaceful,” Elizabeth said with a wry smile as the culprits bounded into the breakfast room.

Anna’s two beloved dogs—a tiny, grey pug and a large black Newfoundland—barged in with their usual exuberance. The contrast between the two animals never failed to amuse Elizabeth. She had long ago taken to calling them “the Pea” and “the Cannonball.”

“They were walked quite early today,” Petunia observed calmly between bites of her toast, though she kept a wary eye on the pug, knowing all too well his antics during meals.

“No, no! Titan, not my sausages!” Peggy cried as the pug, ever the mischievous one, leaped onto the table and made a bold move toward her plate.

Titan had a notorious reputation for his audacity at mealtimes, often seizing whatever food took his fancy. His behavior was met with indulgence from Anna, who merely laughed as Peggy wrestled with the little creature for her sausages.

“Titan!” Anna called at last, and the pug, as if understanding he had pushed his luck, promptly scampered to his mistress’s lap, where he was rewarded with even more sausages from her plate.

“You really should teach that dog some manners,” Petunia scolded mildly, though her tone held little weight against Anna’s adoration for the little grey creature.

“He only wants breakfast too,” Anna defended with a grin, scratching Titan’s ears. “Don’t you, darling?” she cooed, and the pug barked happily in response, wagging his curled tail.

While Titan wreaked his usual havoc, Plato, the Newfoundland, moved with far more dignity. He padded quietly over to Elizabeth’s side and sat by her feet, his gentle eyes waiting patiently for a treat.

“Now, there’s a good boy,” Elizabeth murmured, tossing him a piece of sausage from her plate. “Would you like some cheese as well?” she asked, scratching his thick fur. “If only certain dogs could be as refined as you, Plato,” she added pointedly, casting a sidelong glance at Anna.

“You’re going to hurt Titan’s feelings, Lizzy,” Anna chided playfully, covering the pug’s ears as though he might understand the slight.

Elizabeth laughed. “She speaks the truth, Anna. That little thing on your lap needs

some serious etiquette lessons from Plato,” Peggy chimed in, eager to support her sister in their ongoing rivalry with Titan.

“Perhaps I can teach him a lesson or two,” Aunt Petunia suggested, her tone light but firm.

Peggy let out a snort, trying to suppress her laughter.

“What is that supposed to mean, child?” Aunt Petunia’s eyes narrowed suspiciously as she turned her sharp gaze on Peggy.

“Nothing, Aunt Petunia,” Peggy replied with exaggerated innocence, shaking her head in an attempt to look serious.

“You’re lucky. I would have asked you to stay behind from today’s shopping trip,” Petunia said with a satisfied nod, clearly enjoying her small victory.

“Shopping?” The room echoed with three voices at once, though Peggy’s rang the loudest, nearly bursting with excitement.

“What shopping, Auntie?” Elizabeth asked, her curiosity piqued but tempered with caution.

“Why, for your trousseau, of course. What else?” Aunt Petunia replied, as though the matter was already settled.

Elizabeth’s heart sank slightly. “I hardly think that necessary, Auntie. It’s an unnecessary expense and will only strain our finances.” She could already feel the weight of the responsibility on her shoulders.

Petunia, however, would have none of it. “Your uncle has already given me some

funds. I split it in two and returned half to him. The rest I've supplemented with my own savings. It won't be too much of a strain on him," she said with a gentle but decisive tone.

"Oh, Auntie, I couldn't possibly—" Elizabeth began again, her words filled with protest.

"I will hear none of it," Petunia cut her off sharply, her voice firm but kind. "I have only three nieces in this world that I adore, and I am not about to marry any of them off without a proper trousseau."

The depth of her aunt's thoughtfulness brought a sudden swell of emotion to Elizabeth's throat, and she felt her eyes prickle with unshed tears. Despite her earlier reluctance, she was deeply touched by the gesture.

"Thank you, Auntie," she whispered, reaching out to squeeze her aunt's hand in gratitude.

"Now, eat up, all of you," Petunia urged. "We have a day of shopping ahead, and I'll not have you fainting from hunger before we even begin."

Peggy, ever the excitable one, gave a delighted squeal, her earlier irritation over Titan's antics entirely forgotten.

Despite the uneasy circumstances surrounding her impending nuptials, Elizabeth found the shopping excursion a welcome distraction. It wasn't often that they indulged in new clothes, and she couldn't deny the small flicker of joy that came with selecting fine fabrics and elegant designs.

Their aunt had even insisted that Anna and Peggy choose dresses for the wedding, a task they took up with great enthusiasm.

“Now, Lizzy, for your morning dresses—would you prefer pastel pinks, greens, or blues?” Aunt Petunia asked, her hands resting on an album of swatches the modiste had handed her.

Before Elizabeth could respond, a voice emerged from a nearby chamber. “The pinks would look lovelier on the younger ladies, don’t you think?”

Elizabeth turned to see a striking blonde woman with piercing green eyes enter the room, moving with a kind of graceful elegance that commanded attention. An attendant trailed behind her, clearly having just finished taking her measurements.

“Your order will be ready in two days, my lady,” the modiste said, bowing slightly as the woman approached with an air of quiet pride.

But then the woman smiled, and the cool formality that had surrounded her seemed to soften, revealing a pleasant, cordial demeanor. “The pink would complement your bright complexion perfectly,” she said, her voice warm as she regarded Elizabeth.

“Why, she could simply go for all colors,” the modiste suggested brightly, flipping through the fabric swatches with a flourish. “After all, Lady Elizabeth won’t be needing just one morning dress. Why limit yourself to monotony when variety is at your disposal?”

“My thoughts exactly,” Elizabeth agreed, feeling a surge of relief at the suggestion. She wasn’t fond of restricting herself to one particular shade, and the idea of variety appealed to her. Still, she turned to the Countess with a gracious nod. “Thank you for your suggestion nonetheless.”

“I must confess,” Lady Winston said with a sheepish smile, “I have a particular fondness for delicate pinks and lavender. I can be quite monotonous in my choices, I’m afraid.”

“There’s no monotony if it’s what you love, my lady,” Elizabeth replied kindly, though there was a flicker of something in the Countess’s eyes—something brief, almost inscrutable—that left Elizabeth feeling a touch unsettled.

But when the Countess smiled again, warm and seemingly genuine, Elizabeth chided herself for her unease. It’s just nerves, she thought. Bride’s nerves, as Aunt Petunia would call them. After all, her impending marriage had her on edge.

“Well,” Lady Winston continued, her tone light and complimentary, “a lovely lady such as yourself, Lady Elizabeth, could make even the dullest of colors look beautiful.”

Elizabeth smiled in return, though a part of her still felt a pang of discomfort. “You’re too kind.”

“Your husband will be a lucky man,” the Countess added, her gaze lingering on Elizabeth a moment too long, that enigmatic air settling over her once more.

Elizabeth’s heart gave a slight jump. She had not mentioned her upcoming marriage, and though the scandal was public knowledge, she wondered how Lady Winston had learned of her specific circumstances. Perhaps she had overheard the conversations earlier, or perhaps word had already spread—after all, news in Town traveled with frightening speed.

The Countess bid them farewell and left, her presence still lingering in Elizabeth’s thoughts even as the modiste continued assisting them with the rest of their shopping.

By the time they returned home, laden with packages and exhausted from the day’s exertions, the memory of Lady Winston’s odd demeanor had begun to fade. But Elizabeth still felt the echo of her unease as she prepared for the evening.

A little before dinner, she sought out her aunt, feeling the need for quiet company. She found Petunia in one of the salons, sipping on a glass of brandy, the fire crackling gently in the hearth.

“Would you care for a drink?” Petunia asked, a teasing glint in her eye.

“No, thank you, Auntie,” Elizabeth declined with a smile, taking a seat beside her.

“You’re no fun,” Petunia pouted in mock disappointment, her lips curling into a smile. “Anna would never say no to liquor.”

Elizabeth chuckled. “Well, Anna is... Anna.”

They shared a quiet laugh, and for a moment, Elizabeth simply enjoyed the warmth of the room, the quiet crackle of the fire, and the comforting presence of her aunt. But Petunia’s sharp eyes didn’t miss the slight tension in her niece’s expression.

“Are you all right, dear?” she asked, setting her glass down and giving Elizabeth her full attention.

“Oh, all is well, Auntie,” Elizabeth assured her, though there was a faint waver in her voice. She reached for her aunt’s hand. “I just wanted to thank you again for today. For everything.”

“Rubbish,” Petunia dismissed with a wave of her hand. “It’s only my duty.”

“But you’re helping us cut costs,” Elizabeth pressed gently. “And that means more than you know.”

Petunia’s smile softened, her gaze distant for a moment as she swirled her glass. “What your uncle has done for me over the years is more than I could ever repay him

for.”

Elizabeth looked at her aunt curiously, sensing a depth to her words she hadn’t fully appreciated before.

“I know what it is to grow up without parents, Lizzy,” Petunia continued, her voice quieter now, tinged with a sadness Elizabeth hadn’t often heard. “But thank goodness, you and Peggy have your uncle. A man with a kind and generous heart.”

Elizabeth nodded, her heart heavy with gratitude for her uncle. “Indeed,” she agreed softly.

Petunia’s gaze grew distant again, and when she spoke, her voice held the weight of old memories. “I was raised by distant relatives after my parents passed. It wasn’t the best of times. Bitter years, really. But I never gave in to despair. I found love, eventually. Married. But happiness can be so fleeting... My husband passed not long after.”

Elizabeth’s heart clenched at her aunt’s quiet confession. She had known Petunia had been widowed twice, but she hadn’t known the full extent of her aunt’s sorrows.

“Your uncle Sebastian sought me out,” Petunia said, her smile faint but full of affection. “He was my long-lost cousin, and he became my sole support during those years of grief. When I married again, it was for convenience, and that husband too was taken from me. But through it all, Sebastian was there. He never left my side.”

Elizabeth reached across the table and took her aunt’s hand, squeezing it gently. “I never knew, Auntie. I’m so sorry.”

Petunia patted her hand with a small smile, though her eyes shimmered with unspoken emotion. “What would we do without your uncle Sebastian?”

Elizabeth sighed, her heart full of gratitude. “Thank God for him,” she whispered.

Petunia nodded, raising her glass once more. “To Sebastian,” she said softly, before downing her brandy and pouring herself another.

CHAPTER 7

If Lord Dowshire possessed even a fraction of the pride his niece harbored, Alexander knew the Earl would undoubtedly reject the stipend and insist on the acceptance of Elizabeth's dowry.

It was precisely for this reason that Alex had refrained from broaching the subject when he'd made his offer to marry her. He'd expected resistance, and sure enough, a letter arrived from Dowshire, addressing the dowry. Anticipating a stubborn refusal, Alexander invited the Earl for a drink, thinking it best to discuss the matter in person.

"It is a pleasure to have you in my home, Lord Dowshire," Alexander greeted, gesturing to the chair opposite his desk.

"I must confess, your invitation took me by surprise," the Earl replied as he settled into his seat.

"I thought it the perfect opportunity to conclude our discussions," Alex said, retrieving two snifters and placing them on the desk before making his way to the liquor cabinet. "What takes your fancy this afternoon, Lord Dowshire? I've received a shipment of some fine Cognac from France. There's also American whiskey, or perhaps you'd prefer something more familiar? Some Scotch, maybe?"

The Earl chuckled. "Closer to home would be Farmer John's brandy, I daresay."

"Ah, nothing quite competes with that," Alex laughed, sharing in the jest. "But the Cognac, then?" he offered.

“Yes, the Cognac will do,” Dowshire agreed.

Alex poured them both the French liquor, handing the Earl his glass before taking his own seat at the desk. As they sipped their drinks, Alex shuffled through the papers on his desk, retrieving the document detailing the monthly stipend he intended to offer Dowshire. He passed it across to the Earl, watching as confusion flickered across the older man’s face.

“What is this?” Lord Dowshire asked, his brow furrowing as he scanned the document.

“Precisely what it appears to be,” Alex replied calmly. “I’ve arranged a monthly stipend for you. The scandal, as you can imagine, may cast a shadow over your business dealings. This is meant to compensate for that.”

The Earl’s expression tightened as he pushed the document back toward Alexander. “You’ve already compensated what was due by offering for Elizabeth. I don’t need more.”

A smile tugged at Alex’s lips. The pride in the Sutton family was unmistakable. “I suspected you might say that,” he said. He hadn’t expected Dowshire to accept the stipend easily.

“To be frank, we were not expecting you to take responsibility for your brother’s actions,” Dowshire continued, his tone thoughtful. “You had no obligation to step in for mistakes that were not yours to correct. Few men would show such a sense of duty.”

“Which is exactly why you must understand,” Alexander said, leaning forward, “that this responsibility obliges me to offer you these funds.”

“I came here to discuss my niece’s dowry, not to collect charity,” Dowshire said, his tone firm. He sounded so much like Elizabeth in that moment that Alex couldn’t help but see the family resemblance.

“I won’t be accepting the dowry,” Alexander declared, meeting the Earl’s gaze squarely.

Dowshire paused, his glass halfway to his mouth, before setting it back on the desk with a faint thud. “You cannot be serious,” he said, disbelief plain in his voice. “First a stipend, now you’re refusing the dowry? When was that ever done?”

“Since my fool of a brother nearly ruined an innocent family with his recklessness and selfishness,” Alex replied, his voice steady. “This isn’t charity, Lord Dowshire. It’s restitution for the damage caused. You must understand, I owe you every coin I’m offering. It’s not merely an act of generosity.”

The Earl fell silent for a moment, his gaze thoughtful as he considered Alexander’s words. The room was filled with a quiet tension as the weight of responsibility hung between them.

“Then you must accept the dowry if I am to accept the stipend,” Dowshire said finally, his tone shifting to one of negotiation, as if this were a business arrangement rather than the marriage of his niece.

Alex chuckled, appreciating the Earl’s stubbornness. “Ah, but my offer includes the omission of the dowry as well,” he replied, a smile tugging at his lips. He had anticipated this exchange, knowing well the pride that ran deep in the Sutton family.

He recalled the state of the Dowshire residence during his visit. While the Earl was too dignified to admit to financial strain, Alexander suspected that things were not as secure as they appeared. His offer, however, came with the delicate balance of aiding

without offending.

“Let us put it this way, my lord,” Alexander began again, his voice measured. “You feel responsible for your family, do you not?”

“I don’t feel responsible for them, Sterlin. I am responsible for them,” the Earl corrected, his tone resolute.

“Exactly,” Alexander said, nodding in agreement. “Then do not think of this as something for yourself. Think of it as a way to fulfill your responsibility to them. Consider my offer not as a handout, but as an assurance for their future. After all, I will soon be family as well, marrying your niece.” He held Dowshire’s gaze, watching as the older man weighed his words carefully.

“You are almost as stubborn as my Lizzy,” the Earl chuckled lightly at last, his posture relaxing.

Alexander allowed himself a silent sigh of relief. It appeared he had finally managed to convince the man. “Almost?” he said, his lips quirking into a smile. “Then I shall have to work harder and match her stubbornness.”

“If the two of you ever reach that height, you’d burn the house down,” Dowshire laughed, the tension in the room easing as he reached for his drink once again.

“We’ll live in a castle then,” Alexander replied, joining in the humor.

As the laughter subsided, Dowshire grew pensive once more. His voice softened as he spoke. “I believe things happen for a reason, and that certain people enter our lives with a purpose. I cannot help but feel that your brother’s flight, as irresponsible as it was, may have been for the best. You are a man of great honor, Sterlin. I could not have chosen a better husband for my Elizabeth.”

Alexander smiled politely, though the compliment weighed heavily on him. Honor, he thought, was the last thing that defined him. He had failed before—failed to protect his family, failed to fulfill his father’s dying wish. This marriage, this so-called act of responsibility, was merely a desperate attempt to patch over the cracks in the promise he had made years ago.

Still, his time spent with Lord Dowshire that afternoon was unexpectedly pleasant. The Earl was a man who, despite his pride, deeply cared for his family. Alexander admired that quality. He, too, had spent years trying to protect his family, albeit with less success. Perhaps, in that sense, he and the Earl were not so different after all.

The special license arrived soon enough, and the day before the wedding, Alexander found himself in need of familiar company. He called upon his friend Colin, who greeted him with a raised brow the moment he entered the room.

“You look like you’ve seen better days,” Colin remarked, leaning casually against the billiards table as Alexander helped himself to a drink.

“Perhaps I have,” Alex muttered, pouring a generous measure from the decanter. The weight of tomorrow sat heavily on his shoulders, pressing down harder with every passing hour. He tossed back the drink, savoring the brief burn that numbed his mind.

Colin watched him with an amused yet curious expression. “Are you ready for tomorrow, then?”

Alexander snorted into his glass. “How does one ever truly prepare for marriage?”

“Don’t ask me,” Colin shrugged with a grin. “I’m not married, nor do I plan to be anytime soon.”

“You really are hopeless, aren’t you?” Alexander sighed, rubbing a hand across his

face as the weight of everything bore down on him.

“In that regard, I’m afraid so,” Colin replied, a grin tugging at his lips. “But you, Sterlin—you always have everything under control.” His friend’s voice was full of that easy confidence, the kind that only comes when one isn’t in the midst of a storm.

Control, Alex thought bitterly. If only that was the word for the swirling conflicts inside him. If only he had even a fraction of the confidence in himself that Colin seemed to possess.

“Any chance of Percy’s miraculous reappearance right now?” Alexander muttered, taking another sip of whiskey. The bitterness of the drink mirrored the bitterness in his chest.

“You know,” Colin said, his tone light with amusement, “I’ve heard of bride’s nerves, but never of the groom’s.”

Alexander couldn’t help but chuckle despite the tension that tightened his chest. “Perhaps it’s just nerves, after all.”

But deep down, he knew it was more than that. He was scared. The realization hit him harder than the whiskey. He had failed to protect his family once, and now, he was about to take on another soul—another responsibility. What if he failed to protect her too? What if his failures repeated themselves?

“I hardly know Lady Elizabeth Sutton,” Colin said, as though reading his thoughts. “And I’m not just saying this because we’re friends, but if ever there was a man capable of providing security for a lady, it’s you, Alex.”

Alexander shook his head, the familiar weight of doubt pressing harder. “You sound too confident.”

“It’s not confidence,” Colin replied, his voice firm, yet steady. “It’s simply knowing the man that you are. Apart from how hopelessly blind you tend to be sometimes,” he added with a teasing smile.

“Blind?” Alexander raised a brow, curious but wary.

“To your true self,” Colin said, meeting his gaze with unshakeable certainty. “You’ve always been too hard on yourself.”

Alexander frowned, contemplating his friend’s words. His true self. What did that even mean? Who was his true self? Was it the man who had failed his family, who couldn’t keep the promises he had made to his father?

Or was it the man who now sought to fulfill those promises through this marriage, even though it wasn’t of his choosing?

CHAPTER 8

“M ake it tighter, Anna,” Elizabeth urged, her voice taut as her cousin worked at the laces of her stays.

Her insides twisted in painful knots, every breath tightening the noose around her thoughts. She was still trying to process the enormity of it all—she was getting married today. To a man she scarcely knew. And it was all because of a scandal in which she had played no willing part.

“Goodness, Lizzy, are you trying to expel your lungs through your mouth?” Anna teased, though her tone held a hint of concern as she gave another tug. “Is this tight enough for you?”

“It’s... passable,” Elizabeth managed, though in truth, she wished it could be tighter still. Perhaps then her tangled nerves would have no room to wreak havoc inside her.

“You look divine,” Aunt Petunia declared, clapping her hands in satisfaction as she admired Elizabeth’s reflection in the tall standing mirror.

“Would you like a handkerchief, Auntie?” Peggy teased from the side, a mischievous smile on her lips.

“I don’t cry at weddings,” Petunia replied with a small, dignified sniff. “They are happy occasions, no matter the circumstances.”

“I’ve never understood the tears shed at weddings either,” Anna chimed in, shaking

her head lightly.

Elizabeth offered a small smile at their exchange. Anna and Petunia were so alike in spirit, it was as if her cousin was a reflection of what her aunt might have been at that age. A thought that usually amused her, though today, it only added to the surreal feeling enveloping her.

“You do look beautiful, Lizzy,” Peggy said, her tone soft and sincere as she stepped closer.

Elizabeth turned her gaze to her reflection. She was dressed in the palest powder-blue satin dress, with delicate lace trimming the edges. The soft hue made her blue eyes appear even brighter, their depth intensified against the fairness of her skin. She looked almost ethereal, like some fragile creature from a dream. Yet despite the elegance of her appearance, she felt far from composed.

As she met her sister’s gaze, Elizabeth noticed the unshed tears shimmering in Peggy’s eyes.

“Oh, look who needs a handkerchief now,” Elizabeth teased gently, pulling her younger sister into an embrace. The act caused a lump to rise in her throat, emotion tightening within her chest as she held Peggy close.

“Oh no! Margaret Sutton, you are not going to make your sister cry and ruin her toilette under my watch!” Petunia exclaimed, feigning alarm at the sight of their embrace.

Elizabeth and Peggy broke into laughter, their shared emotions easing under the weight of Petunia’s playful scolding.

“That’s better,” Petunia chuckled approvingly, though there was a softness in her

eyes.

Before Elizabeth could say more, there was a gentle knock, and Sebastian appeared at the door, his face kind but serious. “The vicar is here. We’re ready.”

Elizabeth’s stomach lurched at the words. It’s time. She swallowed hard, the weight of the moment pressing down on her.

“Oh God,” she whispered, barely audible, her pulse quickening. Anxiety coiled tighter, threatening to choke her composure.

Just then, Anna took her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze.

“It’s going to be alright,” Anna whispered as Aunt Petunia gently ushered them out of the room.

Elizabeth tried to take comfort in her cousin’s words, but her heart was a knot of nerves. The wedding had been a quiet, intimate affair, attended only by her family, the Duke’s solicitor, and his close friend, the Marquess of Broughton. It all passed in a blur—vows exchanged, rings slipped onto fingers, and now, she stood as the Duchess of Sterlin, barely able to comprehend it all.

It felt like a dream, one she had been thrust into without warning. But whether it was a dream or a nightmare, she could not yet tell. Time, she supposed, would be the only judge of that.

As the Duke and his party filed out of the room to grant her a moment with her family, Elizabeth stood there, her hands twisting the lace of her gloves. Just as the Marquess of Broughton was about to leave, however, the quiet was broken by the unmistakable sound of barking. Titan and Plato burst into the room, their paws skidding across the parquet floor as they bounded towards her, nearly knocking the

Marquess to the side in their enthusiasm.

“That pug is so tiny, he looks like a thimble!” The Marquess chuckled, amused by the sight of Titan darting about the room with his usual energy.

“He’s my dog, and he does not resemble a thimble, My Lord,” Anna retorted, scooping the pug into her arms with a protective glare.

“A thimble! Now that is too perfect!” Peggy laughed, her agreement evident as she clutched her side. Anna shot her a withering look.

Elizabeth glanced at her aunt and noticed the twitch of amusement on her lips as she tried to stifle a smile.

“When I brought you all to town for the Season, I never imagined I would be marrying off one of you girls this year,” Petunia said, her voice suddenly softer as she turned her attention to Elizabeth.

Her aunt’s words tugged at her heart, and Elizabeth’s throat tightened. She wasn’t sure how to respond, but her aunt continued before she could muster an answer.

“Never mind the circumstances. I cannot begin to tell you how happy I am, Lizzy. And how very much I am going to miss you.”

“Auntie...” Elizabeth whispered, her voice breaking as emotion finally caught up to her.

“No tears now, remember?” Petunia said, giving her a mock scolding look. But then she softened, pulling Elizabeth into a warm embrace. “But it’s alright. You’re allowed your tears today, darling.”

As if those words unlocked the dam, Elizabeth felt the sting of unshed tears burning hotter behind her eyes. She struggled to hold them back, but they seemed to have a will of their own.

“Oh, my little girl,” Sebastian’s voice came gently as she pulled away from her aunt, only to find herself enveloped by her uncle’s strong arms.

“Not so little anymore,” Petunia chimed in with a soft chuckle, though her eyes glistened too.

“I wish your parents were here to see you today,” Sebastian said, his voice thick with sentiment as he took her hands in his. His warm, steady hands held hers with such tenderness that it nearly undid her completely.

Elizabeth’s heart twisted. How often had she wondered what her parents might say if they could see her now? Would they be proud? Would they understand the weight of this path she had taken?

“Perhaps they are watching, Uncle,” Elizabeth said softly, her voice thick with emotion. “And I am certain they are very much proud of you as well.” Her words were filled with gratitude, not just for his care, but for all the ways he had become the father figure she so desperately needed after her parents’ deaths.

“Why, you speak as though I were the one being married today!” her uncle replied, raising a playful brow.

“Well, it isn’t too late for you either, Seb,” Aunt Petunia chimed in with a teasing gleam in her eye. “Perhaps I should make it my new goal to see both father and daughter married off by the end of the Season.” She cast a deliberately mischievous look toward Anna.

“Good luck with Father, Auntie, but count me out of your matchmaking schemes,” Anna quipped, a familiar glint of defiance in her eyes.

Sebastian laughed heartily. “It will happen sooner or later, my dear,” he teased.

Anna responded with a glare that was so reminiscent of the one she’d given the Marquess of Broughton earlier, that Elizabeth couldn’t help but laugh.

Turning his attention back to Elizabeth, her uncle’s expression softened. “It is you they are proud of, my child,” he said quietly. “We are all going to miss you dearly.”

The lump in Elizabeth’s throat returned as she wrapped her arms tightly around him. She breathed in deeply, trying to memorize the familiar scent of him—something to carry with her into the unknown. She held him for a long moment, unwilling to let go, but eventually, she had to.

As they made their way to the waiting carriage, Elizabeth glanced at Peggy, who was discreetly dabbing her eyes with a handkerchief. The reality of her departure was beginning to sink in.

“You be a good girl, Lizzy,” Anna whispered, pulling her into a tight embrace beside the carriage. Her voice wavered slightly, betraying the emotion she was trying to hide.

“I should be saying that to you, Anna,” Elizabeth replied, her voice cracking as the first tear slipped down her cheek.

“I miss you already, Lizzy,” Peggy said softly, wrapping her arms around her sister, her grip trembling slightly.

Elizabeth nodded, though her throat felt too tight to respond. As she stepped into the

carriage, a sudden wave of disbelief washed over her. Was this really happening? Was she truly leaving them all behind—the only family she had ever known, the people who had been her world?

As the carriage began to pull away, her hand waved automatically, her heart aching with each turn of the wheels. She had barely processed the overwhelming sense of loss when her husband's voice interrupted her thoughts.

“You will be visiting them, of course. I shan't be keeping you prisoner. Not for long, at least,” the Duke said from his seat across from her.

Elizabeth turned to him, startled. His expression was unreadable, and for a moment, she didn't know how to respond. Was he jesting? Or simply being his usual blunt self?

“Is that something to say to someone leaving their family?” she asked, arching a brow at him.

“I'm merely reassuring you,” he shrugged, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

“In that manner?” she replied, her brow raised in skepticism.

“You're welcome,” he said with a trace of amusement, the faintest hint of a smile tugging at his lips.

For a brief moment, the tension in the carriage lessened, and Elizabeth's heart skipped at the sight of his half-smile. God help her, but he was handsome. The thought took her by surprise, and she felt an embarrassing warmth rise to her cheeks. Quickly, she turned toward the window, feigning interest in the passing scenery.

The countryside began to stretch beyond the city, the familiar landscape of London giving way to rolling fields, but Elizabeth couldn't shake the sudden nervousness that had gripped her. Where were they going? She wanted to ask, but her pride kept her silent. She didn't want to appear vulnerable or uncertain, not when everything else already felt so beyond her control.

The silence between them grew, thick and awkward. Elizabeth kept her gaze firmly on the window, resolutely avoiding looking at her husband, though she was keenly aware of his presence across from her.

Suddenly, the Duke rapped on the roof of the carriage, his voice firm as he ordered the coachman to halt.

Elizabeth's heart jumped in her chest. Her eyes darted to him, alarm creeping in as she wondered what had gone wrong.

CHAPTER 9

“I will ride outside,” Sterlin declared at the question in Elizabeth’s eyes.

“Oh,” Elizabeth muttered, slumping back into her seat as a strange feeling washed over her—disappointment? The notion seemed absurd. Only moments ago, she could barely meet his gaze, and the silence between them had been suffocatingly awkward. How could she possibly feel disappointed at his leaving?

But as she watched her husband exit the carriage, mounting his horse with practiced ease, Elizabeth couldn’t shake the unsettled feeling. Did he already find her company tiresome? After all, their marriage had been born out of necessity, not affection. Surely, he felt burdened by the arrangement, just as she did.

The carriage moved on without him, the rhythmic sound of the horse’s hooves the only companion to her swirling thoughts. Each mile passed in silence, the journey feeling longer and more lonely with every turn of the wheels.

By the time they arrived at Hertfordshire in the late afternoon, Elizabeth was emotionally drained, though her fatigue did not stop the sharp intake of breath at the sight of her new home. The baroque castle was grand beyond anything she had ever seen, its elegant spires and intricately carved stone walls gleaming in the fading sunlight. She fought the urge to gape as Sterlin reappeared and offered her his arm, guiding her through the imposing entrance.

Inside, the grand vestibule was just as impressive, its marble floors gleaming beneath the glow of crystal chandeliers. The servants were lined up in neat rows, standing at

attention, waiting for their new mistress. Elizabeth's nerves tightened as her husband introduced the elderly couple before her.

"Mr. and Mrs. Ryton have overseen the affairs of the castle for decades," Sterlin said, gesturing toward the butler and housekeeper, both of whom looked to be well into their later years. Mr. Ryton, with his neatly combed white hair and stiff posture, offered a respectful bow, while Mrs. Ryton, a stout woman with kind eyes, gave a small curtsy.

"Mrs. Ryton will help you settle in. You will be in the most capable hands," Sterlin added, his tone polite but distant, as he promptly handed her over to the housekeeper and disappeared down a narrow hallway through an arched door.

Elizabeth's eyes narrowed. I did not marry Mrs. Ryton, she thought, biting back the words she longed to hurl at his retreating figure. But propriety won out, and she turned her attention to Mrs. Ryton, who was patiently waiting for her next instruction.

"I must say," the housekeeper began as she led Elizabeth up the grand staircase, "we received quite the surprise when the Duke wrote of his arrival with his new Duchess. Shocking news, but the most pleasant this castle has had in years." There was something in the woman's tone that gave Elizabeth pause—something heavy, as though there was more beneath the surface than the words alone revealed.

"Your chambers, Your Grace," Mrs. Ryton announced as they reached a door, pushing it open to reveal a beautiful room adorned in soft peach and ivory. The warm hues gave the space a light, almost ethereal quality.

Elizabeth stepped inside, her eyes sweeping over the tasteful furnishings—the canopied bed, the elegant chaise longue by the window, and the delicate embroidery of the draperies. It was lovely, certainly, though it did little to quell the unease that had taken root inside her.

The footmen arrived shortly after, bringing up her boxes, and Mrs. Ryton turned to her with a practiced smile. “I will leave you with your lady’s maid to help you settle in.”

“Oh, but I do not have one,” Elizabeth admitted, her cheeks coloring slightly at the admission.

Mrs. Ryton’s brow furrowed briefly in confusion, but she recovered quickly. Without asking further, she gestured to a young girl who had just entered the room, her arms full of fresh orchids for the side table.

“Esther is one of our chamber maids, but she is capable enough to assist you until we find a more permanent arrangement for the position,” the housekeeper explained.

Elizabeth nodded, grateful for the solution. “I look forward to working with you, Esther,” she said softly as the girl curtsied, her eyes wide.

Mrs. Ryton’s tone turned brisk once more. “Tomorrow, we shall take a full tour of the castle and acquaint you with the household’s daily runnings, Your Grace. But for now, dinner will be served in a few hours.”

With that, the housekeeper excused herself, leaving Elizabeth alone in her new chambers.

As the door closed softly behind her, Elizabeth exhaled a breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding. She wandered toward the window, her gaze drifting over the manicured grounds below. Everything about this place—the grandeur, the formality, the very air itself—felt foreign. She belonged here now, but it didn’t feel like home.

Would it ever?

Elizabeth wore one of her new dresses for dinner that night, a simple but elegant ensemble of olive green satin. It hugged her figure gracefully, but as she arrived at the drawing room, her anticipation quickly dimmed when the butler informed her that the Duke was in a meeting with his steward. He had left word for her to dine without waiting for him.

She swallowed the lump of disappointment that rose in her throat and followed the butler to the dining room. As she sat down to her solitary meal, the vastness of the room seemed to magnify her loneliness. The footmen moved with quiet efficiency, but their exchanged glances were hard to ignore. Elizabeth's fork moved slowly across her plate, but the food—no matter how finely prepared—felt tasteless. This was not how she had imagined her first dinner as a married woman.

She had expected it to be awkward, perhaps even stilted, but to dine alone, in the unfamiliar grandeur of her new home, was worse than anything she had prepared herself for. She had longed for his presence, no matter how stiff or uncomfortable the conversation might have been. At least she would not feel so utterly alone.

After finishing the uncomfortable meal, Elizabeth retired to her chambers, where Esther, the temporary lady's maid, fussed over her with just as much care as she had before dinner. The night wore on, and still, there was no sign of the Duke.

The emptiness of her bed felt like a physical weight pressing down on her chest. Was this to be her new life? She wondered miserably. She couldn't help but recall the lively, chaotic dinners she had shared with her family—the laughter, the warmth, the chatter. Fresh emotion gathered in her throat, threatening to spill over.

Elizabeth pulled the covers to her chest, willing herself to close her eyes and fall asleep. But no matter how hard she tried, her gaze kept drifting to the adjoining door that led to the Duke's chambers. It remained firmly shut, the silence on the other side deafening.

Eventually, she could bear it no longer. Perhaps it was her duty to go to him. Perhaps he was waiting for her.

With a deep breath, she slipped out of bed and padded across the room. The cold handle of the door felt like a final tether to her fraying nerves. When she turned the knob and peered inside, she was met with darkness. The room was empty.

Where could he be? she wondered, frustration and unease bubbling within her. She slipped into the hallway, the quiet unsettling her further. She had no idea where his study was, but she remembered the door he had disappeared through earlier. She decided to start her search there.

Relief washed over her when she saw light filtering from beneath a nearby door. Summoning her courage, Elizabeth gave a brief knock before stepping inside.

Sterlin sat at his desk, papers scattered before him. He looked up, surprise flashing briefly across his features before it was replaced by something else—something inscrutable. His gaze lingered on her longer than she expected, traveling the length of her figure in her night rail, making her feel suddenly self-conscious.

“I thought you’d be asleep,” he said at last, his tone as unreadable as his expression.

“You weren’t at dinner,” Elizabeth replied, her voice barely above a whisper.

“I had urgent estate matters that required my attention,” he said simply, his tone dismissive.

“I see,” she murmured, mostly to herself, feeling the weight of his gaze still upon her.

The silence between them stretched taut, and Elizabeth’s heart raced as she prepared herself to ask the question that had driven her here. “Are you not coming to bed?” she

asked, her voice steady, though her nerves felt anything but.

His brow quirked ever so slightly. “There is no need for us to consummate the marriage, if that is what you are asking, Elizabeth,” he said flatly.

Heat flushed her cheeks, spreading through her body in a wave of mortification and frustration. She opened her mouth to speak but found herself momentarily stunned by the bluntness of his words.

“You never made clear the terms of our marriage from the start,” she finally managed, her voice tight with indignation.

“Would it have made a difference in your decision?” he returned, his tone still maddeningly calm.

“I still had a right to know,” she challenged, her heart thudding in her chest. His dictatorial manner, his refusal to include her in even the most personal decisions—how could she have been so naive to think there might be any semblance of partnership between them?

“Well, now you know,” he said, dismissively, as though the matter were of little consequence.

Elizabeth’s irritation flared. “This is nothing more than a marriage of convenience, then?” she demanded. “I see now. You have no intention of having children.”

“Exactly. I do not intend to sire any children,” he replied, his voice devoid of emotion.

She hadn’t realized how much those words would hurt until she heard them spoken aloud. Disappointment and anger surged within her. She had unknowingly given up

the hope of ever having a family of her own by entering into this marriage. It felt like a betrayal, as if something precious had been stolen from her without her knowledge.

“Who will be your heir, then?” she asked, her voice sharper than she intended.

“Why, my brother, of course,” he said, as if the answer were obvious.

The mention of Percy brought a bitter taste to her mouth. Percy, who had thrust her into this situation. Percy, who had thought only of himself, leaving her to bear the consequences of his actions. Even from miles away, he was still haunting her life, still casting shadows over her future.

“Very well,” Elizabeth said, her voice strained but dignified. She straightened her back, holding herself tall as she bid him goodnight and turned on her heel, leaving the study behind.

The moment she returned to her chambers and closed the door behind her, the dam broke. Tears spilled freely down her cheeks, hot and unbidden. She had always dreamed of having children—of a family filled with laughter and warmth. And now, that dream was as distant as the stars, unreachable in the life she had chosen.

Or rather, the life that had been chosen for her.

CHAPTER 10

Alexander sat at his desk, the faint morning light filtering through the heavy curtains, casting a soft glow over the room. He had been awake for hours, restless thoughts keeping sleep at bay, and now, with the day barely begun, he found himself already seeking answers. The knock he had been anticipating finally came.

“You summoned, Your Grace?” Mrs. Ryton entered, her brow furrowed slightly. It was early, far too early for his usual summons, and her presence conveyed that she, too, sensed something out of the ordinary. “Is everything alright, Your Grace?” she asked.

Alexander waved a hand dismissively, leaning back in his chair. “All is well,” he replied. “I simply wished to speak with you before the day carried on.”

He could see the relief in Mrs. Ryton’s posture as she offered a small nod.

“I trust the Duchess is settling in?” he ventured, though his mind already regretted the question. It was an indirect way of asking after Elizabeth, to inquire without showing too much of his own concern. He had brought her here, taken her from the life she knew, thrust her into this unfamiliar world of his. How could she not feel disoriented? He wondered if she had slept well, if the enormity of the changes had kept her awake as it had him.

Mrs. Ryton’s expression softened, her gaze gentle. “The poor young lady does seem a bit lost, Your Grace, as one would expect in such circumstances. But I am certain that, with time, she will find her footing.”

Alexander nodded slowly, the guilt settling deeper in his chest. He had seen the strain in Elizabeth's eyes, though she had tried to hide it behind a composed exterior. He was grateful for Mrs. Ryton's honesty. "I trust your judgment in helping her along."

The housekeeper offered him a reassuring smile. "You need not worry, Your Grace. She's in capable hands, and we will do all we can to make her feel at home."

"I never doubted," he said with a slight smile, though it didn't reach his eyes.

"Although..." Mrs. Ryton hesitated, her expression clouding. Alexander's brow furrowed as he leaned forward slightly.

"Is something amiss?"

"Not overly grievous," she began, though the hesitation in her voice lingered. "Mr. Ryton mentioned that the Duchess seemed... disappointed by her solitary dinner last night."

The words hung between them, heavy with implication. Alexander felt a sudden tightening in his chest. He recalled the look on Elizabeth's face last night—the quiet hurt, masked beneath her calm words. She had every right to be disappointed. He had left her to dine alone on her first night as his wife, knowing full well how isolated she must feel.

Alexander knew he was subjecting Elizabeth to more than just solitary meals. His choices—limited though they were—were meant to protect her, to shield her from the future he feared. He had no intention of siring a child only to fail them as he had failed others. It wasn't just failure he feared—it was breaking her. And he would be damned before he broke another soul, especially one he had sworn before God to protect. In sickness and in health, no matter the circumstances.

“But I told Mr. Ryton to excuse your first day,” Mrs. Ryton continued, interrupting his thoughts. “After all, estate matters needed tending. I trust the Duchess won’t be dining alone for breakfast?”

Her words hovered somewhere between suggestion and question, a quiet challenge wrapped in propriety.

“We shall see,” Alexander replied, his tone measured. It was the best answer he could offer, though it felt hollow. The truth was a burden too heavy to speak aloud.

Mrs. Ryton’s scrutinizing gaze lingered, her lips pressed into a thin line, as if she weighed her next words carefully. She seemed to have more on her mind than she let on.

“I beg your pardon, Your Grace, but that hardly sounds reassuring,” she finally said, the concern in her voice unmistakable.

“Did I give ‘no’ as an answer?” Alexander raised a brow, a warning embedded in the arch of it.

The housekeeper fell silent, her expression thoughtful. For a moment, he thought she would leave it at that. But then she spoke again, her tone softer, almost maternal. “It isn’t your fault, Your Grace. It never was. But do not let the past cast shadows over your marriage. Don’t limit yourself.”

His jaw tightened at her words. “Do not start, Mrs. Ryton,” he ground out, irritation prickling his skin.

“I do not speak as your housekeeper,” she pressed on, undeterred by his warning. “I speak as one soul to another.”

Alexander felt the tension coil in his chest. He had outgrown the need for her reassurances long ago. He appreciated her loyalty, her service, but this—this was stepping over a line.

“And this soul wishes that you would take a moment to open your eyes to the truth,” she added quietly, her voice steady.

“Is there any other truth besides their deaths, Mrs. Ryton?” Alexander’s voice was sharp, cutting through the morning air with a finality that even he recognized as harsh.

Mrs. Ryton’s face tightened at his tone, but she didn’t flinch. He regretted it almost instantly, feeling the weight of his own frustration pressing down on him.

“They wouldn’t have wanted this for you,” she said quietly, her eyes softening with the familiarity of years gone by. “Your father?—”

“Is dead,” Alexander interrupted, his voice firm. “And I made him promises, promises I intend to keep. At least the ones I can keep now.”

After my past failures, he thought, though the words remained unspoken, locked away in the deepest corners of his mind.

“If I may be presumptuous again,” Mrs. Ryton ventured, her tone careful, though they both knew she never let propriety stand in her way.

“Since when has propriety ever concerned you?” Alex rolled his eyes, a half-smile tugging at his lips despite the heaviness of the conversation.

She returned the smile, a brief flash of warmth between them. It was a comfort, that familiarity, one he hadn’t realized he needed in the moment.

“But I think,” she continued, “you shouldn’t see your wife as just another promise you must keep.”

Alex’s smile faded. “She is a promise I made to God, Mrs. Ryton. How can you expect me to simply disregard what is, perhaps, the most important aspect of her?”

Mrs. Ryton met his gaze, unflinching. “She is a person first, Your Grace. Not just a promise. She is your wife. Give yourself a chance to see that. And perhaps, in time, you may even come to feel it.”

Her words lingered long after she left the room. Alexander sat at his desk, staring at the papers before him, though his thoughts were far from the estate matters at hand.

He felt uneasy. It wasn’t the irritation he often felt when confronted with memories of his past—it was something deeper, something unsettling.

CHAPTER 11

Elizabeth stared at the empty chair across from her, the silence of the room broken only by the faint clink of her spoon against her plate. Her second morning as a married woman, and once again, she dined alone. It seemed her husband was determined to remain elusive.

Part of her had braced for this, especially after their confrontation the night before. She had stood her ground, spoken her mind, and still... he had left her to face yet another solitary meal. The empty chair taunted her, a reminder of the distance between them, both physical and emotional.

And yet, despite her best efforts to prepare herself for his absence, a small part of her had held onto hope. Hope that perhaps this morning, he might surprise her, join her at the table, offer some gesture that they were more than just strangers bound by duty. But as she sat there, the hope faded, leaving behind a familiar ache of disappointment.

She straightened in her chair, forcing herself to maintain the composure expected of her new title. She was a Duchess now, and if nothing else, she would carry herself with the pride and dignity of one. Her emotions—whatever they might be—had no place in this moment. She took a steadying breath and resumed her breakfast.

At least there was cheese, she noted with a small, bittersweet smile. A familiar comfort in an unfamiliar world. She savored the rich flavor, using it to distract her from the hollow feeling growing inside her. If nothing else, she could count on the small pleasures of the morning meal.

The day would be a busy one, she reminded herself. Mrs. Ryton was due to give her a full tour of the house after breakfast, acquaint her with the daily workings of her new home. There would be no time to dwell on her husband's absence. She had duties now, responsibilities that required her attention.

But before she could finish her meal and move on with her day, the butler appeared in the doorway, his expression composed as always. "Your Grace," he began with a bow, "a caller has arrived."

Elizabeth blinked, surprised. "A caller?"

"The Viscountess Compton," the butler announced, his voice measured and polite.

Elizabeth set her fork down and stood, smoothing the front of her dress as she mentally prepared herself for an unexpected visit. She had heard of the Viscountess—a woman with a reputation for gossip and an insatiable curiosity. What could she possibly want so early in the day?

When Elizabeth entered the drawing room, the Viscountess was already standing, her round face flushed with excitement. She was a short, plump woman, her mass of red curls bouncing as she curtsied deeply, though her expression remained gleeful rather than respectful.

"Oh, pardon my manners and unannounced visit, Your Grace," she exclaimed, her voice practically dripping with enthusiasm. "But once I heard the news of the new Duchess of Sterlin, I simply couldn't stay still until I came to see for myself!"

Elizabeth offered a polite smile, though she could feel her patience already thinning. The Viscountess seemed to devour every detail of her appearance with eager eyes, her gaze lingering in a way that made Elizabeth feel like she was being inspected rather than greeted.

“And my, you are as beautiful as they say,” the Viscountess gushed before Elizabeth had a chance to respond.

The Viscountess was, Elizabeth was quickly coming to realize, a woman impatient with her words. There was a certain charm in her lack of restraint, and Elizabeth found herself amused by the unguarded nature of her guest.

“Oh, how flattering of them to say. And of you to agree,” Elizabeth remarked, offering a light chuckle as she motioned for the Viscountess to take a seat. With a graceful gesture, she rang for tea, maintaining the poise expected of her new title.

“Oh, no flattery on my part whatsoever!” the Viscountess blurted, her stubby fingers shooting up to cover her mouth as her eyes widened in a comical display of belated self-awareness. “Oh, excuse my tongue again, Your Grace,” she added hastily.

Elizabeth felt a soft chuckle escape her before she could stop it, the candidness of the Viscountess catching her off guard in the most pleasant way. It was rare to encounter such openness, especially in a world where politeness often masked true thoughts. There was something refreshingly honest about Lady Compton’s unpolished nature, and Elizabeth found herself warming to her company despite the abruptness of her visit.

“I think there should be no shame in honesty,” Elizabeth said, her tone gentle yet thoughtful. “If anything, it ought to be appreciated.”

The Viscountess, if possible, turned an even deeper shade of red, her round cheeks nearly glowing against the vibrant hue of her hair. Elizabeth wondered if the woman’s complexion was naturally flushed or if her own words had caused such a reaction.

“Oh, finally, someone who agrees!” Lady Compton exclaimed with a sigh of relief.

“When I talk, people just think I have too many words to spare.”

Elizabeth couldn't help but smile more broadly. It was clear why people might feel that way—the Viscountess seemed to be positively overflowing with conversation. But there was no malice in her words, only an enthusiasm that bordered on endearing.

“I felt it was only proper to call personally and give you a formal welcome, of course,” the Viscountess continued, her hands fluttering as she spoke, as though the force of her words needed physical accompaniment.

“And I do appreciate it,” Elizabeth replied, offering a gracious nod. There was a genuine warmth in her voice, even though the visit had been unexpected. It was a small reprieve from the silence of the morning, a silence she had not quite grown accustomed to yet.

“I was going to bring you some delightful biscuits my cook bakes,” the Viscountess added, her voice rising with excitement. “He makes the best in the village, you see. But my curiosity overthrew my generosity, I'm afraid, and I simply couldn't wait for the batch to bake before I saw the new Duchess.”

Elizabeth's smile deepened as she listened. Every word that fell from Lady Compton's lips was spoken with such earnestness that Elizabeth couldn't help but be charmed by it.

Perhaps life at Sterlin House wouldn't be quite as miserable as she had initially feared. Not when there were entertaining visitors like the Viscountess of Compton, who seemed more than willing to fill her days with gossip—and even biscuits, once she finally brought them.

As if summoned by her thoughts, the butler entered just then, wheeling in a silver tray laden with tea and a variety of delicate pastries. Elizabeth offered a small smile as the

teapot was set down, the warm, familiar scent of shortbread wafting through the room.

“Ah, perfect timing,” Lady Compton exclaimed, her eyes lighting up as she reached for a piece of the crumbly confectionery. “My, these shortbreads rival cook’s!” she added with a delighted sigh after taking her first bite.

“I shall be sure to pass your compliment along to the cook,” Elizabeth replied, pouring the Viscountess a cup of tea with a smile. It was a small gesture, but she found herself grateful for the company, however unexpected.

The Viscountess took the tea eagerly, her words flowing as easily as the tea into her cup. “Oh, thank goodness for you, Your Grace. God knows this family deserves some light after that awful tragedy.”

Elizabeth’s hand paused for the briefest moment, the teapot poised in midair. Tragedy? She blinked, confusion flickering across her features. The Viscountess’s tone had shifted, the air growing heavier with the weight of something unsaid.

“Tragedy?” Elizabeth echoed, setting the pot down carefully. Her heartbeat quickened, but she maintained her composure, unwilling to let her curiosity show too plainly.

Lady Compton, however, seemed oblivious to Elizabeth’s restraint, her words tumbling out in a flood. “Oh, my dear, you don’t know? The tragic accident which took the late Duke and—” She stopped abruptly, her eyes widening as if realizing her mistake too late. Her hand flew to her mouth, muffling the remainder of the sentence.

“If you did not know, I am not sure it is my place to suddenly spring such news upon you,” she added hastily.

Elizabeth's chest tightened, a sharp spike of frustration rising beneath her calm exterior. You brought it up, didn't you? she wanted to cry out, the unspoken words burning on her tongue. But instead, she forced a polite smile and nodded, reaching for her cup to conceal the disappointment that threatened to show on her face.

She took a measured sip of tea, the warmth doing little to soothe the cold weight settling in her stomach. So, there was indeed a shadow hanging over the Sterlin family—a tragedy that Alexander seemed determined to bury, leaving her to stumble blindly through the darkness of it.

A part of her had hoped that Lady Compton might have offered more, cracked the window open a little wider and shed light on the reasons behind her husband's brooding demeanor. But no, it seemed fate had other plans for her curiosity. Delayed plans, perhaps. Or plans that would never come to pass.

"Well, I still think you are a cause for celebration in the Sterlin household, Your Grace," Lady Compton whispered, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial tone, as though they were suddenly surrounded by eavesdroppers.

Elizabeth raised her brow, feeling a flicker of irritation at the woman's dramatic shift in demeanor. It was as if the Viscountess was deliberately dangling some piece of knowledge just out of reach, teasing her with half-revealed truths.

"And I do not blame them at all for not mentioning it," Lady Compton continued, her voice taking on a more serious note. "Every family would want to keep their tragedies buried and hopefully forgotten."

Elizabeth felt a tightness in her chest, her fingers stiffening slightly as she held her teacup. The woman was taunting her now, wasn't she? Teasing her with vague hints of a mysterious sorrow that Alexander had gone to such lengths to hide from her. It felt like the Viscountess was holding a carrot before her, only to snatch it away

whenever Elizabeth dared to reach for it.

But before she could formulate a response, Lady Compton abruptly shifted gears, her tone brightening with renewed energy as she reached for another shortbread. “Oh, did I tell you about my country assemblies, Your Grace?”

Elizabeth blinked, taken aback by the sudden change of subject. “I believe you were getting round to it,” she muttered, barely able to mask her exasperation.

The Viscountess chuckled, clearly missing the edge in Elizabeth’s voice. “Oh, you know me so well already!” she laughed, her cheeks glowing as though the prospect of another assembly brought her genuine joy.

“Well, Your Grace,” Lady Compton continued, her voice swelling with pride, “I host the finest country dances and assemblies in the village. And I should very much like your grace and the Duke’s radiant company at the next one.”

Elizabeth tilted her head, a flicker of interest sparking in her mind. “Is that so?” she asked, her brow arching slightly as an idea began to form.

Perhaps this woman’s invitation was more than just idle chatter. If she and Alexander were expected to attend a public event together, it would be impossible for him to continue avoiding her company. He would have no choice but to appear by her side, and for once, he would be forced into her presence for more than a fleeting moment.

Something within her stirred at the thought, a small, almost triumphant smile tugging at the corner of her lips. Perhaps the Viscountess had given her the very thing she needed.

“I think the Duke would welcome the idea,” Elizabeth said smoothly, sipping her tea with newfound satisfaction. “We would love to attend, Lady Compton.”

“Excellent!” the Viscountess exclaimed, her eyes gleaming with excitement. “I shall send the official written invitations as soon as I return home. Oh, how the village will be thrilled to see you both!”

Tea had certainly become much more pleasant, and for the first time since her marriage, Elizabeth found herself laughing freely. Lady Compton’s stories of village life were filled with colorful characters and more than a few instances of thinly veiled gossip, but it was harmless enough, and Elizabeth could not help but be entertained.

“...and Lady Ashton, well, she had the statue of herself from the country fair on display in her conservatory for ages!” Lady Compton giggled. “We never hear the end of her achievements to this day.”

When it was finally time for the Viscountess to take her leave, she stood with a dramatic flourish, her cheeks flushed from both conversation and the warmth of the room. With one last glance at the shortbread crumbs on her plate, she sighed with exaggerated wistfulness.

“Why, after trying these delectable shortbread, I feel as though I should hide my cook’s pastries from Your Grace,” she declared, her tone as blunt as ever but softened by the playful glint in her eyes.

Elizabeth couldn’t help but laugh again. There was something entirely disarming about Lady Compton’s unfiltered honesty, a quality that was both refreshing and rare in her new world of polished manners and veiled intentions.

“Oh, please do not,” Elizabeth replied, her smile lingering. “I should love to give your cook’s biscuits a try.”

The Viscountess beamed, clearly delighted by the encouragement. “Very well then, Your Grace. I shall have them sent over without delay!”

“I trust Your Grace had a pleasant time with her caller earlier,” Mrs. Ryton inquired as she spread the household accounts before them on the wide oak desk.

“Oh, I have never met a more spirited woman,” Elizabeth responded with a light chuckle, still recalling the Viscountess’s unabashed exuberance.

“The Viscountess is as pleasant as she is exhausting, I agree,” Mrs. Ryton nodded, her tone matter-of-fact.

Elizabeth’s lips twitched into a smile. “Why, I never called her exhausting,” she replied, amused, letting out a small laugh.

A ghost of a smile touched Mrs. Ryton’s otherwise stern face, and for a moment, the room felt lighter. But then, the shadow of what Lady Compton had said earlier crept back into Elizabeth’s mind. She shifted slightly in her seat, weighing her next words, uncertain how to proceed without crossing any unseen lines.

“Mrs. Ryton...” Elizabeth began, her voice hesitant. The housekeeper looked up, waiting with a calm but expectant expression.

“The family tragedy...” Elizabeth ventured cautiously.

“Must not be spoken about,” Mrs. Ryton interjected swiftly, her expression darkening as though the very mention of it summoned something long buried and best forgotten.

Elizabeth felt herself deflate under the weight of those words. She hadn’t realized how much she had been holding on to the hope that someone—anyone—might shed light on the secrets her husband kept so fiercely locked away. The abruptness of the housekeeper’s response stung, as though she had been reprimanded for daring to pry.

“Oh,” was all she could manage, her voice small, betraying the disappointment

tightening in her chest.

“My apologies, Your Grace,” Mrs. Ryton added quickly, her voice softening, though her expression remained solemn. “It is just that I do not think it my place to discuss such matters in detail.”

Elizabeth nodded in acknowledgment, though it did little to ease the frustration building within her. It made sense, she supposed. If there was anyone who ought to tell her the truth, it should be her husband. But Alexander had made it clear through his actions—or lack thereof—that he didn’t see her as part of the family, not truly. Perhaps that was why he avoided her, why he treated her presence in his life as little more than an obligation.

She wanted to understand him, to know the man she had married. Yet, he remained a stranger, locked away in his grief, or his pride—or perhaps both.

The room had fallen into an uncomfortable silence, one that Elizabeth felt keenly. She stared at the accounts laid before her, the columns of numbers blurring together as her mind wandered.

“It was a carriage accident,” Mrs. Ryton’s voice broke through the quiet, catching Elizabeth by surprise.

Her eyes snapped to the housekeeper’s face, startled by the unexpected admission. The older woman’s expression had grown grave, the lines on her face deepening with the weight of what she was about to say.

“The accident nearly wiped out the entire Hunton line,” Mrs. Ryton continued, her voice low and measured. “And I’m afraid the Duke remains shaken about it to this day.”

Elizabeth's heart constricted at the words. She had known there was something—something dark and sorrowful that lingered over her husband like a storm cloud. But hearing it spoken aloud, even in such sparse detail, made it feel all the more real. Her mind raced with questions, with the desire to know more, to understand how such a tragedy had shaped the man who seemed determined to keep her at a distance.

But that was all Mrs. Ryton offered, and Elizabeth could sense that no further details would be forthcoming. The housekeeper's face remained solemn, but closed off now, as if the door to the past had been opened just a crack, only to be shut once more.

For the rest of the afternoon, Elizabeth found it impossible to focus on the household accounts. Her mind kept drifting back to the housekeeper's words, to the notion of an accident that had nearly erased the Hunton family. What had happened? How many lives had been lost? And why did it still weigh so heavily on Alexander?

She had never been more curious about anything in her life.

And she would not find the answers here, in this room, pouring over ledgers and inventories. She must find her husband, she decided.

CHAPTER 12

For a man so determined to remain elusive, Alexander was surprisingly predictable. Elizabeth thought as much when she knocked on his study door after dinner, knowing she would find him there. It had become his sanctuary, his escape, just as much as her solitude had become hers.

The door creaked open, and Alexander stood there, looking as surprised to see her now as he had been the night before. His expression, though calm, betrayed a flicker of uncertainty.

“Elizabeth,” he greeted her, his voice touched with surprise. “It’s late.”

“And I should be in bed?” she quirked a brow, half-amused by the suggestion.

He paused, eyeing her with the same measured gaze he always wore when he wasn’t sure of her intentions. “I heard you had a long and busy day, so naturally, yes,” he replied, his tone practical, as though she were one of the servants under his care.

“I’m not a child, Alexander,” she said, her voice soft but firm. The words struck her harder than she had intended. Was that truly how he saw her? As something to be managed, kept out of sight when not needed?

But then his earlier words registered fully, and her curiosity piqued. “Did you just say you heard about my day?” she asked, her brow furrowing.

He raised a brow, his face a study in nonchalance. “Did I?” he responded flatly,

though a hint of amusement played at the corner of his mouth. “I suppose I did.”

“Are you stalking me now?” she teased, though she could not help but wonder how closely he had been paying attention.

“With a house full of servants and the arrival of a new Duchess,” he began, leaning casually against the doorframe, “do you really think news of you would remain quiet?”

Elizabeth opened her mouth to respond, but faltered. “I... suppose you are right,” she admitted, her voice trailing off.

“I am hardly ever wrong, Elizabeth,” he said smoothly, his gaze steady upon her.

“And hardly ever humble, too, I see,” she quipped, her lips curling into a small smile. There was something different about him tonight, a subtle shift in his demeanor. His guard, though still present, seemed to have lowered just enough to allow a glimpse of the man beneath.

“Hardly ever does not imply totality, Liz dear,” he responded, and the familiar shortening of her name made her stiffen, though not entirely with displeasure.

Liz. She had not given him leave to call her such, yet there it was, rolling off his tongue as though it were perfectly natural. Before she could object to the familiarity, he continued, his tone as smooth as ever.

“Which means that I can be wrong sometimes,” he added. “And humble too. When I so wish.”

Elizabeth’s eyes narrowed, her amusement bubbling just beneath the surface. “You realize that a humble man would not call himself such?” she challenged, her gaze

locking with his.

“Do you only ever issue challenges from those lips of yours whenever they move?” Alexander chuckled, the sound low and deep, rolling through the air between them. His amusement was palpable, and yet, inexplicably, it sent warmth rushing to her cheeks.

Elizabeth lifted her chin, refusing to be flustered by him. “No. They move when I eat too,” she replied with a shrug, her tone insolent, daring him to continue the game.

“Right. I forgot her grace needs sustenance too,” he said slyly, the glint in his eyes unmistakable.

She narrowed her gaze, unsure if his remark carried hidden barbs or another layer of jest. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“Merely that you carry yourself with such an otherworldly air, one might assume basic human needs beneath you,” he replied smoothly, his expression unreadable, yet there was an edge of admiration in his words.

Elizabeth blinked, caught between indignation and uncertainty. Was he insulting her? Or offering some form of compliment masked in clever words?

“It’s a compliment, Elizabeth,” he said, his voice softer now, as though he had plucked the thought straight from her mind. “I could practically hear the gears in your head turning,” he teased, and once again, heat crept up her neck, staining her cheeks.

She hadn’t meant to react, but there it was—the undeniable flush of embarrassment. And yet, there was something different about the atmosphere between them now. The sharpness of their earlier exchanges had softened, and for the first time, she saw him truly amused, relaxed even. The tension that usually hung between them had

lessened, and she felt an unfamiliar urge to press her advantage while the moment lasted.

“Alexander,” she began, her voice carefully measured, though her heart was racing. She tried to sound composed, though inwardly she felt anything but.

“Elizabeth,” he returned, the humor still in his eyes, though now tinged with curiosity. His brow quirked, waiting for whatever she was about to say.

She hesitated for the briefest moment, but then decided to forge ahead. “The family tragedy, what happened?”

The shift in him was immediate.

Where a moment ago he had been like the most clement of weather, now he darkened, his entire demeanor transforming as though a storm had descended upon him. The amusement vanished from his eyes, replaced by something far more guarded—something that sent a chill down her spine.

Elizabeth swallowed, her earlier confidence rapidly fading in the face of the sudden change. She had known the question was delicate, but she hadn’t expected the force of his reaction. It was as though the very mention of the past had summoned the ghosts that lingered around him, shrouding him in shadows once more.

Had she indulged her curiosity too quickly? Had she crossed an unseen line?

“That is something you need not concern yourself with.” Alexander’s words were like a whip.

Elizabeth blinked, momentarily stunned by his brusqueness. But to her own surprise, her obstinacy flared, rising to the surface despite the nerves tightening in her chest.

“You do not think I should know?” she asked, her voice firmer than she expected.

“Perhaps I haven’t made myself clear enough,” he replied, his tone measured, but no less cold. “You and I have an arrangement. We lead our independent lives, out of each other’s hairs. And that includes minding our own businesses and not digging around the past.”

The chill in his voice sent a fresh wave of hurt through her. It was as though every word was meant to push her away, to remind her that she did not belong in the parts of him that truly mattered. Her heart ached, but she pressed on, determined to stand her ground.

“You make it sound as though I am being nosy in a matter that ought to be of my concern now that I am Duchess,” she said, forcing herself to remain steady, even as the weight of his indifference threatened to crush her resolve.

He exhaled, his gaze hardening. “I’ll give you a piece of advice, Your Grace ,” he said, his voice lowering to something almost dangerous. “The sooner you know your place as Duchess, the better you will find your new role and life here.”

Elizabeth felt the sting of his words as though he had slapped her. For a moment, she could not find her voice, her shock rendering her mute. His dismissal, his refusal to even consider her role as part of this family—it was more than she had been prepared to face.

She rose slowly, every movement deliberate, her manners holding her together even as her heart fractured under the weight of his coldness. “Goodnight,” she said curtly, refusing to let him see the full depth of her hurt, before turning and leaving the room.

Her footsteps echoed faintly as she made her way through the dim hallways, her mind reeling with the conversation, every word replaying in her head. How had it all gone

so wrong? How had they become such strangers?

Before she reached her chambers, the butler, Mr. Ryton, stopped her in the hallway. His presence broke through her storm of thoughts, though she barely managed to focus on him.

“The Viscountess Compton had this delivered for Your Graces earlier,” he said, extending two folded papers toward her.

Elizabeth took the invitations with a nod of thanks, though her mind remained elsewhere. The Viscountess’s assembly—an opportunity to appear publicly with Alexander. But now, after tonight’s exchange, what hope did she have of convincing him to attend?

She sighed softly, folding the invitations in her hand as she continued to her chambers. Perhaps it was best to wait, to approach him when the tension between them wasn’t so raw. She would ask him some other time. She wouldn’t give up—not yet.

Elizabeth heaved a sigh as her gaze fell once more on the Compton assembly invitations lying neatly on her desk. The event was in the coming week, and here she was, two days after receiving the invitations, no closer to convincing her husband to attend than she was to marrying off her spinster cousin by the season’s end.

Hopeless. That was how she felt.

The days had grown repetitive, empty in their isolation. She was now accustomed to dining alone, the quietness of her meals becoming a bitter companion. Since the night she had dared question Alexander about the family tragedy, she had seen him but once. A fleeting glimpse through the drawing room window, where he strode across the grounds with his steward in tow, his expression as distant as ever.

It seemed, if anything, he was more determined to keep her at arm's length now, locking her in the very box he had warned her to stay in.

But the question lingered in her mind—would she stay there? Could she, even if she wished to? The restlessness in her heart refused to be so easily quelled.

Before she could dwell further on her tangled emotions, the sound of muffled voices in the hallway drew her attention. She paused, listening intently, then rose from her seat, curiosity pricking at her.

“Oh, I think we should just tell her,” came a voice, low and hesitant, from just beyond the study door.

Elizabeth moved closer, her brow furrowing. She reached for the handle and opened the door to find Mr. Ryton, the butler, and Mrs. Ryton, the housekeeper, standing in the hall. Both wore identical expressions of sheepishness, caught mid-conversation.

“Oh, Your Grace,” Mrs. Ryton cleared her throat, recovering quickly. “Pardon the disturbance.”

Elizabeth glanced between them, her curiosity deepening. “What is it?”

“It’s just that there’s been a caller for His Grace,” Mr. Ryton explained, his voice careful. “But he’s out on estate rounds and isn’t expected back until late afternoon.”

“A caller?” Elizabeth echoed.

Who could possibly be calling during their honeymoon? And more importantly, what could be the reason for such an abrupt visit? Elizabeth’s thoughts spun as she stared at the butler and housekeeper.

“She’s waiting in the drawing room, Your Grace,” Mrs. Ryton added, her expression carefully neutral.

“She?” Elizabeth echoed, her surprise deepening. A woman? What business could a lady have with her husband, especially now?

Forcing herself to regain composure, she straightened her posture. “I shall receive her in his stead, then.”

With a nod from Mrs. Ryton, Elizabeth made her way toward the drawing room, her mind racing with speculation. She hadn’t expected any more surprises today, but as she stepped inside, she was confronted with yet another.

“Lady Winston?” Elizabeth blurted, her surprise impossible to conceal as she stared at the widow she had met at the modiste’s just days before.

CHAPTER 13

“M y, I didn’t realize I’d be seeing the Duchess instead.” Lady Winston swiveled in her chair upon Elizabeth’s entrance, a pleasant smile on her lips. The lightness of her tone, however, gave Elizabeth pause.

For a brief moment, Elizabeth’s brows furrowed, though she quickly schooled her expression, choosing not to dwell on the Countess’s remark. What business could this woman have with her husband? And why was it so urgent that she couldn’t wait until their honeymoon had ended?

“Then again, I should have sent word of my visit beforehand,” Lady Winston chuckled lightly, as though the lack of courtesy was nothing more than an amusing oversight.

Elizabeth moved to the bell and rang for tea, all the while trying to gather her thoughts. “I didn’t realize you were acquainted with the Duke,” she said, her voice carefully measured.

“Oh, Alexander and I have been good friends for years,” Lady Winston replied smoothly, her use of his given name as casual as if they were in the midst of a private conversation. The ease with which the widow addressed her husband sent a small ripple of discomfort through Elizabeth. She swallowed, willing herself not to dwell on the implications. But still, the question lingered—what manner of friendship existed between a widowed Countess and a Duke?

“I’m afraid the Duke is not home at present,” Elizabeth said, her tone polite but firm.

“So I was told,” the Countess replied, her air of nonchalance unwavering, as if Alexander’s absence meant little to her. “I suppose I should offer my felicitations on your marriage then, Lady Elizabeth,” she added, a smile curving her lips.

Elizabeth’s grip tightened slightly on the arm of her chair. Lady Elizabeth . The title, so pointedly used, struck her with the force of a subtle jab. Was it deliberate? Did Lady Winston mean to dismiss her newly acquired status as Duchess, or was this some casual disregard?

“Thank you,” Elizabeth replied, her voice steady despite the unease twisting inside her.

“The country air never disappoints, does it? You’re practically glowing, Lady Elizabeth,” Lady Winston said with a smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. “Or is it the marriage?” she added with a curious air, her gaze sweeping over Elizabeth in a way that made her skin prickle with discomfort.

Elizabeth forced a smile, though inwardly, she felt the tightness of uncertainty growing. “Could be both,” she responded, trying to sound pleasant while attempting to collect her scattered thoughts.

Lady Winston’s eyes gleamed with something—satisfaction, perhaps—as she leaned forward slightly. “Oh, I wouldn’t be surprised. Alexander knows how to take care of a woman. I am sure you know that now,” she said with a shameless chuckle, the implication hanging heavily in the air between them.

Elizabeth’s stomach turned. If she had entertained any doubt before, Lady Winston’s words all but confirmed her worst suspicions. There was no mistaking the allusion, no hiding from the truth now glaringly clear: Alexander had a mistress. And that mistress, it seemed, was Lady Winston.

The realization stung, sharper than she had expected. Why it hurt so much, she could not fully understand. After all, it was hardly unusual for a man of Alexander's rank to have had a mistress, especially one who had been a bachelor for so long. But still, the thought of it—of him—carved a hollow ache into her chest.

Even as her heart squeezed painfully, Elizabeth maintained her smile, her composure intact. She could not afford to let her emotions show. Not now. Not in front of this woman. "We all have our talents, I suppose," she managed, her voice tight. "And being a gentleman is one of my husband's."

She prayed that she was wrong, that the insinuations were nothing more than baseless gossip. But the confidence with which Lady Winston spoke, the brazenness of her words—it was difficult to believe otherwise. And the fact that the widow had followed them all the way to the country, during their honeymoon no less, only made it worse.

Would Alexander's relationship with her truly remain in the past? The nagging doubt clawed at her as she glanced at Lady Winston once more. The woman exuded familiarity, as if she had a claim on Alexander that Elizabeth, his wife, did not yet understand.

The arrival of the tea offered a brief respite from the tension, and Elizabeth moved to serve them, her hands steady despite the storm roiling within her.

Lady Winston continued without missing a beat, her voice sweet but edged with something darker. "I ought to have waited for Alexander to return to Town to give my felicitations on his marriage, but I'm afraid some unpleasant news I heard couldn't wait. I simply had to pass it along to him immediately."

Elizabeth paused, her heart skipping a beat. "Unpleasant news?"

“The scandal, I’m afraid, seems to have left plenty of dust behind,” Lady Winston remarked, taking a graceful sip of her tea. Her voice was calm, but the weight of her words settled heavily in the room.

Elizabeth remained outwardly composed, but inside, her stomach twisted with apprehension. She waited, her hands steady on the delicate teacup, though her heart raced as she sensed something far worse coming.

“Society spreads rumor of an affair between you and Sterlin’s brother. An affair they believe you are carrying into your marriage,” Lady Winston continued, confirming the dread that had been simmering beneath the surface.

The words hit Elizabeth like a physical blow. She felt the color drain from her face, a wave of nausea rising in her throat. How twisted the aristocracy could be, to weave such vile fabrications. She could hardly breathe for the sickness and humiliation that gripped her.

“I thought it best to warn Alexander at once of these lies before they got out of hand, of course,” Lady Winston went on, her tone light as though she were speaking of some trivial matter. But her words were filled with something darker—a sense of satisfaction, perhaps, in delivering such damning news.

“But now that I’ve told you, I am sure there is nothing to worry about. And that these rumors are just the lies they have always been?” she added, her gaze sharp, the question in her statement more pointed than Elizabeth had expected. The skepticism in Lady Winston’s green eyes was unmistakable, her disbelief thinly veiled behind a polite smile.

Elizabeth swallowed hard, summoning every ounce of control she had. She could not let this woman see how deeply the rumors had shaken her. Instead, she returned Lady Winston’s gaze with an unperturbed smile. “Why, I should think a woman of your

caliber would be able to tell the truth apart from falsities in such rumors,” she replied, her voice steady and calm, though her insides churned.

Lady Winston’s eyes widened slightly, clearly taken aback by Elizabeth’s unexpected composure. But she recovered quickly, her expression smoothing over with practiced grace. “That is why I thought to break the news to you and possibly nip the rumors in the bud soon.”

“How very thoughtful of you,” Elizabeth responded with cool politeness, reaching for a sugar-coated cookie as though nothing at all had unsettled her. She took a small bite, though the sweetness barely registered. “The gesture will be remembered,” she added, her words carrying a subtle edge.

“I am sure Alexander—” Lady Winston began again, clearly not yet finished.

“Will find the rumors as interesting as I do,” Elizabeth interrupted, her tone firm but light, cutting off whatever further venom the woman might have wished to spread.

Lady Winston’s face stiffened, a flicker of discomfort passing over her features as she reached for her tea once more. It seemed the conversation had not gone as she had expected.

Elizabeth, however, felt her appetite vanish entirely. The afternoon with Lady Winston had left a bitter taste in her mouth, one that no amount of tea or sweets could ever wash away.

At dinner time, Elizabeth made the decision to seek her husband out rather than force herself to sit through another lonely meal. The weight of Lady Winston’s visit lingered heavily on her, and she could no longer bear the silence of the dining room.

She found Alexander in the one room he seemed to favor for his self-imposed

isolation. The moment she stepped inside, he glanced up, his brow lifting in mild surprise.

“Isn’t it time for dinner?” he asked, a hint of amusement lacing his tone.

“I should say the same to you,” she countered, stepping further into the room.

He straightened, his expression shifting slightly. “I did not marry you to have you skipping your meals and starving yourself, Elizabeth.”

Elizabeth’s heart gave a painful twist. Like he cared, she thought bitterly. His concern rang hollow to her ears, given the distance he had kept between them. Still, she pushed those thoughts aside and focused on the matter that had driven her here.

“You had a caller earlier,” she said, ignoring his remark as she folded her hands before her, doing her best to sound casual.

His brow rose higher, curiosity flashing in his eyes. “Oh?”

“Lady Winston was most disappointed when she was told you were out,” Elizabeth continued, keeping her tone light, though her stomach churned at the memory.

“Georgianna called?” he blurted before quickly correcting himself, “I mean, the Countess was here?”

Elizabeth noticed the brief slip, and it sent a fresh wave of hurt coursing through her. The way his expression shifted—something unspoken passing over his features—was all the confirmation she needed.

She swallowed the lump rising in her throat, trying to steady her voice. “Oh, do not seem overly surprised, Alexander,” she said, her words cutting. “After all, I am sure

you wouldn't be the first man in England to be paid a visit by his mistress during what is supposed to be his honeymoon."

His expression darkened instantly, his brow furrowing in confusion and displeasure. "The Countess is not my mistress, Elizabeth. Wherever did you get such a notion from?"

Elizabeth's chest tightened at the earnestness in his voice, but the hurt from Lady Winston's visit still burned fiercely within her. "I'm afraid her visit and your relationship couldn't have been clearer even to a blind man," she retorted, her voice betraying the sting of her emotions.

Alexander's eyes narrowed, and his tone grew more serious. "Do not make assumptions and conclusions without any basis," he warned.

"Oh, but the Countess gave me all the basis I needed," she replied, her words sharp as she met his gaze head-on, refusing to back down.

He exhaled, his patience clearly thinning. "Did she mention why she called?" he asked, his tone more measured now, though there was an edge of frustration beneath it.

Elizabeth's composure was slipping, the anger and pain she had been holding back now spilling forth. "Perhaps you should return her call and ask her yourself," she suggested coldly, unable to keep the bitterness from her voice.

The room seemed to grow heavier with the weight of their silence. Finally, Alexander spoke again, his voice low but firm. "There is nothing between me and that woman, Elizabeth," he repeated, his eyes locking with hers.

For a fleeting moment, something about the way he spoke, the earnestness in his

expression, made her hesitate. There was a sincerity in his voice that almost made her want to believe him.

But who was she fooling? This was no business of hers. She was not truly married to Alexander, not in the way a wife should be. Whatever affairs he conducted and with whomever he pleased, it was no concern of hers. They had entered into an arrangement, nothing more—an arrangement to protect both their family honors after the unfortunate misunderstandings that had brought them to this point.

Elizabeth swallowed hard, the bitter reality settling in her chest. She had to accept it. This was her life now.

“She claimed to have called to give you a warning about some... unpleasant rumors she’d heard in society about our marriage,” she said, keeping her voice as even as she could. “Specifically, about me.”

Alexander’s brow furrowed, his gaze darkening with curiosity. “And those are?”

Elizabeth hesitated for the briefest moment before continuing, the words tasting foul as they passed her lips. “Society believes me to be in an affair with your brother despite my marriage to you,” she said quietly, the humiliation rising within her as she spoke.

Alexander ran a hand through his hair in frustration, his expression hardening. “Good heavens,” he muttered, his voice heavy with exasperation. “Will the troubles never end?”

He let out a long breath, his hand running over his face. “Was that all she said?” he asked.

“All that you will not deny,” Elizabeth replied, her voice sharper than she intended.

She was tired—tired of the secrecy, the suspicions, the distance between them. The pain that had been simmering inside her boiled over, and for once, she didn't care if her words cut.

Alexander's jaw tightened, his expression hardening at her insinuation. She saw the anger flare in his eyes, but she was too hurt, too humiliated, to care about his feelings in that moment.

The tension in the room was palpable, the silence thick with unspoken words. Finally, Elizabeth broke it, her tone more controlled but no less determined. "The Viscountess of Compton has sent us invitations to her assembly," she said, deciding that she might as well speak her mind while they had the opportunity for conversation. It wasn't often that she had his attention.

"If indeed there is an element of truth to what the Countess said," she continued, "and those rumors are circulating, then I believe making a public appearance together might help to douse them somewhat." She hoped her words would encourage him, that he might see reason in her suggestion.

Alexander remained silent for a long time, his gaze distant as though he were weighing her words carefully. The tension between them stretched, the quiet almost suffocating.

At last, he spoke, his voice low and measured. "I shall think about it."

Hardly reassuring, Elizabeth thought bitterly as she turned to leave his study.

CHAPTER 14

“Broughton, what in the world are you doing back here?” Alexander clapped his friend on the shoulder as Colin was ushered into his study.

“I had some property to view in the neighboring village and thought to drop by after,” the Marquess replied with a grin.

Alexander couldn't help but feel a sense of relief at the sight of him. Colin had always been a welcome distraction from the burdens that weighed heavily on his mind. He poured them both a drink and handed one to his friend.

“So, how's the new life going?” Colin asked, stretching his legs out comfortably over the rug and crossing them at the ankles, a picture of ease.

Alexander felt a sigh escape him, unbidden. The question hit closer to home than his friend could have known. His new life, this marriage—on the surface, it was just as expected, but beneath it, there was a constant tug of tension. Keeping Elizabeth at a distance was one thing, but managing her curiosity about his past was proving to be far more difficult than he'd anticipated. And now, there was Georgianna's meddling to contend with.

He had always known the widow to be relentless, but even he had underestimated her persistence. To show up during his honeymoon—her audacity left him speechless. And worse, Elizabeth now believed her to be his mistress. No matter what he said, she wouldn't be swayed from that notion. The very thought of it made his chest tighten with frustration.

It wasn't just the lies that troubled him. What unnerved him most was his growing desire for Elizabeth to believe him . He wanted her trust—needed it, for reasons he could not fully explain. The idea that she viewed him with suspicion perturbed him, unsettling in a way he hadn't expected.

“Well, that sigh doesn't sound very promising,” Colin remarked, his gaze sharp as he watched him over the rim of his tumbler.

Alexander offered a wry smile, swirling the brandy in his glass. “Suffice to say, I am still navigating the tides,” he replied, his voice more guarded than he'd intended.

“Hopefully not in a storm?” Colin's tone shifted slightly, concern flickering in his eyes.

Alexander chuckled lightly, though there was little humor in it. “I have to keep the storm at bay. Isn't that what marriage is all about?”

It was, indeed, a most daunting task.

“The unflattering aspect of it, I suppose,” Colin shrugged, taking a sip from his glass.

“Flattering? You find marriage flattering?” Alexander couldn't help but laugh at the absurdity of it. His marriage, thus far, had felt anything but flattering.

“From afar, yes,” Colin replied with a mischievous grin. “For example, it looks good on you so far,” he added impishly, his tone full of jest.

Alexander shot him a look, which only made his friend roar with laughter. But beneath the banter, Alex's mind was already turning over the rumors Georgianna had delivered. If anyone would have a finger on the pulse of society, it was Colin.

“So, how fare the rumors in town?” Alexander asked, his tone more casual than he felt.

Colin raised a brow, but answered readily. “I believe society has made its peace with the scandal,” he said, referring to the unfortunate circumstances that had led to Alexander’s hasty marriage to Elizabeth.

But Alexander frowned, confusion knitting his brow. “I speak not of the scandal precisely, but of the new rumors about the Duchess,” he clarified, his voice more serious now.

Colin blinked, his expression shifting to one of genuine surprise. “What are you talking about?” he asked, clearly at a loss.

Alexander exhaled, feeling the frustration begin to coil within him again. He briefly shared what he had been told about Elizabeth and Percy, though he deliberately left out the identity of the person who had brought the news to him. There was no need to drag Georgianna’s name into this conversation—at least not yet.

Colin frowned in thought, his brow furrowing as he processed the information. “Perhaps these rumors started after I left town already,” he mused aloud.

Alexander clenched his jaw. Could Georgianna have been lying? He wouldn’t put it past her—causing trouble in his marriage would be entirely in keeping with her vindictive nature. But then again, could there be any truth to her words? He couldn’t shake the uncertainty prickling at him.

“How long have you been out of Town, then?” Alexander asked, hoping to gain some clarity.

“Oh, I left town the day after you did. I had a brief stop in Essex first,” Colin replied,

his voice thoughtful.

Alexander felt his frustration deepen. If Colin had left so soon after him, there was little chance he would have heard anything about these rumors. Which left him no closer to the truth than before.

Could Georgianna possibly be telling the truth?

Alexander knew he needed to confront Georgianna at the earliest opportunity, to put an end to her schemes once and for all. But perhaps, for now, a warning—delivered through a carefully penned letter—would suffice. The thought brought him a measure of resolve.

“I have another property to view in an hour. I best be on my way, then,” Colin said, rising from his chair at last.

They walked together toward the front hall, and as Colin reached for his coat, he turned back with a grin. “Give my regards to the Duchess, would you?”

Before Alexander could respond, a voice cut in, soft but clear.

“She’s heard you already.”

Both men turned, their gazes lifting in surprise to find Elizabeth approaching, her graceful figure framed by the doorway.

“How pleasant to see you here, Lord Broughton,” she said with a smile that warmed the room, her eyes a brilliant blue that seemed to catch the morning light. The simple morning dress she wore flattered her pale, porcelain-like skin, and as she moved toward them, Alexander found himself momentarily transfixed.

He had managed to avoid her for days now, convincing himself it was for the best, but the truth was that her absence had done little to ease the constant invasion of his thoughts. He yearned for her—deeply, inexplicably—and the sight of her now only intensified that longing, a sensation he had tried so hard to suppress.

Quickly, he schooled his expression, locking away the emotions that threatened to surface. “That saves me delivering the message, then,” he said, his tone casual, though his mind was anything but.

Elizabeth chuckled, the sound light and teasing. “How lazy of you to find such simple tasks as delivering messages tedious,” she quipped, casting him a playful glance before turning back to Colin.

Colin, always quick with a charm, stepped forward with a smile. “It is even more pleasant seeing Her Grace’s lovely face,” he said, bowing gracefully as he lifted her hand and pressed a kiss to her knuckles.

Alexander’s chest tightened as a soft pink blush rose to Elizabeth’s cheeks. It was a small reaction, but one that stirred something fierce within him. He did not like it—the manner in which she was smiling at Colin, or to any other man for that matter.

“Are you in the country for a while?” Elizabeth asked, her voice as light as ever, though Alexander could sense the subtle undercurrent of curiosity in her tone.

“I came to view a few properties I intend to purchase in the area,” Colin replied easily. “I might linger a little longer to see the processes through,” he added with a grin.

At that moment, Alexander’s gaze met his wife’s. There was something unreadable in her expression—tentative, perhaps, but veiled, as though she was weighing her next words carefully. Then, almost too quickly, she shifted her attention back to Colin.

“Why, that sounds like the perfect opportunity to host you for dinner then,” she said with a pleasant smile.

Colin beamed, never one to refuse a generous offer. “I never turn down a free meal.”

“Excellent,” Elizabeth replied, her tone smooth.

But when her eyes met Alexander’s again, he caught the brief flicker of triumph in her gaze. It was unmistakable. She had set something in motion, and the realization sent a jolt of unease through him. What exactly was she playing at?

As they watched Colin make his departure, Alexander couldn’t shake the feeling of being outmaneuvered. He felt as though the ground was shifting beneath him, trapping him in a game he hadn’t realized he was part of.

“Care to share your little game?” he asked once Colin was out of earshot as they walked together through the hallway.

Elizabeth paused, her footsteps halting as she turned to face him. “I beg your pardon?” she responded, feigning innocence with such ease it only deepened his wariness.

“Oh, do not feign innocence with me, Elizabeth,” Alexander chuckled, though the sound lacked warmth. There was something brewing, something he couldn’t yet grasp. “You’re playing at something here, for your dinner invitation to Broughton was not without a motive.”

“Is that so?” she asked, raising a brow as she came to a full stop in the hallway, forcing him to do the same.

Her face was a picture of innocence, her expression so composed that it nearly

convinced him— nearly . But he knew better. She was playing a game, and he was at the center of it, though he couldn't yet see the full board.

“I have no inkling what you are talking about,” she said sweetly.

“Is that so?” Alexander stepped deliberately closer, and the flicker of satisfaction he felt when she instinctively took a step back was undeniable. The delightful pink that bloomed across her cheeks as she looked up at him only added to his enjoyment.

“Perhaps I need an incentive to share that motive,” she said, her voice soft but filled with challenge.

He quirked an amused brow. “I thought you claimed yourself without an ulterior motive just now?”

“That was before I saw an opportunity,” she responded slyly, her gaze steady.

He couldn't help but laugh. She was far more cunning than he'd given her credit for. “An opportunity for what?” he asked, genuinely intrigued now.

“An opportunity to gain something out of your curiosity,” she replied, her confidence matching his.

The sound of his own laughter surprised him. She was delightful—he had to admit that. There was something invigorating about the way she played the game, how she never backed down.

“Well then, pray tell, what incentive do you need?” he asked, his voice lowering as he closed the distance between them.

“An answer,” she said plainly. “About the Compton assembly invitations,” she added,

her tone light, but her eyes filled with determination.

“You do not give up, do you?” he asked, shaking his head in disbelief.

“Never,” she replied, jutting her chin out in defiance, the gesture both endearing and maddening.

“Ominous,” Alexander chuckled again, thoroughly entertained by the exchange.

“So? Will you go to the assembly?” she pressed, her persistence unwavering.

His gaze drifted downward, settling on her lips as she spoke, and for a moment, the conversation faded into the background. She was so insistent, so focused on the blasted Compton invitations, but all he could think about was whether she would stop talking if he kissed her.

He took another step toward her, and her eyes widened in surprise. He felt a thrill of satisfaction when she found herself backed against the wall. He liked the way she looked at him now—unsure but still determined, her breath quickening as he drew closer.

And he liked the idea of keeping her right there, his prisoner in that moment, caught between defiance and something else entirely.

Alex raised his hand, letting his fingers trail lightly along her jawline. He relished the way the soft pink in her cheeks deepened under his touch, her reaction delightfully visible.

“Liz, dear,” he said, his voice low and teasing, “didn’t I tell you that I’d think about the invitations?”

Her lips parted slightly, as if she meant to respond, but no sound came forth. Her breath caught, and Alex felt an almost instinctual pull, his head lowering toward hers.

“A little patience,” he murmured, his voice barely a whisper now, “would get you your answer.”

Her eyes fluttered shut, and for a moment, the space between them all but disappeared. The temptation to close the gap, to kiss her, was nearly overwhelming. He could feel the warmth of her breath, sense the tension in the air as they hovered on the edge of something dangerous.

But just when their faces were barely a breath apart, Alex abruptly pulled back, stepping away and putting a deliberate distance between them. The sudden withdrawal was as much for his own restraint as it was to toy with her.

Her eyes flew open, wide with surprise, and there, unmistakably, was a flicker of disappointment. It almost made him laugh—though he had to admit he was just as affected by their closeness as she was. But playing this game, leaving her wanting, was far more entertaining.

This should be fun, he thought, an impish smile curling at the corner of his mouth.

“I—I will need to see Mrs. Ryton about the dinner...” she stammered, her composure crumbling as her voice came out flustered and breathless.

Without waiting for a response, she turned quickly on her heels and hurried down the hallway, practically skipping out of his sight. Alex watched her retreat, his amusement still lingering, though the urge to chase after her remained strong.

CHAPTER 15

Elizabeth was mortified. God help her, but she had wanted her husband to kiss her, she realized with a rush of heat that only deepened her humiliation.

And the worst part? He'd teased her—played with her emotions, no doubt aware of the effect he had on her. The nerve of him! She clenched her fists at her sides, the memory of his smug expression flashing vividly in her mind. He had pulled away at the last possible moment, leaving her flustered and vulnerable, all while he seemed to relish her reaction.

But what truly unsettled her was the fact that she had betrayed herself. She had practically handed him her interest, her weakness, on a silver platter. And Alexander, ever perceptive, had exploited it for his own amusement. The way his eyes had gleamed with smug satisfaction—it was infuriating.

Elizabeth shut the door to her study behind her and leaned heavily against it, trying to steady her breath. The moment replayed over and over in her mind, each time deepening her embarrassment. She was slightly miffed, not just at him, but at herself. How had she allowed herself to be so easily swept up in the moment?

One minute, he was cold, distant, treating her like a stranger, and the next, he was teasing her, playing the part of a man enjoying his game. The whiplash of his behavior left her unsettled, unsure of how to respond or how to guard herself against his unpredictable moods.

A sudden knock on the door startled her, causing her to jump. Elizabeth's heart raced

again, this time from the fear that Alex had followed her. Was he here to mock her, to see how flustered she still was?

She quickly collected herself, straightening her dress and smoothing her hair before opening the door. Relief washed over her when she saw Mrs. Ryton standing there, not her teasing husband.

“Your Grace, I hope I’m not interrupting,” the housekeeper said, her voice polite and measured.

“Not at all,” Elizabeth reassured, trying to calm the remaining flutter in her chest.

“I’ve found a girl to permanently fill the position of your lady’s maid,” Mrs. Ryton announced. “She’s in the drawing room. Perhaps you’d like to assess her now?”

Elizabeth nodded, grateful for the distraction. “Very well,” she replied, following the housekeeper out.

Elizabeth welcomed the distraction of something— anything —other than her husband.

“This is Miss Lydia Harper, Your Grace,” Mrs. Ryton introduced. “She comes with excellent recommendations from the Merrifield estate in Dorset.”

Elizabeth nodded, gesturing for the girl to take a seat. Lydia Harper, though young, held herself with an air of calmness that Elizabeth immediately noted. Her brown frock was neat and modest, and her hands—though clasped tightly—did not tremble.

“Miss Harper,” Elizabeth began, “I understand you have experience as a lady’s maid. Tell me about your duties at Merrifield.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” Lydia replied with a slight smile. “I was lady’s maid to Miss Merrifield for three years. I attended to her dressing, her correspondence, and her daily needs. I also ensured her wardrobe was properly cared for and managed. I often traveled with her when she visited family in the north.”

Elizabeth tilted her head slightly, impressed by the young woman’s clarity and poise. “And why did you leave the Merrifield household?”

Lydia’s eyes flickered briefly with what Elizabeth assumed was hesitation before she replied. “Miss Merrifield recently married, Your Grace, and her new household already had an established lady’s maid. She was kind enough to recommend me for new employment.”

“I see,” Elizabeth said, nodding thoughtfully. She liked that the girl was straightforward in her answers. “And are you comfortable managing various tasks beyond what you mentioned?”

“Very much so, Your Grace. I am quite organized, and I take pride in keeping a steady schedule for my mistress,” Lydia replied with quiet confidence.

Elizabeth glanced at Mrs. Ryton, who gave a small nod of approval. “Miss Harper, I believe you shall do well here.”

“Thank you, Your Grace,” Lydia said, rising and curtsying. “I will do my utmost to meet your expectations.”

“Mrs. Ryton will acquaint you with the routines of the household.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” Lydia replied, standing with another graceful curtsy.

After Miss Harper had left the room with Mrs. Ryton, Elizabeth took a deep breath,

feeling better. It had been a small distraction, but one she had needed. “I shall miss Esther, but she will do well.”

“I am glad she is up to your standards, Your Grace,” Mrs. Ryton replied, her tone respectful and neutral.

Elizabeth smiled faintly. She certainly wasn’t accustomed to demanding much from a maid, and the idea of high expectations felt almost foreign.

“Mrs. Ryton,” Elizabeth called out as the housekeeper made to leave.

“Yes, Your Grace?” Mrs. Ryton paused, waiting attentively.

“We shall be hosting the Marquess of Broughton for dinner tomorrow evening,” Elizabeth announced, feeling the need to make herself useful, if only in the smallest of ways.

“Very well, Your Grace. I shall have cook draw up a menu for your sampling and assessment,” Mrs. Ryton replied smoothly, offering a slight curtsy before she took her leave.

Sleep eluded Elizabeth that night. Her thoughts were tempestuous. She had entered this union out of necessity, and yet... something lingered between her and Alexander that unsettled her in ways she couldn’t quite explain.

Finally, unable to endure the silence of her chambers any longer, she rose from her bed, wrapped a dressing dress around her shoulders, and slipped quietly into the dimly lit hallways. The manor was asleep, and she moved toward the library, hoping to find a book to calm her restless mind.

As she pushed open the heavy mahogany doors, she was met with the faint glow of

candlelight—and the unexpected sight of Alexander, seated in an armchair by the hearth, a book open on his lap. His dark hair was slightly tousled, his posture was relaxed as he read, and he did not appear to be aware of her presence.

Elizabeth hesitated, unsure whether to retreat or announce herself. But the quiet of the room and the sight of him there, alone, drew her in. She cleared her throat softly, and his gaze lifted from the book, surprise flashing across his face.

“Elizabeth,” he said, the quiet of the room emphasizing the rich timbre of his voice. “I did not expect to see you wandering the manor at this hour.”

She managed a small smile, stepping further into the room. “Nor did I expect to find you here, Your Grace. I was... unable to sleep.”

His brow lifted slightly, a hint of amusement in his expression. “You have come in search of a book to remedy that, I presume?”

She nodded, moving toward the shelves, her fingers lightly trailing over the spines of the books. “I thought perhaps reading might help.”

“And what sort of books do you seek?” he asked, setting his own aside and rising from his chair to join her by the shelves. “I admit, I did not take you for one who spent late nights with books for company.”

Elizabeth glanced at him, catching the glimmer of amusement still in his eyes. “And I did not take you for a reader, Your Grace,” she replied, her tone light, but beneath the teasing, she felt the tension between them stir.

A faint smile tugged at the corner of his lips. “You would be surprised at what I read.”

Her curiosity was now piqued, and Elizabeth tilted her head. “Is that so? What do you read then, besides estate matters and the endless correspondence from London?”

Alexander chuckled softly. “History, politics... but occasionally, I find myself drawn to the works of adventurers. Tales of distant lands, wild journeys beyond our little world.”

Elizabeth’s eyes widened. “I enjoy those stories as well. They take me away from... all of this.” She gestured vaguely around her. “I’ve always been fascinated by tales of exploration, of venturing into the unknown.”

Alexander raised a brow, his voice softening as he asked, “Do you yearn for adventure, Elizabeth?”

She looked away, her fingers stalling on the spine of a book as she considered his question. A moment passed before she nodded, her voice quiet. “I suppose I do... though I never truly had the chance. My world has always been rather small.”

A faint smile touched his lips when she looked up at him, as though her admission amused him in a way she couldn’t quite place. He turned to the shelves and retrieved a book, one with a worn leather cover. “Perhaps this will suffice for tonight’s adventure,” he said, handing it to her.

As their hands met, their fingers brushed—briefly at first, but neither pulled away. His hand lingered on hers, the warmth of his touch spreading through her. Her breath caught as their eyes met, and the room felt smaller, the air heavier, as if the space between them had narrowed to nothing.

Elizabeth quickly glanced down at the book he had given her. *Tales of the Far East: Journeys into the Beyond*. She smiled, though her heart still raced from the unexpected touch. “Thank you,” she whispered.

He regarded. “Are you certain one book will suffice? You seem like the sort who might devour it before morning.”

Elizabeth’s cheeks warmed, and she quickly tried to compose herself. “I suppose I’ll manage with just one, Your Grace. But I thank you for your concern.”

“I shall have more ready should you finish before the dawn,” he teased, though the air between them still crackled.

Elizabeth smiled. “I shall be sure to pace myself then.”

They stood there for a moment longer as the silence between them grew once more. Alexander’s gaze lingered on hers, his eyes unreadable, and for a moment, Elizabeth wondered if he, too, felt the pull that had drawn her here, to him, on this quiet night.

Finally, breaking the moment, he took a step back. “Goodnight, Elizabeth.”

“Goodnight, Your Grace,” she replied.

But neither of them moved. They stood by the door, their eyes still locked. For a brief second, it seemed as if something more might happen, as if the air between them might shift again—but then, as though realizing that she needed to leave, Elizabeth tore her gaze from his, her heart pounding.

Without another word, she turned and hurried from the room, clutching the book to her chest, her thoughts swirling in the wake of their encounter. She could still feel the warmth of his touch lingering on her skin,

“Ah, nothing quite like the sight of a hearty meal,” Broughton gushed, his eyes alight with enthusiasm as they settled into their dinner.

Elizabeth forced a smile, though her thoughts were elsewhere. It was the first meal she was sharing with her husband since their marriage, and it had taken inviting his friend just to secure that small liberty. The thought left her with a quiet sense of dejection. How strange, she mused, that she had to orchestrate the presence of another to simply sit with her own husband.

“Have you been starving all this while, Colin?” Alexander teased, his tone light as he glanced at his jovial friend.

“If the Sterlin cook’s meals are still as exquisite as I recall, then yes. I have been starved of his culinary magic,” the Marquess replied with a grin, his good humor infectious. Elizabeth found herself laughing softly, caught up in the warmth of the moment.

“You have a stingy husband, Elizabeth,” Colin turned to her, his eyes gleaming with mischief. “He never bothered to invite me to dinner like this.”

“We will have to remedy that, I see,” Elizabeth responded with another chuckle, though her laughter faltered slightly when her gaze met Alexander’s across the table.

His eyes were on her—steady, burning with an intensity she couldn’t quite decipher. The look sent an unexpected warmth coursing through her, unsettling her in the most maddening way. Her fingers instinctively tightened around her fork, the sensation spreading through her entire body. How was it that he could make her feel so acutely aware of him, even in moments like these?

She hated it—this constant, unbearable awareness of him. Even in his absence, her thoughts were plagued by the idea of him, by the memory of his touch, the sound of his voice. It was a torment she couldn’t escape, and yet... a part of her reveled in it, delighted in the way he had taken up residence in her mind.

“With meals like this, we are well on our way to doing just that,” Colin added heartily, pulling her from her thoughts. “You heard that, Sterlin? Your wife intends to remedy my starvation as your friend,” he added with a playful grin toward Alexander.

The dining room rang with laughter, the ease between the men palpable. But as Elizabeth sat there, her own laughter fading, she reminded herself of the second purpose for this dinner. The gentlemen were relaxed, which meant it was time to set her plan in motion. If she could catch Alexander in this mood, perhaps she could finally get him to agree to the Compton assembly.

“Since you are in the country, I presume you will be attending the Compton assembly?” Elizabeth asked Lord Broughton, her tone deliberately casual as she sipped her wine.

She had orchestrated this dinner carefully. It wasn’t merely an excuse to share a meal with her husband—something that had become frustratingly rare—but a calculated opportunity to use Colin’s influence to her advantage. Her gaze remained steady on Colin, though she could sense Alexander’s presence acutely beside her.

“I never miss an opportunity for a good gathering,” Colin replied, a broad smile lighting his face.

“As a matter of fact, we shall be attending as well,” Elizabeth said smoothly, shifting her gaze to meet Alexander’s. She held his eyes with quiet determination, knowing full well what she was doing. “It will be our first public appearance as a married couple, and we are very much looking forward to it.”

There. The words were spoken, and with them, the trap was set.

Now, let us see you wriggle out of this, Alexander, she thought, her gaze unwavering. She watched as his eyes narrowed slightly, the flicker of realization

crossing his face. He knew. He understood the game she had just played, and his look told her he was well aware of the predicament in which she had placed him.

“Even more reason for me to attend,” Colin declared with enthusiasm, oblivious to the tension between husband and wife. “A first appearance as a couple—how splendid it shall be! Especially in the relaxed atmosphere of the country.”

“Indeed,” Elizabeth replied, her voice light, though inwardly she reveled in her triumph. The remainder of the meal passed without incident, the gentlemen in good spirits, and Elizabeth content in her small victory.

Once Colin had departed, Alexander turned to her, his expression calm but carrying the weight of something unsaid. “Are you quite satisfied now?” he asked, his voice carrying a note of dry amusement. “And do not feign innocence, Elizabeth,” he added with a slight smirk.

“Oh, I had no intention of doing so,” Elizabeth replied. “And to answer your question, yes, I am quite satisfied.”

He chuckled, the sound low and dark, his eyes never leaving hers. “I suspected your invitation to Colin was not entirely without motive.”

Elizabeth allowed a small shrug, insolent yet graceful. “One cannot fault a wife for being resourceful.”

Their eyes met again, the tension between them thick in the air, but for the first time, Elizabeth felt as though she had won a small but significant battle. She could sense that Alexander knew it too, and she intended to savor this moment for as long as she could.

“That was quite an impressive maneuver you executed, cornering me into attending

the assembly like that. Admirable, I must say. I believe you deserve full credit for it,” Alexander remarked, his tone carrying both amusement and reluctant admiration.

Elizabeth offered a slow, graceful smile, tilting her chin just so. “How very generous of you, Your Grace,” she replied with polite mockery, the sweetness of her tone not concealing the challenge beneath.

He stepped closer, towering over her with an air of quiet authority. His gaze, sharp and intent, seemed to probe for any sign of faltering, but she remained unruffled. Tonight, the victory was hers, and she would not allow him to intimidate her now.

“So, it is all a game to you now, is it, Elizabeth?” His voice was low, a dangerous edge to it, as though daring her to admit the truth.

“Is it not for you as well, Your Grace?” She smirked.

CHAPTER 16

The soft light of morning filtered through the curtains as Elizabeth stirred beneath the covers. She blinked, her eyes adjusting to the light, still heavy with sleep. A soft knock sounded at the door, and moments later, Lydia entered, carrying a small folded note in her hand.

“Good morning, Your Grace,” Lydia said softly, offering a curtsy before approaching the bed. “A message for you.”

Elizabeth sat up, her curiosity piqued, as she took the note from her lady’s maid. Her fingers worked quickly to unfold it, her heart beginning to race even before she read the words inside.

Elizabeth,

I would be most pleased if you would accompany me for a ride this morning. I would like to show you more of the estate.

Alexander

Elizabeth’s breath hitched. Her heart fluttered at the unexpected invitation, her excitement rising despite her attempts to remain composed. A ride, she thought. With him.

“Shall I help you dress, Your Grace?” Lydia asked, noting the soft flush creeping into Elizabeth’s cheeks.

“Yes, please, Lydia. My riding habit,” Elizabeth replied, trying to maintain her composure. As Lydia began to prepare her attire, Elizabeth’s thoughts swirled. A ride with Alexander? The notion filled her with a kind of nervous energy she hadn’t felt in quite some time.

Once dressed in her deep green riding habit, which fit her slender figure perfectly, Elizabeth glanced at herself in the mirror. The color made her eyes stand out, and for the first time in days, she felt a surge of confidence. Lydia smiled approvingly, her expression pleased.

“Lovely as always, Your Grace.”

Elizabeth returned the smile and made her way downstairs, her heart pounding a little faster with each step. As she descended, Mr. Ryton, the butler, appeared at the foot of the stairs.

“The Duke is waiting for you in the drawing room, Your Grace,” he said, bowing slightly.

Elizabeth’s pulse quickened again. She thanked him quietly and walked toward the drawing room, pausing just outside the door to collect herself. Taking a deep breath, she pushed the door open.

Alexander stood before the grand portrait of the late Duke, his posture tall and dignified, the light from the nearby window casting a soft glow over him. Elizabeth stilled for a moment, watching him, her gaze tracing the lines of the portrait and comparing them to the man who stood in front of her. He had the same upright, commanding stance as his father, the same quiet strength that radiated from the painting.

“Alexander,” she said softly, her voice pulling him from his thoughts.

He turned to face her, a faint but unmistakable smile touching his lips. His gaze swept over her, lingering for a moment on her riding habit, and his expression warmed.

“Good morning, Elizabeth,” he said, his tone gentle, though there was a hint of something more in his eyes. “You look... prepared.”

She smiled, her heart leaping at the subtle compliment. “Good morning. I wasn’t expecting an invitation to ride, but I’m quite ready.”

“I thought it only fair to show you the estate,” he replied, offering his arm. “Shall we?”

Elizabeth hesitated only briefly before taking his arm, the warmth of his touch sending a slight shiver through her. Together, they made their way outside, where two horses were already waiting for them in the courtyard.

Alexander helped her mount, his hand steady at her waist. The brief touch lingered, and Elizabeth couldn’t help but feel the connection between them growing stronger with each passing moment. Once seated, she looked down at him, their eyes meeting for a heartbeat longer than necessary before he mounted his own horse.

“Shall we begin?” he asked, his voice carrying the faintest hint of amusement.

She nodded, and together they rode across the estate, the vast fields stretching out before them like a painting come to life. As they moved at a steady pace, Elizabeth found herself stealing glances at Alexander, intrigued by the way he seemed so at ease on horseback, so connected to the land around him.

“How long has the estate been in your family?” she asked, breaking the comfortable silence.

Alexander glanced at her, his expression thoughtful. “Since the time of the Tudors,” he replied. “It has passed from generation to generation, each one adding to it in some way. My family has always taken great pride in maintaining its legacy.”

Elizabeth could hear the pride in his voice, and she found herself drawn to this side of him—a man who cared deeply for his heritage, for the land he was entrusted with. “It must feel... daunting, sometimes,” she said softly. “To carry on such a legacy.”

He nodded, his gaze fixed on the path ahead. “It is. But it is also a privilege. I take great care to ensure the estate thrives.”

As they continued to ride, Alexander spoke of the estate’s history, of how it had evolved over the centuries. But when he mentioned his mother, Elizabeth noticed a slight change in his tone.

“My mother loved riding,” he said quietly. “She had a mare named Marietta and later, a stallion named Caesar. She often rode across these fields.”

Elizabeth smiled softly, but the absence of any mention of his father did not go unnoticed. She was tempted to ask, to delve into the unspoken history that lingered between them, but something held her back. She knew better than to push.

They approached the edge of the woods when Alexander pointed to their left, gesturing toward the barley fields. “Those fields produce some of the finest barley in England,” he remarked, pride lacing his words.

Elizabeth chuckled, glancing toward the fields. “Perhaps I should walk through them someday. It sounds like quite the adventure.”

Alexander raised a brow, his lips twitching into a smirk. “Seeking adventure, are you?”

She laughed, the sound light and genuine. “Hardly. A walk through the fields is less of an adventure than...” She paused, meeting his gaze with a playful glint. “...racing you.”

His eyes widened slightly in surprise. “Racing me? Are you certain you’re capable?”

Elizabeth feigned offense, sitting up straighter in her saddle. “Would you like to find out?”

A flicker of challenge sparked in his eyes, and with a brief nod, he turned his horse away from the woods and toward the open field opposite the barley. “Very well, then. The field is ours. Shall we?”

Elizabeth’s heart raced with excitement. She gave him a determined smile. “Let’s.”

With a flick of the reins, they were off. The race was exhilarating, the wind whipping through Elizabeth’s hair as her horse galloped across the field. Alexander was ahead at first, his pace swift and sure, but Elizabeth urged her horse on, feeling the thrill of the competition as she gained on him. For a brief moment, she was ahead, her laughter ringing out across the open space.

But then, Alexander caught up, and they drew even, neck and neck as they sped toward the end of the field. They came to a halt, breathless and laughing, the exhilaration of the race still coursing through their veins.

“You ride remarkably well,” Alexander said, his voice filled with genuine admiration. “I am... impressed.”

Elizabeth beamed, her cheeks flushed from the ride. “Thank you. My uncle Sebastian is an excellent rider. He taught me well.”

Alexander's eyes gleamed with amusement. "Then I suppose we'll have to do this again sometime."

"I would enjoy that," Elizabeth replied, feeling a renewed sense of hope rising within her.

As they steered their horses back toward the woods at a slower pace, the tension between them had shifted into something far lighter—something that felt almost... promising.

Lady Winston

This correspondence comes as a matter of necessity. While I have previously shown a measure of leniency towards your actions, recent events compel me to be direct.

Your unannounced visit during what should be a private period for my wife and me was both ill-timed and inappropriate. I must ask, in no uncertain terms, that you cease any further attempts to insert yourself into our affairs, particularly those pertaining to matters that no longer concern you. I trust that you will understand the importance of this request and act accordingly.

Should you choose to disregard this warning, I will not hesitate to take steps to ensure that there are no further misunderstandings between us.

Regards,

Duke of Sterlin

Alexander let the ink dry before folding the letter and sealing it with his crest. His jaw tightened as he pressed the wax, his thoughts lingering on Georgianna's audacity.

He had warned her before, albeit indirectly, but this time the message would leave no room for doubt. She had meddled far too long, and now she was testing his patience. He stood from his desk, shaking off the tension as he reached for the bell to summon the butler.

Just as he pulled the cord, the door swung open.

“Sterlin!” Colin’s jovial voice filled the room as he strode in, a grin plastered on his face. “I hope I’m not interrupting your musings.”

“Not at all, Broughton,” Alexander said with a dry smile, tossing the letter aside for the moment. “What brings you here this time?”

“I come bearing gifts, of course,” Colin replied, producing a neatly wrapped parcel from behind his back. “A small token of my appreciation for the Duchess’s hospitality. It’s only right, seeing as I’ve been indulging in your fine dining and company.”

Alexander’s brow lifted in surprise as he took the parcel. “Gifts for my wife now, is it? I must say, I’ve never once received such finery from you, Colin. After all these years, I’m feeling rather neglected.”

Colin laughed heartily. “Ah, you sound positively jealous, Sterlin! I suppose it’s your wife who has earned my gratitude—seeing as she’s the one who graced me with an invitation, unlike her stingy husband.”

Alexander smirked, shaking his head. “Jealous? Of my own wife, no less? It seems your time in the country has softened your sense of judgment.”

“Or perhaps your wife has simply charmed me,” Colin shot back with a wink. “It’s Spanish lace and silk from China. I daresay she’ll appreciate it more than you ever

would.”

“Undoubtedly,” Alexander chuckled, his mood lightened by the easy banter. “Let’s see what she makes of your grand gesture, shall we?”

He rose from his seat and strode to the door, ringing the bell. When the butler, Alexander said, “Send for the Duchess, please.”

Mr. Ryton bowed and responded, “Your Grace, the Duchess is not at home.”

Alexander stilled, his brow furrowing slightly. “Not at home?” He hadn’t known she had plans to leave the estate, and it wasn’t like Elizabeth to go off without mentioning it. His thoughts briefly flickered to where she might have gone, but he dismissed them as quickly as they came. We’ve agreed to live our lives separately, after all, he reminded himself, though a nagging unease began to stir.

Colin did not appear to notice Alexander’s change in demeanor. “No matter! She’ll receive it when she returns. I’m sure the lace will be a pleasant surprise.”

Alexander forced a smile, nodding. “Indeed. I’ll make sure she does.”

Colin gave him a knowing look. “Now, now, Sterlin. Try not to let the jealousy overcome you. You might actually end up competing with your wife for my affections.”

Alexander snorted. “If she claims your affections, you’re welcome to them,” he retorted with a smirk. They laughed, the camaraderie between them easy and natural, but the unease in Alexander’s chest hadn’t disappeared.

Once Colin departed, leaving behind the delicate gift for Elizabeth, Alexander’s thoughts returned to his wife. He couldn’t shake the question of where she had

gone—why she hadn't told him.

Summoning Mrs. Ryton, he folded his arms, his expression more serious now. "Where is the Duchess today, Mrs. Ryton?"

The housekeeper's lips pressed into a tight line before she responded. "Her Grace received an invitation to tea this morning from the Viscountess of Compton. She left after breakfast, quite pleased, I might add."

Alexander felt his frown deepen. "The Viscountess of Compton?"

"She did, Your Grace," Mrs. Ryton confirmed, her tone polite but pointed. "Had you joined Her Grace for breakfast, you would have known of her plans."

Her words stung, though she had said them carefully. There was a quiet reproach in her tone, one that he could hardly ignore. He had kept himself distant from Elizabeth, maintaining that their lives should remain separate. But in doing so, he realized, he was missing more than just the details of her day.

Silence hung between them for a moment before Alexander dismissed her with a nod, though the unease lingered long after she'd gone.

CHAPTER 17

“I thought it would be most dull to wait until the assembly for our second meeting, Your Grace,” Lady Compton gushed as soon as Elizabeth was settled in the drawing room. “So, I thought to invite you for tea. After all, what better way for you to sample Cook’s biscuits?”

“We kill two birds with one stone, then,” Elizabeth agreed with a smile, delighted by Lady Compton’s easy manner.

They both reached for the plate of biscuits, and as soon as Elizabeth took a bite, she couldn’t help but express her admiration. “I must say, your cook rivals Sterlin’s. These biscuits are delightful, but this sandwich—with the cheese—is impeccable.”

Lady Compton clapped her hands, her face lighting up with joy. “I knew you’d love it! I’ll send the recipe straight to your cook. Oh, how wonderful that you want to replicate it!”

Elizabeth smiled again, feeling more at ease than she had in weeks. The company was pleasant, the food was wonderful, and for a moment, she allowed herself to bask in the light-heartedness of it all.

Just then, the butler entered the room, announcing the arrival of a second guest. Lady Compton gasped, her hand flying to her mouth. “Oh dear, I do apologize, Your Grace! I entirely forgot to mention that we were expecting another guest for tea.”

Elizabeth’s brow lifted in polite curiosity, but her heart sank as the butler stepped

aside to reveal the very last person she wanted to see.

“Good afternoon, Your Grace,” came the smooth, measured voice of the Countess of Winston.

Elizabeth’s smile wavered, but she quickly recovered, keeping her expression as serene as ever. Georgianna. She could hardly believe her ill luck.

“Oh, how splendid! I wanted you to meet before the assembly, as the Countess is one of the most influential people in the county,” Lady Compton chimed in, her usual enthusiasm bubbling over. “But it seems you already know one another?”

“Indeed,” Georgianna said with a thin smile. “It’s lovely to see you here again, Duchess.”

“Yes, we’ve met,” Elizabeth replied, her tone pleasant, though her stomach knotted at the Countess’s presence.

“Well, that should make for a less awkward introduction, then,” Lady Compton said cheerfully, beaming at them both. “No long silences or stilted conversation.”

Not that there’s ever a chance of silence with you around, Elizabeth thought wryly, a touch of humor softening the tension that had settled over her the moment Georgianna entered the room.

They continued with tea, but it didn’t take long for Georgianna to strike the first blow, her words as delicate as the porcelain teacup she held, yet sharp enough to sting.

“I see you’ve settled quite well into your role as Duchess. I’m sure it must be an adjustment, especially with the demands of a title so grand,” Georgianna said, her

tone dripping with false sweetness. “It takes time, of course, to understand all the expectations.”

Elizabeth kept her smile in place, refusing to let the barb hit its mark. “Oh, I’ve always been quick to adapt,” she replied evenly, holding Georgianna’s gaze. “And with such guidance from people like yourself, I’m certain I shall manage splendidly.”

Before the tension could build further, Lady Compton burst in, oblivious to the sparring beneath the surface. “Oh, my, I nearly forgot! You must try the lemon tarts next! They’re Cook’s specialty. I simply cannot resist them.”

The tension in the room momentarily dissipated as Lady Compton, in her usual manner, steered the conversation toward safer shores. Elizabeth took a steadying breath, grateful for the reprieve.

But it wasn’t long before Georgianna struck again.

“And how lovely it is to be surrounded by so much admiration so early in your marriage,” the Countess said smoothly. “I daresay there are already whispers about how devoted the Duke is to his new bride.”

Elizabeth’s fingers tightened imperceptibly around her teacup, but she refused to let her smile falter. “Indeed,” she replied, her voice light but firm. “Devotion is something I treasure deeply.”

“Oh, have you heard about the new shops they’re constructing in the village?” Lady Compton exclaimed, her eyes alight with excitement as she set her teacup down. “I’ve been watching the progress closely—there’s talk of a haberdasher, a new grocer, and even a milliner. Quite the improvement for our little corner of the county!”

Elizabeth smiled at the thought. “How wonderful. I shall have to visit once they are complete. I do hope there will be a bookstore among them. I’ve been longing for something new to read.”

Lady Compton clapped her hands together, delighted. “A bookstore, you say? What a marvelous idea! We shall have to go together and explore once it opens. You and I shall make a grand day of it, Your Grace.”

Elizabeth’s smile deepened. She hadn’t expected to find a kindred spirit in Lady Compton, but the idea of an excursion was a welcome one. “I should like that very much.”

Georgianna, who had been sipping her tea with a practiced indifference, set her cup down with a faint clink and looked at Elizabeth with a deceptively sweet smile. “And how receptive is the Duke to such pursuits, I wonder? Many gentlemen, I have found, are not as inclined toward... shall we say, literary diversions ?” Her tone was light, but the insinuation was clear—men, especially those of rank, had little patience for bluestocking wives.

Elizabeth felt the familiar pang of irritation, but she kept her expression serene. “On the contrary,” she replied smoothly, meeting Georgianna’s gaze. “The Duke himself is quite well-read. His library is one of the finest I have ever seen, with an impressive collection of works from across the world. In fact, I often find myself borrowing from it.”

There was a flicker of something in Georgianna’s eyes—displeasure, perhaps—though her smile didn’t waver. “How fortunate you are to have such access,” she said, her voice taking on a more measured tone. “Not all husbands are so accommodating.”

“You know,” Lady Compton chimed in, glancing between Elizabeth and Georgianna,

“we have quite a well-stocked library here, though I must confess it’s no match for the Duke of Sterlin’s grand collection.” She leaned forward with a grin. “Still, if you’re ever inclined, Your Grace, I’d be delighted to have you explore it and perhaps borrow a book or two.”

Elizabeth laughed, grateful for Lady Compton’s light-heartedness. “I would be delighted. It seems I’ll never tire of perusing libraries, no matter how large or small. I may just take you up on that offer.”

Before the conversation could shift again, Georgianna placed her teacup down with an air of deliberate care. “And when, may I ask, do you plan to return to London, Duchess? I do hope it’s not until the rumors have settled. It would be unfortunate to return amidst such scandal.”

The words were pointed and intentional. Elizabeth felt a prickle of annoyance rise in her chest, but she schooled her features, refusing to give Georgianna the satisfaction of rattling her.

Lady Compton gasped softly, now aware of what had been said. “What a silly thing to say!” she exclaimed, waving a hand in dismissal. “Of course, the Duchess has no plans to visit Town anytime soon. Isn’t that right, Your Grace?”

Though Georgianna’s smile remained fixed, her gaze shifted to Elizabeth, her eyes glinting with a challenge. She was waiting for Elizabeth’s response, no doubt hoping to stir some unease. But Elizabeth had learned to swim in these treacherous waters, and she would not falter.

With a calm smile, Elizabeth replied, “My dear friend Lady Compton is quite right. I have no such plans to return to London in the near future.”

Georgianna’s smile widened, though it held no warmth. “Very brave of you,” she

remarked, her tone light but touched with something darker. “To remain so steadfast amidst such... unpleasantness.”

Elizabeth’s pulse quickened, but she remained poised. She took a slow sip of tea before replying, her words measured and cool. “There is a kind of braveness that borders on foolishness, Countess. Sometimes one finds oneself in places they are not wanted, simply because they overstep.”

The tension in the room sharpened instantly. Georgianna’s eyes narrowed. Lady Compton, once again oblivious to the exchange, frowned slightly, her brow furrowing.

“Is something the matter?” the Viscountess asked, her concern genuine.

Georgianna’s lips stretched into a stiff smile. “My tea has gone cold,” she said, her voice tight.

“We can’t have that!” Lady Compton exclaimed, rising from her seat. “Allow me.” She hurried to pour a fresh cup, her cheerful nature cutting through the tension like a beam of sunlight. “There, fresh as can be!”

As Lady Compton set the new cup before Georgianna, Elizabeth’s gaze met the Countess’s once more. While Georgianna’s eyes held a steely glare, Elizabeth simply smiled, her composure unshaken.

Elizabeth returned home feeling oddly satisfied, a triumphant sense of victory humming through her. Georgianna had been put firmly in her place, and Elizabeth couldn’t help but replay the scene with a touch of amusement. As if that weren’t enough, she now had a book from Lady Compton’s library tucked under her arm—an unexpected treasure from an otherwise tense tea.

As she passed through the grand hallway, lost in her thoughts, a figure suddenly appeared from one of the side rooms. She jumped, her hand flying to her chest as her heart raced. Her gaze quickly focused on the familiar face before her, and she exhaled, calming herself.

“You startled me,” she said, her voice steady as she met Alexander’s amused expression.

Alexander quirked an eyebrow, clearly entertained. “I wasn’t aware I had such an effect on you, Duchess,” he teased, the corners of his mouth lifting into a playful smirk.

Elizabeth narrowed her eyes, though a smile tugged at her lips despite herself. “I wasn’t expecting you home this early, that’s all.”

“And where did you imagine I’d be? Roaming the countryside?” he asked, his voice light and teasing. “How was your tea with Lady Compton?”

Her brow furrowed slightly. “You knew?”

His grin widened, clearly enjoying her surprise. “Servants spread news faster than wildfire. Did you think your outing would go unnoticed?”

Elizabeth rolled her eyes, recovering her composure quickly. “Ah yes, I keep forgetting I’m the most important topic of conversation among the household staff,” she replied with a touch of sarcasm.

“Quite the wit today,” Alexander said with a chuckle before offering her his arm. “Come along. I’ve something to show you.”

Her heart leapt unexpectedly at the gesture. What could he possibly want to show

me? she wondered, curiosity mingling with a strange sense of anticipation. As they walked together toward his study, she marveled at the easy, light-hearted atmosphere between them. It felt... different.

Once inside, he led her toward the desk where a neatly wrapped package sat. With a flourish, he gestured toward it. "From Broughton. His appreciation for your impeccable hosting at dinner."

Elizabeth's eyes widened in delight as she reached for the package, her fingers trembling slightly with excitement. "For me?" she asked, barely able to contain her happiness.

Alexander smirked, watching her with amusement. "You look like a child receiving sweets for the first time," he teased, folding his arms across his chest.

Elizabeth shot him a glance but didn't rise to the bait. Nothing could ruin her mood right now—not even his teasing. Between her victory over Georgianna and now this unexpected gift, her day felt near perfect.

She quickly unwrapped the parcel, revealing exquisite Spanish lace and silk. "Oh, it's beautiful!" she exclaimed, holding up the fabric with wide eyes. "Broughton is too generous. You must thank him for me."

Alexander chuckled. "I think you've already done enough to ensure his endless generosity. But yes, I shall pass along your gratitude."

Still marveling at the gift, Elizabeth found herself comparing this version of Alexander to the one she had come to know over the past few weeks. This man, full of light teasing and easy conversation, felt so far removed from the cold, distant figure he became whenever the topic of their marriage or his past surfaced. It was as though he had two sides, and she never knew which she would encounter on any

given day.

“We should invite Broughton more often,” she mused aloud, her voice light with contentment.

Alexander shook his head, though there was a smile in his eyes. “That menace? We’d have no peace if we indulged him too often. The house would be in chaos before the week was out.”

Elizabeth laughed, unable to contain the joy bubbling inside her. “Perhaps a little chaos wouldn’t be so terrible.”

“Careful what you wish for,” he replied, his tone teasing but his gaze lingering on her a moment longer than usual.

He’s like a man with two entirely different versions living inside him. One moment, Alexander was teasing and playful, like this, making her feel as though they could truly enjoy each other’s company. The next, he could be cold and distant, as though he carried the weight of the world on his shoulders. It was almost like being married to two different men. The thought amused her, and she had to hold back a small chuckle.

Elizabeth had to wonder, however, if she would ever know who Alexander truly was. If he would ever allow her to get close.

CHAPTER 18

The ballroom was alight with the glow of chandeliers, the soft hum of conversation blending with the strains of the orchestra. As Elizabeth and Alexander stepped through the grand doors of Compton Manor, the air seemed to shift, and all eyes turned toward them.

Elizabeth's heart fluttered. She could feel the weight of the stares, the whispers that followed their entrance. Her fingers tightened slightly around Alexander's arm as they walked deeper into the room. Is it the scandal? she wondered, her nerves spiking. But as they moved through the crowd, nodding politely at familiar and unfamiliar faces alike, she began to realize something else.

The people here weren't like those in London. The atmosphere lacked the sharp edge of falseness and gossip that so often pervaded the grand rooms of the ton. These were people who had chosen the country, not for lack of fortune or standing, but for the genuine pleasures of simpler life—free from the relentless frivolities of society.

Her grip on Alexander's arm eased, and she allowed herself to breathe more freely. Perhaps this wouldn't be so dreadful after all.

Alexander was calm beside her, his usual composed self. He introduced her to several influential country families: a retired military general with a stately air, a baronet and his charming wife, and an earl who, despite his title, seemed far more relaxed than any peer Elizabeth had met during the Season. She smiled politely, engaging in light conversation, but a part of her remained aware of the attention still lingering on them.

And just when Elizabeth thought they couldn't possibly receive any more focus, Lady Compton's voice rang out, clear and commanding above the chatter.

"My lords and ladies, if I may have your attention!" The Viscountess stood in the center of the room, beaming as she gestured toward Elizabeth and Alexander. "I have the great pleasure of announcing that the Duke and Duchess of Sterlin will be opening the dance floor this evening!"

A murmur of approval rippled through the crowd, and Elizabeth's cheeks flushed. She turned to Alexander, her heart racing, flustered by the sudden spotlight. She wasn't sure if it was nerves or excitement that flooded her chest, but her thoughts jumbled together as she realized all eyes were truly on them now.

Alexander looked down at her with an amused glint in his eye, offering his hand. "Shall we, Duchess?"

Elizabeth blinked, feeling the world spin slightly. "Must we?" she asked in a soft, breathless voice, though there was a hint of laughter in her words.

His grin widened, and without another word, he led her to the center of the ballroom. The orchestra struck up a waltz, and Elizabeth found herself in Alexander's arms, moving across the floor with surprising grace. She had danced with him before, but tonight... tonight felt different.

He was a good dancer—no, a very good dancer. His movements were confident, each step fluid as though the dance were second nature to him. She looked up at him in surprise.

"You've been hiding this talent," she said, a teasing smile pulling at her lips.

Alexander raised a brow, a glint of pride in his gaze. "I am a man of many talents,

Elizabeth. Ones you'll come to discover in time."

"Is that a promise, Your Grace?" she asked slyly, unable to resist the playful challenge in her voice.

His smile deepened, his grip on her waist tightening ever so slightly. "It is."

They twirled together, the music swelling around them, but for Elizabeth, it was as if the rest of the room had faded. For a brief, fleeting moment, she forgot everything—the scandal, the reason for their marriage, the carefully constructed walls between them. Here, in Alexander's arms, she could almost pretend their union was real, that they were like any other couple, enjoying the pleasures of a country ball.

She laughed softly as they moved, feeling lighter than she had in weeks. As the music swelled toward its final notes, Elizabeth felt something unexpected bloom in her chest—a sense of happiness, of contentment. For a moment, she allowed herself to indulge in it, to forget the complications that loomed over them.

But as the dance ended, and Alexander's hand slipped from hers, the reality of their situation crept back into her mind. Still, she couldn't dismiss the lingering warmth from their dance, the way he had made her feel.

Perhaps, for tonight, she could let herself enjoy the pretense.

Elizabeth excused herself after a moment to use the retiring room, and she was making her way back to the ballroom when something caught her eye—a familiar figure slipping through a nearby door. It was Alexander. He moved with purpose, his tall frame disappearing into what appeared to be a conservatory with barely a glance behind him.

A prickle of curiosity stirred in her chest. Where could he be going? The ball was still

in full swing, and Alexander had never been one to shy away from his duties as host or guest. Something about the way he moved, so swift and deliberate, unsettled her. Without thinking, she followed him.

Elizabeth stepped quietly into the conservatory, the soft glow of moonlight filtering through the glass walls. She moved carefully, her breath catching as she saw him standing not far from her—engaged in conversation with a woman she immediately recognized.

Georgianna.

Elizabeth's heart clenched painfully in her chest, her pulse quickening as she pressed herself against the doorframe, unwilling to make her presence known. She wasn't sure why she stayed hidden. Perhaps it was the sudden wave of unease that had gripped her. Something about the way Georgianna stepped closer to him, the way her voice purred through the quiet air, made Elizabeth's stomach twist.

"I received your letter, Alexander," she said, her voice low, flirtatious. "I must admit, I wasn't expecting such... directness from you."

Elizabeth's heart thudded painfully against her ribs. A letter? Her mind whirled, her vision narrowing. What letter?

Alexander's voice, calm and measured, followed. "It was necessary."

Necessary. Elizabeth's hands tightened into fists at her sides. What could possibly be necessary between them? Her breath quickened as she strained to listen, the soft tones of their voices curling into the air like poison.

Georgianna laughed softly, the sound sending a shiver down Elizabeth's spine. "You never change. Always so proper. But I can see right through you, Alexander. You

wouldn't have written to me if there wasn't more to it. There's always more."

Elizabeth swallowed hard, tears already stinging her eyes. More? Was Georgianna insinuating...? Her mind began to spin, piecing together what felt like a cruel puzzle. Had she been blind all along? All those moments of distance, the coldness, the unexplained absences—was this the reason?

Her vision blurred, and she took a shaky step back, unable to hear more. She couldn't. If she stayed, she might witness something that would shatter the fragile sense of stability she had built over the evening.

The words between them were enough. A letter. More. The undeniable familiarity between them. Her heart broke a little more with each second she remained.

Without another thought, she turned and fled, her shoes barely making a sound on the carpeted floor as she made her way back down the hallway. Tears threatened to spill, her chest tightening with the weight of her hurt. She could hardly breathe.

Her husband was indeed keeping Georgiana as his mistress. The truth, bitter and cold, settled in her chest like a stone. How foolish she had been, to believe that this evening, this fragile happiness, was real.

She stood in front of the refreshment table, her breath hitching. She blinked furiously and picked up a glass of lemonade, raising it to her lips and taking a sip that she barely tasted.

Had it all been a lie?

The rest of the evening passed in a blur. Elizabeth went through the motions—smiling politely, engaging in conversation—but inside, she felt hollow. The joy she had felt earlier, dancing with Alexander, now seemed distant, drowned

by the bitter sting of what she had witnessed. Each glance at Georgianna across the ballroom sent another stab of pain through her chest.

Alexander had noticed her growing silence. She felt his gaze on her throughout the remainder of the evening, but she avoided him, not trusting herself to face him after what she had seen.

The carriage ride home was suffocating in its silence. Alexander, sensing her distance, tried to break it.

“You seemed to enjoy yourself earlier,” he began cautiously. “But something’s changed. What is it?”

Elizabeth kept her gaze fixed out of the window, the dark landscape blurring past. Her heart was pounding, the fury simmering just beneath her skin. She clenched her hands in her lap, refusing to answer. How dare he? How dare he act as though nothing had happened, as though he hadn’t just been meeting with Georgianna in secret?

“Elizabeth,” he pressed, his voice more insistent now, “what’s wrong?”

She remained silent, her chest tight with anger and pain. She couldn’t bring herself to speak, not here, not now. Her silence stretched on, and Alexander’s confusion only grew.

When they reached the Manor, Elizabeth barely waited for it to come to a full stop before she bolted from her seat, her heart racing as she hurried into the house. She didn’t care about the propriety of her behavior or the curious glances from the servants. She had to get away, to escape before she exploded with the weight of her emotions.

She made for the stairs, her feet moving swiftly as she headed toward her chambers. She just wanted to be alone, to shut the door and block out the world—and especially him .

But just as she reached her door and began to close it behind her, it was stopped by a sudden force. Elizabeth turned, her breath catching as she saw Alexander standing there, his foot wedged in the door to prevent her from shutting him out.

“Elizabeth,” he said firmly, his voice low but edged with frustration. “We need to talk.”

Her heart lurched, anger and pain rising in her throat. “I have nothing to say to you,” she replied, her voice trembling.

“You’re upset. I can see that,” he continued, pushing the door open wider as he stepped into the room. “What happened?”

Elizabeth’s fury boiled over. She turned to face him fully, her hands shaking at her sides. “What happened?” she spat, her voice rising. “I saw you, Alexander. I saw you with Georgianna.”

His brow furrowed in confusion. “Saw me? What are you talking about?”

“In the conservatory,” she continued, her voice breaking as her emotions spilled over. “I followed you. I heard you talking about letters and God knows what else!”

His eyes widened, realization dawning on his face. “Elizabeth, that’s not what you think?—”

“Don’t lie to me again!” she snapped. “I saw you, Alexander! You were meeting with her, and don’t you dare tell me it was innocent!”

“Elizabeth,” he began, his voice steady, trying to calm her, “if you’ll just let me explain?—”

“Explain?” she cut him off. “There’s nothing to explain! I’ve already been dragged through one scandal because of the rumors with your brother, and now this? Now I’m supposed to endure the humiliation of being married to a man who keeps a mistress?”

Alexander’s jaw tightened, his frustration evident as he stepped closer. “There is nothing between Georgianna and me. Nothing. You misunderstand,” he said, his tone more insistent now. “I sent her a letter because I had to warn her?—”

“I don’t want to hear your excuses!”

He moved closer, his eyes flashing with anger now. “You’re wrong, Elizabeth. You don’t know the full story.”

“I know enough,” she retorted, her voice shaking. “I know that I won’t be publicly humiliated by you. Not after everything I’ve already endured!”

“And what of what I have , Elizabeth?” he snapped, his voice rising above hers. “How you gave my brother liberties and left me to sort it out. Have you given that any thought?”

Elizabeth froze. Her heart plummeted, the words cutting through her like ice.

CHAPTER 19

The moment the words left his mouth, Alexander regretted them. He saw the shock, the hurt, flare in Elizabeth's eyes, and a knot twisted in his gut. What had he done?

His frustration had taken control, fueled by the confusion of her accusations and her refusal to let him explain. She claimed to have seen him with Georgianna, yet surely she must have overheard more—surely she had heard his warnings to the widow.

But no. She had only heard enough to incriminate him in her mind, and when she wouldn't listen, his irritation had flared into an outburst. And now here they were—his accusation striking her like a blade.

Elizabeth's face flushed with fury, her eyes burning with a rage that matched his own. Before he could say another word, she raised her hand, aiming to slap him. But instinct took over, and he caught her wrist mid-air. The force of it shook her, and he instinctively pulled her toward him, steadying her as she stumbled into his chest.

He didn't let go. He couldn't. Alexander could feel the heat of her fury. And yet—beneath the anger—something else stirred. A pull he had felt before but had fought against for so long. Now, with her so close, with their emotions raw and exposed, he could feel it growing stronger.

His grip on her wrist loosened, but his hand remained, his fingers grazing the soft skin of her arm. His gaze dropped to her lips, and he felt the pull of them.

He began to lower his head. He could feel the moment between them teetering on the

edge of something neither of them had anticipated?—

A sharp knock on the door shattered the moment like glass.

Alexander jerked back, blinking as if waking from a trance. Elizabeth stepped away, her face flushed. They both turned toward the door as Alexander called, “Yes?”

Mr. Ryton entered, his eyes respectfully downcast. “A letter for you, Your Grace,” the butler said, stepping forward and handing it to Alexander.

He took it, his heart still pounding from the charged moment they had just shared. His fingers tightened on the letter as he saw the name on the front.

Percy.

“The messenger said that it was urgent. I beg your pardon for the disturbance.” Mr. Ryton retreated.

he broke the seal and unfolded the paper, his eyes scanning the contents quickly.

Alex,

Word has reached me that you have taken Elizabeth as your wife. I could hardly believe it at first, but then again, nothing surprises me these days. How strange life has turned out. I must ask—why?

Is it out of duty? A noble act to salvage what was left of the mess I created?

I cannot imagine you marrying for any reason but duty now, but I had to hear it from you directly. I have been in Portugal for some time now, trying to make sense of my life. And I wonder, brother—are you doing the same?

Do not mistake this for anything more than curiosity. I have no intention of returning to England, not now, and certainly not after all I've done. But I would like to know if you truly mean to take on a life bound to her. I need to know.

Yours,

Percy.

Alexander's grip tightened on the letter, anger surging through him. The nerve of Percy—to question him now, after he had created the mess in the first place. And now he had the audacity to ask why? To question his motives?

Yet, beneath the anger, a wave of relief washed over him. Percy was alive. Percy was safe. After months of uncertainty, at least he knew where his brother was. His chest clenched with both frustration and long-buried affection.

“Alex?” Elizabeth's voice slipped through his thoughts. “Is everything all right? You look as though you've seen a ghost.”

He blinked, the words from the letter still echoing in his mind. He hadn't realized the shock had registered so clearly on his face. He glanced at her, his jaw tight.

“It's Percy,” he muttered, his voice rough. His mind was too cluttered to answer her properly. He needed to respond to Percy—immediately. Needed to make sure his brother understood the consequences of what he had left behind, even as relief coursed through him at knowing he was safe.

“I need to reply to him,” Alexander said abruptly, folding the letter with a sharp movement. “Excuse me.”

Even from afar, Percy managed to interfere in my life! Elizabeth couldn't believe it.

Of all times to send a letter...

Her anger toward her husband simmered beneath the surface, unresolved and growing. She needed answers, yet he had been so dismissive, offering her nothing but curt replies when she sought understanding. And what was worse, he had stirred something within her she couldn't seem to shake. That yearning, that maddening pull she had felt during their conversation in his study the day before, refused to leave her. It clung to her, and she hated it.

Elizabeth's thoughts returned to the letter—Percy's letter. What could he possibly want from overseas now? Had he not done enough damage already? The nerve of him.

She let out a frustrated huff, collapsing back into her chair, her gaze drifting to the ledgers laid out before her. She had been trying to focus on the household accounts, but it was no use. Her mind refused to settle. The numbers blurred together, and all she could feel was the tight coil of frustration building inside her.

With a quick movement, she pushed the ledgers aside and stood, unable to sit still any longer. Her steps were brisk as she left her study, needing a distraction, something—anything—to occupy her mind.

As she passed down one of the halls, something caught her eye. An open door. She retraced her steps, curiosity drawing her in. It was the portrait gallery.

She hadn't ventured in during her initial tour with Mrs. Ryton. Now, it was being cleaned, and the sight of the large canvases lining the walls piqued her interest.

"Your Grace, did you need something?" Mrs. Ryton turned, her hands pausing on the frame she was straightening as Elizabeth stepped inside.

Elizabeth shook her head slightly, her gaze traveling over the frames that filled the room. She took a slow breath, her frustration momentarily softened by the curiosity blooming in her chest.

The maids, having finished their work, gathered their supplies and offered quick curtsies before exiting, leaving Elizabeth alone with Mrs. Ryton in the vast portrait gallery. The room felt heavy, not just with history but with an overwhelming sense of lineage—family members long gone, their faces captured in oil, watching over the house they had once known.

“I’ve never been in here before,” Elizabeth said softly, her voice almost swallowed by the silence. Her eyes roamed the walls, taking in the imposing figures of ancestors she’d never met. But her gaze drifted to the portraits that looked more recent, childhood depictions of Alexander and, presumably, his immediate family.

One painting, however, caught her attention. She stopped in her tracks, something about it left her perplexed. It was a portrait of a young girl.

The girl’s dark hair was styled in a way that hinted at a time before Elizabeth’s own, and her blue eyes—so startlingly similar to Alexander’s—seemed to hold secrets, frozen in time.

“Who...who is this?” Elizabeth asked as she moved closer to the painting, trying to decipher the girl’s identity.

Mrs. Ryton was silent.

CHAPTER 20

“That was the young lady Eleanor Hunton,” Mrs. Ryton said softly.

Elizabeth’s breath caught. She had assumed Alexander and Percy were the only children, but now, before her, was the image of a girl who had been lost to time. The girl in the portrait appeared younger than Percy, her delicate features framed by dark hair, her blue eyes strikingly familiar, almost haunting in their resemblance to Alexander’s.

Elizabeth turned to meet Mrs. Ryton’s gaze. The housekeeper’s expression had grown solemn, her eyes distant, as though she were recalling a memory too painful to bear.

“The poor child never survived her injuries from the carriage accident,” Mrs. Ryton continued, her voice heavy with sorrow.

“I was unaware the Duke had a sister,” Elizabeth murmured, the revelation settling upon her like a shroud.

“You could not have known,” Mrs. Ryton replied, “The accident claimed the old Duke immediately. But Eleanor, like Lord Percy, lingered, suffering her wounds for days before she, too, was taken.”

“How dreadful,” Elizabeth gasped, her hand instinctively rising to her chest as the full weight of the tragedy pressed upon her.

She could scarcely fathom the horror that had befallen the family. Her heart ached for the young Alexander, who had not only lost his father but had been forced to witness his sister's struggle, only to lose her as well. The thought of a boy, burdened with such grief, seared into her mind, and a profound sadness welled within her.

"The brothers, I fear, still bear the scars of those losses," Mrs. Ryton said. "Their wounds remain as fresh as though it had all transpired but yesterday."

Elizabeth's gaze returned to the portrait of Eleanor, her heart heavy with sorrow and empathy. The pain Alexander carried now seemed clearer, the shadows in Alexander's eyes were not merely the result of his duties but the lingering ghosts of a past filled with unimaginable sorrow.

As Elizabeth stood before the portrait of young Eleanor, memories of all the moments Alexander had shut out her curiosity, deflected her questions, came rushing back to her. Each of those instances now took on a new, painful clarity. She had unknowingly prodded at a wound that had never fully healed, and the realization struck her with a crushing weight.

"Oh my God," she choked out, her voice barely a whisper as guilt flooded her. If only she had known...

"I gave what support I could to the young boy," Mrs. Ryton's voice broke through her thoughts, soft yet filled with a sorrow that resonated deep within Elizabeth. "But I fear there is only so far I can reach the man he has become now, Your Grace."

The housekeeper's gaze met Elizabeth's, and the look in her eyes was one of desperate imploration, as though she were a mother pleading for the well-being of her child. The concern etched on her face made Elizabeth's heart ache even more for the man she had married, a man who had suffered more than she had ever imagined.

“He may deny it, but he needs you,” Mrs. Ryton continued, her voice trembling with emotion. “Now more than ever, Your Grace.”

“What could I possibly do?” Elizabeth’s voice was thick with helplessness, the weight of the situation pressing down on her.

“A man needs his wife,” Mrs. Ryton replied, a melancholic smile touching her lips. Her words were simple, yet they carried a profound significance that Elizabeth could not ignore.

Elizabeth felt the gravity of Mrs. Ryton’s plea, and a multitude of thoughts swirled in her mind. What had changed? What had prompted the housekeeper to share such intimate details now, after holding them back before? The timing, the urgency—it all weighed heavily on her.

As they exited the gallery, Elizabeth’s thoughts were interrupted by the sight of Alexander in the front vestibule, deep in discussion with his steward. The men had their backs turned, unaware of their presence.

This was the first time Elizabeth had seen him since their argument the previous night, and a tempest of emotions surged within her at the sight of him. Her heart ached for the pains he carried, the burdens that had shaped him into the man he was.

Yet, even amidst her compassion, there remained a persistent need for answers—answers about Georgianna, about the letter from Percy, and the unresolved tension that hung between them. And despite everything, despite the distance and the hurt, she couldn’t suppress the yearning she still felt for him.

As if he could sense the storm of feelings within her, Alexander suddenly looked up, his gaze locking onto hers. Elizabeth’s heart skipped a beat, and she felt a wave of mortification wash over her. In that moment, she felt like a foolish schoolgirl caught

in a vulnerable moment, exposed under the intensity of his scrutinizing gaze.

Panic seized her. Without thinking, she turned on her heels and hurried down the nearest hallway, desperate to escape the overwhelming emotions that threatened to consume her. She needed space, time to collect herself before she could face him again.

“Oh, I must tell you it wasn’t easy getting the recipe from Cook,” Lady Compton said with a conspiratorial smile as she handed Elizabeth a folded piece of paper, containing the coveted recipe for the impeccable cheese sandwiches she had enjoyed at the Viscountess’s residence.

Elizabeth returned the smile, feeling a rare warmth in the company of the Viscountess this afternoon, especially after the turmoil of the previous day. Unfolding the sheet, she was grateful for this small, comforting gesture.

“I’m afraid he isn’t very generous with his recipes,” Lady Compton added with a chuckle, taking a delicate bite of her shortbread.

“Utterly understandable. No one wants competition,” Elizabeth responded, her mood lifting as she joined in the light-hearted banter.

“Oh, I think you would get on quite well with my cook for that statement, Your Grace,” Lady Compton laughed again, the sound pleasant and familiar.

As Elizabeth refilled her teacup, she noticed a sudden shift in the Viscountess’s demeanor. The lightness of their conversation seemed to evaporate, replaced by a somber air that was entirely uncharacteristic of Lady Compton. Elizabeth’s brow furrowed in concern.

“You mustn’t have heard, have you, Your Grace?” Lady Compton asked, her tone

hushed.

“Heard what?” Elizabeth replied, a mix of confusion, concern, and curiosity threading through her voice.

The Viscountess set down her teacup, her eyes darting around the room as though to ensure they were alone. The weight of her next words seemed to hang in the air before she finally spoke.

“I’m afraid some unsavory news has been circulating about your marriage,” she said softly.

Elizabeth felt her heart drop, an unpleasant weight settling in the pit of her stomach. The rumors that had plagued them in town seemed to have found their way to the country, relentless in their pursuit. It was as if there was no escape, no end to the whispers that threatened to unravel the fragile peace she was trying to maintain.

She thought of Georgianna’s ominous warnings, and the shadow they had cast over her already troubled thoughts. The world seemed determined to remind her of the precariousness of her situation, and the isolation that accompanied it.

“Last night, I hosted a few relatives who were taking a respite from the festivities in Town,” Lady Compton began, her tone uncharacteristically serious. “As we spoke of the assembly and how lovely you appeared alongside the Duke, they shared some rather troubling news.”

Elizabeth felt her heart quicken, the air between them growing heavy with unspoken words. She had never seen the Viscountess so grave, and the weight of her concern only deepened Elizabeth’s anxiety.

“What news do you speak of, Lady Compton?” Elizabeth asked.

The Viscountess hesitated for a moment, then continued with a sigh. "It is being said that the Duke is the victim of an affair—a supposed affair between you and his brother."

"Oh God," Elizabeth gasped, the words striking her like a blow. The very fear that had grasped her since their marriage was now confirmed in the ugliest of forms.

"Of course, I find the notion utterly ridiculous," Lady Compton said, her spirits rallying as she spoke. "Such lies, such baseless attempts to tarnish the Sterlin name, are truly abhorrent. I felt it my duty to warn you as soon as I learned of it."

"I appreciate your efforts, Lady Compton," Elizabeth managed to say, though her mind was reeling.

"Oh, do not thank me. What are friends for, if not to look out for one another?" the Viscountess replied, waving off the gratitude with a kind smile.

Elizabeth attempted to return the smile, but the bitterness of the rumors settled like a stone in her chest. How could such vile gossip spread so quickly, so effortlessly? She thought of Alexander, of the tension that already existed between them, and wondered how this latest slander would affect them. Would he believe such lies? Would he blame her?

Long after the Viscountess had taken her leave, Elizabeth found herself pacing the drawing room, her thoughts tangled in the web of their conversation. The weight of the rumors pressed heavily upon her, each whisper a dagger aimed at her marriage, at the fragile bond she and Alexander had yet to fully form. The situation was far graver than she had initially believed; the scandal seemed to be spreading like wildfire, consuming all in its path.

Returning to London—yes, that must be the solution. It was the only way she could

see to stem the tide of this vile gossip. If they presented themselves as a united, contented couple before society, perhaps they could quash the rumors before they took deeper root. The thought gave her a glimmer of hope, but it was quickly overshadowed by the daunting task ahead.

She would have to convince Alexander to return to Town with her, to join her in this pretense. The very idea of approaching him filled her with dread. After the previous night's revelations, she felt the sting of her own insensitivity, of having probed too deeply into wounds that were still raw. The guilt knotted her insides, making the prospect of another conversation with him even more unbearable.

Elizabeth felt torn, caught between her desire to protect her marriage and the overwhelming fear of facing her husband again.

CHAPTER 21

Elizabeth was clearly still displeased with him; that much was evident. The memory of her cold dismissal in the front hall pricked at Alexander as he rode through the countryside. His grip tightened on the reins, and he urged his horse onward, seeking some solace in the wind that whipped through his hair. But the ride brought little relief.

Georgianna. Her name alone was enough to sour his mood further. She was fast becoming the bane of his existence, a thorn that pricked at the fragile peace he had hoped to find in this marriage. He had wanted nothing more than a quiet, uncomplicated life—yet here he was, ensnared in a web of complications.

He knew he needed to apologize to Elizabeth, but the words eluded him. How did one begin to mend what felt so broken? His thoughts were a tangled mess as he dismounted in front of Colin's cottage, a charming abode that spoke of wealth and comfort. It was more befitting a king than a simple lord.

"I shall inform His Lordship of your call," the butler greeted him as he was admitted inside.

"There is no need," Alexander waved him off. "Tell me where he is."

"Up in his chambers, Your Grace."

"Good." Alexander was already making his way up the stairs.

He entered Colin's room to find it in a state of disarray, with boxes and luggage strewn about. "What about all these boxes?" he asked, his curiosity piqued.

"Ah, I'm afraid it's time for me to return to London," Colin replied, a touch of melancholy in his voice.

"When do you leave?" Alexander inquired as he poured himself a generous measure of brandy from a decanter nearby.

"Tomorrow morning," Colin said, watching him closely. "But I expect you intend to rusticate some more in the country before you grace Town with your presence, eh?" he added with a teasing smile.

"Ah, avoiding more than just business, I see," Colin remarked with a knowing look.

"Perhaps I'll make my appearance next social season," Alexander said flatly, dropping into a nearby chair with a weary sigh.

Colin, ever perceptive, arched an eyebrow. "How fares our Duchess? Did you deliver my gifts?"

Alexander's thoughts drifted to Elizabeth's reaction. She had been truly delighted with the gifts, her smile radiant as she admired each one. But the memory, instead of bringing him satisfaction, stirred an unsettling feeling deep within. That smile—Colin had put it there, not him. He wanted to be the one who brought her joy, not his friend or any other man. Elizabeth was his wife, after all, and for reasons he couldn't fully grasp, he needed her happiness to be because of him.

"Your silence doesn't bode well, man," Colin interrupted his thoughts, his tone laced with concern. "Surely you delivered them? Or, God forbid, she didn't like them?"

Alexander shook himself from his reverie. “On the contrary, she loved them,” he replied, though his voice lacked its usual steadiness.

“And why do you sound so dejected?” Colin pressed, a teasing glint in his eye. “Perhaps I should have included some embroidered waistcoats for you in those gifts as well.” He chuckled, but when Alexander only gave him a pointed look, Colin’s laughter died down.

“Something is definitely up. What is it?” Colin asked, his tone sobering as concern replaced his earlier mirth.

“A frivolous misunderstanding, no more,” Alexander half-dismissed, pouring two fingers of brandy into his tumbler.

Colin’s gaze flicked between Alexander and the decanter before he spoke again. “Hardly frivolous if it’s got you drinking and in such a sour mood,” his friend observed, leaning back in his chair.

Alexander responded with a grunt, his eyes fixed on the amber liquid swirling in his glass.

“Whatever it is, you need to apologize,” Colin advised, his voice taking on a more serious note.

Alexander sighed heavily. “How does a man begin to apologize for something he himself lacks a proper understanding of?”

Georgianna had made it her mission to disrupt his life, and Elizabeth—well, she seemed equally determined to remain stubborn, rejecting any attempts at explanation. The entire situation felt like a tangled mess with no clear way out.

“Whatever it is, the understanding will come after the apology. Believe me,” Colin said, his tone laced with the confidence of a man who had seen his share of complicated situations.

“Why, one would think you quite experienced in marriage with the wisdom you share,” Alexander retorted, a hint of a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

“I fancy myself something of a connoisseur of the opposite gender, you see,” Colin replied with a smug smile that was both infuriating and oddly comforting.

Alexander couldn't help but laugh, the tension easing slightly.

“You could do or give her something she likes. That should open the door for an apology,” Colin suggested, his tone more earnest now.

Alexander furrowed his brows, the suggestion hitting a sore spot. He realized with a pang that he had no idea what Elizabeth liked. He knew next to nothing about his wife. The thought unsettled him deeply, and he found himself staring into his glass, troubled by the realization.

“After all, you can never go wrong with a new wardrobe for a woman,” Colin continued, his tone light and confident.

Alexander's thoughts drifted to Elizabeth's reaction to the lace and silk Colin had gifted her. The memory of her delight brought a slight smile to his face. Yes, that was the answer. Elizabeth would appreciate new clothes, he concluded.

“I would call you a genius for your ideas, Colin. But I'm not feeling so generous today,” Alexander teased, his spirits lifting just a little.

“I know. You're lost without me, man,” Colin replied with a hearty laugh, brushing

off the jibe with his usual ease.

After bidding his friend farewell and wishing him a safe journey, Alexander returned home, satisfied that he had found a way to approach Elizabeth with an apology. The idea of giving her something she would genuinely enjoy seemed like the perfect solution.

No sooner had he settled into his study than a knock came at the door. He looked up, somewhat surprised, as Mrs. Ryton entered, carrying a tea service.

“I thought you’d like some tea after your return, Your Grace,” she said, setting the tray on the coffee table. “After last night’s rain, the weather today feels a little cool,” she added, her tone as warm and motherly as ever.

“How very thoughtful of you, Mrs. Ryton. Thank you,” Alexander replied as she poured him a cup.

“I thought you should know,” she said, setting the cup on the desk before him. “The Duchess seems to have found her steps around now. And I must say, Lady Compton makes her excellent company. They had tea just earlier this afternoon, in fact.”

“I am glad to hear it,” Alexander said, lifting the cup to his lips.

“You made the right choice for a Duchess,” Mrs. Ryton continued, her voice carrying a note of approval that made Alexander pause. He found himself wondering where this conversation was headed.

“But of course, no marriage is without its ups and downs. Mr. Ryton and I have been at it for decades now, but sometimes, we bicker like children,” she added with a soft chuckle, the warmth of her tone contrasting with the gravity of his thoughts.

Alexander's mind wandered back to the scene in the hall when Elizabeth had turned away from him, ignoring his presence. Was Mrs. Ryton hinting at that? Had she noticed the tension?

"I suppose such misunderstandings are a part of life," he replied, not entirely sure what else to say but feeling the need to agree.

"I am glad you know that, Your Grace," Mrs. Ryton smiled, a hint of approval in her eyes. "And I expect you also know that there is no misunderstanding a little communication and an apology cannot overcome?" she added, her tone gently probing.

Alexander nodded, feeling a bit like the boy he once was under her watchful care. It was clear now that this was about Elizabeth. Mrs. Ryton, he realized with a newfound appreciation, was fiercely protective of his wife.

After serving him the tea and her well-meaning advice, the housekeeper made to leave. Alexander hesitated, grappling with the awkwardness of his next request.

"Mrs. Ryton," he called out, stopping her just before she reached the door.

She turned back to him, her expression patient and curious.

"Can you get me the Duchess's measurements?" he asked, the words coming out more hesitant than he intended.

Mrs. Ryton's brow quirked slightly in surprise, but she quickly masked it with her usual composure. "Would you like me to send for the modiste then, Your Grace?" she inquired. "I hear one of the prominent ones in London now has another shop in the village."

“No, no,” Alexander quickly interjected. “It would be best if the Duchess doesn’t know about it.”

He wanted to surprise her.

Mrs. Ryton appeared thoughtful for a moment, her keen eyes considering his request. “In that case, I shall ask her lady’s maid to get the measurements. I am sure she can manage it surreptitiously enough,” she said, her tone assured.

“Excellent,” Alexander replied, feeling a sudden surge of excitement at the prospect of surprising Elizabeth. This would be a small step toward mending the rift between them.

“When you have the measurements, I will need you to take them to the modiste,” he continued, his mind already racing with ideas. “I should like to view some samples too.”

A small smile played on Mrs. Ryton’s lips as she nodded, her approval evident. She gave a curtsy and left the room, leaving Alexander alone with his thoughts. He leaned back in his chair, a sigh escaping him as he stared at the closed door.

Would this be enough? he wondered, a flicker of doubt creeping in.

CHAPTER 22

Elizabeth's slippers made no sound on the polished floor as she walked down the hall, her thoughts as dull as the household accounts she had just set aside. It seemed her husband was determined to remain an enigma, making himself scarce at every possible opportunity. The distance between them felt as vast as the echoing halls of their home, and she filled her days with whatever distractions she could find—no matter how uninspiring.

As she passed by an open drawing room, the murmur of voices caught her attention, halting her steps. The tone of the conversation was low and conspiratorial, the kind that demanded secrecy yet begged to be overheard.

"I told you. John the footman said he was in the hall when the Duchess ran away from the Duke," a maid whispered urgently to another.

Elizabeth's heart skipped a beat. What on earth were they talking about? She took a step back, pressing herself against the cool wood of the wall as dread began to knot in her stomach. The exchange they were referring to—she knew it well. A brief, tense moment with Alexander, no more than a few words shared in the hallway. How had that small incident twisted into something so absurd?

"Do you think they're fighting?" the second maid asked, her voice full of curiosity.

"Well, considering the Duke has been avoiding his Duchess since he brought her here, I think things have never been smooth with them," the first maid replied with a hint of smugness.

Elizabeth closed her eyes for a moment, a wave of anxiety washing over her. The servants had noticed. She had been so careful, or at least she thought she had, to mask the tension that simmered beneath the surface of her marriage. But it seemed her small lapse—succumbing to her emotions that fateful afternoon—had only made matters worse.

“Poor woman,” the other maid sighed, her tone dripping with pity. “Such a pitiful creature cannot even get her husband’s proper attentions.”

Elizabeth’s grip tightened on the folds of her dress. Was that how they saw her? A pitiful creature, abandoned by her husband? The thought was almost unbearable, and yet she knew there was a kernel of truth to it. Her husband’s aloofness was not something she could easily dismiss, nor was the growing chasm between them.

“But you know...” the first maid suddenly lowered her voice to a near whisper, her words barely carrying to Elizabeth’s ears.

Elizabeth took a cautious step closer to the door, her heart pounding as she strained to catch the rest of the conversation. What more could they possibly say?

“They say the Duchess and Lord Percy are together despite her marriage to his brother,” one of the maids whispered, her tone dripping with scandal. “It all started in London, I heard. And a scandal was why the Duke married her in the first place.”

Elizabeth’s hand flew to her mouth, muffling the gasp that escaped her. Her heart pounded, each beat echoing in her ears like a drum. Lady Compton had been right—these rumors were spreading like wildfire, reaching even the remote corners of the countryside. It seemed no matter where she went, these lies followed, tainting her reputation and threatening to unravel everything she had tried so hard to hold together.

“But I thought Lord Percy had left England?” the second maid asked, her voice full of doubt.

“What I heard is that he’s still around,” the first maid replied confidently. “Hiding and meeting her in private.”

The words struck Elizabeth like a blow, the weight of them almost too much to bear. The audacity of it—the sheer baselessness of these accusations—left her breathless with anger and fear. This was no mere idle gossip; it was a poison, seeping into the very fabric of her life, threatening to destroy her marriage and her standing in society.

She had to find Alexander at once. They needed to act swiftly, to return to London and root out these vile rumors before they took deeper hold. The decision was made in an instant, clarity cutting through her panic like a blade. She would not allow these lies to fester. They had to confront this head-on.

Her resolve firm, Elizabeth turned on her heel, determined to speak with her husband the moment he returned. But as she made her way toward her bedchamber, her thoughts racing, she was met with an unexpected sight.

“Oh, Your Grace. I was just about to go find you,” her new lady’s maid chirped the moment Elizabeth entered the room.

The girl was bent over something on the bed, her eyes alight with a strange excitement that seemed to radiate from her. Elizabeth’s steps faltered, curiosity piqued despite the turmoil in her heart.

“What is it, Lydia?” Elizabeth asked, moving closer.

The maid straightened, revealing a sight that made Elizabeth’s breath catch once more, but this time for an entirely different reason. There, spread across the covers,

was a dress of the deepest red velvet, its richness almost overwhelming in the soft light of the room.

“Where did you get this from?” Elizabeth asked, surprised.

“The Duke had it made for you, Your Grace,” Lydia replied, her smile broadening. “It was delivered not long ago.”

“Made for me?” Elizabeth echoed, her surprise evident. “But how? When?” The questions tumbled from her lips, her mind struggling to grasp the unexpected gesture.

To her further astonishment, Mary chuckled, a sound filled with youthful mischief. “I was instructed by Mrs. Ryton to get your measurements in secret,” the girl admitted, her eyes twinkling with delight. “I didn’t understand why at first, but it seems like the Duke wanted it to be a surprise.”

“Oh my,” Elizabeth murmured, her fingers grazing the luxurious fabric with reverence. The dress was a masterpiece—soft as a whisper, yet vibrant and bold in its hue. It was, without a doubt, the most beautiful dress she had ever beheld.

“Shall we try it on, Your Grace?” Mary asked, her excitement infectious.

Elizabeth nodded, her own anticipation building. As the dress settled around her, the depth and richness of the red velvet seemed to come alive against her pale complexion. She turned to the mirror, breath catching at the sight.

“Oh, it looks wonderful!” Elizabeth exclaimed, giving a small twirl before the standing mirror, the skirt flaring out with a graceful sweep.

“You make it look so, Your Grace,” Mary said with an admiring smile.

Elizabeth couldn't help but smile back, though a small frown tugged at the corner of her lips as she studied her reflection once more. The gift was so unexpected, so out of character for Alexander, that she couldn't help but wonder at its purpose. Could it be... a peace offering? Was this his way of bridging the gap that had grown between them?

The thought lingered in her mind as she carefully removed the dress and returned to her usual attire. Whatever his intentions, she would soon find out. Alexander returned home just before dinner, and Elizabeth wasted no time in seeking him out, her heart racing with both anxiety and hope.

She found him in the library, his back turned to her as he leafed through a book. The sight of him—so familiar, yet still so distant—filled her with an odd sense of longing.

“There you are,” she sighed, relief washing over her at the sight of him.

Alexander turned, his expression one of mild surprise. “You’re looking for me?” he asked, clearly taken aback.

“Is it so implausible that I would be?” Elizabeth countered, her voice steady though her heart beat uncomfortably fast.

His brow furrowed slightly, as if pondering over her words. “Well, considering you looked as though you could barely tolerate my presence in that hall...”

Elizabeth stilled. Could it be that he had misinterpreted her reaction as well?

But perhaps she had imagined it because his expression was inscrutable now, his features carefully composed. Yet, the sting of guilt lingered in her chest, nagging at her. She had felt a glimmer of something—vulnerability, perhaps—but it was gone, replaced by his usual calm reserve.

“I’d been in a hurry,” Elizabeth excused, her voice softer than she intended.

He nodded, the motion almost perfunctory. Silence fell between them, thick and heavy with unspoken words. Elizabeth shifted, feeling the awkward tension in the air pressing down on her, making her acutely aware of how strained their relationship had become. She cleared her throat, desperate to break the silence.

“The dress is beautiful,” she said, hoping to steer the conversation to safer ground. “I didn’t realize you had quite the taste, Your Grace,” she added, attempting a teasing tone.

His lips quirked in a small, almost imperceptible smile. “I am glad it is up to your standards then, Your Grace,” he replied, his voice carrying a hint of playfulness.

Elizabeth felt some of the tension ease from her shoulders, a small measure of relief washing over her. At least they could still exchange pleasantries, even if the words felt somewhat hollow. “Pray tell, what is the occasion?” she asked, tilting her head in curiosity.

“Do I need an occasion to give gifts to my Duchess?” he returned, his tone light, yet his gaze held something deeper, something she couldn’t quite decipher.

Elizabeth felt a warmth spread across her cheeks, a blush she couldn’t control. The compliment, though simple, touched her in a way she hadn’t expected. “I am glad you like it,” he added, his voice gentler now.

“Thank you,” Elizabeth beamed, her smile genuine, the awkwardness momentarily forgotten.

“My pleasure,” he replied, with a small bow, making a show of gallantry that drew a soft chuckle from her.

But the ease of the moment faded as quickly as it had come. Elizabeth's thoughts returned to the troubling news she had been burdened with all day. "There is something I wanted to talk to you about," she began again, this time more tentatively.

He looked at her, his expression shifting to one of expectation, the air between them suddenly charged with anticipation.

"I had tea with Lady Compton," Elizabeth started, choosing her words carefully. "And I'm afraid she came bearing similar news to what Georgianna shared."

Alexander's jaw tightened, and he let out a low, frustrated curse under his breath, his eyes darkening with displeasure.

"What is more," Elizabeth continued, her voice steady despite the anxiety curling in her stomach, "I overheard the servants discussing these rumors as well. They seem to be spreading faster than we anticipated."

"Good lord. Is this never-ending?" he muttered, running a hand over his face in clear frustration.

Elizabeth hesitated, then took a breath, gathering her courage. "I was thinking that perhaps it is time we return to Town," she suggested, her voice careful, almost cautious.

When he quirked a questioning brow, Elizabeth felt a pang of trepidation settle in her chest, her confidence wavering under the weight of his scrutiny.

"If we return to the Season and show society just how content we are in our marriage, perhaps we can nip these rumors in the bud. After all, it all began in London," she elaborated, her voice steady despite the nerves that tugged at her resolve.

“Quench the flames from their source,” he murmured, his expression thoughtful as he considered her suggestion.

“Precisely,” she agreed, a flicker of hope igniting within her at the possibility that he might see reason, that he might consider her proposal with the seriousness it deserved.

He seemed to deliberate for a moment longer, his gaze distant as if weighing the merits of her plan. Then, finally, he nodded, though the set of his mouth hinted at some condition yet to be revealed. “We return to London on one condition,” he said at last, his tone carrying a gravity that made Elizabeth’s heart skip a beat.

“And what is that condition?” she asked, her voice betraying the slight nervousness that had crept back in.

“You wear your new dress to dinner tonight,” he replied, a touch of amusement coloring his words.

Elizabeth blinked, taken aback. For a moment, she could only stare at him in surprise, her mind racing to comprehend his request. Not only had he agreed to her proposal with unexpected ease, but he was also suggesting they dine together—a rare occurrence that left her momentarily speechless.

“You’re joining me for dinner?” she managed to ask, the question slipping out before she could temper the surprise in her voice.

“Since we’re leaving for Town soon, I might as well grace the dining room this once,” he quipped, his lips curving into a smile that was both teasing and unexpectedly warm.

Elizabeth gave him a look, a mix of skepticism and amusement, though she couldn’t

quite keep the corners of her own mouth from turning up in response.

And then he chuckled—a deep, rich sound that sent a pleasant warmth rushing to her cheeks. It was a sound she had heard so rarely, yet it had an immediate effect on her, easing some of the tension that had built up between them.

“I think it’s overdue. I have business back in London waiting for me anyway,” he declared, his tone shifting back to the practical, though the smile still lingered in his eyes.

When Elizabeth returned to her bedchamber, her mind still buzzing from her conversation with Alexander, she wasted no time in informing her lady’s maid of their impending departure.

“We shall be leaving for Town in the next few days,” she announced, her tone brisk as she crossed the room.

The maid, who had been carefully folding a garment, paused mid-motion. “Why, so soon?” she asked, her voice laced with what Elizabeth could only describe as mild surprise.

Elizabeth raised a brow at the question, slightly taken aback by the girl’s forwardness. “We’ve been rustivating here a while now. I hardly think it’s that soon. Besides, you only just started here, remember?” she replied, trying to keep her tone light.

But as she spoke, she noticed something shift in the maid’s expression—something fleeting, inscrutable, that passed over the girl’s features before she quickly averted her gaze.

“I beg your pardon, Your Grace,” the maid said, her tone suddenly more formal,

almost guarded. “It is not my place to question your decisions.”

The abrupt change in her demeanor was subtle, yet unmistakable. The familiarity the girl had displayed moments before seemed to vanish, replaced by a carefully controlled politeness that left Elizabeth feeling some unease.

CHAPTER 23

Elizabeth took Alexander's hand as he reached up to help her down from the carriage. The warmth of his touch sent a pleasant shiver through her, and she couldn't help but smile as she gazed up at him. The setting sun bathed him in a golden light, accentuating the sharp lines of his jaw and the deep, thoughtful eyes that now seemed softer, more open, than she had ever seen them.

He smiled down at her, a look that made her heart skip a beat, and for a moment, she forgot about the long journey, the exhausting hours on the road, and the uncertainty that still lingered between them. In that instant, he was not the distant, enigmatic Duke of Sterlin, but simply her husband, the man she had begun to hope she could truly love.

He led her up the steps of Sterlin House, his hand never leaving hers, and Elizabeth marveled at how natural it felt, how right. But as they stepped inside, their shared moment was interrupted by the butler, who approached with a stack of correspondence that required Alexander's immediate attention.

Alexander glanced at the letters, then turned back to her with an apologetic smile. He brought her hand to his lips, brushing a soft kiss against her knuckles. "Forgive me, my dear," he murmured, his voice low and intimate. "Duty calls."

Elizabeth's heart fluttered at the warmth in his gaze, the tenderness in his touch. "Of course," she replied, her voice barely above a whisper.

He lingered for a moment longer, his eyes holding hers, and the connection between

them felt almost tangible, as if they were sharing a secret, a promise that went unspoken but was deeply felt. Then, with a final squeeze of her hand, he turned to attend to his duties, leaving Elizabeth standing in the entrance hall, her heart still racing from the intensity of their brief exchange.

She watched him go, a small, wistful smile playing on her lips. Elizabeth still couldn't quite believe her luck. Alexander had become more present, more engaged in their marriage, and the change was as surprising as it was welcome.

But even as she reveled in the warmth of his newfound attentiveness, a small voice in the back of her mind wondered if this was all part of the facade they were preparing to present to society. Was he truly warming to her, or was he simply ensuring that they played their roles to perfection once they returned to London?

These thoughts lingered in her mind as she made her way to her bedchamber, the exhaustion of the journey finally catching up to her. The familiar surroundings of Sterlin House did little to soothe her restless thoughts, and even as she dressed for bed, her mind was elsewhere—on her family, whom she hadn't seen in so long.

Once ready for bed, she sat at her escritoire, the room lit softly by a single candle. She pulled out a sheet of fine paper and dipped her pen in ink, the simple act of writing bringing her a sense of calm. The words flowed easily as she penned a note to her family:

Dearest Aunt Petunia, Margaret, and Anna,

I write to you with great excitement to inform you that Alexander and I have just arrived in London. The journey was long, but my thoughts were filled with the anticipation of seeing you all again. I cannot wait to call on you tomorrow. It has been far too long, and I have missed you dearly.

Until then, I remain, as ever, your loving Elizabeth.

She read over the note, a fond smile tugging at her lips as she imagined their reactions. With a satisfied sigh, she sealed the letter and left it on her writing table, her thoughts now filled with the joy of reuniting with her loved ones.

The following morning, Elizabeth dressed with care, her anticipation growing with each passing moment. But just as she was fastening the last button on her gown, a commotion in the front hall drew her attention. Curious, she hurried downstairs, her heart skipping with excitement as she approached the source of the noise.

“Peggy!” Elizabeth practically squealed, her voice filled with delight as she caught sight of her sister, Margaret, standing in the doorway.

Margaret beamed at her, her eyes shining with the same joy. “Lizzy!” she called out, rushing forward to embrace her.

But Margaret wasn’t alone. Behind her stood Aunt Petunia and Anna, their faces lit with excitement. “We got your letter late last night, dear,” Aunt Petunia said as she squeezed Elizabeth in a warm hug.

“And we simply couldn’t wait to see you,” Anna added, her voice bubbling with laughter as they all crowded around Elizabeth, pulling her into a group hug.

Elizabeth laughed, the sound pure and joyful as she held her family close. “Oh, rubbish,” she dismissed, her heart swelling with happiness. “It’s wonderful to see you all again. I’ve missed you so much.” She led them into the drawing room and rang for tea.

“Oh, I’m sure you must have quite the news for us,” Aunt Petunia said, her eyes gleaming with anticipation as she settled into a comfortable chair.

Elizabeth chuckled softly, though there was a slight self-consciousness in her tone. “Oh, hardly anything special,” she replied, trying to downplay the significance of her time away from Town.

“But the change of scenery was much welcome,” she added, glancing around the room that now felt more vibrant with her family’s presence.

“Now you’re back in the fray,” Anna chimed in with a playful chuckle, her impish smile making Elizabeth smile in return.

“Indeed we are,” a new voice joined in, and Elizabeth’s heart gave a small leap of surprise.

She looked up to find Alexander standing at the entrance of the drawing room, his presence commanding as always. He met her gaze briefly, and she thought she saw a flicker of warmth there before he turned his attention to her family.

“You’re welcome to our humble home, ladies,” Alexander said as he stepped further into the room, his tone gracious and welcoming.

“Thank you, Your Grace,” they all replied in unison, their manners impeccable as they dipped their heads in acknowledgment.

“Would you like to join us for tea?” Petunia offered, her voice taking on the tone of a practiced hostess, despite being the guest herself.

Elizabeth couldn’t help but chuckle softly at the sight. Petunia was still Petunia, always ready to take charge of any situation, and the familiarity of it filled Elizabeth with a warm sense of belonging.

But Alexander shook his head slightly, a small, apologetic smile on his lips. “I’m

afraid I must make an urgent appearance at the House of Lords,” he said, and Elizabeth felt a faint pang of disappointment, quickly followed by doubt. Was this just another of his excuses, a convenient way to avoid spending time together?

“There’s always a next time then,” her aunt replied brightly, seemingly unperturbed by his departure.

But before Elizabeth could dwell on her thoughts, Alexander spoke again, his words catching her completely off guard. “In that case, how about dinner to make up for it?” he suggested, his gaze meeting Elizabeth’s with a surprising earnestness. “Liz and I would love to have you all over,” he added, his tone warm and inviting.

“Sounds marvelous,” three voices echoed with identical excitement, their enthusiasm lighting up the room.

As Alexander made his exit, Elizabeth felt a mix of emotions swirling within her—surprise, confusion, and a flicker of something that felt like hope. Was this another attempt to bridge the gap between them, or simply a courteous gesture for the sake of appearances? She couldn’t be sure, but she found herself wanting to believe in the former.

“He calls you Liz, eh?” Peggy suddenly turned to Elizabeth with a mischievous grin as Alexander left.

“Liz sounds sweet. A little too excessive for my taste, but just perfect for you, Lizzy,” Anna remarked with a playful wink at Peggy, and the pair dissolved into laughter.

Elizabeth felt the warmth of a blush creeping up her neck. “Do not start, you two,” she admonished gently, though her voice carried more amusement than censure.

“Why ever not?” Peggy retorted with a mischievous grin. “You did say you missed

us, did you not?”

“I missed you, not your mischief,” Elizabeth replied, a soft laugh escaping her.

“Oh, but there are no half measures, Lizzy darling,” Anna interjected with mock gravity. “If you miss us, you must take us as we are—mischief and all.”

“Well said, Anna,” Peggy agreed, nodding sagely. Their shared laughter filled the room, light and carefree, warming Elizabeth’s heart.

“Oh, you two. Do give the girl a reprieve. She has only just returned,” Aunt Petunia chided, though the twinkle in her eye and the soft chuckle that followed showed she was not entirely displeased by their antics.

Elizabeth shook her head fondly. “How is Uncle? I cannot wait to call upon him as well,” she asked, her tone bright with anticipation.

“He was summoned to the House of Lords this morning,” Petunia replied, her expression softening as she spoke of her husband. “But he sent his warmest regards, naturally.”

Elizabeth nodded, but beneath her composed exterior, her mind was awirl with questions. She wondered about their financial situation, how society had treated them in the wake of the scandal, and whether they had heard the new rumors that plagued her so. But she kept her concerns hidden, choosing instead to wear a smile as they conversed over tea.

“So, Lizzy,” Anna began, her curiosity evident, “what news do you bring from your time away?”

Elizabeth hesitated for a moment, then decided to steer the conversation toward a

more pleasant topic. “I have recently struck up a friendship with the Viscountess Compton,” she said, her tone lightening at the memory of the lively woman.

“I have heard of Lady Compton,” Petunia remarked, her interest piqued. “They say she prefers the quiet of the countryside to the hustle of London society. Her gatherings are said to be quite unparalleled in their charm.”

“Indeed,” Elizabeth agreed with a soft laugh, recalling the Viscountess’s infectious energy and the warmth she had shown. It was a friendship she had not anticipated but one she had quickly come to treasure.

“Is that a Ra figurine?” Peggy exclaimed, her eyes lighting up with excitement. Without waiting for a reply, she jumped to her feet and crossed the room to inspect the display on an end table, her fascination with ancient Egypt as strong as ever.

Elizabeth watched with a fond smile as her sister leaned in to examine the small statue. “Such a beautiful place you have here, Lizzy. I am so happy for you,” Aunt Petunia said, her voice warm as she too allowed her gaze to wander around the drawing room, taking in the elegant furnishings and tasteful decor.

Elizabeth followed their lead, letting her own eyes drift over the room’s details. She had not truly taken it in before, not with the eyes of someone seeing it for the first time. It was beautiful—refined and stately, yet with a warmth that made it feel like home. And yet, there was a pang of disbelief within her, a small part of her that still found it difficult to believe that this, all of this, was now her life.

“Oh my, it’s made of pure gold,” Peggy exclaimed, her voice brimming with awe. “Come have a look, Auntie,” she called out, beckoning with a wave.

“Oh, I cannot turn down an opportunity to sight some foreign treasures,” Aunt Petunia responded, rising from her seat with a matching eagerness. The two women

huddled around the figurine, their expressions a mix of curiosity and delight.

“Those two’s curiosity should be a crime,” Anna remarked with a chuckle, her gaze following Margaret and their aunt as they continued to explore the room with unabashed enthusiasm.

“And your lack of curiosity needs some questioning too, Anna,” Elizabeth teased, a playful lilt in her voice as she reached for the teapot and refilled her cup.

“You call it a lack of curiosity, I call it grace and sophistication in maintaining control over one’s curiosity,” Anna countered, sitting up straighter, her posture suddenly prim and proper as she made an exaggerated effort to embody the very elegance she spoke of.

“Oh, do not let Aunt Petunia hear your opinions about their display,” Elizabeth laughed, the sound light and genuine as it echoed through the room.

“You know how to keep a secret, don’t you, Liz darling?” Anna responded with a wink, and the two sisters shared another bout of laughter, the easy camaraderie between them filling Elizabeth with warmth.

But just as quickly as the moment of levity had come, it faded. Anna’s expression sobered, the mirth draining from her features as she moved closer to Elizabeth. Her sudden seriousness sent a ripple of unease through Elizabeth, the shift in mood impossible to ignore.

After casting a brief glance in the direction of a distracted Petunia and Peggy, Anna leaned in, her voice dropping to a whisper. “I shouldn’t be saying this to you, but I feel you must know.”

Dread coiled in the pit of her stomach. Elizabeth had known this was coming—had

felt it looming over her ever since her return to London.

“Aunt Petunia is of the opinion that you needn’t be burdened with this,” Anna began, her voice laced with concern. “But I believe that knowing is the only way for you to protect yourself—and your husband.”

Elizabeth’s heart sank as Anna’s words confirmed the dread she had been trying to suppress. The rumors that had plagued her thoughts were not mere whispers carried on the wind; they were very much alive and spreading like wildfire through the ton.

Anna leaned in closer, her expression grave as she continued. She recounted the latest murmurings in town, each word solidifying the fear that had grasped Elizabeth ever since the whispers had first reached her ears.

Elizabeth sighed, the sound heavy with resignation. “I know, Anna. The rumors somehow reached us even in the country,” she admitted, feeling both frustration and weariness.

“Oh dear,” Anna breathed, her eyes widening with sympathy.

“As a matter of fact, we returned to town for that very reason,” Elizabeth added, her tone firming as she spoke.

“What do you mean?” Anna asked, curiosity and concern mingling in her voice.

Elizabeth met her cousin’s gaze, the determination she had been clinging to rising to the surface. “Hiding away in the country will only make society speculate further,” she explained. “But if we present ourselves in society and they witness our interactions—see that there is no cause for scandal—then perhaps we can quell their curiosity and put an end to the speculations and rumors.”

Anna considered this for a moment, then nodded slowly. "It sounds very plausible," she agreed, though there was a hint of doubt in her voice, as if she wasn't entirely convinced that such a plan could truly silence the relentless gossip of the ton.

Elizabeth offered a faint smile, appreciating her cousin's attempt at optimism, even if she herself felt the weight of uncertainty pressing down on her.

"I am sorry about everything, Elizabeth," Anna said softly, her gaze dropping to her hands. "You made the sacrifice and married, but even that wasn't enough to stop the rumors and scorn."

Elizabeth felt a pang of guilt at Anna's words. The scandal that had forced her into a hasty marriage had not only affected her own life but had cast a shadow over her family as well. She reached out and took Anna's hand, squeezing it gently. "It is you I am worried about, Anna," she said, her voice earnest. "How is society treating you all after the scandal?" she asked, her concern evident.

Anna hesitated, her eyes flicking away for a moment before meeting Elizabeth's gaze once more. "It has not been easy," she admitted, her voice quiet. "There have been whispers, cold shoulders... and some invitations that no longer arrive. But we are managing. Aunt Petunia has been a pillar of strength, and Uncle's position helps, of course."

Elizabeth's heart ached at the thought of her family enduring such treatment because of the decisions she had been forced to make. "I am so sorry, Anna," she whispered, her voice thick with emotion. "If I could change it all, I would."

Anna shook her head, a sad smile playing on her lips. "We know, Lizzy. But what's done is done. We just have to move forward the best we can. Society's tongues cannot and will not bring us down, Lizzy, you know that," Anna said, attempting to lighten the mood. Her voice carried a note of determination, as if she could will the

gossip away by sheer force of will. “We are all right. Papa is all right,” she reassured, her tone gentle but firm.

Despite Anna’s words, Elizabeth couldn’t shake the concern that had settled like a weight in her chest. She had always known the cost of scandal, but it was another thing entirely to see its effects ripple through the lives of those she loved.

“I am glad to see you fare well with your husband anyway,” Anna continued, steering the conversation toward lighter topics. “Considering the circumstances of your marriage, I am happy to see that he treats you well, Liz ,” she added with a teasing grin.

“Anna,” Elizabeth murmured, a blush creeping up her cheeks at her cousin’s deliberate use of Alexander’s affectionate nickname for her.

“Goodness, Lizzy. You’re married to this man, but you still blush like a schoolgirl at the mere mention of him?” Anna chuckled, her amusement clear as she observed Elizabeth’s reaction.

Elizabeth’s blush deepened, her cheeks warming under her cousin’s scrutiny. She couldn’t deny the effect Alexander had on her—his presence, his touch, even the sound of his voice could stir something within her that she struggled to understand. But it wasn’t the easy affection of a well-settled marriage; it was something more complicated, more uncertain.

Perhaps, she thought, if she and Alexander shared a true marriage, she wouldn’t react so strongly to him. But theirs was an arrangement, a partnership formed out of necessity rather than love, and the thought of that reality made her feel strangely inadequate. It was a sharp reminder that, despite the moments of connection they had shared, there was still a distance between them that she wasn’t sure they would ever truly bridge.

“Oh, and Lizzy dear,” Anna said suddenly, breaking into her thoughts. “Do not tell Aunt Petunia or Papa that I mentioned the rumors. They didn’t want you troubled by everything and would have my head if they knew I had gone against their wishes.”

Elizabeth nodded, understanding the delicate balance her cousin was trying to maintain. “Oh, I have no intentions of telling anyone about our conversation,” she reassured her, her voice steady. “Thank you, Anna. I wouldn’t have wanted to be kept in the dark about it all,” she added, her gratitude sincere.

Anna smiled, her relief evident. “I knew you would understand,” she said, her tone softening. “But do take care of yourself, Lizzy. And know that we are here for you, whatever happens.”

Elizabeth felt a swell of affection for her cousin, her heart warming at the support and loyalty that shone in Anna’s eyes. She stood and embraced Anna, holding her close for a moment longer than usual. “I shall call upon the house and personally tell Uncle about the Duke’s dinner invitation,” she promised. “In the meantime, send him my warmest regards.”

“Of course,” Anna replied, her voice touched with emotion as she returned the embrace.

Elizabeth then turned to her aunt and younger sister, gathering them into a warm hug as well. “I have missed you all so dearly,” she whispered, her voice thick with the emotion she had been holding back.

“And we, you,” Aunt Petunia replied softly, squeezing her hand before pulling back to look at her with a gentle smile.

Elizabeth watched as her family departed, the solitude of the house settling around her like a heavy cloak.

Later that night, Elizabeth found herself staring up at the ceiling, sleep elusive as her mind replayed her conversation with Anna. The weight of the rumors, the concerns for her family, and the complexities of her marriage swirled in her thoughts, refusing to be quieted. Finally, unable to bear the stillness of her bedchamber, she slipped out of bed and donned her dressing gown, the cool fabric brushing against her skin as she tied it securely around her waist.

With a candle in hand, she ventured out into the silent hallways of her new townhouse, the soft glow casting flickering shadows on the walls. The house, though elegantly furnished, still felt unfamiliar, its vastness amplifying her sense of isolation. She wandered aimlessly, her slippers making barely a sound on the polished floors as she acquainted herself with the rooms.

It was during this quiet exploration that she stumbled upon a curious room. At first glance, it appeared to be just another guest chamber, but as she stepped inside and her candlelight revealed more, she realized there was something different about this space.

Personal items were scattered about—a collection of dolls, papers with a young girl's scrawls on them, and a name written in a childish hand: Eleanor. Elizabeth's breath caught in her throat as realization dawned. This must have been Alexander's sister's room, preserved just as it had been when she was alive.

What struck Elizabeth most was how untouched everything seemed, as though the room's owner might return at any moment. The wardrobe was filled with clothes, the dolls on the bed sat neatly arranged as if waiting for playtime, and on the escritoire, an inkpot was still full, a quill poised in its stand. There was even a faint scent of lavender in the air, delicate and lingering, adding to the eerie sense of presence in the otherwise empty room.

Elizabeth's heart ached as she approached the bed, her fingers lightly brushing one of

the dolls. She couldn't help but feel a pang of sorrow for the little girl who had once filled this room with life and laughter, and for the brothers who still mourned her loss. She picked up the doll, cradling it in her hands, the soft fabric worn from use. The emotions stirred within her—a mix of sadness for the sister she had never known and a deeper sympathy for Alexander, who had clearly kept this room as a shrine to his sister's memory.

Suddenly, a voice cut through the quiet, sharp and filled with unexpected anger. "What are you doing in here?"

Elizabeth startled, the doll slipping from her hands and falling to the floor with a soft thud. She turned swiftly, her eyes widening as she saw Alexander standing in the doorway, his expression etched with displeasure. Even in the dim light of her candle, she could see the hard lines of his face, the anger that simmered just beneath the surface.

"I couldn't sleep. I came across the room..." she began, her voice tentative, unsure of how to explain her intrusion. She could feel the tension radiating from him, the air thick with the unspoken.

"You shouldn't be in here," he said, his tone curt, leaving no room for discussion.

Elizabeth nodded, the weight of his disapproval heavy on her chest. She hesitated for a moment, wanting to say more, to ask the hundred questions that had sprung to her mind the moment she entered the room. But the rigid set of his shoulders, the tightness of his jaw, told her now was not the time. She turned on her heels and quickly left the room, feeling his gaze bore into her back as she stepped out into the hallway.

Just as she exited, a faint sound reached her ears—a gasp, quickly followed by the hurried sound of footsteps retreating down the corridor. Elizabeth paused, her heart

quickenning as she turned the corner, but the hallway was empty.

Curious, she thought, a cold shiver running down her spine.

CHAPTER 24

“A lovely surprise to have you back in Town before the next social season,” Colin teased as he strolled into Alexander’s study, a grin lighting up his features.

“Ah, we got bored of the country,” Alexander replied with a laugh, though the sound felt hollow even to his own ears.

“Unbelievable,” Colin chortled, shaking his head. But then he caught the shift in Alexander’s expression, the way the lightness faded, replaced by something heavier, more troubled. “If only it were that simple,” Alexander sighed, his voice betraying the weight that had settled on his shoulders.

“This is about those rumors, is it not?” Colin’s tone grew serious, matching the mood of the room as he took a seat opposite Alexander.

“We returned to see the extent of the damage. And, hopefully, to find a way to salvage the situation before it gets completely out of hand,” Alexander admitted, running a hand through his hair in a gesture that betrayed his frustration.

Colin’s face hardened with concern. “I will not make this falsely pretty for you, man,” he began. “But I was at White’s, and that is all they could talk about. The ‘Sterlin affair,’ it’s being called now.”

Alexander’s jaw clenched involuntarily. “Is it truly that bad?” he asked, needing to know the full scope of the storm that had been brewing in their absence.

“Suffice to say your wife is being bandied about as a sly woman, your brother as a coward and dishonorable man, and you as a pitiful victim of their selfishness,” Colin said, his voice steady but laced with anger on his friend’s behalf.

Alexander felt his fingers tighten around the tumbler on his desk, the glass cool against his palm as he struggled to contain the sudden surge of anger that roiled within him. He could almost feel the weight of the scandal pressing down on him, threatening to crush the fragile peace he and Elizabeth had barely begun to build. Liz had been right to insist they return to Town. God knew what further damage could have been done had they delayed any longer.

“Yes. It is that bad, man,” Colin confirmed, his eyes narrowing as he took in Alexander’s reaction.

“Elizabeth insisted on our return, as a matter of fact,” Alexander said, his tone thoughtful as he looked away, his mind racing with the implications of their decision.

Colin quirked a curious brow. “She is of the opinion that showing ourselves and being active in society would douse the speculations and rumors,” Alexander elaborated, his words measured, as though speaking them aloud would make them more real.

“I cannot agree more,” Colin nodded, approval clear in his voice. “But if I’m not mistaken, you seem incredulous?”

“Not incredulous. Rather... disturbed,” Alexander confessed, his voice dropping slightly. “What if nothing works?”

“Do not give room for pessimism,” Colin softly admonished, his tone firm but kind.

Alexander exhaled slowly, feeling the weight of his responsibilities more acutely than

ever. “It is my responsibility to protect her honor and dignity as I swore to. We haven’t been married long, but look what’s happening already,” he said, the frustration bleeding into his voice, the words sharper than he intended.

“This is just a start, Alexander. You haven’t failed. And you will not fail,” Colin reassured him, his confidence unwavering. If only Alexander could share in that certainty. But doubt clung to him, a persistent shadow that refused to be banished.

“As a matter of fact, there’s a second purpose to my visit today,” Colin said, his tone suddenly brightening, as if eager to shift the conversation to lighter matters. “I acquired a pure Arabian and thought you’d like to sight her. She’s a true beauty,” he added, his excitement palpable.

Alexander couldn’t help but smile at his friend’s enthusiasm, the tension in his shoulders easing slightly. “Why, where’s the new lady then?” he asked, curious despite the heaviness still lingering in his thoughts.

“She’s just outside,” Colin replied with a grin, clearly pleased with his latest acquisition.

Alexander followed his friend out to the courtyard, and the sight that greeted him was nothing short of spectacular. The mare was as beautiful as Colin had described, her coat shimmering like polished gold under the sunlight. She stood tall and proud, her dark eyes intelligent and alert, every inch of her exuding the grace and power of her breed.

As they examined the mare, admiring the fine lines of her form, the sound of approaching hooves drew their attention. A carriage pulled up beside them, and the window was opened.

“Why, I didn’t realize you were back in Town already, Your Grace,” Georgianna’s

voice sliced through the air, drawing Alexander's attention. She leaned slightly out of her carriage window, a coy smile playing on her lips. "I am just returning myself," she added, her tone light and conversational.

Alexander stiffened, though he managed to keep his expression neutral. "We didn't want to miss out on too much of the Season," he responded curtly, his voice betraying none of the wariness that had crept into his thoughts.

He wanted to believe it was mere coincidence that Georgianna had chosen this exact moment to return to Town, but the cautious voice in the back of his mind whispered otherwise. It was difficult to trust anything about Georgianna—her timing, her intentions—especially given the undercurrent of manipulation that always seemed to accompany her actions.

"Why, the party lover in you still lives, I see," she chuckled lightly, the sound grating against Alexander's nerves. There was something far too casual, too calculated, about her words, and he couldn't help but tense.

"Did you think he was dead?" Colin quipped, chuckling as he joined the exchange, though Alexander noticed how his friend's gaze flicked to him with concern.

"Well, they do say that marriage often changes a man," Georgianna mused, her tone playful, though her gaze remained fixed on Alexander. There was a challenge in her eyes, a deliberate provocation that made his blood simmer with barely contained irritation. "But what would I know, right?" she added with that same irksome little chuckle, the sound like nails scraping against glass.

"Quite a lot, apparently," Alexander drawled, his voice laced with an edge as he met her gaze head-on, refusing to back down from whatever game she was playing. The silent challenge between them was palpable, a tension that crackled in the air like a brewing storm.

“Speaking of parties,” she said, abruptly turning her attention to Colin. “I think the newlyweds deserve one in Town, don’t you think?”

“I never turn down an excuse for some merriment, Lady Winston,” Colin replied, playing along with a smile, though Alexander could see the wary look in his friend’s eyes.

“Did you hear that, Your Grace?” Georgianna’s gaze slid back to Alexander, her eyes glittering with something that made him uneasy.

Before he could respond, she continued, “I best get on my way then. I’m afraid the confinement of the carriage is beginning to make me quite weary.” Her voice was sweet, almost mocking, as if she knew exactly how to twist the situation to her advantage.

Alexander watched her carriage pull away, his jaw clenched. He couldn’t shake the feeling that this encounter was more than just a chance meeting—that it was the first move in whatever game Georgianna was planning. She was not one to let an opportunity slip by, no matter how slight, and he had no doubt that she was already plotting her next move.

After seeing Colin off, Alexander returned to the house, his mind still churning with unease. He was just crossing the threshold when the butler approached him, a silver tray in hand, bearing several invitations.

He wasn’t surprised that word of their return had already spread. London was a hive of gossip, and whispers traveled faster than the wind. As he stared at the invitations, a sudden thought occurred to him—Elizabeth would need a new dress for the upcoming events.

Fresh excitement bubbled within Alexander, a rare emotion that took him by surprise.

The thought of presenting Elizabeth with another gift, especially after the way her eyes had lit up at the sight of the first dress, filled him with a sense of anticipation. He wanted to see that smile again, to know he had brought her a moment of genuine happiness in the midst of all the tension they faced.

The decision was made almost instinctively. He wanted something more than just a dress this time—something that would truly convey his intentions, perhaps even bridge the distance that still lingered between them.

He summoned the butler without delay.

“You called, Your Grace?” the man inquired as he entered the study, his demeanor as composed as ever.

“I need the keys to the old rooms,” Alexander said.

CHAPTER 25

“O h, it’s wonderful to see you again, Uncle,” Elizabeth exclaimed, her voice brimming with warmth as she buried herself in her uncle’s welcoming embrace.

“And even better to see you, my dear child,” he responded, his arms enveloping her with a comforting squeeze. When he finally released her, his eyes shone with genuine affection. “Do have some lemonade, will you?” he offered, gesturing toward the refreshment on a nearby tray. “I had it brought in just before your arrival.”

“Sounds marvelous,” Elizabeth replied, slipping off her kid gloves and settling into the sitting area by the hearth in his study. The familiar surroundings brought a sense of calm that she had sorely missed.

“The weather is a bit warmer today after all,” her uncle noted as he handed her a glass of lemonade, the coolness of the drink a welcome reprieve from the heat.

“Any excuse to indulge in something cold, sweet, and sour, right, Uncle?” she teased, a soft chuckle escaping her as she took a sip. The lemonade was as refreshing as she had anticipated.

“Indeed,” he laughed, his eyes crinkling at the corners. But then his expression grew more serious as he asked, “How have you been?”

“Very well,” Elizabeth replied, though the words felt more like a practiced response than a true reflection of her feelings. She took another sip of the lemonade, hoping it would wash away the unease that threatened to surface.

Her uncle's gaze lingered on her, thoughtful and probing, as if he could see past the veneer she had carefully constructed. After a moment, he finally spoke, "Glad to hear that then. Else I would have marched down to Sterlin House with my most efficient blunderbuss right this moment."

Elizabeth couldn't help but laugh, the image of her uncle storming the estate with his old blunderbuss both absurd and endearing. "How have you been, then, Uncle?" she asked, steering the conversation back to him. "And everyone?"

"Oh, your aunt and sisters are as rambunctious as ever. And me, I just try to keep up," he replied with a chuckle, the fondness in his voice clear.

Elizabeth smiled, the warmth of the exchange soothing her nerves. But there was still one question that weighed heavily on her mind, one she had to ask despite the risk of shattering the fragile peace. "And how has society been treating you after everything?" she inquired, her voice carefully measured.

Her uncle opened his mouth to respond, but before he could speak, the butler interrupted, entering the room with a silver tray bearing a stack of freshly delivered invitations.

"Why, it's another ball," her uncle squinted at the embossed papers as he sorted through them.

Elizabeth felt a small surge of relief as she watched him examine the invitations. The fact that her family still received such invitations was a good sign, a glimmer of hope that they had not been entirely ostracized.

"Will you be going too?" her uncle asked, handing her the invitations to peruse.

"If we receive an invitation, why not?" Elizabeth responded, trying to sound

confident even as that familiar voice of anxiety whispered in the back of her mind, reminding her of the many reasons they might not be welcomed.

“I see no reason why they wouldn’t extend one to you and your husband,” her uncle said, his tone reassuring.

Elizabeth forced a smile, grateful for his optimism, though she couldn’t silence the doubts that lingered. Her uncle hadn’t mentioned the rumors—not that she had expected him to after what Anna had told her. The subject was delicate, and she decided then that she would keep her own silence on the matter as well.

“Oh, speaking of invitations,” she said, suddenly recalling the purpose of her visit. “Alexander and I would like to host the family for dinner soon.”

“We would be honored,” her uncle beamed, the genuine pleasure in his expression easing some of the tension in her heart.

Elizabeth left her uncle’s home feeling a bit lighter, but the reality of their situation remained with her. Upon returning home, she found that the same ball invitations her uncle had received had also arrived for her and Alexander. It seemed society was willing to give them a chance, and she knew they had to make the most of it.

The day before the ball, Elizabeth entered her bedchamber and was greeted by a sight that took her breath away. Laid out on her bed was an exquisite evening dress of midnight blue satin and lace, its rich fabric shimmering in the soft light. Next to the dress was a small box and a note.

Her heart quickened as she picked up the note and unfolded it, her eyes scanning the elegant handwriting:

My dear,

The dress is for the ball tomorrow evening. I took the liberty of picking out something for you from the family jewels as well. I do hope it is to your liking.

—Alexander

Elizabeth's fingers trembled slightly as she set the note aside and opened the box. Inside, nestled on a bed of velvet, was a stunning tiara adorned with diamonds and sapphires that perfectly matched the dress, and a pair of equally resplendent earrings.. The sight of it, combined with the unexpected gesture, sent a wave of emotion crashing over her.

Elizabeth found herself unable to tear her gaze away from the breathtaking gown and the sparkling jewels that lay before her. Time seemed to stand still as she marveled at the exquisite craftsmanship of the midnight blue satin, the delicate lace, and the shimmering sapphires. The anticipation of wearing them was almost too much to bear, and she wished, with all her heart, that she could hasten the hours until tomorrow evening when she would finally adorn herself in the dress and jewels.

Could this be another gift? The thought flitted through her mind, bringing with it a flutter of hope. Could this be Alexander's way of making amends for his absences, for the distance that had so often separated them? Oh, how she desperately wanted it to be true. How she longed for this gesture to mean something to him, to signify that she, Elizabeth, meant something to him.

The following evening, as her lady's maid fussed over the final touches, Elizabeth could hardly contain her excitement. The maid, equally enthusiastic, beamed as she stepped back to admire her handiwork.

"Oh, and I thought the red dress was beautiful on you," the maid gushed, her eyes sparkling as she took in the sight of Elizabeth in the midnight blue gown.

Elizabeth smiled at her reflection, the rich color of the dress bringing out the blue in her eyes. It was as though the gown had been crafted with her in mind, every detail designed to complement her natural beauty. Satisfied with the final look, she took a deep breath and descended the stairs to meet her husband.

As she reached the front vestibule, she noticed Alexander loitering there, his posture relaxed yet attentive. At the sound of her steps, he glanced up abstractedly, but when his gaze truly settled on her, he froze, his breath catching in his throat.

“Liz,” he called out, almost breathless, as she reached the bottom of the stairs. The color rose in her cheeks, a warm blush spreading across her face.

“The dress fits,” she quipped sheepishly, trying to ease the tension that suddenly filled the space between them.

“Indeed,” he murmured, his voice thick with something she couldn’t quite place. “You look as though you’ve stolen the entire cosmos in that dress, Liz.” He reached for her gloved hand, his touch gentle yet purposeful, and slowly slipped off the glove before placing a lingering kiss on her bare knuckles.

The warmth of his gesture spread through her, enveloping her like a soft embrace. “In that case, you stole the cosmos for me then,” she chuckled softly, her heart swelling with an emotion she could scarcely name.

“And I would steal it a hundred times over for you,” he replied, his voice low, yet filled with an intensity that sent shivers down her spine. The emotion in his gaze was so raw, so unexpected, that it left her momentarily speechless. She had never seen him look at her like this before, with such depth of feeling.

Just as she opened her mouth to speak, he interrupted her. “You’re almost ready.”

“Almost?” she echoed in surprise, her brows knitting together in confusion. What more could there possibly be?

A sly smile tugged at the corners of his lips as he reached into his coat pocket and retrieved a small velvet box, slightly larger than the one that had held the tiara she now wore. “Open it,” he urged, holding the box out to her.

Practically bursting with curiosity, Elizabeth took the box from his hand and carefully opened it. A gasp tore through her lungs as her eyes fell upon the dazzling necklace inside.

“Oh, Alex,” she breathed, her voice barely above a whisper as she stared at the magnificent piece. The diamonds and sapphires nestled in the velvet lining sparkled with a brilliance that took her breath away.

“Never say you thought I would let my Duchess grace society without a befitting jewel around her neck too?” Alexander teased gently, his voice warm and affectionate.

Elizabeth was at a loss for words, emotion pricking at her eyes as she tried to process the overwhelming gesture. “I don’t know what to say,” she managed, her voice trembling slightly.

“This is not from the family jewels, Liz,” he said, his tone soft yet resolute. “I purchased this separately for you,” he added, emphasizing the last word as though it carried all the meaning in the world.

Elizabeth’s heart swelled with emotion, and for a moment, she feared she might cry. This was not just a gift—it was a declaration, a testament to the fact that she mattered to him in a way she had not dared to hope for.

“May I?” he offered, his voice tender as he gestured to the necklace.

Unable to speak, she simply nodded and turned, lifting her hair to allow him to fasten the necklace around her neck. His fingers brushed against her skin as he secured the clasp, sending a shiver through her that had nothing to do with the coolness of the jewels.

“There,” he said, stepping back to admire her.

“I think society is ready to meet you now,” Alexander said, his voice filled with palpable satisfaction as he surveyed the ballroom.

Elizabeth managed a nervous chuckle, the weight of the evening suddenly settling on her. “I’m not sure if I am ready,” she admitted, her heart fluttering with both excitement and trepidation.

This was it—her first appearance in London society as the Duchess of Sterlin, and more daunting still, their first appearance together as a married couple.

The significance of the moment was not lost on her, and despite her outward composure, she couldn’t quite quell the nerves that danced just beneath the surface.

“Breathe, darling. I am right here,” Alexander murmured, pressing a soft kiss to her knuckles. The warmth of his lips against her skin sent a wave of reassurance through her, and something warm and tender squeezed at her heart as she met his gaze.

Was this all part of the happy, contented facade they had to present to society tonight? The thought brought an odd pang of disappointment. She wanted this to be real, not just a performance. She wanted to mean something to him—more than just a partner in their carefully constructed life.

As they entered the ballroom on his arm, whispers followed them like a shadow, and Elizabeth felt the weight of countless curious eyes tracking their every step. The atmosphere was charged with anticipation, the collective gaze of society practically buzzing with intrigue as they made their way to greet their hosts.

“Why don’t you open the dance floor for us tonight, Sterlin?” their host suggested, a smile playing on his lips. Alexander nodded in agreement, and before Elizabeth could fully process it, he was leading her towards the center of the room.

The music swelled, and soon, Elizabeth found herself lost in the graceful rhythm of their dance. Alexander’s guidance was sure and steady, and she let herself be carried by the flow of the music, the elegant sweep of his movements. For a moment, the world around them blurred, and it felt as though they were the only two people in the room.

“They cannot take their eyes off you. They’re positively smitten, Liz,” Alexander said softly.

Elizabeth glanced up at him, a mischievous glint in her eyes. “Are those your words you’re putting in society’s mouth, Your Grace?” she teased, a small smile tugging at her lips.

“So what if they are?” he returned, a wicked smile crossing his face as he suddenly pulled her closer. The unexpected closeness sent a rush of heat to her cheeks, and she felt her heart skip a beat.

He must have noticed her flustered reaction, because he chuckled, the sound rich and warm, sending a pleasant vibration through his body and into hers. Elizabeth felt the warmth in her cheeks deepen, and for a moment, she forgot about the prying eyes, the whispers, the weight of expectation. All that mattered was the man in front of her, and the way he made her feel.

Too soon, their dance came to an end, and the spell was broken as they were pulled back into the reality of the bustling ballroom.

“Your Grace,” a familiar voice called out, drawing Elizabeth’s attention. She turned, her eyes lighting up with surprise and delight as she recognized the speaker.

“Lady Compton!” she exclaimed, a genuine smile spreading across her face. “I didn’t realize you were in town. What a pleasant surprise.”

“Oh, I haven’t graced London in quite some time,” the Viscountess confessed with a laugh. “But after you left, I thought it best to follow you and partake in the rest of the Season together.”

“Why, I feel honored then,” Elizabeth replied, her voice warm with affection.

“Oh, you’re too kind,” Lady Compton dismissed with a pleasant wave of her hand before she introduced her husband to Alexander.

Viscount Compton was a rather scrawny, bespectacled man in his sixties, his demeanor pleasant but subdued in comparison to his vivacious wife. He immediately launched into conversation with Alexander, the two gentlemen quickly finding common ground in their discussion.

“While the gentlemen are distracted, allow me to introduce you to a childhood friend of mine, Your Grace,” Lady Compton said eagerly, practically dragging Elizabeth away from the gathering. “The Marchioness of Delle. She is French, you see. We went to the same finishing school in Paris.”

Elizabeth allowed herself to be led, her curiosity piqued as they approached the Marchioness. The woman was as pleasant as Lady Compton had promised, she had a prominent French accent that added a charming touch to her already elegant

demeanor.

“I have heard a great deal about you from Lady Compton,” the Marchioness said, her gaze warm as she took Elizabeth’s hand.

“Hopefully good stories,” Elizabeth replied with a light chuckle, trying to mask her nervousness.

“Oh, only the most marvelous ones,” the Marchioness reassured her with a smile.

“News of the new Duchess of Sterlin hardly ever hides,” came another woman’s voice as she joined their party.

They turned to the sight of none other than the Countess of Winston.

CHAPTER 26

“C ountess of Winston,” Georgianna announced herself to the French Marchioness with a haughty air, not bothering to wait for Lady Compton to make the introduction. Elizabeth noticed the slight narrowing of Lady Compton’s eyes, a telltale sign that she was less than pleased with Georgianna’s forwardness. Yet, ever the practiced hostess, Lady Compton masked her displeasure with a courteous smile.

“Why, I wasn’t expecting you back in Town so soon, Your Grace,” Georgianna turned her attention to Elizabeth, her lips curling into a smirk that did little to hide the snark behind her words.

“Neither was I expecting you back so soon, Lady Winston,” Elizabeth replied smoothly, matching Georgianna’s tone with one of her own.

“Oh, I got bored of the country,” Georgianna waved off the comment with a careless flick of her wrist before adding, “That was a rather short honeymoon, I must say.”

Elizabeth felt a flare of irritation but kept her composure. “I wanted to make my official appearance in society as the Duchess of Sterlin. I couldn’t wait until next season, you see,” she responded, her voice pleasant but firm.

“I see. But a properly observed honeymoon lays a good foundation in a marriage, don’t you think?” Georgianna pressed on, her green eyes glittering with a challenge as she held Elizabeth’s gaze. “But then again, considering the circumstances of your union in the first place, I suppose a honeymoon cut short wouldn’t be utterly shocking,” she added, her tone dripping with faux innocence before Elizabeth could

respond.

Before Elizabeth could muster a reply, the Marchioness of Delle spoke up, her tone cool and measured. “A protracted honeymoon hardly makes a marriage, Lady Winston. I thought you of all people would know that, given that you have been both married and widowed.” There was an unmistakable edge to the Marchioness’s words, and Elizabeth couldn’t help but feel a surge of gratitude toward the woman who had so deftly stepped in on her behalf.

Elizabeth glanced at Lady Delle, surprised by the intervention, and was met with a look that was both inscrutable and reassuring. The Marchioness offered her a small, knowing smile, one that seemed to say, I see what is happening here, and I stand with you .

Georgianna sputtered momentarily, clearly caught off guard by the Marchioness’s pointed remark. But she quickly regained her composure, opening her mouth to deliver a retort—only to be interrupted by Lady Compton.

“If I had married a Duke, I wouldn’t have allowed him to take me to the country at all. Forget a honeymoon. I would have wanted to parade myself through the Season with my new title. So I completely agree with the Duchess. In fact, if you ask me, she rusticated in the country for far too long,” Lady Compton declared with her usual bluntness, her candor eliciting a ripple of laughter from both Lady Delle and Elizabeth.

Georgianna was left momentarily speechless, her mouth opening and closing as she searched for a suitable response. Elizabeth suppressed a smile, feeling a small victory in the exchange.

“Why, do not let Viscount Compton hear those words, Lady Compton,” Elizabeth teased, allowing herself to relax into the banter.

“That man forgives my crimes even before I commit them,” Lady Compton replied with a wink, her voice brimming with amusement.

“Don’t they all,” Lady Delle added with a laugh, the tension between them dissipating into lighthearted camaraderie.

As the evening wore on, Elizabeth excused herself to the ladies’ retiring room, her spirits high from the successes of the evening. However, as she passed a nearby balcony, she overheard a conversation that made her pause.

“Sterlin looked hardly able to tear his gaze away from his wife,” one matron remarked.

“I am beginning to question the rumored affair with his brother,” the other replied, her tone contemplative.

Elizabeth’s heart swelled with a sense of satisfaction. The evening had been more than just a social success—it had begun to shift the tides in their favor. She had seen the looks, heard the whispers, and now, as she returned to Alexander’s side, she felt a quiet confidence take root within her.

They had accomplished what they had set out to do, but she knew that there was still much work to be done.

The following morning, Elizabeth awoke with a lightness in her heart that she hadn’t felt since her marriage. The events of the previous evening had left her with a sense of hope, a belief that perhaps things were beginning to change between her and Alexander. She dressed quickly, eager to begin the day, and made her way down to the breakfast room, anticipation buzzing in her chest.

But when she entered the room and found it empty, the sense of joy that had carried

her through the night began to falter. The table was set for one, the room quiet save for the soft clinking of China as the footman arranged her place. The realization that she would be eating alone once again weighed heavily on her, pulling her spirits down. After the way Alexander had treated her last night, the warmth in his gaze, the tenderness of his words, she had allowed herself to believe that things might finally be falling into place. But now, in the cold light of morning, it seemed clear that it had been nothing more than an act, a performance for society's eyes.

Her heart sank, the hollow feeling in her chest making it difficult to even consider eating. She forced herself to take a few bites, though the food tasted like ash in her mouth. Eventually, she pushed her plate away, unable to stomach any more, and found herself wandering aimlessly through the halls, the grand rooms of the townhouse feeling emptier than ever.

Almost without thinking, she found herself back at the door of Eleanor's bedchamber. She hesitated for a moment before reaching for the handle, a part of her hoping to find some comfort or connection in the room. But when she tried the door, she was met with resistance. It was locked.

The disappointment was like a physical blow. Her husband was determined to keep her out—not just of this room, but of his past, and perhaps out of his life entirely. The thought settled in her stomach like a lead weight, and she stood there, staring at the locked door, feeling more isolated than ever.

As she stood there, lost in her thoughts, a throat was suddenly cleared behind her, causing her to jump.

“I beg your pardon, Your Grace,” the butler said, his voice measured and calm. “But there's a caller for you in the drawing room.”

Elizabeth composed herself quickly, pushing down the swirl of emotions as best she

could. “Who is it?” she asked, though she already had a sinking suspicion.

“Lady Winston,” the butler replied, confirming her fears.

Elizabeth’s heart sank further as she made her way to the drawing room. The sight of the widowed Countess did nothing to improve her mood. “Lady Winston,” she greeted, trying to keep her voice steady and not let her displeasure show too clearly.

“Lady Elizabeth,” Georgianna replied, her tone as smooth and insincere as ever.

“To what do I owe such a surprise?” Elizabeth asked, masking her true feelings behind a veneer of polite curiosity.

“I am sure you will excuse my unannounced call,” Georgianna said with that familiar, snarky chuckle that grated on Elizabeth’s nerves.

“Of course. This wouldn’t be the first time you’ve forgotten your manners, Lady Winston,” Elizabeth replied, her tone cool but civil.

A fleeting scowl crossed Georgianna’s features, but she quickly masked it with another chuckle. “Oh, such a sense of humor you have, Lady Elizabeth,” she said lightly, though her eyes were sharp. “I came to deliver some invitations.”

“You’re hosting a ball?” Elizabeth asked, though she already knew the answer.

“A garden party,” Georgianna corrected, her tone dripping with false sweetness.

“Why, you needn’t have troubled yourself to come all the way to deliver the cards then. A footman should have sufficed,” Elizabeth replied, her voice as pleasant as she could muster, though the irritation was bubbling just beneath the surface.

“Oh, I’d been hoping to give the invite to Alexander myself,” Georgianna said, her eyes narrowing slightly as she watched Elizabeth’s reaction. “As I’m hosting the party in his honor, you see.”

Elizabeth felt a flash of anger at the audacity of the woman. Why would the Countess throw a party in honor of Alexander?

It was clear to Elizabeth that this was no mere social courtesy—it was a bait, a deliberate attempt to provoke her.

CHAPTER 27

“Why, how magnanimous of you, Lady Winston,” Elizabeth replied, keeping her tone as serene as possible. “I shall pass on the pleasant news to my husband when he returns home.”

Georgianna’s eyes narrowed slightly, as if searching for a crack in Elizabeth’s composure. “Is he never home? You seem to always be by yourself,” she observed, her tone laced with feigned innocence.

“My husband is a Duke, Lady Winston. Naturally, he has matters of business to attend to during the day,” Elizabeth responded, her voice steady and unruffled.

“You must find it awfully boring then,” the widow pressed, her words clearly meant to needle.

“About as leisurely as you find your own days at home alone,” Elizabeth returned sweetly, her smile never wavering.

For a brief moment, the Countess looked taken aback by Elizabeth’s retort, but she quickly recovered, though there was a hint of sheepishness in her tone as she replied, “Well, we women must devise ways to make the most of our days.”

Elizabeth could sense the shift in Georgianna’s demeanor, but she was not inclined to offer any further courtesies. “Now, I am sure you must have quite a lot to do with your afternoon,” she said dismissively, her words a clear invitation for Georgianna to take her leave.

“Quite a lot indeed,” Georgianna agreed, though her tone now conveyed her annoyance. “A party for a Duke must live up to expectations, after all. Don’t you think, Lady Elizabeth?” she added, her voice carrying that familiar edge.

“Your Grace,” Elizabeth corrected her calmly, her eyes meeting Georgianna’s with an unwavering gaze.

“I beg your pardon?” Georgianna sputtered, her composure slipping for the first time.

“You seem to have forgotten your manners once again, Lady Winston. It’s ‘Your Grace,’ not ‘Lady Elizabeth’ anymore,” Elizabeth repeated, her tone patient but firm.

A deep shade of pink spread across Georgianna’s cheeks, and she pinned a rather forced smile to her lips, clearly embarrassed. She rose to her feet, clearly eager to end the conversation.

“Oh, and Countess Winston,” Elizabeth called out as Georgianna reached the door. The widow turned, her expression strained. “I am the Duchess of Sterlin. You will do well not to forget that next time,” Elizabeth added, her voice carrying the quiet authority of her title.

Without another word, and looking thoroughly mortified, Georgianna turned and hurried out the door. As soon as the Countess was gone, Elizabeth felt a rush of questions flood her mind, questions she had been trying to suppress about the true nature of Georgianna’s relationship with Alexander. Throwing a party in his honor was a bold move, indeed. What was the woman after? And more importantly, what sort of backing did she believe she had from Alexander to be so audacious?

As Elizabeth pondered these troubling thoughts, she was interrupted by the housekeeper in the hallway. “Oh, I was just on my way to your chambers now, Your Grace,” the woman said, approaching with a rather large box in her hands.

“This just arrived for you,” the housekeeper declared, setting the box down with a respectful nod.

Perplexed and curious, Elizabeth followed the housekeeper to her chambers, where the box was placed on the bed. With a mix of anticipation and excitement, she opened the box to reveal yet another dress, this one a stunning olive green and gold ensemble. Her eyes widened at the sight, and the disappointment from her earlier encounter with Georgianna seemed to melt away, replaced by a renewed sense of joy.

Was her husband trying to make up for his actions once again? Whatever his motives, Elizabeth found herself increasingly drawn to these little surprises. They filled her with a sense of anticipation, a spark of excitement that she had not felt in quite some time.

“Oh, I find myself looking forward to your new dresses now, Your Grace,” her lady’s maid remarked, pausing in her task of folding laundry to admire the new gown. It was as though she had read Elizabeth’s thoughts.

Elizabeth picked up the accompanying note, her heart fluttering as she unfolded it. ‘Gold is a color fit for the Royal Opera House, don’t you think, Liz?’ her husband’s elegant penmanship read.

A thrill of excitement coursed through her. Alexander was taking her to the theater!

“I am beginning to think that you would make even a burlap sack look beautiful,” Alexander said, helping Elizabeth into their waiting carriage the following evening, his voice rich with warmth and affection.

“Is that a hint about my next dress?” Elizabeth quipped, feeling a pleasant warmth spread through her at his compliment.

“Oh, do not tempt me, Liz,” he laughed heartily as he joined her inside the carriage, the sound of his laughter reverberating pleasantly through the enclosed space.

As their carriage rolled through the lamplit streets of London, heading toward the theater, Elizabeth took the opportunity to share something that had been on her mind. It was the first real chance for a proper conversation since the ball, and she wanted to let him know how their efforts were being perceived by society.

“I overheard a conversation between two matrons at the last ball,” she began, glancing at him to gauge his reaction. “They were questioning the rumors about you and your brother, given how you seemed unable to take your eyes off me.”

Alexander’s lips curved into a satisfied smile. “Something that is finally going as it should,” he said, a note of relief in his voice.

“Indeed,” Elizabeth agreed, her spirits lifting even further at the realization that they were beginning to turn the tide in their favor.

When they arrived at the theater, the grandeur of the event was on full display. The English aristocracy had turned out in force, pairs and groups of peers indulging in an evening of entertainment and glamour. The theater was a center of wealth and status, and Elizabeth took a deep breath to tamp down her excitement and nervousness as they took their seats.

The performance began, and Elizabeth found herself utterly absorbed in the story. The emotions conveyed on stage were powerful, pulling at her heartstrings in a way she hadn’t expected. By the time the curtains fell for the intermission, she realized she had been moved to tears.

“Is that a tear I see, Liz?” Alexander’s teasing voice broke through her thoughts.

Elizabeth dabbed at her eyes with her matching olive green and gold satin handkerchief, a soft chuckle escaping her. “Oh, tell me you weren’t moved by that,” she challenged, meeting his gaze with a playful smile.

“The Duchess of Sterlin so moved? Unbelievable,” he teased, his eyes sparkling with amusement.

“Oh, with those words, one would think me heartless, Alexander,” Elizabeth said, still smiling.

“Only too stubborn for tears,” he chortled, and Elizabeth gave him a mock stern look.

“I cannot be that bad,” she said, feigning indignation.

“Only worse, perhaps,” he laughed, and she couldn’t help but join him, the sound of their shared laughter filling the space between them.

As the laughter faded, Alexander’s expression softened, taking on a more reflective quality. “This is a bit of a family tradition, you see,” he said, his tone tinged with nostalgia.

Elizabeth tilted her head, intrigued. “A tradition?”

“This particular performance was my mother’s favorite,” he revealed, surprising Elizabeth with this glimpse into his past. “Father always brought her here whenever they were in town. She loved it so much that she even watched the French version in Paris when they traveled.”

Elizabeth listened intently as he continued, “After her death, when we were older, he would bring Percy and me sometimes. I’ve watched it twice with him.”

“It’s a brilliant piece. I’m not surprised she loved it that much. Thank you for sharing it with me,” Elizabeth said, her heart warmed by this rare moment of openness from him. It was the first time he had spoken to her about his family in such a personal way.

“Like I said, it’s a family tradition, Liz,” he replied, a small, almost wistful smile tugging at his lips.

Elizabeth felt a flutter in her chest at the way he spoke, as if he were acknowledging, perhaps for the first time, that she was part of that tradition now—part of his family. “When did she pass on?” she asked gently, hoping to learn more.

“She died giving birth to my sister, Eleanor,” he answered, his voice quiet, the pain of the memory still evident despite the years that had passed. “I was eight years old then. Percy was six.”

“I’m so sorry,” Elizabeth said, her heart aching for the little boys they had been, for the losses they had endured. She understood that kind of pain all too well.

“Eleanor must have been very young when the accident happened,” she ventured, hoping to learn more about the sister whose room remained untouched.

“Nine years old was too young,” he replied, his voice suddenly tight with bitterness. There was a curtness to his tone that made it clear he did not wish to continue down this path.

Elizabeth opened her mouth to ask more, but before she could, he abruptly changed the subject. “Did you know that in France, one must make a reservation to watch this performance at least a month in advance? That’s how beloved the piece is.”

She recognized the diversion for what it was and felt a pang of disappointment. He

had shared something with her, but just as quickly, he had shut her out again, retreating behind the walls he kept so carefully constructed.

For the rest of the performance, Alexander remained unusually quiet, his earlier warmth and humor replaced by a distant demeanor. Elizabeth couldn't help but admonish herself for pushing too hard, for indulging her curiosity and perhaps ruining the atmosphere that had been so promising.

Would I ever truly know the family I married into?

CHAPTER 28

Alexander found himself increasingly drawn to any excuse that allowed him to spend time with Elizabeth. Whenever they were together, it felt as though he had found a missing piece of himself, one he had unconsciously searched for his entire life. As he stood across the garden, watching her engage in animated conversation with her friends, a small, contented smile tugged at the corners of his lips. She was the picture of elegance and vitality, the perfect Duchess—his perfect Duchess, he thought with a warmth that spread through his chest.

He had reluctantly agreed to attend Georgianna's garden party. When Elizabeth mentioned the invitation, he had braced himself for a disagreement, half-expecting her to question his relationship with the Countess. But she had surprised him by suggesting they attend, reasoning, "The party is in your honor, after all. We wouldn't want the Countess to waste her efforts, now would we?"

As they arrived, Alexander couldn't shake the feeling that Georgianna was up to something. He recalled their encounter shortly after her return to Town, the way she had maneuvered the conversation, and he wondered what exactly she hoped to achieve by hosting a party in his honor.

"The Marchioness of Delle was just telling me about the French version of the performance," Elizabeth's voice interrupted his thoughts as she returned to his side, her enthusiasm evident. "She's watched it too and thinks very highly of it."

"I am yet to meet anyone who doesn't," Alexander replied, the corners of his mouth lifting in response to her excitement. "Perhaps we can watch it as well, if you'd like,"

he proposed, wanting to share in the experience with her.

Her eyes widened with delight. “You mean we travel to France?” she asked.

“Unless you know of some other magical way to watch it from afar,” he chuckled, enjoying the way her excitement seemed to light up her entire face.

“Oh, that sounds marvelous, Alexander,” she exclaimed, and her radiant smile squeezed tenderly at his heart.

Just then, her family arrived, and Elizabeth excused herself to greet them. Alexander watched her go, feeling a sense of satisfaction that her family had not been entirely ostracized from society. He was glad to see that they were managing to find their place once more.

“The man of the hour standing all alone?” A voice drew him from his thoughts. He turned to see Georgianna approaching, her expression as self-assured as ever.

“There is no company greater than one’s own, they say,” Alexander replied, his tone polite but guarded.

“Is that why you’re always abandoning your wife all alone?” Georgianna teased, but there was a sharpness in her words that set him on edge.

He felt his brow furrow in confusion. “One would begin to question your marriage, you see,” she added, her tone dripping with insinuation.

“Thank you for the concern, but my wife is hardly abandoned, Lady Winston,” he returned tersely, his patience wearing thin.

“Lady Winston?” she echoed in exaggerated surprise. “Why so formal, Alexander?”

She quirked her lips into a mocking smile.

“I know my place. And you would do well to remember the same,” he said, his tone leaving no room for misunderstanding.

“My place is as your friend, Alexander. As it has always been,” she replied, the smile on her lips sharpening.

“You seem to have quite the deluded conception of this friendship you speak of, my lady,” he countered, his voice edged with irritation.

“Never say I’m the only one who remembers all the good times we shared?” she asked, placing a hand provocatively on her décolletage in a show of feigned innocence.

Alexander remained silent, his expression hardening as he resisted the urge to respond.

“Well, in that case, I must make more of an effort to win you back, it seems,” she added at his silence, her eyes gleaming with a dangerous determination.

“You seem to forget that I am married now, Georgianna,” he ground out, his tone icy.

“Ah, but it seems you just remembered my name now,” she pointed out with a smug smile, clearly pleased to have elicited a reaction from him. “I think my lack of manners is worth it if it gets you to drop the formality,” she chuckled.

Inwardly, Alexander chastised himself for letting his guard slip. Georgianna had a way of bringing out the worst in him, stirring up irritation he normally kept tightly controlled.

“Listen, Lady Winston,” Alexander began, his voice measured as he cast a glance at the distracted guests, his gaze lingering on Elizabeth, who was engrossed in conversation with her family. He felt a pang of guilt at the thought of her overhearing this exchange. “This is the last time I will tolerate such reckless behavior from you,” he continued, his voice low and firm as he turned back to the Countess.

A slight scowl flickered across Georgianna’s features before she masked it with her usual placid expression. “Does that mean I should exercise more caution in approaching you?” she asked, her tone feigning nonchalance. “We can always arrange a more private meeting, perhaps later tonight? If His Grace wishes?”

“It means that I do not have an ounce of interest, and you should refrain from approaching me so carelessly in the future,” he said, his voice steely.

“Why, that is no way to thank a friend for hosting a party in your honor, Alexander,” she replied, and he could detect the irritation seeping through her calm facade.

“That friend neither asked for nor wanted this,” he bit out, his patience nearly exhausted.

“Oh come now, Alexander,” she said, her voice betraying a hint of desperation. “You know giving up has never been in my vocabulary.”

As she reached out to touch him, another hand slid into his arm, the touch familiar and grounding. “Has my husband been keeping you from entertaining your guests, Countess Winston?” Elizabeth’s voice was pleasant, her expression the picture of cordiality. But there was a subtle firmness in her words that made it clear she was not to be dismissed.

Alexander felt an immense wave of relief as she stood by his side, her presence immediately shifting the dynamic. “I’m afraid he can be a little too talkative when he

wants to be,” Elizabeth continued, giving his arm a light pat. Alexander reached over with his free hand, giving her hand a gentle squeeze in return, grateful for her intervention.

Georgianna’s gaze flicked to their joined hands, and he could see the venom simmering just beneath the surface of her placid mask. Alexander met her gaze with a look of satisfaction, feeling vindicated in a way he hadn’t expected.

“Shall we now, darling?” Elizabeth asked, looking up at him with a loving expression that made his heart swell.

“Of course, dear,” he replied, his voice warm with affection.

“Now, if you’ll excuse us, Countess Winston. We will let you return to your guests,” Elizabeth said, her tone polite but final as she steered them away, leaving Georgianna standing there, fuming in silence.

As they walked away, Alexander couldn’t resist teasing, “If I didn’t know better, I’d say you were jealous back there, Liz.”

Elizabeth shot him a sidelong glance, her lips curling into a playful smile. “Why, you looked positively mortified back there, Alexander. I felt generous enough to step in and save you.”

“Save me?” he echoed, a laugh bubbling up from his chest.

“Most definitely,” she nodded, her tone light and teasing. “You looked like a cornered mouse.”

“Well, thank God for a magnanimous wife then,” he said, laughing again, the tension from earlier melting away.

“Indeed,” she agreed with a smug smile.

“Although not the most humble, I’m afraid,” he added with a mischievous glint in his eye.

The look she gave him in response was so endearing, so full of life, that it tore forth another burst of laughter from him. In that moment, he realized something profound—he never wanted this to end.

Elizabeth halted abruptly in the threshold of the breakfast room, her eyes widening ever so slightly at the unexpected sight before her. Alexander was seated comfortably at the table, nursing a mug of coffee while he scanned the morning paper. He had never joined her for breakfast before. What was the occasion?

“What are you doing here?” she asked, blinking at him.

Alexander looked up from the paper, a faint smile playing on his lips. “What a question to ask me in my own house,” he chuckled, setting the paper aside.

“I meant, you’re in here. Having breakfast,” she clarified, still trying to process the unusual sight.

“I’m a man. I have an appetite too, Liz,” he replied with a laugh. “And besides, is it so improbable to see me having breakfast at my own home?” His tone was teasing, but there was something sincere beneath it that warmed her heart.

“Oh, you know what I mean, Alex,” she dismissed his teasing as she moved toward the sideboard to serve herself.

“Alex?” He raised an eyebrow in mild surprise.

“You call me Liz, do you not?” she countered with a mischievous smile. “I think it’s only fair.”

“Perhaps,” he conceded, his smile widening, and Elizabeth felt a blush rise to her cheeks. Good heavens, but it seemed he grew more handsome by the day.

She joined him at the table, feeling uncharacteristically flustered, like a schoolgirl in the presence of her first crush. His gaze held a subtle amusement, and the expression only deepened the warmth in her cheeks.

“I felt it only fair to share in a hearty breakfast with my savior this morning. Don’t you think?” he said as she reached for the cheese platter, his voice laced with that familiar mix of affection and humor.

“Oh, so you do acknowledge that I saved you from the Countess yesterday?” Elizabeth beamed, her earlier surprise giving way to a surge of satisfaction as she recalled the moment she had intervened on his behalf.

“I never denied it,” he replied, his tone still light. Then, glancing at her plate, he added with a playful glint in his eye, “That is some copious amount of cheese you’re having, Your Grace.”

Elizabeth followed his gaze to her plate, noting the generous serving of cheese she had taken, along with the piece of bread she was happily spreading with more. She met his gaze with a grin, entirely unrepentant. “Oh, there’s never too much cheese, Alex,” she responded before taking a creamy bite of her bread, savoring the rich flavor.

Alexander’s laugh was warm and genuine, filling the room with a pleasant sound that seemed to make the morning even brighter.

“What say you we get some air in town later?” he suddenly suggested, his tone casual, but the offer itself was anything but ordinary.

Elizabeth’s eyes widened slightly in surprise. Was he truly asking to spend more time with her?

“You do not have business to tend to? Or an urgent call at the House of Lords?” Elizabeth asked, her tone lightly teasing, though there was an undercurrent of genuine curiosity. Those were his usual excuses whenever he disappeared, leaving her to navigate the vastness of Sterlin House alone.

“Oh, there’s always work to do, Liz,” Alexander replied with a smile that seemed to soften the distance she often felt between them. “But what manner of husband would I be if I couldn’t even take out a little time for my wife? Besides, I think my savior deserves a treat. Or two, don’t you think?” he added, his eyes glinting with a warmth that made her heart skip a beat.

“I do think,” she responded, a wave of giddiness washing over her. The anticipation of spending the day with him, of having him all to herself, was almost too good to be true.

That afternoon saw Elizabeth and Alexander exploring the shops on Bond Street, strolling arm in arm like any other couple in love. The novelty of this unhurried time together, without the pressures of their usual obligations, felt like a rare and precious gift.

“Oh, I think that is enough for now, Alexander,” Elizabeth chuckled as he purchased an ornate Asian jewelry box she had admired in an antiques shop. Her protests had been frequent, but he seemed determined to spoil her, buying nearly everything she had so much as glanced at in the earlier shops.

“In that case, let us stretch our feet some more at the park,” he suggested, the twinkle in his eyes making it clear he wasn’t ready for their day together to end.

As they walked through Hyde Park, Elizabeth couldn’t help but notice the curious glances they received. The ton was taking note of their public display, no doubt marveling at the sight of the Duke and Duchess of Sterlin strolling so companionably. But Elizabeth found she didn’t care. In fact, she reveled in it.

“It’s been a lovely afternoon, Alex. Thank you,” she said, her voice soft with gratitude as they paused by the Serpentine.

“No, thank you . For giving me your day,” he replied, dropping a tender kiss on her hand before tucking it back possessively into the crook of his arm.

A warmth bloomed in Elizabeth’s chest, spreading through her like a comforting embrace. She realized, with startling clarity, that she loved this man. She had tried so hard to protect her heart, to keep herself guarded against the complexities and uncertainties of their marriage, but she had failed—woefully so. The truth was undeniable now: she had fallen in love with her husband.

For a brief, blissful moment, she allowed herself to bask in that feeling, pushing aside the fears and doubts that usually plagued her. She knew that loving him might come with a price, but that was a worry for another time. Right now, she wanted nothing more than to revel in the joy of this afternoon, to cherish the tenderness he was showing her.

“I do have a favor to ask, though,” Alexander said, pulling her from her thoughts.

She looked up at him, her curiosity piqued. “What is it?”

“The new powder blue dress we bought earlier—I want you to wear it to dinner

tonight,” he requested, his tone warm but with an intensity in his gaze that she couldn’t quite decipher. There was something about the way he looked at her in that moment, something that made her heart leap with hope.

“Oh,” Elizabeth was momentarily surprised by the request. “You’re joining me for dinner too?” she asked, feeling her eyes widen.

“May I?” he asked, his expression softening in a way that made her chest tighten.

“You may, Your Grace,” she replied, unable to hide the smile that tugged at her lips. The warmth in his gaze deepened, and he beamed back at her, a sight that made her heart flutter.

“Oh, I am beginning to lose count of the number and shades of blue I have in my wardrobe now,” she chuckled, realizing how many of her recent acquisitions were in that particular hue.

“I could have you wearing the color all day, every day if I could,” he said, his voice earnest. “It brings out the brilliance in the rivaling blue of your eyes.”

Elizabeth felt the familiar heat rise to her cheeks, her blush betraying how deeply his words affected her. He had a way of making her feel cherished, as though he truly saw her.

“They’re like the glistening surface of the ocean on a beautiful summer afternoon,” Alexander said later that evening, as he kissed Elizabeth’s knuckles and led her into the dining room. She was wearing the powder blue dress, and the way he looked at her made her feel like royalty.

She couldn’t help but smile at his poetic compliment. “You know what I could get jealous of?” she said as he pulled out her chair for her.

He quirked an eyebrow, intrigued. “And what might that be?”

“My eyes. For the amount of compliments they get from you,” she teased, her eyes sparkling with humor.

“Oh, whoever heard of a woman jealous of her own eyes,” he laughed, the sound rich and full, filling the room with warmth.

“You really are full of wonders, aren’t you, Liz?” he added, his voice filled with affection.

They had only just begun to enjoy their meal when the butler appeared, his expression curiously disturbed. He opened his mouth to speak, but before he could utter a word, Elizabeth’s attention was drawn to the figure standing just behind him. Her breath caught in her throat as a gasp escaped her lips.

“Brother,” Lord Percy said, addressing Alexander as he stepped forward.

Elizabeth’s heart pounded. Was she seeing things? Or was Percy Hunton truly back in England and standing right here in their dining room?

CHAPTER 29

Percy.

For a moment, Alexander didn't breathe. Shock washed over him, quickly followed by a tight, suffocating mix of emotions. Relief flickered for the briefest moment—his brother was alive and well—but it was immediately drowned by anger. The sight of Percy, standing there as though nothing had happened, sent a surge of frustration coursing through him. How dare he show up now? After weeks of silence, after the lies, the scandal, the abandonment.

Elizabeth shifted beside him, sensing the sudden tension. She turned her head, her own surprise evident as she caught sight of Percy, who seemed equally startled to see her there. His eyes darted between them, as if weighing his next words, but Alexander had none of it.

He stood abruptly, the chair scraping the floor as he rose. His body moved stiffly, barely containing the storm that brewed inside him. But when he turned to Elizabeth, his expression softened, though his voice remained tight.

“My dear,” he said, bending to kiss her hand, “I must beg your forgiveness. It seems I will have to leave you to dine alone.”

Elizabeth, ever composed, gave a small nod, though he could see the question in her eyes. There would be time for explanations later. He turned on his heel, casting a glance toward Percy—one filled with ice.

“Follow me,” he said, his voice clipped and unforgiving.

There was a beat of hesitation, a pause in which Alexander wondered if Percy would obey or flee again. But then he heard the soft shuffle of his brother’s footsteps behind him, reluctant but present.

Alexander led the way to his study, the familiar walls of the estate doing little to calm the tempest raging within him. Once they entered, the door clicked shut behind them, and Alexander whirled on Percy, unable to contain himself any longer. His brother stood before him, looking—unbelievably—contrite. The sight only fueled Alexander’s anger further.

“First,” Alexander began, his voice cold and sharp, “you cause a scandal. Then, you deceive me into believing you would fix it. And instead, you abandon the woman you’ve compromised, flee the country, and leave me to salvage what remains of our family’s honor.”

He took a step closer, his fists clenched at his sides. “Then, as if that weren’t enough, you have the audacity to send me a letter questioning my honorable actions— my actions—when it was you who created this mess to begin with.”

His voice rose, his frustration spilling over. “And now, you walk back into my home, sit at my table, and call me ‘brother’ as though nothing has happened? What games are you playing, Percy?”

Percy flinched at the venom in his brother’s words, but he didn’t shrink away. Instead, he met Alexander’s gaze, though there was a weariness to him, a heaviness in his posture that hadn’t been there before.

“I’m afraid I do not have the answers you seek, brother,” Percy said softly, his voice laden with regret.

“Then why are you here?” Alexander demanded, his patience wearing thin. The sight of Percy standing there, looking remorseful but offering nothing more, only served to heighten his frustration.

Percy sighed, running a hand through his disheveled hair. “I have come to seek forgiveness.”

“Forgiveness?” Alexander barked a laugh, though there was no humor in it. “The person whose forgiveness you must seek is Elizabeth.”

“I know.” Percy’s reply was quiet, but firm. He lifted his head to meet Alexander’s eyes, his voice steady despite the guilt that weighed on him. “And I intend to spend the rest of my life seeking her forgiveness, if I must.”

The sincerity in Percy’s voice gave Alexander pause, but the anger still simmered beneath his surface. He paced, the words swirling in his mind, but he couldn’t let go of one thing. “Then why did you run?” he snapped, turning back to face Percy, his brow furrowed. “Why did you abandon her—and me?”

Percy’s expression darkened, and for the first time, he looked truly shaken. “I don’t know,” he muttered, his voice breaking slightly. “I panicked. I was ashamed. I didn’t know what else to do.”

Alexander’s frustration boiled over. “You didn’t know what else to do? You could have stayed. You could have done the right thing from the beginning, Percy!”

Percy winced, his head lowering, but he didn’t respond immediately. The silence stretched, thick and heavy between them. Finally, Percy spoke, his voice low and broken. “I wasn’t ready. I wasn’t ready to face any of it—Elizabeth, you, or what I’d done.”

“And so you thought running away would fix everything?” Alexander’s voice was incredulous, the disbelief clear in his tone.

“I thought it would disappear,” Percy admitted, the confession hanging in the air between them like a dead weight.

Alexander shook his head, his anger still simmering but tempered now by a deep sense of disappointment. “And did it?” he asked quietly.

“No.” Percy’s voice was barely above a whisper. “No, it didn’t.”

They stood in silence, the weight of Percy’s actions pressing down on them both. Alexander wanted to rage, to shout, to release the fury that had been building within him for weeks. But as he looked at his brother—his younger brother, the one he had always tried to protect—he saw the guilt and shame written all over Percy’s face. It wasn’t enough to erase the damage, not by far, but it was something.

“I don’t know how to mend this, Alex,” Percy said, his voice breaking. “I know I’ve made a mess of everything. I know I’ve hurt her. But I want to make it right. I have to.”

Alexander stared at him, the conflict raging inside him. On one hand, he wanted to hold onto his anger, to let Percy feel the full weight of his actions. On the other, he couldn’t help but see the brokenness in his brother—the same boy who had once looked up to him, trusted him.

“This isn’t about what you want, Percy,” Alexander said finally, his voice cold but controlled. “You don’t just ask for forgiveness and expect it to be given. You’ve hurt Elizabeth. You’ve damaged our family’s name. You don’t get to run from that.”

Percy nodded, his shoulders sagging under the weight of Alexander’s words. “I

know,” he whispered. “

“I did not return to argue, Alex. I came back to mend the damage I caused.”

Percy’s words settled in the room, but they did nothing to douse the fire of anger burning in Alexander’s chest. He glanced at his brother, taking in his appearance—the same youthful face, yet worn with a new heaviness that did little to garner his sympathy. Percy stood there, remorseful perhaps, but remorse could not erase the harm already done.

“Then you should never have left in the first place,” Alexander replied coldly, his tone sharp as a blade.

Percy flinched, but he stood his ground, nodding as though to absorb the reproach. “I am truly sorry, Alex.”

Alexander’s response was a stony silence. No words of forgiveness or understanding. His eyes locked with Percy’s for a moment, and then he turned away, allowing his brother to exit the study without another word. The door closed with a soft click, leaving Alexander alone in the oppressive quiet.

But the silence did nothing to soothe him. If anything, it left too much space for the emotions to fester and multiply—anger, confusion, frustration—all swirling within him, heavier with each passing second. He had tried to maintain order, to quell the scandal and carry on, and now Percy’s return had unraveled all the control Alexander had fought so hard to retain.

What was Percy truly after? And why now, after abandoning everything, did he believe an apology could repair what he had shattered?

With a sigh, Alexander knew he needed a diversion—a conversation with someone

who could offer clarity or, at the very least, a distraction. And there was no one better suited for that than Colin Caldwell, the Marquess of Broughton.

Not long after, Colin arrived at the estate, his expression a picture of cheerful ease. As ever, his demeanor was bright, almost jovial, a marked contrast to the storm brewing inside Alexander. Colin entered the study with a smile, immediately making his way to the sideboard where the decanter stood.

“Well, well, Alex,” Colin began, his tone light with amusement. “It seems the tides have turned in your favor.”

Alexander watched as his friend poured two generous glasses of brandy, handing one to him before taking a seat. Colin raised his glass with a satisfied grin.

“The ton can’t seem to stop talking about you and the Duchess. You’ve become quite the subject of admiration, it appears.” He paused to take a sip, clearly savoring the moment. “I hear you and Elizabeth were the talk of the ball, the garden party, and even at the theatre last week. Word is, you were spotted promenading at the park too.”

He leaned back in his chair, the smirk never leaving his face. “The Duke and Duchess of Sterlin, so very in love—so the whispers go.”

Alexander took a slow drink of his brandy, feeling the warmth spread through his chest but finding little comfort in the words. It was true, their public appearances had been orchestrated to divert attention from the scandal. And it seemed to be working. The whispers had shifted from suspicion to admiration, the speculation about their union growing fainter with each appearance.

But none of that seemed to matter now.

Colin's grin faltered as he noticed the tension in Alexander's face. "What is it, Alex? You look as though you've received the worst news imaginable."

Alexander sighed, running a hand through his hair. "Percy has returned."

Colin blinked, clearly taken aback. "Returned? As in, appeared at your doorstep?"

"At dinner, no less," Alexander muttered, setting his glass down on the table with a clink. "As though he hadn't vanished for weeks."

Colin's eyes widened in disbelief. "What in God's name is he thinking? After all that's happened, to return so brazenly?"

Alexander shook his head, leaning back in his chair, the weight of the situation pressing heavily upon him. "I haven't the faintest idea. He says he wishes to make amends, but how am I to trust anything he says? He fled, Colin. He abandoned me to clean up his mess."

Colin frowned, his usual carefree demeanor slipping as he considered the gravity of the situation. "And what do you intend to do now?"

Alexander exhaled deeply, staring into the amber liquid swirling in his glass. "That is the question, isn't it? I thought I had resolved everything. The scandal was beginning to fade, my marriage to Elizabeth—though not what I expected—was stabilizing. And now, Percy's return has thrown everything into disarray again."

He took another sip, the alcohol doing little to ease the turmoil in his mind. "I was prepared to deal with my anger toward him, but now... seeing him again, seeing the way he looked... it's left me more conflicted than ever."

Colin remained silent, his gaze steady as Alexander spoke.

“There was something in his eyes,” Alexander continued, his voice quieter now. “Something... broken. Guilt, certainly, but more than that. It unsettled me.”

Colin leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “Do you believe there’s more to his return than mere apologies?”

Alexander met his friend’s gaze, the weight of Colin’s question hanging between them. He did not have the answer. Not yet.

“You’re overthinking this, Alex,” Colin said, his tone casual yet full of encouragement, as though the return of a brother who had upended his life was a minor inconvenience. “Percy came back. That has to mean something.”

“Does it?” Alexander’s voice was flat. He had no desire for empty reassurances. “He left without a word, abandoned his responsibilities. His return does not erase any of that.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Colin agreed, pouring them both another measure of brandy. “But it could be the start of him taking responsibility. Give him a chance to make amends. You know he looks up to you. He always has.”

Alexander huffed, setting his glass down on the side table with a little more force than necessary. “If this is how he shows admiration, I would prefer he keep it to himself.”

Colin chuckled, shaking his head. “You’ve always been too hard on yourself—and him. Yes, Percy is reckless, but he came back, didn’t he? That has to count for something.”

A silence settled between them, Colin’s words lingering, though they did little to ease the tight knot of frustration in Alexander’s chest. As much as he wanted to believe

that Percy's return signaled something good, he couldn't shake the feeling of failure, a failure that extended beyond his brother.

Colin's voice broke the quiet, his tone softening. "And how is Elizabeth with all this? Percy's sudden return must have been quite the shock for her."

Alexander's jaw tightened at the mention of his wife. His thoughts had been so consumed by Percy that he had scarcely allowed himself to dwell on Elizabeth's reaction. "She was... shocked, yes," he replied slowly, his voice low. "And I have no idea what to say to her. I feel as though I have failed her."

Colin frowned, studying his friend carefully. "Failed her? How?"

"By not preventing any of this." Alexander let out a frustrated sigh. "I should have done more. I should have kept Percy in line, stopped him before he could cause this scandal. But I didn't. And now, Elizabeth bears the brunt of it."

"She's your wife, Alex," Colin said, his voice gentle but firm. "She married you knowing full well the situation with Percy. You didn't fail her."

But Alexander shook his head. "I promised her stability, Colin. And what has she received? A marriage born of necessity, endless whispers from the ton, and now, my wayward brother returning to upset it all again."

Colin leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees as he looked at Alexander earnestly. "You're being too harsh on yourself. Elizabeth is stronger than you give her credit for. She's handled everything with grace. She won't hold Percy's actions against you."

Alexander said nothing, but Colin's words echoed in his mind. Elizabeth had indeed been the picture of composure throughout all the chaos, but that only made the guilt

gnaw at him more. He had wanted to shield her, to offer her a life free of scandal and turmoil. Instead, he felt as though he had dragged her deeper into it.

Colin stood, crossing the room to refill his glass before glancing back at Alexander. “You mustn’t carry all of this on your shoulders. You’ve done what needed to be done. You saved your family’s name, and you’ve been a husband Elizabeth can count on. Don’t let Percy’s mistakes make you doubt yourself.”

Alexander exhaled, grateful for the drink in his hand but still feeling the weight of his brother’s return pressing down on him. Colin’s words, though kind, did little to alleviate the sense of inadequacy that had been building inside him.

Before he could respond, a thought struck him. “We’re hosting a dinner tomorrow evening,” Alexander said, setting his glass down. “Elizabeth’s uncle and aunt are to join us. I would be grateful if you would attend.”

Colin raised an eyebrow, a smile tugging at his lips. “A family dinner? With you? I’m not certain I’m the sort of distraction your in-laws would appreciate.”

Alexander managed a faint smile. “It would be a welcome relief to have someone who isn’t directly involved in all this madness. I doubt I shall be at my best.”

Colin laughed, raising his glass in a mock toast. “Very well. I accept your invitation. I’ll do my best to lighten the mood.”

“Good,” Alexander said, nodding in appreciation. “I shall send a note to confirm the time.”

Colin leaned back in his chair, the easy smile still on his face, but as Alexander drained the last of his brandy, the unease remained, clinging to him like a shadow.

CHAPTER 30

Elizabeth paced the length of her bedchamber, her thoughts as restless as her steps. The soft padding of her slippers did little to muffle the tension crackling in the air. She had anticipated this evening—looked forward to it. A quiet dinner with her husband, a moment where they might share something akin to normalcy. But, no. Instead, Percy had appeared, shattering the peace she had so desperately sought.

Her hands clenched into fists at her sides, and she exhaled sharply, forcing herself to calm. It wasn't as though she should have been surprised. Percy had been meddling in her life from the very beginning—first with the scandal, and now, once again, with his untimely return. And of course, Alexander had felt the need to deal with him immediately, leaving her to dine alone.

Alone. Yet again.

Her heart twisted with disappointment, a gnawing ache that settled deep in her chest. Why did it seem that every time she thought she might have a moment with Alexander, something—or rather, someone—interfered? The first real opportunity to share a meal with him, and Percy had to barge in and ruin it. It was bad enough that his recklessness had landed her in this marriage in the first place, and now he seemed determined to upset what little happiness she had managed to find.

Elizabeth's pacing quickened, the soft rustling of her skirts filling the room as frustration simmered beneath her skin. She halted only when the door creaked open, revealing Lydia, her lady's maid, carrying a candle and a soft robe in her arms.

“Your Grace,” Lydia greeted her, her voice quiet yet cautious as she closed the door behind her. “Shall I prepare you for bed?”

Elizabeth nodded, though her movements were sharp, betraying the tension she struggled to contain. Lydia stepped forward, her hands deft as she began to help Elizabeth out of her gown, folding the fabric with care. As Lydia worked, her brows furrowed slightly, concern evident in her gaze as she glanced up at her mistress.

“If I may, Your Grace, you seem... troubled,” Lydia ventured cautiously, her voice gentle. “Is something amiss?”

Elizabeth stilled, her hands tightening around the edge of the dressing table. Troubled? It seemed an understatement. She was furious. Hurt. But she couldn’t very well pour all that onto Lydia’s shoulders, could she?

“It’s nothing,” Elizabeth said, her voice clipped, though it lacked the strength to fully dismiss Lydia’s concern. She turned slightly, catching her own reflection in the mirror. Her face was pale, her eyes darker with the frustration she tried to mask.

Lydia paused, her movements slowing as she continued to study her mistress, clearly unconvinced. “If it were nothing, Your Grace, I do not think you would be pacing the floor so.” There was no judgment in Lydia’s voice, only quiet concern.

Elizabeth sighed, relenting. “Lord Percy is back.”

Lydia’s hands froze for a moment, her surprise evident. “The Duke’s brother?”

“Yes.” Elizabeth exhaled sharply, the words slipping out before she could stop them. “He returned this evening—just in time to interrupt the only opportunity I had for dinner with my husband.”

Lydia's eyes widened slightly, but she said nothing, simply continuing her task of helping Elizabeth out of her gown and into her nightdress. The silence was almost a relief—at least Lydia had the sense not to press further. But as the quiet settled around them, Elizabeth felt the weight of her words hang in the air, and the frustration she had tried to tamp down surged once more.

“Forgive me, Your Grace, but... does the Duke know how you feel?” Lydia asked, her voice soft as she smoothed the fabric of the nightdress over Elizabeth's shoulders.

Elizabeth's heart tightened at the question. Did Alexander know? Did he care? She had no idea. They had shared so little time together since their marriage—every conversation overshadowed by obligation or propriety. She had thought tonight might change that, but now...

“I do not know, Lydia,” Elizabeth said quietly, her tone laced with resignation. “I truly do not know.”

The next day passed in a blur. Elizabeth didn't see Alexander, nor Percy, and perhaps it was for the best. The space gave her the time she needed to steady herself, to focus on the evening ahead. They were to host her uncle and aunt, and the thought of her family arriving was a welcome distraction from the tumult that had clouded her mind.

She busied herself with the preparations, ensuring everything was in place for the dinner. It was a small mercy, she thought, to have something tangible to focus on. The hours slipped by quickly, and before long, her family arrived.

When Elizabeth greeted them at the entrance, a warm rush of affection swelled within her. Her uncle, the Earl of Dowshire, greeted her with his usual joviality, his round face beaming with warmth. Aunt Petunia was more reserved but smiled as she enveloped Elizabeth in a tight embrace. And Anna—dear Anna, with her sharp wit and ever-present charm—seemed as delighted as Elizabeth was for the evening

ahead.

But despite the joy of her family's arrival, a gnawing worry lingered. Where was Alexander? He had yet to make an appearance, and as the minutes ticked by, the knot in her stomach tightened.

Her uncle glanced around the room before turning back to her, his brow lifting. "And where is your husband, my dear? I had hoped to finally share a drink with him this evening."

Elizabeth's heart stuttered, and she forced a smile, trying to mask the unease creeping through her. "He is attending to some urgent business, Uncle," she said, hoping her voice sounded steadier than she felt. "But I assure you, he will join us shortly."

As the evening wore on, Elizabeth couldn't shake the growing worry that Alexander might not show at all. She had been foolish to think this evening would go smoothly. Percy's sudden reappearance had clearly thrown everything off course.

Her anxiety eased slightly when Colin arrived, his ever-pleasant demeanor bringing some lightness to the room. He greeted her with a warm smile before making his way over to her cousin Anna.

"Ah, Lady Anna," Colin said with a playful grin as he bowed, lifting her hand to kiss her knuckles. "But where is your little thimble tonight?"

Anna's expression darkened at the mention of her beloved pug, and her lips pressed into a thin line. "That thimble, my lord," she replied tersely, her tone sharp, "has a name."

Colin chuckled, his eyes gleaming with mischief as he looked between Anna and the rest of the room. "Of course, my lady. Do forgive me. Titan, if I recall correctly—of

all the names to give such a tiny creature!” His laughter rang out, clearly finding his jest far more amusing than anyone else in the room.

Anna’s lips tightened, her gaze sharpening, but Elizabeth caught the subtle twitch of amusement in her cousin’s expression. Anna, ever proud of her beloved pug, couldn’t help but rise to the occasion.

“What he lacks in size, he more than makes up for in great spirits,” Anna declared, her chin lifting as if that settled the matter.

Colin leaned back, a broad grin spreading across his face. “Now, why does that sound oddly ominous?” he teased, his voice light and jovial, drawing laughter from the others. Even Uncle Sebastian chuckled, though Aunt Petunia’s expression remained as composed as ever.

Elizabeth joined in the laughter, but her smile felt tight, hollow. The levity in the room did little to ease the growing sense of unease twisting in her chest. Where is Alexander? She had expected him to join them well before now, but with each passing moment, her concern deepened.

Just as her worry reached its peak, the door creaked open, and she turned, her heart giving a small jolt.

Alexander entered the room, his tall, familiar figure a welcome sight—but only for a fleeting moment. For just behind him, stepping cautiously into the room, was Lord Percy Hunton.

The shift in the atmosphere was immediate and stark. The warmth and lightness that had filled the room moments before vanished, replaced by a palpable tension. Elizabeth felt it settle over the gathering like a cold mist. Her uncle’s smile faded, his expression tightening with quiet disapproval. Aunt Petunia’s mouth pressed into a

thin line, and Anna's sharp wit seemed to evaporate as she regarded Percy with silent disdain.

Even Elizabeth, who had mastered the art of maintaining a composed exterior, felt a flicker of resentment stir within her. Percy's reappearance had already upset their lives once; now, his presence here, at what should have been a peaceful family evening, felt like another intrusion. But she did what was expected of her—smiled, controlled, and poised.

"My apologies for the delay," Alexander began, his voice steady, though Elizabeth could detect the tension beneath his words. "I was detained by business and, of course, by my brother." He gestured toward Percy, who stood awkwardly by the door, clearly aware of the discomfort his presence caused.

"I do not believe you've been formally introduced," Alexander continued, his tone formal and distant, as though attempting to impose civility on the room. "This is my brother, Lord Percy Hunton."

The silence that followed was longer than it should have been, and it was Uncle Sebastian who finally broke it. "We are familiar with Lord Percy," he said, his voice cool and measured, not bothering to disguise his displeasure.

Percy shifted, his discomfort palpable. Elizabeth watched him carefully, noting how he struggled to maintain his composure under the weight of her family's silent judgment. Despite everything, she could not help but feel a momentary pang of sympathy. But it was fleeting—Percy had caused too much harm, and no amount of awkwardness on his part would erase that.

Thankfully, Colin, ever the one to diffuse tension, stepped forward with his usual easy charm. "Well," he said brightly, clapping his hands together, "I don't know about the rest of you, but I am positively starved. Shall we see about dinner?"

The room's mood lightened, if only slightly, as laughter rippled in response to Colin's well-timed comment. Elizabeth shot him a grateful look. Colin, it seemed, had once again rescued the evening from slipping further into uncomfortable silence.

As they waited for the formal announcement of dinner, Elizabeth's gaze wandered, settling on Peggy, who had been uncharacteristically quiet throughout the evening. She found her youngest sister seated in a corner of the room, her attention completely absorbed in the book she was holding.

Aunt Petunia noticed as well, and her disapproving sigh broke the room's momentary calm. "Lady Margaret Sutton," she said sharply, her voice filled with the familiar edge of maternal reprimand. "Have you brought a book to a family gathering? What must the others think of your manners?"

Peggy looked up, startled, her cheeks flushing in embarrassment as she hurriedly closed the book. "I'm sorry, Aunt," she mumbled, her fingers lingering on the book's cover as if reluctant to set it aside.

It was Percy who spoke next, his voice gentle, yet carrying genuine curiosity. "May I inquire what you are reading, My Lady?"

Peggy's face lit up in a way Elizabeth hadn't seen in some time. There was a spark in her eyes, the kind that only came when someone showed a genuine interest in the things she loved. The moment Lord Percy asked about her book, Peggy's shyness seemed to melt away, replaced by a bright, almost breathless excitement.

"Oh, it's fascinating, truly!" Peggy said, leaning forward eagerly. "The knights, the quests, the battles—there's even a dragon who hoards enchanted jewels."

Percy smiled warmly at her enthusiasm. "It sounds like quite the adventure. I must confess, I do enjoy a good story with a touch of magic."

At that, Peggy's eyes widened. "You do?"

"Indeed," Percy replied. "I've been known to dabble in writing a few stories of my own."

Elizabeth blinked, surprised by the revelation, but it was Peggy who reacted first, practically bouncing in her seat. "You're a writer? Oh, how wonderful! What sorts of stories do you write? Do they have knights too? Or dragons? Do you write novels or plays? Have any been published?"

The flood of questions poured from her younger sister's lips as she leaned in, her curiosity fully piqued. Elizabeth couldn't help but smile at the sight. Peggy, often quiet and reserved, was now animated in a way that was rare to witness, especially in formal company. It seemed Lord Percy had struck upon something that had instantly endeared him to her.

Percy chuckled softly, clearly amused by Peggy's barrage of inquiries. "Yes, I've written a few novels," he said. "Though I'm afraid my characters are rather less noble than the knights you seem to enjoy. They're often flawed... but I do try to give them some redemption by the end."

Peggy's eyes sparkled. "That's even better! Flawed characters are the most interesting, don't you think? They're the ones who make the best stories because they can change."

Elizabeth watched the exchange, a warmth spreading in her chest despite her initial reservations. Peggy was positively glowing, and it was hard not to be swept up in her excitement.

Just then, the butler appeared at the door, announcing that dinner was ready. The group rose to their feet, the earlier tension easing into a more relaxed air. The evening

was beginning to turn, and Elizabeth felt the shift in mood as they all moved toward the dining room.

The meal passed with pleasant conversation. Alexander and Uncle Sebastian quickly found themselves deep in discussion about parliamentary matters—something Elizabeth could only half follow but enjoyed hearing in the background. Meanwhile, Colin kept the atmosphere light, offering sharp-witted remarks that earned laughter from everyone, particularly when Anna was the subject of his teasing.

Anna, seated across from Colin, gave as good as she got, but Elizabeth couldn't help but notice the way her cousin's gaze strayed toward the Marquess more often than necessary. There was something unspoken there, a tension that danced between them, though neither would admit it aloud.

The dinner was one of the better ones they'd hosted, and by the time dessert was served, Elizabeth felt the strain of the evening easing, though not completely disappearing. The weight of Percy's return still lingered at the back of her mind, casting a shadow over the evening's lightheartedness.

After dinner, Anna was persuaded to play the piano, and the guests gathered in the drawing room to listen. Her fingers danced across the keys with practiced elegance, filling the room with music that seemed to charm everyone in attendance. Elizabeth, however, felt a growing restlessness.

Quietly, she slipped away from the gathering, making her way toward the balcony. The cool evening air greeted her as she stepped outside, the soft breeze brushing against her skin. She breathed in deeply, trying to shake the heaviness that had settled in her chest since Percy's unexpected return.

As she stood there, gazing out into the night, lost in her thoughts, she heard the faint sound of movement behind her. Her heart lifted, thinking it was Alexander. She

turned, a small smile already forming, but it quickly faded when she saw that it was not her husband.

It was Percy.

Her expression must have given her away, for Percy's eyes sparkled with amusement as he stepped forward, a glass in his hand. "I'm sorry to disappoint, Your Grace," he said lightly, holding out the drink to her. "I can see I'm not quite the company you were hoping for."

Elizabeth felt her cheeks warm in embarrassment. She hadn't meant to show her disappointment so plainly, and now, caught off guard, she found herself sheepishly accepting the glass he offered. "I... thought you were Alexander," she admitted softly, glancing away.

"Clearly," Percy said with a teasing smile. "And I understand. Your husband is just inside, after all. Not far from you."

The humor in his voice, gentle as it was, managed to ease the tension she hadn't even realized had built between them. Elizabeth allowed herself a small smile, the corners of her mouth lifting despite the weight of her emotions.

They stood in silence for a moment, the cool night air swirling around them. Then, Percy's tone shifted, becoming more serious. "I didn't come out here to disturb your peace, Elizabeth. I wanted to say something that's long overdue."

She turned toward him, curious but guarded.

"I know that no apology I offer will undo what I've done," Percy said, his gaze steady and sincere. "There is no excuse for the disrespect I showed you, for the way I treated you and your family. But I hope... in time, you might find it in your heart to forgive

me.”

Elizabeth studied him, her emotions churning beneath the surface. The words hung in the air between them, heavy and weighted with the past. She wanted to believe him, wanted to accept his apology, but the hurt he had caused lingered like an old wound that had not yet fully healed.

Still, there was something in Percy’s eyes that made her pause. Genuine remorse, perhaps. And though her feelings were conflicted, she found herself nodding slowly. “I... appreciate your words, Lord Percy,” she said quietly. “But forgiveness... that may take time.”

Percy inclined his head, accepting her response with grace. “Time is something I’m willing to give.”

Elizabeth gazed out over the balcony, the cool breeze brushing against her skin as she turned her eyes upward. The moon hung high in the sky, full and bright, casting a silver glow over the garden below. It was a peaceful night, a sharp contrast to the emotions roiling within her. She sipped her drink, letting the quiet of the evening settle over her, but her thoughts remained restless.

As her gaze lingered on the moon, an unexpected thought surfaced, and before she could stop herself, she spoke aloud. “Peggy always says the full moon is when the werewolves come out.”

Percy, who had been leaning quietly against the railing beside her, turned with a raised brow. “Werewolves?”

Elizabeth smiled, her amusement growing as she recalled Peggy’s enthusiastic descriptions of the books she devoured. “Yes. It’s a favorite topic of hers, it seems. The more fantastical, the better. Werewolves, dragons, enchanted forests... she lives

for such tales.”

Percy chuckled, his eyes gleaming with humor. “Ah, yes. I can see why that might appeal to her. Knights, dragons, and now werewolves. It all sounds rather thrilling.”

Elizabeth couldn’t help but laugh at his tone, the tension between them easing further. “She does have quite the imagination, doesn’t she? It’s been that way since she could first hold a book. I used to worry she would get too lost in her stories, but now... it’s simply who she is. She finds comfort in her books.”

Percy nodded thoughtfully, his expression softening. “She’s a curious one, Lady Margaret. There’s something... intriguing about her.”

Elizabeth’s smile faltered slightly at the sudden change in his tone. She studied Percy for a moment, noting the peculiar interest he seemed to have in her sister. “She is curious,” Elizabeth agreed slowly, feeling her own curiosity rise. “But why does she intrigue you so?”

Percy shrugged, his gaze shifting away. “I suppose I’ve always been drawn to those who live with one foot in reality and the other in imagination. It takes a certain kind of mind to lose oneself in stories, doesn’t it?”

Elizabeth nodded, her eyes narrowing slightly as she considered his words. There was something about the way he spoke, as if he were keeping something back, evading her question in a way that felt intentional. “And what about your own stories, Lord Percy?” she asked, her tone light, but her curiosity genuine. “You said you write. What sort of tales do you create?”

Percy smiled, but it was tight, and the ease in his expression from before seemed to fade. “Oh, nothing nearly as exciting as your sister’s fantasies, I assure you. Just... tales of flawed men, trying to make sense of their own mistakes.”

Elizabeth tilted her head, watching him closely, sensing the evasion. “You sound as though you know your characters well.”

A shadow flickered across his face, and for a brief moment, something unreadable passed through his eyes. But then, just as quickly, his usual charm returned. “Perhaps too well,” he said lightly, deflecting the question once more. “Though, I must say, werewolves would certainly liven up my stories.”

Elizabeth laughed, the tension between them lifting once more, though her thoughts remained unsettled. Percy was difficult to pin down. One moment, he seemed sincere, the next, elusive. But despite the evasion, she found herself warming to him, against her better judgment.

As they continued to talk, Elizabeth felt a subtle shift in her thoughts. Maybe the scandal had been an accident after all, born of recklessness rather than malice. Percy had caused pain, there was no denying that, but as she stood here with him, listening to him speak with humor and a kind of quiet self-reflection, she began to wonder if she had judged him too harshly. Perhaps he was not the villain she had made him out to be. Perhaps he was just a man who had made a grave mistake.

Her thoughts spiraled, conflicted and confused. She had spent so much time building walls of resentment toward him, seeing him as the source of her misfortune. But now, as she stood beside him, she began to see cracks in those walls. He was more than the scandal that had ensnared them all. He was a person—flawed, yes, but human.

And yet, the unease lingered. Elizabeth’s gaze drifted back toward the drawing room, her eyes searching for Alexander. She spotted him immediately, standing near the door. But what she saw in his face made her heart stutter.

Alexander was watching them, his dark eyes fixed on her and Percy, narrowed with a cold intensity that sent a shiver down her spine. There was a hardness in his gaze, a

shadow that had not been there before, and the sight of it twisted something deep inside her. The easy warmth she had begun to feel evaporated, replaced by a sudden, sharp tension.

Her breath caught as their eyes met across the distance. There was no mistaking the darkness in Alexander's expression.

CHAPTER 31

“I heard something rather unsavory after my return to Town,” Percy said as he closed the study door.

Alexander, seated behind his desk with a glass of brandy in hand, glanced up at his brother. It was late, the guests had long since departed, and the house was finally quiet. He’d expected to be alone to reflect on the evening, but Percy had other plans.

“Is that so?” Alexander leaned back in his chair, feigning disinterest, though he already suspected what Percy would say next. Gossip was never far from the lips of the ton .

Percy nodded, moving closer and taking the seat opposite his brother. “Rumors are circulating. About the three of us. You, me, and Elizabeth.”

Alexander sighed, setting his glass down on the desk with a dull thud. “Idle gossip, Percy. You ought not to concern yourself with it. I’m already taking care of things.”

“Taking care of things?” Percy raised a brow, clearly unconvinced. “You don’t seem terribly worried.”

“Because I’m not,” Alexander replied, his tone firm. “The ton will talk. They always do. But it will pass, as all things do.”

For a moment, Percy said nothing, his gaze steady as though measuring his brother’s words. Then, his lips curved into a mischievous smile. “If you say so. But I couldn’t

help noticing how your wife... well, she's quite captivating, isn't she? I certainly couldn't take my eyes off her during dinner."

Alexander stiffened, the words unexpectedly striking a nerve. He recalled Elizabeth's laughter on the terrace earlier, the way she had smiled at Percy, her posture relaxed as they conversed. It had been a rare moment—one where she seemed at ease, almost happy.

The thought of it left Alexander feeling... odd.

He quickly pushed the feeling aside. He should be glad things were less strained between them. It meant that Elizabeth was adjusting, that she was handling Percy's return with grace. Surely, that was a good sign. She would be fine. They both would.

"Anyone who spends more than a minute with the two of you can see that you care for each other," Percy remarked, leaning back in his chair as if commenting on something as mundane as the weather.

Alexander's thoughts snagged on those words. Did he care for Elizabeth? He had made a promise to protect her, to offer her stability. But was that enough? The question stirred something deeper, something uncomfortable. Caring for her was one thing, but there were other emotions, other fears that lingered just beneath the surface—fears he wasn't ready to confront. His marriage had never been about love, not in the way society expected.

He cleared his throat, eager to steer the conversation away from his own uncertainties. "Speaking of settling down," Alexander began, his voice shifting to a more authoritative tone, "now that you've returned, it's time you considered your own future. You need to take responsibility, Percy. Find a wife, start a family."

Percy blinked, his lighthearted demeanor vanishing in an instant. "What are you

saying?”

“I’m saying,” Alexander continued, “that perhaps we should host a ball in your honor. Introduce you to some eligible young ladies. You need to think about your future.”

Percy’s expression darkened, his posture stiffening. “Do not treat me like some debutante, Alexander.”

“I promised Father I would protect you,” Alexander pressed, his voice hardening. “And ensuring you’re settled—happy, even—is part of that.”

“I am not a child!” Percy shot back, his tone sharp. “Do not speak to me as though I were. I am not that boy any longer.”

Alexander opened his mouth to respond, but Percy cut him off, his anger bubbling to the surface. “If you truly want a child to look after, then wait until you have one of your own. Surely, it won’t be long before that happens now.”

Silence fell between them, heavy and charged. The words hung in the air like a challenge.

“I have no intention of siring a child,” Alexander said, his voice cool but edged with something darker.

Percy looked at him, truly looked at him, and for a moment, his anger gave way to confusion. “But you need an heir,” he said, incredulous. “Surely you know that.”

“And I have you,” Alexander replied matter-of-factly, his gaze steady as though that settled the matter.

Percy fell quiet, his expression thoughtful. The silence stretched, tense and uneasy. Then, after what felt like an eternity, Percy spoke again, his voice softer but tinged with a new understanding. “Does your wife know about this?”

“She does,” Alexander answered, though he felt a tightness in his chest at the admission.

“And what is her opinion on it?” Percy asked, his eyes narrowing slightly.

“It doesn’t matter,” Alexander replied dismissively, his voice sharper than intended.

“Oh, but it does,” Percy pressed, his tone growing firm. “You cannot force your decision upon her, Alexander. Do not subject her to making such a sacrifice simply because you do not mind remaining childless.”

Alexander stared at his brother, the words hitting him harder than he cared to admit. He had never truly considered what Elizabeth thought about it—about the prospect of children, about their future. Had he simply assumed she shared his feelings? Or worse, had he forced his decision upon her without even realizing it?

A pang of guilt twisted inside him. He felt pathetic for not having considered her feelings, but also... afraid. Afraid of what failure would look like. Afraid of what bringing a child into this world might mean for him, for them. The fear clung to him, despite the logic of Percy’s words.

And yet, as Alexander looked at his brother now, he realized how much Percy had changed. The younger man standing before him was no longer the reckless boy he had once been. There was a new maturity in his voice, a depth to his words that hadn’t been there before.

Still, Alexander’s pride—and his sense of duty—kept him from yielding. He

straightened, his expression hardening once more. “I made a promise to Father, Percy. You are my responsibility. I cannot simply abandon that.”

Percy’s jaw clenched, frustration darkening his features. He shook his head slowly, his voice laced with anger. “Stop living in the past, Alexander. Stop using me as your excuse to remain unhappy.”

With that, Percy turned and stormed out of the study, leaving Alexander alone with his thoughts, his guilt, and his fears.

Alexander tossed and turned in his bed, the echo of Percy’s parting words refusing to leave his mind. Quit living in the past. The phrase repeated itself over and over, like a drumbeat that wouldn’t cease. It wasn’t just his brother’s frustration that struck him, but the truth that had threaded itself through those words. Was Percy right? Was he still clinging to the past, allowing it to dictate the present, to hold him—and perhaps Elizabeth—back?

The stillness of the night only made his thoughts louder, and before long, sleep was an impossible task. He rose from the bed, quietly so as not to disturb Elizabeth, and found his feet carrying him through the darkened hallways of the house to the one place he had not visited in some time.

Eleanor’s room.

The door creaked open, and the familiar scent of lavender greeted him. The room had been preserved perfectly, as though waiting for its occupant to return at any moment. Nothing had been touched—her bed, her belongings, everything remained in its place, frozen in time.

Alexander stood in the doorway, his chest tightening with the familiar pang of grief. He stepped inside, his gaze roaming over the room. There was a soft light filtering in

through the window, casting long shadows across the floor. Everything about the room reminded him of her, of the sister he couldn't save, no matter how hard he had tried.

He moved to the bedside, his hand grazing over the coverlet. How long had it been since he last stood in this room? And yet, despite the passage of time, the pain felt as fresh as it had the day Eleanor passed.

Am I clinging to the past? The question gnawed at him, and for the first time, Alexander didn't push it away. Perhaps Percy had been right. Perhaps he had allowed his grief, his guilt, to shape too much of his life.

The soft sound of footsteps broke through his thoughts, and he turned, startled to find Elizabeth standing in the doorway. Her figure was bathed in the dim light, and her expression was unreadable as she took in the sight of him in this place he had never shared with her before.

"I couldn't sleep," she said softly, stepping further into the room.

For a brief moment, he considered sending her away, shielding her from the weight of his past, as he always had. But tonight, something was different. For the first time, he found that he didn't mind her seeing this part of him, didn't mind her witnessing the pain that had always been his alone to bear.

"Elizabeth," he said, his voice low, laden with the vulnerability he had always tried to hide from her. "Do you think I'm clinging to the past? That I'm putting myself—and the people around me—through pain as a result?"

The words came out before he could stop them, and he realized he didn't want to stop them. He wanted her to know, to understand.

Elizabeth's gaze softened, and she stepped closer, her presence a quiet comfort in the dimly lit room. "I think our pasts can become unnecessary weights if we allow them to," she said gently, her tone free of judgment. "And perhaps we are better off dropping that weight and walking into whatever awaits us ahead."

Her words sank into him, and for the first time in years, Alexander felt something shift inside him. There was no harshness in her tone, no expectation for him to be stronger or better. She simply understood, and that understanding made something inside him loosen, unraveling the walls he had built around his pain.

"I made a promise to my father," he began, his voice tight. "It was inside the wreckage... just before he took his last breath. I told him I would protect Eleanor, that I would keep her safe. But I failed."

Elizabeth said nothing, allowing him to continue. Her silence wasn't cold or detached, but filled with quiet encouragement.

"She nursed her wounds for a week after the accident," Alexander continued, his voice thick with the memory. "We thought she might recover. The doctors... they tried everything. I tried everything. But nothing worked." His voice cracked, the weight of the grief he had carried for so long suddenly becoming too much to bear. "She died, Liz. A painful death. And I couldn't do anything to stop it."

Elizabeth moved closer, placing a gentle hand on his arm. "It wasn't your fault, Alex," she said softly. "It was her time to go. Nothing you did—or didn't do—could have changed that."

"But I'd promised Father..." he choked out, the guilt tearing at him.

"I'm sure he understands," Elizabeth replied, her voice soothing, yet steady. "He's with her now. And I know they wouldn't want you to keep blaming yourself for

something that was never in your control.”

Alexander stood still, her words slowly sinking in. He had preserved Eleanor’s room, her memory, as if by doing so he could somehow make up for his failure. But the longer he kept this room untouched, the more painful it had become. The memories were no longer a source of comfort; they were chains, binding him to a time he could never change.

“Since I couldn’t save her,” he whispered, “I thought keeping this room for her would suffice. Preserving her memory, holding onto it... but it’s only made everything worse, hasn’t it?”

Elizabeth’s hand remained on his arm, steady and reassuring. “Memories can be painful when we don’t let them rest,” she said softly. “You don’t need to carry this burden anymore, Alex.”

As he stood there, in the room that had held his grief for so long, he realized that perhaps Percy and Elizabeth were right. He was clinging to the past, to a promise he couldn’t keep, to a burden that had only served to weigh him down.

A heavy sigh escaped him, and with it, some of the weight he had carried for years. He looked at Elizabeth, truly looked at her, and for the first time, he felt lighter. The guilt that had defined so much of his life suddenly seemed... smaller. Manageable.

Without thinking, he pulled her into his arms, holding her close, feeling her warmth against him. She didn’t speak, didn’t ask questions—she simply held him, her presence grounding him in a way he hadn’t expected.

In that quiet moment, Alexander realized that perhaps he could let go of the past, that perhaps there was a future waiting for him—one that didn’t involve carrying the weight of guilt and loss.

For the first time, he felt as though he had shed that burden. And it was Elizabeth who had helped him do it.

CHAPTER 32

Elizabeth walked down the hallway, her thoughts lighter than they had been in months. The events of the previous night had left her with a sense of relief—and, more than that, pride. Alexander had finally opened up to her. After so long, he had let her see the part of him that had been locked away, guarded by grief and guilt. She had been the one to console him, to share in his pain, and that gave her a sense of closeness she hadn't known was possible.

She wanted more.

The thought filled her mind, refusing to be ignored. Their marriage had always been a formal arrangement, a necessity to protect their family's honor, but now, after last night, she couldn't pretend any longer. She wanted a real marriage, a true partnership, not just the hollow shell of a union they had maintained for months. Couldn't they build something more?

Her steps quickened as she made her way toward the salon where she suspected Alexander was. She would speak to him about adjusting the terms of their marriage. It was time. Perhaps, after last night, he would be open to more—to everything .

But as she neared the door, she heard voices, and her steps faltered. Colin's unmistakable tone carried through the room, light and jovial.

"The Duchess was a marvelous hostess, I must say," Colin declared, his voice filled with cheer. "And what a delightful family she has."

Elizabeth paused, her hand on the doorknob, a smile forming on her lips. It was kind of Colin to say so, and for a moment, she felt a sense of pride. But something stopped her from entering. Instead, she lingered by the door, her curiosity keeping her in place.

“They are a delightful lot,” came Alexander’s voice, his tone warm in agreement. “And I must say, your idea about the gifts for the Duchess has reaped excellent results. She receives them well each time.”

The smile on Elizabeth’s lips froze, something within her sinking. The gifts... had they not been from him? Had they merely been suggestions from Colin? She had cherished those moments, thinking they had come from Alexander’s heart. Each gift had felt like a small bridge between them, an olive branch he had offered in the quiet of their marriage. But now... now it seemed they were merely a strategy, a gesture devoid of the meaning she had attached to them.

Had he only given her gifts to placate her? To keep her satisfied while maintaining the distance between them? Her thoughts spiraled, each one sharper than the last, cutting into the hope she had held only moments before. Perhaps it had all been for show. Perhaps their entire marriage was nothing more than a performance to uphold his family’s honor.

The voices in the salon continued, but Elizabeth could no longer bear to listen. Her heart heavy with disappointment, she turned away, her steps swift as she made her way back to her bedroom. She barely noticed the butler as he intercepted her in the corridor, holding out a letter.

“An invitation for tomorrow evening, Your Grace,” he said, bowing slightly.

Elizabeth barely registered the words, her thoughts clouded by the ache in her chest. She took the letter absently, offering a nod before retreating to the quiet solace of her

chambers.

The following evening, Elizabeth attended the dinner party, but the lively conversations and laughter felt like a dull hum in her ears. She played the part of the gracious hostess, her smile practiced and polite, but inside, she was struggling. The weight of her disappointment sat heavily on her, and though she tried to push it aside, it gnawed at her throughout the evening.

Alexander joined her on the terrace after the meal, a glass of port in his hand. The cool night air brushed against them, but Elizabeth felt anything but calm.

“You’re quiet,” Alexander observed, his brow furrowing slightly. “Are you all right?”

Elizabeth managed a faint smile, but it felt hollow. “I’m quite fine,” she replied, though the words tasted like a lie. His presence beside her, so close yet so distant, felt like a reminder of everything she could never have with him. The thought of it, of the barriers between them, tightened around her like a noose.

Suddenly, she felt suffocated.

“I... I need a moment,” she muttered, her voice strained as she excused herself. She caught the brief flicker of concern in his eyes, but he didn’t stop her as she hurried inside, making her way to the retiring room.

Inside, Elizabeth stood before the mirror, her hands gripping the edge of the vanity as she tried to collect herself. She could feel the sting of tears at the back of her eyes, but she refused to let them fall. This was not the time, nor the place. She was the Duchess of Sterlin, and her duty was to keep up appearances, no matter how much her heart ached.

After a few moments, she steadied herself and made her way back toward the party.

As she walked through the hall, she nearly bumped into Percy, who appeared from one of the adjoining rooms.

“Alone, Your Grace?” Percy teased, his eyes sparkling with amusement. “I thought you and my brother were practically joined at the hip these days.”

Despite herself, Elizabeth laughed softly. “It seems I managed to escape for a moment.”

Percy grinned. “Tell me, how did you manage it? What’s your secret, eh?”

His humor was light, and though her heart was heavy, Elizabeth found herself smiling. “It’s a talent, I suppose.”

They walked back toward the drawing room together, Percy’s lightheartedness lifting her spirits, if only slightly. As they approached the entrance, however, Elizabeth’s steps faltered.

On the terrace, she saw Alexander in conversation with none other than Georgianna. The widow stood close to him, her body angled toward his, a satisfied smile playing on her lips. Elizabeth couldn’t make out Alexander’s expression, but something about the scene made her stomach twist. Georgianna glanced up then, her sharp eyes catching sight of Elizabeth. A smirk curled on her lips as she whispered something to Alexander, placing a deliberate hand on his sleeve.

Elizabeth’s heart sank as she watched. Alexander’s gaze followed Georgianna’s, landing on Elizabeth and Percy. For a moment, his eyes darkened, flicking between them as if taking in the sight of them together. The smile that had been on Elizabeth’s face faded, and she felt her heart constrict.

Georgianna leaned closer to Alexander, said something inaudible, and then turned to

leave, casting one final glance in Elizabeth's direction as if to underscore her victory.

"I'll leave you to return to your husband," Percy said softly, stepping back as if sensing the shift in the air.

Elizabeth nodded, but her thoughts were elsewhere, her gaze still locked on Alexander. She could feel the tension between them, thick and unspoken, as the evening drew on. Even the carriage ride back to the estate was filled with a strained silence, Alexander trying once more to ask if she was all right, and Elizabeth dismissing him with a quiet murmur.

The next afternoon, as Elizabeth tried to distract herself in her sitting room, the housekeeper entered, carrying a set of keys.

"These are the keys to Lady Eleanor's bedchambers, Your Grace," the housekeeper said, holding them out to her. "The Duke wishes for you to have them."

Elizabeth blinked, surprise flashing through her. "Whatever for?"

"I believe the Duke will be the best person to answer that," the housekeeper replied with a respectful nod.

Elizabeth hesitated for a moment before taking the keys. Confusion mingled with curiosity as she made her way to Alexander's study, where she found him sorting through correspondence.

"Ah, yes," Alexander said when she questioned him. "I want you to have them."

Elizabeth's heart gave a small flutter as she held the keys in her hand. "Why?" she asked softly.

“You can do as you wish with the room now,” he said, his voice steady but carrying an edge of something deeper. “It is time to close that chapter, and I trust you to decide what should be done. It is in your hands now.”

Elizabeth was touched, a warmth spreading through her chest at his words. This was a gesture she hadn’t expected, and it meant more to her than she could express. But at the same time, a painful reminder crept into her heart. He may trust her now, but that didn’t mean he loved her. He may rely on her, but she would never be more than a part of his duty. She reminded herself to know her place, even as her heart longed for more.

Before she could respond, the butler entered with yet another invitation, interrupting the moment.

“It seems every household in society is clamoring to host now that the season is drawing to a close,” Alexander remarked, his brow furrowed as he scanned the pile of ball invitations spread out before him. His tone was measured, a hint of exhaustion creeping into his voice as he sifted through the endless cards, each one vying for their attention.

Elizabeth sat across from him, her hands resting idly in her lap, though her thoughts were anything but calm. She had been distracted all morning, her mind turning over the same question, the same quiet longing that had been building inside her since their conversation the night before. Alexander had shown her a glimpse of the man he kept hidden, the man buried beneath layers of duty and responsibility, and it had stirred something deep within her.

Despite everything—despite the rocky start to their marriage, the misunderstandings, the moments of distance—she still longed for something real between them. Something more than an arrangement or a partnership of convenience. Last night had given her courage. They had made progress, surely. Perhaps it was finally time to ask

for more.

“Alex...” Her voice came out softly, almost tentative, as she reached for the words that had been sitting on the tip of her tongue all morning.

Alexander looked up from the stack of invitations, his gaze shifting to her. There was curiosity in his eyes, tempered with a trace of concern. “Yes?”

The simple word hung in the air between them, and for a moment, Elizabeth felt as though the entire room had stilled. This was her chance—to say what had been weighing on her heart for so long. To tell him how she truly felt, how she wanted their marriage to be something more. She opened her mouth to speak, to find the courage to finally voice her desires.

But as the words hovered on the edge of her lips, doubt crept in. What if he didn’t feel the same? What if her longing for more was met with indifference, or worse, rejection? The fear of what his response might be seized her, and in that instant, the courage she had felt just moments before crumbled.

She shook her head, letting out a small, resigned sigh. “Nothing.”

His eyes narrowed slightly, but he did not question her further. For how long must I endure this?

CHAPTER 33

Alexander had been watching Elizabeth closely for days now, a gnawing worry building inside him with every passing moment. Something had shifted in her—he could feel it. There was a distance between them, one he couldn't quite place. She regarded him curiously at times, as though she had something on her mind, yet every time she gained his attention, she dismissed it. She would start to speak, only to stop, offering nothing but a quiet, "It's nothing."

But it wasn't nothing. He could see it in her eyes, in the way her smiles never quite reached them. Something was troubling her, and she wasn't telling him. That, more than anything, unsettled him.

As they arrived at the ball that evening, his concern only deepened. Elizabeth looked radiant, her dress a soft ivory that contrasted beautifully with the dark, gleaming curls that framed her face. She moved with her usual grace, greeting the guests with poise, but Alexander couldn't shake the feeling that she was... distant. Present, but not really there .

Determined to address it, he asked her to dance. As they moved together on the floor, the music swelling around them, Alexander used the closeness to press her gently for answers.

"You've been quiet of late," he said, his tone low and careful. He didn't want to startle her, but his concern was palpable. "Is something troubling you?"

Elizabeth glanced up at him, her expression soft but guarded. "No, nothing's the

matter, Alex,” she replied, offering a polite smile.

But Alexander wasn’t convinced. She had been saying that too often lately, and each time it felt less and less believable. “You’ve seemed... distant,” he pressed. “If something is wrong, you can tell me.”

She smiled again, though this time it was thinner, as if she were trying too hard to reassure him. “All is well. Truly.”

The music swirled around them, the violins filling the air with a melody that should have been soothing, but Alexander found little comfort in it. He twirled her gently, guiding her across the floor with practiced ease, but in the pit of his stomach, the unease remained.

After their dance, Percy approached them, his usual grin plastered on his face. “May I have this dance, Your Grace?” he asked, extending his hand toward Elizabeth.

Alexander hesitated for a moment, a brief flicker of something— what exactly, he wasn’t sure—tugging at him. But then he recalled the night before, at the dinner party. He had seen Elizabeth with Percy, smiling as they stood together by the entrance. She had been lighthearted with his brother, something she had not been with him. A slight discomfort stirred in him now, but he quickly dismissed it. It was irrational to feel uneasy about such a thing.

He gave a small nod, handing Elizabeth to his brother. “Of course.”

As Percy led her away, Alexander found himself unable to take his eyes off them. There was something about the way they moved together, the way they seemed to fall so easily into conversation. Elizabeth, who had been so reserved with him, appeared... different with Percy. Livelier. Happier, even.

A soft laugh escaped her lips as Percy said something, and it was a sound Alexander hadn't heard from her in days—weeks, even. It took him by surprise, the way she laughed so freely in his brother's presence. And as he watched them, a thought struck him with unsettling clarity.

Had the scandal been for a reason?

The question made his stomach turn. He had never truly believed the rumors, dismissing them as idle gossip. But seeing Elizabeth now—laughing, smiling, so at ease with Percy—it made him wonder. What if there was more to the scandal than he had allowed himself to consider? What if Percy... desired her? What if Elizabeth would have been happier had she married his brother instead?

The thought gnawed at him, bitter and sharp. His gaze followed them as they moved across the dance floor, Percy speaking animatedly, Elizabeth laughing at whatever he was saying. Something harsh and unpleasant rose in Alexander's throat, tightening with every passing moment. His chest felt heavy, constricted, as though a weight was pressing down on him, threatening to choke him.

“What do we have here?” a voice interrupted his thoughts, pulling him back to the present.

He turned to find Georgianna standing beside him, her gaze following his to the dance floor. A knowing smile played on her lips as she watched Elizabeth and Percy, her expression one of satisfaction.

“What a lovely reunion I see,” she commented, her voice dripping with false sweetness.

Alexander didn't respond, his eyes still fixed on his wife and brother. Percy looked utterly animated, his gestures lively as he spoke, while Elizabeth's face was lit with a

brightness Alexander hadn't seen in her for some time. She giggled—actually giggled—as Percy twirled her gracefully.

“They look quite comfortable and content, don't you think, Alexander?” Georgianna continued, her voice soft but tinted with something darker.

Alexander clenched his jaw, his heart pounding uncomfortably. He had no words, his thoughts too clouded by the sight before him.

“My, too comfortable, one might say,” Georgianna added, her eyes gleaming with amusement. “So much so that it brings into question whether or not those rumors in Town are indeed true... about the Duchess and Lord Percy.”

Her words hit him like a blow, and though Alexander had long since learned to disregard Georgianna's venom, something about what she said lodged deep inside him. Were others seeing what he was seeing now? Had the guests at the ball noticed the ease with which Elizabeth and Percy moved together, the undeniable connection that seemed to flicker between them?

As the dance ended and Percy led Elizabeth off the floor, Alexander's eyes followed them, unwavering and pained. He could feel something sour and bitter rise within him, something that made his chest tighten painfully. Jealousy. And it wasn't just jealousy—it was the fear that perhaps, just perhaps, the rumors had held a grain of truth.

What if he had been blind all along?

Alexander felt his hands ball into fists beside him. The thoughts running through his mind were already hard enough to bear without Georgianna adding her venomous voice to the mix. It was as though she could sense his unease, could taste the bitterness of his jealousy, and she relished in it. He turned to her, his frustration

bubbling to the surface.

“Is there a particular reason you insist on inserting yourself where you do not belong, Countess?” His tone was sharp, harsher than he intended, but he didn’t care. He had no patience for her tonight.

Georgianna arched a brow, affronted, but her expression remained smug. “I merely comment on what I see, Alexander. After all, what are we to think when your wife and your brother seem so... acquainted? Surely, you cannot fault me for stating the obvious.”

“Perhaps if you spent less time speculating and more time minding your own affairs, you might find your company more welcome,” Alexander snapped.

Georgianna’s smile tightened, her eyes flashing with irritation. But rather than back down, she leaned in, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. “It is not my fault, dear Alexander, that others notice what you refuse to see.”

Before he could fire back another retort, the music came to an end, and Alexander felt a wave of relief wash over him. Elizabeth looked up from the dance floor, her gaze meeting his briefly before flicking to Georgianna at his side. He gave her a small, knowing smile, expecting her to come to his rescue, to extricate him from the Countess as she had done before. But instead, Elizabeth’s expression remained unreadable, and to his surprise, she turned away. She walked toward her sisters by the edge of the dance floor, leaving him standing there, the smile fading from his lips.

Something sank in his chest, heavy and cold.

Georgianna, ever perceptive, noticed the exchange and let out a quiet, mocking laugh. “Ah, it seems even your wife has tired of you, Alexander,” she said, her voice dripping with false sympathy.

Alexander's jaw clenched, his temper flaring once more. "If only I could say the same about you, Countess," he replied coldly, leaving her standing there with a miffed expression as he turned on his heel.

He made his way to Elizabeth, his insides twisting with a storm of emotions he couldn't name. There was a burning desire for answers, an anger he couldn't control, and beneath it all, a gnawing fear that he didn't dare acknowledge. The distance she had placed between them lately, the closeness with Percy—it all clawed at him, making him feel off balance, uncertain. And he hated it.

When he reached her, she was engaged in conversation with her aunt and sisters, her face calm, composed, as though nothing were amiss. But Alexander couldn't wait any longer.

"It is time we take our leave," he said politely to the group, but there was an edge to his tone, a barely concealed urgency.

Elizabeth turned to him, her brow furrowing in confusion. "Now?"

"I'm afraid Liz and I have other plans later tonight and must cut our stay short," he lied smoothly, not giving her a chance to object.

Her aunt, ever the picture of propriety, smiled warmly. "Oh, you need not apologize, Your Grace. There is nothing more important than time well spent between a man and his wife. Go on then, Lizzy. We will see you soon."

Elizabeth hesitated for a moment, glancing between her family and Alexander, clearly torn. But her aunt's urging left her little choice, and with a reluctant nod, she bid them goodnight and followed him to the waiting carriage.

The ride back to the estate was tense, the silence thick and oppressive. Elizabeth sat

across from him, her confusion and irritation clear in the way her eyes darted toward him, her hands fidgeting in her lap. Several times she opened her mouth to speak, only to close it again, as if waiting for him to explain.

Finally, she couldn't hold back any longer.

"Why did we leave so early?" she asked. "What was so urgent that we had to abandon the ball?"

Alexander's jaw clenched, his thoughts swirling with the memory of her laughter with Percy, the ease with which they had moved together on the dance floor. He didn't trust himself to speak, knowing that if he did, he might say something he couldn't take back. So he remained silent.

Elizabeth's irritation grew. "Am I talking to a wall, Alex? What is going on?"

When they arrived at the estate, she followed him into his study, her frustration evident in the quickness of her steps. "Are you unwell? Talk to me, for God's sake."

Alexander turned sharply to face her, the tension that had been simmering in him now boiling over. "Have you been talking to me these past days, Liz?" he shot back, his voice harsher than he intended. "You've been distant, dismissive—what am I to make of that?"

"This doesn't answer why you cut our time at the ball short," she retorted, ignoring his accusation.

"Oh, my apologies," Alexander said, his words dripping with sarcasm. "I didn't realize you were enjoying yourself so much at the ball. You seemed quite morose during our dance. What changed? Did Percy lift your spirits suddenly?"

Elizabeth's eyes widened, shock flashing across her face at his insinuation. "I beg your pardon?"

"You're not giving me answers, Elizabeth," he pressed, his voice sharp with frustration. "What is going on with you?"

"You speak of answers?" she said, her voice rising as she bristled at his words. "Tell me, Alexander. Have I gotten my own answers regarding your true relationship with Georgianna?"

His anger flared at the mention of the widow. "Georgianna? You have the audacity to question me about her when all I've been doing is staving off her advances?"

Elizabeth's gaze didn't falter, her eyes burning with an emotion he hadn't seen in her before—hurt. "I saw you with her at the dinner party. I saw you with her tonight. What am I supposed to think?"

Alexander's chest tightened, his jealousy clouding his reason. "Do you regret marrying me, Elizabeth?" The question spilled from his lips before he could stop it. "Would you have preferred to marry Percy instead?"

Elizabeth recoiled, her face paling with disbelief. "How dare you?" Her voice trembled, but it was thick with anger. "Where is all of this coming from, Alexander? Why are you saying these things?"

"I've simply drawn my conclusions from what you've made quite too obvious to me, Liz," he spat, his voice cold, though the sight of her pained expression twisted something inside him.

For a moment, she stared at him, hurt and anger swirling in her eyes. Then, her face hardened, her expression closing off. "Then I shall leave you to further reflect on

these conclusions of yours, Your Grace,” she said quietly, her voice icy as she turned and walked out, closing the door firmly behind her.

Alexander stood there, the sound of the door clicking shut echoing in the silence. His chest heaved with the remnants of his anger, but as the moments stretched on, the weight of what he had said—what he had done—sank in. His hands curled into fists, and before he could stop himself, he drove one squarely into the desk, the sharp pain radiating through his knuckles.

“What have I done?” he muttered under his breath, the words a hollow echo in the empty room.

He had let his jealousy get the better of him. He had hurt her, deeply, and he had no one to blame but himself.

CHAPTER 34

Elizabeth stormed out of Alexander's study, her vision blurred by the tears she fought to contain. The sting of his accusations still rang in her ears, disbelief mingling with the ache in her chest. How could he? Whatever fragile hopes she had nurtured about their marriage, about building a life together, crumbled with his distrust. To believe the whispers of society, to accuse her—of all people—of an affair with his brother? She had never thought him capable of such cruelty until now.

Her heart shattered as she turned sharply around the corner of the hallway, nearly colliding with someone. Strong arms reached out, steadying her before she could fall.

"Elizabeth, are you all right?" Percy's familiar voice came from above her, filled with concern.

At the sound of his question, something inside her broke. A sob escaped her throat before she could stop it, and without a word, she turned and fled, unable to bear facing him or anyone else in that moment.

Tears blurred her vision as she hurried toward her room, her thoughts a jumble of pain and confusion. She vaguely registered the sound of footsteps above, running along the upper landing, but she paid them no mind. When she reached her chambers, her lady's maid was there, oddly out of breath, but Elizabeth barely noticed. She dismissed the maid with a wave of her hand, not bothering to explain.

Once alone, Elizabeth collapsed onto the bed, burying her face into the pillows as her sobs finally broke free. She cried for what felt like an eternity, her heart aching with

the weight of Alexander's accusations and her own helplessness. How could things have gone so terribly wrong? Just when she thought they had made progress, just when she had begun to hope for more, he had crushed that hope beneath his accusations. He would never love her—of that, she was now certain.

And to think that he believed she had feelings for Percy. Percy! The very notion was absurd, and yet Alexander had seemed convinced, his jealousy twisting reality into something unrecognizable. How could he doubt her so completely?

She wished, more than anything, that she could escape. To be anywhere but under the same roof as Alexander. He had become a reminder of everything she could never have, and the thought of facing him again felt unbearable.

When dinner time came, Elizabeth made no effort to rise from the bed. She had no intention of going down to dine with him, not tonight. Her lady's maid returned to help her dress, but she dismissed her once more, unwilling to entertain the idea of playing the dutiful wife at the dinner table.

But just as she settled back into the quiet of her room, a knock came at the door. Her heart gave a small jolt— was it Alex? But no. When she heard the voice that followed, it wasn't him.

"Elizabeth," Percy called from the other side, his voice light and encouraging. "I've come to escort you to dinner."

Elizabeth blinked, sitting up slightly in surprise. She hesitated, but Percy's voice continued, jovial and insistent. "Come now, you cannot hide away all evening. I'll not allow it."

She sighed, wiping at her eyes, though she wasn't sure what possessed her to do so. Perhaps it was his tone, or perhaps it was the desire to escape her own thoughts, but

something made her get out of bed and move toward the door.

“But I’m not dressed for dinner,” she said weakly when she opened it, gesturing to her simple attire.

“Balderdash,” Percy said with a grin, offering her his arm. “Who cares about such formalities? We’re only going down to stuff our cheeks and guts, after all.”

Despite herself, Elizabeth chuckled softly, and Percy’s grin widened as though he had won a small victory. She looped her arm through his and allowed him to lead her downstairs.

Throughout dinner, Elizabeth couldn’t help but notice that Percy made a conscious effort to keep the conversation light, his wit and charm working tirelessly to ease the somber air that had threatened to settle over them. He was quick to offer a jest, always attentive, and though she remained quieter than usual, Elizabeth found herself appreciating his attempts. She wondered if he knew—if he had somehow overheard her argument with Alexander.

After the meal, Percy suggested they share a glass of wine he had brought back from Portugal. Elizabeth, desperate for anything to numb the pain of her current situation, agreed. They moved to the terrace and sipped their drinks in silence for a while.

But soon enough, Percy spoke, turning more serious. “I heard,” he said quietly, glancing at her with a knowing look. “And I know how irrational my brother can be.”

Elizabeth stiffened, her heart sinking at the direction of the conversation. She didn’t want to talk about Alexander, not now. “I’d rather not discuss it,” she said, her voice tight as she tried to steer the conversation away from the source of her pain.

But Percy, persistent as ever, continued. “I do not want to excuse his actions,

whatever they may be,” he said, his voice gentle yet firm. “But you should know, Alex wasn’t always like this.”

Elizabeth said nothing, staring out into the darkness beyond the terrace. She didn’t need to hear more about Alex’s reasons or excuses. She just wanted to forget, if only for a little while.

“The accident changed him,” Percy pressed on, his voice softening as he spoke of their past. “He feels as though he’s failed everyone—first Eleanor, and now you.”

At the mention of Eleanor, Elizabeth’s heart squeezed painfully. “What do you mean?” she asked, her voice hesitant, not entirely sure she wanted to hear the answer.

Percy sighed, looking down at his glass for a moment before meeting her gaze. “After the accident, Alex made a promise to our father—a promise to protect Eleanor. He was determined to keep it, but when she passed...” He trailed off, the weight of the memory clear in his voice. “It shattered him. And after I lost my hearing, well, he blames himself for that too.”

Elizabeth blinked in surprise. “Your hearing?”

Percy nodded, offering a faint smile. “I lost hearing in one ear after the accident. Alex has carried that guilt with him ever since, as if he could have prevented it.”

Her heart broke further for Alexander, for Percy, for all the pain this family had endured. She had known about the accident, but she hadn’t known the depth of the burden Alex carried. And as much as she wanted to stay angry with him, as much as his accusations had hurt her, she couldn’t help but feel sympathy for the man who had been crushed beneath the weight of so many losses.

Percy’s next words caught her completely off guard. “I know you love him,

Elizabeth.”

Her breath hitched, and she looked up at him in shock. Percy’s expression was gentle, understanding, but his eyes held a quiet certainty that unnerved her.

“And my brother,” he continued, “is the veriest of fools and a coward, but I know for certain that he cares for you too.”

“No, he doesn’t care,” Elizabeth shook her head, her voice quiet but resolute. She couldn’t afford to hold on to false hope now—it would only break her further. “And I cannot bear to be around him, with this constant reminder.” Her throat tightened at the admission, but she refused to let her emotions overwhelm her again.

“If that is truly what you feel and believe, I cannot change your mind,” Percy said, his voice gentle. “But I do hope you take whatever time and space you need to reflect. To truly see the man that Alexander is—a man who cares deeply for you, even if he is too afraid to face his own heart.”

Elizabeth’s chest tightened painfully at his words, but she refused to believe it. Alexander didn’t care for her. He couldn’t. Not after what he had said, what he had accused her of. Whatever affections she had held onto were now shattered beyond repair. No, there was nothing left for her in that house but hurt and disappointment.

A decision settled within her then, firm and unyielding. She would leave. She would return to her family and take the space Percy suggested—not that it would change anything. It wouldn’t make her see things as Percy hoped. Her mind was clear. She had lost whatever chance she had with Alexander, and there was no recovering from it.

Without another word, Elizabeth rose from the terrace, her heart heavy. She made her way to her room, not bothering to take any of the belongings Alexander had given

her. They were gifts meant to maintain appearances, nothing more. There was no sentiment behind them, and she had no desire to bring anything that would remind her of the hollow life she had built with him.

She slipped out of the house quietly, telling none of the staff where she was going. But Percy knew. He didn't try to stop her, didn't try to convince her otherwise. His silence was his understanding.

When Elizabeth arrived at her family's home, she plastered a smile on her face, though her heart was breaking inside.

"Oh, after our hasty departure from the ball last night, I simply couldn't wait to spend more time with you all," she said lightly when her family welcomed her with pleasant surprise.

Her aunt and sisters beamed at her, none of them suspecting the truth behind her visit. But as they sat for tea in the drawing room, Elizabeth caught Anna watching her with a curious expression. Her cousin's eyes seemed to linger, as though she could sense that something wasn't quite right.

Elizabeth tried to ignore it, focusing instead on keeping the conversation flowing, on pretending that nothing was amiss. But when dinner approached and she asked to stay for the meal, the table grew awkward.

"You're abandoning your husband to dine alone?" Petunia asked.

Elizabeth hesitated for a moment before offering a dismissive smile. "Oh, he knows. And he will be fine."

Her answer seemed to ease their curiosity for the time being, but the weight of her lie pressed heavily on her chest. She pushed it aside and sat with them for dinner, but the

knot of anxiety tightened with each passing moment.

It wasn't until later, when her uncle called her into his study after dinner, that Elizabeth's facade finally cracked.

"Elizabeth, my dear," Sebastian began, his voice soft as he led her to a chair. "You're welcome here, always, but something tells me this isn't just a casual visit. What is it, child?"

The concern in his voice, the kindness in his eyes, broke through the dam Elizabeth had been holding back all evening. The tears she had tried so hard to hide spilled over, and she found herself confessing everything. Well, almost everything. She couldn't bear to share the part about Alexander's accusations of an affair with Percy—it was too humiliating.

"We had a misunderstanding," she whispered through her tears. "I needed time to think."

Sebastian's arms wrapped around her in a warm, fatherly hug. "Oh, my dear. No marriage is without its misunderstandings. It will be all right. You just need time."

Elizabeth clung to him, her heart aching. "Can I stay here for a while? Just to... cool off?"

Sebastian pulled back and cupped her face gently. "You needn't ask. Our doors are always open to you." He turned to call Petunia, who entered the study with a concerned frown. When Sebastian explained, Petunia's face softened, and she joined in comforting Elizabeth, holding her close as they offered their reassurances.

Later, Elizabeth settled into her old room, a place that held the warmth and familiarity of her past. She had just gotten into bed when there was a knock at the door, followed

by the soft sound of it opening.

Titan bounded in first, his tail wagging eagerly as he jumped onto her bed, followed closely by Plato, who padded over and licked her face with fervor.

“Oh, you boys ought to be asleep by now!” Anna’s voice came from the doorway. “Why do you follow me about as though I have no privacy?”

“They just miss me,” Elizabeth chuckled through her tears as she hugged the dogs close, their warm bodies providing a small measure of comfort. For a brief moment, she allowed herself to get lost in their affection, missing the simpler days before her life had become so complicated. Before her heart had become entangled with a man who would never love her.

Anna entered the room and perched herself on the edge of the bed, her eyes sweeping over Elizabeth with a scrutinizing gaze. “I knew something was off the moment you walked through the door. I wonder how the others didn’t notice immediately.”

“I’m glad they didn’t,” Elizabeth murmured with a self-conscious little laugh.

Anna tilted her head, studying her closely. “So, what’s truly going on?”

Elizabeth hesitated, but the weight of her pain was too heavy to carry alone. And if she could trust anyone, it was Anna. She told her cousin everything—every detail, every hurt, every doubt. The words spilled out before she could stop them, and when she was finished, she felt raw, exposed.

Anna, however, shocked her with laughter.

Elizabeth blinked, startled. “Anna?”

“Oh, Lizzy,” Anna said through her laughter. “It sounds to me like your husband has fallen in love with you, and his jealousy has gotten the better of him.”

“Not you too,” Elizabeth groaned, dropping her head into her hands. “Please, don’t give me hope. Percy said something similar.”

Anna chuckled. “Well, I daresay Percy is correct. And I do believe you two need some space to think—and perhaps return to your senses.”

“You make it sound like we’ve lost them,” Elizabeth said with a wry smile.

“You have,” Anna replied without hesitation. “Desperately in love and utterly out of your minds. Look at you, Lizzy. It hasn’t even been twenty-four hours, and it’s clear to anyone—even a blind man—that you’re already pining for him. I’d wager Titan that your husband is feeling the same right now.”

“Wager Titan ?” Elizabeth asked, shocked at her cousin’s confidence.

“Indeed. I see what you do not. What your pain is blinding you to, perhaps.”

Anna’s voice softened as she continued. “I believe Alexander is a good man, Lizzy. There’s an explanation for his behavior, and I think it’s his jealousy. I know he’s hurt you, but don’t be too quick to assume the worst. Give him a chance, when the time comes.”

Elizabeth’s heart squeezed at her cousin’s words. She wanted to believe her, wanted to believe that there was hope. But the hurt was too fresh, too raw. “If it comes,” she said, her voice tinged with hopelessness.

Anna smiled optimistically, her confidence unwavering.

A second knock sounded at the door before Peggy appeared, her playful energy filling the room. “A late-night party without me?” she teased, eyeing the scene with mock indignation.

Anna threw a pillow at her. “You weren’t invited for good reason!”

Peggy picked up a pillow and tossed it back, but Anna dodged, and it hit Elizabeth square in the face.

Laughter bubbled out of Elizabeth as she retaliated, and soon the room was filled with the sounds of giggles and teasing as the three girls engaged in a lighthearted pillow fight. The dogs barked excitedly, jumping around the room as if joining in the fun.

For a brief moment, Elizabeth felt lighter, finding comfort in the warmth of her family’s love. They reminisced about old times, making promises to always be there for one another.

Despite that, there was a space in her heart that Alexander had already taken, and nothing could fill it.

CHAPTER 35

Alexander returned home from the House of Lords in a foul mood, his head pounding with the weight of the decisions made that day. But the moment he entered the estate, something felt off, as though the house itself were holding its breath. He was greeted by the butler, who, strangely, looked more anxious than usual.

“Where is the Duchess?” Alexander asked, shrugging off his coat and handing it to the waiting footman. The question seemed innocent enough, but a knot of unease twisted in his gut as he awaited the answer.

The butler hesitated, his gaze flickering nervously before meeting Alexander’s. “Her Grace has... left the estate, Your Grace.”

Alexander blinked, the words taking a moment to sink in. “Left? What do you mean, ‘left’? Where has she gone?”

“I am afraid... we do not know, Your Grace. She did not inform anyone of her destination. In fact, none of the staff even saw her depart.”

The knot in Alexander’s stomach tightened into a painful twist. He felt his pulse quicken, a sense of dread creeping up his spine. “What do you mean, no one saw her? She couldn’t have simply disappeared!”

The butler remained silent, his head bowed slightly, clearly uncomfortable under the weight of Alexander’s growing frustration.

A storm of panic and anger began to swirl inside him. Where had she gone? Why hadn't she told anyone? His mind raced with the possibilities, none of them easing the fear clawing at his chest. He turned, ready to tear through the house in search of her, when he was met by Percy standing at the entrance to the hallway.

"She's gone to her family," Percy said quietly, his expression unreadable.

Alexander's heart stuttered at the revelation. "To her family?" he repeated, his voice tight with disbelief. "Why?"

"She left this morning," Percy explained. "After last night... she needed space."

Without another word, Alexander made for the door, ready to bring her back. He wouldn't allow this. He couldn't. But Percy stepped in front of him, blocking his exit.

"What do you think you're doing?" Percy barked, his tone sharper than Alexander had ever heard from his younger brother.

"I'm going to get her," Alexander growled, his patience snapping like a taut string.

"No, you're not," Percy said firmly, his hand braced against the doorframe. "You'll only hurt her more if you go after her now."

Alexander glared at him, his temper flaring. "And what business of yours is it?" he shot back.

"This has nothing to do with me," Percy replied evenly, though his gaze was unwavering. "It has everything to do with your obstinacy and cowardice."

The words hit Alexander like a slap, igniting a fire of anger within him. "Cowardice?" he spat, stepping closer to his brother. "You dare?—"

“You love her,” Percy interrupted, his voice calm but forceful. “Yet you hurt her. Because you refuse to let go of your own pain.”

“Get out of my way,” Alexander demanded, his voice low and dangerous.

But Percy didn’t budge. Instead, he continued, his voice steady as he spoke the truth that Alexander had been unwilling to face. “You’ve been clinging to your guilt, to the past, and it’s stopping you from seeing what’s right in front of you.”

Each word Percy spoke only fueled Alexander’s frustration. He felt as if every accusation, every truth his brother pointed out, was another blade twisting in his chest. He shoved Percy aside, his temper boiling over. “Enough!” he barked. “I’m bringing her back.”

As Alexander reached for the door, Percy’s voice followed him, quiet but piercing. “She’s unhappy, Alexander.”

He froze, his hand still on the door handle.

“Last night, after dinner,” Percy continued, “she told me about her decision to return to her family. She needs time to sort through her emotions. Don’t force her back into the storm. Not now.”

Alexander’s breath left him in a slow, painful exhale. His entire body felt as though it had gone limp, the fire inside him extinguished by Percy’s words. He turned slowly to face his brother, the weight of everything finally crashing down on him. “I’ve failed her, haven’t I?” he whispered, his voice strained with guilt.

Percy’s expression softened slightly. “It’s not too late to seek her forgiveness,” he said quietly. “But you need to give her space. She needs time, Alexander. And so do you.”

Alexander stood there, feeling utterly lost, hating himself for every ounce of pain he had caused Elizabeth. His heart ached in a way he hadn't known was possible, and he hated that he was the reason for her suffering.

The next two days without Elizabeth were perdition for Alexander. The house felt empty, hollow, and every moment was a reminder of her absence. He spent most of his time in his study, drowning his sorrow in brandy, the glass never far from his hand.

It was late in the afternoon when the butler announced a caller. Colin stepped into the study, taking one look at Alexander and immediately frowning. "You look a damned wreck," he said bluntly.

Alexander barely had the strength to respond. "I've ruined everything," he muttered, running a hand over his face. "I love her, Colin. And I might have destroyed our marriage. I've broken her trust completely."

Colin sat down across from him, his expression sober. "You're right. You've screwed up. But what matters now is what you do next."

"I don't know what to do," Alexander admitted, the weight of his guilt suffocating him. "She's gone. She's left me."

Colin leaned forward, his gaze serious. "Percy's right. If she needs time, give it to her. You owe her that, Alex. After everything, it's the least you can do."

Alexander stared into his glass, feeling as though he were being ripped apart. "But what if I lose her?" he whispered, the fear gnawing at him. "What if I never get her back?"

Colin's voice softened. "If you love her, you'll give her the space she needs. And

maybe, during that time, you'll realize just how much you've jeopardized. How much you almost lost."

Alexander's chest tightened, the thought of losing Elizabeth unbearable. "I don't need time away from her to know that," he muttered bitterly.

"Absence makes the heart grow fonder, or so they say," Colin offered with a small shrug.

But fondness wasn't what Alexander felt right now. It was a deep, wrenching pain. A hollowness that consumed him entirely. Would she ever forgive him? Would he ever have the chance to make things right?

"I can't lose her," Alexander said, his voice barely audible.

Colin watched him for a long moment, his face thoughtful. "I'm hosting a soiree before the season ends. Perhaps that'll give you the opportunity to see her."

A thought struck Alexander, cutting through the fog of his despair. The soiree—it was a chance. A chance to see Elizabeth again, even if it was just one more time. He clung to the idea like a lifeline.

"Will you come?" Colin asked, concern in his voice as he glanced at Alexander's disheveled state.

Alexander lifted his head, a glimmer of determination breaking through the haze of his misery. "Oh, I shan't miss it for the world," he said, setting his glass down with finality. "And I have every intention of showing up with my wife."

The days without Alexander had been torturous for Elizabeth, each hour stretching longer than the last. At first, she thought that time away from him would allow her to

collect herself, to think clearly. But as the days slipped by, the reality of her situation settled like a lead weight in her chest—she had truly lost him. Her resolve to keep her distance, to protect herself from further heartache, began to crumble with each passing day.

She moved through her family's home as though in a haze, barely able to keep herself together. It had become impossible to ignore the aching void left by his absence. Every morning she awoke with the hope that maybe today, something would change—that he would send word, come after her, anything. But nothing came.

Her aunt, Petunia, noticed the cracks forming in her composure. Elizabeth had tried to hide it, but there was no concealing the pain that weighed on her heart.

One afternoon, as they sat together in the drawing room, Petunia finally broached the subject.

"Elizabeth," her aunt began gently, setting aside her embroidery. "You've seemed troubled ever since you arrived. I know it isn't my place, but... what is truly going on, darling?"

Elizabeth felt the weight of her aunt's kind gaze upon her, and for a moment, she hesitated. But the knot of emotions that had been building inside her for days was too much to bear any longer. Tears welled in her eyes as she set down her tea, her hands trembling slightly.

"I've fallen in love with him, Aunt Petunia," she confessed, her voice breaking. "I've fallen in love with Alexander, and now I fear I've lost him completely."

Her aunt's eyes softened with understanding, and she reached for Elizabeth's hand, holding it between her own. "Oh, my dear child," Petunia said quietly, "why do you think you've lost him?"

Elizabeth shook her head, the tears she had been holding back spilling over. "He doesn't care, Aunt. Not in the way I want him to. And I can't bear it. I thought I could handle this arrangement. But now... now it's too late. I love him, and he—" her voice faltered. "He will never love me back."

Petunia pulled her into a tight embrace, her hand smoothing over Elizabeth's hair as she whispered soothing words. "There, there, my love. All will be well, you'll see. Men are often more foolish about their feelings than we give them credit for."

Elizabeth let out a shaky breath, trying to draw comfort from her aunt's words, but the pain remained lodged in her chest. Just as Petunia was about to speak again, the butler entered the room, carrying a small tray with missives and invitations.

"Missives and invitations, Your Grace," the butler announced, placing the tray on the side table.

Elizabeth dried her eyes quickly, composing herself as best as she could. She picked up the pile of correspondence, her fingers fumbling slightly as she sorted through them. One in particular caught her eye.

"Colin is hosting a *soirée*?" she said aloud, her voice tinged with surprise.

Her aunt smiled. "He always did enjoy entertaining."

But before Elizabeth could respond, the butler handed her another envelope—an invitation addressed specifically to the Duke and Duchess of Sterlin. A note was attached. Elizabeth's brow furrowed as she carefully opened the missive, and her breath caught when she saw the familiar script. It was from Alexander.

Her heart raced as she unfolded the letter, her eyes scanning the words quickly. It was brief, formal—almost curt.

Elizabeth,

I enclose your copy of the invitation to Lord Broughton's soirée. I will come to fetch you tomorrow evening. It is only proper that we attend together, as he is a good friend to us both.

—Alexander

The words felt like a blow. Not a single mention of their argument. Not a word of apology or acknowledgment. It was as if nothing had happened between them, as though she hadn't left, as though her absence had meant nothing to him. Elizabeth's heart clenched painfully. He hadn't reached out in days, and now, when he finally did, it was to inform her of a social obligation. Cold. Distant. Detached.

She didn't know what she had expected—perhaps an apology, perhaps a sign that he missed her. But this? This was worse than silence. It was as if her leaving had made no difference to him at all.

Her hands trembled slightly as she folded the letter back into the envelope. Yet, despite the pain, she couldn't deny that Colin's invitation deserved to be honored. She had grown fond of the Marquess, and their friendship should not suffer because of her marital troubles.

"Will you go?" Petunia asked gently, her voice filled with concern as she saw the tension in Elizabeth's features. "You don't have to if you're not ready, darling. We can simply make your excuses to the Marquess and to your husband."

Elizabeth shook her head, her resolve hardening. "No, Aunty. I shall go," she said firmly. "Colin deserves that much. I will not let my personal feelings get in the way of my duties as a wife. I owe him that. And..." she hesitated, "I owe Alexander that much too."

Her voice wavered slightly on the last sentence, but she forced a weak smile. "It is my duty, after all."

Petunia looked at her with sorrowful eyes, seeing the battle Elizabeth was waging within herself. She pulled her niece into another warm embrace. "I love you, darling. And you must know, all will be well in the end."

"I love you too, Aunty," Elizabeth whispered, though her heart felt heavy, and the tears threatened to spill once more.

As Petunia held her close, Elizabeth tried to steel herself for the coming evening. She would play the role of the Duchess, as she had always done. She would stand beside her husband and maintain their facade. But deep down, she knew—this might be the last time she could pretend. The last time she could hold herself together before everything truly fell apart.

CHAPTER 36

The carriage ride to the Dowshire residence felt longer than it should have. Alexander's heart pounded with every passing second, his mind racing with uncertainties. What would he say to her? How could he face her after everything that had happened? His hands tightened around his gloves as the carriage came to a halt, and he took a steadying breath before stepping out.

As he entered the drawing room, he was greeted by Lord Dowshire. The older man smiled warmly, though there was a hint of his knowledge of the situation in his gaze.

"Ah, Sterlin! Come in, come in," the Earl said heartily, moving toward a small table in the drawing room to pour two glasses of brandy. "A drink to start the evening, hmm?"

Alexander hesitated, anxiety coursing through him. "I—thank you, but I?—"

"Oh, come now," the Earl insisted with a good-natured laugh. "We might as well start our own party a little earlier, don't you think?"

Reluctantly, Alexander obliged, accepting the glass though his nerves made him wish for anything but liquor right now. The Earl handed him the drink, and they stood in an awkward silence for a moment before Alexander finally spoke.

"I... I did not intend for things to happen as they did," Alexander said, his voice low but sincere. He wasn't sure what compelled him to offer an explanation, but he felt as though he owed it to the man standing before him. After all, he had failed Elizabeth,

and by extension, her family as well.

To his surprise, the Earl's expression softened. "Such squabbles between a man and his wife lay the very foundation of a solid and lasting relationship. It is only natural, Your Grace. That is life, after all. We err, we learn, and we grow from our mistakes."

Alexander blinked, taken aback by the older man's easy understanding. "My darling girl is hurt right now, no doubt," the Earl continued, "but it is nothing she won't recover from in time."

Alexander felt both relief and guilt wash over him. He was grateful for the Earl's words, but it did little to ease the deep ache in his chest. "Thank you," he said quietly.

They returned to the front hall to await the ladies, but when Elizabeth descended the stairs, Alexander's breath caught in his throat. She looked as radiant as ever, and seeing her again after all these days filled him with an overwhelming need to hold her, to tell her how much he had missed her.

But instead, he did what duty and propriety required. He offered her his arm. "Shall we?"

She accepted, her fingers brushing against his arm, and though the touch was brief, it sent a wave of longing through him. She didn't say a word, and the silence between them only deepened as they departed for the soirée in the Sterlin carriage, her family following behind in their own.

The tension in the carriage was suffocating. Alexander could feel the weight of his unspoken words pressing down on him, the distance between them more palpable than ever. He glanced at her, taking in the curve of her profile, and before he could stop himself, the words slipped out.

“I missed you,” he blurted, the confession sounding raw and unfiltered.

Elizabeth looked up at him in shock, her eyes shining with unshed tears. Her reaction took him aback, and confusion flickered across his face. Why did she look so stricken? What had he said to make her look like that?

She opened her mouth to speak, and Alexander’s heart raced, desperate for her to say something—anything. But before she could utter a word, the carriage pulled to a stop. They had arrived at the ball.

Throughout the evening, Elizabeth was pleasant and composed with everyone they greeted, but toward him, she was distant. Cold, even. It was as though the woman he had grown to love had slipped away, leaving behind only a shell of formality and politeness. The sight of it pained him more than he could express.

Does she truly desire to be away from me that much?

The thought gnawed at him as he watched her move gracefully through the crowd, her laughter and smiles reserved for everyone but him. He had never felt so helpless, so lost. And the more he watched, the more he realized that their entire charade—their marriage, their roles in society—was a lie. A facade that had begun to crumble, and the weight of it was becoming unbearable.

He couldn’t continue to force her into this. The truth hit him with a painful clarity. He loved her, yes, but keeping her by his side would only cause her more pain. And if he truly cared for her, he couldn’t do that. He had to let her go.

The decision settled like a stone in his chest as he approached her on the dance floor. “May I have this dance?” he asked quietly, his heart heavy with what he was about to do.

Elizabeth looked at him, her eyes filled with something he couldn't quite place, but she nodded and took his hand.

As they moved together in the dance, Alexander summoned the courage to speak. "We must stop pretending, Liz," he began, his voice low. "We've been convincing enough for society. But you don't owe our marriage that any longer. We've fulfilled the terms of our arrangement, and I... I think it's time we go back to living our separate lives."

He felt her tense in his arms, her grip on his hand faltering. He continued, though every word felt like a knife twisting in his chest. "I have a property in Lancashire. You could live there, away from all of this... away from me."

Her gaze snapped up to meet his, hurt flashing in her eyes. "Is that what you truly want?" she asked, her voice trembling.

"It's what we agreed upon," he replied, though it felt like a lie even as he said it. Every syllable twisted painfully inside him.

She nodded, her face unreadable, and the moment the dance ended, she turned on her heels and walked away.

Alexander followed her, his heart pounding as he watched her retreat to the empty balcony. He couldn't let her go like this—not without understanding what had just happened. When they were alone, she turned to face him, her eyes brimming with tears.

"I cannot do this any longer, Alex," she whispered, her voice breaking.

"Hence my proposition," he said, his heart shattering as he spoke the words. She truly wanted to leave him.

“You don’t understand,” she said, shaking her head. “One moment I feel like I have you, and the next, you slip away. I know you cannot ever love me, Alexander, and I am trying to accept that. But I cannot take this torment any longer. You tell me you miss me, and then you tell me to go away. Which is it?”

Her words hit him like a punch to the gut, and for a moment, he could hardly breathe. Did she just say she felt like she had me?

“You yearn for me, Liz?” he asked, his voice hoarse with disbelief.

Tears rolled down her cheeks as she looked up at him. “I love you, Alexander. And I know I shouldn’t, but?—”

He didn’t let her finish. Before she could say another word, he pulled her against him and kissed her, pouring everything he felt into that kiss—the longing, the regret, the love he had been too afraid to admit.

When he pulled away, she looked up at him, her eyes wide and confused. “I don’t understand,” she whispered.

“It means that I have loved you, too, all this while,” he confessed, his voice thick with emotion. “And I am sorry it took me this long to admit it.”

Her face crumpled with relief, and she threw her arms around him, holding him tightly. “Oh, Alexander,” she whispered, her voice filled with the same love he had been too blind to see before.

Before he could say another word, a familiar voice interrupted them. “I see you two have finally found your missing brains,” Percy said, grinning as he stepped onto the terrace.

Alexander kept his arms around Elizabeth, a rare smile tugging at his lips.

“He turned into a madman in your absence, Elizabeth,” Percy teased, his eyes twinkling with mischief.

Elizabeth’s eyes sparkled with newfound light. “Did he now?” she asked playfully. “You’ll have to tell me everything, Percy.”

“I’ll gladly spill all of it,” Percy grinned, bouncing on his feet.

“You say a word, Percy, and you’ll regret it,” Alexander warned, though he couldn’t stop the laughter bubbling out of him.

Elizabeth woke to the soft glow of morning light spilling through the curtains, warmth wrapping around her like a comforting embrace. For a brief, blissful moment, she forgot where she was. Then, she turned and saw Alexander beside her, his features softened in sleep, his breathing steady. The sight filled her with a happiness so profound that she could scarcely believe it. After everything, she had never imagined waking up like this—beside the man she loved, and knowing that he loved her in return.

Her heart swelled, but before she could savor the moment, a commotion echoed from downstairs, disturbing the quiet of the morning. She sat up, exchanging a confused glance with Alexander, who was already alert.

“What is going on?” she murmured as they both quickly dressed and made their way downstairs to investigate.

As they reached the foyer, Elizabeth was startled to see a footman holding her lady’s maid, struggling as if she were trying to break free. Percy stood nearby, his expression stern as he questioned her, while the housekeeper and butler looked on,

clearly distressed.

“What is the meaning of this?” Elizabeth demanded, her voice sharp with confusion as she stepped forward. “Let her go!”

“I’m afraid I cannot do that,” Percy said, his demeanor calm but gaze firm.

Alexander moved to intervene, but before he could speak, Percy held up a hand. “You need to hear this,” he said, his eyes serious as they flicked between Elizabeth and Alexander. “The lady’s maid, I regret to inform you, has been acting as a spy.”

“A spy?” Elizabeth’s brow furrowed in disbelief. “What on earth are you talking about?”

Percy sighed, his expression grave. “She’s been in Lady Winston’s employ since the moment she arrived here. Georgianna has been using her to spy on your household, to feed her information about your marriage.”

Elizabeth’s stomach churned, her mind reeling with the betrayal. She glanced at the young maid—her maid—who had become a familiar presence in her life. The girl had always seemed so kind, so eager to help. And now to learn she had been an agent for Georgianna all this time... It made her feel sick.

“We caught her trying to leave this morning,” Percy continued. “She realized that I had begun to suspect her the night of your argument. I found her eavesdropping then, and it raised my suspicions.”

Elizabeth’s throat tightened. “You were spying on me?” she asked the maid, her voice barely above a whisper.

The girl looked down, her face pale, and said nothing.

Percy's voice cut through the tense silence. "I decided to investigate further, and what I found was... unsettling. Georgianna has been paying her to report back on everything. She's also the one responsible for spreading all those rumors about your marriage and the supposed affair."

Elizabeth felt as though the ground had been ripped from beneath her. The rumors, the whispers that had nearly destroyed her—it had all been orchestrated by Georgianna? And her own maid had been part of it?

Her heart hardened, the shock quickly giving way to anger. "You are dismissed," she said coldly, her voice trembling with restrained fury. "You will leave this house immediately."

Before the maid could say a word, Alexander's voice rang out, firm and unyielding. "Without a wage," he added. "Consider it your punishment. You'll receive no reference from us, and if you seek help from Lady Winston, you may tell her exactly why you were dismissed. Perhaps she will be more than willing to employ you again as her spy."

The girl's face drained of color, and she gave a slight, terrified nod before the footman released her and escorted her out.

Elizabeth let out a shaky breath, her heart still racing. "Thank you," she said quietly to Percy, her voice thick with emotion. "I don't know what we would have done without you."

Percy offered a faint smile, though there was a glimmer of smugness in his eyes. "What would you two do without me, eh?"

Alexander shot him a look but couldn't suppress a chuckle. Despite the gravity of the situation, they all shared a brief, tense laugh.

“There’s somewhere we must go,” Alexander said, his demeanor serious and guarded.

Elizabeth blinked with a sense of unease. “Where?”

“You’ll see soon enough,” he replied, offering no further explanation.

She followed him, apprehension settling in her stomach as their carriage made its way across town. But when they arrived at the familiar gates of the Winston residence, Elizabeth’s heart sank. Why on earth were they here?

The butler showed them into the drawing room, where they waited in tense silence. The sound of approaching footsteps drew their attention, and moments later, Georgianna swept into the room, her expression triumphant.

“Oh, Alexander,” she purred, a knowing smile on her lips. “I knew it would only be a matter of time before you came to your senses and changed your mind about our relationship.”

Elizabeth’s heart twisted painfully at the insinuation, but Georgianna’s next words were cut off by Alexander’s sharp words.

“We discovered your little spy, Lady Winston,” he barked, his voice full of restrained fury. “And we know that you concocted and spread all those rumors about us in Town.”

Georgianna faltered, her steps slowing as her eyes darted between Elizabeth and Alexander. “I... I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she stammered, but the panic in her voice was unmistakable.

Alexander took a step forward, his gaze hard and unyielding. “Enough with the lies,”

he growled. “We know everything. You’ve meddled in our lives for the last time.”

Georgianna’s face twisted in anger. “Fine,” she snapped. “Yes, I did it. I spread the rumors, I paid your maid. But I did it because I know what your marriage truly is—a scam! And you,” she sneered, turning her venom on Elizabeth, “have failed miserably to keep your husband’s affections.”

Alexander’s fury flared, and he took another step toward Georgianna, his fists clenched. The Countess, realizing the danger in his posture, instinctively stepped back. Elizabeth, seeing the rage in his eyes, quickly placed a hand on his sleeve, her touch grounding him.

“I could ruin you, Georgianna,” Alexander said in a low, threatening voice. “I could have you exiled from society in an instant, and don’t think I won’t if you so much as whisper my wife’s name again.”

Georgianna’s defiance faltered, and for the first time, Elizabeth saw real fear in her eyes. She had always known Alexander held power, but to witness it so clearly now, she realized just how dangerous he could be when protecting the people he loved.

After a long, tense silence, Alexander turned to Elizabeth, his expression softening instantly, as though the storm inside him had suddenly vanished.

“Shall we leave now, darling?” he asked, gentle and tender, as though nothing had happened.

Elizabeth stared at him, utterly shocked at the abrupt change in his demeanor. One moment, he had been a seething volcano of rage, and the next, he was the tender, loving man she had come to adore.

Good heavens, he’s like a man with different personalities, she thought, her heart

swelling with affection even as her mind struggled to keep up.

Without another glance at Georgianna, Alexander led Elizabeth out of the house, his hand steady and reassuring on hers. And as they stepped out into the fresh air, Elizabeth couldn't help but marvel at the man beside her—a man full of contradictions, but one whose love for her was now undeniable.

EPILOGUE

Elizabeth stood on the ship's deck, her hands lightly gripping the rail as the sea breeze danced through her hair. The salt air was cool and crisp, carrying with it the faint scent of the ocean, and she closed her eyes for a moment, letting it wash over her.

It was calming, soothing, and as she looked out over the expanse of water stretching towards France, she couldn't help but feel a sense of excitement bubbling up within her.

They were on their way to France, as Alexander had promised. She smiled at the thought of seeing the French version of the performance she had grown so fond of. And, of course, there was the invitation from the Marchioness of Delle. As if that weren't enough, just before they left England, a letter had arrived from Lady Compton, who had apparently decided to rusticate in the French countryside, and she had written to say she eagerly awaited their visit.

A thrill of anticipation coursed through Elizabeth at the thought of seeing old friends. But more than that, there was something else—a more personal excitement, a secret she had been carrying, one she was eager to share with her husband. She'd been waiting for the perfect moment, and now, perhaps, that moment had come.

As if summoned by her thoughts, she felt Alexander's arms slide around her waist from behind, pulling her back against his chest. His breath brushed her ear as he whispered, "Dinner is served, darling."

Elizabeth smiled, leaning into him. “I am quite hungry,” she murmured, though her hunger was more for the conversation they were about to have than for the food itself. Still, the idea of sitting down with him, away from the deck’s bustle, seemed just right.

They returned to their chambers, where a hearty meal had been laid out, complete with fresh bread and cheeses that had evidently been ordered specially for her.

“I had some French cheese ordered in advance,” Alexander said, pointing to the array of cheeses on the table.

Elizabeth’s heart warmed at the gesture. “Oh, you could have waited until we arrived in France,” she said with a light chuckle. “Then I could sample all the cheese I want.”

“No, my Duchess shouldn’t have to wait for anything,” he replied, a smile tugging at his lips as he served her a generous slice of cheese atop some bread.

Elizabeth accepted it gratefully, but as she lifted the bite to her mouth, a sudden wave of nausea washed over her. The rich smell of the cheese hit her all at once, and her stomach churned violently. She gasped, quickly setting the bread down and rising from her seat.

“Liz?” Alexander’s concerned voice followed her as she rushed to the chamber pot, where she heaved, and nothing came out. She was glad she did not cast up her accounts, but she was still in considerable discomfort.

She heard his footsteps behind her, felt his hand gently rubbing her back as he knelt beside her, his voice full of worry. “Are you all right? Should I call for the ship’s physician?”

Elizabeth shook her head. “Oh no... I don’t think that’s necessary.” She paused,

glancing up at him, a soft smile spreading across her lips despite the discomfort she felt. Her hand drifted to her stomach, resting there as if to calm the unease within. “I think the little one doesn’t like cheese.”

There was a brief silence as Alexander processed her words. His brow furrowed, and then, with a look of pure confusion, he asked, “Little one?”

Elizabeth couldn’t help but laugh at his expression. The way his confusion gave way to dawning realization was priceless. “Yes, my love,” she said softly, turning to face him fully. “I’m with child.”

The change in his face was immediate—first a flicker of disbelief, and then, as the words truly sank in, an overwhelming rush of joy. His eyes shone with emotion, and he stared at her as if trying to comprehend what she had just said. “Pregnant?” he repeated, his voice thick with emotion.

Elizabeth nodded, her own heart swelling as she placed her hand over his. “I confirmed it with the housekeeper just before we left England. I’ve been waiting for the right moment to tell you.”

For a long moment, Alexander simply looked at her, as though the reality of the news was too much to take in all at once. Then, without warning, he swept her into his arms, pulling her close. “Elizabeth... I—” His voice broke, and he pressed his forehead to hers, his arms trembling slightly as he held her. “I love you,” he whispered, his voice rough with emotion. “I love you so much.”

Tears filled Elizabeth’s eyes, and she found herself laughing softly through them. “I love you too,” she whispered back, her own heart full to bursting.

He kissed her then, a kiss full of warmth and tenderness, his lips lingering on hers as if he couldn’t bear to let her go. When they finally parted, his eyes were shining with

unshed tears, and he cupped her face in his hands, looking at her as if she were the most precious thing in the world.

“Thank you,” he murmured, his voice barely above a whisper. “Thank you for this.”

Elizabeth’s heart swelled with love and happiness as she gazed up at him. “We’re going to be parents,” she said softly, the words still feeling surreal as they left her lips.

Alexander laughed, his joy unmistakable. “Parents,” he repeated, his voice full of wonder. He kissed her again, his arms wrapping around her protectively, and for a moment, it felt as though the rest of the world had faded away, leaving only the two of them and the life they had created together.

The End?

Six years later

“She’s perfect,” Alexander whispered in Elizabeth’s ear. “Absolutely perfect.”

Elizabeth stood in the nursery, gently rocking Eleanor, their three-month-old baby, in her arms, her heart swelling with love as she gazed down at her daughter. The girl’s eyes fluttered closed, her little mouth forming a soft pout as she drifted into sleep. The soft coos escaping Elizabeth’s lips seemed to soothe her even more.

Years had passed since the day she and Alexander had first married, and now here they were—three children later, and preparing for Eleanor’s christening. Their family had grown in ways Elizabeth could scarcely have imagined, and she couldn’t be happier.

Elizabeth smiled, glancing up at him. “Just like her brothers,” she said softly, though she couldn’t help but tease, “Though hopefully, she won’t be quite as mischievous as they are.”

At that, Alexander chuckled, gently brushing a hand over Eleanor’s downy head. “I wouldn’t expect it. I believe she already has that Hunton spirit.”

Elizabeth laughed, careful not to wake the baby. As they made their way out of the nursery, Eleanor bundled snugly in her father’s arms, Elizabeth caught sight of something in the corner of the room.

“My bonnet!” she exclaimed, spotting the little bonnet she’d been searching for all morning. She frowned slightly, wondering how it had ended up in the nursery of all

places. She crossed the room to retrieve it, but as soon as she picked it up, a strange shape caught her attention. She turned the bonnet over, and a piece of cheese tumbled out, followed by another.

Elizabeth blinked, her eyes widening in surprise. “Cheese?”

Alexander stepped closer, peering over her shoulder. “Stuffed with cheese,” he murmured, the corner of his mouth twitching with amusement. They exchanged a knowing glance, and in unison, they said:

“Archie.”

Their second son, Archibald, had an insatiable love for cheese, and apparently, he’d decided that Elizabeth’s bonnet was the perfect place to store his secret stash.

Shaking her head with fond exasperation, Elizabeth tucked the bonnet under her arm and followed Alexander down to the drawing room, where they found Edward and Archie playing with Lady Compton, who had just arrived. She stood once she saw them, her gaze moving to Eleanor.

“Oh, I cannot wait for the christening,” Lady Compton said cheerfully as she took the baby from Alexander. “Afterward, I fully intend to host a grand assembly in honor of the newest addition to our little world. It’s simply the perfect excuse for a celebration!”

Elizabeth smiled warmly at the older woman’s enthusiasm. Lady Compton never missed an opportunity to organize a social gathering, and though it wasn’t necessary, Elizabeth was grateful for her thoughtfulness.

“I shall write to Lady Delle as soon as possible to see if she can join us,” Lady Compton continued, looking down at Eleanor with a fond smile.

Elizabeth exchanged a glance with Alexander, both of them silently thankful for the Viscountess's kindness. She truly was a dear friend, and her support had been invaluable over the years.

Turning her attention back to Archie, who had been eyeing her curiously, Elizabeth raised an eyebrow. "Now, Archie," she began, unable to suppress a grin, "Would you care to explain why I found my bonnet stuffed with cheese?"

Archie looked up at her with wide eyes, clearly unbothered by his mischief. "The governess said squirrels store food for the winter," he explained solemnly. "So I'm storing cheese so we don't run out when winter comes."

Elizabeth burst into laughter, shaking her head at his logic. "Darling, you are not a squirrel. And I promise, we will never run out of cheese."

Archie looked thoughtful for a moment, then gave a satisfied nod, clearly reassured by her promise.

"We have some exciting news," Alexander said as he crouched down beside their sons. "The rest of the family is arriving soon for Eleanor's christening."

Edward's face lit up with excitement. "Is Uncle Percy coming too?" he asked eagerly. Percy was easily Edward's favorite, always giving him rides on his shoulders and engaging in all sorts of fun and games.

"Yes, your uncle Percy will be here," Alexander confirmed, smiling at his son's enthusiasm.

Edward grinned, and even Archie seemed pleased, though his mind was clearly elsewhere, likely still on the subject of cheese. Then he asked, "Is Aunt Anna bringing the dogs this time, too?"

Elizabeth hesitated, glancing quickly at Alexander. “After what happened last time, I’m not entirely sure,” she whispered, leaning closer to her husband. The last time Titan visited, Archie had taken such a liking to him that he had nearly traumatized the poor animal, squeezing him too tightly and trying to feed him cheese.

“I’m not sure if Titan would want to come back here,” Alexander said with a laugh, clearly remembering the incident. Elizabeth couldn’t help but giggle along with him, and even Lady Compton joined in the mirth.

Later that night, after the manor had quieted and the children were fast asleep, Alexander stood by the fire in their bedchamber, the warm glow casting a soft light across the room. He watched Elizabeth from where he stood, his heart swelling at the sight of her. She sat at her vanity, brushing out her long hair, each stroke slow and languid.

He smiled to himself. In all this time, the love he felt for her had only grown. The sight of her, so serene, still took his breath away.

“I still can’t believe it sometimes,” he murmured.

Elizabeth glanced at him in the mirror, her brow arching in curiosity. “Can’t believe what?”

“That this is our life now,” he said, pushing away from the fire to cross the room. He gently took the brush from her hand, running it through her hair in long, smooth strokes. “You. Me. Edward, Archie... and now Eleanor.”

Elizabeth’s eyes softened, her lips curving into a tender smile. “It feels like a dream, doesn’t it?”

He nodded, setting the brush aside before leaning down to press a kiss to her temple. "I love you, Liz. More than words could ever say."

She turned in his arms, her hands resting on his chest as she gazed up at him, her eyes shining with the same deep love that had only grown stronger over the years. "And I love you, Alexander. More than I ever thought possible."

He lowered his head, capturing her lips in a slow, tender kiss, one that spoke of quiet gratitude, of joy for the life they had built together. When they finally pulled apart, Alexander rested his forehead against hers.

"Thank you," he whispered.

"For what?" she asked softly, her hands still resting on his chest.

"For giving me everything I never knew I wanted. For being my heart, my home, my love." His voice wavered slightly, the depth of his feelings surprising even him.

Tears welled in Elizabeth's eyes, but her smile was radiant. "You've given me the same, Alex. And more."

He stepped back slightly, reaching into the inner pocket of his coat. "Actually," he said, "I have something for you."

Elizabeth's eyes widened in curiosity as he pulled out a small, velvet box and placed it in her hands. "What's this?" she asked, her voice filled with surprise.

Alexander smiled. "Something I've been meaning to give you for a while."

With trembling fingers, Elizabeth opened the box. Inside was a delicate locket, gleaming softly in the candlelight. The intricate design of the locket's surface

shimmered as she lifted it from the box, and when she opened it, she gasped. Inside were two tiny portraits—one of Edward and Archie on one side, and on the other, a newly painted image of baby Eleanor.

“Alex...” Elizabeth’s voice wavered as she looked up at him, her eyes misting.

“I had it made shortly after Eleanor was born,” he said. “So you could always carry them with you, no matter where we go.”

Elizabeth’s hand flew to her mouth as tears spilled down her cheeks. “It’s beautiful,” she whispered. “Thank you.”

He reached for the locket, gently fastening it around her neck. As he did, his fingers lingered at her nape, and he kissed her just behind her ear, his lips brushing softly against her skin. “You deserve it, my love. You deserve everything.”

Elizabeth leaned back in his arms. “You are everything I could have ever wanted, Alex. Everything.”

He kissed the top of her head, pulling her even closer. “And you are everything I never knew I needed.”

The End

CHAPTER 1

Eleanor Reeves, daughter of William, Duke of Fife, stood in a corner of the crowded ballroom with her best friend, Sarah Thorn. As usual, the two of them had sequestered themselves from the rest of the attending ton to discuss other things. In reality, Sarah was simply Eleanor's accomplice in avoiding the attentions of any interested gentlemen.

"I heard from Lady Mary Weston that there is a new shade of gold silk thread that absolutely puts to shame what all of us have been using," Eleanor told Sarah. "I thought perhaps we ought to make a trip to the town market tomorrow to see it for ourselves. If what she said is true, we simply must switch out the threads for that embroidery project we have been working on. I am also out of the indigo I have been working into that little blue bird on my stitching canvas, so pray, help me remember to look for it while we are there!"

Sarah laughed. "Trust you to be thinking of your embroidery when there are men to dance with, Eleanor. Do you not think we could spare a little time to dance tonight?"

"Why should we?" Eleanor grimaced. "Our projects are so much more entertaining, Sarah. Tell me, what will you do for your next project if we do find the thread Lady Mary mentioned?"

Sarah stared longingly at the attendees dancing in the center of the ballroom, but she obliged her friend with an answer, even as she kept an eye on the dancers. "Oh, perhaps I shall embroider that floral piece I have designed. I think it would look lovely with gold threads in it. Or perhaps I should shock everyone and use the black

and gold thread technique my tutor from Spain taught me. It would certainly be eye-catching!”

“Yes, you must! Black threads with a little gold worked into the design would be the envy of all the ladies.”

“And will you begin a new project too, Eleanor?” Sarah was only half-listening by now, an aggravating habit she had when they were at these events.

“I think I shall simply finish what I have already begun. But you are only half-listening to me now, Sarah! Whatever is so intriguing about the dancers that I only have half your attention?” Eleanor crossed her arms and stared at the contrast of the flowing colors of the ladies’ gowns against the dark hues of the men’s suits with a frown. “Everything looks as it always has.”

Sarah was moving ever so slightly in time to the music, mimicking the movements of the waltz the attendees were now dancing. “I do so love dancing,” she said. “Let’s dance, Eleanor. Just tonight. It is only one evening I am asking for.” She stared down at her empty dance card with a sigh. “Mother will be furious with me if I do not dance with at least one or two eligible bachelors. Please, do not be sour with me over it. She wishes me to bring a suitable, rich gentleman, and you know I shan’t manage it by hiding with you all night.”

Eleanor heaved a sigh. “What is it about bringing suitable gentlemen that has all the ladies so occupied with it? I cannot see the appeal, and I think I shall never marry.”

Her friend gasped. “You should never say such things, Eleanor! Of course you will marry! You merely have to find a man who will cherish you dearly enough to entertain your eccentricities. Then, you shall see it is not so bad after all.”

Eleanor scoffed, “I shall never find such a man! Have you ever known a man who did

not wish to lord over his wife, Sarah? Really, the things you say sometimes can be so very fantastical.”

Sarah flushed and hid her face behind her fan. She was about to respond when her brother, Duncan Thorn, approached. He bowed to Eleanor with a smile. “Lady Eleanor, you look beautiful, as always. I hope you will not mind my borrowing my sister.” He turned to Sarah. “There is someone you simply must meet, Sarah.”

Sarah lowered her fan and glanced at Eleanor apologetically. “You do not mind terribly, do you, Eleanor?”

“Of course not!” Eleanor would miss her friend, but she understood that other duties would call Sarah away at such events, and she wouldn’t be seen arguing with Duncan over whether or not his sister ought to fulfill them.

Sarah placed her hand in the crook of her brother’s elbow and let him lead her away, gaily chatting with him about this new acquaintance he wished her to meet and asking if he knew which gentlemen had not already danced too much to think of dancing with her.

Eleanor groaned. While her friend was always very supportive of her apathy towards the idea of marriage—which bordered on disgust some days—Sarah did not share her disdain for the concept or her desire to remain free. In their world, spinsterhood was a scandal and simply unimaginable for most ladies.

Eleanor could afford to remain single thanks to her father’s fortune, and she tried to be understanding of Sarah’s inability to afford such a scandalous position. Yet, it didn’t make it any less difficult to bear her friend’s absence or the boredom she faced at these events, since she preferred not to dance and refused to entertain a conversation with most of the attending ton .

She left the corner they were hiding in and walked towards the refreshment table, plastering a pleasant smile on her face and wishing more than anything that whoever designed the set-up for these parties would stop placing the refreshments in the center of the room.

It is hardly a refreshment if you go to fetch your food only to be accosted by every eligible gentleman in the room without a partner or bothered by every woman seeking to climb the social ladder.

As a duke's daughter, Eleanor was usually accosted by both, much to her dismay.

At the refreshment table, she picked up a glass of red wine. If she had to endure the rest of the evening, she might as well do so with some wine to make it all seem more enjoyable. When she would throw her own balls, she would make sure to never place the refreshment table in the center of the room. She settled at a nearby table, and the absurdity of the idea dawned on her then. Why would she ever throw a ball, to begin with? She despised such events after all.

A laugh escaped her, and she tipped her glass by mistake. A little bit of wine spilled over the edge, dripping down her fingers and onto the white tablecloth, staining it. Blushing, she glanced to her left to see if anyone heading for the refreshment table had noticed. It was hardly becoming of a duke's daughter to be so slovenly at a public event.

I really should have chosen the white wine.

There was a quiet, deep laugh on her right, and her blush intensified. Of course someone had noticed. It was likely some wizened old lord who had nothing better to do than to hang about the refreshment table and laugh at the young ladies' foolishness. She set her glass on the table and turned, intending to tell the man that he hardly had reason to laugh given how shaky his own hands must be at his advanced

age.

However, she came face-to-face with a tall man with neatly combed brown hair that looked as soft as her embroidery threads. He was staring down at her with a bemused smile and a flicker of humor in his hazel eyes. She stared back, her insult momentarily forgotten along with her embarrassment. This was not the sort of wizened lord or simpering member of the ton she had expected to face. This man exuded command despite his amused expression.

Eleanor's blush returned full force when she realized that she was staring at him, and she hid her face behind her fan. "It is rude to laugh when someone attempts to bring a little color and variety to the decorations, Sir. These ball decorations are always the same, bland and monotonous. I was doing them a favor, truth be told."

She expected the man to grimace and walk off, either chastened by her cutting remark or put off by the inane excuse for her mistake. Instead, he laughed, this time more loudly. Askance, Eleanor lowered her fan, indignation overcoming her embarrassment. "Whatever are you laughing about?"

The man stopped laughing and stared down at her, a thoughtful expression replacing his amusement. It looked as though he was deciding whether to engage her further and what to make of her question, but he finally smiled and glanced down at the stain from her wine. "I had believed it a joke, Lady Eleanor. I meant no offense."

Oh. Well, I suppose I can forgive him that.

Eleanor stood there, undecided about what to do next. Should she accept his roundabout apology? Engage him further? He was the most interesting person she had met so far tonight, besides Sarah. Perhaps she should talk to him despite her usual policy of avoiding conversation with men.

He shifted and shoved his hands in his pockets. "I hope none was taken," he added.

She cleared her throat and stared down at the offending blot on the tablecloth. "Apology accepted. I cannot fault you for presuming I was making an attempt at humor, I suppose."

The awkward silence between them resumed, amplified by the music and laughter from the dance floor and nearby tables. The man pursed his lips. Was he now annoyed with her? He gestured towards her table with a little reluctance. "Would you like to return to your drink alone? If my presence is unwanted..."

"I..." Eleanor hid behind her fan again, seeking a moment to recover her thoughts and decide on the appropriate response.

"Perhaps I ought to introduce myself," he said.

She lowered her fan with a frown.

The man looked uncomfortable with the idea, but he continued anyway, "I am the Duke of Richmond."

We are equals then. I should have been more polite towards him.

"It is wonderful to meet you, Your Grace. I am Lady Eleanor Reeves."

The Duke smiled. "I am aware."

Eleanor blushed again and stared down at her feet. "Yes, I suppose you are."

"What are you doing out here alone, anyway, Lady Eleanor?" The Duke glanced about. "I would not have expected the daughter of the Duke of Fife to be without

company.”

No one who knew her expected her to be without company at these parties. “I find most of the people here droll or too impressed with themselves for my fancy.”

“I see.” His response was smooth and warm. “I do hope I fall under neither category. Would you like to dance?”

Absolutely not!

She would have nothing to do with being courted or wooed, no matter how good-looking the Duke was. Nothing good could possibly come out of dancing with him, so she floundered about for any excuse to escape. “I am afraid the floor is too slippery for me, Your Grace. Perhaps another time?”

The Duke raised an eyebrow, and he looked as if he was about to respond.

Eleanor picked up her wine glass with a tight smile. “If you will excuse me, I just recalled I have to speak with one of the other ladies about something of vital importance.”

The disbelieving expression on his face told her he wasn’t buying her excuse, but he didn’t stop her as she turned on her heel and fled for the opposite side of the room. On her way around, Eleanor spotted Sarah laughing and talking to a handsome young man. The man seemed as enamored with her as she was with him.

There would be no extracting Sarah to return to some dark corner now, and Eleanor didn’t want to be around if the Duke decided to renew his request later in the evening.

Searching about, she located her chaperone and hastily joined the older woman. “Lady Devonshire, might we leave? I find myself quite thoroughly worn out.”

The woman stared down at Eleanor's empty dance card and then glanced in the direction she'd come from. "What did His Grace want?"

"He was laughing at me for a small mishap," Eleanor muttered. "Please, let us go."

"Oh, very well." Lady Devonshire made her excuses to the group of older women she'd been talking to and accompanied Eleanor out of the ballroom. "You shall have to answer to your father for that empty dance card, though, young lady."

Better that than having to make more excuses to avoid dancing with the Duke or enduring more of the mindless inanities of the ton for the evening.

Eleanor climbed into their barouche with the help of the footman her father had sent along with them. She remained silent for the drive home, and Lady Devonshire made no attempt to encourage her to talk, thankfully.

The entire drive home, the only thing Eleanor could think of was the encounter with the Duke and the way his hazel eyes lit with good humor as if he were laughing with an old friend about some private joke. It was the one thing she desperately wanted not to think of, but no matter how she tried, she couldn't get her mind off it. Eventually, she abandoned any effort to do so and let her mind go over the conversation they'd shared until she and her chaperone reached home.

When she arrived at home, Eleanor stopped by her father's study before she went to her rooms to retire. William was in his study, as always, working on papers, his gray head bent low as he squinted at whatever he was writing. Eleanor smiled fondly and turned, intending not to disturb him.

"Eleanor, my dear, do come in." William's voice made her halt.

She turned back and entered with a smile. "How do you always know that I am at the

door?”

“That is my secret.” His blue eyes twinkled with amusement. “And I shall take it to my grave. Tell me, though, how was the ball?”

Eleanor settled into the leather armchair across from her father with a groan. “As boring and dull as expected. Sarah abandoned me to dance with some foppish-looking gentleman, and I begged off shortly after.”

He shook his head with a long-suffering sigh. “You believe that all the men your age are foppish, my dear. Truly, I despair of ever finding you a husband.”

A laugh escaped Eleanor, though she knew it wasn’t entirely appropriate to let such a sound slip out over such a serious subject. “I think I shall be content if I never marry. At least then, I shall be free.”

William’s smile collapsed, and he shuffled the papers with a pained grimace. Eleanor stopped laughing and smiling too, eyeing him warily now. Usually, he only had that look when he was about to deliver news she wouldn’t like.

“Did you dance with anyone?”

“I rarely do. Tonight was no different.” That wasn’t entirely true. The Duke of Richmond had been quite different, but she had no intention of mentioning that lest it convinces her father she could be matched off with some older man since the younger ones were not to her fancy. If she had her way, she would never marry.

A heavy silence fell, and he still wouldn’t meet her gaze.

She cleared her throat. “Is something the matter, Father?”

“Nothing is the matter,” William replied, suddenly regaining his usual stolid expression and looking up at her. “It is only that we must discuss a few things. There are some things that will need to change around here.”

Eleanor’s stomach twisted. “Change?”

“You will need to marry soon, Eleanor. Surely you realize you cannot remain unwed forever?”

“I realize no such thing.” She crossed her arms. “I do not need a husband.”

“You do. Every young woman must grow up and wed eventually, and it is time you do the same. You will need someone to care for you and protect you when I am gone someday, Eleanor.”

“You still have many good years in you! I see no need to rush.”

“I am tired, Eleanor. I wish to have grandchildren and to know that my daughter is not one of the people I must worry about when my final days do come, as they must for all of us. Do not argue with me on this.” William straightened, his gaze sharpening.

Eleanor ignored his warning with a scowl. “I see no purpose to rush. Give me a reason why you are suddenly so keen to be rid of me. Is it that I am a burden? Do you no longer want me?”

“Of course not!” He groaned. “This has nothing to do with not wanting you here by my side, Eleanor. Do not put words into my mouth!”

“Then, why?” She leaned forward, her cheeks heating with frustration and anger. “I don’t need a husband when I have a father to protect me, and I certainly do not want

one either. I will be content if you never find a way to leg-shackle me, regardless of who the man might be!”

William shoved away from the desk sharply and turned his back on her. “Cease your objections! I will find a match for you if you cannot be trusted to do it yourself. One way or another, you will be wed as soon as I find you a suitable match.”

Eleanor pushed herself to her feet with a harsh bark of laughter. “What could have driven you to this? I have been a good daughter, have I not? Why do you wish to punish me?”

Her father spun to face her and slammed a heavy hand on the desk’s glass surface. “I am your father!” His voice rose to a shout. “You will obey me without question! It is high time you learned to submit to authority without needing a reason for everything, Eleanor. Let it be now, since you show no signs of learning it yourself.”

A shiver worked down her spine, and she stepped back, the words hitting her like a physical blow. She lowered her head as tears welled up in her eyes. “That is how it is to be, then?”

“Eleanor...” William’s voice softened as though he was trying to cajole her into cooperation.

However, Eleanor would not be cajoled or coddled into cooperation after he’d shouted at her and treated her so cruelly. Where had her kind, loving father gone? She didn’t know, but it didn’t matter. This harsh, unyielding man had taken his place, and it was clear there would be no reasoning with him. She would rather retreat and lick her wounds in private than sacrifice her pride by allowing him to see her cry or give in.

“Goodnight, Your Grace,” she uttered stiffly.

“Do not use my title as a weapon, Eleanor,” he warned.

She dropped into a low curtsy. “I would like to retire, Your Grace, Father. If I may?”

There was a stony silence following her words, but finally, he said, “Go then. Get out of my sight if that is your reply to my attempt to see you well-situated.”

Eleanor spun on her heel and fled from the study, heading straight towards her bedroom. When she reached her rooms, she slammed the door behind her and sank to the floor in a puddle of dark blue satin and silk, her tears spilling free.

The maid knocked on the door, likely to see if she wished help with changing out of her gown.

“I will take care of my toilette tonight,” Eleanor called through the door.

The maid’s footsteps retreated, and she was left alone in her misery. Pulling her knees to her chest, she rested her head against the heavy wooden door and let the tears fall. Never before had her father been so sharp with her. It was as if he felt as trapped as she did, but she could not imagine what would leave him feeling like that when he was not the one being forced to marry.

Eleanor couldn’t fathom the new reality facing her, and a deep-seated fear set in along with the sorrow. Who would her father barter her off to? What if the man he would choose for her clipped her wings and treated her like a toy or a treasured possession like so many rich men did with their wives? She would not be able to bear it.

Better to die than to endure such a fate. How could he ask it of me?

Rising, she struggled out of her dress and then slipped into bed in her shift, leaving

her gown on the floor. Her weeping resumed until she ran out of energy and fell asleep, the stains of her tears still on her cheeks.

CHAPTER 2

Eleanor woke to the sunlight streaming through the lace curtains of her bedroom windows. She sat up with a groan, her head aching from last night's excitement. Had everything really happened, or had it all been a dreadful dream? She prayed it was the latter, but until she went down for breakfast and saw her father, she wouldn't be certain. A painful knot in her stomach told her the truth. She already knew deep down that it had happened. Still, she clung to the desperate hope that she was wrong.

Her maid entered the room with a bright smile. "My Lady, what shall I fetch from the wardrobe today?"

"The yellow silk dress with the white ribbons, if you please, Agatha."

Agatha complied, and Eleanor climbed out of bed and let her maid dress her in silence. Usually, she and Agatha would discuss the latest news and gossip about the ton, but she was in no mood to do so today, so she remained silent.

"Is everything well, My Lady?"

"Why would you ask that?" Eleanor snapped as Agatha pulled the laces of her corset tight.

"You seem rather subdued this morning, is all, My Lady."

"I am well. Everything is well."

Nothing is well.

Agatha wisely chose to fall silent then and helped Eleanor into her yellow and white silk dress without further comment. She laced it up at the back and fastened the hooks at the neck and waist. Then, she styled Eleanor's hair into a simple bun, leaving a few wisps of curls at the nape of her neck before smiling and stepping back. "Is it to your liking, My Lady?"

"It will do. Thank you, Agatha." Eleanor rose and headed out of her room towards the morning room, where she and her father usually broke fast in the mornings.

When she reached it, she knew with a sinking dread that she hadn't imagined everything that transpired the previous night. It was reality, not a bad dream. Her father was absent. He was never absent. Each morning, William made a point of waiting for her to come in and break her fast with him. It was their morning ritual. And whenever they didn't speak at all to one another before dinner, they made certain breakfast was the one time where they slowed down and spent time with one another. Eleanor had always taken breakfast with her father for granted, but now, as she sat down at the table and stared at his empty seat, she felt the loss of it keenly.

The butler approached with a maid carrying a tray of food. "Lady Eleanor, your breakfast."

Eleanor smiled up at him, but it was forced. "Where is my father, Mr. Huntley?"

"Away on business in town, I am afraid, My Lady. His Grace told me to tell you that he believes he will return in time for dinner but that he had urgent meetings and that they regrettably called him away before breakfast." The butler placed a steaming plate of eggs, toast and bacon in front of her. "He wished me to assure you that there was no cause to fret. Is the food to your liking?"

“Yes, thank you.” She waited until the butler and maid retreated to begin picking at her food. Usually, this was one of her favorites for breakfast. This morning, however, the smell of food turned her stomach. She stayed at the table and tried to make herself eat it anyway.

After a few bites, she rose and swept out of the room in search of the comforts of the library and a good book to take her mind off whatever her father might be doing in town. He had sworn to rectify her state as a single woman as quickly as possible. That meant he might be arranging a husband for her even now. Dread quickened her steps, and she hurried into the library to locate a book to distract herself from her worries. Let him arrange whatever he pleased. She wouldn’t let it ruin her day even if he was being unusually cruel towards her. She would worry when something was certain.

William stepped into the smoky interior of the gentlemen’s club he and his brother Edward frequented. They would usually meet later in the morning for some whiskey and talk about their businesses, but today, he wished to escape the house sooner to avoid seeing his daughter. He doubted he could face her and hold strong on the matter of marriage when she was so against it.

Still, he was determined to see her wed as quickly as possible. Eleanor was already older than most unmarried daughters of his peers, and he would not see his only daughter become a spinster. Once he had spoken to Edward about the situation, there would be no going back. Someone would need to hold him accountable for it and help him in procuring a match, and Edward always came through for him.

William clasped his brother by the shoulders and gave him a broad smile. Edward was younger by a few years and had inherited the Marquisate of Winchester after a petition to the court at their uncle's passing. The two brothers had remained close despite the years between them. “Edward, how are you?”

“Well enough, William.” Edward eyed his brother appraisingly. “You look downright

knackered, though.”

“My daughter is proving difficult,” William muttered, heading towards their usual table in the empty club. “And I need a stiff drink already.”

“What could have possibly gone so wrong with her? She is strong-willed, but she is generally not intractable enough to drive you to drink before breakfast!” Edward joined him, sliding into the chair across from him. “Tell me what happened, William. You will feel better if you do, trust me.”

William sighed and rubbed his hand over his face. “I need to find her a husband, Edward, but she is proving most unpleasant about it. We ended up arguing about the matter last night. She is determined not to be, in her words, ‘leg-shackled’ no matter who the man might be. I am worried she will end up on the shelf if I let it go on much longer, but I am equally determined that I will no longer put it off.”

“I see.” Edward pursed his lips. “No matter the man, she is quite determined, you say?”

“Indeed,” William uttered flatly.

A server came to take their order, but William waved him off, deciding the drink could wait. Edward raised his brow, and William leaned forward and said in a low voice, “Tell me, Edward, do you have any men in mind who might be suitable for her? Men who will not mind that she is... less than tractable but will be gentle with her? Despite her opinion of me at the moment, I would not be well-pleased to see her wed to a man who could not appreciate her in time. At the very least, I need to see her wed to a man who is of good character and manners.”

Edward stroked his beard and nodded slowly. “I have heard that Phillip Lewis, the Duke of Richmond, may be battenning down the hatches after his uncle squandered the

money intended for his estate. He is a good man and a better friend, and I do believe he might actually suit our headstrong, willful Eleanor quite well once she has been given time to come round to the idea of being a married woman. He has the charm and elegance to wrap her around his little finger if she could be convinced to give him a chance. He has not spoken directly to me about the financial difficulties he is in, though I doubt he has mentioned it to anyone. He is too proud to do it.”

“I do not intend to give her a chance to refuse. Has he made mention of seeking any arrangements?”

“None that I have heard. He certainly never spoke of it to me, but I think he would be amenable. Come to think of it, William, I seem to remember catching a glimpse of him speaking with young Eleanor at the ball last night.” Edward frowned in concentration and nodded. “Indeed, I am certain of it. It was but a brief glance, and I thought little of it, but I do recollect seeing them before Lord Tweeddale demanded my attention.”

William’s brows rose. “Did you? I asked her how her night went, but she made no mention of meeting the Duke of Richmond.”

A sly smile slipped on Edward’s lips. “Did she not? Well, it is hardly a surprise. Perhaps she did not wish you to know she’d been enamored already. Or perhaps she did not know it was the Duke of Richmond she had met. It would be just like him to fail to mention his title. He is a hard worker with little interest in putting on airs, and the title came to him late in life after he already made a name for himself in the financial market. I am given to understand that his small fortune is simply not enough to handle his estate’s sorry affair.”

“I see...” William smiled too. “Perhaps he would be the perfect choice, then. Eleanor will come with a high amount for her dowry as well as numerous properties when I pass. Could you arrange a meeting with this friend of yours?”

“I could. Expect a word from me in a week or two. Do you think you can keep Eleanor in check until then?”

William smiled wryly. “I think I can manage that much, Edward.”

“Then I will bring the Duke of Richmond to the table. I have little doubt he will prove amenable.”

William rose, tossing a few pounds onto the table to pay for the drinks. “Thank you, Brother. You have no idea the relief you have brought me this morning.”

“Go home to Eleanor, William. You look worn.” Edward raised his glass in farewell. “I shall see you with the Duke of Richmond in a few weeks, if not sooner.”

William took his brother’s advice and left the gentlemen’s club with a sigh. He hoped that Eleanor would not hate him too much for what he and Edward were planning and hoped even more that, if the Duke of Richmond proved amenable and agreed to marry her, she would not despise him for his part. Whether she did or not, however, it simply had to be done. He would not allow her to continue chafing at the role she was to play on account of being one of the fairer sex.

William loved his daughter, but it was because he loved her that he could no longer allow her to run as wild as she pleased. It was time to curb her childish antics and push her into adulthood. If his efforts were not enough to achieve it, he was certain the Duke of Richmond’s would be. He tucked his hands into his pockets and climbed into his waiting carriage to go home.

Eleanor was grateful when Sarah called on her. Her father had returned a few hours ago and closed himself off in his office. She had knocked at lunch to beg him to come to dine with her, but he had refused, and he had not left his office since. Her original intent had been to have another discussion about his demands that she marry. In the

light of day, it seemed a more promising prospect, and she had hoped to convince him to see reason. Now, she simply wished that he would speak more than two words to her and that he would open the door so that she would know their angry exchange last night was forgiven and forgotten.

Sarah provided a welcome distraction from that situation. She sat with Eleanor in the drawing room by the window while they both worked on their embroidery projects.

“Sarah, I have something that I simply must tell you,” Eleanor murmured at length. “It really is quite extraordinary, though not in the marvelous way as the word usually implies.”

Sarah lifted her head, and she looked at Eleanor with a frown. “Well? Do not speak in riddles, Eleanor! If you have something to say, then say it.”

“My father has demanded I marry,” Eleanor stated bluntly.

Sarah stared back at her blankly.

“Did you not hear what I said? He has demanded I?—”

“Marry. Yes, I heard quite well, thank you...” Sarah’s frown deepened. “What I am perplexed about is why you think that so dreadful. I know, I know. You believe being leg-shackled to a man is the worst fate for any woman to endure. But really, Eleanor, you cannot have imagined you would escape such a fate forever.”

“I did!” Eleanor grumbled. “He shouted at me too! Shouted, Sarah. He told me that he was my father and that he would be obeyed as if my wishes in the matter do not concern him.”

“I am certain they do,” Sarah countered tremulously. “Perhaps you are growing too

hasty in your concern, Eleanor. Has he mentioned whom you shall wed?"

"No, and that is the worst of it. I do not think he knows, and if I do not set my heart on anyone in a few weeks, I am certain he will sell me off to the highest bidder."

"Eleanor!" Sarah gasped. "Your father would never do such a thing. You know he loves you! Truly, I cannot imagine what has put you in such a state. He let you escape marriage for a very great deal of time, much longer than most of us have. You would become a spinster if he does not push the matter, and that is far worse than being wed."

"It is not!"

"It most certainly is. You would be fit to do nothing but chaperone other ladies' daughters if they would even allow that and would not perceive you as a sign of ill fortune, since you would be unmarried. You would never fit in with society. The ton ?—"

"Forget the ton!" Eleanor dropped her embroidery on the window seat and rose, pacing the length of the foyer with her long skirts swishing about her ankles. She rounded on her friend and crossed her arms with a huff. "Really, Sarah, you know I believe it is a fate worse than death, and my father knows it too. How can he do this to me?"

"Perhaps he has good intentions after all?" Sarah set her own stitching aside, her hands fluttering over the red silk ribbon tied just below the bust of her white cotton lawn dress. "Why talk ill of your father so? Have you not taken the matter up with him?"

"I tried, but he would hear none of it."

“Then, you must obey. As much as it may pain and anger you, you are his daughter, and you must.” Sarah rose and took Eleanor’s hands in hers. “Let us forget about the matter, for now, Eleanor. Yesterday, we spoke about going to the market to look for threads. Shall we go now?”

Eleanor pulled her hands free and turned to the window with a sigh. “I am in no mood to look at cotton twists and gold threads.”

“Please, do not be in such a mood,” Sarah pleaded. “It is not the way of the world for a woman to remain unmarried. I am certain your father will find a good man, Eleanor, but you must trust him to do it.”

Eleanor shook her head with a bitter laugh. “So even you are on his side? Does no one understand how I feel about the situation?”

“I know how you feel, though I cannot claim I understand.” Sarah touched her shoulder gently. “And I do sympathize with you. I know this must be dreadfully difficult news for you. Still, your father is a good man. He will not give you to a man who will hurt you or unduly restrain you.”

Eleanor bit back her reply, but she couldn’t help thinking it over. She wasn’t so certain her father was the good man she’d imagined him to be after all. Not after everything that had transpired the previous evening after the ball. He had coldly disregarded how she felt and refused to give her any say in the matter, let alone any answers. He’d yelled at her when she proved stubborn. Were those the actions of a good man? Eleanor wasn’t certain. She was only certain that she had no wish to marry or to trust him to find her a husband.

“Let us return to our stitching, Sarah. I am in no mood to go to the market.” She sank into the cushion on the window seat and resumed her embroidery.

Sarah rejoined her, and the two of them sat together with their heads bent as they worked on their stitching. The tension between them eased, but they maintained the silence, each lost in her own thoughts and concerns and in no mood for idle discussion.

CHAPTER 3

The meeting with Phillip was arranged much quicker than William had initially expected. It took a week and a half before it could be arranged to suit both of their schedules, but it was quicker than he had first expected. Phillip, it seemed, was as eager to discuss the matter of Eleanor's hand as William himself was. When Phillip arrived, William was not there to greet him right away. It took him longer than usual to make his way down the stairs these days thanks to his arthritis, and when he finally made his way into the parlor to meet the Duke of Richmond, he found his daughter entertaining in his stead.

The two did not spot him right away, so he lingered on the threshold just out of sight, listening as the two talked.

"... read Sir Walter Scott?" Eleanor asked.

"I have. His work is most delightful."

"Really? I have not met any in the ton this season who think so!" Eleanor leaned forward in her seat, her voice light but eager. "Perhaps there is more to you than I had first assumed, Your Grace."

William could just see Phillip's expression from his spot at the door. The Duke's lips curled into a bemused smile. "So I have often been told, Lady Eleanor. Perhaps you judged a little too quickly when you fled from my presence at the ball a few weeks ago?"

Eleanor did not respond at first, and William held his breath, wondering how Phillip's little remark would go down with his daughter. She did not appreciate quips at her expense, though she dearly enjoyed laughing and was quick to laugh at her own foibles so long as others did not laugh first.

Finally, Eleanor replied, her voice soft. "Perhaps I did. You will not hold it against me, I hope?"

William's brows rose. Had his daughter really just replied to the Duke's teasing with poise and gentility? He'd expected her to offer back some barbed quip as she usually did. Perhaps Edward had been right. Perhaps Eleanor could be persuaded to love Phillip in time.

"I would not hold such an innocent mistake against you, Lady Eleanor," Phillip replied just as gently. "I am certain you will rectify your opinion of me if we see more of one another."

At that moment, William stepped into the room and cleared his throat. Eleanor might have responded out of character in her last remark, but he suspected she would reject the obvious reason behind Phillip's last reply if allowed to do so, and he did not want his guest to think his daughter was unwilling. "Richmond, a pleasure to meet you at last. Eleanor, my dear, thank you for entertaining my guest. I can handle it from here."

Eleanor rose and turned to face her father, her cheeks rosier than usual. "I was only doing as a good daughter ought to do," she said quietly, her gaze never meeting his.

William had wanted to apologize for being harsh with her a week ago, but the situation demanded he remains silent, so Eleanor was still furious with him. They hadn't spoken much lately, and their habit of breaking fast together had been put off every day this week since the morning he'd gone to see Edward.

William nodded at his daughter and cleared his throat. "For which I am very grateful." He turned to Phillip and asked, "Do you not think Eleanor the best of hostesses, Richmond?"

Phillip's lips curved into a slow smile, his gaze settling on Eleanor. "Quite so, Fife. She is a very unique young lady. It would be a pleasure to speak with you again, Lady Eleanor, if you will do me the honor."

Eleanor met the Duke's gaze and then looked away quickly, her eyes fixed on the floor as her blush intensified. "You will have to speak to my father. I am sure he knows better than I if I will do you the honor," she mumbled.

"Eleanor," William warned.

Phillip's eyes flicked from father to daughter and back again, but he didn't ask any questions about the strange response, yet. "I am afraid I must bid you farewell, for now, Lady Eleanor." He took her hand and kissed the back of it. "I have business with your father."

"I presumed as much when you came to call," she said, her tone quieter and more subdued now. "Good day, Your Grace."

"Good day, Lady Eleanor."

Eleanor swanned past her father, who waited until he was certain she was gone before sighing and going to the side board to pour Phillip a glass of whiskey. "Shall we stay here or move to my study? I am afraid these old bones will not permit me to go up the stairs again so soon, but the study is quite comfortable as well." It had better chairs that would ease the pain in his hip and back too.

Phillip eyed him and accepted the proffered glass of whiskey. "The study would be a delight. I should think it more private too."

William chuckled. "My daughter has too much pride and good breeding to eavesdrop on doors, Richmond."

Phillip sipped his whiskey and nodded. "Still, perhaps the study would be best. And please, call me Phillip. I think we can move past the formalities given our intentions for this meeting."

"Phillip it is, then." William led the way to his study, opening the door and ushering the man he hoped would become his son-in-law into the spacious room. One of the maids had tidied it up and lit the fire in expectation of the Duke's arrival. William sat by the fire with a relieved sigh. "This room has the best chairs in the house."

Phillip joined him with a smile. "They are quite nice. I shall have to see if I can acquire some for my library. They seem perfect for long afternoons or evenings spent reading or doing accounts."

"Indeed, they are."

"Your daughter seems a little stiff today. She was most vivacious when I met her at the ball a week and a half ago. I admit, she made an impression." Phillip sipped his whiskey and stared into the fire contemplatively. "She was still quite lively today until I asked if I might see her again."

"Eleanor has only recently been informed that she is required to wed," William admitted. "She is not yet aware of whom she will wed. I will deal with it if you decide you would like to marry her."

"You know my situation is dire," Phillip murmured, still staring into the fire. "I do not have the luxury of time on my side in taking a bride, and I do not have the luxury of marrying for love. Does that not bother you?"

"I know my daughter's chances for marriage at her age are slim, Phillip. I am not

trying to find her a love match. I want her married to a man who can provide for her, who will not squander the fortune I intend to settle on her for her marriage, and who will be faithful to her whether anything beyond mutual respect ever develops. My brother tells me you are this man.”

Phillip smiled. “Your brother thinks very highly of me. Too highly, perhaps. But you may rest assured that if we strike a bargain for her hand, I will do all three.”

“That is all I need to know, then. You will not hurt her, but you will protect her. It is all I ask of the man she is given to.”

“You have my word.”

“And what of you?” William eyed Phillip with a smile. “What do you really think of my daughter?”

“I think she is headstrong, opinionated and a breath of fresh air in a crowd of dreadfully false-faced women, Fife. Whether or not she and I can ever come to love each other is something I will not venture to predict, but I do think we can learn to respect one another. She is quite well-read and knowledgeable for a woman.”

“I am afraid that is my doing,” William admitted. “I really could not refuse her anything after her poor mother died of consumption. She reminds me a great deal of my Isabel, and I could not bear to deny the poor girl books if that was what brought her comfort.”

“I do not think it a poor quality, Fife. I plan to nurture it if she becomes mine.” Phillip finished off the last of his whiskey. “If I have your blessing, I would like to court your daughter properly.”

William grimaced. That would end in disaster. Eleanor still believed she could find a way around his demand that she marry. She would never agree to this. Still, it would

not do any harm for her to develop some level of familiarity with the man she would be wed to. William just had to make certain that Phillip knew the score so that he wouldn't inadvertently step into a hornet's nest. "About that... she has no notion that we are arranging her life here, Phillip. Go gently. If she believes you intend to marry her and are not merely enjoying her company when you come to visit me, she will balk, and we will have a fight on our hands."

"I am not a man to back from a challenge when it is something I want, Fife."

"I did not think you would. Still, I would prefer not to deal with this particular challenge."

"If you wish for her to be wed to me, how do you propose that happen if I cannot court her and propose properly?"

"There will be no proposal." William crossed his arms. "We will arrange everything once you and she have had time to become a little acquainted. In due time, I will arrange a special license. I have a business relationship with the Archbishop of Canterbury. He will be happy to help after I assisted him in finding a position for a friend of his last year. Then, we will hold the wedding ceremony at your estate."

Phillip frowned. "And what will Lady Eleanor be told?"

"Nothing."

Phillip's frown deepened. "I do not like this plan."

"If you wish to marry my daughter, you will have to cooperate with my methods, Phillip." William went to his desk and sat down. "Do we have a deal? I will handle getting my daughter to the right place at the right time when the time comes."

Phillip shifted his weight on his feet, the expression on his face uneasy. Finally,

though, he nodded. “We have a deal, Fife.”

Eleanor picked up Bella, her fluffy little dog, from the pen in the corner of her room. She looked at the small creature and smiled. Lately, she felt as though it was her and Bella against the world, especially since Sarah continued to insist they shouldn’t speak poorly of her father’s decision. Eleanor and her father still weren’t on speaking terms, and aside from Phillip, who spoke to her on the days he came by to see her father, she had no friends to talk with.

She took Bella out to the garden along with one of her fetch toys. “What do you think, Bella? Shall we play ball?”

The little dog yipped and licked her chin enthusiastically. Eleanor sighed and set the little white dog on the ground, throwing the ball for her. Phillip weighed heavily on her mind. She wasn’t sure what to think of him. If she didn’t know better, she’d think he was coming by so often to see her and not her father, but he had yet to make any formal request to come calling. Maybe she was misreading the situation. She hoped she was, for if he showed any interest openly, her father would leap at the opportunity to push the two of them together.

Thankfully, William had been quiet on the subject of her marriage prospects for a few weeks now. Perhaps he was simply waiting to see if anything would come of Phillip’s frequent visits. Eleanor bit her lower lip as Bella brought back the ball. If she weren’t so against marriage per se, she wouldn’t be opposed to the idea of marrying Phillip. He seemed very kind, and he indulged her in conversations about literature, science and mathematics. There was little he wasn’t willing to discuss during their brief conversations before her father would show up to take him away. It didn’t hurt that he was so attractive as well.

“What do you think, Bella? Do you like him? I know my father would if he thought His Grace was the least bit interested in me.” She sighed as the little dog licked her hand. “Then again, any man who shows the least bit of interest in me would suit him.

It would matter little whether we like him too.”

Bella yapped in response, and Eleanor sighed and threw the ball again, watching the little dog chase it. Her chest squeezed, and she lowered her head into her hands. What a mess this had become! She had the threat of marriage hanging over her head, and there was no way out of it. No way out except death, but Eleanor wanted to live too badly to take that way out.

She groaned, tears flooding her eyes. Why couldn't her father understand that she didn't want to be married? Didn't need to be? She had him. Wasn't he enough? Didn't he want her anymore, or was this all because he thought her a burden because she was not a son and would never be of any use except as a wife to some man he wanted to strengthen ties with?

Her head ached along with her heart, and she swiped at the tears, not wanting anyone from the staff to walk past and see her weeping. She would hold back her tears until she was in the privacy of her own chambers. Bella's cold, wet nose nudged her arm, and she lifted her hands to pet the little dog's head. "I am well, Bella. It will pass. It always does."

Eleanor hoped she was telling the truth, though. It didn't feel as though she would ever be well again, especially if her father followed through on his threat to find her a match if she didn't do so herself. She doubted he would concern himself with whether or not the man he would choose would clip her wings or let her fly free. He would only be concerned with having her off his hands and becoming someone else's problem.

"Eleanor?" William's voice came from behind her, quiet but stern. "We should speak about the matter of you being unmarried. Have you found someone you give preference to?"

Eleanor stiffened, stroking Bella's floppy ears with a scowl. "I told you, Father, I

have no interest in marrying.”

William exhaled. “Very well. I have been lenient with you, Eleanor. That leniency comes to an end now. I will arrange a match as soon as possible. I thought you deserved to know that you will be wed soon.”

Her jaw tightened, and she said nothing.

“Eleanor, be reasonable. You cannot have expected to remain unwed forever. This is for the best.”

“For your best, you mean.” Eleanor clenched her hands in her lap. “Stop pretending that this is about me. It never was. It is about your desire to be rid of me.”

William didn’t respond.

“Well? Is it too ugly a truth to be spoken aloud, Father? Or is it simply that you have no good response?” Eleanor stood and faced him with a frown. “Do as you please. We already know you always do. I will simply be the casualty in the whole affair.”

“Eleanor…”

“No. I have heard all I need to on the matter. I will be wed shortly, whether I like it or not.” She smoothed out her skirts and brushed past him. “Let me know when you decide it is time for me to present myself at the altar. I have no interest in meeting or knowing the man you choose before then. It will be nothing but a business deal, anyway. I will not pretend otherwise.”

William sighed and tucked his hands into his pockets. “Very well.”

Eleanor started walking towards the house, with Bella at her heels. Wouldn’t she be granted even one ally in this miserable affair? Would she be forced to face this fresh

torment with no friend to stand beside her and ease her agony? It seemed that could very well be her fate, and her stomach twisted at the thought.

She had never known the sort of yawning loneliness she felt now, not even in the days following her mother's death.