



His Temporary Duchess (Dukes Ever After #5)

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Category: Historical

Description: "I ought to punish you," he murmured, kissing her, "for tormenting me in this way."

Lady Eleanor has spent a lifetime in the shadows, overlooked and forgotten. But when the Duke offers her his hand over her half-sisters, she is determined to turn their marriage into something real...

Duke Sebastian needs a wife—one he can easily cast aside. His plan is simple: push her to the brink until she begs for an annulment. And who better than the demure, forgettable Lady Eleanor?

But from the moment their vows are spoken, it becomes strikingly clear—Eleanor is anything but meek. The more he pushes, the more she defies him, and soon, resisting her becomes nigh on impossible...

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CHAPTER ONE

Eleanor Bennett stared at the opulent ballroom, filled with ladies and gentlemen of the ton in various masks and costumes. Behind her, her half-sisters all gathered as Greek muses, giggling amongst themselves. A quartet played a lively Scottish reel, and a set of country dances had formed in the center of the room.

“Do you suppose the Duke of Ravenscroft will be in attendance?” Isabel, her eldest half-sister at twenty, whispered. “Mama said he was certain to be present, but when I spoke with Lady Eliza, she said that although her mother had extended him an invitation, she thought him unlikely to accept.”

Eleanor did her best not to roll her eyes, though it was tempting. The Duke of Ravenscroft had expressed his intention of calling within the next few days, supposedly with the intention of choosing a wife from among the Bennett girls. Of course, although she was the eldest, Eleanor knew she would not be a part of this ‘honored’ ceremony. Ever since her father had died when she was just seven years old, she had been the bane of her stepmother’s life.

She supposed, in a way, she ought to be thankful that her stepmother had kept her fed and clothed, with a roof over her head. Considering that Mrs. Margaret Bennett had no love for Eleanor’s father, and even less for Eleanor herself, anything more would have been foolish to wish for.

Eleanor had a home, and she had the opportunity to accompany her half-sisters to this ball, which looked as though it would be the largest and most elaborate that Eleanor had ever been to.

Given she had few blessings to count, she made sure to count them all now.

Yes, she did not have a particularly flattering dress—the patterned muslin was from Isabel’s season last year, and it suited Isabel’s blonde curls far more than it did Eleanor’s brown tresses—but she was here.

And yes, perhaps she had little likelihood of dancing, but she had her pet mouse in her pocket—an infraction her stepmother would never forgive if she ever knew about it—and would be sure to have some company that way. Besides, the beauty of the ballroom alone made her feel as though she had stepped into Olympus itself.

“I think he will choose me,” Isabel was saying, fluttering her fan at her flushed cheeks. “After all, I am the eldest.”

“Only by a year,” Annabel, her second half-sister, snapped. “And you can’t be certain he won’t find me far more beautiful.”

“With your dark hair?” Isabel snorted. “I’ve heard he prefers blondes.”

“How would you know?” Mirabel, the youngest of them all at seventeen, asked with rounded eyes. Of all her half-sisters, Eleanor found Mirabel’s company the most palatable, and if it had not been for Isabel’s spite, she thought that perhaps the two of them might have been friends. “Have you ever spoken to him?”

“Men do not speak of their conquests to ladies,” Isabel said scornfully. “No, I heard it from Lady Eliza. She told me that a few years ago, when her sister first came out, he courted Lady Lydia.”

Eleanor had heard of Lady Lydia, one of the famed beauties of the ton. She had never spoken to the lady, which was hardly surprising; ladies such as Lydia did not spend time with maligned first daughters of a deceased gentleman.

“What happened?”

“Well, I don’t know the details, but he certainly isn’t married now,” Isabel smirked and tossed her hair over her shoulder. “But I would say that it displays his preference for blonde hair, do you not think?”

“Yes, but Lady Lydia is far more beautiful than you,” Annabel murmured, pursing her lips. “She looks like a doll.”

And you do not .

Isabel slapped her fan against Annabel’s arm. “As though he would be tempted to marry you , with your coarse hair.”

“Now, now, girls,” Margaret, Eleanor’s stepmother, said, coming up behind them like a mother eagle guarding her young. With her hooked nose and sharp eyes, the comparison seemed apt, but where eagles did not have the richest plumage, Margaret wore a gown of rich crimson and a nodding peacock feather in her headpiece. As always when she appeared out, she presented herself at her very best. “That’s no way to treat one another. The Duke shall choose a bride from amongst one of you, and I’m sure it could be any one of you.”

Any one of them , Eleanor thought.

That notion did not sting as much as she had once thought it might. To be sure, she was now three-and-twenty with no prospect of a husband, but she found she had little interest in the Duke. She, too, had heard rumors about the Duke of Ravenscroft—about his rakish ways. It didn’t matter that he was due to pay them a visit to choose a wife from among them. Everyone knew that he only courted a lady for a maximum of seven days before moving on to his next victim. Eleanor hardly knew why Isabel so desperately wanted to be yet another on a long list, or why she

thought she should be any better.

Margaret turned piercing eyes on Eleanor, and her brows pinched in a frown. “Why are you just standing there? Fetch me a drink before I perish from this heat.”

“Yes, and for myself,” Isabel put in. “You know my constitution is so frail.”

In Eleanor’s estimation, Isabel had the constitution of an ox. With a robust figure and cheeks often ruddy from the heat and exertion, she seemed about as far from fainting as it was possible to get.

“Hurry,” Annabel said, glancing around the crowded room. “Before a gentleman asks us to dance. You do not need to worry about that.”

“We do not all wish to spend the rest of our lives on the shelf,” Isabel scoffed.

Mirabel sent her a quiet, pitying look, but said nothing in her defense. As is usual . Eleanor knew better than to hope for Mirabel’s defense.

“At least you are wearing a mask so no one can connect you to us ,” Isabel smirked. “I do so hate it when people think we are related, and I must explain that you are so much older and yet still unmarried.”

Annabel snorted. “Only because no one wants her.”

“Now then, girls.” Margaret held out a finger, although her lips twitched. “You must not be cruel to Eleanor. She is aware of her inadequacies already, no doubt. Are you not, Eleanor?”

Sometimes, at times like these, Eleanor dreamed of telling her half-sisters and stepmother what she really thought of them. Their pride, avarice, and selfish disdain

for the feelings of others made them positively dislikable, even in the soft, golden lighting of a masquerade ball. Perhaps no gentleman would be inclined to dance with her, in her plain, unfashionable gown, but two minutes' conversation with her half-sisters would be enough to put any gentleman off the very idea of matrimony.

But if she gave vent to her feelings, they would go out of their way to make her life even more unpleasant—and that was no easy feat. Better she hold her tongue than be consigned to her bedchamber for the next week.

“Yes, Stepmother,” she said. “I’ll find some lemonade.”

“Good.” With a wave of her hand, Margaret dismissed her, and Eleanor slipped into the crowd. Finding the table of refreshments meant pushing her way through the bodies, and by the time she emerged, drinks in hand, she felt as though she’d had quite enough for the evening.

Fortunately, her half-sisters were surrounded by a collection of young men and women, and after delivering the glasses in her hands, Eleanor was able to escape. She patted her pocket, ensuring her mouse, Scrunch , remained still curled up there, unscathed.

At least one of us is safe and protected , she thought, casting her gaze about the busy room. Making herself as small as possible, she prowled around the edge of the room, aiming for the stairs leading to the balcony on the second floor. There, perhaps, she would find some privacy and quiet. But before she made it very far, a face popped up in front of her.

“Hullo!” it chimed. Eleanor blinked, focusing, and a young lady with auburn ringlets and merry blue eyes came into view. She had a round, pretty face and a smile so wide, Eleanor half felt as though it could swallow the floor and everyone on it.

“...Hullo,” Eleanor replied.

“Oh, I am so glad to see another friendly face. Is it not such a large ball? I declare I’ve never been to one like it before.” She waved the elaborate silver mask in her hands. “Are you here as a shepherdess? I love your gown—so simple! Are you having fun? I am, although I’ve only danced two dances, and both times the gentlemen were dreadful bores.” She giggled, and although Eleanor had been looking forward to some quiet, she could not help smiling in return.

“Did you find their conversation lacking?” she asked.

“What conversation? I declare, I have never encountered a gentleman with so little of use to say. The first commented on the size of the ballroom and the number of couples present in the dance, as though I should have any concern for such things. Then, if you please, said nothing else the entire time. And the second gentleman—well, I ought to have known when he said I bore the same name as his favorite hound, that he was going to speak of nothing but hunting. I am convinced that he resents the frosts for chasing all company back to Town.” She took a heaving breath and smiled prettily at Eleanor. “Don’t mind me—Mama always says I talk far too much and ladies should be seen and not heard. But, well, when you think that the alternative is listening to gentlemen speak, I don’t think it’s so very bad after all.”

Eleanor found herself smiling at the other girl, oddly charmed by her excess of words and the freedom with which she spoke. It was so different from the atmosphere at home, and a welcome change. She envied that ease, just as much as she enjoyed seeing it on display.

“I would much rather hear you speak,” she agreed. “Tell me, what was the second gentleman’s favorite hound called?”

The girl laughed, her delight contagious. “Oh, forgive me, I forgot we aren’t

acquainted! Mama and I lived in America for many years, and I've quite forgotten how reserved you English can be. You see, I saw you and thought that we should be friends, and then I spoke with you and felt as though we were already friends." She held out her hand. "I am Miss Olivia Ashby, although you can call me Livvy. I do hope you will, because then we will feel like proper friends, and won't that be delightful!"

Eleanor's stomach gave a flip. Friends . For the longest time, Isabel and Annabel—and of course Margaret—had prevented her from forming any real friendships. Yet here was this girl, seemingly oblivious to the nastiness that surrounded her.

"Miss Eleanor Bennett," she said. "Pleased to make your acquaintance."

"Lawks, are you one of those Bennett girls?"

"They are my half-sisters."

"Half-sisters, hmm?" Olivia sharpened her eyes, then smiled. "Well, you don't seem half so superior as them, if you don't mind me saying." She glanced around her. "Oh Lord, my mother is looking for me. If she has found another gentleman for me to dance with, I think I shall be done for. Wish me luck, Miss Eleanor."

"Ella," Eleanor corrected, feeling as though she had been spun about in a whirlwind, and not minding the sensation so much.

Olivia beamed. "Oh, we are going to be such good friends!" She kissed the air by Eleanor's cheek, then melted into the crowd as though she had never been there at all.

A smile lingering on her face, Eleanor worked her way around the room until she found the stairs she had originally been aiming for. Mounting them, she found herself

on a small landing that led to a balcony overlooking the ballroom. Large curtains hung from the ceiling, and if she tucked herself away, she thought she might go entirely unnoticed by the rest of the ball at large.

Down below, she caught a flash of red hair and grinned. There was Olivia, led into the latest dance by a tall, spindly gentleman. Eleanor wondered if she was speaking as avidly to him as she had to her, but by the way the girl's shoulders slumped, she doubted it.

"Well," she said to Scrunch, stroking his tiny form through the material of his dress. "I suppose it has been an interesting evening so far. And Miss Olivia was nice enough to think I came dressed as a shepherdess." She tugged the plain mask over her face, concealing her features. "When, in truth, I didn't come dressed as anything at all."

Behind her, fresh air blew in from a pair of open doors, and she inhaled, relieved at the easing heat. A cool breeze brushed along her neck, pleasantly refreshing. Yes, this was the perfect place to remain for the duration of the night.

"See, it's truly not so bad," she said to Scrunch.

"Did you think it would be?" a deep voice asked from behind her.

Eleanor whirled, taking in the figure standing between her and escape. He was tall, dressed elegantly as, she supposed, King Charles I, a white mask over his face concealing all but his eyes and mouth. She noticed his mouth first, in part because of the way his lips curved into a smile at seeing her, and in part because the candlelight played across the dips and lines as intimately as a lover's fingers.

She shook herself at the thought.

"Are you alone?" he asked, peering behind her. "Who were you speaking to?"

Instinctively, she cupped a hand over Scrunch in her pocket. “No one. Myself.”

He made no attempt to approach, merely surveyed her through the gloom. Now more than ever, she was glad she’d chosen to keep the mask over her face; it was the only thing standing between her and ruin.

“If you would allow me to pass,” she said, unwilling to approach him. “We should not be seen together.”

“Oh?” His fingers came to toy with the edge of his mask, feathered like a bird, but he made no attempt to remove it. “Because you are a lady and I am a gentleman? Fear not, shepherdess, you are safe with me. I am no wolf, here to prey on unsuspecting young ladies in search of some peace and quiet. In fact, I came here for the same.” He gestured to the other side of the balcony. “Do not feel as though you should leave for my presence. See, I shall remain here and you can remain where you are, and no one down there shall be any the wiser.”

If there was another place she could go where she might find some relief from the crowd, Eleanor would have been tempted to find it, but she could see nowhere else, and with the gentleman out of arm’s reach, she didn’t feel particularly unsafe.

“You had better stay where you are,” she warned.

He gave a mocking smile. “Your virtue is safe with me.”

She gave an unladylike snort, searching for her newfound friend amongst the dancers. It was not her virtue she feared for, but her reputation and her peace. Both, he threatened.

A few minutes passed in silence, during which time she felt his gaze upon her. Determined to ignore her unwelcome companion, she kept her own fixed on the

crowd below, but his attention bored into the side of her neck.

“Why are you not dancing?” he asked, one elbow propped insouciantly on the balcony railing.

“No one has yet asked me.”

“I find it unusual that a young lady would wish to be here rather than below.”

She pursed her lips. “You have no idea whether I am young or not.”

“Am I wrong?”

“My sisters would not consider me young,” she said without thinking, then winced.

“Ah, so you have sisters?”

“You can stop attempting to discover my identity, good sir.” She adjusted her mask, ensuring it covered her entire face. “I have no wish to be known by you.”

“No?” His tone warmed, as though he was smiling, but she refused to look at him. If she did, she would no doubt notice his mouth again, and that was not what a proper young lady ought to do. “And why is that?”

“Because you are a shocking flirt.”

He gave a bark of laughter. “And you have come to that conclusion because I am avoiding the ballroom below just as yourself?”

“I am not so much of a greenhorn that I don’t recognize your rakish antics,” she said as primly as she could. “I realize you are attempting to seduce me.”

“Did I not say when I arrived that your virtue would be safe with me?”

“And that, sir, is exactly what a seducer would say.”

“I see. According to you, my character is a sad one. You are wrong, little shepherdess, but let me assure you now. If I had intended to seduce you, I would have succeeded already.”

For the first time, she turned to face him, noticing as she did so how very tall he was. His hair hung to his shoulders, dark in the dim lighting, and a certain gravel in his voice made her shiver. She felt suddenly as though he were a wolf and her a sheep, and although he had promised her safety, an unusual prickle of trepidation came over her... along with excitement. Nothing about him or this encounter ought to make her feel this anticipation in the base of her stomach, and yet she felt warm like never before.

“You think it would be so easy?” she demanded. “You seem very sure of yourself.”

“Why, that’s because I am.”

“You will not find me so readily persuadable.”

“Will I not?” He stepped closer, head tilting as he looked down at her. From this angle, he seemed overly grand, a man playing at being a god—and perhaps she was susceptible, because something inside her quivered at the thought of being so close to him. “You see, seduction is very simple if one knows what he is doing. All a man needs to do is make the object of his admiration feel as though she is the only lady he has ever seen.”

Eleanor folded her arms. “A ridiculous concept. I don’t believe you can do any such thing.”

“Oh, it’s not the work of a moment. Rather, several strung together. Proximity helps. And compliments, aimed at just the right level, tailored to each lady’s particular beauty. You, for example—I would tell you that you hold yourself with rare elegance, and that this mark, here”—he touched the mole near her collarbone, the flash of heat against her skin informing her that he wore no gloves—“is singularly compelling.”

Unsteadied by the sincerity in his voice, and from having a gentleman stand so very close and speak to her so familiarly, Eleanor could not move away. “That—that is all?” she stammered, digging her nails into her folded arms so she would not lose focus. “You must have been seducing weak-minded ladies indeed if that is all it takes to charm them.”

He chuckled. “Perhaps. But let us not forget the efficacy of a well-placed touch.” He reached out and took a curl in his fingers, letting the soft lock slide across his knuckle. She glanced down, watching, hypnotized despite herself. “And then, of course, the anticipation of what is to follow. A lady who has been kissed before may know that a kiss is forthcoming; she might look at me with shy hunger. Yes,” he breathed, tipping her chin up with his other hand. “Just like that, pretty shepherdess. Have you ever been kissed before?”

“N...no,” she whispered.

“Then you are a lucky girl that this is your first.” As he spoke, he bent his head, and as though she were in a dream, she allowed him this freedom, allowed him to slide his fingers through her hair and tilt her chin a little further, so his breath brushed across her lips. And then, after a pause, where she could have fled if she were so inclined—where she ought to have fled—he brought his mouth down to hers.

CHAPTER TWO

A first kiss ought to be maidenly, Eleanor had always thought, although she had rarely given kissing much consideration. After all, until this stranger dressed as a former king, she had never encountered a gentleman so inclined to kiss her.

In fact, thanks to her stepmother, she had rarely encountered a gentleman who gave her a second glance compared to her younger and far better-dressed half-sisters. This was the way of things, and she had largely come to accept her place in the world—fighting it, after all, had never done her any good.

But as the man's lips pressed against hers, she felt as though the walls around her life fell away. All this time, she had never given kissing any consideration, and yet it could feel like this .

Soft, warm. Her lower belly felt molten as his lips moved, opening her mouth and tilting her head so their kiss perfectly slotted together. He tugged her closer, until their bodies were flush, and her heart pounded in her chest. Her hands moved of their own volition, reaching up to slide into his hair. Long and thick and silky, so unlike her own and yet so similar, too. She had never encountered a man with long hair like this before. Roguish, like a pirate.

At the feel of her hands on him, he made a low sound in the back of his throat, and his tongue flicked across her lower lip. She stifled a gasp. The liquid feeling between her legs deepened into something approaching an ache as he repeated the gesture, then slid his tongue into her mouth. Hot. Wet. So very different from anything she could ever have imagined.

For several more heady seconds—or perhaps they were sunlit days—she lost herself to the intimacy of his touch. The hand at her chin slid down to her jaw, fingertips soft as they skated across her skin; his other hand found her waist, bowing her body against his, holding her steady when she felt as though her knees might buckle.

For years, she had been a stranger to desire. It had never held much of a place in her life. But today, it came upon her with a vengeance, and she—

She was kissing a stranger.

Kissing a stranger on the balcony of a public ball where anyone might see them.

To be sure, she doubted many would recognize her, but if any of her half-sisters were to discover this, they would out her immediately. Her reputation would be ruined. This, she had known when he approached her, so how had she allowed him to take such liberties with her?

“Stop,” she gasped, pushing at his chest. He immediately stepped back, his hold on her loosening as though she had shocked him.

Heavens, she ought to have shocked some sense into herself several minutes prior. The music still lilted around them, the dances below continuing as though nothing had happened, but the heat that coursed lazily through her body said otherwise. Her entire life had fundamentally changed, and she should not have allowed it to.

“How... how dare you,” she hissed, jabbing a finger at him. “You said my virtue would be safe with you!”

He looked down at her, a speculative gleam in his eyes. “And you said you had never before been kissed.”

“I was telling the truth .”

His smile widened. “Then I must have been a better teacher than I could have accounted for.” He gave a flourishing, mocking bow. “You are welcome, my shepherdess.”

“I am not your anything.” Gathering what remained of her dignity and courage, she pushed past him, fleeing back down the stairs and into the bulk of the crowd once more. Her face burned and tears stung her eyes, although she hardly knew why. It was hardly as though she knew his identity or even cared to know. This did not have to go further than a pleasant recollection in her most private moments.

Though she did not look up, refusing to give him the satisfaction of knowing he dwelled in her thoughts for even a moment, she felt his gaze linger on her from the balcony above for the remainder of the night.

The next few days passed slowly, syrupy like melted sugar as Eleanor tried not to think of the man at the ball, and succeeded in thinking about little else. The way he had spoken to her, the way he had touched her, and the way he had kissed her.

The way she had allowed him.

No doubt he was precisely the kind of rake she had originally supposed him to be. And she had proven herself to be just like every other girl he had no doubt seduced. For him, it had been another conquest to add to his list, a notch in his belt, but it had been her first kiss.

Her first kiss had been with a man who cared nothing for her, and who did not know so much as her name.

And yet she could not stop thinking about the way it had felt. More than once, she

had come back into herself to find she was running her fingers along her bottom lip, tracing the route his tongue had taken.

“Eleanor!”

Eleanor snapped up to find Isabel hanging over her. “Ah! Yes. I’m sorry. What was it you wanted?”

“Are you even listening to me? I need you to find the green ribbons for my hair. The Duke will be here in a matter of minutes, and I am not even remotely ready to receive him! And all you can do is sit there with a dazed look on your face.”

“I’m sorry,” Eleanor said mechanically. “I hadn’t intended to—” She cleared her throat. Enough thinking about the strange man. She would never see him again, anyway. “The green ribbon. Of course.”

“And my slippers,” Annabel cut in with an oily smile. “The silver ones. I must look my best.”

Eleanor glanced at the maids dealing with her half-sisters’ hair and clothes, both their shoulders hunched in case her sisters’ wrath turned on them instead.

Better she take it. After all, it hardly mattered what she wore, seeing as the Duke would not be arriving to look at her. And the maids suffered enough torment at Isabel and Annabel’s hands at the best of times.

“I don’t like the way you’ve done my hair, Betsy,” Isabel huffed, running her fingers through the unruly tumble of blonde curls. “Brush them out and start again. It should be more—” she hesitated, feigning nonchalance, “neat. Pinned higher, perhaps. Like Lady Lydia always wore hers... what did she call it? A Corinthian chignon?”

A knock sounded at the door, and Margaret stepped inside. “Oh, my darlings,” she said effusively, touching the top of both Isabel and Annabel’s heads. “You both look so very beautiful.”

“Eleanor !” Isabel snapped. “The ribbons! And I also require rouge for my cheeks.”

“Nonsense, my darling.” Margaret held up a hand at Eleanor, stilling her. “You don’t need any cosmetic help. Better he see how fresh-faced and beautiful you are. And that goes for you, too, Annabel. I wouldn’t want him to get the wrong impression of your virtue. Young ladies do not need the help of such practices.” She pinched Isabel’s cheeks. “There now. What more could you possibly need?”

Privately, Eleanor didn’t think the Duke would care too much about the virtue of his future bride. At least, perhaps he would when he actually intended on marrying, but she doubted very much this was the case here and now. And certainly not with her half-sisters.

“As for you,” Margaret said, turning disdainfully to Eleanor. “I assume you know the purpose of the Duke’s visit?”

Eleanor ducked her head. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Then you know he is arriving intending to marry one of my three girls. The eldest two, most likely. I hardly think it necessary that you put in an appearance, especially given you are past a desirable marriageable age, especially when compared with dear Isabel.”

Three years hardly made all that much of a difference. But as Eleanor had no interest in the Duke or his escapades, she merely shrugged. “As you say.”

“Such an uncouth gesture . You ought to know better than that. Now, go and see to

Mirabel to make sure she is presentable. I suspect she harbors some hope that the Duke might glance her way too.” She waved a hand, dismissing Eleanor. Sensing an opportunity for escape, Eleanor curtsied before scurrying for the door, moving to Mirabel’s smaller bedchamber. The younger girl looked up with a wan smile.

“Oh, Ella! I thought it was Mama here again.”

“Just me,” Eleanor smiled secretly. “Would you like me to do your hair?”

“Mama... Mama said I should wear your pearls,” Mirabel said hesitantly.

An unexpected stab of pain choked Eleanor, and she placed a hand against her heart. Her pearls were the only possessions she had of her mother’s—the one thing Margaret could not take away from her. Except, now, she was attempting to do just that. And the only reason Isabel or Annabel hadn’t already demanded it was because they had nicer jewels to their name.

Mirabel chewed on her lip. “I promise to give them back as soon as he leaves.”

“It’s—” Eleanor took a breath. This was nothing new, and she could endure just as she had before. Better, in fact, because she had something none of her half-sisters knew of: a secret . She had the strange man’s kiss lingering on her lips even now, proof that someone at least had thought her worthy of something, no matter how wrong it might have been. “It’s fine,” she finally said, forcing a smile. “I shall go and retrieve them from my room.”

“Thank you.”

As Eleanor fetched the pearls and placed them on her half-sister’s throat, fastening them and stepping back, she forced all unhappy feelings away. Perhaps she had hoped to wear the pearls herself, perhaps even to her own wedding, but that had

always been a foolish dream. And, of all her half-sisters, she had rather Mirabel wore them. After all, now there was at least a chance of getting them back.

“Let me help you with your hair,” Eleanor said, knowing it was her duty. The other maids were too preoccupied with the older girls.

A fist pounded on the door just as Eleanor finished pinning Mirabel’s dark curls behind her head. “Come on, Mira!” Annabel called. “The Duke is here! Come downstairs to greet him.”

Eleanor gave Mirabel’s shoulder a reassuring pat. “You go, now. I’ll stay here.”

It was a testament to the usual way of things that Mirabel put up no argument as she hurried excitedly to the door. Once it closed behind her, Eleanor peered out of the window at the street below. There, a carriage was sitting beside their front door, and she saw a man emerge from it, a top hat on his head, obscuring the rest of his body. From this angle, she could see little of him, but she didn’t care, turning away and clicking her tongue. Now, at least, she would have some time to sit and read some romantic stories to Scrunch.

“Right?” she asked, patting the pocket where she kept him.

Her hand encountered air, and her stomach dropped.

No...

Surely she could not have lost Scrunch. If someone else discovered him, there would be hell to pay! They would bring up the cat from the kitchens to find her dear pet and dispose of him. No one would care that he was all the company she had in the world—they did not care about anything she owned, and especially not a mouse.

She had to find him, and quick, before her half-sisters did.

Or worse, the Duke. If he were to find her darling mouse, all would be lost!

CHAPTER THREE

Sebastian Fairmont, the Duke of Ravenscroft, adjusted the pin in his cravat as he stared down the modest facade of the Bennett household. Beside him, the stick of a solicitor he'd brought to accompany him sniffed.

"You cannot delay the inevitable forever, Your Grace," Mr. Pratt intoned.

Sebastian sighed. "And you are certain I must choose a bride from among these girls?"

"If you wish to access the portion of your inheritance your father locked behind this clause, yes. It must be a daughter from the former Mr. Thomas Bennett. You know your father was particularly close to the man and wished, above all, to someday bind the families."

Sebastian knew, and it did not improve his mood one jot. If he could have his way, he would have chosen to remain a bachelor forever. Marriage sounded disagreeable, a lifelong contract he could not escape, and its only advantage was granting him access to the fortune he very much needed. Still, he had a plan, despite his father's and Pratt's meddling: nothing in the agreement stated he had to remain married to his wife.

"Well then," he muttered, biting his tongue at all the unpleasant things he could have said. Much as he disliked this beanpole of a man, whose very voice reminded him of dusty schoolbooks he'd spent his education avoiding, this predicament was not entirely his fault. "Ring the bell, and let's get this over with."

Mr. Pratt sniffed again, but did as he was bid, and the butler immediately opened the door, welcoming the pair into the house with a jocund smile that made Sebastian feel somewhat queasy. Nothing else about the place eased that initial feeling; the décor could only be described as fussy, and as Mrs. Bennett descended on him doused in headache-inducing perfume, he had an early sense of how the visit would go.

“Your Grace,” she said, sinking into a deep curtsy. “Please, do come this way.” She led the way to the drawing room—also decorated with an inordinate number of frills—and waved a hand at the three young ladies gathered there. “These are my three darling daughters. Miss Isabel, Annabel and Mirabel Bennett.”

All three curtsied. They were, at first glance, not displeasing to the eye, but there was also nothing particularly taking about them. Certainly, he’d had far prettier girls vying for his attention before now.

“Oh, Your Grace,” the eldest said in a nasal voice that grated across his ears. Isabel, he presumed. Any thoughts of her attractiveness went out of his head immediately. “It’s such an honor to welcome you to our household. We do hope you’ll enjoy your time here. My, how handsome you are.” She giggled, whipping out a fan with more aggression than grace, and fanning herself.

“Izzy!” the darker-haired sister beside her said sharply. “Lawks, you cannot tell a gentleman to his face that he is handsome.”

“I hardly see why not, Anna, when it is perfectly true.”

The youngest gave him a toothy smile. Of the three, she seemed the least offensive, but even for London, she seemed a trifle young. Barely out of the schoolroom. “Your Grace,” she lilted, and perhaps he was imagining the youthful lisp, but the sound of it made him perilously close to running from the room. “Please excuse my sisters.”

“Youthful exuberance, I assure you,” Mrs. Bennett laughed nervously, casting the girls a look of such fierce rebuke that all three stilled. The eldest flushed like a tomato.

The fire, lit despite the fact it was May and far too hot for such things, began to smoke.

Heavens. He could not endure this a moment longer.

“This... is Mr. Pratt,” he said slowly, gesturing at his solicitor who loomed over them all like a giant spider. “Allow him to keep you company for a few moments, ladies. I require the washroom.” He glanced at a footman who detached himself from the wall with surprising alacrity.

“Of course, Your Grace. This way.”

Patting Pratt on the shoulder with a grim smile, Sebastian left him to deal with the girls’ crass behavior and ill-timed flirtatiousness. To think that his father wished him to shackle himself to one of those girls. Could this have been a punishment from beyond the grave?

No. At the time of his death, his father had not known what kind of man Sebastian had become. His father could have not known enough to be disappointed.

After spending a moment too long in washing his face in the small washroom, as if an extra splash of water might rinse away his predicament— it did not—he raked a hand through his damp hair and stepped back into the corridor, setting his course for the drawing room.

He never made it.

A blur of movement shot past him—no, into him—knocking against his shoulder with enough force to send him stumbling back. Instinct overrode surprise. His hands found purchase, gripping slim shoulders, steadying the wayward figure before him.

Dark curls framed a face—soft, heart-shaped, with a chin lifted in defiance or determination. The dim light obscured details, but it hardly mattered. His gaze caught on the blue-gray eyes, wide with something between surprise and terror. Then his attention dipped to her mouth.

Soft lips. He knew the shape of them.

After all, he'd had them pressed against his, not all that long ago.

She stared up at him, dawning horror in her face as she, too, came to the same conclusion. In a quick, nervous movement, she clamped a hand against her mouth and stepped back, angling her body from his as though attempting to hide something from him. Perhaps her entire identity.

“So, little shepherdess,” he smirked wolfishly, releasing her shoulders. “We meet again.”

That full mouth of hers fell open with a pop. “Y-your Grace?”

“The very same. But the question is... who are you?”

“I—” She glanced in the direction of the drawing room. “What are you doing here?”

“In this house?” He raised a brow. “Were you not informed of my call?”

“Yes, I—” She flushed and looked away again. She appeared different here, with her face fully revealed. Shyer. The freckles across her nose and cheeks made her appear

younger than he suspected she was. "I had expected you to be in the drawing room," she finished stiffly.

"Ah. As it happens, I was just returning." He nodded to the door, which was now opening. Mrs. Bennett appeared in the doorway, her face pinched and sour. Once, perhaps, she might have been pretty, but that had long gone now. "Mrs. Bennett!" he said with a pleasant grin. "I've just had the fortune of encountering your fourth daughter."

Mrs. Bennett gave a false smile. "You are mistaken, Your Grace. She is the daughter of my late husband, Miss Eleanor Bennett."

Miss Eleanor Bennett curtsied, her head bowed low. He wondered briefly if she was worried he would reveal all about their kiss, and he smirked. If she thought he was in the habit of revealing his rendezvous, she was very much mistaken. "Your Grace," she murmured.

"I believe Miss Eleanor is feeling a little under the weather," Mrs. Bennett said. "Is that not right, Eleanor?"

"I—" the girl stuttered.

Sebastian looked at her again, the way her hands were clasped in front of her, and the way her shoulders hunched. "Miss Eleanor ..." he mused. The name didn't sound familiar to him, and he thought he knew all the notable young ladies of the ton. "Are you often ill, Miss Bennett? I don't recall seeing you before."

She sent him a speaking, blushing glance before looking at her feet once more. "No, Your Grace," she mumbled.

"Come back inside, Your Grace." Mrs. Bennett beckoned to the drawing room.

“Isabel—my oldest, if you recall—would so like to play something for you on the pianoforte. She is thought to be a rare talent.”

Isabel simpered, and Sebastian knew for certain that a life with this woman would be intolerable. She would constantly be vying for his attention, and she would no doubt irritate him until he provided it.

Unless...

He glanced again at Miss Eleanor, who appeared to be trying to merge with the wallpaper.

An invisible lady.

One who appeared entirely uncomfortable with any attention, and who had escaped a ballroom so she might be alone instead of dancing.

If he had to marry, he would prefer his wife to be someone silent and docile, who would allow him to live his separate life with little interference.

Following Mrs. Bennett’s directions for now, he stepped back inside the drawing room, taking a seat and enduring the mediocre performance offered to him. Miss Eleanor Bennett made no other appearance, and he wondered at that, too. Why she had not been involved, and why she had not been invited to join them even after their introduction.

All the more intriguing.

“Well, Your Grace?” Mrs. Bennett said as her three daughters preened behind her. “Have you made up your mind which of my three daughters you wish to marry?”

Sebastian didn't so much as blink at the veiled suggestion behind her words, and the less-than-subtle emphasis she placed on three. "You flatter me," he said, giving her a winning smile. "I hardly know how I could make a choice such as this so soon. Would you be amenable to a promenade tomorrow so I might better acquaint myself with the Bennett girls?" He paused, letting his words settle before adding, "All four of them."

Irritation flitted across Mrs. Bennett's face before she replaced the expression with another smile, this one a good deal faker than the last. "Why, of course, Your Grace. Though I don't see the need for Eleanor to be there. You saw the poor girl yourself. She hardly has any social skills to speak of, and we are not expecting that you will favor her with your hand in marriage when she would be so unsuitable as a wife."

How ironic that you consider your unfavorable brats as better prospects, he thought grimly, and rose to leave. "I insist. It would hardly be fair of me to exclude any one of the Bennett girls when my father asked me to select a bride from amongst them." He inclined his head. "Until tomorrow, then."

Mrs. Bennett dropped into a curtsy. "Until tomorrow, Your Grace."

Sebastian knew how to make himself agreeable—in fact, it was one of the things he had spent the past decade doing—and as he promenaded through Hyde Park with a Bennett girl on either side of him, he went out of his way to charm them.

Each, particularly the two eldest, proved themselves delighted with his attentions, talking over one another in an attempt to secure his praises. The third sister walked beside the second—he could not, for the life of him, remember their names, though it hardly mattered—and Miss Eleanor Bennett followed a few paces behind. That was the position her stepmother had commanded she take, and she hadn't demurred even for a moment.

Although he outwardly appeared to be flirting heartily with the elder Miss Bennetts, he had his attention fixed on the oldest. Just as he had suspected at the house, she appeared shy, not venturing forth so much as a word, and accepting the muttered criticisms of her stepmother with an air of resignation.

Fascinating.

It was precisely what he had been looking for: a lady who would bow to his every command. One who would inevitably fold and agree to end a marriage between them. Not one of these social climbers by his elbow, seeking to be the wife of a Duke, irrespective of whether they felt desired or accepted.

“What do you think, Your Grace?” Annabel asked, fluttering her eyelashes and glancing up at him with such a cloying expression of adoration that he briefly contemplated throwing himself into the Serpentine to see whether she might show a hint of any true emotion.

“I think whatever you think must be right,” he instead smiled, and she giggled, accepting his compliment at face value without considering that he had not been listening to a word she had been saying for the past five minutes.

“I don’t know why His Grace required you to be here, but you are not to speak with him unless spoken to,” Mrs. Bennett scolded Miss Eleanor under her breath. “And do not so much as look at him unless absolutely necessary. You must do nothing to put him off marrying one of your half-sisters.”

“Yes, Stepmother.”

“And stop fidgeting. For heaven’s sake, girl, did no one ever teach you any manners?”

Given he'd had his solicitor give her the family's history, Sebastian knew for a fact that if anyone had been responsible for teaching the girl manners, it would have been the current Mrs. Bennett, who had married Mr. Bennett when Miss Eleanor was just two years of age.

The girl, however, did not mention this fact, and remained mute.

She truly was perfect for his grand plan. So effortlessly cowed, she would be easy to intimidate, and very little trouble. After all, he had more than enough experience in pushing people away. His bride would not be the first; nor would she be the last.

"I believe we've promenaded enough for one afternoon," he said, guiding the two sisters on his arm in a circle, back toward his waiting carriage.

Mrs. Bennett hurried forward, leaving Miss Eleanor behind to follow at a more measured pace. "Have you decided, Your Grace?"

He smiled to himself. It was often said that he delighted in causing mischief and mayhem. Perhaps that was not always true, but today it most certainly was. "I have indeed," he said. "But I wish to declare myself properly, and not in public, if you please."

Mrs. Bennett flushed with pleasure, exchanging a speaking look with her eldest daughter. "Of course. Let us hurry and return. Come, Eleanor. Don't hold us up."

Sebastian kept up his flow of easy conversation, made harder because of his companions, until they finally reached the Bennetts' household. Once in the drawing room, he removed his hat and gave them all a benevolent smile.

Now to set the cat among the pigeons.

“As you know,” he began, “my father asked me to find a bride from amongst Mr. Bennett’s daughters, and after some consideration, I believe I know whom it is I would like to marry.” He glanced across their faces until he found Miss Eleanor attempting to sneak from the room. “Miss Eleanor Bennett, there you are. Would you do me the honor of becoming my wife?”

CHAPTER FOUR

Eleanor twirled to face the Duke in mute horror. She felt a little as though she were underwater, submerged in her bath as she sometimes did when she felt the weight of her worries too strongly. Surely he could not be asking her to be his bride .

Surely.

Surely .

“You!” Margaret screeched, descending to Eleanor with her clawed hands outstretched like the bird of prey Eleanor so often felt she resembled. “How could you?”

“Now, now,” the Duke said, taking a step forward. Eleanor could only blink, wishing this awful nightmare would end so she could wake up. “The lady has not answered me.”

“Of course she will not marry you, Your Grace!” Margaret shouted. “You would not want her to—if she has behaved in a way that is inappropriate for her station, you may be assured that she will be adequately punished, but you must not feel obliged to—”

Eleanor’s cheeks heated. Did Margaret somehow know about the kiss? And was a kiss alone enough to provoke a Duke into offering marriage?

“Are you implying that if I were rogue enough to seduce the daughter of a gentleman,

I should not offer her my hand in marriage?" the Duke asked blandly. "I must be mistaken."

For the first time in Eleanor's life, she saw her stepmother stumble over her words, physically recoiling from the idea, though Eleanor knew that was precisely what she had meant. She had meant that Eleanor's honor, her reputation, was not of enough value to warrant marriage.

That alone gave Eleanor the strength to raise her head. "Thank you for your flattering offer, Your Grace. I accept."

"No!" Isabel wailed, throwing herself at Eleanor and grabbing her hand. "You cannot! Think of what you are doing. You, a Duchess?"

Eleanor glanced at the Duke, remembering the way his mouth had felt against hers. The realization had been burning into her since the very first moment she'd seen him in this house, Scrunch only just safely in her pocket. The way he had caught her shoulders and looked down into her face, and the way his eyes had lit with the same realization that had plagued her. That their kiss, committed between strangers, had been between two people who would shortly come into direct contact.

But she had never supposed he would choose her.

Could it be because of their kiss?

No. She dismissed the idea immediately. A man of his caliber would have no shortage of ladies whom he could kiss, and to be sure, she doubted theirs had meant anything to him.

He approached, looking down into her face with a small, private smile that hinted at a great many thoughts behind his mask. Surely he could not be marrying her merely

because of a kiss no one else had witnessed. He'd almost directly informed Margaret that he had not seduced her, which implied he did not intend to use their kiss against her.

In which case, what could be his purpose? She could think of nothing.

"I am honored you accept," he said, still with that infuriatingly private smile, a certainty in his voice that suggested he had known she would not refuse. He reached for her hand, bringing it to his mouth. Her half-sisters and stepmother watched in open-mouthed dismay as he kissed her knuckles with rare grace, dropping her hand again once he had finished.

Eleanor snatched it back and cradled it against her chest, wishing she knew what to make of this turn of events. A Duchess; the thought didn't seem as though it could be real. Her, a Duchess. Eleanor Bennett, soon to become the Duchess of Ravenscroft, her husband the Duke of Ravenscroft. She would outrank almost everyone she knew. And she would finally escape her family.

That thought felt the most absurd of all. Even when she had dreamed of a way of escaping, she had always known how unlikely it was. How, even if she did marry, it would be to a husband who was under Margaret's thumb. If she escaped Margaret's household, she had always assumed it would be to a lesser position. After all, Margaret had never hoped to use Eleanor to elevate her position; she could not care less what happened to her.

Margaret drew herself up. "You are certain you wish to choose Miss Eleanor Bennett?" she asked, her voice frigid.

The Duke's smile tightened as he looked across at her. "I find your surprise deeply unflattering. Why is it so unlikely that I would choose the eldest daughter of my father's friend?"

“Why, nothing, save for that Isabel is more beautiful, and Annabel more accomplished, and both are younger.”

The Duke raised a brow as he glanced at Eleanor, and there was certainly nothing of the lover in his eyes now. “I have no need for beauty or accomplishments. Miss Bennett has everything I require in a wife. My decision is final, and as the lady has accepted my suit, I believe there is nothing more to say on the matter.”

Margaret opened and closed her mouth several times, but Eleanor knew when the lady had been beaten. After all, she had experienced the same many times prior. She found it oddly satisfying to see the Duke render her stepmother speechless with just a few words.

Perhaps Eleanor ought to feel bad for her half-sisters, all of whom had been passed over in an oddly callous way, or perhaps even for herself—he had not, after all, flattered her and called her beautiful or accomplished. All he had said was that she met his requirements for a wife. And she could not for the life of her think what that meant, unless he was under instructions to only pledge himself to the eldest Bennett sister.

“Of course, Your Grace,” Margaret said, curtsying. “I understand.”

“I shall make the arrangements,” he said, striding to the door. “A week hence, I think. I shall acquire the license.”

Margaret curtsied again, and Eleanor’s heart leaped. She would be free of this terrible household in a week’s time. For that, she would be prepared to put up with a great deal. Even, if necessary, the Duke of Ravenscroft. Though she enjoyed his put-down of her stepmother, she very much disliked his high-handed ways. If he had decided, for whatever reason that she could not discern, that he wished to marry her, he ought to have given her some indication in advance of his proposal—if one could call it

that.

Her irritation rose, but after a glance at Isabel, who looked prepared to strangle her, she forced it back.

Only one more week, then she would be free. For that, she would endure anything.

Much as Eleanor knew Margaret wanted to delay the wedding, or somehow prevent it from happening, there was nothing she could do. And so, reluctantly, Margaret bought Eleanor wedding clothes, warned her three daughters away from Eleanor, and instructed Eleanor not to forget the great kindnesses Margaret had shown her over the years.

If there were any, Eleanor would have made sure to recall them.

As it was, she played the part of a dutiful daughter, promising that she would do her best to convince the Duke to perhaps host them all, or throw a ball, or somehow do something to elevate the remaining Bennett sisters into the ton .

The day of her wedding dawned gray and inauspicious, and Eleanor adjusted the pale cream dress Margaret had supervised her purchasing. It was cream and simple, modest yet elegant. Everything the young bride of a Duke might be expected to wear.

Eleanor knew that if the eyes of the ton had not been on them, Margaret would never have been so forthcoming or generous. But given as though she had not wanted the marriage any more than her stepmother or half-sisters, she could do nothing other than reflect on what a relief it was that the wife of a Duke would be so much in the public eye, and that her family were obliged to behave.

Margaret tapped on the door, scowling when Eleanor opened it—though it was hardly her fault that she was dressed as a bride.

“Is it time?” Eleanor asked.

“The carriage has arrived.” Margaret’s scowl deepened. The Duke had made the arrangements, only leaving Margaret in charge of Eleanor’s wedding clothes; he had even gone so far as to provide a carriage. This, Eleanor suspected, was not out of the kindness of his heart, and she wondered if it was designed as a snub. Erasing Margaret’s presence at the wedding and in Eleanor’s life as much as could be reasonably done.

“I’m ready,” Eleanor said, collecting the silk flowers she intended to carry as a posy. Then, too, she would have something to do with her hands.

This was it. Her marriage day. And, to her relief, the Duke had not appeared to want to make the wedding common knowledge. As it was to be held in St George’s in Hanover Square, anyone could attend, but from what Eleanor could gather, very few knew about the connection at all, and aside from a very small announcement in the paper—made from what Eleanor suspected to be necessity rather than desire—there had been no other announcement.

She preferred it this way. But Margaret, who had wanted to benefit from the connection one way or the other, had bemoaned this several times.

The carriage ride to the church was near silent, and when they finally alighted outside the small church, Eleanor discovered that her knees felt somewhat weak.

“Remember your family,” Margaret hissed in her ear. “Just because the Duke chose you over your half-sisters does not give you the right to leave us behind. I took you in and raised you, though you are not my blood. You will repay me with gratitude.”

Eleanor steadied herself on the door, her stomach turning over. “I shall defer to my husband in all things.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

Eleanor shook her head but said nothing else as they entered the church. Very few people were in attendance, save for the bishop, her husband-to-be, a man she didn’t know, and her sisters. Her heart lurched again at the sight of the Duke, stony-faced and flint-eyed. She had not noticed, when they had been at the masquerade together, how very cold his eyes could be, or how hard his jaw looked. There, although she had seen the capacity for hardness on his face, he had also been engaged in softness. Teasing, mostly, and humor which lightened the expression in his eyes and the firm line of his mouth.

She ought not to look at his mouth.

Yet somehow, as she walked down the old stone floor toward him, her slippers near silent, she found she could not look at much else. They had not discussed the kiss. Perhaps they would not. Eleanor did not know what she would prefer, but she did know that if they were to discuss it, she would rather not do so with this version of her husband-to-be.

Already, she missed the other man, with his dancing eyes and compelling charm. This man appeared like a stranger to her, as though he had been dragged here against his will, even though he had chosen her.

What lay behind his decision, she could not even begin to think.

She finally reached his side and he looked down at her, eyes sharp as a hawk, a lock of brown hair falling across his forehead. She resisted the urge to brush it back. The fashion was no longer for long hair for men, but it appeared he cared as little for fashion as he did for the opinions of others.

With a gasp, she broke their eye contact and looked at the bishop, who was waiting

for the Duke's nod to begin. Once he gave it, the ceremony began, and Eleanor did her best to concentrate. Yet as the bishop droned on about the sanctity of marriage and desires of the flesh, she found her mind and gaze returning to the stern man beside her. He stood stiff-backed and tense, as though he was fighting the urge to turn and flee.

That makes the two of us .

He did not seem as though he would make for a very comfortable husband. But as soon as she thought that, she remembered the man he had been when he had taunted her into kissing him—and enjoying it.

There would be some perks to this marriage, she supposed.

He glanced down at her, a muscle flexing in his jaw, and his lips thinning further still. If anything, the look resembled a glare, though she hardly knew why; she was not the one who had initiated this entire ordeal.

Hmm, perhaps there will be no perks after all .

She pinched her inner wrist, the sting reminding her that she was, in fact, present. This was happening. She would shortly be a Duchess. Married to the Duke of Ravenscroft. A man who could not decide between being a lovable rogue and a stern, brooding Duke.

The bishop guided her through her vows, and she promised to love and obey the silent man beside her. Then he did the same, promising to love and cherish her, and all too soon, he had taken her hand in his and was slipping a ring onto her finger like a shackle. Binding her to him for the rest of time. When she raised her gaze to his face, she found his eyes on her. All the things she wanted to say rose to the very edge of her tongue, but she'd lived in silence for too long to break it now.

His mouth twisted as though he knew some of what she was thinking, but he merely bent and brushed his lips across hers. A chaste kiss, especially considering the one they had shared once, but still, at the feel of his mouth against hers, something in her loosened. Warmed. She raised a hand, placing it on his arm to steady herself, and when he pulled back, for a fraction of a second, she wanted to follow.

When he next looked at her, his eyes seemed very dark indeed.

He tucked her arm through his and led her back down the aisle, stopping when the man came out of the pews to speak with them. He looked much the same age as the Duke, though perhaps with a more friendly demeanor. That, she reflected, was not particularly difficult. If she had to guess, she would have said that this man and the Duke were the same age, but she hadn't known the Duke had friends.

Then again, by the way the Duke eyed this man, it hardly appeared as though they were.

“What in god's name are you doing here, Luke?” the Duke of Ravenscroft muttered, his voice low and a little dangerous. A shiver ran down Eleanor's spine.

“I saw the announcement in The Guardian and I thought I would come to congratulate you, old chap.” The man, Luke, clapped the Duke on the shoulder. “Finally marrying, eh? And you could not have found a more lovely bride.” He beamed at Eleanor, who gave a hesitant smile in return.

“I did not ask for your congratulations.”

“Perhaps not, Sebastian, but you didn't need to.”

“We are not friends.”

Luke's smile faltered a little. "Well... no," he admitted. "But we were, and we could be again."

"I suppose you expect me to invite you to the wedding breakfast?"

"Not at all, but I have already spoken to your lovely wife's mother, and she graciously extended me an invitation."

No doubt in case he might be tempted by one of her daughters, Eleanor thought cynically. Margaret never wasted an opportunity, no matter how fruitless it may be.

"To my house?" the Duke demanded. "She has a nerve... Very well, you may attend if you have a wish to, but do not speak with me, and it would be preferable if you stayed well out of my eyeline." He tugged Eleanor after him as they left the man behind and left the church to where a carriage was already waiting.

"Who was that?" Eleanor whispered.

"No one. A man I used to know, and whom I very much wish I did not still know."

"Why? Did he do something terrible?"

He handed her into the carriage and gave no answer. Fortunately, his home was not far away, and it only took them five minutes to ride there. Eleanor was not looking forward to that evening, when everyone would leave and it would be just them together in the house. Although if he had no particular desire to marry her, perhaps he would spend no time with her at all.

Until that evening.

She decided it would be better for her sanity if she did not think about that, especially

in the wake of their kiss.

They entered his extravagant townhouse and breached the dining room, where their sumptuous wedding breakfast had been laid out. She paused in the doorway, all thoughts of her new husband passing out of her head. This had all been put on for her . Whether or not the Duke liked her, and she very much doubted from his behavior that he did, he had still made this effort for her. As his wife. For the first time in her life, she would be the center of attention, and not because Margaret wanted to point out her faults.

The Duke glanced down at her face and grunted, taking his place at the head of the table. “The sooner this is over, the better,” he said under his breath, and Eleanor’s smile faded. Still, she soon perked herself up. This was a rare opportunity, and she would make the most of it.

CHAPTER FIVE

Sebastian watched Eleanor eat and talk with that good-for-nothing scoundrel Luke Thornton, the Earl of Greycliff. Yet another man who had left him, and who now sought to be in Sebastian's good books because he figured it suited him.

He swirled his wine broodingly. For all intents and purposes, the wedding had gone off without a hitch. But he felt as though he had been trapped against his will, bound to a woman whom he cared nothing for, and whose idea of a delightful time appeared to be a distinctly mediocre dinner.

Still, as he watched her, an idea occurred to him. Whenever she glanced at her stepmother, she shrank back, as though fearing cruelty. A shy thing, his new wife, and nervous around those she perceived as some kind of threat.

A timid creature like her would be easy to intimidate, no doubt. Easier still, he was sure, to convince to dislike him. Perhaps even loathe him. An unkind word or two, that was all it would take, and she would become dissatisfied in the marriage. Better still, she might even take it upon herself to annul it. If he were to keep himself from consummating the marriage, such a thing might be done with very little damage to either of them.

Well, perhaps some damage. But as he had no wish to marry anyone else at present, and he was certain that his name would carry Eleanor through any mishaps, he hardly saw any reason for concern.

Mr. Pratt had made his lamentable situation perfectly plain: he was not to end the

marriage under any circumstances, or that might make it fraud and him ineligible for his inheritance. But if his wife were to independently take those steps, that would not render his agreement void. He would have fulfilled his duty; it would not be his fault that his chosen bride disliked him so much she could not bear to remain married to him.

He noted the way Eleanor's head dipped when she spoke to her half-sister—the particularly nasty one. Isabel, perhaps? Yes, she certainly seemed timorous enough.

How fortunate that he had landed on both a wife that had not aspired to his title—thus meaning she would not feel any pang at relinquishing it to marry another—and that would submit so easily to his tormenting.

He pushed aside any qualms at the idea of frightening her enough to convince her to annul the marriage. It would not be so very difficult—a few cruelties on his end, enough unfair expectations on her as his wife, and she would be relieved to leave him. Then they could both enter a life they preferred. He would be free, and so would she.

“Your Grace?” the lady to his side asked, leaning in, her arms pressing her bosom together in a calculated, yet less-than-subtle way. “You appear deep in thought.”

Obnoxious family . He barely spared her a glance. “Indeed I am. Merely thinking how fortunate I am in my choice of bride.” He gave her a bland smile. This was the middle sister, he thought. Annalise? Annabel? Not that it mattered. “I believe it is time to leave. You must excuse me.” He pushed back his chair, and the entire room turned to look at him. Eleanor, engaged in conversation with Luke, glanced up in confusion.

“Come, wife,” he said brusquely. He may as well put his plan into action now, at least a little. Not too much in public—let them all think he was the contended groom—but

enough to make her fearful of what was to come. “Jarvis, have the carriage brought around. We leave for the country at once. Is everything packed?”

His butler materialized in front of him. “Yes, Your Grace.”

“Excellent. Busy day ahead. See that we depart without delay.”

Eleanor rose immediately and did not demur, barely even pausing in order to bid her family farewell before following him from the room. Well, that was hardly to be surprised about: she evidently had little love for the remainder of her family, and no doubt she thought they would be retiring to a life of marital bliss.

Young ladies, he supposed, were all of that sentimental, romantic inclination. He could see no reason why Eleanor would be very different. Yet something in her demeanor made him wonder if she would be this submissive to him; if she would see bedsport with him as a duty to be fulfilled, or if she would take as much pleasure from it as he might. After all, their shared kiss had taught him that she was responsive, and he was quite certain that if he were to make advances, she would enjoy them. Perhaps, even, she would enjoy them the same way he did.

He found himself hardening at the thought, and shut down any further considerations on the matter. Consummation was out of the question.

She kept her hands clasped before her as she accompanied him to the carriage, and good breeding intervened enough for him to help her inside before following. A footman closed the door, and they set off, rocking slightly as the carriage took them across the cobblestones and out of the city.

He had imagined his new wife would pepper him with questions, now that they were alone at last and for more than a fleeting moment. But she merely sat with her hands folded in her lap, her gaze fixed on the passing countryside, as distant as the fields

beyond the window. It was only an hour into their journey, as they approached his estate, that she raised her gaze to his and said, in a remarkably forthright way, “You know, this is the first time I have been outside London.”

He blinked. “Your father had no country estate?”

“Oh, he did, but he preferred to keep us girls, and first my mother, then Margaret—that is, the current Mrs. Bennett—elsewhere. We remained in London when he went into the country. I think my stepmother preferred it.”

Sebastian chose to give no answer, not wanting to encounter her talkativeness, even though he felt oddly surprised by the confession. Though, he supposed after meeting Mrs. Bennett, he could hardly be surprised at her preferring London, if indeed she did. He wondered if she still had access to the country estate, then banished the thought before it could take hold.

It did not matter what her life had been, or what experiences she had access to.

He maintained his silence until they finally reached Ravenscroft Manor, situated on the very outskirts of London. Close enough that from his home, he could travel easily into the capital for business. Although he had a townhouse, far more easily accessible for the Season, he preferred it at the manor house, where he felt the semblance of peace.

Or at least he had, until Eleanor had come along.

He helped her from the carriage and dropped her hand. “See to it the luggage is taken in,” he said, keeping his voice and words crisp as he strode to the house. The servants gathered outside, as was usual to greet a new lady of the house, but he waved them away. “Go back to your duties. There is no need for you to be here.”

The butler frowned. “But, Your Grace, is that not—”

“My wife? Certainly. But she does not need you to dance attendance on her.” He turned to glance at her, momentarily taken aback to find she was attempting to help the footmen with their luggage, only for them to wave her off with increasing desperation. He pinched his nose, irritated by the fact that he had not considered the response of his servants when devising his plan.

“Never mind that, Eleanor,” he called out to her, and she started, glancing at him with wide eyes as though the use of her Christian name was something to be shocked by. “Come inside now.”

She hurried to his side. “The footmen wouldn’t allow me to help.”

No, and he could hardly tell them not to bother when they had gathered outside with the singular intention of assisting him and welcoming both him and his new bride to the house. Yes, these particular footmen would be gone in a week, but if his eccentricities became too well known, he would have more difficulty hiring replacements.

“What a lovely home you have,” she said as they entered through the front door and into the large hallway. “How old is it? I feel as though there must be a wealth of history here.”

He glanced down at her head. Already, he had been far more dismissive of her than any new husband ought to be of his new wife, and she treated him as though all she wanted was to get to know him better.

Evidently, he would have to go further.

Firmly, he took her arm and brought her into the drawing room, shutting the door

behind them and pressing her up against the wall. Her gaze briefly traveled about the room before returning to his face.

“Now that we’re here, I should lay down the ground rules,” he muttered, not allowing his eyes to drop to her mouth, which parted in surprise. “You may not be altogether astonished to hear that I had no desire to marry, and I have no intention of allowing a wife to interfere with my routine life.”

“How so?” she whispered.

“I prefer a wife who will be seen and not heard ,” he said, doing his best to inject a cold, cruel edge into his voice. This was not his usual mode of operation, but better he established the situation now, even if the soft press of her body against his was bringing all sorts of other thoughts to the fore.

That night, the one he had no intention of bringing up again, and the way her inexperienced, eager mouth had felt against his. Though he had tried, he had not succeeded in quite dismissing the memory of it all.

“You must not talk during dinner,” he ordered, trying to find rules that might most provoke her to rebel against him. “You will not enter the library or the study and disturb me when I am working. And you are to have no guests. Do you understand me?”

She looked up at him, her breathing elevated and her eyes shining. He felt the warmth of her breath against his skin, but he did not pull back. If he did, she might not believe him to be cruel—and it was imperative that she believed it beyond anything. The faster she believed the worst about him, the more likely it was that she would agree to a separation and annulment.

“These are my terms,” he said, taking her chin and tilting her face to his. “And you

will obey me.”

Her tongue darted out across her bottom lip—and Christ, he was looking at her mouth. His fingers tightened on her chin, and her nostrils flared. “And if I do not, Your Grace?”

“Then I will make sure to punish you,” he growled. Her eyes widened. Finally. Believe that I am a brute. Hate me. Despise me. Yearn to live a life apart from me . “You will wish every day that you had not married me.”

“I—” She frowned. “You wish to spend no time with me?”

Be cruel . “Am I under any obligation to?” He released her chin and folded his arms, resting his shoulder against the door. “I made a promise that I would marry one of your father’s daughters—I have done so. My duty is complete. Now, do you understand the position you are in?”

“If my stepmother asks to visit, you will refuse her?”

He paused, surprised that she would ask the question. Of everyone he had thought she might wish to receive, her stepmother—that cruel woman—had not occurred to him as one of them. Then again, what did he know about the workings of a female mind? “I will refuse her,” he clamped. “No one connected to you may step foot in this house.”

“I see,” she said slowly, then nodded. “I understand.”

“You—” He scowled. At the very least, he had expected a modicum of weeping or a ploy to tug at his nonexistent heartstrings. He had assumed that she would be particularly displeased at the thought of having nothing and no one to speak to.

Perhaps he needed to go a step further.

What else could he do that might strike her as cruel? Something, moreover, that he would allow himself to do. There were some things that even a cad like him would not contemplate.

Eleanor met his gaze with a quizzical look of her own, her eyes appearing more gray than blue in the light. He noted the freckles across her nose and wished he had not. The first time he had seen her, in the mask, he had not known much about her face, save for the lushness of her full lips. Now, he knew far more than was good for him—the rosy glow that infused her cheeks when she looked at him; the delicate arch to her brows as she waited for him to speak.

When he had kissed her at the masquerade, his body had responded in a way it rarely did, especially with innocents like her. He hardly knew what had possessed him to kiss her then; seducing young ladies of virtue was not his usual play.

Yet he had. And now he had to live with the memory of what kissing his new wife felt like—and he would have to resist the urge to do it again.

Despite his best intentions, his gaze dropped to her mouth, which opened in surprise. Her lips appeared as a torment, a temptation he could not wholly deny. And, confound him, he wanted nothing more than to kiss her again. Even knowing, as he did, that he would need to chase her away—and that he could not consummate the marriage if he wished for it to be annulled.

Just then, something moved on her chest. A lump that traveled across her shoulder and down her arm, emerging at her elbow with a tiny pink nose and whiskers. Horrified, Sebastian leaped back, and Eleanor—damn her—laughed.

“What the devil is that?” he demanded.

“This is Scrunch , my pet mouse.”

Sebastian’s elbow caught the vase behind him and it wobbled on its pedestal. He turned, catching it with difficulty. Eleanor let out a tiny giggle, then clapped a hand over her mouth, as though she knew what a dangerous path she walked.

“What did you mean by bringing that thing to my house?” he snapped.

“I could hardly leave him behind.”

“What lady carries a mouse on her person!”

She curtsied. “The one you see before you.”

He pinched his nose. “Get out of my sight, or I will set the cats upon that mouse of yours. Ask the housekeeper for a tour of the house. She will show you to your rooms. Do not disturb me. Do not allow your pet to escape, or I will not be responsible for my actions. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

“And Eleanor?” He held her gaze as she turned to leave the room. “Do not try my patience. I can make life very unpleasant for you.”

Instead of cowering at the threat, as he had imagined, she merely inclined her head. “I have no doubt, Your Grace,” she said, but when she exited the room, she left behind the lingering sensation that she did not mean the things she said.

If he was going to scare her away from this marriage, he would have to do something more than he could ever have imagined here.

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CHAPTER SIX

“What can you tell me about His Grace?” Eleanor asked the housekeeper, whose name was Mrs. Hodge, she discovered. “Anything I ought to know?”

“Well now.” Mrs. Hodge gave her a frightened glance, as though the question came as an unwelcome surprise. And as though she mistrusted Eleanor—although that could not be right. What loyal retainer would mistrust their master’s chosen wife? Unless they, too, knew that he had not wished to marry her.

Eleanor wished she could understand what lay in the Duke’s head. But every attempt she made was met with resistance.

“He is... as any powerful man, Your Grace.”

“I fear I am acquainted with few.”

“Well...” Mrs. Hodge hesitated. “I expect you know him better than I do, Your Grace.”

Eleanor sucked her teeth in frustration, but it appeared Mrs. Hodge did not want to speak with her about the Duke, and she would not force the issue. Especially when the implication appeared to be that he had few good qualities. Otherwise, surely Mrs. Hodge would have led with them?

They passed through a drawing room, several small parlors, a music room, and a room named merely the blue room, which was where the late Duchess would write

her letters. Several times, Mrs. Hodge would try a room that appeared to be locked, and offered no explanation for the closed doors, and certainly did not reach for the keys at her waist to open them.

When they came to the third locked door at the end of the gallery upstairs, Eleanor finally summoned the courage to ask. “What lies beyond it?”

“That’s His Grace’s domain, Your Grace.”

The sound of her new title made her want to protest every time, to tell the housekeeper that there had been a mistake—that she could not be the new Duchess, that she was only an insignificant lady who had never been much to anyone.

But the ring on her finger told her that there had been no mistake. The Duke, too, appeared to have intended this, so who was she to argue?

“Do you not have the keys?” she asked.

“I do not, ma’am.” Mrs. Hodge turned abruptly on her heel and led the way to the east wing, where the bedchambers were located. “This is your bedchamber. Do not hesitate to ring when you would like to dress for dinner. Abigail shall come to assist you.”

“Thank you,” Eleanor said, stepping inside the lushly appointed bedchamber. Mrs. Hodge gave a thin smile, a curtsy, and left her to it. She perched on the edge of the large, four-poster bed. “Well,” she said to Scrunch, taking him from her pocket and holding him in her palm. His black eyes stared up at her. “I suppose this is not quite the marriage we had expected, but it is the marriage I have found for myself—or I suppose, the marriage that the Duke saw fit to give me—so I should make the best of it.”

Scrunch sniffed and licked his front paws, cleaning his face.

“You’re right, of course.” Eleanor held her hand against the covers and allowed him to scamper off. “Life here will be far easier than it ever was at home. The Duke has his rules, but if I am patient and treat him with kindness, I’m sure he will come to see me as a life partner and not as a burden.” She sighed. “Or at least, if not a life partner, then at the very least, he will grow partially fond of me. I am his wife, after all.”

Not that she seemed much of a wife. He had married her apparently under duress, and now that they were to share a life, he seemed to want nothing more to do with her. In fact, it sometimes seemed to her as though he wished to intimidate or scare her—although if he did, he would have to try significantly harder than that.

Still, at least she had a room to herself, a bedchamber so lush that she felt like a queen, in a manor house that carried its years in its walls. He would see away Margaret if she ever expressed a desire to visit, and would do so at very little inconvenience to herself. In fact, Eleanor would not even need to petition him; now she knew his intentions, she could deny Margaret and give her their deepest regrets. And, if Margaret should go behind her back and ask the Duke himself, he would be sure to give her a resounding no .

“I am deeply grateful, you know,” she said to Scrunch. “I never asked for this marriage, and to think that he is the same man who—” Well, the less she thought about that , the better. It seemed he had no intention of bringing up their kiss, and she was grateful for that, too. Although it did make her curious about what might come later this evening. She knew very little about what transpired between a husband and wife on the eve of their wedding, but she knew it would involve more kissing.

In fact, there had been a moment in the drawing room when she had thought he might kiss her again, though instead he had warned her that bad behavior would result in punishment. The way he’d said it, though, had made her want, for the first time in her

life, to be something other than good. To explore just what punishment under his hands would feel like.

She rather thought it might be delightful.

With a sigh, she rose from the bed and went to explore her rooms and the door set into the wall. Presumably, this was the door adjoining her chambers and the Duke's. Curious, she reached out a hand and turned the handle, but it wouldn't budge more than an inch in either direction.

Locked.

Intriguing. Yet another locked door.

The manor appeared to be full of them, and no one seemed to have the answers. At least, Mrs. Hodge didn't seem inclined to tell her, and it was entirely possible that the housekeeper didn't know herself. Although Eleanor thought that odd; her father's servants had been around almost as long as he had been, and they knew everything there was to know about the house. They had been fond of him, too, and though soon after his death Margaret had replaced them, Eleanor had fond memories of them affectionately feeding her snacks in the kitchen, or the maids brushing out her tangled hair and singing lullabies.

Not, of course, that the Duke would require similar treatment from his servants. But she did find it odd that Mrs. Hodge seemed to have no fondness for the Duke at all.

Abandoning the door, she hunted around the rest of the room, exploring the writing desk—which held paper and nothing else—and her closet. When she opened the door to the small room, she discovered it was near empty, save for a few dresses that appeared decades old. Perhaps they once belonged to the Duke's mother? She fingered the heavy brocade. Quite a different style, and oddly plain, despite the

material.

At a knock on the door, she spun to find a maid and a footman bringing her luggage to the room. At her stepmother's house, she'd never had a maid of her own, and so it didn't strike her as odd that she hadn't been assigned a lady's maid immediately. Perhaps the Duke would take time to interview new candidates. It hardly mattered to her; just having someone, even an ordinary maid, to help her dress, was more than she could have hoped for.

"Your luggage, ma'am," the maid said, bobbing a curtsy.

"Thank you. What's your name?"

"Abigail, ma'am."

"It's nice to meet you, Abigail. Thank you for bringing everything up for me." Eleanor hesitated. As a new Duchess, she knew that her rank had elevated far higher than it had ever been as a girl, but she had also been brought up almost as one of the servants since her father's death, and she felt more in common with them than the other ladies of the ton. After a second's deliberation, she hurried to help with the clothes in the trunk. "Here," she said. "Let me."

"Oh no, Your Grace. That wouldn't be proper at all."

Eleanor smiled. "Well, I don't care much for proper, and I have quite a few clothes that must be folded and put away. Let me help you; I have nothing else to do."

Abigail gave her a dubious glance, but evidently, she did not have it within herself to argue with a Duchess, no matter how inappropriate she might feel Eleanor's helping her was. So, she relented.

“What do you think I should wear for dinner?” she mused, examining her dresses with a critical eye. None were especially beautiful—she supposed she ought to have some commissioned for her—but they were all perfectly serviceable.

And perhaps the Duke was expecting her to look her best for their first dinner together.

Her stomach flipped at the thought. There, she could begin her task of encouraging him to think well of her, and they would truly begin their marriage. His rule of silence at the dinner table struck her as odd, but she wasn’t well-versed in the upper echelons of society, so perhaps it was routine. Whenever Margaret had hosted large dinner parties, Eleanor had been required to keep out of the way.

And, if she had been present, she had been expected to keep quiet. Perhaps that was merely how things were done.

Either way, she would do her best to please the Duke and keep to his rules of silence. But at the very least, she would do her best to appear to advantage; that, along with her obedience to his rules, may be enough to win him over.

She selected perhaps the nicest of her gowns and placed it to one side. Now, all she had to do was await dinner with her new husband.

Sebastian swirled the ruby liquid in his glass as he contemplated the long table, laid out with all his best silverware for the new Duchess. He ought to have told the staff to dispense with the formalities, but he didn’t have the energy for the quizzical looks they would give him. Especially as he would have to do it all over again for the next set. It hardly seemed worth the bother.

The chair opposite, where his bride would sit, remained conspicuously empty.

He suspected that was due to the quality of the dresses he had left in her room; he had them brought out of the attics especially for her. No doubt she was horrified at the offerings. Perhaps even too embarrassed to come down for dinner.

That would save him an awkward meal, at least. And further confirm, in her mind, that they were unsuitable together. A little more of this, and he was certain she would flee him for his neglect and cruelty, and he would be free of this farce of a marriage.

Just then, the door opened.

But instead of the anger he had expected to be greeted with, Eleanor entered with a sunny smile as she took her place at the other end of the table. And instead of one of the gowns he had provided for her, she wore something distinctly flattering. The dress clung softly to her curves, a peach that shimmered in the candlelight and highlighted the rich brown of her hair, which curled becomingly around her face.

Even at the masquerade, where he had been instantly attracted to her curves and delicate features, she had not looked better than she did then.

“Eleanor —” he croaked, clearing his throat as she looked at him in surprise. In the light, her mouth looked more lush than ever, her bottom lip soft and red. He blinked the thought away. “How did you find your room?”

Her brows creased, but she remained silent.

“...Did you find everything you... needed ?” he pressed, wanting to hear her acknowledgement of the hideous gowns he had provided, and to perhaps offer some justification for not wearing them. Instead, she smiled at the footman pouring her some wine, and took a sip.

At Sebastian’s clear irritation, she tilted her head, as though she could not understand

why a man might be exasperated at his wife not so much as answering a basic question.

“When I ask you a question,” he commanded, his voice colder than he might have intended it to be under ordinary circumstances, “I require an answer.”

Her lips puckered, but she finally answered. “You instructed me to be silent during dinner, Your Grace.”

Sebastian blinked. He’d forgotten he’d given her that ridiculous rule, and the fact that she had remembered only brought more chagrin. She appeared happy enough to obey him, and he had not so much as considered the request, given it was so outrageous.

“Well...” he coughed again, knowing he needed to speak, and having nothing of consequence to say that would justify his position, he added, “you may answer me, of course. I just do not wish for you to address me with idle remarks.” Even though he had been doing precisely that.

She bowed her head. “Of course, Your Grace.” She fell silent once more.

“Tell me how you find the accommodations,” he almost barked.

“The room is lovely. There are some dresses there, perhaps your mother’s? I can have them put into storage if that would suit you?” She began piling food on her plate. “I am happy to do whatever will suit you best, Your Grace.”

“I—” How had such a small chit of a girl rendered him so speechless? “...And what if I would wish for you to wear those dresses?”

She frowned. “Do they not belong to your mother?”

To be frank, he did not know to whom they belonged; he had found them in the attics and ordered them to be taken to her rooms. They held no sentimental value to him whatsoever. “I do not believe so,” he said at last.

“Well, if you require me to wear them, I will do so.” She took a bite of meat and chewed, and he could not help himself watching the progress of her slim neck as she swallowed. “Does that please you, Your Grace?”

Damn the girl . She acted as though he asked nothing more than he had every right to, despite the fact that he knew his request to be unreasonable in the extreme.

“What do you hope to get from this marriage?” he demanded.

“I hope that I can please you enough that you will come to think well of me, despite knowing me very little before we married.” Her expression remained serene. “Now we are both in this position, it behooves us to do the best we can and make the most of the situation.”

She intended to make the best of the situation. To please him.

How could she be so optimistic about such an aim when he had been downright dismissive of her? She still wished for his good opinion, when heaven knew that opinion was worth nothing.

How on earth could he quell her hopes and make her want to annul the marriage when this was her mindset? Determined to make the marriage work at all costs, presumably up to and including her own happiness.

Perhaps he had chosen wrong, after all. Perhaps choosing the browbeaten daughter, the one whom he had presumed to be timid, had been a mistake. If she had been accustomed to misery for so long, then it made sense that she might be prepared to

endure more of it for the sake of peace.

If he was to succeed at his aims, he could not allow her that peace.

He stood abruptly. “I find myself no longer hungry. You may retire when you finish eating. I have work to be doing.” Ignoring the surprise—and could that be hurt?—in her eyes, he strode from the room.

There had to be a way to persuade her to leave him. There had to be. And if there was, by God, he would find it if it was the last thing he did.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Eleanor stared at her plate, wondering what she had done wrong to make the Duke storm out of the room like that. He had looked angry, but she had done as he requested; she had not spoken until he had addressed her directly, and she had agreed to wear those old clothes.

Perhaps he preferred the style.

They were too old to have belonged to a former lover, and the idea that they might belong to his mother made her uncomfortable, but she had not allowed her discomfort to show.

And yet, he had been so displeased that he had left the room with no excuse.

She massaged her temples. Tomorrow, she would merely have to do better. There had to be some things the Duke liked. If she found them and used them to her advantage, she was certain he would warm to her.

What man did not want a wife, once he had gone through the trouble of marrying her, who went out of her way to please him?

She ate in silence, and when she had finished, went to the library to choose a book, and ascended the large stairwell in silence to find her bedchamber. Not once did it occur to her that they would, as husband and wife, engage in the usual social norms of retiring to the drawing room. After all, when she had been living with Margaret, she had been expected to retire after dinner. This hardly seemed so out of the

ordinary.

And so, as she rang for Abigail to help her change, she merely reflected about the night ahead. Already, it had gotten late, and she looked at the small carriage clock on the mantelpiece, marveling at its beauty. The fire had slumped into embers, and she marveled at that, too. Even in winter, Margaret rarely allowed her a fire in her room; she considered it a waste of coal. But here, even though the worst of the year's chill had passed, someone had lit a fire to keep her warm.

Yes, this life would not be so very bad, after all.

For some time, she occupied herself with her book by the fire, yawning occasionally, until she heard a creak from next door. Immediately, a shiver ran through her body. She did not know precisely what occurred on wedding nights, but she supposed this was the moment she would find out.

For better or worse.

Next door, the footsteps lingered, then stopped. Silence. Eleanor held her breath, listening, then slid from the chair. The carpet felt soft underneath her bare feet. She glanced at the large bed, now appearing positively intimidating in the dark, before her gaze fixed on the adjoining door between their two quarters.

She could hear nothing from the Duke's room.

Curiosity won out.

As quietly as she could, she padded across to the door, then clasped the door handle. Earlier, it had been locked, and she still half expected it to be as she turned. But, to her surprise, the door swung open, and she stumbled into the Duke's bedchamber.

At first glance, it appeared much the same as hers, if outfitted in a more masculine sense, the hangings around the bed a deep velvety green. He had lit a lamp that illuminated the wallpaper and, crucially, the Duke himself. Candlelight roved over the dips and lines of his bare chest, and for the longest moment, Eleanor felt unable to move. A shirt lay on the chair beside him, and his breeches were slung low on his hips.

Skin.

So much skin .

In the low lighting, his torso looked soft and inviting, but there were ridges of muscle there that she was utterly unfamiliar with. Two lines, on a slight diagonal, pointed down past the top of his breeches and below, and she wondered with a fierce, heady wanting, what lay underneath.

There was so much to a man's body she had yet to discover.

Her gaze finally roved its way past his broad shoulders and the strong lines of his neck to his face. His hair hung down to his shoulders, no longer tied back, and his square jawline, paired with his high cheekbones and the slight scar through one brow, gave him a fearsome look. And the way he glowered at her, brows low over his piercing gray eyes, only added to the effect.

Yes, he was a handsome man, but the sight of his glare brought back her sense of propriety and place back to the fore.

She jumped back, colliding with the doorframe. "Y-your Grace," she stuttered.

"And what, precisely, do you think you are doing in my bedchamber?" he demanded, stepping closer until she could have reached out and touched him—if she were not

afraid that her fingertips against his skin might scorch them both.

“I—”

“Did I give you leave to be here?”

Her face burned, and she blinked past the embarrassment and shame. “No.”

“Then get out.” Something shifted in his eyes, like burning coals, and she thought she saw something there that twisted her stomach—something like hunger—but she backed away before she could refine too much upon it. Still mumbling excuses, she escaped through the door into her own rooms. The last thing she saw of the Duke before the door slammed shut behind her was the fierce anger on his face.

The lock clicked, and she released a long breath.

Well, she supposed that answered a number of her questions. Primarily, whether they would be consummating the marriage that day. And, more particularly, what a man looked like without his shirt.

She closed her eyes as she pictured him again. Gilded, draped all in gold and shadow, every crevice and dip accentuated. She had not known men could be so hard, so angled; when she looked at her own body in the mirror, she saw only softness and curves.

She wondered what it would have been like to touch him. To smooth her palm over the hard bulges of muscle. Would his skin feel rough or smooth? It struck her that a man of such a build would be velvet over iron.

The thought brought an unfamiliar hunger to her belly, and she pressed a hand there, trying to understand her reaction and what on earth it could possibly mean.

Sebastian lay in bed, glowering at the darkened, invisible ceiling above. Of all the stupid, nonsensical things for her to do, walking in on him when he was changing had to have been one of the worst. Her, with her hair unbound over her shoulders, the tips of her nipples visible through the thin silk of her nightgown, the material catching on the curve of her hip when she moved.

She had been a gift, deliciously packaged for him—one he had known beyond all doubt that he would enjoy.

And he, angry after dinner and the difficulty he was having in enacting his plans, had been of a mind to take her anyway. To push her against the wall and silence that infuriating mouth with his. To make her submit, to beg for him.

All things she would have granted him, he already knew. She had a passive spirit, if a passionate one. If he commanded, she would yield, and the thought made him near groan in the darkness.

What folly it was to want her when she was the last woman in the world whom he could have!

And how close he had been to touching her.

One day into this marriage, and he was already certain it would be the death of him.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Sebastian sipped his brandy as he cast a gaze over the correspondence on his desk. Letters from tenants, from debtors, invitations from a large collection of people wanting to get in with the new Duke. And, of course, letters from several members of the ton congratulating him on a marriage he had never wanted.

He consigned those letters immediately to the fire.

In the past few days, he had gone out of his way to avoid Eleanor. The only time he saw her was for dinner every evening, during which she wore one of her own gowns. He could have demanded that she wear one of the ones he provided, but he suspected she would do so without demur, and that was not the response he wanted, nor the outcome he desired.

In truth, he had not wholly decided precisely what to do about her. There were options, and he knew he ought to get about making her marriage unpleasant enough to leave. But his attention had been entirely focused elsewhere. Specifically, on the news he had been anticipating for several days now.

As though on cue, he heard a knock on his study door. He put his brandy down. “Come in.”

“Correspondence,” the messenger said as he entered the room. He held a letter in his hand, and Sebastian took it with unbecoming eagerness. “I’m sorry I came to you directly, Your Grace, but when I knocked, there was no answer, and the butler—”

“Think nothing of it,” Sebastian said curtly. Every other Sunday of the month, he replaced the entirety of his staff. There would be none of the sentimentality around him that he saw in other households, and certainly no chance for someone else to get close to him and ultimately leave.

Of course, that did on occasion put him out, but the sacrifice was more than worth it.

“Yes, Your Grace.” The messenger gave a clumsy bow, sandy hair falling into his eyes, and made his escape. Sebastian sat back down and tore the letter open, scanning its contents. Yes: he was correct. The inheritance had been released on the point of his marriage, and Sebastian might make withdrawals as he pleased. The caveat being, of course, that his marriage did not prove to be a farce. Pratt mentioned that the adjudicators of the Will would be watching hawkishly to ensure that the marriage was not a premeditated way for him to exploit the conditions of the clause.

For if they suspect foul play, you may be sure they will revoke the release of the funds, and you will lose the inheritance; moreover, it will be incumbent on you to repay any withdrawals you might have made in this period .

Scowling, Sebastian tossed the letter back onto his desk, where it lay amongst the other invitations to balls and routs.

How displeasing.

No doubt he would be required to appear in public with her, and treat her as though she was someone close to his heart, not merely a means to his end. An objectionable thought, particularly when he wanted nothing more than to keep his distance from her.

He drew a page of blank paper closer and dipped his pen into the ink. If he was going to enact his plans properly, he would have to make a list of all possible strategies and

work through them one at a time.

Unusually for Eleanor, she found herself awoken early by a disturbance downstairs. For the first time in her life, she had grown accustomed to sleeping in, and not getting up with the sunrise to darn some stockings, or assist in some other drudgery task her stepmother had concocted for her.

The reality of her situation was that now she was a Duchess, she had more time in the day than she knew what to do with, yet no one to spend it with. At her stepmother's house, she had at least been on familiar terms with the servants; she spent more time with them than with anyone else. But here, the servants seemed nervous to speak with her, and certainly did not treat her—or anyone else—with the affection she had come to expect from retainers.

Rolling out of bed, she rang the bell and waited for Abigail to come and assist her. After several minutes, she rang again, then selected her dress. After waiting still a little while longer, she rang one more time, and eventually, the door opened and a maid entered.

“I—I apologize, Your Grace,” she stammered, and Eleanor stared at her.

She had spent five days in this house now. Five days of getting to know Abigail, who was the closest person she had to a friend. And now a new face looked into hers, freckled and shy.

“Where is Abigail?” she asked, brows knitting.

“Ah.” The girl looked confused and a little upset. “I’m sorry, Your Grace. She must have been one of the other servants.”

“What do you mean, the other servants?”

“The ones that was let go.”

“All of them?”

“Well, I think so, ma’am. To be sure, there’s a new butler, and he’s learning the way of doing things. The old butler has stuck around for that, ma’am, but most everyone else has gone already.”

“Already,” Eleanor repeated, glancing at her carriage clock. It was barely eight in the morning. “Why?”

“I don’t know, Your Grace. I saw an advertisement in the paper and I answered it.” She bobbed a curtsy. “Was there something you wanted me for?”

“Yes. Dress me. I must see His Grace.”

“Yes, ma’am.” The new girl did as she was told, and although she did not perform her duties quite as well as Abigail had—the two had worked out a system in the time they had come to know each other—she did a good job, and Eleanor thanked her briefly as she left the room. Deciding a confrontation would be better on a full stomach, she went to the breakfast room, where she found a letter resting by her place.

My dearest and newest friend,

Imagine my shock when I discovered the lady I had spoken to at the masquerade had only gone and married a Duke! You have my congratulations—and of course, my admiration, because you did not mention that you had such a fine match brewing when last we met.

Do come and call on me. I know my mother would be positively delighted to

welcome you to the house, in the vain hopes it will make my big mouth more palatable to this Season's eligible bachelors. I doubt even your rank and influence can compel a man who prefers a silent wife to marry me. Still, one must have hope. Hope that such men do not exist at all—or if they do, that they'll have the good sense to avoid me entirely. Because while I can be silent when absolutely necessary, I much prefer not to be. And I don't think I could endure a lifetime of quiet submission. Not without going mad. Or worse—boring myself to death.

But I digress. I hope I am not beneath your notice now, although I am certain that cannot be the case—when we met, you impressed upon me the purest sensation of your honor and kindness. I anticipate your answering letter with indecent excitement, my dear friend.

Yours,

Olivia Ashby

Eleanor could not help her smile at the rushed, energetic letter, filled far more with affection than decorum. A good thing the Duke had not been compelled to offer her his hand in marriage; that would not have made for a good match.

Thinking of the Duke made her wonder again about the change in staff. Surely not all of them could have offended him. What would he even have to do with Abigail? Aside from acting as Eleanor's personal maid, she would have changed and tidied the bedchambers and kept entirely out of sight.

It transpired Eleanor had the appetite to eat very little, and after a slice of dry toast, she pushed back her chair and left the room. As she went, she saw so many new faces as to disorient her, and when she finally reached the study, she barged inside without so much as knocking.

“Your Grace,” she began, and stopped at the sight of the Duke behind the desk. He glowered down at a sheet of paper before him, ink staining his fingers, and brandy in a glass—at this hour in the morning—to one side.

All around lay evidence of his bachelor behavior. Nothing could more clearly have signaled that he lived life as a rake, caring about nothing and no one but his comfort. Discarded clothes lay across clothes, coats tossed off and cravats thrown against cushions, the starched white vivid against the dark material of his woolen carpets. Then there were the drink decanters, many empty, that littered every available surface. Trays of partially eaten food lay piled on the other armchair, rendering both useless for their intended purpose.

Irresponsible. And, given the state of the place, he had evidently not allowed servants to enter and clean. No doubt she would have to do so at some point—and brave his inevitable wrath. But she would prefer that to knowing he spent his days in squalor.

“Your Grace,” she repeated, turning her attention back to him.

He cocked a brow. “I don’t recall giving you permission to enter my private space.”

Her face heated as she recalled the last time she had done that. His half-naked form, and the way he had loomed over her. Perhaps he had intended to intimidate her, but the difference in size between them had inspired very different emotions.

Ever since then, the adjoining door between their chambers had remained locked.

“I apologize, Your Grace,” she mumbled, ducking her head. “I merely came to inquire about the servants.”

“What of them?”

“They appear to have been... replaced?”

“Indeed.”

“I wondered at the necessity. My maid—”

“She has gone,” he interrupted, setting his pen down. “They have all been dismissed. You do not need to know why.”

Eleanor bit her lip. No doubt he wanted her to bow to his word and accept it at face value, and she very much wanted to, but Abigail had been the closest thing to an ally in this strange house with her mercurial husband.

“I appreciate you must have your reasons,” she said as calmly as she dared. “And I do not mean to imply that they are unjustified.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” he said with some irony.

“However, Your Grace, I must ask that you do not dismiss my personal maid, Abigail. She has served me well, and I would prefer to keep her over this new girl.” She ducked her head, doing her best to appear humble. Anything that would convince him.

She heard his chair scrape back, and footsteps approach. Her entire body tensed as his finger came to her chin and tilted her face to his. “You are very daring, wife,” he murmured, but although his tone was almost tender, the light in his eyes was not. The sight of it both terrified and excited her. “Do you mean to ask me to recant my word? To fire a girl I have just hired so I can bring back the old?”

“Merely retain Abigail as well,” Eleanor said.

“And if I do not?”

“I’ll do anything.”

“Anything?” His brows rose, finger still under her chin. “That encompasses a great many things. Will you not barge into my study at all hours of the day? Will you restrain your desire to ask me about my choices, even if they make no sense to you?” His thumb came to pinch her chin, none too gently, and as she stared up at the Duke, she saw his expression harden. “My motivations are none of your concern, and your audaciousness astonishes me. Did I not lay down the rules?”

In her urgency and confusion, she had forgotten about his rules. She closed her eyes, trying her best to suppress the anticipation buzzing in her stomach at the thought of what his punishment might entail. That question had been occupying her thoughts far more than it ought to have been. “I understand. You will have to punish me. I am very sorry.”

“Are you?” He brought a hand into her hair and tugged, firmly enough that it pinched and her eyes watered. And although she suspected it was deeply wrong—in simply every regard—something in her stirred in response to the vehemence. Something hot and aching in her lower stomach, that although she hated to admit, she knew was desire. “Are you sorry, Eleanor? Or are you simply determined to defy me?” When she continued to keep her eyes closed, ashamed at how she felt, and wanting him simultaneously to do more—do worse—he shook her. “Look at me.”

Reluctantly, she opened her eyes and met his, and watched his expression change as he read what there was to see in her face. She had not known until now that she was so very different from other well-bred, polished, proper young ladies, but there was no hiding it now. She craved the roughness of his touch, for him to lay down the law and force her to submit.

She wanted to know how his punishment would feel against her skin. The harshness of his palm against hers, or perhaps even worse. Pain under his direction seemed like a distinctly appealing prospect, more so than she could ever have imagined before meeting him.

He released her and stepped back as though she had burned him. But although his eyes were wide and horrified—she could clearly read the terror—she thought she saw a flash of something else there. Answering heat that scorched through her, sending the fluttering ache in her lower belly lower still. A hot, liquid feeling.

“We are to attend societal functions together,” he said tightly, as though every word cost him. “Balls and routs and the like. We must be seen together, and you must be everything a Duchess is supposed to be. Do you understand me?”

Eleanor’s knees felt as though they might buckle. “Yes, Your Grace.”

“Do not prove a disappointment.” He returned to his desk and sat as though he wished not to be standing a moment longer. “Leave me.” As she reached the door, he added, “And Eleanor?”

“Yes?”

“In public, you may call me Ravenscroft. Let us pretend we enjoy a modicum of intimacy.” He gave a thin smile. “Practice the notion at dinner.”

Dinner, where his request for silence went almost unacknowledged. “Yes, Y—Ravenscroft.”

“Good.” He glanced down at the paper before him, frowning. “One more thing. If you wish to retain your maid, you will have to approach her yourself. I will next change the staff in two weeks. If she still pleases you by then, I suppose you may keep her

around longer.” He scratched another note on the parchment and said, as though an afterthought, “If you have not displeased me in that time.”

Eleanor almost asked whether, by coming in here, she had displeased him—or even asked why he chose to change his staff every two weeks when it was surely more of a hassle than anything. But she already knew the Duke—no, Ravenscroft—well enough to know such a question would not be received well. So, she bobbed a curtsy he didn’t see and closed the door after her.

Once she was alone in the corridor, she pressed a hand to her stomach. Heavens, what had that been? Why did she still feel hot all over, and as though she needed something but did not know what? Her body was not her own, or at least, it was not any version of herself that she recognized.

But at least she had Olivia’s friendship. And if she could retrieve Abigail, that would be two people on her side; two more than she’d ever had before. With their help, she was certain she could find a way of winning the Duke over and making him hers once and for all.

CHAPTER NINE

Eleanor did not usually delight in misbehaving, or misinterpreting instructions, but when Ravenscroft had forbidden any of her friends or family from visiting them, he had not explicitly stated that she could not visit them in turn. Thus, the day after she had located Abigail and brought her back to the manor house—with the promise of compensation she would pay through her pin money if necessary—she left to visit Olivia.

If nothing else, she wished for a friend to confide in about this entire situation—and the mess that she had made of it all.

“Ella!” Olivia’s face beamed past her butler’s arm as Eleanor was admitted to the house. “May I still call you Ella? It is such a delightful name, and so easy on the tongue. I’m so glad you have come! Mama said it was awfully audacious of me to write to you on so little an acquaintance, but I just knew you were like me and wishful of a friend. That will do, Gregory,” she added to the butler. “I will take Her Grace to the drawing room.”

“Of course, Miss.” The butler inclined his head and creaked away to do his duties elsewhere.

“He’s an old bore, but he’s been in the family forever,” Olivia whispered. “While we were in America, he took care of the house here, and I believe he came to half believe it was his, although you may be sure he would never admit to such a thing on the rack. But enough about me! You must tell me a little more about yourself. You are now a Duchess!”

“...Yes,” Eleanor said after a second where she tried to order her thoughts. They entered a well-appointed, bright drawing room. To her relief, she found no one else there. “I am very fortunate in a great many ways.”

“You should just hear the way your stepmother talks about you now.” Olivia plonked herself on the sofa with a decided lack of grace. “If she is to be believed, you have been close ever since she married your father, and she is expecting an invitation to the Duke’s house the moment you have emerged from your wedded bliss.” Olivia grinned as she poured them both some tea. “Of course, I didn’t believe a word of it. The Duke picked you, so he cannot have terrible taste, and I simply cannot imagine he wants that woman hanging around him. No doubt she has already decided which parts of his fortune she will use for herself.”

Eleanor allowed herself a grim smile. That was just like Margaret. And something about Olivia’s bright prattling made her feel more at ease than she had almost anywhere else in the world. She could not confide about the alarming desires she had experienced with the Duke during their recent encounters, but she could confide some things, she decided.

“Ravenscroft has said he will not allow her to visit,” she said. “Or anyone, in fact.”

“The brute!”

“No, I believe it is common in marriages of this sort. We did not know each other before we married, you know. It was entirely a match made for convenience. I believe he was under some obligation to marry one of my father’s daughters.”

“Well, at least he showed some good sense choosing you, but Ella, you must not believe that cutting a wife off from her friends is acceptable behavior for any man.”

“Is it not?” Eleanor raised her brows. “I thought it was perfectly normal for

gentlemen to have very particular notions about what they want from their wives.”

“Oh, perhaps in terms of temperament. And no doubt he would not want a scandalous wife—I suppose I should never marry a Duke, for I believe I am born for scandal.” She waved a dismissive hand. “But that is neither here nor there. Are you telling me he has been laying down the law?”

“Why does this surprise you?”

“Why, merely because no wife should put up with such a thing! And you, too, should not. Do you wish to be trapped in a miserable marriage for the rest of your life? I know many a lady in that situation, and be assured, it is not very pleasant.” Olivia put her teacup back on her saucer with deliberation. “If he does not already like you, and I cannot see why he could not—but let us follow the thought to its conclusion—then you must make him fall in love with you.”

Eleanor laughed, despite herself. “What a ridiculous thing to say! As though I have the power for that.”

“Of course you do! All you need do is seduce him.”

“Oh?” She raised her brows, uncomfortably aware of the warmth in her body at the prospect. “You say that as though you have experience in this matter.”

“Things are different in America.”

“Not that different, I fancy.”

“No,” Olivia admitted with a dimpled smile. “Not that different. And perhaps I do not have personal experience, but can any lady say she has gone through a London Season without being witness to at least one assignation?”

Eleanor glanced down at her hands. “My experience with the ton is not that extensive, I’m afraid,” she said, neglecting to mention that the only assignation she had been even partially witness to had been her own. And that one she had been decidedly more than witness to.

And, mortifyingly, it had been with her own husband. One who seemed disinterested in pursuing things further.

“The issue is,” she said, looking back up into Olivia’s sympathetic face, “I simply don’t think I can seduce him.”

“Oh, dearest, is that all ?” Olivia giggled. “I am certain you can! Listen carefully, and we shall go over all the steps.”

Sebastian stared moodily into the bottom of his brandy tumbler, the remnants of the amber liquid glinting in the dim light. All around him, smoke hung heavy in the air, and drunken men gambled their fortunes away on the toss of a dice.

Usually, when he came here, he felt a modicum of relief, a sense of being a man in a man’s world, and one he had occupied for many years. But today, he felt nothing more than irritated. Here he was, sitting in an armchair that was not his own, drinking alcohol that he had not procured, and all with the intention of avoiding his wife.

After she had disregarded his instructions and barged into his study the previous day, he had known how futile it would be to expect to avoid her entirely in his own house. After all, now she lived there too, it was inevitable they would occupy the same space.

At least he had come here for dinner and would not see her this evening at all. But even that posed no relief. One day, he would have to return. He would have to see her again, and all the desire he had pent up would come bubbling to the fore. How absurd

that he could be so attracted to such a shy mouse of a girl.

Except it was more than that. It had been the way she'd responded to his touch. He knew without a doubt that if he had demanded something of her, she would have yielded, and in the most delicious way. Unlike most ladies of his acquaintance, she would understand that pain only added to the edge of pleasure. And he, a man well-versed in such things, could be the one to show her.

A foolish, idle thought that deserved to be exterminated. Yet it lived on in his mind anyway, tormenting him with thoughts of what could never be.

He held out his glass for a refill, then went to join a table. Faro, perhaps, if the play went deep enough. He needed a distraction. And his wife had at least provided him with the fortune left to him; what use was that if he did not spend it?

By the time he arose again, his pockets were considerably heavier, and he was congratulating himself on a night well spent when a hand shot out to clasp his arm.

"Ravenscroft," an irritatingly familiar voice chirped. "I had not thought to see you here so soon after your marriage. Come, drink with me!"

Sebastian shrugged him off. "Enough. Leave me be." He blinked at Luke, the other man coming into focus. More irritation swamped him. Of all people, Luke ought to know that Sebastian did not engage in such frivolous friendships, especially when one's connection to one's so-called friend had already been severed. "I have nothing to say to you."

"Ah, but I have plenty to say to you. You may wish me to the devil, but he and I are already well-acquainted." He grinned, no doubt expecting Sebastian to return the expression, not faltering in the slightest when Sebastian did no such thing. "Dinner! We must dine together. What do you say to that?"

“No.” Sebastian turned to leave.

“Why, busy with other invitations?” Luke’s voice was abruptly wry. “Don’t tell me you’ve cultivated friendships elsewhere?” He looked pointedly about Sebastian, but Sebastian had not come with anyone, and he had no one by his side. “I won’t let you push me away.”

“I needed to do nothing,” Sebastian reminded him, the throbbing in his head increasing. Perhaps they had once been close, but that was before he knew the dangers of such things. “You were the one who left, and now I have nothing to say to you.”

“I’m afraid that simply isn’t a good enough reason to decline a meal with me.”

“My reason is that I don’t wish to.”

“Unfortunately, I do,” Luke said, following him outside into the spitting rain. “I will find a way to dine with you, old friend. We will see each other again, and one way or another, we will have a drink like old times.”

Sebastian waved a hand as he stumbled to his carriage, and to his relief, Luke made no attempt to follow him further. As the coach rumbled back toward Ravenscroft Manor, he came to the horrifying realization that his carefully constructed life was falling into disarray.

First the business of his wife, and the marriage that already felt as though it had failed spectacularly. Every assumption he’d made about the quality of his wife and the inevitable outcome of the marriage had proven false. And now this. Luke, a friend who had abandoned him for the West Indies shortly after his parents died, when he was still young and trying to find his way in the world.

Luke, a friend on whom he had once been certain he could depend. Back in London, back in his life, and determined to become a permanent fixture.

Sebastian groaned, massaging his temples and wishing the darkened interior of the carriage would stop spinning. He knew better than to close control of the reins of his life now, especially when this period of his existence left him increasingly open to vulnerability. He could not afford to be vulnerable, not ever but especially not now ; with vulnerability inevitably came disaster and disappointment, and heartache he could not stomach when he had finally gotten to a point where he had everything he had been wishing for.

At least everything, if one did not include the wife.

He rather wished he could not include the wife.

He glanced out of the window at the passing streets and frowned at the sight of unfamiliar houses. This was not a part of London he recognized.

“Driver!” he called, banging the roof of the carriage. “Where the devil do you think you’re going? I said to take me back to the manor.”

“Right you are, guv,” the voice came back. “Just this way. A little farther.”

Sebastian pinched his nose, a little of his inebriation receding as frustration replaced it. Finding good coachmen to replace the old was beginning to prove impossible; this man evidently did not deserve the wage he was being paid. Yet, what else could Sebastian do? He refused to hire someone who had already worked in the position, yet for some reason, he had caved to Eleanor’s request to bring back her maid. Foolish, foolish choice. Inanity at its finest.

He gritted his teeth and slumped down the leather seats until his knees rested against

the cushions on the other side of the carriage. He remained in that position for the full hour and a half it took them to finally make their way back to the manor. By that time, the sun was beginning to rise, and he wished he had just stayed in his apartments on St James Street. His concern there came from whether his solicitor would hear of it and think he was avoiding his wife.

Of course, that was precisely what he would have been doing, and what he had done all evening, but that was hardly the point.

He paused upon entering the darkened, silent manor. Upstairs, he knew, Eleanor would be slumbering in the bedchamber directly next to his. The one, moreover, with an adjoining door that only he had the key to.

No, he could not return there in his current state of mind.

A candle in one hand, he made his way to his study, opening the door and enclosing himself inside. There was a small sofa by the fireplace; he would make his bed here until the sun fully made its ascent, and perhaps once he knew she had risen for the day, he would retire. That way, he could spend even less time in her company, and crucially out of temptation's enticing grasp.

But when he raised the candle to make his way to the drinks cabinet, he experienced another major shock of the evening. Instead of its usual disarray, his study appeared—there was no other word for it— tidy. The space he had cultivated to resemble his state of mind had been swept clean. The clothes had been removed, the trays of spent food and dirty glasses equally missing. Paperwork had been set into neat piles on his desk, unopened correspondence laid out for him to read.

Nothing remained in its proper place, the place he had assigned for it.

“The devil take it,” he muttered, striding to his drinks cabinet and opening it, only to

find that the brandy he had expected to find there, or at least somewhere, was missing. And there were no glasses. He swept his gaze across his desk, in case he had missed something, and noticed a note in handwriting that looked decidedly not his own.

My dear husband , it read. I took the liberty of cleaning your room so you did not have to be surrounded in such chaos. If you prefer things to be laid out in a different manner, you need only say so to me and I will be happy to make any changes you deem necessary.

Eleanor

His fist crumpled the paper, obscuring the cheerful words.

Of course, she must have come in here and thought she was doing him a favor. That, or she had been highly trained in psychological warfare, and this was her first strategic move.

Well, if they were to do battle, she had selected her opponent well.

He would not give up. And by God, he—

Movement along the far wall caught his attention, and before he knew what he was doing, he had hurled his candle at it. He missed spectacularly, the object in question moving far too fast for him to track, and the candlestick clattered impotently against the wall, its flame quite out.

“ Damnation ,” he said aloud, his heart still pounding, though it had been nothing more than a mouse. No doubt his new wife’s cursed pet, though why of all things she had chosen a mouse was utterly beyond him.

Unless, of course, it had been chosen with the precise purpose of discomfiting him. And how well it had worked.

He dropped his head into his hands. The old familiar fear returned, brought on by anger and the way she so overtly disrupted his plans and intentions. If she stayed in his life, he would undoubtedly get used to the way she carried around. He would become accustomed to the disruption. Perhaps he would even want to rise to the challenge—either to assert his dominance or to win her over—and then he would be stuck once more caring about someone who would have no reason to care for him in return.

Just like Lydia .

His heart, just as it did whenever he thought of her —though it had been rare of late—tightened.

If he gave Eleanor a chance, she would dig just as much of a hole in his heart. It was better, easier , if he put an end to it now. Forced her to leave him so he could go back to his life of never letting anyone be around him for more than a few weeks at a time. Once she had disappeared, everything would go back to the way it should be. Not this new reality in his tidied room and with a woman who could not seem to stop herself from forcing herself into his world.

The sooner she annulled the marriage the better, or there was no saying what would happen—or if either of them would survive the encounter.

CHAPTER TEN

Eleanor's first proper opportunity to seduce her husband came shortly after her visit with Olivia. That night, he had not come home before dawn—at least not that she had seen—but after lying in wait for him a few hours, she pounced as he was making his way from his study to the dining room.

“Ravenscroft!” she called, scurrying to his side. Olivia had loaned her one of her more outrageous dresses, and Eleanor had taken the steps of ordering some garbs from the fashion places she adored. However cold and distant the Duke was in many ways, he was at least generous with his pin money, and she had more than enough to procure a few gowns. That was especially important now they had social events to attend.

His gaze slid down the frothy pink dress, then back to her face. “What?” he snapped.

Not to be put off, she smiled at him. “Have you seen your study?”

He came to an abrupt stop. “You mean my personal space, which you saw fit to enter and destroy?”

“Destroy?” She blinked. “I tidied it.”

“And did I give you leave to do so?” he growled, stepping forward so she was forced to yield ground. Another flare of excitement came over her at the concept of his body coming so close to hers, pressing into it, pushing her up against the wall. Heat like lit coals burned low in her stomach. “Did I give you permission to sort through my

things?”

“I did not read anything.”

“As though that matters,” he scoffed. “It is the principle of the thing.”

She stared up into his face. Logically, she understood that the purpose of his action was not to arouse her, but to intimidate her. She had told Olivia that he had no interest in her, and she believed it to be true. But there was no denying that whenever they were in such close proximity as this, her heart fluttered and her cheeks flushed, and she felt her body awakening. Only a fool would misinterpret what this meant: she was attracted to the man.

Deeply. Alarmingly. Beyond all reason or thought.

His brows furrowed as he glared at her. “Well ? Have you nothing more to say on the matter?”

“Well, only that it seemed to me that spending your time in a room that was in such a state must not have been happy,” she said carefully. “And I thought that now we are married, you do not need to behave like a bachelor.”

“I will behave how I see fit.” He gripped her chin, none too gently. The press of his fingertips exhilarated her. “And you will not be the one to dictate that.”

“But you will dictate how I behave?”

A wry smile. “Unless, of course, you would prefer not to be married to me.”

Eleanor thought back to Olivia’s advice—dispensed with the authority of a master instructing a pupil, though Eleanor rather doubted Olivia had any true experience in

the matter. Still, the general principles had been clear enough.

Find any excuse to touch him or have him see you in a state of undress. A man has urges, and if he is with you all the time, you may find he gives into those urges .

She wrapped her fingers around his wrist, keeping her eyes on him at all times. Perhaps she was not particularly alluring on a regular day, but if he spent time with none but her, especially given the close confines of their life together, surely at some point he must feel something for her. After all, she was a woman and bore womanly curves, all of which her new gown from Olivia accentuated. The low neckline, paired with the high waist and silken skirts, all served to highlight her breasts and hips.

Gentlemen desire such things, you know, Olivia had said with such decisiveness, Eleanor had not thought to doubt her. They enjoy all displays of the flesh .

Well, Eleanor certainly had plenty of flesh on display.

“Ravenscroft,” she murmured, using the voice she had practiced alone in her room, low and throaty. “Are you determined to quarrel with me?”

His gaze dropped to her chest, and the soft roundedness of her breasts, before flicking back to her face. A muscle in his jaw flexed. “I only argue with you when you provoke me,” he said, releasing her. “If I had my way, we would not speak at all.”

“Even when at social events?”

“No,” he snapped. “There, we will behave as any other husband and wife, newly married.”

“But why? When you are so determined to ignore me when we are home together?”

“What transpires between us in private is no one’s business but our own.”

She stepped closer, eliminating the chasm he had created between them. “Then explain to me why you married me if you dislike me so much?” She bit her lip, testing her courage, which was rapidly failing her. Not because the Duke scared her; no, she had faced far worse tyrants in her time. Rather, she feared what his answer might be, and what it would mean for the state of her marriage. The only way for her to keep him as a husband, to keep him for her and prevent him from straying would be to gain his affection, but she didn’t know if that was even possible.

He stared at her, something flickering in his eyes, there and gone. “I do not dislike you. I do not know you enough to dislike you.”

“Then—”

“I married you because I must. Why else? You knew the score when I proposed.”

Now or never . “Then why did you kiss me at the masquerade?” she blurted. “Did you know who I was then? Was that some kind of cruel joke?”

After all, if he had kissed her, a stranger then, why did he not kiss her now?

“I was nothing to you then,” she continued as his jaw snapped shut. “And yet you idled away your time with me, and you—” She could not say the words again. He had kissed her. And they had never once discussed it.

For a moment, she thought she saw a great, dividing conflict pass across his face. Then he gave her a small, cruel smile. “Ah, so that is the source of your constant attempts to gain my attention. You wish for me to kiss you again. Was once not enough, dear Eleanor? Would you rather I kiss you again as your husband? Would you like me to flatter you and tell you that I have been dreaming of it since?” He

caught her about the waist, drawing her closer, his grasp anything but tender. “I kissed you because I was bored at that dull party, and you seemed enough of a challenge to make it worth the reward. A prudish lady determined to resist me, and I capable of making her forget herself.” He leaned down, breath hot against her lips. “Was it truly that enjoyable for you that you would brave my temper to get closer to me? Is this enough for you?”

Eleanor’s stomach fluttered, and she placed her hands on his face. “I wish you would tell me the truth.”

“The truth ?” His smile grew even colder, and he released her so suddenly she almost fell. “The truth is you pose no challenge for me as my wife. You are mine; I can have you whenever I want. And thus, I no longer want you.” He turned away, striding back down the corridor. “If that is all, I have matters to be attending to.”

Eleanor gaped after him. She was, admittedly, not an expert in male desire, or the ways in which it manifested, but she knew something about herself, and she most certainly recognized the look in his eye when he had spoken about dreaming of kissing her. And she could not ignore the eager press of his fingers against her waist.

Perhaps he did not want to like her—perhaps he did not like her at all—but no one could deny that he wanted her. The lie filled the silence left in his wake.

The only question was how she could convince him to admit such a thing to her, or to himself.

Sebastian rested his forehead against the wall. Bloody hell, but he had not been prepared for her to ask such a direct question. What happened to the timid mouse he had married? And where had she acquired that delicious gown from? He had never seen her look so... alluring, and the flush on her cheeks had only added to the impression.

You pose no challenge for me as my wife. You are mine; I can have you whenever I want. And thus, I no longer want you .

What folly. A lie for the sake of cruelty—but worse, he did not know if she believed it. He had left before he could see her reaction. He needed her to hate him, but he could not stop himself from thinking about what would happen if he kissed her again. Whether she would respond the way she had when she had thought him nothing more than a stranger. What noises would she make? Would she wrap her arms around his neck?

He knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that he needed to keep his distance from her, or he would find out precisely what she would be like to kiss as his wife.

Such knowledge would be dangerous. Particularly when he sensed other things about her. How submissive she was; how very easily she would give in to every one of his desires—and he had many. He had not been lying when he had mentioned dreaming about her. He had fantasies galore, and all of them involved her. So many, it would take him half a lifetime to explore them all.

He shook his head to clear it and strode out to the stables. By the time he came back, hopefully she would have gone somewhere else and he could return to ignoring her existence in his life.

He ought to have known that would be far too much to hope for.

When he returned to the house, sweaty after a good, hard ride, he found his new wife in the dining room, balancing on a chair, holding a swathe of material up to the curtains.

“What in God’s name do you think you’re doing?” he exploded from the doorway.

She glanced up, wobbling and losing her balance on the chair. Without thinking, he dived forward, managing to catch her before she landed on the ground. Blinking, she stared up at him, delicate in his arms, her body pressed against his.

His body, inevitably, reacted instantly, and he put her down so abruptly she almost lost her balance all over again.

“You ought to watch your language,” she reproved, turning her attention back to the curtains.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“Well, I am your wife now.” She held up the two swathes of material. One was a cool blue; the other a red and white floral design.

“You being my wife explains nothing.”

“I believe it is customary for the mistress of the house to redecorate where appropriate,” she said, still not regarding him.

“There is no need to redecorate this room. Or any room in the house. If I wished for them to be changed, I would have given the order myself.”

As though she had not heard him, she pursed her lips. “I think the red, don’t you?”

“Eleanor . Are you not listening to me?”

“I am listening,” she said absently, “but all you are doing is saying the same things. You may not think this room is in need of sprucing up, but I disagree, and I am the mistress of the house. You are in the habit of changing the servants frequently, so I cannot rely on a housekeeper to make any such changes. But no matter!” She waved

the material so it fluttered in the air. "I prefer doing this myself. And it is hardly as though I am unaccustomed to putting the work in. In fact," she added, still not paying him any attention, "I prefer having some occupation. Having nothing to do is infuriating."

He took hold of her wrist, fingers wrapping around the delicate bone. She was so small; he could crush her so easily. Hurt her so easily. "And if I asked you to do nothing?"

Her large gray eyes met his. "Does the notion of new curtains offend you so very much?"

"I prefer to be the person to make the changes in my home."

"Is it not my home too?"

"No ." He said the word as bluntly as possible. "You are a guest in my house."

"Then you are remarkably rude to your guests."

"You are especially forward."

"Have you forgotten that you married me?"

He tugged her closer, knowing it was a mistake even as her proximity singed into him. "I have wished to forget nothing more since that occasion," he said, and she raised a brow. "I have one source of grief in my life, and it is standing right before me."

Hurt flashed across her face, and he had never felt like such a cad. This was the entire point of being cruel to her: so she would forget about this ridiculous marriage and

move on with her life. Then he would be able to move on with his. Really, he was doing them both a favor, especially if he kept his word and did not allow himself to consummate the marriage. Until that point, an argument could be made that they were not, in fact, married at all!

Yet although he could see the sting his words left behind, she did not appear to be intimidated by the way he loomed over her, or the tight grip he had on her wrist. If she was aware of all the multitude of ways he could hurt her, she did not seem to care. And if she did not know—well, there was only one way he could think of to fix that, and it would involve crossing one of his lines.

Cruelty was one thing, and he could contemplate that with fair ease. But the idea of harming her in a physical sense went against all his morals, few of them that he had.

“ Damnation ,” he muttered, releasing her. “Do not look at me like that, Eleanor. I had no wish to marry you, and now we are married, I have no wish to know you better. And I have no wish to be reminded of your presence every time I enter a room because you have seen fit to make alterations. Leave such business to myself, if you please.”

Her chin rose. “And if I do not?”

“Then I will make your life far worse than it is now,” he promised. Her eyes met his, and he bit back another curse at the look of expectation in them—as though she hoped for something other than what he had to give. And damn him, for a moment he was tempted. “And not in the manner you are imagining. Perhaps I will lock you in your room so you may never escape. How would you like that, wife?” He took hold of her neck, careful not to grip her tightly enough to bruise. No one could see the remnants of this. But before he could help himself, he felt his thumb swipe up across her throat, up to her jaw. No one could have denied the tenderness of the action, but he could not have stopped himself if he had wanted to. “You think I would treat you

well just because we are joined under the eyes of the law? You would do better than to cross me, and I beg you will remember that.”

A frown touched between her brows, and he brushed his thumb over the divot of her bottom lip, before finally stepping back and giving them both space. Space they needed if he was to keep up this mask of indifference and cruelty. He could still feel the plump softness of her lower lip against his thumb. His blood pounded in his veins, eager for everything he had no intention of giving. If he was not careful, he might kiss her here and now, and that would be foolish indeed. Already, it felt as though the soft skin of her neck had burned itself into his palm. He could feel all the tendons, the low throb of her veins.

And by God, he wanted her as he had scarcely wanted anyone else.

“Tomorrow, we will be attending Lady Rochester’s ball,” he said shortly, making to leave the room. “See to it that you are properly dressed and that we will make the appropriate impression.”

Her throat bobbed as she swallowed, and another dark wave of lust nearly overcame him. “Yes, Your Grace.”

He did not correct her as to his title when he left the room. Truth be told, he liked the way she said it, and he despised himself for that weakness, along with all the many others he showed around her. The sooner she came to her senses, the better.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

A bigail pinned the final white flower into Eleanor's hair and stepped back to appreciate her handiwork. Eleanor admired herself in the mirror. This was the first time she had ever attended a ball in a dress that she had, herself, chosen. And, moreover, it would be her first presentation in Society as a Duchess.

The Duke might wish to keep their lives separate in private, but in public, for whatever reason she could not fathom, he viewed it as imperative that they were seen together. The previous day, she had attempted to gain the Duke's attention, first by touching his arm and initiating conversation, and then by making alterations to his house. Both had resulted in his threatening her.

And yet—she could not quite put her fingers on it—but there was something about his threats that rang hollow. Oh yes, he said them, and sometimes there was enough grimness in his voice to suggest that he did mean them. And yet... And yet they did not terrify her the way Margaret's threats had.

Perhaps it had something to do with the manner by which they were given. Aside from her attraction to him, which could not merely be dismissed, there was the matter of the threats themselves—vague and unsubstantiated, and often accompanied by a gesture that made her heart race for reasons other than the ones he intended. The way he had stroked her throat, and how he had run his finger across her lip. His body belied his words, rendering them almost meaningless.

That hesitation, implicit but always present between his words and under the harshness of his voice. No matter what he pretended to her, he did not mean it.

Margaret's threats had always been cold, sharp little comments that dug under her skin and ate away at her self-confidence. The Duke had threatened to shut her in her bedchamber, but she doubted he would enact such a thing without being all the while present there. After all, she was his wife.

But Margaret had directed her to the kitchens to help with the cooking when they were low on servants, and it always felt as though they needed extra help when Eleanor had done something to offend her stepmother.

Once, Isabel had taken a pair of scissors to all but the dowdiest of Eleanor's dresses, and she had been forced to wear the same one three days in a row, all to different social events where people stared and pointed. Margaret had not permitted her to purchase new dresses, and she had to wait until one of the girls was done with an old dress before having the chance to try something new.

Compared to that level of callous cruelty, the Duke's means of intimidation had no chance of working.

"You look wonderful, ma'am," Abigail chimed, offering Eleanor a shy smile. "Doubtless he won't be able to keep his eyes from you."

She hoped so. The elegant satin gown was a burgundy that brought out the flecks of red in her brown hair, and was certainly far more daring than any she had worn out before. The color of a married woman than that of a debutante.

She drew her gloves up to her elbows and took hold of her reticule. "Thank you, Abigail. I shall see you later on tonight." Unless, of course, she was particularly lucky and attracted her husband's attention enough for him to bring her back into his bed that evening.

No point in getting ahead of myself .

First, he would have to admit to either of them that he wanted her. And although Olivia had been certain that if he did not immediately, he would soon, Eleanor felt less convinced. The way he had spoken the previous day made it sound as though he wanted nothing less than to kiss her again; the only appeal had been that of the chase, and he no longer had to chase.

Unless , of course, he felt as though she was not so much of a sure thing as he presumed.

Another of Olivia's techniques, delivered with the certainty of someone who had a mere assumption it might work.

"You must make him jealous. That way he will find it imperative that he claim you as his own . "

A tempting proposition if ever there was one. But she would have to do the thing carefully, provoking his jealousy in subtle ways, without doing anything to make them assume their marriage was an unhappy one. Or worse, make him suspect that she was doing this deliberately. It would only work if he believed she genuinely preferred the company of others over his own, with no consideration given to him at all.

One way or the other, she would tempt him to her.

With her reticule dangling over one wrist, she descended the stairs to where he waited a little impatiently. Although she had been ready in time, she had gone out of her way to dawdle a few more minutes, so he was certain to be in the hallway waiting for her. That way, he could better appreciate the sight of her coming down the stairs.

"There you are," he drawled, turning as he heard her approach. "New rule. When I give you a time to be ready, my girl, you will adhere to it, or—" He broke off as he saw her. His brows furrowed, and she saw his throat bob with a swallow.

There it was. The admiration that she had so hoped he would feel, there and gone in a flash.

“I truly apologize, Ravenscroft,” she said, lowering her head and resting one gloved hand lightly on his arm as she reached his side. “I merely wanted to look my best for the evening ahead. I know we are to be putting on a good performance for all our acquaintances.”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “You are being remarkably complacent about the fact.”

“Why not? I am attending a ball as a Duchess.” She smiled up at him. “You may think it of no consequence, but I certainly do.”

“The Lord help me,” he muttered as he took her to the carriage and handed her inside. “I did not think you were one of the ladies who aspired to marry the greatest title they could find.”

“I aspired to nothing, but you bestowed the honor on me, and I think it would be unfair of me not to make the most of it.”

“And if I had not married you?”

“Well, then I probably would have been stuck under my stepmother’s thumb for the rest of my life,” she said serenely. Admitting to that now she was married felt like no difficult thing. “She would never have allowed me to meet an eligible gentleman. Perhaps if she felt she was spending too much on my upkeep, she might have found a modest match for me. Someone unimportant, so I did not outshine her daughters.”

He fixed his gaze on her, harsh and direct. “And what if something were to happen to me? Would you throw yourself back on her kindness?”

“What kindness?” she asked with a rueful smile. “I did not experience any kindness at her hands, I assure you.”

“Answer the question.”

“If you died and the estate passed elsewhere, I suppose I would do my best to survive independently of her. In truth, I doubt she would allow me back into her household unless I could bring some wealth with me, or she thought that I might elevate her position somewhat.” Eleanor frowned. “Why, are you ill?”

“Nothing of the sort.” He scowled, looking at her as though she was ridiculous for coming to such a conclusion—though what else she was supposed to think after such pointed questioning, he hardly knew. “I expect your stepmother and half-sisters will be present tonight.”

“I imagine so,” she agreed. “They will be very angry at me for not issuing them an invitation, but I will be able to tell them that you prevented me from doing so, and they will have no choice but to excuse you.”

“You—” He snapped his jaw shut. “Yes, I can see how it has happened that way. I ought to have chosen different instructions.”

“Would you rather she came to visit?”

“That lady? Good God, no. What a preposterous idea. I have no intention of letting her step foot in the house.” His brows descended over his eyes again. “But you should say nothing of the sort to her. Let her believe that I am inclined to keep you to myself as my new bride. That would be preferable, at least at the beginning.”

“And after that?”

“After that, I do not anticipate it being any concern of mine any longer.”

Eleanor settled back in her seat. Yes, he was possibly correct. Margaret would want to foster her relationship with them both if she could, but she would not do so indefinitely. At some point, hopefully in the near future, they would be free from her altogether.

Eleanor beamed at the Duke. “Do you know, I think this is the first civilized conversation we have had since the wedding. We are learning to get along.”

His scowl deepened. “Stop saying such ridiculous things. And be silent until we arrive. I have no patience for your yammering.”

And yet, until she had brought up such a thing, he had been content to sit and talk to her. Perhaps her lesson to learn here was not to mention things about them getting along or not doing so, but to encourage his conversation as much as she could.

Still, she held her tongue for the remainder of the visit to London and to Lady Rochester’s ball, to which they had been invited and would be attending. With every passing second, she found herself becoming increasingly nervous.

Her first venture into Society as a Duchess. No doubt her stepmother and half-sisters would be in attendance, and though she now outranked them and could not be blamed for not having issued them an invitation to the Duke’s house, they had a certain way of making her feel ill at ease. As though she would never be good enough for anything.

And heaven knew she had been granted a great honor.

“Your hand is shaking,” the Duke commented as he handed her down from the carriage upon arriving.

“Oh,” she said faintly. “Is it, sir?”

“Why are you so alarmed?”

“I am not alarmed as such.”

“I told you that you must do me credit as my wife.”

She held her chin up high. “And indeed I shall do my best, Your Grace.”

“Ravenscroft,” he said irritably. “Or better still, Sebastian. I defy any of the gossip-mongers to say we enjoy no intimacy, or that I had no wish to marry you when we employ such informality with one another.”

Eleanor’s heart raced. Sebastian. She had known his Christian name, of course, before they had married. He was not just a Duke; he was also a man. And yet, the prospect of addressing him thus had never occurred to her.

“You give me great honor,” she said faintly.

“Indeed I do. So perhaps you might endeavor to try looking like it.” His voice was curt, but he rested his hand on hers as they entered the great house, and that gentle contact did a great deal to calm her nerves. She was not alone, however much sometimes it felt like it. The Duke was on her side, and he would protect her. Some small instinct told her that. If anyone dared insult or belittle her, he would defend her right to be in the position she had, even if he merely did it to preserve his own reputation.

The thought soothed her still further, and by the time they were introduced at the edge of the ballroom, she felt equal to raising her head and smiling and meeting the ton’s interested gaze with equanimity.

Beside her, the Duke played his part, transforming from the grouch that had sat opposite her in the carriage to a charming young man who knew just what he ought to say. Still, as they made the rounds—everyone seemed keen to speak to the Duke and his new wife—she could not help noticing that none amongst his closest friends appeared to be in attendance.

Come to think of it, she did not know of any close friends.

Interesting.

She glanced into his face, but he steered her into yet another small group of ladies and gentlemen. To her relief, she had not encountered her stepmother yet, although that time would come soon, she was sure.

“The Duchess of Ravenscroft,” he flaunted, presenting her, and she smiled and blushed.

“I say, Your Grace,” one gentleman said to her once the party had split. The Duke had found himself engaged in conversation with a rotund older gentleman, and Eleanor had been accosted by this young buck. Several years younger than the Duke, she estimated, and probably not out in London all that long. Perhaps he had not long graduated university at all. “You are remarkably pretty,” he smiled. “Ravenscroft is dashed lucky to have you, and that’s a fact. But I do not believe we have met before? I am Lord Sinclair.”

Eleanor curtsied. “A pleasure to meet you, Lord Sinclair.”

“And the man speaking to the Duke now is m’father. Curst boring affair this, but I don’t suppose there’s much to be done about it now. Say, Your Grace, I don’t suppose you’d like to dance? There’s little else to be done, and the Duke can’t steal you away all night.”

Eleanor glanced across at the Duke to find he was still deep in conversation with Lord Sinclair's father. He had never said anything to her about dancing with other gentlemen, and while she did not find Lord Sinclair especially appealing as a romantic prospect, she may as well enjoy herself where she could, and his open admiration of her person was flattering. Far better than being stuck in a conversation she had no part in, or wished to take part in.

"Of course," she smiled, putting her hand in Lord Sinclair's. "Thank you. I should be delighted to dance with you."

As she stepped out into the center of the room where the other couples were gathering, she could not help but feel the Duke's hot, heavy gaze on her back.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The devil take it. Sebastian scowled as he accepted a glass of wine and tried to look as though he did not wish to be anywhere but here. His wife, dancing the first two dances with a young buck, set on flirtation. Of course, she likely did not know it, but she ought to have known better than to dance with another man.

The first two sets as well, dash it all.

You ought to have asked her , a small voice said in the back of his head.

Of course, he knew that well enough, but he had not expected her to accept the hand of the first gentleman who had requested it.

In truth, he had not expected anyone to ask her at all. A fool's error. He had presented her in a way to make her appealing to all the young men in the room. A wife, a new Duchess, looking especially well. It was like dangling bait in front of them and expecting them not to snap.

Now he would be forced to watch her dance for half an hour, and no doubt when he came to collect her and impress upon her the importance of her duty to him, she would fix him with an innocent gaze and inform him that she did not know he had ever intended to dance with her.

Until this moment, he had not.

Until this moment, he had not known he would want to do anything more.

A dangerous, dangerous desire.

Then again, was not all desire dangerous?

“I see my son is entertaining your wife as I bore you with talk of hunting,” the man beside him said with a chortle. If the man in question had not been the Earl of Derbyshire, Sebastian might have been tempted to clock him square in the jaw.

As it was, he watched Eleanor in time to see her laugh, head tipped back and lips wide in mirth. Lord Sinclair, that ridiculous boy child, had done what Sebastian never had.

“She is a pretty thing, is she not?” Sebastian forced himself to say, tone light as though it meant nothing to him that his wife was currently making a fool out of him.

When they returned home, he would find a way of punishing her. Perhaps in the way she desired, then denying her everything she wanted. A promise that every time she misbehaved, he would torment her beyond all endurance.

That would teach her.

A spike of arousal lanced through him, and he abandoned the train of thought, choosing instead to excuse himself from the Earl and prowl further around the room. Before he could get his wife back in his sights, however, Luke materialized from seemingly out of nowhere to accost him.

“How are you doing, my dear fellow? I had hoped you would be here. But where is the lovely Duchess?” His gaze followed Sebastian’s until he found her, and he made a small noise of acknowledgment. “Ah. I see.”

“Go away,” Sebastian growled.

“I think if you truly wished me to leave, you would go to greater lengths.”

“What lengths do you wish me to go to? Speaking to Lord and Lady Rochester to have you cast out? I have not ruled it out, I assure you.”

Luke smiled wistfully. “I am sorry the years have been so harsh to you.”

“Enough, Luke.” A pang of pain interrupted Sebastian’s irritation, and he rolled his shoulders, trying to dislodge the feeling. “I am not a man who indulges in friendships.”

“You were once.”

“That was then.”

“Is now so very different?” Luke peered at Eleanor once again, and Sebastian had to resist the urge to strike him. For both looking at his wife, and for being so very right. Now was no different in his essence, save that he now knew he would not endure another person leaving him.

No man could control the actions of others, not fully. All one could do was remain in control of oneself, and that was something he fully intended to do. He would make it so he did not run the risk of becoming close to anyone ever again, and thus, no matter what their actions were, he would not be hurt by them.

He had learned his lesson with Luke once. He would not play the same game again.

“My wife is none of your business,” he snapped. “Do not speak about her again. And do not speak to me again. That is not your place.”

“You cannot hide from the world forever, Sebastian,” Luke called from behind him.

“You may have given up on your friends, but your friends have not given up on you.”

Sebastian did not dignify the statement with a response, or even a grunt of acknowledgment. He had no friends remaining, no matter what Luke wished to delude himself into thinking, and he preferred it that way.

And indeed, as he strode around the room, no one spoke to him except for the sake of having exchanged words with the Duke of Ravenscroft. The thought was freeing until the second dance came to an end and Lord Sinclair finally led Eleanor from the dance floor—and straight into the waiting arms of Mrs. Margaret Bennett.

Sebastian stiffened, though he had not meant to. He had no love for his wife, but he had even less love for the woman who had treated the girl as a servant in her own home. Neither party had admitted to as much, but he knew how to read between the lines. Upon seeing her stepmother, he saw the way Eleanor’s shoulders curved in, and the way her chin fell a little lower.

Lord Sinclair, cad that he was, merely bowed his excuses and abandoned Eleanor to her fate.

Sebastian did not think before he moved, striding toward them both until he came to stand beside Eleanor, looming over her and glowering at Mrs. Bennett. At least she was not carting one of her obnoxious daughters with her.

“Mrs. Bennett,” he said, barely reaching for politeness as he placed Eleanor’s arm firmly in the crook of his elbow. She was shaking again. Fear. The girl thought nothing of defying him, sometimes in decidedly open ways, but the merest brush with her stepmother made her shake .

“Your Grace,” Mrs. Bennett said, dipping into a curtsy. “I am relieved to find you both here safe and sound. Eleanor, you know, has not been responding to my letters,

so I was convinced she must be ill.”

“That is not true,” Eleanor said weakly. “I have indeed responded to your letters, ma’am. But—”

“I have asked three times if we might come to stay.”

Sebastian did not even attempt to tamp down his irritation. “I believe such an honor rests on the shoulders of those hosting,” he said, and looked down at Eleanor’s head. “My wife and I are enjoying the beginning of our married life together, and wish for no interference.”

“I had not thought you would consider it interference, Your Grace.” Mrs. Bennett sent Eleanor a poisonous glance. “We would not stay long. Just for tea. Eleanor knows what she owes us.”

“Indeed ?” Sebastian raised his brows. “I have an idea of what my wife owes you, and it certainly is not tea, and not in my house. I thank you, ma’am, but I have claimed Eleanor’s hand for the next dance.” He gave her a small inclination of the head, nothing approaching a bow, and tugged at Eleanor’s arm. She came meekly, following him out onto the dance floor and standing opposite him in the line of ladies.

Sebastian did not miss the hectic flush in her cheeks, or the way she finally relaxed now she was out of her stepmother’s gaze. It irritated him to no end that he noticed these things at all, and he found himself grinding his teeth as he prepared himself for the torture that was to come.

He had not danced in a very long time. It was an abominably dull way for a healthy young man to spend the evening, and if he had any need for female company, he would not have chosen to come to one of these obnoxious balls and held insipid hands with a lady for half an hour.

No, there were far better options for a man of such vigor.

Yet, when he glanced up to find Eleanor's gaze locked on his, and when her hand brushed his and he took it more firmly, he found himself more aware of her existence than he had ever been before. Her proximity, the way her curls framed her face. He wondered at the silkiness of them. The way her fingers tightened infinitesimally around his when he guided her, and the loss of her hand when the dance parted them. Every time her skirts brushed his legs, he wondered what lay beneath them.

What man had taken a wife for over a week and had yet to see what she looked like without her clothes?

He could remember in vivid detail how she had looked in her nightgown when she had entered his bedchamber. The pebbled press of her nipples against the soft silk, and her hair loose around her shoulders.

Dash it all, he detested that she occupied so much space in his thoughts.

The problem was that he had not had her the way a husband ought to have a wife. Once he had given in to his urges, his infernal preoccupation with her would desist, and he would be free to go about his life as he always had.

Yet if he was to see his plan through, he would not grant himself the chance to give in to his urges.

"Well, Sebastian?" she asked, raising her gaze to his when they met in the dance once more. "Are you going to say nothing to me?"

"Why?" he asked curtly. "Do you have something in particular to say?"

She glanced down, eyelashes casting soft shadows on her cheeks. "Thank you for

intervening with my stepmother.”

“You were terrified.”

“Yes,” she breathed, still not looking at him. “She... often has that effect on me.”

“Then do not be scared any longer. You outrank her. She may do nothing to harm you.”

“Even a Duchess can at times be subject to scandal.”

“By God,” he muttered, frowning down into her sweet face. “Is there much of scandal to be said about you?”

“Well, I think not, but she may not speak the truth.”

“Then you will no doubt have some gratification in dismissing the rumors.” He felt his irritation growing. “And if they persist, I shall act myself. Let it not be said that I have no power.” In fact, he had more power than ever now his inheritance had been released and he was finally at liberty to draw on the funds his father had left him.

“I doubt anyone would say you were powerless, Sebastian,” she said, and smiled shyly at him. He found himself staring at her a moment too long until the dance parted them once more. He had never experienced such a thing—the urge, in that moment, not to kiss her or push her skirts about her legs or any of the coarse thoughts he often had about a woman he desired, but to return her smile.

Age was getting to him after all, no doubt. Thirty approached, and perhaps he had overindulged a few too many times.

“Tell me what you were thinking dancing with Lord Sinclair,” he said when they

returned together. He gripped her fingers more firmly this time. “That was the first dance. You ought to have danced it with me.”

“Well, I looked to you for direction,” she said. “But you were engaged in conversation, and you said nothing about dancing. I know many young gentlemen do not care for dancing, and I supposed you were one of them.”

Just as he’d thought. And a small pang reminded him that he had, as she said, been engaged in conversation, and although he had intended broadly to dance with her, he had not thought to communicate such a thing. He had assumed, more foolishly of him, that when he searched for her, she would be patiently waiting.

Getting rid of her would be harder than he had hoped if she was prepared to find enjoyment and engagement elsewhere if he did not deliver.

“In the future, presume that I will wish to dance the first set with you,” he said crisply.

“Yes, Sebastian.”

He almost told her to stop using his name, then he hesitated. To be sure, it felt a little too intimate, but he could not say he disliked the sound. Not to mention that it was precisely what he had commanded, all for the sake of appearing as though they were happily married.

“Smile at me,” he said, and she glanced up into his face once more, offering a hesitant smile that he privately reflected showed nothing of the lover about her. “As though you desire me, Eleanor. I know you can do it.”

A knowing glint entered her eyes. “And if I told you that I did not desire you?”

“Then you will do well to pretend,” he retorted. “And stop your lying. I know when you do it.”

“A convenient trait.”

“Quite . So you will desire me, Eleanor. And you will smile at me, at least as long as we are in attendance here. And when we return home together, you will say not one word of complaint.”

She pressed a little closer, her breasts just brushing the lapels of his coat. “And if I do not, will you punish me?”

“I have a mind to do so anyway, after that showing with your dancing.” His hand found her waist, and her eyes sparked with excitement. “Did you think I would not notice or care, sweetheart? Or that I have not been plotting what to do about it ever since?”

“I had not—I had not known you would be angry.” Her voice turned breathy, and he recognized the sight of desire in her eyes. Oh yes, she wanted him, and he craved giving into that mutual want. Lust , he knew, could be sated so very easily, and he had every right to her.

There were things he could do that would not count as consummation. Ways he could have her, yet not.

The evening could not end soon enough.

“I will show you in the carriage home,” he murmured as they came together for the last time that dance, “ precisely how angry you have made me, Eleanor.”

She visibly shivered, her skin erupting in goosebumps. “Will you? Good. When are

we leaving?”

He smiled at her as the dance came to an end and they bowed opposite one another.

“When the night is over and not a moment before.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Eleanor discovered many things that evening. The first was that she enjoyed being the center of attention. People treated her with respect now her name was Eleanor Fairmont, Duchess of Ravenscroft. Thanks to the Duke— Sebastian , she reminded herself—she was fast becoming one of the most influential people in the room.

Of course, there were some who thought she did not deserve her position, but she suspected there would always be some who resented her, and if she did not stand up for herself, or if Sebastian did not stand up for her, then they would feel justified in speaking out against her.

Margaret was one of those people.

To Eleanor's relief, she kept her distance for the remainder of the evening, only glaring from afar, and no doubt whispering poison in people's ears. But Eleanor forced herself not to think too much about that.

The second thing she discovered about herself was that she was, in her soul, an impatient woman. Much as she enjoyed the talking and the dancing and the lavish dinner that they attended, she could not wait to escape so she might discover whatever Sebastian had in store for her.

The third was that she must be very, very wicked indeed for her to find the thought of physical aggression so very appealing.

The fourth was that she no longer cared about what others might consider wicked. If

she were to ask Sebastian, she suspected she would be told not to be so silly.

By the time they finally bade their host goodnight and returned to their carriage for the long ride back to the manor, she could hardly suppress her excitement. Sebastian, too, seemed rather more eager than usual. He had not left the ball early, but he had certainly not lingered the way some did. And in the darkness of the carriage, his eyes glittered as he took her in.

“Eleanor,” he said once they were on their way, the coach so finely sprung she could hardly feel the unevenness of the road. This would be a smooth ride and would give them leave to do whatever they chose.

“Sebastian,” she replied, breathless. Her excitement felt as though it fizzed around her body, irrepressible and compelling. Her chest felt as though it was expanding, and she found her hands shaking a trifle as she tucked them in her lap. “Have I made you very angry?”

“You have.” His tone was sharp, and she shivered under the feel of it, a whip cracking across her skin, the pain exquisite.

“Then will you show me what my punishment is to be?”

“You are entirely too eager, my girl.” He turned to her, tipping her head back so he could see her throat. His fingers briefly closed about it. “I can feel your pulse,” he murmured. “Thrumming. Are you afraid of me?”

“N-no.” She answered instinctively, not giving herself room to doubt.

“Even though I could do you severe harm now?” He gave her a little shake, but although his hold on her was firm, and although it forced her blood harder against his fingers, he did not hurt her. “Why are you not afraid of me?”

“Because you are not a cruel man,” she rasped, her breasts tender and heavy beneath her gown, and a throbbing beginning between her legs.

“What makes you so certain of that?”

“Because I have seen cruelty before.” She looked into his shadowed face. “And because there is a difference between being capable of great harm, and choosing to act upon it.”

He cursed under his breath and brought her face to his for a blazing kiss. His hand twisted roughly in her hair, and his other hand remained around her throat, a promise that although he had chosen not to, he could hurt her.

The thrill sent another burst of lust through her.

Perhaps she had not won his respect, never mind his love, but he could no longer deny that he wanted her, and that was enough for now. Knowing that he kissed her despite not truly wanting to meant there was something in their marriage to save.

He had defended her in front of her mother, and now he tilted her head to meet his, his body coming to rest on hers, and she welcomed the pressure.

Finally, she might discover what magic there could be between a husband and wife. Yes, he had implied roughness, but she was not a china doll. She rather thought she would enjoy the aggression, and hoped he would not think to be gentle with her now. Not when he had promised punishment.

His mouth opened hers, and his tongue swept inside, dominating, devouring her. He consumed her senses, holding her firmly in place so she could not move, pressing her into the seat, kissing her so thoroughly she drowned in sensation. This was not the same kiss he had given her at the masquerade; he kissed her now with the edge of

anger, the burn of desire, as though he could not bear how very much he wanted her, yet he could not endure letting her go for another second.

She kissed him back as ardently as she could, drifting her hands along the breadth of his shoulders. There was so much to this man she did not yet know. Every time she thought she might have gotten over it, she thought about the way he had looked, half-naked and bathed in candlelight. She longed to remove his coat, his waistcoat, his shirt, so she might put her palm against skin. Then she would be able to feel the subtle shift of his muscles, the gentle friction of his hair, the softness of his skin. There was so much she had yet to discover.

But he caught her wrists and broke away from her mouth long enough to say, in a harsh voice, “You may not touch me or yourself. Do you understand, Eleanor?”

“ Yes, Sebastian ,” she breathed.

“When we are like this, you will call me sir.”

“Yes, sir .”

“Good.” He brought her arms up to either side of her head. “Keep your hands here at all times.”

She sucked in a breath. The position made her vulnerable, and she was certain he knew it, leaving him fully in control. No doubt he preferred that. And was that little tingle of mingled fear and anticipation not what she wanted from this encounter too? She wanted nothing more than to yield herself to him. He would know what to do with her body better than she did.

“Yes, sir,” she said when it became apparent he was still waiting for her response. Apparently satisfied, he ran his hands down her arms to her sides, finding her breasts.

They ached with the need to be touched, and when he cupped them in his hands, even through the layers of her clothing, she gasped.

“You will be silent,” he informed her. “My coachman is above, and although he will not be with us long, I would not have him made uncomfortable.”

While that may be true, and she had no doubt that if the coachman heard the way she wanted to moan, he would be made uncomfortable, she doubted that was the true reason behind his command. No, it was merely another way of exercising control over her. For him, she would have to bite back her natural instincts, and endure all he was doing to her silently.

For him, she would do so. In fact, the thought brought another wave of heat with it.

“If you make a noise, I will stop what I am doing immediately,” he informed her. “And nothing you say will convince me to begin again, no matter how invested you may be in the outcome.”

The outcome? She looked to him for clarification, but he merely took her hips and twisted her so she sat with her back against the wall of the carriage, facing him.

“Take hold of this,” he said about the strap over her head. “Don’t let go.”

“Yes, sir.”

He made a noise of satisfaction, though something about it seemed a little pained. He lifted her skirts, pushing them up over her calves and knees and thighs, until she felt bared to the world, exposed in all the ways she would never contemplate as being acceptable.

But this was Sebastian, and he took hold of her knee, widening her legs, then skating

his fingertips up her inner thigh until he came to the apex of them. Her head spun with anticipation, though he made her wait for an excruciatingly long time until he finally let his fingers dip into the slickness waiting for him there. The hollowness of her desire bit into her, and she tightened her grip on the leather strap around her head. Liquid heat bloomed everywhere he touched.

“You are so wet for me,” he growled, approval evident in his voice. His hand went to his groin, but it was too dark to see what he did there. “Do you want me then, Eleanor?”

“Yes,” she whispered.

“Yes, what ?”

“Yes, sir.” She had wanted him for a long time—longer than she had ever wanted to admit. She rolled her hips, trying to encourage him to stroke there again. Once or twice, she had explored her own body, wishing to know what lay there, but she had never touched herself in a way that resembled this. As though every brush of his fingers gave birth to a new bloom of heat and pleasure. Her nipples hardened, her breasts so aching and heavy and desperate to be touched once more.

There were so many things she wanted, many of them beyond articulation. How could she ever explain that she just wanted more ? That her body demanded it, and she did not know precisely what that entailed, only that he could give it to her.

“Peace, wife,” he said, slapping the tender skin of her inner thighs. The sting transformed into more pleasure that made her ache so acutely, she might betray her word and make a sound. Her teeth dug into her bottom lip.

“You smell delicious,” he murmured, his voice husky, rumbling from his chest in a way that only made her desire wilder. Then his words sunk in. If she had not bound

herself to silence, she would have asked what he meant. As it was, she could only assume and guess.

His fingers slid across her slick folds once more, and she bit back a gasp, arching her spine. Every touch felt so exquisite, the dearest kind of torture, and yet she sought more. This would never be enough; she knew that in her bones.

“Impatient?” He laughed softly, and this time, using his thumb, drew a circle that made her breath halt in her lungs. “I know the feeling, my dear. To crave the sensation that you think may be coming, to know that you are capable of so much. Are you a passionate lady, Eleanor?”

“I—” She hardly knew how to answer. “I don’t know.”

“Then we will find out together.” He brought his other hand to her, toying a little lower, his finger dipping out of her, pleasure spiking each time it did. “You are certainly very responsive. I think it will not take much to bring you to your climax.”

“My... climax?”

“Keep your hands on the strap.”

She tightened her grip, sweat slick on her palms. “Is this my punishment?”

He delivered another stinging slap, and she moaned low, under her breath. “Silence,” he commanded. “Or I will give you no pleasure at all.”

Surely he would not be that cruel. But she buttoned her lip, because some part of her knew that he could indeed be that cruel. In fact, she rather suspected that he wanted to be that cruel. For her to writhe in his arms, then to deny her the thing she anticipated most of all.

She could feel her heartbeat in every extremity.

“Yes, I think it would take very little.” He drew that single finger in and out of her, and she lost track of time. All that mattered to her was the feel of that finger, the slick heat of her desire, and the tightening pleasure in her lower stomach. The knowledge that there was more to come—and heavens above, she wanted it. She needed it.

“Sebastian,” she gasped.

He made a sound low in the back of his throat, as though hearing his name from her tongue was almost as unbearable for him as the feel of his fingers was for her.

As though he wanted her just as much as she wanted him.

An impossibility, she knew. He was a handsome man in his prime—a Duke, no less—and he no doubt had his fair share of experience. As for her, she had nothing but what he chose to give her, and she was discovering so much about herself.

“Eleanor,” he grated, pronouncing her name as though it was a curse even as he lingered on the vowels, caressing them with his tongue. Another flash of heat ran through her, and she rolled her hips against his hand. “What do you want?”

“I—” How could she know what she wanted? How could she articulate it? His other finger resumed its pressure on her folds, precisely where she needed him the most. “Please.”

“Tell me.”

“ Please .”

“What would you like?”

She felt so close now, as though she might fracture and fall apart in his arms, as though she was reaching the very edge of a cliff and would tip off and fall, fall, fall. She had lost herself; the only thing left in the world was the press of his clever fingers, and her burning, aching need for him. For this , and so much more than this .

“You are so responsive,” he whispered under his breath. “I had not meant to—” He cursed, the word ugly between them yet somehow igniting her still further. “I should stop,” he muttered, and the words sounded as though they were meant for him rather than her.

Yet he did not stop. He did not slow his caresses, and instead brought his mouth to her neck, kissing, then licking, then biting, the sting of pain quickly turning to heat.

She moaned, forgetting for a moment to be silent in the throes of pleasure. She felt like a string pulled taut, ready to snap. The heat gathered between her legs, building and building, until she wondered if it were possible to die from pleasure.

“You feel divine.” He removed his fingers, bringing them to her lips. “Lick them clean, my girl. That is what you feel for me. That is evidence of your desire.”

Blindly, the feeling of being close fading and frustrating her, she opened her mouth, and he inserted his fingers, wet with her arousal. The flavor was musky and almost sweet, unusual but not unpleasant, and he let out a low groan.

“Yes...” he grated. “That’s right. Suckle. Suck me. Show me what you can do with your tongue.”

Confused, she did as she was bid, wishing she could remove her arms so she could touch him in return. Or perhaps even herself, but she knew with that woman’s instinct—one she hardly knew she possessed, yet was certain of, anyway—that he would want no one else’s hands on her, not even her own.

That was the nature of man's possessiveness, or at least this man's possessiveness.

As she licked, drawing her tongue along the salty skin of his index finger, drawing it still deeper into her mouth, his other hand fumbled at his breeches, opening his falls. She could not see fully what he removed, but she knew enough about men to know that it was his manhood, fingers wrapped around it. He released a harsh breath as his hand began to move.

"If this were not a punishment, I would taste you until you screamed from the pleasure of it," he said, his voice harsh. "If I had my way, you would be trembling and exhausted by the time I was done with you. If I could, I would be entirely too greedy with you."

Eleanor squirmed in her place, pressing her thighs together to release the ache. "Then why don't you?"

As though he could not help himself, he reached out to touch her again. "Your punishment is denial," he told her. "You are mine to have as and when I choose, but today... you will go home wanting."

It didn't feel as though he wanted her to go home wanting. All of a sudden, the heat and pleasure came rushing back, all the more potent for the break.

"Why?" she gasped.

"Because you need to be reminded that you are my wife. Mine. And as such, I may do as I please."

"If you were doing as you pleased, you would not be leaving me wanting."

He let out a small groan, but he slid a finger inside her even so. "I will not allow

impertinence. I will not allow you to seem as though you prefer the company of other men. These are my rules and you will obey them.” His hand at his manhood moved faster, and she understood then that he was doing to himself what he was doing to her. The thought made her prickles all over, pleasure building, and she let out another moan.

If he just kept going, she might discover what happened when the pleasure could build no further.

He wrenched his hand from her. “Damn you,” he said, almost viciously.

“Sebastian,” she begged, bringing her legs together, thighs rubbing slick against one another as she desperately sought to chase the pleasure he had so almost given her.

He bent over himself, letting out a sound that almost might have been pain. He shuddered, and although she did not see what happened, his breath was loud and ragged, battling against the rattling carriage. Horses’ hooves thudded against the ground, and Eleanor’s heart thudded against her chest.

What had just happened? His pleasure had sounded beyond anything she could have imagined, and the thought made the tender flesh between her legs ache still further, desperate for the release of her own.

Release he had made it clear she would not receive. Not because he did not want her pleasure, but because he had told himself he would not allow himself to give it.

Denial for them both, in a way. The control, the expectation that she would follow his commands—and the exacting way they had been given—made something in her burn again. Oh yes, she liked it when he took control of her and demanded that she obey.

He sat up, tucking himself away again, and his hand coasted up her leg. For a

moment, she thought he might finish what he had started with her, but his fingers tensed on her thigh and he drew back once more.

“That ,” he exhaled, “was long overdue. You may release the strap now, Eleanor.”

She let go, rotating her wrists to encourage the blood flow. He tucked her skirts back down around her legs, and she sat as she had been doing when she entered the carriage, facing forward. She longed to feel his hands on her again.

“Will you come to my bedchamber tonight?” she whispered.

He swallowed audibly, then cleared his throat. “No .” The word was harsh, but if he intended to offend her, or perhaps even scare her, it had not worked. She peered at him, wishing she could see more in the darkness—wishing, in fact, she had seen more of everything he had experienced. The moment had passed, its intimacy gone, and yet she felt as though she had somehow missed out on the best bit of all. She had heard his pleasure, yes, but she had not seen it. She had not known .

“Do not act out again,” he warned, not looking at her.

But if she did not do that, she would not get to experience this pleasure at his hands again. And although it was not precisely satisfying, she felt as though a new door had been opened in her soul. And other, distinctly lower, places.

“Yes, sir,” she whispered, and had the delight of hearing a growl of frustration at the blatant lie in her voice. “I would never dream of it.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Sebastian knew he had made a mistake the moment he walked into the dining room the next morning and found his wife hard at work directing the servants to remove the curtains he had forbidden her from interfering with.

His servants. His curtains.

“What,” he demanded, his voice cold, “do you think you are doing?”

She looked back at him with rosy cheeks and sparkling eyes, and he fought back the memory of everything that had happened between them the previous night. The way she had sounded in the carriage as he had tormented her, bringing her to her peak and refusing to tip her over the edge. The wet, hot feel of her against his fingers. He had longed to use more than just his fingers then, and he did even more so now.

His irritation roared at the persistent lust flooding his body. If only he had never met her. Or if he had just married one of her awful sisters. Then he might at least have had some peace inside his mind, even if not inside his house.

Eleanor gave him neither.

“Good morning,” she told him sunnily.

“I did not ask if it was a good morning. I asked what you are doing.”

“What do you think I am doing?” She gestured at the curtains, the stately green

replaced by a pink-and-white print. “I thought these might be a little brighter. And, you see, they tone beautifully with the wallpaper, so there is no obligation to change anything else in the room unless we should wish it.”

“I told you not to change anything at all .” He nodded at the footmen attempting to pin the material in place. “You may leave us.”

They bowed immediately. “Yes, Your Grace.”

Sebastian turned to Eleanor. “You persist in defying me.”

Her cheeks turned a deeper color. “You make it hard not to, Sebastian. Either I do as you say and get no part of you, or I resist your instructions and I get far more of you.”

“And why do you want more of me?”

“Why do you think?” Her head tilted to one side. “You are my husband. What else should I want?”

“A life separate from me. Away from me.” He found he had stepped closer until her backside pressed against the edge of the table. “Why do you persist in trying to have a relationship with me when I have made it plain I wish for none with you?”

“Do you?” She rested a hand against his chest and looked up into his face. “Do you really wish for nothing to do with me?”

Yes . He knew what he had to say. One simple word that was close enough to the truth that he could pretend it encompassed all of the truth. A half-lie that he could convince himself he meant utterly.

And yet, he could not bring himself to say the word. His entire plan hinged on having

nothing to do with her in the slightest. To push her away to such a degree, in fact, that she would be prepared to annul their marriage and leave him to his life of solitude.

He would be safe there.

He was no longer certain he wanted to be safe.

Her gray eyes sparkled as they looked up at him, soft lips curving delightfully. How could he ever have thought her nothing more than reasonably pretty? She was, without a doubt, the most beautiful lady of his acquaintance. Stunning, compelling in every way. The soft dusting of freckles across her nose and cheeks that he wanted to kiss. The delicate point of her chin. The lashes that arched up to her browbone, as dark as her hair.

He had not seen her face the previous evening in the carriage; it had been too dark. But he knew now, looking down at her, precisely how she would have appeared.

He craved her.

To silence his urges, he took a lock of her hair in his hands, running it through his fingers. Just as soft as he had imagined, perhaps more so.

“You deserve more than I can ever give you,” he said quietly. “You would be better placed elsewhere as another man’s wife.”

“Then why marry me in the first place?” When he said nothing, she reached up onto her toes, her face dangerously close to his. “Tell me, Sebastian. Tell me why you want nothing to do with me, and I will go. But unless you do, I will fight. Anything to make you notice me. Anything to make you punish me. If that brings you joy, you may do it as often as you like.”

“And deny you every time?” He caught her hair in his hand, tightening his grip until he saw awareness of the pain pass across her features. “Is that what you would prefer, my dear? To never know the glorious rush of climax? To always be left wanting by my hand?”

“Better your hand than any other’s,” she whispered.

He dropped her hair abruptly and stepped back. This had gone too far. He needed space to breathe and come into himself. Perhaps he would need a new plan. Punishing her, after all, had been a punishment for them both, given he had needed to force himself not to touch her and give her pleasure. All it had done was inform him of how much he wanted her pleasure, and how much more important that was to him than his own.

He had not been thinking clearly.

He just feared if he was, then he might not choose to force her to leave.

Eleanor carefully arranged the freshly gathered blooms into porcelain vases, adjusting a wayward petal here, tilting a stem just so. She stepped back, head tilted, assessing her work with a critical eye. Venturing into Sebastian’s study with an armful of flowers would be nothing short of reckless—he was best left undisturbed when brooding over his ledgers. But by placing them in the drawing room, the dining room, anywhere he might pass through, she hoped to lure him beyond mere contentment. Perhaps even into something resembling happiness.

One day, he would appreciate having a wife.

At least, so she hoped. These small touches—the curtains he had argued so firmly against, and the flowers, and everything else she could think of to do—would improve his life enough that he would welcome her place in it. He would see all the

ways she improved things. And if he saw fit to punish her for her transgressions again... well, she could not say she would object. The more he gave into his desire for her, the greater hold she would have over him, and the more likely he would be to want her to stay.

Her greatest fear was if he should send her back to Margaret in disgrace, determined to live separately. That happened for some married couples; once she bore him an heir or two, he shipped her off to another house entirely, and they conducted the rest of their lives in isolation from one another.

Sebastian could not be allowed to get rid of her.

At least she had not borne him a son yet. He had not, to her knowledge, committed the act that would get her with child, so she had at least some chance of persuading him to fall in love with her.

Not that she loved him, exactly. But he had shown just enough of himself to her that she thought she could love him, and it was her duty as his wife to try.

Once she finished arranging the flowers, she called for the carriage for a meeting with Olivia. Both to update her friend on her progress, and to get some more advice about what other things she could do to persuade Sebastian to fall in love with her.

When she arrived at Olivia's house, the two girls decided to take a walk in Hyde Park so they could talk privately.

"For you know Mama likes to listen in on everything we say," Olivia said as they set out, arm in arm under the warm summer sunshine. "And she cannot hear of this, though I have no doubt it's a common enough affliction. Young ladies often need advice on how to seduce their husbands, I think."

“And you are an authority on the matter?” Eleanor teased.

“I certainly know more than you. So tell me what happened at the ball? I’m devastated that Mama refused to let me attend.”

“It would have been nice to see a friendly face there,” Eleanor agreed, but although she sighed, her disappointment was short-lived. She had too much to tell, and in truth, she hadn’t felt the loss of Olivia too much when Sebastian had spent so much of the ball by her side.

She told Olivia everything that happened, though she glossed over the details of precisely what occurred in the carriage. Better not to shock her friend too far, although she had a sneaking suspicion that Olivia would have delighted in the details and thought it was very much a good thing.

Even so, her face lit up when Eleanor explained that they had been somewhat intimate in the carriage, even if he had then proceeded to ignore her.

“I just do not know how I can get him into my bed,” she said as they passed through the gates into Hyde Park. “Of course, I know that he wants me. Even today, he could not hide that. And when I displease him, he gives me more attention than he would have done if I merely obeyed his rules.” She gave a shocked giggle. “I am becoming quite the rebel. But for all that, he does not visit my bed. He does not even seem as though he is tempted, though I would have thought...”

“I am positive he is,” Olivia declared. “What man could not be? Especially after something happened between you both. But for whatever reason, he is resisting your charms.”

“He told me that he has no wish to like me.”

“Hmm.” Olivia pursed her lips. “Perhaps he has made a vow never to fall in love with his wife.”

Or perhaps he had made a vow never to form a connection with anyone. Eleanor had not missed the way Sebastian avoided friendships. He actively tried to ignore her, and when he could not, denying her seemed to cause him near pain.

Then there was the matter of the servants. It had not yet happened, but she knew he intended to replace them all again soon—though not Abigail if she had anything to do with it. It was as though he intended everything in his life to be transient. Impermanent.

A wife was, by nature, none of those things.

Perhaps he wanted to keep his distance out of principle?

Well, she would not stand for it.

“I would like him to fall in love with me,” Eleanor whispered.

“Of course you would! I would like a man such as that to fall in love with me, too. Just imagine the way he would look on his horse riding to save me...” Olivia sighed dramatically. “And vowing his undying love. He has a handsome enough face to pull that off, you know, which is more than can be said for most gentlemen, and while I will confess he is not the most loquacious, I suppose he is pleasant enough when he does open his mouth, and really, what more could a lady want? A handsome husband who is not unpleasant, and who adores her?” She looked at Eleanor. “Are you listening to me?”

Eleanor was not, in fact, listening. She was staring ahead of her, down the long, wide path they promenaded down, to where her own knight in shining armor approached

on a big black horse, somehow more handsome than she could remember him being.

Perhaps the events of the carriage had warmed her to him more than she had thought. Or maybe it was what had occurred between them that morning when he pinned her against the table and said one thing with his mouth while his eyes said quite another.

She had known then she could never give up.

“I think,” she said, a trifle breathlessly, “you have summoned him.”

Olivia glanced around before spotting him. “Oh, you sly thing. I had no notion you knew he would be here. Is that why you were so amenable to us walking together?”

“No, I had no idea that he would be riding here.”

“You should see him,” Olivia urged, tugging at her arm. “Speak with him. Flirt with him.”

“But I don’t know how to flirt,” Eleanor protested as Olivia dragged her closer. “I am not a natural-born flirt. I would rather do nice things for him and bring him around to my presence that way.”

“That will never work! Gentlemen like the Duke are immune to nice gestures. He would live in the same house as you for a thousand years and never notice a single thing you did for him, except to find something wrong with it. But he will notice you flirting. Just think how he reacted when he saw you dancing with another gentleman. Go, go .”

Eleanor stumbled forward, but before she reached Sebastian’s side, another gentleman came out from nowhere, a wide smile on his face.

“Sebastian, old friend,” said Luke, the man from her wedding breakfast. “I had not thought to see you out riding. What are you doing here?”

“I,” he said, his voice crisp, “am avoiding my wife. The question is, what are you doing here?”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Sebastian scowled down into Luke's face, wondering how a simple ride in the park might have come to this. When he had left the library, in which he had taken refuge should Eleanor find an excuse to invade his study, he had seen the flowers everywhere, and known he would need to escape.

The flowers had been pretty, recently cut from the garden, which had survived, by some miracle, the endless supply of gardeners tending to it. He had known immediately that Eleanor had placed them there, either as a means to apologize or infuriate him.

Either way, he had known he would need to avoid her before he lost his mind and did something he could never take back, like drag her to bed and have his way with her.

She, he knew, would delight in it. And he would too, until he came to terms with what that would mean for the future of their marriage, and thus the rest of his life. And so he had ordered his horse to be saddled and ridden into town, determined to return at least in part to his old life.

Only then he had come face to face with Luke, someone else he had been determined to avoid.

"Why are you here?" he asked again.

"For the same reason as you, no doubt. To promenade and take in the town, just as we used to do," Luke laughed. "Walk with me. Save the scowl for another day. It has no

place here.”

It became more of an effort to maintain the expression, but he did so. “I beg to differ.”

“Then, by all means, continue to glower at the world,” Luke said cheerfully. “No doubt it deserves it.” He turned, stiffening, then doffing his hat, and gave a deep bow. “Your Grace! I had not known you were right behind me. How excellent to see you here, too.”

His stomach sinking, Sebastian turned on his horse to see Eleanor standing stock still, staring at him with such dismay in her expression that he almost wished he could take the words back. He did not know what was happening to him. Why, in God’s name, did he care what she thought? His goal had always been to push her away; he ought to be rejoicing now that he had taken one step closer.

“Good day, sir,” she said finally, looking back at Luke. She gave a tentative little smile that made Sebastian want to rage inside. “How pleasant to see you here.” The lady beside Eleanor nudged her soundly in the ribs. “Ah. Allow me to introduce you to my friend, Miss Olivia Ashby.”

The simpering girl beside Eleanor dipped into a curtsy, but Sebastian barely spared her a glance. He was too busy looking at his wife. Her flushed cheeks, the sparkle in her eye, and—yes, damn him, he saw it—the hope that lingered there too.

Perhaps she had not intended this visit. The surprise on her face when she had approached him said that much, but she certainly did not think this was the disaster he did.

After all, she was not the one going out of her way to avoid him.

“Olivia,” Eleanor said. “This is my husband’s friend, the Earl of Greycliff.”

“How do you do,” Miss Ashby chirped, and to Sebastian’s dismay, Luke held out his arm to her as though he anticipated the four of them walking together. Yet given they were in such a public place, and given he had an audience, Sebastian could hardly snub them all. Not if he wished to keep his inheritance intact, and convince all the executors that he was indeed playing into his father’s hand.

“I had not expected to see you here,” Eleanor murmured as she fell into step beside him.

“I often come here,” he said shortly.

“Oh? Then perhaps we can come together sometimes. If I had known you enjoyed riding and promenading, I would have suggested it.”

The prospect of promenading with a wife who looked so fresh and pretty in the summer sun was not an altogether unappealing one, though he should not have been thinking it. He ought to be despising her for finding him, not thinking about the softness of the skin at the hollow of her neck, or the way her lips had tasted against his.

All these were things it would have been better for him not to know.

She rested her hand on his arm, looking up at him as she did so, as though she thought he might fling her off.

At home, he might have done. At home, where he was free to treat her as he liked, free to have her if he so chose, he would have been both far more likely to push her away, and far more tempted to let her remain close.

“I had not expected to see you with Lord Greycliff,” she said, looking at where his former friend strolled arm in arm with her friend. “You told me once you were not friends.”

“We are not. He found me here much the same as you did.”

“But why?” she persisted. “If he is so eager to be your friend, why do you deny him?”

“He lost that right a long time ago.”

“So then he seeks forgiveness?” She let out a long sigh, and Sebastian cursed her for understanding the situation so quickly and easily. “And you are reluctant to give it. Did he do something very bad?”

“Not in the slightest. I merely find it more convenient to have as few ties to my companions as possible.”

A frown touched her brow, drawing a line down the center, and he had the ridiculous urge to smooth it away somehow. To reassure her, though that had never been his purpose. “Is that truly what you think? That it is better to be lonely?”

“I said nothing about loneliness.”

“Perhaps not, but does that mean you are never lonely?” She peered up at him, her eyes almost blue in the sunlight. He thought briefly, explosively, that she was the most beautiful woman he had ever laid eyes on, and he burned a little with the need to touch her, to make her his in the only way he knew he could not.

She may be his in the eyes of the law, but she would never be. And that was the way he wanted it, even if sometimes his fingers itched with the need to feel her skin

against him, and his lips burned with the memory of her kiss.

She was a ghost to him, yet so achingly alive. Sometimes, in moments like these, he wondered if he could ever survive this marriage.

“I am too busy to be lonely,” he muttered instead, attempting to distract himself. “I have my work, my estate, and my engagements in town. When one has as many things as I do to occupy himself, he has no need for idle friendship. Luke’s friendship would not reflect well on either of us, and I have no desire for it.”

Eleanor’s hand tightened on his arm. “Will you let no one in?” she whispered, and although they were on a large pathway in Hyde Park, surrounded by trees, the Serpentine in the distance, and many other promenading families all around, he felt briefly as though she had transported them to a private parlor where there was no one but the still air around them to hear her words.

He stopped, and so did she. The cruel rejoinder was on his tongue, a heartbeat away from crushing the delicate hope in her eyes. He needed to crush that hope, but even as he thought the words, he knew he could not bring himself to do so.

A long time ago, he had made the decision to keep everyone in his life at bay, and it had worked spectacularly—until now. Better he keep his distance and not get hurt. The moment he allowed someone to pass his defenses, he knew they would take advantage of his weakness and use it against him.

After all, it had happened before. Everyone he had ever cared about had left him.

He pressed his lips together, irritated at himself, at every laughing god in the sky who had watched him propose to this woman without doing anything to intervene and spare him.

Even without letting her into his life, perhaps she would destroy him anyway.

He leaned in closer. “Do you think you have the power to change me, Eleanor? A man’s habits are not easy ones to break.”

“I am not looking to break you, Sebastian,” she murmured back. “Nor am I looking to change you. I just want to know you.”

Shaken, he leaned back again. Luke and Miss Ashby had strolled further ahead. No one was close enough to overhear them, but he felt exposed, flayed open under the punishing glare of the sun. Only, it wasn’t the sun seeing through him, but Eleanor.

“You will never,” he told her, as harshly as he could, and dropped her arm. They walked the rest of the way in silence.

As she traveled back to the manor, Eleanor rubbed her fingers together where she had held his jacket. Although he had told her she would never know him, she had not missed the flash of indecision across his face, so raw it looked almost like pain. Perhaps his mouth said one thing, and perhaps that was what he thought he should say—cruelty appeared to be the thing he relied upon the most—but she got the impression that was far from the thing his heart desired.

And so, uncowed by his rejection of her, she prepared for the evening in relative solitude, allowing him to think that perhaps he would not find her again that day. Then, as night approached, she bid Abigail to dress her in her most revealing nightgown.

Sebastian would not get away with this so easily. She would not allow it.

Perhaps he thought his explanation in Hyde Park would be enough to satisfy her, but he would find himself mistaken. He found it convenient to have as few ties to his

fellow man as possible? Even if he believed it was the truth, she did not think so. Everything about him spoke of a man who suffered deeply from loneliness. A man whose loneliness had grown to be a part of him, as integral to his being as an arm or a leg. Of course he did not notice its presence; he would only notice its absence.

She would ensure that he noticed it. One way or the other.

And if her presence in his bedchamber inspired other things, then so be it. Her entire body hummed with desire at the thought, and as she stepped inside his bedchamber—through the main door, as the adjoining one had remained locked since that first night—she felt the slick heat between her thighs.

It did not take long for Sebastian to join her. At first, as he entered and shrugged off his coat, he did not notice her in the shadows. He looked weary here, she noticed. He dragged a hand down his face with a sigh and strolled to the window, where a low moon illuminated the formal gardens and the wilderness beyond. Somewhere in the distance lay London, but they lay far enough outside it that the city was only a smudge on the horizon, invisible in the dark.

She watched, fascinated, as Sebastian tugged his cravat off and tossed it aside. He then lit a candle, shielding the flame from the air and touching it to the wick. Light bloomed, casting his reflection against the window panes. Unable to wait any longer, Eleanor stepped out from where she had been standing, and Sebastian's head snapped around.

“You seem tired,” she began, and took one step closer. “I thought I might be able to assist you with that.”

His gaze flicked to the adjoining door, then back to her. “I thought I—”

“You did lock it. I entered through the main door.” She reached for the hem of her

nightgown, and in one smooth motion, tugged it over her head and away. This had not, strictly, been part of Olivia's instructions, but the events in the carriage left her under no illusions about the strength of his desire for her. Whatever his reasons for not wanting her as a wife, he certainly wanted her as a woman.

He sucked in a breath as her nightgown dropped to the floor in a silken heap beside her ankles. The cool air bit at her bare breasts and the tender, aching flesh between her legs. She had never been exposed like this before, but the light that flared in his eyes—desperate hunger—made her feel warm all over.

“Eleanor.” His voice cracked on her name.

“If you want me to leave, you will have to force me out of the door.”

“I gave you instructions in the carriage.”

“And I have obeyed them.” She sucked in a long, deep breath. “But I wish for you to touch me again. I wish for—” Everything . She wished for everything, even though she did not know precisely what that meant.

“I know.” He blinked, and it was as though his entire being focused in on her, his attention as sharp and cutting as a knife, just as deadly, just as sure. She craved the feel of it against her skin. Her nipples peaked, and her breasts felt heavy. This desire was an all-consuming thing inside her, a need that transcended mere lust.

“Sebastian,” she whispered. “Please.”

Perhaps he had already made up his mind, or perhaps her plea was what did it for him. Regardless, he took two strides toward her, lifted her, and carried her across to his large poster bed. Eleanor stared at the darkened hangings above her, then up at Sebastian's face, equally dark, but this time with hunger.

“You should not have entered my bedchamber tonight,” he muttered, his voice low and dangerous. “That was a mistake.”

She shivered in delicious anticipation. “Show me what a mistake it was.”

He let out a small groan before reaching up to cup her breasts, tweaking her nipple just hard enough that she gasped through the flash of pain that traveled through her, hot and wet and pleasurable .

“Before you arrived, I had plans of my own,” he said, giving her breasts a light slap, one at a time. She held her breath, waiting for more. There would be more—she knew it, a womanly instinct reassured her that he would not step away now.

“ Oh ?”

“Now you are going to fulfill them for me.” He shrugged out of his waistcoat, then ripped his shirt off from over his head. The light played across the muscles of his chest and back, and she followed the trail of hair that pointed to his waistband. The carriage had been too dark to see much at all, but here, with the light of the candle, she would finally see it all . He would be as bare to her as she was to him.

Lastly, he addressed himself to his breeches, tugging them down his legs so his member stood free, thick, and proud as it jutted from his body. For a moment, trepidation filled her. Although she had not known precisely what to expect, she knew a little of what transpired between a man and a woman. After all, she had been around the ladies of the ton often enough, even if they frequently forgot she was there.

So she knew, therefore, that his length should go inside her . She would, somehow, have to accommodate his girth.

Still, she swallowed and attempted not to let him see any of her thoughts. That would not help matters; no matter what he pretended, she knew he would not do anything to truly hurt her. There had been enough of kindness in him—betrayed reluctantly—for her to know that she was safe with him.

He bent closer and kissed her, one hand roughly around the back of her head, tangled in the hair she had left down. She kissed him back with as much enthusiasm as she could muster. More, if possible.

She wanted him. How she wanted him.

His hand slid down her body, across her stomach, to the damp hair below, and the slick flesh that lay between her thighs. He groaned at the feel of it.

“So responsive,” he murmured as she twitched, pleasure alive inside her. “What folly to have married such a sensual being.”

“Folly ?” she gasped.

“I could not stop myself from wanting to pleasure you even if necessity demanded it.” He touched her again. “But that’s not what you want, is it, sweet? I know how you respond to me. Pleasure that is given freely does not taste as sweet as that which is earned.”

She gasped a little at the push of his fingers inside her. Yet even as she craved his touch, she knew he was right. She wanted to do something for him—unlike the last time, during which she had not been allowed to touch him once.

If she merely took, the feel of his hands against hers would not feel as good.

“One day,” he murmured, “I will worship you as you deserve to be worshiped. But

for today, we will indulge in something a little different, and you will have your chance to please me.”

“Thank you, sir,” she said on a gasp. “What would you have me do?”

“What indeed .” The words sounded dark to her ears, and when she glanced up at him, it appeared as though he was in pain. “But do not fear. I will not take what is left of your innocence.”

She frowned, trying to think past the working of his hands between her legs. It was as though he could not stop, as though the idea of giving her pleasure drugged him as utterly as the pleasure she wanted to give him would her. “So we are not going to...?”

“No .” He withdrew his hand from her. “Do not ask again.”

The command weighed on her. Ordinarily, in these circumstances, she found she did not mind commands. In fact, it gave her a perverse joy to obey them, to prove herself to him, to do everything he wished for his pleasure. But this felt like a command too far when it related to their marriage.

Before she could protest the point, he slid his hand back to her, slipping a finger inside with very little resistance. The stab of pleasure briefly lost her grip on her thoughts. What did anything else matter when he was doing such wonderful things to her?

“Let me,” she whispered, reaching for him. “Let me touch you.”

He caught her wrist, then brought her fingers to his lips. The gesture disarmed her, and she looked at him with wide eyes. He had so rarely been affectionate, so rarely been tender like this, that it utterly threw her off-guard.

“Very well.” He spoke against her lips, then traced his hand back up her body to her breasts, cupping them in his hand. His eyes grew very dark. “On your knees.”

“My knees.”

“Did I or did I not give you an instruction?”

The command in his voice sent another shiver through her, one that rivaled even the pleasure he wrought upon her, and she slid off the bed and onto the carpet, sitting before him and looking up. He spread his legs and reached down to cup her chin.

“If you do not like what I am about to do to you, then tap my leg twice.” He took her hand and demonstrated. “I will stop.”

“And if I don’t?”

“Then I will be at liberty to reward you.”

Reward . Oh, she had an idea of what that might entail, and the thought squirmed inside her, eager to be freed.

“I’ll be good,” she promised.

The ghost of a smile crossed his mouth. “I hope so. For both our sakes.” He took hold of his manhood with one hand, and threaded his other through her hair. “Easy now,” he said, urging her face closer. “Just relax. It may feel strange at first.”

“I can do it.”

“Good girl,” he murmured, and brushed the head of his length against her lips. Acting on instinct, she opened her mouth, and he held still as she flicked her tongue across

the hot skin, and the salty bead of moisture at its tip. Then, testing her limits, she sank deeper into him. Sebastian went utterly still, save for one shattered breath.

Yes , this was what she had always wanted. To make him feel like this .

A sense of control even as she yielded to his commands.

At first, it took a moment for her to adjust to the feel of something so large and domineering in her mouth. She had to loosen her jaw, find ways of holding her teeth out of the way so they did not scrape down his length. She flicked her tongue across him and was rewarded with his groan. His hips thrust a little into her mouth, and she choked, her throat closing at the sudden intrusion.

The pressure on her hair loosened, and she had a moment to gather herself before she took him in her mouth again. She adjusted to the sensation, breathing through her nose. When she moved, he kept still, allowing her to choose her pace.

As she accustomed herself to the feel, she found she relished the sensation. There were so many things she could do. And by his muttered praises, he liked the tears that streamed down her cheeks, and when she coughed and choked on his length, it earned her praises like ‘good girl’ and ‘that’s it, sweet’, and she found she craved that almost as much as she yearned for his pleasure.

That, at least, she knew she delivered in spades. His hand kept tightening around her head, keeping her still as he withdrew from her a little, before returning himself to his previous position. There could be no denying that he enjoyed this, and she had been the one to bring that about. He had offered her a challenge and she had risen to it. Now, he found himself lost in the feel of her, and she had done that.

There could be no greater compliment.

He pulled free from her lips abruptly, so fast she thought she had done something wrong, and bent to take hold of her arms, heaving her up and throwing her down onto the bed.

“It’s no use,” he muttered, sounding more as though he was talking to himself than her. “I must have you. I cannot deny myself again. When I climax and paint you with my seed, I want to hear your gasp with pleasure. Say my name when I’m inside you. I cannot leave that to the imagination. Not when I have spent so long dreaming of it.” He bent and suckled on her nipple, even as his other hand found her wet center. “You feel exquisite,” he groaned.

Mindless, feeling as though she was half mad with pleasure, she reached for his length, wrapping her fingers around him and moving. His entire body jerked and shuddered, and he let out a gasp, which only seemed to spur him on. Now she knew a little of what she was looking for, she understood from his panting breath that he was close to his climax.

She longed to be the one to give it to him, and he did nothing to knock her hands away.

“Don’t hold back,” he said. “Tell me you love it when I touch you. Show me what you want. I want to see you writhe in my arms, sweetness.”

There was no world in which she could do anything else. She opened her mouth, and nothing but moans and gasping left her lips.

“My good girl,” he muttered. “You have a natural affinity for this. For pleasure. For—” He cut himself off, and said her name again, pushing closer to her. She felt him jerk, heard the groan that broke from him, and felt the warmth of his seed across her stomach and chest. The primal nature of his marking made her heart pound.

She was his .

Yet even though he had just spilled himself on her, he did not stop. No. Instead, he spread her legs still wider, staring at the apex of her thighs with such hunger, it made something in her chest pinch and ache.

“Oh yes,” he whispered, moving his other hand to her folds as he pressed another finger inside to join the first. “You have been very good. Do you want me to bring you to your climax, my sweet?” The eagerness in his voice could not be denied. He very much wanted to give her pleasure.

“Yes, please ,” she gasped. “Yes, sir. Thank you.”

“You have made life particularly difficult ever since you arrived here as my wife,” he said, stroking her again, then sliding one finger inside her. Her back arched from the bed. “And you refuse to allow me to go back to my old ways. How am I to ignore you in times such as these?” He kissed the inside of her knee, an oddly tender gesture that made her heart contract. “How am I to want to when you put yourself so easily in my power?”

“Sebastian,” she pleaded, already close.

“I never had any desire for a companion, much less a wife. I wanted for nothing. And still, I want for nothing. You should understand that.”

She did not, could not, but she had no air left with which to speak.

“I am content as I am. You cannot change me, sweet.” He pressed his thumb against her pleasure point. “I will not bow to your expectations of me. You would do better not to try.” He worked her, watching her with an almost pained expression on his face. “This cannot happen again. Promise me that, Eleanor. Promise me you will not

try to break me again.”

She had not been attempting anything of the sort, but the raw agony in his eyes told her that he believed she was—if not attempting it, then close to succeeding. She wished she knew what lay inside his mind and heart, why he told her to leave while beckoning the sweet oblivion of pleasure closer with every heartbeat.

He was a man built of nothing but conundrum, and she was determined to discover what lay behind his contrary, contradicting statements.

Pleasure burst over her like a firework in the dark, an explosion of color and light so vast and consuming, she lost herself for several long moments. When she came back into herself, Sebastian was kissing her thighs, soft, sweet kisses that nearly took her breath away.

She blinked at him, her chest suddenly so full she thought she might cry. “That was wonderful,” she breathed, her words constricted.

He looked up at her, the harshness of his face softened by the light and the gentleness of his expression. “Stay there,” he said, then rose. She lay where she was as he walked to a bowl of water no doubt placed there by his valet, and brought back a damp cloth. He then cleaned her, wiping her breasts with more of that tenderness she had never thought she would experience from him.

Now, more than ever, she felt certain she had made the right decision in coming here, even if it did mean invading his personal space.

“Sebastian,” she whispered, catching his wrist as he went to move away. A great languor had settled over her body, but she knew she needed to say this. “Why do you push everyone in your life away? Do not tell me you are content. No man can be content with isolation.”

The softness in his face vanished; his jaw flexed. “Do not presume to know me so well, Eleanor. You might be my wife, and you might have visited my bed on this single occasion, but that does not give you a right to my thoughts, and it never shall.”

“I—”

“It is time for you to leave. Surely now you have received all you came for.” He gave her a smile, the cruel edges of it slicing her open. Yet despite the harshness of his words, she saw a flash of pain in his eyes. In intending to hurt her, he had hurt himself. He was pushing her away just as he wanted to push everyone else—because he was not yet ready to let her in. Whatever had happened between them hadn’t been enough. She’d thought perhaps it might have been, that his plea for her not to break him hinted at a removal of the iron walls he’d placed around his heart, but that was not so.

And she saw the pain it caused him as clearly as if she had plunged a dagger into his chest. Whatever he might pretend to himself and her, he was not indifferent.

She would not allow him to continue in this way.

“I will leave you now,” she said, gathering her nightgown and holding it against her body. “Thank you for the gift of pleasure you gave me. I shall not soon forget it.”

His eyes looked very dark in his face as he watched her, but he said nothing as she left the bedchamber and returned to her own.

Sebastian stared at the door long after Eleanor had slipped through it. His mind raced, though it kept fixing on the expression on her face when she said that he could not be happy. His resentment caught in his throat.

Of course his life made him content. No man could be happy all the time—that was a

fool's errand! And her presumption in thinking that she could compel him to be happy.

Her. A chit of a girl. His wife whom he had married under duress. Yes, he was weak in the flesh, and it had been too long since he'd had a woman. And yes, now when she smiled, he felt the expression in his chest as though she had lit a candle there. He had the oddest urge to make sure it happened more often, which could only be a reflection of more weakness. Once he got the space from her he very much needed, he would go back to normal.

He would not break. Not give in. Not allow her the liberties she so obviously wanted. It was better this way. Better. Safer .

Even if, when he was cleaning up the mess he had made of her, he had imagined her spending the night in his bed, warm and safe in his arms.

His .

Stupid, weak, ludicrous thought. He despised it. Despised her.

Never again. He would not give another person the means to hurt him again, no matter how tempting she made the prospect appear.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Eleanor woke refreshed and reinvigorated. The things he had done to her body certainly helped her feel as though she was ready to take on the world, but more, she had seen the pain in his face when he denied being discontented with his lot in life.

There was something more under the surface here, and she would discover it.

This was the day the servants changed once more—with the exception of Abigail, whom Eleanor had requested remain—and Eleanor took advantage of the relative chaos to slip into his study and close the door behind her. Sebastian had ridden out to London again, no doubt to avoid the confusion of people entering and leaving the house—and to ignore her—so she knew this was her moment.

To her surprise, she found the study to be far cleaner and tidier than she recalled it being the first time she visited. After she had tidied everything, and his subsequent annoyance, she had assumed he'd have gone back to his old ways. But although the decanter of brandy lay on his desk, an empty glass beside it, the clothes and trays of used plates had been removed. Whether Sebastian had done so himself or whether he had instructed a servant to clean up after him, she couldn't say, but it sent another spiral of warmth through her. Perhaps he didn't want to admit it even to himself, but she had made an impact on him. He had changed because of her.

A pleasing prospect. A remarkably satisfying one. She had been the direct cause of this, and it had changed the trajectory of his life, even by a very small amount.

She moved to his desk where he kept his correspondence. One thing she had noticed

since being in the house was that he kept no paintings of his ancestors on the walls—and particularly none of his parents. Either of them. A gallery of portraits lay on the second floor, and she had walked the uneven floorboards often enough, staring into the faces of King Charles II and other such famous men—but she had not once seen a face that pertained to the Dukedom.

It did not take an oracle to conclude that Sebastian held something against them. Or even that he grieved their deaths to such an extent that seeing their portraits around would have hurt more than he could have borne. But she did not think that could be the sole reason for his seclusion. Not only did he reject her, but he rejected everyone else in his life—including servants and his former friend. Something did not quite add up.

She flicked through the invitations and cards across his desk, as well as inventories, letters to his steward and man of business in town, and set them aside with a sigh. This had nothing of use.

Unless anything more sensitive had been hidden.

She opened and closed the drawers in the desk, rifling through papers and ink and wax, a large ring rolling around the wooden bottom of one drawer. She ran her fingers across the crest stamped at the top. His signet ring. Most gentlemen she knew wore theirs, but then again, Sebastian did not resemble the other gentlemen she knew.

As she placed the ring back, her fingers brushed against the end of the drawer and she heard a faint click. A hidden panel opened, and Eleanor saw a flash of white. Paper.

Fingers trembling now, her heart in her throat, she pulled the panel free and drew out the papers, all tied together with string. There were a collection of letters and newspaper clippings, meticulously cut and bound together. She sank onto his chair as she flicked through them. A recording of his parents' deaths, suspected

poisoning—though by the look of things, nothing had ever been confirmed. The article mentioned the way that Sebastian, described as a mere boy, had stumbled across his parents' bodies.

Her throat burned, and she lowered the clipping, staring into the distance with blurring vision.

In her mind's eye, the scene played out in heartbreaking detail. Young Sebastian—only thirteen years of age—entering his parents' bedchamber. Their frozen bodies. His horror.

She could not bear it.

Poor Sebastian. How could he have borne such a thing?

No man should ever endure what he, as a boy, had been forced to suffer.

For a moment, she attempted to imagine what she would have felt if she had walked in on her father's lifeless corpse. Her throat closed, and a tear slid down her cheek. Phantom pain ripped through her chest; her stomach cramped. The grief—not hers, not earned by her, yet still so achingly present in her body—nearly stopped her lungs.

No. She could not fall apart over something that happened fifteen years ago, and to someone else. But even as she picked up the paper and continued reading, she had an image in her head of the dark-haired, mischievous boy, whose childhood had been stolen so abruptly.

Behind the first clipping was another, briefly detailing how Sebastian's uncle made a claim regarding Sebastian's supposed illegitimacy. Eleanor knew nothing about it, not even rumors, but from what she could gather, nothing could be proven. Sebastian's father, the former Duke, had claimed Sebastian as his son; that was

enough. The claim of succession had evidently not been altered. Yet the fact that Sebastian's uncle would betray his own nephew in such a way, at such a time... Eleanor could hardly believe it. She had been betrayed many times by her stepmother and her family, but could it be classed as betrayal if she never cared about them or their good opinion to begin with? This here— this felt like betrayal. She pressed a hand to her mouth as she stared at the cold typed words, then carefully set them aside to see what lay underneath.

Letters. A pile of them, kept so carefully it made her heart sting. She gently unfolded the first. This missive was short and to the point, an official resignation by what sounded like a butler. The date listed it as being delivered only a few days after the death of Sebastian's parents. Such a cruel, heartless thing to do to a boy who needed nothing more than familiarity and support. If she had been there, she would have—

Well, she would have been too young to be of use to him. But she would certainly have done her best.

The note itself held no emotion, but the fact Sebastian had held onto it even after all this time told a different story. Even if the butler in question had felt nothing, Sebastian must have felt the blow acutely. And he kept the letter to...

She didn't know why. A reminder, perhaps. Or a token of affection.

No, surely not.

But a reminder of what? Eleanor thought about the servants, replaced so frequently. Could that all be because of this one resignation?

Her breath came too quickly as she flipped through the remainders of the letters. Several from the Earl of Greycliff, who signed himself as Luke from the first until the last. The first letter detailed Greycliff's intentions of leaving for the Indies for

personal reasons that he never expressed. After that, he wrote further letters that Eleanor inferred Sebastian had never replied to. Eventually, after a period of years, the letters stopped, aside from one final one informing Sebastian that Luke intended to return to England.

No doubt Sebastian had not responded to that, either.

They had been young when Luke left, Eleanor saw, perhaps in their early twenties. Perhaps, even directly after they had graduated from Oxford together. She felt that blow deep in the pit of her stomach too. Understanding, on a fundamental level, what losing friendship in that manner might have done to a man who already felt so alone in the world.

No wonder he had chosen to spurn Luke now. No wonder.

Yet Luke had continued to write. And now, back in London, he continued to seek Sebastian out. Perhaps due to his own need for absolution, but Eleanor suspected it was more than that. Guilt, yes, but also genuine friendship. Friendship that Sebastian, so lost in his own lack of self-worth, could not see.

Eleanor hurt along with him. She knew how it felt to lose almost everything, the pain it brought with it, and the way that nothing could ease that hurt. But if he wanted to save himself from pain in the future, he would not achieve that by blocking out the only people who could bring him joy. His friends. Her .

The final pile of letters underneath were more notes. Slips of perfumed paper signed with an L . The perfume had almost entirely worn off now, but Eleanor could imagine that they had been once liberally scented. From the affectionate tone of the notes, agreeing to meet and expressing a wish that Sebastian would be at the same events, they had been lovers.

No, not lovers. Courting . Sebastian had been courting her. No doubt with the intent to marry. Eleanor swallowed the utterly irrational lump of jealousy in her throat. Sebastian hadn't so much as known her then, and he had asked her to marry him, even if his reasons still weren't clear to her. He had shown no signs of being in love with another lady,

Except that Eleanor did not doubt he had been—or at least if not in love, then certainly affectionate toward. In a way he was decidedly not with her.

Yet, for all that, nothing had come of it. After all, he had not married this mysterious woman.

Eleanor flicked through the notes, frowning when they stopped abruptly with no resolution to be seen. The last few felt somewhat colder in tone, but they still professed affection and agreed to their usual arrangements and meetings.

Eleanor sat back in her chair and tried to think. Although she had never engaged in her half-sisters' gossip about Sebastian, she vaguely recalled someone mentioning something about a former beau of his.

Lady Lydia.

Eleanor's stomach lurched. She knew Lady Lydia, as most young ladies did; she was nothing more or less than one of the most beautiful ladies to have ever graced the ton . At three-and-twenty, she remained unmarried, but several people reported she had received no fewer than five offers of marriage.

Was Sebastian one of those number?

She disliked the thought and the surge of hurt that came with it. So what if Lady Lydia was reputedly one of the ton's most beautiful ladies, and she was not?

Sebastian had married her .

Because she had not said no... Had Lady Lydia refused him? Or had she merely not come up to scratch?

Perhaps I should not presume, but I hope it's the latter.

Regardless, he had kept the letters.

She tallied the loss Sebastian must have faced over the years. First the death of his parents, which he himself had discovered. Then his uncle, his butler—or perhaps valet?—and Luke. And then finally, Lady Lydia.

There was a chance, of course, that Sebastian had been the one to end things. After all, he had done his utmost to end things with Eleanor, as much as one could end things when they were already married. But somehow, given the affectionate tone of the notes, and the slight coolness toward the end, Eleanor doubted it.

How he must have suffered over the years. No wonder he feared letting anyone in now. Her nose stung at the thought, and she smoothed her fingers over the newspaper clippings. Still. She could do at least one thing for him: prove beyond all doubt that she wasn't going anywhere. She would not be another person who abandoned him. Even if it took years for him to trust her, she would give them to him. After all, they had the rest of their lives together.

But she wouldn't let him know that she had rifled through his personal things. Already, she felt as though it was too much of an imposition.

Presently, there was at least one thing she could do. She brought out Lady Lydia's directions and a fresh sheet of paper, then began to write.

Sebastian came back from London in a bad mood, made worse by his wife greeting him in the entryway and informing him that she required him to accompany her on an outing she had arranged.

“After all, you are my husband,” she said, entirely unnecessarily. “And perhaps husbands do not accompany their wives everywhere, but they do at least accompany them sometimes. And we should go for a walk this afternoon while the weather holds. You declared yesterday you intended to meet with your tenants.” She looked up at him with smiling lips and clear eyes, and Sebastian felt his frown slipping. What he ought to do, he knew, was tell her that she was going nowhere with him, and that he would not accompany her anywhere.

But he had lost his appetite for pushing her away. The entire endeavor seemed futile, and he had given in so often in order to please her. Despite his every attempt, his days were ruled by thoughts of her happiness.

Is there a way of convincing her to give up on this marriage?

He could not think of one.

If he thought about it from a particular direction, he could perhaps convince himself that the only reason he had given into her seduction—for that had been precisely what it was—was so he could show her what she would miss out on in their marriage.

A different brand of cruelty, if that truly was what he aimed for.

But deep down, he knew it wasn't. And he knew, deep inside, that the reason he heaved a sigh and murmured, “I suppose you give me no choice,” was because he could not quite bear seeing disappointment cloud the sunniness of her expression.

“Excellent!” she chimed. “Would you like something to eat? Drink? I prepared some

food for your arrival.” She took his arm, and somewhat blindsided, he allowed her to lead her to the dining room, where a light luncheon had already been laid out. He was in his riding clothes, unfit for company, but Eleanor kept up a steady stream of light conversation, not seeming to require a reply. She had, he noticed, gone ahead with changing the curtains, and although he had resolved to oppose her decision, he rather liked the new brilliance they added to the room.

He was, he realized in a rush, doomed.

Once he had finished eating, she accompanied him upstairs and waited for him to change before taking his arm once again and walking him downstairs. He had the overwhelming impression that he was merely a bystander in the events of his own life.

“Is there something you would like to speak with me about?” he asked finally as they emerged into the formal gardens together.

“I merely thought it would be nice for us to spend some time together.”

“I thought I had made my views on the subject perfectly plain.”

“Oh, yes.” She gave him a sunny smile. “But then I decided it was foolish for a husband and a wife to know so little about one another. You may ask me any question you like.”

“And if I wish to know nothing about you?” he asked.

“Well, then I suppose I will have to tell you something I think of.”

“Wait, I have a question.” He pointed to the slight bulge in her skirts where he knew that infernal mouse lay. “Why do you have a mouse? What in the world possessed

you to choose such an animal for a pet and companion?”

She gave a rueful laugh, stroking the rodent with altogether too much affection. “My stepmother would never have allowed me a pet, and she despised mice and all other creatures. I’d have gotten myself a rat, but I could not quite bear the sight of their tails, and I could not have hidden it so effectively about my person. When you encountered me first in my stepmother’s house, I had lost him and needed to find him before I risked something terrible happening to him.”

“But where did you acquire him?”

“I found a tiny nest of babies. I suppose the cat had discovered it? I took him and raised him as my own—fortunately, he was old enough that he could eat solid foods.”

“And no one else knows about him?” Sebastian clarified, feeling as though he was living a dream.

“Correct. I thought that was best, considering the situation.”

Considering the situation indeed. If he had encountered the thing without her influence, he certainly would have gone out of his way to dispose of it. He scowled down at her. “I dislike it.”

“That’s because you don’t know him.” To his horror, she put her hand into her pocket and withdrew the creature. “Here. He’s perfectly docile, as you can see.”

To give her credit, the rodent sat calmly in the middle of her palm, cleaning its whiskers and looking up at him with the utter absence of fear. If anything, he suspected he was more afraid of it, which was a ludicrous thought for a grown man. He had faced death in a curricule during a race to Brighton—which he had won, and bet heavily on the outcome of his doing so. By comparison, allowing a tiny beast to

walk across his hand hardly seemed like much of a trial.

“Does it have a name?” he asked finally, reluctant to hold out his hand to encourage it to move.

“Of course. He is named Scrunch . Here, try holding him.” She grabbed his wrist and brought his hand down level with hers. To his horror, though he ought to have known it would happen, the mouse stepped across onto his skin, tiny claws digging in. The weight was miniscule, and he had to fight the urge to fling the creature away.

“There.” Eleanor beamed up at him, and the urge to dispose of the mouse lessened considerably. “Many people seem to be afraid of them, but I hardly know why. Even if he decided to bite you—and he would never, of course—he could hardly do any damage. And he is a wonderful companion.”

It occurred to him, not for the first time, how lonely her life must have been for her to rely on the company of such a small, relatively stupid animal. Perhaps it felt some affection toward her as the hand that fed it, but he doubted it experienced any real loyalty.

But Eleanor looked as though she considered it a friend. How few friends must she have had to feel that way?

And how much of a bastard was he to contemplate sending her back to that loveless, friendless existence just so he could go back to his life of peace and solitude?

Sometimes he thought there could be no man less deserving of a woman like her, who had so much to give—and who evidently wanted to give so much. Perhaps it would be better if he allowed her the chance to marry another. She was a Duchess, after all.

Yet, somehow, he doubted that she would have that liberty. Just now, as he watched

the way she stroked her tiny pet, he realized that she would have nowhere to go except back to her stepmother's, and although she had gained a backbone with him, her stepmother put the true fear of God into her. The way he never had.

"I think he likes you," she said, still holding his wrist, the touch of her fingers a flagellant against his skin. He could feel every press of her fingertips as though they were imprinted upon his very soul. Even if she let him go now, he would be carrying the mental bruises of her touch for the remainder of his life. He could be cruel to her, he could hurt her so very easily—she was so much smaller than him—but he could never wound her the way she had done to him. And she had no clue. None whatsoever.

"You can have him back now," he said, tipping the mouse back into her cupped hands. "I've recalled some urgent business I have in the house."

"Sebastian?"

He had turned away, but now he spun back. She looked at him with such hope in her eyes, he felt like a villain for walking away. "What is it?"

"You know that I will..." She fiddled with the skirts of her dress, putting Scrunch back in her pocket. "You know that I will always be here for you, don't you?"

He stared at her. "Many people make promises they can't keep, Eleanor. Don't be one of them."

"I'm not. I—" She frowned, looking as though she was searching for words. "I want you to know because I care about you."

Others had said similar things over the years. His uncle, before telling the world that Sebastian was a bastard, had insisted that he cared. His parents cared—that, he

believed—and much good it had done them.

Eleanor did not care. She couldn't. He wouldn't let this be who they were.

She came closer, putting her hand on his arm, slim fingers cool against his overheated skin. "I know you don't want to risk anyone abandoning you again. It is why you change the servants and why you won't let Luke back in. You were friends before, weren't you?"

"Did he tell you that?"

"No. But you are too familiar with each other to be anything but former friends. Let him in, Sebastian. Let us all in. Tell me what you fear, and I will soothe it for you."

"Impossible ." But even as he said it, he found himself aching to believe her. For a moment, he forgot why he married her in the first place, and when he remembered, it was an unwelcome thought. A pointless one, too, because what good was that promise he had made to himself? She would not let him go.

And the scariest thing was he wasn't sure he wanted her to leave.

He just didn't know if he could trust her to stay.

"You are too good to me," he murmured, cupping her chin in his hand before stepping back. "But my fears are beyond even your touch."

"Tell me them. Entrust them to me, Sebastian. You don't think I can help, but if you trust me, if you let me in..."

If he let her in, he risked opening himself up to the kind of pain he didn't think he could survive twice.

What if he cared for her? And then, what if she left?

But even as he thought that, he became aware of an increasing urge to give in. He had the money so long as he married—what if he came to care for his wife? What if they were married in the traditional sense, in the sense that they loved one another?

Could she love him? He wasn't certain he was lovable.

“If I let you in, I will never be able to let you out again,” he said gently. “You might think that you can fix all the breaks and holes in me, but they are too much for anyone, even you.”

“How can you be so certain?”

Because he had loved before, and his insecurities had broken them apart.

She raised her gaze to meet his, the vulnerability in her expression halting him where he stood. Awareness of it lanced through him, the sudden desire to bring her into his arms and soothe her old hurts away. “When I lost my father, I thought I was alone in the world. And I thought, perhaps, that I would always be alone. But then you came along, and you married me. I don't suppose I'll ever know the reason why, because at the time, it certainly wasn't out of affection.” She chewed her lip. “But now I know you a little better, and I think that you have also known how it feels to be alone, to feel as though you have no one there but you. Only, now we have each other.” She stepped forward, looking up into his face, and the desire to gather her closer almost overwhelmed him. He had the unfamiliar sensation of wanting to punish her family for leaving her feeling so hurt, so worthless.

The way she felt resonated in him. How many times had he felt as though there was something fundamentally wrong with him?

He could soothe her pain. When she came this close, it grew harder to push her away again. And when she had her hands on his arm, her eyes on his, he found the old fear banked. Only when she left his sight, would it rise again, threatening to swallow him.

“Being here with you has made me feel as though I am—as though my life could mean something,” she blurted. “I’ve seen parts of the man you are underneath, and I know that you feel the same way. We can heal each other, but only if you let me in. Open your heart to me. Let me be here for you. I am not going to leave the way other people in your life have.” She paused, as though she had struck a sword straight through the heart of his fears. He stared at her, wanting to believe her more than he had wanted anything in his life. “I’ll be waiting for you to realize it. One day, I hope you’ll understand how special this thing between us can be, if only you will let it.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The next social engagement Sebastian and Eleanor attended was a picnic by the side of the Thames. Sebastian joined Eleanor out of a sense of obligation—or at least, that was what he told himself. In actuality, he found the riverside, with the picnic blankets and parasols and small boats, oddly charming.

That was, until Luke joined them at their blanket. “Sebastian, old boy,” he said altogether too cheerfully. “Just the fellow I was hoping to see.”

Beside him, Eleanor beamed up at the man. “Lord Greycliff! I am so glad you could make it.”

“I was delighted to receive your invitation, ma’am.” Luke bowed gracefully over Eleanor’s hand as Sebastian scowled.

“You invited him?” he demanded.

“And Miss Ashby,” Eleanor said, standing on her tiptoes and looking through the crowd. “I believe she is attending with her mother, but she should be here soon, and she can join us in our boat.”

Sebastian blinked. “Boat?”

“But of course.” She looked at him innocently, all large eyes and fluttering eyelashes and butter-wouldn’t-melt smile. When she did that, she looked positively angelic, which did not help matters. “Why would we attend a picnic if we did not also have a

boat ride? This is London, you know, and I have it on the best authority that boating is the height of fashion.”

“On whose authority?” Sebastian growled.

“Mine.” Luke stretched out beside them both and plucked a grape from the basket the servants had spread out. The day was a lovely one, and Sebastian had thought it was shaping up to be a charming one—until he had been assaulted by his old friend.

Your current friend .

No. One man’s determination did not equal friendship, and Sebastian could not forget the way Luke had abandoned him, without so much as a by your leave. No explanation, just a note to explain he was going right when Sebastian had needed him the most. If he’d still had one person in his corner, the business with Lady Lydia might not have—

But it was useless to think of those things. Luke had left, just as Lydia had ended their engagement, and everyone in the world he knew left him. That was just the way things were, and better he had learned that lesson then so he would not have to suffer the pain of that loss again.

“Olivia—that is, Miss Ashby —also says that it is the height of fashion,” Eleanor said, taking his arm and squeezing it. “I thought it would be such fun.”

Sebastian thought ruefully of the clothes he had picked out for her, waiting in her bedchamber at home. An apology of sorts for the wardrobe he had left her at the beginning of their marriage. And considering she had not worn the clothes, he hardly thought it made a difference regarding whether she would want to leave the marriage or not.

Besides, he thought she would look charming in the blue gown he had selected for her. When he'd seen it, he had thought of her dusky curls and known that he must see her in it. Really, the gift was more for his benefit than anyone else's. He would enjoy seeing her in it, and he would enjoy the way he suspected her face would light up when she saw the gift.

Until then, he would have to endure this company.

Eleanor waved at Miss Ashby, who came to join them, auburn ringlets gleaming like burnished copper in the sun, and her blue eyes merry and amused.

"Your Grace," she smiled, curtsying so deeply, he felt the urge to snap his fingers at her and tell her to rise. "It is such an honor to make your acquaintance again. When Eleanor—that is to say, Her Grace—invited me to come boating with you I was quite aflutter. And Lord Greycliff, too, what a pleasure to see you here. My friend did not tell me you would also make one of the party."

Luke grinned. "I take it I am not a disappointment?"

"Oh no, my lord. How could you think such a thing?"

"I am relieved to hear it."

Sebastian glanced between the two and wanted to groan. Eleanor beamed, more radiant than the sun itself. No doubt this outcome, a connection between their two friends—acquaintances—was another thing she had been hoping for.

"Is it not wonderful?" she whispered to him. "Lord Greycliff and Olivia got on so well when they met in Hyde Park that I thought it would be a crime if they were not to meet again, and do you not think that today is so very romantic a setting?"

Sebastian thought that he would rather like to kiss his wife, and he thought it a great shame that he would not be able to. He also thought that he had no particular desire for Luke and Olivia to fall in love, though he suspected he would have no opportunity whatsoever to influence this.

“Do you have Scrunch with you?” he asked instead.

She wrinkled her nose. “Here? He would just get lost. I left him at home in his nest where he will sleep most of the day and be happier. Why, do you wish he was here?”

“Where does he sleep?”

“In my bedroom, in one of the drawers. I have already told the servants not to go in there, and Abigail will tell any future maids we have.” She accepted the change of servants without so much as batting an eyelid, though he knew that when she first arrived at the manor to stay with him, she had been confused and dismayed by the overhaul.

“Would he not benefit from somewhere more secure?”

She shrugged, leaning back on her hands and tilting her face to the sun. “There is nowhere else for him. I hardly dare telling most people about him—you might think that a mouse is an acceptable pet for a Duchess, but I assure you, most people do not.”

“I also do not,” he informed her, and the corners of her lips curled into a smile.

“Well then, you understand.”

He made a mental note to request a carpenter to make her some kind of cage for the animal. One large enough and comfortable enough that the mouse would have all the

space it needed without taking up—and therefore making a mess in—one of his wife’s drawers.

That, too, would be a surprise, he decided.

His hand brushed hers, and she looked up at him, gray eyes soft and warm and filled with subtle hope. Not for the first time, he wondered what the devil he was doing in this marriage with this woman.

To Eleanor’s delight, the boat trip proved just as lovely as she’d hoped. Sebastian and Luke took the oars, forced to work together as they navigated the boat into the center of the river. Eleanor and Olivia, sheltering their faces from the sun with the rim of their bonnets, huddled together and trailed their hands in the water.

“He is so unbearably handsome,” Olivia sighed under her breath as they watched the men, their coats abandoned and shirt sleeves rolled to their elbows.

Eleanor sighed too. “Yes.” She watched Sebastian’s throat bob with effort as he barked a command at Luke—who, credit given where it was due, accepted it without question and adjusted their course. “He is, is he not?”

Olivia cast her a wry glance. “You are looking at your husband.”

“Should I not be?”

“Do you truly believe that the Duke is more handsome than the Earl?”

“Why, of course.” Eleanor frowned, glancing at Luke, who was, naturally, handsome enough in his own way, but could never hold a candle to Sebastian. Why, he did not have the glossy black hair, tied at the back of his neck, the same fierce gray eyes, the subtle dimple that popped in one cheek when he smiled. Eleanor could not help

wanting to provoke that smile from him as often as possible, and as time went by, she felt as though she did so increasingly often.

Luke, by contrast, was charmingly handsome in an urbane way that did nothing for Eleanor—but quite clearly did something for Olivia.

“I think both men are handsome,” Eleanor said diplomatically. “But I confess, I find my husband more handsome than his friend.”

“I suppose that is to the right. Would you say they are friends?”

Eleanor watched as Sebastian exchanged a brief look of triumph with the other man, his mask slipping just enough that he allowed some of the friendliness underneath to show.

She just knew that under the facade he kept in place, there was a young man eager to be loved and accepted. If only he would let that side of him out.

“I think they could be,” she said. “And I hope that, in time, they will be.”

“I hope so too. What is the next event we can get them at?” Olivia grinned wickedly. “Ideally another one involving this level of physical exertion. Have you ever found anything so appealing as a gentleman glistening with sweat?”

Eleanor thought back to the way Sebastian had appeared to her naked, bathed in candlelight, his chest rising and falling as she urged pleasure from him, his eyes hot and heavy and dark, fixed on her as though he could see nothing else in the world and had no wish to.

“No,” she said. “Nothing.”

When Eleanor and Sebastian arrived home, to her surprise, she found that instead of retiring to his study or elsewhere, he accompanied her upstairs.

“To see this ridiculous nest your rodent has created,” he said when she asked him what his purpose was.

“It is not ridiculous , and I have only given him rags to make do with. I would hardly sacrifice one of my dresses for the task.”

“No?” He raised his brows at her. “Not even the ones I left for you to wear?”

“Those were designed for me to wear in deliberation?” She turned astonished eyes to him, and he felt like a cad all over again.

“Well, they were left there, and one might have thought that upon inheriting the room and them, you might have had no choice but to wear them.”

“I suppose so, and I would have done if it had brought you peace, but I am glad you did not require it of me. I hardly know how to wear them, and they seem so heavy. So much brocade!” She laughed, the sound light and airy, and for the first time since his marriage, Sebastian followed his wife into her bedchamber.

It was outfitted much as he had left it, although now, her scent lay thick everywhere, and although the bed was neatly made, he had a vision of her sprawled there. All this time, he had not been with her, not been lying in this bed with her, imprinting it with them rather than just her.

That felt like a missed opportunity. Weeks of missed opportunities.

His breath grew short and arousal thrummed through him.

But Eleanor's gaze turned immediately to the dresses that he had arranged to be set out for her arrival. The blue dress first, then others behind. Gray, to match her eyes, and a soft cream silk that would cling to her curves delightfully.

Obscenely.

He could not allow her to leave the house wearing it. But for him—yes, he could have her wearing it for him, just as she had come to him the other night wearing nothing but that thin little slip of nightgown.

He hardened almost painfully.

She whirled back to him, joy lightening her face like sunrise, a smile blooming at her lips and brightening her eyes from gray to the deepest blue.

“Sebastian,” she whispered, and he knew with that single word he was lost, and may never be found again. He knew with that word that the battle he had fought to keep her out of his life had failed already, and even if he banished her forcibly from his presence, he would never be able to banish her from his mind.

He knew, beyond all doubt, that his quest to convince her to leave had failed. Not now, but days ago. Weeks . It had failed the moment she had walked down the aisle to marry him, and he could not bring himself to regret it.

“Is this for me?” she asked.

“It is.”

She pressed her hand to her lips and tears sprang to her eyes. “I don't know what to say. This is—the gowns are beautiful. You bought them for me?”

“Well, I can hardly wear them,” he said irritably, annoyed by her shock, even though it was perfectly justified. Annoyed, too, by her tears, and the effect they were having on him. And, most of all, annoyed because he wanted nothing more than to ease her suffering and wipe away the moisture on her cheeks. With a hesitancy he deeply disliked, he stepped closer and used his thumb to wipe them just so. She looked up at him, expression trusting, and he cursed. Then he drew her to him and kissed her.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Eleanor felt as though her world ended and began every time Sebastian touched her, especially when he did so in this way, with the roughness of urgency and the gentleness of tenderness. The shape of his mouth against hers convinced her that he wanted her almost as much as she wanted him, and there was nothing more in the world that she could want.

“I ought to punish you,” he murmured there, tearing at her clothes to reveal skin, “for tormenting me in this way.”

Such sweet torment. She would have given herself to the flames themselves if they would have burned her with this same pleasure. “Then do so.”

He growled and tore still more at her clothes, ripping them from her body and tossing them aside. Then he bent her over his knee, naked while he remained clothed, and brought his hand down on her bare buttock. She gasped, the sting moving through her body until it dissolved into heat. Nothing had ever quite felt like it, the pain and pleasure blending together to such an extent that she could not distinguish one from the other.

“This is for all the ways in which you have invaded my life,” he said, delivering another stinging slap. “And this is for inviting Luke to the picnic with us.”

“Why are you so against his friendship?”

Another stinging slap directly where the other had been. “That was for the question.”

She squirmed, already aching and needing something between her legs to ease her need. “I’m sorry.”

Another blow. “What do you call me when we are like this?”

“Sir. I’m sorry, sir .”

“Good. I’ll give you ten more of these, and if you choose to behave, I may consider rewarding you.”

Eleanor bit her lip as he struck her across her other buttock. She could almost imagine the red handprint he would leave on her pale skin, the proof that he had been there, branding her, marking her. Not in a permanent way, but he had already done that to her heart. She had never been opposed to falling for her husband—marriages, she supposed, would be easier with some affection on one or both sides—but she knew now how fixed that affection was.

Even if he denied her for the remainder of her life, she would still love him for all the small gestures, and the way he slowly had opened himself to her. She loved the cruel man he could be, and the clever man he often was. There were so many different facets to him, and she loved them all.

Five spans. Her eyes watered and she bit her lip to hold back her cries of pain. The soft flesh between her legs throbbed with need. If she could not endure the pain, she could tell him, and he would stop, but with each strike, her arousal grew. And after a few seconds of sting, the pain turned to pleasure. The burning felt exquisite.

“ Eight .” He struck her again. “ Nine .” Once more. “ Ten .”

She whimpered, draped helplessly over his lap. Her legs felt like jelly, and her bottom burned. It was all too much and yet not enough, because she needed—she needed

—more.

He feathered his hand between her legs and cursed. “So you did enjoy that after all, hmm, my sweet girl?”

“Yes, sir,” she whispered.

“Have you been good?”

“Yes, sir. Please...”

“I suppose I can be generous.” He slid a finger inside her, and she gasped. Then he shifted her so he was sitting in the bed beside her, her face beside his groin. As she watched, he brought his length out from the falls of his breeches and offered it to her. Understanding what she was being given, she brought her mouth down on him, and he sucked in a breath.

Their intimacy became a competition of sorts; who could bring the other to completion first. He worked her with his fingers, and she used her mouth and tongue. And all too soon, she felt the overwhelming rush of impending climax.

Oh yes, he was a generous man.

“Sebastian,” she gasped.

He thickened in her mouth, but before she could say a thing, she tipped over the edge. As he worked her through the waves of pleasure, he found his own release, pumping in her mouth. She choked, but dutifully swallowed once she came back to herself.

“I’m sorry,” he breathed, catching her chin and wiping the corner of her mouth. His cheeks were flushed, eyes dark and heavy, his hair a little wild as though he had run

one hand through it. "I should have checked if you were ready."

She licked her lips. In truth, she hadn't minded, but she adored this softer side to him. It always felt as though after their intimate moments, he lowered a wall around himself and allowed her to see a different side to him.

"Stay with me," she said instead, taking hold of his arm. "Please? Just for a little."

She thought he might protest, but perhaps he was tired for he adjusted his position on the pillows and gave her space to crawl into his arms. She rested her head against his chest, feeling the strong pounding of his heart and the strength of his arms as they settled around her.

"Are you warm enough?" he murmured, and she remembered belatedly that she wore no clothes. He had brought her dresses, then removed everything she had been wearing.

"No, I'm perfectly warm." She trailed a finger across his chest, wondering if she was going to stray too far and force him to close up again. "But I do have a question."

He sighed, but the sound was one of resignation rather than true irritation. "Of course you do."

"Be honest with me." She hesitated, thinking she knew the answer but uncertain if he would admit the true cause. "Why do you change the servants so often?"

"Mm." He placed his hand on hers, right above the heavy thud of his heart. "I was wondering when you would build the courage to ask again."

"I waited until I thought you might answer."

“A wise move.” He hesitated, and she saw him frown. “In my experience, servants are not so much loyal to a position as they are to convenience and their own whims. I would prefer the disruption of replacing my servants than risk becoming accustomed to ones who might leave.”

Eleanor’s heart pinched. “Has something like that happened to you before?”

“When my parents died...” He cleared his throat. “I am certain you must have heard rumors about it. My parents died under circumstances that were never truly brought to light. I believe a servant was trying to steal from them and made an error when putting them to sleep. Still, the fact is, they died, and my father’s butler, a man who practically raised me as a boy, decided the scandal could not be borne, and he chose to resign and choose a different position.”

She twisted her hand around and clutched his more tightly. “I’m sorry. That must have been so difficult.”

“It was a valuable lesson. I had thought him loyal, but he was not, or at least not so loyal that self-interest did not come first.”

“Not everyone is like that,” she murmured. “He might have left because he found his personal situation to be untenable, but that does not mean everyone is the same.”

“They are the same enough.” He looked down at her. “You believe yourself obliged to be with me out of duty, but that does not mean you cannot leave. I know of plenty of wives who do.”

“You do?” The thought sent a burst of terror through her. “I know of none.”

“It is better to remain unattached.”

“I don’t believe it is. My father died too, Sebastian. My mother and my father passed away and Margaret detested me. I know what it is to be alone. For a long time, my only friend was Scrunch. But I refused to believe the worst of everyone, and now I have friends. I have a life. I have a husband .”

He sat up abruptly. “You would have done better in learning how fickle people can be.”

“Not everyone is. Luke—”

“ Luke left me when I most needed someone, and he did not so much as have the decency to tell me why. Even now, his motives remain a secret, and I was left to deal with...” His throat bobbed, and he looked away. Lady Lydia. Eleanor wished she knew enough to understand. “Well, he was just another in a long line of people who have left me.”

“I will not leave you,” she said, almost desperately. “Please, believe me.”

“I wish I could believe you, but we can never know what we must face in life. We never know what might happen, or how our hearts may change.” His expression twisted, and she felt certain he was thinking of Lady Lydia again. He had a tally of all the people who had abandoned him when he needed them, but she would not become one of them. “Besides, it might be better if you did not learn to care so much. I am too broken a man to give you what you need.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I know it better than you might think.” He gave a sad smile and drew back, and Eleanor felt her heart crack at the gesture. “You have proven yourself to be soft and good and everything I’m afraid I cannot be.”

“I want you just as you are,” she pressed, scrambling to follow him out of the room, nakedness and all. “I don’t need you to change for me, Sebastian. I just want you.”

He frowned down at her, and the raw pain in his voice cut her open, too. “You don’t know what you are asking.”

“Please.” She took his hand and brought it to her lips. “You are my husband, and I—” She didn’t quite dare to say the words in case they scared him off again, so she said, “I care for you.”

“I should push you away,” he murmured, laying a hand on her bare waist and drawing her closer to him. “I should remember all the reasons why it is foolish to care.”

“There are no reasons when it comes to us.”

“There are plenty. And I have forgotten them all. That is my folly.” He laid a hand on her bare waist and drew her closer to him. “I think you may be the death of me, my sweet wife.”

“Gladly.”

He chuckled, but his expression smoothed, and when he kissed her again, Eleanor knew with a certainty that he would stay the night.

Sebastian did not know when he had fully abandoned his plan of forcing Eleanor to leave him. But as he lay beside her, listening to her soft breaths in the darkness, he knew how utterly in vain it was. Everyone left him—and Lydia had taught him how fundamentally unlovable he was, especially given his fear of attachment.

Yet for all that, he had given Eleanor space in his heart. There was no purpose in

trying to deny it. He had given her space, and she had taken hold of it with both hands. Now, if he lost her, he knew just how much it would hurt. But for the first time in his life, or at least the first time in a long time, he resolved to do what he could to keep her.

Dresses. Gifts. Pin money. A wooden cage for that ridiculous mouse of hers so it would not defile her drawer and have a secure place to stay when it was not on her person. That would give him peace of mind, too, to know that the rodent would not crawl across his face as he slept. But most importantly, it would give her joy.

When had that become the primary focus of his life?

She stirred and rolled over, her breath hot against his arm. She remained naked, and he had removed his clothes for the night, too. Skin-to-skin; it had been a long time since he had allowed that liberty with another person. The first time he had shared a bed and the night with another.

His body stirred at the thought and her proximity, and the understanding that he would no longer be seeking to find ways for her to annul the marriage. She had made it plain enough that she had no intention of it, and there was no point flogging a dead horse.

No point in denying them both any further.

He reached over and stroked a hand down her arm. Her breath hitched, then she sighed in what sounded almost a little like relief. “Sebastian?” she whispered, her voice heavy with sleep and—yes, there was lust there, too.

That was another thing he adored about the woman he married. She wanted him just as much as he wanted her.

He leaned over and pressed his mouth to hers. Even sleepy, she stirred under him, and he kissed her jaw, her neck, the hollow of her throat where her pulse thudded. She wrapped her arms around his nape, and he continued his explorations. Her breasts, and the dusky nipples that had already stiffened in anticipation of his attentions. She let out a soft cry as he allowed his teeth to graze them.

Yes, he would not be stopping now unless she bid him to. He ached, hard and ready against her leg, eager to sink inside her and make her his in every definable way. Finally, the marriage would be consummated. She would be his .

He needed her to be his. To stay his.

This went beyond mere passion or desire. He needed her the way a man needed air to breathe and water to drink. Having her had, somewhere along the way, become an integral part of his life, something he needed, lest he slowly fade away.

She shuddered underneath him as he kissed his way down her body. Soon, he would have her, but first, he wanted to taste her.

“Sebastian?” she asked uncertainly as he kissed her inner thigh.

“Hush. You’ll enjoy it.” He gave her another reassuring kiss against her thigh. “I promise.”

She lay back, protesting no more, and Sebastian set his mouth against the sweet center of her. She tasted delectable, better than anything he could ever have imagined. A man could gorge himself on a woman like her and never be satisfied. Above him, Eleanor fisted the blankets and arched her back, her breathing shattering as he found the point of her pleasure and worked it with his tongue. As he did so, he slid a finger inside her. Hot, wet, tight. Everything he needed. He throbbed, desperate to push inside her with more than a finger, his hips thrusting involuntarily against the bed.

Even that sent a spike of pleasure through him.

He did not know how she did this to him, but he suspected it would never end.

She tightened around him, and he knew she was close.

“Don’t hold back,” he whispered against her slickness. “Don’t you dare hold back, Eleanor.”

She started to say something, or perhaps it was just his name, but he slid a second finger inside just as he flicked one last time with his tongue, and she broke, cresting a wave that he felt thrum through her. He kept up the pressure until she wilted, and then he could wait no longer. Slowly—painfully slowly—he moved back up her body, delivering kisses as he went, until he reached her lips, which he claimed with his own.

“I want you,” he murmured, and allowed the words to register on her face before continuing. “Will you allow me that right?”

“You are my husband...”

“I am asking you as a man.”

“Then let me grant you permission as a woman.” She shifted under him. “I am yours. Take me as you will.”

A dangerous command, given what he wished, but he restrained himself, and instead brought his hands to the head of his manhood, ensuring that her juices were slick enough on him to grant easy access. He had never taken a lady’s virginity before, but he had a general understanding of the basics.

“This may hurt,” he whispered. “I will—this time—be gentle.”

This time . Her eyes widened at that, then filled with familiar heat. She had climaxed once already, the taste of it still on his tongue, but that face told him she would be eager to do so again, and for him to take her roughly.

Not this time, though. He wanted her too much—valued her too much—to be anything but gentle this first time. Once she had accustomed herself to him, he had other things planned. Other positions, other intentions, other ways that he could have her.

So many ways.

He burned for her.

Carefully, he positioned himself at her entrance, and she canted her hips to allow him better access. He slipped inside, and it was an exercise in restraint that he did not sink inside her mindlessly, determined to take and take and take. Instead, he pushed in slowly, gently, inch by inch, as her body gave underneath him. He encountered resistance and paused, looking down into her face and meeting her eyes as he broke through the last piece of her virginity.

Then he was seated fully inside her, and heaven help him, he could have embarrassed himself fully if he wasn't careful.

“How do you feel?” he grated.

She experimented with rolling her hips beneath him, and he sucked in a breath, tensing every muscle and willing himself to remain still.

“Good...” she breathed after a moment. “I feel good. Can you—”

“Yes.” Gently, he withdrew, and then thrust back inside. “ Yes .” With his other hand, he brought it to her folds and began to rub her there, and a blank sort of pleasure rolled across her face as her eyes grew distant. He felt the pressure begin at the base of his spine, and forced himself to hold back, to make this as pleasurable for her as possible.

“ Sebastian ,” she gasped.

“You are mine,” he told her as he worked them both into a frenzy. “You are mine, and I hope you never have cause to forget it. Mine .”

“Yours. I am yours.” Her eyes rolled into the back of her head. “Always,” she mumbled, her breathing catching. She was close again, and it was a relief to him that she took relatively little to get her to the edge, because he knew he would not last long, either.

“Together,” he said.

She looked confused. “Together?”

“We will crest the wave together.”

For a moment, she looked as though she didn’t understand, but finally, awareness bloomed in her eyes. She was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. There could be no competition. Beautiful and his . Not just in the eyes of the law, but in the eyes of man. He had claimed her, and now he would not let her go.

“Yes,” she breathed, her nails digging into his arms. “ Together .”

He gritted his teeth. “Tell me when.”

“I—” Her back arched, and she jerked against his fingers. “ Now ,” she whispered.

He could not have held back if he tried. They both tumbled off the edge into ecstasy together, and when they had both come back to themselves, he wrapped her in his arms again, holding her close as sleep overcame them both.

Together .

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Sebastian cradled his wife in the dull glow of dawn and tried to imagine what had brought his life to this point. In truth, he had abandoned his plan of forcing her to annul the marriage a long time ago—it had merely taken him until that moment to come to terms with what it meant.

Forever. The golden band on her finger bound to him, and now he had given in and consummated the marriage, there could be no changing that. If she drew away from him now, it would not be to leave the marriage and start afresh.

The thought brought relief with it, so potent he could taste it, and he brushed her hair back from her slumbering face. The future was not at all guaranteed, of course, but now he had acknowledged that something lay between them, he did not have to force himself to let her go.

It was a foolish plan to begin with. Now they had come this far, he could admit that much to himself. Imagining she would be prepared to annul the marriage when, he now saw, she had done everything in her power to bring them closer together.

That had worked far better than his plan ever had.

He chuckled to himself. The fear of loss that never left him had not gone entirely, but it had faded. She could not leave now. Not without a divorce, and he knew she would not attempt something so difficult and scandalous.

His. He relished the thought.

She stirred a little, eyes opening in the dim light and fixing on him.

“Sebastian. You stayed.” Her lips curved up. “I didn’t know if you would.”

“From now on, you will join me in my bed at nights,” he said, and her smile widened. “I have had my fill of sleeping alone.”

“What changed your mind?”

“I gave up fighting a battle lost long ago.” He trailed a finger down her cheek. “I do not know how to be a good husband, but I will try.”

“You need nothing more than this. Be with me. Stay with me. Wake with me in the mornings and fall asleep at night.”

A simple task.

“You told me once that we would find a way of healing one another,” he murmured, kissing her shoulder. “And you asked me to open my heart to you.”

“Alone, together,” she whispered.

“I am not an expert at this. It’s been a long time since I last attempted openness, but...” He hesitated, unsure how much of himself to give. “I’m tired of being alone.”

“You don’t have to be.” She smiled up at him, naked and lovely, and his chest cracked with how much he adored her. She had crept into his heart so silently, he hadn’t known she had made inroads, and now he did not think he could easily dig her out. “You have me. And I’m not going anywhere.”

Although he had known that, hearing the words relaxed something inside him, and he

leaned over her to kiss her again. “Then neither am I, wife,” he said against her mouth. “Tell me, how do you feel?”

“Happy. And sore.” Her eyes sparkled up at him. “Though not too sore to try again, if you were of that mind.”

“Are you not tired?”

“I can sleep when I’m dead.”

He laughed, loud and surprised, and rolled her onto her back. “Well then, wife,” he said, smiling down at her face. He had not felt like this in years—light, a hot air balloon filled to its brim and rising into the air.

I’m happy , he realized with a start. And to think, all he had needed to do was sleep with his wife.

No, it was more than that. All he had needed to do was accept that she was a permanent fixture in his life. Once he had come to terms with it, everything else had followed.

“You are insatiable,” he cooed, nuzzling her cheek. He bit her lower lip, swallowing her gasp, then spread her legs. “I love it.”

Eleanor had not known it was possible to be this happy.

Sebastian walked beside her in the gardens, plucking an early rose and handing it to her with a bow and a flourish.

“If you had ever been of an inclination to flirt, you would have been a dreadful one,” she said with a laugh, accepting it.

“I was always of an inclination to flirt. Do you not remember the first time we met?”

She flushed. She had given altogether too much thought to the time they had first met. The way he had approached her, the dare she had uttered, and the way he had matched it effortlessly. His charm.

“I thought you were a different person when we first married,” she admitted. “I wanted to know how to find that man again.”

“The flirt?” He arched a brow.

“Does not every wife desire to be flirted with?”

“I know not. I only have the one.” He looked down at her and trailed a finger along her rosy cheeks. “Tell me, did you think of that kiss as often as I did?”

“You thought of it?”

“I tried not to.” His expression turned grave. “For a long time... you must know that I did not marry out of a wish to.”

“Yes ,” she said dryly, a slight morsel of hurt stabbing through her.

He caught her expression and drew her closer, a possessive hand on her waist. A bee hummed nearby, coming to investigate the rose she still held. “I did not want to marry anyone ,” he emphasized. “And you know why. My luck has not been... good. So I thought that if I didn’t care for you, things would be easier.”

Her heart, which had fallen into her boots, now rose and fluttered. “But you do care?”

He gave her a sidelong glance. “What do you think?”

“I think I would like to hear you say it.”

“Very well.” He hesitated, and she could see the way the words weighed on him. But then he looked down at her, a small smile on his face. “I do care. While I resisted your charms, I did my best not to think of that kiss, but I ended up thinking of nothing more.” He bent his head to her neck, and Eleanor prayed there were no gardeners to see them. “I thought about the way you smelled. The way you tasted. The sounds you made.” His lips brushed up the column of her throat to her jaw. “And it made me want nothing more than to do it again.”

Oh Lord. Her knees felt weak. She had now lain with her husband and she knew how it felt to have all of him—but he was right. She was insatiable.

She was happy .

“There,” she murmured in response. “This was the husband I hoped I’d receive.”

“Then brace yourself.” He nipped at her lower lip. “There is a great deal more of it to come.”

Eleanor stared at the letter in her hands, fingers trembling as she read the words written across it in a neat script. She’d forgotten all about writing to Lady Lydia—forgotten, that was, until the butler placed this letter before her.

Dear Duchess, it ran.

I thank you for your letter, and I confess that reading it nearly brought me to tears. That period of my life is one I reflect on with great shame, and I would be delighted if I could meet with dear Sebastian to resolve our past misunderstandings. I do not want him to go through life thinking that I never cared for him, because that would both grieve me deeply and be grossly incorrect. There are many things I have to say.

Would you be so good as to facilitate the meeting? I know my behavior then did not reflect well on me, and no doubt led Sebastian to believe things about himself that are untrue.

Thank you, my dear Duchess, and may I congratulate you on your husband. He is a man well won.

Lady Lydia

Eleanor stared at the letter blankly for long moments. This missive, unlike the notes Sebastian had kept, was not perfumed, but she could imagine the scent, anyway.

Of course Lady Lydia was still in love with Sebastian. That fact seemed as obvious as the nose on her face. No doubt a simple misunderstanding had brought about their separation, and both parties spent a few long years regretting it.

She glanced across the table at Sebastian, who now breakfasted with her as a matter of course, having risen from her bed a mere hour or so previously. At her attention, he lowered his newspaper and raised his brows.

“Anything interesting, my dear?”

Things had changed between them, and for the good. He had finally seemed as though he began to trust she would be around as long as he wanted her to.

But Lady Lydia... When Eleanor had written, she had not felt the surge of jealousy that she felt now. She had not been so certain then that Lady Lydia loved Sebastian, or even that she ought to worry if Sebastian loved her. Yet he had kept her letters, and though he had been kind to Eleanor now, treated her body as though he worshiped it, she could not help but be reminded of the fact that he had not told her he loved her.

She doubted he did love her.

She could not say the same about Lady Lydia.

If he knew Lady Lydia regretted the way they ended things and perhaps even wanted to rekindle their romance, would he say no? Eleanor couldn't be certain. Her hand quivered around the letter. After everything she had done to win him over, she could not risk losing him now.

"Nothing interesting," she said lightly. "Merely a letter from one of my half-sisters."

"I will not have them in the house."

"Then I shall remind her of that fact." Eleanor folded the letter up very small and put it in the tiny pocket sewn into her dress. She would consign it to the fire later. Perhaps there was unfinished business between Sebastian and Lady Lydia, but as far as Eleanor was concerned, it would have to remain unfinished. The fear of being cast aside after learning to care for her husband so deeply was, though selfish, too terrifying a thought for her to ponder presently.

"Have you any other plans two days' hence?" he asked suddenly.

"Two days? No. I don't think we have any prior engagements."

"And you are not intending to see your friend?"

"Miss Ashby? No." Eleanor frowned at Sebastian, her heart thudding in her chest from the letter and the feeling of dread that had come with it. "Why? Are you trying to get me out of the house?"

"Not in the slightest." He smiled, and Eleanor was suddenly, forcibly, reminded of

the man who had first spoken to her at the masquerade, all teasing good fun and charm. “I have a surprise for you.”

“A surprise ?” Eleanor expelled a breath in delight, the feeling of dread lessening a touch. If he still cared for Lady Lydia, would he go out of his way to provide surprises for her? “What is it?”

“You’ll see.” He grinned. “But I think you will enjoy it.”

It transpired that Sebastian’s surprise lay at the Tower of London, something that Eleanor had never taken time out to see, although she had read about it briefly in her history books.

“Why are we here?” she asked, her arm tucked in Sebastian’s. “So we may see where former kings and queens were beheaded?”

“A gory thought. No.” He steered her to the right of the three towers by the principal entrance. “We are here to see the royal menagerie. This is the lions’ tower, and inside are all manner of animals.”

Eleanor gasped. “Is it true there are lions here?”

“Not just lions.” He waved a hand at a keeper, who came forward to accept his two shillings. “I believe there are also leopardesses, and tigers, and a spotty raccoon.”

“A raccoon?” She laughed, delighted despite herself. Her love of animals extended to the exotic, but she had never thought to come here, and she would never have asked. In fact, if Sebastian had not proposed and organized the trip, she might have thought it beneath him. Yet, as they moved through the lions’ tower, taking in the different animals, she could not help but notice the look of intense interest on his face as they listened to the keeper’s explanations of the different creatures and where they had

arrived from. Miss Fanny was a lioness so ferocious that the keepers had to be careful not to lose an arm, and there was also Miss Peggy, a black leopardess, with dark fur and spots of deeper darkness. Eleanor thought she was the most beautiful animal she had ever seen.

They were not the only visitors. The king's menagerie was evidently a place that many people visited out of curiosity or wonder, although many of these visitors were foreigners to the city or the middle class, enjoying a day out in style.

"Thank you for bringing me here," she said, looking up into his face as they moved on from the large, unsettling wolf, its intelligent eyes following them from the room. "How did you know I would like it?"

"I had a sneaking suspicion." He grinned down at her, and she marveled—not for the first time—how disarmingly handsome he was when he smiled at her like that. "Have you had enough?"

"Yes, thank you." She slipped her arm through his and they emerged back into the sunlight at the end of the tour. Her heart soared, and for a moment she thought nothing could be more wonderful than this day with her husband.

A lady emerged from the wall as they left the Tower's walls. She wore a dress of flowered muslin caught high above her waist, and the prettiest bonnet Eleanor had ever seen. She was, beyond all doubt, the most beautiful lady she had laid eyes on.

Lady Lydia.

The other lady's blond curls bobbed around her face as she started forward, delight evident on her face as she beheld Sebastian. Eleanor's stomach felt as though it dropped out from underneath her.

She had never given Sebastian Lady Lydia's note. And she most definitely hadn't given the other woman their location and permission to come and approach them.

Not that Lady Lydia needed permission, it seemed.

"Sebastian, dearest!" she chimed, coming up to them both and not so much as sparing Eleanor a glance. Any thoughts Eleanor might have had about this being a good thing, resolving old trauma, vanished almost immediately. "It has been too long. A veritable age." She rested her hand on Sebastian's arm, and although Eleanor wished he'd shake it off, he just stared at her, stunned.

"Lydia." He appeared to gather himself and turned, dropping her arm as he looked at Eleanor. "This is my wife, Eleanor. Eleanor, meet..." He cleared his throat. "Lady Lydia."

"Wife!" Lady Lydia's laugh tinkled. "Someone said you had married but I couldn't believe it was true."

"It is. I'm a married man now." He patted Eleanor's hand, but she wasn't sure if it was a gesture of affection or a silent request for her to remain silent. "It is a recent affair."

"I saw the announcement in the paper. Quite a sudden thing, too." She smiled and took Sebastian's other arm. "But I have to say, I am delighted to have met you again after all this time."

"It is a long time," he said neutrally.

"Have you been to see the animals? I couldn't do it." She gave an exaggerated shudder. "Although I'm sure you must have had a good time." A note in her voice indicated that she did not, in fact, think such a thing. "Are you staying in town?"

Please say you'll have tea with us. Both of you, of course." For the first time, she looked directly at Eleanor. "I am so sure we can be good friends."

Eleanor did her best to suppress the worm of jealousy that wiggled its way up her throat at the idea of spending more time with this woman. She liked to think of herself as level-headed, but there was nothing she liked less than the prospect of watching another lady flirt with her husband.

A lady whom he used to love.

But Sebastian seemed oblivious to her thoughts or her disinclination to go.

"We have no other plans," he said. "We'd be delighted to."

"Oh, wonderful! My house is not far from here, as it happens. We could walk."

He inclined his head a little. "Of course. I'll inform my coachman. You ladies set off without me."

Eleanor watched him stride back to the coachman—a new one who seemed reasonably competent, at least—and her heart pinched a little.

"Thank you so much for writing to me," Lady Lydia whispered, slipping her arm through Eleanor's. "I confess, it was such a relief to hear from you. I was quite worried for him, you know. I thought a fit of madness might have overcome him." She laughed, tipping her head back as though she had said something terribly funny. "I don't mean to be rude, forgive me."

"Why would you think madness had overcome him?" Eleanor asked stiffly.

"Well, he has never been one to rush into things, and I know that his proposal to you

was not one made after courtship. I would have known, you see.” She said the words carelessly, but Eleanor knew what lay behind them.

She would have known, because she had been keeping a close watch on the Duke.

“I was a fool, when I was younger I mean to say,” Lady Lydia said with a sigh. “I loved him, but he was hurting in ways that I could not quite entertain, and I ended things with him. He was quite distraught over it all.”

Eleanor thought about the letters she had found. The coldness in the latter few, and the lingering perfume.

The fact he had kept those letters despite everything.

“We were young, yes, but we were very much in love. That was another reason I was startled by your sudden marriage. Not only had he not courted you, but I am intimately familiar with his tastes, and while I am certain many gentlemen prefer darker hair, Sebastian has always complimented me on my fair hair.” She sighed wistfully. “It surprised me, that was all, that he would choose you when you are not his ordinary style.”

Another rush of uncertainty flooded Eleanor, swelling in her throat until she had to take a breath past the obstruction. Sebastian had certainly appeared satisfied with her of late, but he had never said anything about marrying her for her beauty.

And who could compare to Lady Lydia? No woman could.

“But you are very pretty,” Lady Lydia said in a rallying tone. “And I have no doubt that now he has come around to dusky curls like yours. I would not wish to do anything to stand in your way—all I want to do is speak to him about our past and clear the air. He must know how much I regret behaving the way I did, and that it was

entirely my fault and not any fault of his. You see why that would be a good thing for him to hear, don't you?" She blinked big, blue eyes at Eleanor, who swallowed back the acidic words brewing in her chest.

Of course she understood. Of course she knew the importance of having someone who abandoned Sebastian explain the reasons why, and how it did not pertain to him not being enough.

She just wished— oh how she wished —that person was not Lady Lydia.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Sebastian followed Lydia into the drawing room he had once been invited to almost daily. That had been a long time ago, so distant in his past that he could barely remember it. The pain of losing her at the time had felt as though it might swallow him whole, but he supposed that time truly did ease all hurt.

Or perhaps it was newfound happiness that did that. Once, he had brooded over losing Lady Lydia near-nightly, wondering which of his faults had finally driven her away. Wondering, in truth, if he was unlovable.

Now he knew that not to be the case.

Still, when they had such a shared past, it seemed foolish not to give into it at least a little.

“Here,” she said, pouring him and Eleanor some tea. “You see, not so much has changed since you were last here.”

So much had changed, but he looked around and noted that the room still kept its pleasing aesthetic, and sipped his tea.

“Do you play the pianoforte?” Lydia asked Eleanor. “My mother makes me practice daily, but I’m afraid I have no affinity for the instrument.” She smiled. “You look as though you have musicality running through your bones.”

Eleanor glanced at Sebastian, who nodded. He’d heard Eleanor playing often enough,

and it was an excellent opportunity to show off her skills.

“Why don’t you play for us?” he suggested, pleased he had a wife whom he could brag about. And especially pleased that before Lydia of all people, she had this advantage. “It would be lovely to hear you.”

Her face curiously set, Eleanor rose and made her way to the instrument. She exhaled as she looked down at the keys, then began to play, melody flowing from her fingers like water.

“She is a lovely player,” Lydia said, looking across the room. “I thought she would be. But that was not why I asked her to go. I wanted to speak with you privately, Sebastian. To talk about the past.”

“There is nothing to say.”

“I hurt you. Deeply. And I’m sorry for it.”

He looked across at her, all pale beauty, ethereal like the moon, with sharp hazel eyes and the birthmark on her temple she usually had her curls cover. There could be no doubting her attractiveness, or even her desirability as a woman. He was surprised no other gentleman had snapped her up.

But although he could acknowledge her beauty, he no longer felt that pang of attraction. Not when Eleanor lived in his mind, all dark hair and gray eyes, not ethereal but grounded in his life. All other ladies paled in comparison—even ones he had once thought were the pinnacle of beauty. Eleanor was real, and she was his.

“There’s nothing to apologize for,” he put in. “We were young and foolish, and aren’t everyone foolish when they’re young?”

She raised a brow. “You are remarkably sanguine about it.”

“I’ve had time to come to terms with it all.”

Her eyes narrowed, then she allowed her gaze to wander back across to Eleanor, who seemed to have lost herself to the music. He felt a pang of something in his chest that felt remarkably like a combination of fondness and concern. Sometimes, he felt as though the thing they had cultivated between them had no chance of failing; they were, after all, married.

Other times, he felt as though their connection was like the fragile stem of a flower, liable of snapping at any moment. After all, he had believed in his love for Lydia, and she had changed her mind about wanting him.

How did he know if and when he would be enough for any woman?

“She is lovely, if not your usual style,” Lydia said, sipping her tea. “Your marriage came as a surprise to me. She never struck me as a lady who particularly desired for an advantageous marriage.”

“We had a rocky beginning,” he admitted. “But I believe we are headed for smoother waters.”

“Of course,” Lydia murmured. “And is she satisfied? Poor girl. Imagine taking her to the menagerie, Sebastian. You ought to be ashamed of yourself.” She laughed and she slapped his arm. “Truthfully, I think she was eager for the two of us to rekindle things. She reached out to me, you know. She heard that we were once courting.”

He frowned, unease slicing through him. “She did?”

“Yes. Did you not know? Oh, but maybe that was her gift to you. Most ladies, you

know, prefer to keep their husbands at a distance. And if she was brought into this marriage unwillingly, I expect she's hoping you will allow her to foster her own interests." The delicate weight she placed on interests made it plain she was not merely regarding embroidery or painting.

"Eleanor is not that type of lady."

"Of course not," Lydia soothed. "All I'm saying is you shouldn't be surprised if she is. But you know her better than I do, of course."

"Of course." He shifted in his seat. They had spoken about many things, especially of late, but what did he truly know about her? So much, and yet so little.

Lydia placed a hand on his arm. "No matter," she whispered. "A man does not have to change all things merely because he has a wife."

He shook her free, turning his attention back to Eleanor. He thought she'd enjoyed the menagerie, but had she, or had it been too coarse an entertainment for a lady? He rather suspected it had been.

He should have known better.

"You are in the best days of your marriage," Lydia said under her breath as the piece came to an end. "Enjoy it while it lasts." She smiled sweetly at Eleanor as she returned to their party, and Sebastian was forced to let the subject drop.

The ride back to their house was silent. Eleanor plucked at a loose thread in her gloves, wishing Sebastian would say something to her. All her enjoyment of the day had been sucked out by the way Sebastian had entertained Lady Lydia's advances, content to send her off to accompany their private conversation.

How humiliating.

“Did you enjoy the menagerie?” Sebastian asked suddenly.

“Of course.” She summoned a smile for him. “It was the best time of my day.”

“You did not think it was too common an outing?”

Was that what Lady Lydia had insinuated? No doubt the other lady would have preferred something more refined, more genteel. Did Sebastian also think that Eleanor ought to have preferred something else?

Her shoulders stiffened. “It was not,” she said, and he frowned.

“I see.”

“We have a ball in three days’ time. I was hoping to attend with Olivia. Would you accompany us? If not, I can ask Luke.”

Sebastian’s expression tightened. “You would ask him?”

“Only if you had preferred not to go,” she snapped.

“I would much rather attend with you than leave you in his hands.”

“For heaven’s sake, Sebastian. I thought you were finally friends again.”

“I would be more likely to contemplate friendship so long as he did not make advances on my wife.” Sebastian’s eyes flashed, and Eleanor wasn’t sure whether to laugh or drop her head in her hands.

“We both know Luke’s interest is in Olivia rather than me. Come, are you truly going to fight with me?” She reached out her hands to him pleadingly, and he immediately took them in both of his.

“I’m sorry. You’re right, we shouldn’t fight when things are finally so good between us.” He lifted her fingers to his mouth and kissed them tenderly. “It would be my honor to attend the ball with you. But I do have a question for you. Why did you write to Lydia?”

Eleanor’s heart dropped. “A mistake,” she managed.

Sebastian shook his head, but although he smiled at her, she wondered if he had resolved whatever thoughts lay behind his eyes. Still, he brought her face to his for a kiss, despite the rocking of the carriage, and she allowed herself to relax. This distance between them was a temporary thing, and who could blame him for being a little distant from her after meeting with the woman who broke his heart? She had been the one to write to her, after all. He had not sought her out.

But Lady Lydia was not his wife, and she would not—could not—be allowed to break them apart when they had only just come together.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Over the course of the next few days, Eleanor was able to forget about Lady Lydia. Although Sebastian did not entirely thaw toward her again, he had gone as far as asking her how she would feel about not changing the staff when his two weeks were up.

Nothing about his demeanor to her suggested that he was thinking of another, even if sometimes he did descend into his own thoughts. But when she brought him back into the present, he always looked at her with a smile as though delighted to see her still there.

Thus, when they traveled into London together to attend another ball, Eleanor looked forward to the evening with an air of enjoyment.

First, they went to Olivia's house to collect her, and her mother—worn and tired from the extravagances of a London Season—handed Olivia into the carriage with an air of relief.

“Mama is very grateful,” Olivia said as she settled beside Eleanor. “She thinks I will have a better chance of making a match if I am with you.”

“Well, so it's true,” Sebastian said. “Do you have any gentlemen in mind?”

Olivia blushed, and unusually for her, kept her peace.

“Enough,” Eleanor said, nudging her husband. “Did you write to Luke as I

requested?”

“I did, although I doubt he would have missed this opportunity for the world.” Sebastian leveled a significant look at Olivia before lapsing back into silence.

Olivia glanced between them and grinned. Did it work? she mouthed.

Smiling, Eleanor ducked her head in acknowledgment. Olivia had perhaps not the most experience in the world, but her tips had certainly worked. She had gotten under Sebastian’s skin enough that he contemplated her as a wife, and now they were here.

When they arrived at the ball, Sebastian handed both ladies down, and they entered the house on each other’s arms, giggling and laughing together. Sebastian accompanied them in, and they followed the footmen through to the ballroom.

Eleanor was, by now, accustomed to the gazes that followed her through the room, and she no longer wanted to hide. Instead, she smiled graciously at them all. Having Sebastian at her back, his fingers grazing her spine, was enough to make any woman feel as though she could conquer the world.

“Ah, Lord Greycliff!” Eleanor waved her fan at his now-familiar figure. “Please, join us.”

Luke turned and smiled, his grin broadening when he saw Olivia standing with them. “My friends,” he said as he approached. “What a delight to see you here tonight.”

Sebastian’s hold on Eleanor’s arm tightened, pulling her possessively into his side. “You say that as though you were unaware we would be attending. I wrote to inform you.”

“A delight,” Luke repeated firmly, and although Sebastian’s hand rested on her hip

now, she caught the corner of Sebastian's smile as he glanced away. Perhaps he could not quite close off his mind to his darker thoughts, but he still loved his friend.

The first dance was announced, and Sebastian held his arm out to Eleanor. "Wife."

"Husband," she offered, eyes twinkling as she accepted his arm and allowed him to lead them out amongst the other couples. Behind them, Luke asked Olivia to dance, and Eleanor reflected on the first time she had seen her friend, forced to dance with numerous gentlemen who made her feel either uncomfortable or bored.

Now, finally, both of them looked as though they might have their happy endings.

"Who would have thought we could have come here," she said, looking up into Sebastian's face.

He grinned. "Some might say it was inevitable."

"Don't say so. That implies it was inevitable that you would have been this way with anyone you were close with."

He considered her for a moment, eyes turning somber. "I can say with certainty that this would not have been the case with almost any other lady."

Eleanor glanced away, wondering whether he was thinking of Lady Lydia then.

His fingers touched her chin. "Eleanor?"

She forced a smile she didn't feel. "Let's not speak of things that never came to be."

"Very well. What would you like to speak of?"

Eleanor hesitated, looking down at her hands, clasped in his. She disliked thinking of unpleasant things, but thinking of other ladies made her feel unsettled. Unsteady.

He had chosen her, but not for the right reasons.

She almost asked him if he regretted marrying her, and his failure in pushing her away, but forced the words back. Instead, she started a light conversation about the ball and the number of couples in attendance. They talked of idle matters until the very end of the dance, when he glanced behind her and froze. Confused, Eleanor looked from his face, suddenly blank, to that of Lady Lydia in the corner of the room. For an unmarried lady, her dress was remarkably daring: a red bolder than that of most, if it held just enough pink to keep it from being wholly improper. And a neckline that plunged almost daringly low.

And Sebastian looked at her as though he had never seen a woman before. Confused and transfixed, and... could he want her?

Surely not. Surely.

The thought was poison in her mind.

“Sebastian?” she asked, and his gaze snapped to her. The dance ended.

“Forgive me, my darling. I know you’re too generous to do anything, but excuse me.” He bowed over her hand, bringing it to his lips, and strode off through the crowd. To Lady Lydia’s side. Eleanor stood in the middle of the floor, alone, feeling as though she had been shunted abruptly aside by the man she thought cared for her.

Perhaps he merely wants to exchange pleasantries with her .

She had to believe it. If not, she risked her entire world crashing down around her.

Sebastian scowled down at Lady Lydia. Six years he'd gone without seeing her, now twice in the span of a week?

Of course, part of this could be attributed to the fact that he had not taken part in Society for a long time. But that part did not explain the way she had waved at him from across the ballroom, beckoning him across as though she were in command of him.

He had been tempted to ignore her, but he had no faith that if he did, she would not do something more outrageous to attract his attention.

Enough of the ton knew of their courtship that any public interaction would be scrutinized. And so he had capitulated, but she needed to know that things would have to change going forward.

"I am not your dog," he growled when he approached. "That you can call to heel."

"No?" She looked up at him through hooded eyes and gave a slow, wicked smile. "And yet you came. Did the dance with your wife displease you so much?"

"No," he said shortly.

"Oh? I could not help but think she seemed a little bored. You must entertain your wife, dearest, or she will grow tired of your company."

He recalled the distraction in her manner when he had spoken of how she was the only lady who could possibly have brought him to care for her. Could it be that she regretted it?

No, he couldn't believe it.

The reluctance in her expression ate away at him. Did she regret fighting so hard for him? He had been cruel to her at the beginning. Was she thinking of that?

He snapped his attention back to Lydia. “Is that what happened between us? You grew tired of my company?”

“Oh no, darling. Not in the slightest. I was just young and foolish, and you were always so afraid that people would leave. I found it exhausting, I confess. But we are past that now, aren’t we? You are much older, and so am I. We are different people.”

His stomach lurched. Different people . Yes, they were—and yet at the same time, they were not. He had never quite conquered his fear of people leaving. Even now, it occupied his thoughts, along with the lady he left behind on the dance floor. Had he burdened her with his worries that she would leave? He certainly hadn’t believed her the numerous times she’d told him, and even now he struggled to fully believe it, searching for reasons she was either lying or mistaken.

Would she grow tired of it as Lydia had?

Had she already grown tired of it?

“It is not your place to speak of these things with me,” he said finally. “My relationship is none of your concern.”

Both her brows raised. “I would never dream of overstepping.”

“See that you don’t.”

“I wouldn’t go looking for your wife. She is currently dancing with Luke.” Lydia held out her hand. “Had you missed that little detail?”

Anger boiled in his stomach. Luke—he ought to have known his friend would snap up his wife the moment he turned his back.

Deep down, he knew the thought was unjust, but he despised the thought that another man had the joy of dancing with her. He glanced over his shoulder just in time to see her smiling up at Luke, her hand in his.

The dark possessiveness in him rose at the sight. This was wrong. She was his .

He had to get closer.

“Dance with me,” he snapped at Lydia, taking her arm and dragging her out to the newly forming lines, as close to Eleanor as he could get. She ought to have known better than to dance with Luke—

Guilt speared through him, dispelling a little of his anger. What right had he to dictate whom she danced with? In truth, he knew Luke did not want her, and she had shown no signs of wanting him, either.

Yet at the sight of her smiling at his friend, something twisted inside him. If she tired of Sebastian and chose someone else—

Enough was enough. He did not need to follow his wife around like a lost puppy, demanding she return to his side. He trusted her.

He did. He must .

Lydia fluttered her lashes at him. “Face me, Your Grace, or people will see you staring after your wife like a lost puppy.”

He looked back at Lydia, feeling as though he had awoken. This had been a mistake.

But already, the damage was done—dowagers were already gossiping about him and Lydia. He could not leave the dance now.

“Let us get one thing straight,” he said as he looked down into her beautiful face. The sight of it did nothing for him now. “I am not interested in rekindling things, and nor will I ever be? Understand?”

The corner of her mouth curled up, but her eyes remained oddly cold. “We shall see.”

Eleanor did not know how such a perfect night could have gone awry so quickly. And it was all to do with Lydia.

“He’s dancing with her,” she whispered to Luke, who had seen her standing alone after Sebastian had left her so abruptly and had been kind enough to ask her to dance. “People will talk.”

Luke glanced around them, where people were indeed looking and talking about this new chain of events. “It’s nothing to worry about,” he said as calmly as he could, but Eleanor knew he was lying. “You don’t know what he was doing.”

“She crooked her finger to him and he came running.” Eleanor’s nostrils flared. “And now he is dancing with her.”

“Perhaps out of irritation that we’re dancing,” Luke said wryly. “He always did have a jealous streak.”

“If it is jealousy, he is not executing it well.”

“No one ever claimed men were the wisest of creatures.” Luke sighed, meeting her burning gaze with his steady one. “It’s impossible to know what he’s thinking without being privy to his thoughts. Your best course of action is to ask him. And,

meanwhile, don't look at him. Don't pay him any attention. People will talk more. When this is over, you must go and greet him as though nothing is wrong. If you wish to confront him, do so at home."

Eleanor's head throbbed. How had she thought coming here would be a good idea when she ought to have known Lady Lydia would be present too?

She'd been so determined to put the lady out of her mind that she hadn't fully allowed herself to consider the possibility that Sebastian had never gotten over her. After all, he had never told Eleanor that he loved her. They had come close, and their intimacy hinted at it, but he had never outright said the words.

Perhaps because he could not.

Perhaps because if he did, it would be a bald, bare-faced lie.

Perhaps because he was still in love with Lady Lydia. All these years, he had kept her notes. Instead of merely keeping them, perhaps he had taken them out and looked at them, smoothing his fingers over the words and remembering.

Now that Lady Lydia had changed her mind, did that mean Sebastian would want her back?

"You are thinking too much," Luke murmured. "Don't let the thoughts get to you."

The thoughts sent hurt fracturing through her. Her breath trembled. She didn't know if she wanted to rush to Sebastian, demanding that he tell her the truth of what lay in his heart, or ignore him until he volunteered the truth of his own volition. If he saw her pain, would he be more or less likely to speak?

"Smile," Luke offered. "Let no one else know what you're thinking, Your Grace."

You are a Duchess.”

His formal address stirred her out of her melancholy, and she straightened her spine. If Sebastian did love another woman, that was not her responsibility to repair. He must choose for himself, and until then, she would have to keep her distance from him.

“That’s it,” Luke said supportively. “I’ll invite him to dine with me at White’s tomorrow. We’ll speak and I’ll bid him to be honest with me. Whatever he may pretend to feel about me and our friendship now, I know he still cares.”

“His problem has never been a lack of care,” Eleanor sighed. “It has been that he cares too much, and does not know how to regulate his emotions, and so he denies their existence altogether.”

“Foolish and short-sighted, yet understandable.” Luke cleared his throat. “Give him as much grace as you can, Eleanor, and I will speak with him. Then, everything will go back to how it was.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

White's, as always, was obnoxiously busy. Sebastian strode through the filled tables and hazes of cigar smoke until he saw his friend.

Former friend, he corrected himself. He did not have friends any longer.

Except he knew even to himself that such a claim was false.

"Sebastian!" Luke rose as he spotted him, a grin upon his face, and Sebastian was transported back in time to when they were both mere boys, navigating the world until Luke left and that had been the end of everything.

Or, well, so Sebastian had thought. So he had intended .

"Sit," Luke offered, waving to his seat. "Drink?"

"Please."

Luke poured him a brandy and passed it across the table. "I ordered food for us both already. If anything displeases you, I'm certain you can make enough of a fuss to make up for it."

"I don't enjoy throwing my weight around, you know," Sebastian said dryly.

"Perhaps not, but I enjoy watching the fallout." The corners of Luke's eyes creased as he smiled, but the smile quickly fell away. "I have something to say and something to

ask. Which would you prefer came first?"

"Does it matter?"

Servants brought heaped dishes to the table, removing lids and allowing steam to billow into the air. Duck and potatoes and beef pie and a bowl of quails' eggs to the side.

"I suppose not," Luke said. "So let me start with the first. I'm sorry for the way I left as a boy. Truth was, it was the devil of a situation, and I felt embarrassed confessing it to anyone. Even you. So I didn't, and I have regretted it ever since." He contemplated his spoon. "My uncle was to be hanged for killing a man. He lost all his land, and we lost a great deal of our investments out there." He sighed. "We went to fight for his freedom, of course, and ultimately failed, but in truth, my father insisted we make the journey to recoup what little we could of his inheritance. Cold-blooded to say the least." He gave a wry smile as he piled his plate high. "I felt ashamed to be his son. Ashamed to be my uncle's nephew. Uncomfortable and unpleasant time, and the heat . Never visit the tropics, Sebastian. It's not worth the mosquitoes." He shuddered. "But I brought you here to offer an explanation and an apology."

Sebastian sat back in his chair, his head reeling. "You didn't want to tell me because of the murder?"

Luke raised his brows. "You must admit it's a little close to home. I didn't want to upset you, or destroy our friendship in any further more tangible way. Of course, irony has it that I did so anyway. But I would like to be your friend, Sebastian. In truth, as accepted by you as it is by me. So will you give me that chance?"

Sebastian stared at the hand Luke offered to him. The first word on his lips was a refusal, but that was a habit ingrained in him from long years of being alone.

Would it not be better to finally put that side of him aside?

“Very well,” he said, accepting Luke’s hand. “My friend.”

“Excellent.” Luke dropped his hand and stabbed a piece of meat with his fork. “So now, explain to me what you were doing with Lady Lydia?”

“Excuse me?”

“At the ball. Do you know what people were saying about the two of you?” Luke scoffed. “And Eleanor?”

The warmth in Sebastian’s chest faded, replaced by a burgeoning anger. “Nothing happened. And no one has a right to discuss my wife or myself, including you.”

“You just said we were friends.”

“That doesn’t make all of my mistakes your business.”

“So you admit to making a mistake?” Luke pinched his nose. “You should speak to Eleanor before she wholly misunderstands the situation.”

Sebastian’s jaw snapped shut, but although he wanted to rant and rage at Luke, he knew his friend was right. “I spoke to Lady Lydia explaining the situation and how there is no situation between us.”

“Does Eleanor know that?”

“She ought to! I’ve never once brought her up. Lydia is in my past.”

Luke looked at him steadily, mouth twisting to one side. “Better you had both

discussed it, Sebastian, so she knew. All the ton knows you courted Lydia back in the day—I don't doubt she also knows that. Maybe you never brought her up to Eleanor because you never thought about it, but you ought to have done after the ball. What happened between you?"

"It was late. We went to bed. Eleanor slept in the carriage ride home." An unusual occurrence, but when he had danced with her later, she had seemed lively. Almost too lively, so he had assumed the best. "Then this morning, I dressed and rode out to dine with you. We haven't had a chance to speak so far today."

"Well, perhaps you'll have a chance to speak when you arrive home again." Luke shook his head. "I just hope you know what you're doing."

"So do I, my friend," Sebastian huffed, noting Luke's obvious delight at the phrase, and trying not to reflect too much on it.

Once they finished their dinner, Sebastian rode home filled with thoughts of Eleanor. How foolish he had been to ever think she might seek an annulment. Of everyone in his life, she was the only one who had ever stayed and fought for him, no matter what he threw at her.

And he loved her.

The thought hit him like an avalanche, almost unseating him from his horse. Meeting with Luke had changed something, unlocked part of the man he had been before this all.

He loved Eleanor. His wife. More than he had once ever imagined loving another person, never mind someone he had chosen to bind himself to. The prospect alarmed him, and he pressed a hand to his beating heart, which had been hers for longer than he cared to admit.

Before he had taken her physically.

Perhaps when she'd held her mouse cupped in her hands and looked at him as though she trusted him, even when he had given her no reason to. It was then he'd been lost. Not out of desire, but because his defenses could not stand up against such an act of vulnerability.

And yet.

When he imagined saying the words to her, he could not quite do it. His mouth closed, turning into sand. Every part of his body revolted against the idea. Once she knew, she would have power over him.

Everyone he had ever loved had left him.

Lydia, the only other lady he had ever loved, had taken his love and snuffed it out. She had stomped on his heart and returned the bruised and bloody pulp.

Eleanor, he was sure, would not do the same.

All he needed was more time. Just a little more.

On the road leading back to his home, he encountered Lydia herself riding with a maid in tow. At the sight of him, she pulled up her mare.

"Lydia," he said, startled. "What are you doing so far from home? Surely your mother didn't allow you to ride out all this way by yourself?"

"I'm not by myself," she said, gesturing at her maid. "You were not at home."

"You called with the intention of seeing me?"

“We had some unfinished business at the ball last night.”

His hands tightened on the reins. “No, Lydia. I don’t think we did.”

“You know as well as I do that there is still something between us.” Her lashes lowered, and once, he might have fallen at her feet for a chance to kiss her and make her his. Now, he felt nothing but irritation. “And your wife doesn’t value you the way she ought. When she heard that I was looking for you, she said I was welcome to you.” Her brows rose. “Hardly the words of a wife besotted with her husband, I would say.”

His heart gave a violent clench. “She doesn’t need to love me—that doesn’t change the fact we’re married.”

Lydia pouted. “You are going to hold something I said in my youth and folly over my head now? We could have something beautiful, Sebastian.”

“As tempting as you make the offer seem,” he said dryly, “I’ll have to decline.”

“All for the sake of her?”

“Yes.” He clicked his tongue, urging his horse onward again. “I’m afraid so. Don’t do this again, Lydia. You should know better than to seek me out in this way. People are going to talk, and it is not my reputation that you should worry about.”

A stubborn expression flickered across her lovely face, but before she could protest, he dug his heels in his horse and galloped away. Yet, despite his certainty that he had made the correct choice—he would always choose his wife—he could not get the comment she had made to Lydia from his mind.

If he loved her, he did not think he could bear it if she did not love him in return.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Eleanor paced the drawing room, then left for the gardens, which were in full bloom. Summer truly was a wonderful time of year, she reflected, and how cruel the world was that she would not be able to appreciate it properly. A weight pressed on her heart.

She was under no illusions about what Lady Lydia had wanted when she had visited, asking for Sebastian. The boldness of the lady! And her audacity in suggesting, so very delicately, that it was better to know as little as possible of one's husband's activities.

Eleanor had not been born a fool. She knew as the sunlight beamed down on her face that men often strayed from their wives in marriage. And perhaps she was an idealistic fool for supposing that Sebastian did not. Had not. Would not.

She had deluded herself into thinking that he would be loyal to her because he'd married her. And once they had finally consummated the marriage, she had never had reason to doubt his loyalty.

Now, however, she doubted everything.

No. No, she doubted that he had ever moved past Lady Lydia's betrayal. And now, with the lady in question pursuing him so thoroughly, she couldn't be certain that he would deny her.

At the ball, they had danced together.

She paced in the gardens until the tip of her nose felt uncomfortably hot, then came inside to the news that yes, the Duke had returned, and no, he had not come looking for her.

Well then.

Well.

The tightness in Eleanor's chest grew. It was not as though she had been hiding from sight, or failed to inform any of the servants where she had gone. The implication was obvious: he had not cared enough to seek her out.

Her breath shuddered out of her lungs, but she refused to cry. Instead, she went to one of the back parlors where she had done some sewing, and sat, staring sightlessly at the wall for long moments before she came back into herself.

Enough of this , she told herself sternly. If you have a problem with your husband, all you must do is speak to him .

Easier said than done.

The setting sun bathed the world as she made her way to his study. She knocked and called his name. Then, when she received no answer, she let herself in.

The room was empty. The disappointment stabbing her gut felt as though it had rendered her through. Sebastian had gone, and he had not so much as sent a message for her.

Perhaps he had gone to see Lady Lydia.

She pressed a hand against her stomach, willing herself to keep her composure.

Surely he would not be away all evening—they were due to dine together in just an hour or so. Her thoughts calmed. If he had left, she would merely wait for him. No doubt she was overthinking, anyway. She had the tendency to do so when she was upset.

To pass the time, she moved about the study, which had retained the cleanness she had given it all those weeks ago. Her fingers moved over dustless, clean surfaces. The hearth had been swept out, and if he had been drinking in here, she saw no evidence of it.

The man who inhabited these rooms now was happier than the one who had inhabited them before.

As she passed his desk, remembering the time she had seen his letters and learned how deeply he cared, she came across something she hadn't seen before. A slip of paper sticking out from behind the *escritoire*. Curious, she tugged it free.

The page was in Sebastian's handwriting. Half-finished, by the look of it, and she would have put it back, had she not caught sight of her name.

It was... a list.

Remove the mouse and deny her further pets

Limit her freedom

Force her into subservience

Small cruelties

Refuse to eat with her

Make her believe she repulses me

Dismiss her ability to alter the house to her liking

Ignore her

The list went on and on. Some things she noticed almost immediately—the way he had refused to allow her to change anything about the house. Other things she suspected he had not gotten around to doing. Certainly, he had not convinced her that he was repulsed by her.

Although he had denied her for a long time.

All of it—everything he had done had been under the pretense of having her separate from him. Even now, no doubt, he was hoping that she would finally have it within herself to leave so he would not have to chase her out.

Ever since their marriage, she had been trying to win him over, and he had been doing his best to chase her away.

Her breath left her lungs and she sat abruptly. It was one thing to suspect him of harboring feelings for a lady other than her, but this ?

It was too much to bear.

How could she live with this knowledge? She had always known he had not loved her, and had not married her out of any desire to—but she had not known how desperately he had wanted to be free of her. Free of his marriage. He had wanted nothing more than to be rid of her.

Hurt split her heart wide; she felt almost as though she ought to have heard the

cracking for herself, the way an ancient tree was timbered. Down, down, down. The pain of it was a scream inside her chest, and if she was anywhere else, she would have given in to the urge to cry. It hurt to breathe.

How could he do this to her when she had done nothing but love him?

She dropped her head in her hands. Five minutes, that was all she would allow herself. Five minutes in which to grieve the life she had thought she would share with Sebastian. Five minutes to grieve the husband she'd thought she had.

Then, when it was over, when she could finally draw in a full breath, she would give him what he wanted. She loved him enough for that, at least. He might never have loved her back, but she cared for him enough to leave. Once she had disappeared from his life, she would find a way of picking up the pieces.

A life without Sebastian in it. The empty years stretched pointlessly ahead of her, and she drew in a jagged breath. A tear escaped, and she forced it back.

Later. She would cry later.

Five minutes passed all too quickly, but when she raised her head, her resolve was set. She found his ink pot and pen under the mass of other correspondence, and found a sheet of paper. Quickly—she must be quick, before he returned. Better she not see him now, and then he would never know precisely how deeply he had ruined her.

Dear Sebastian , she wrote. It has come to my attention that you are not happy in this marriage and would rather leave it. Learning this grieves me beyond all belief. When I vowed I would stay by your side, I meant it. I thought we could grow to love each other and build a life together. However, I was mistaken. That is not your desire. Thus, by the time you read this, I shall be gone. Annulment I believe is out of the question, but we can live separate lives. That way, you may allow your feelings for

certain others to take precedence in a way I'm sure you would not contemplate while I still lived under your roof . She contemplated underlining this section for emphasis, then decided not to. Although her heart did hold anger and bitterness, the emotions she felt the most were love and grief.

I want nothing more than your happiness, and I understand now that I cannot be the reason behind this. You will never see me again.

With all my love,

Eleanor

She folded the letter and kissed it before leaving it on the table and hurrying from the room, calling for Abigail and instructing her to pack a small trunk. She would allow herself fifteen minutes to leave and no longer. When she was gone, Sebastian would find her note and understand that she was letting him go. Perhaps, at first, he might be angry. He did not like his will tested. But soon, he would see it was for the best.

“Come along, Scrunch,” she murmured, her nose stinging and the inevitable tears encroaching. Olivia would understand—her friend would shelter her and comfort her broken heart. One thing was for sure: she could never go back to Margaret. “Say your goodbyes, because we will never come here again.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Sebastian returned to the house tired and covered in mud. His initial intention had been, when he'd arrived home earlier to find his wife ignoring him, to have a conversation over dinner, but now it seemed he would be late to that, too.

He toed off his boots in the entrance hall, leaving them for his valet to attempt to restore as he padded across the cold floor, irritated with himself and the world. Of all times for an urgent message to be delivered, and about something he could have handled another day.

What a way to end what had been a trying day.

He glanced at the bruising sky. Late, very late. He would have to beg Eleanor's forgiveness. Hopefully, she understood that when his steward had summoned him because his prize cattle had escaped and rampaged into the local village, there was little he could do but attend the scene, assist the farmers, and hand out shillings liberally to cover damages.

"Your Grace." The butler, his face familiar now that he had been at the house for almost a full month. Sebastian felt the weight of that. A full month. When was the last time he had employed a servant for so long?

"Where is my wife?" Sebastian asked, freeing himself of his muddied coat. "I'll speak with her, then send someone to heat some water for a bath. I'm filthy."

"Yes, Your Grace." The man hesitated. Peters? Kellen? Sebastian would remember

soon enough; he worked well and he could think of no reason to end his position.

“What is it?”

“About your wife, sir. I regret to say...” He swallowed. “It pains me to inform you that she isn’t here.”

Sebastian blinked. His chest tightened as he drew in a breath. “What do you mean? Of course she’s here. I left her here.”

“I hoped you might have known where she left to, Your Grace.” The butler looked apologetic. “She, err... she took Abigail with her.”

“Abigail?”

“Her lady’s maid, sir.”

Of course. The one she had asked to keep all that time ago. It felt like half a lifetime. Sebastian looked around the darkening hallway, a footman with a lit taper lighting the lamps. “She’s gone,” he repeated, then shook himself. “When? Where?”

“Over an hour ago. She called for the carriage and asked to be directed to London. When the coachman returns, if he does, we can ask him, sir.”

When the coachman returned. But when would that be? Too long, almost certainly.

“I have to go,” Sebastian said shortly, shrugging his coat back on. Mud be damned.

“Do you have an idea of where she departed to?”

“No, but I—” He stopped, the weight of what had happened crashing into him with

finality. Eleanor, the woman who had promised to remain by his side forevermore, had left him.

She had abandoned him when he needed her the most, just when he realized he loved her. And perhaps he had not told her, had not made it plain enough, but he had , damn it. He had loved her, and now once again he was left to pick up the pieces of his heartbreak.

“I will see if she left any clues as to her whereabouts,” he said shortly.

“Very good, sir.”

Sebastian made his way to his study, knowing, somehow, that he would find a letter there. Knowing that if she wanted to leave a message for him, she would do so there. In the room she had invaded with her presence.

Sure enough, the letter lay on the desk. He broke into it, hands shaking, and read it through. Then again. Again. His eyes glazed.

She was gone. Eleanor had gone and she had left him behind.

The pain in his chest might be enough to kill him. He had thought once that his broken heart might prove to be the death of him, but this could not compare. Whatever love he had felt for Lydia had been childish infatuation, nothing more. A desire, so desperate inside him he ached with it, to be loved and accepted.

Eleanor had made him feel that way, more so than anyone else in his life. More so, even, than Lydia. His parents were a distant blur; all that remained of them in his head was his mother's soft voice and his father's merry smile. Mostly, he remembered their stiff bodies, the way their faces had twisted in death.

Now, when he thought of Eleanor, he would think of this moment, in his dim study, covered in mud as his life broke apart once more.

She was gone and had promised he would never see her again. And all because he had not wanted to marry her when they first married? She had long known that. She knew he pushed everyone else away. And until now, he had thought she was the one person that he might never succeed in doing so with.

How could he bear this?

He took out a brandy bottle from the sideboard and poured a new glass. But this space was filled with her and the memory of her. He needed to find somewhere else, but where could he go that he would not think of her?

There was nowhere, and so he went reluctantly to the library, sitting in the armchair he had always sat in, and began to drink.

It was midnight by the time Sebastian finally stumbled back upstairs. At first, he went into his bedchamber, peering into the gloom. Memories hung here, of course. The memorable time she had come to him in nothing but a nightgown.

But those memories were not enough.

“Damn it,” he mumbled, slurring his words as he tried the door into her bedchamber. Unlocked, of course.

Everything was just as she had left it, gilded in the flickering light of his candle. He put it down on a small table as he inhaled her scent. Just hours ago, she had been here. Just last night, they had slept together in that bed.

Such sentimental thoughts. He could not hold them back. The way she laughed in the

early morning sunlight. The freckles she had that no one else had ever seen. The heat in her eyes when she looked at him. The hunger. The softness. All gone.

For a moment, he swayed on his feet, unsure if he should return to his bed. But the lure of memory proved too strong, and he approached the bed with clumsy footsteps. Angry in his inebriation, but mostly hurt. In six years, she was the first person he had trusted, and she had abandoned him.

No, that wasn't quite right. She had believed that he would be happier without her. Such a foolish assumption when she was the only person left he needed in his life like he needed air to breathe.

Thunder rolled outside the window. Lightning illuminated the room, and with it came a bolt of clarity. She had gone, yes, but love had been written in every line of her letter.

Surely there was more. All this time, she had fought for him, even when she could have been near certain there was nothing worth fighting for. Yet, he would flounder at his first obstacle in doing the same for her?

No. If he did nothing now, he would lose her forever.

He could not let that happen. Would not. Even if it might mean running to his own demise. He needed to know. For their sake, if not his.

There was only one place he could think of that she would flee to now. Olivia . She wouldn't go to her stepmother. All he needed to do was find her before she moved on. There was time. Then he could find her and explain—oh, there was so much to explain. Why he felt the way he did, why he found it so hard to trust, and why he needed her in his life more than he had ever needed anyone.

“Peters,” he called as he hurried back down the stairs. “Where is he? Damn it, I’ll do it myself.”

“Your Grace?” a footman called from behind him, roused but half asleep. “What’s going on?”

“I’ve changed my mind. I’m going after my wife.”

“But—” Another crack of thunder shook the walls of the manor. “The storm. You would be better waiting until morning.”

“If I do that, it might be too late.” He had not ever had a chance to regain something he had lost before. When his parents had died, there had been no coming back from it. When his old butler had left his service, unwilling to be connected with such scandal, there had been nothing Sebastian could say. Even Lydia—heavens, even Lydia. He had begged her then, asked her to give him time. He could have done nothing to win her back.

Even now, her pursuit of him—it was not for his sake. She could have done so any time over the past six years. No. She had done so after she learned of his marriage and thought she could win him over.

He hurried into the driving rain, brushing his hair back from his face. The stable smelled of fresh straw and leather and horses as he stepped inside, striking a match and lighting a candle.

“Come, boy,” he crooned to his gelding, Silver, who watched him with suspicious eyes, his gray coat gleaming in the light. But despite Sebastian having disturbed the horse’s slumber, he came willingly enough, allowing himself to be tacked and saddled. Sebastian did it all without the assistance of the groom, whom he had no wish to wake, and he swung into the saddle.

“Now we fly,” he said, directing Silver at the stable door. They cantered free, leaving the stable block behind. The rain whipped into his face and lightning split the sky. The world felt as though it had come free from its usual restraint, wild and untamed. Clouds blocked even the dim light from the moon, and Sebastian did not care to go faster than a trot along the roads until he came to the outskirts of London. There, he loosened the reins and gave his animal leave to surge forward.

For long moments, he knew nothing but the rain on his face, the chill against his leather-covered fingers, and the knot in his chest. But as he thundered onward, other memories emerged. There had been a storm like this the night his parents had passed.

Lightning. Rain. Rumbling thunder. Darkness that seemed so complete, it bled into his vision. He could taste the fear his younger self had felt. The despair. His hands slackened on the reins, and he sucked in a breath.

This was just how everything had been the day everything went wrong.

If he thought back, he could track every pain in his life back to that singular moment. The loss of his parents had spurred a series of events that had split his life open. With Eleanor’s help, he had begun to stitch himself back together, but now he remembered the trauma, rocking through his body, stiffening him. The terror felt alien, unsettling, as though it belonged to a different man from the one he could become—but he could do nothing to prevent it from moving through his body.

A sound burst from beside him, a man shouting into the storm. A flare of light.

His horse reared, whinnying, and Sebastian lost his grip on the reins.

The ground rushed to meet him.

His last thought was of Eleanor.

“Come away from the window, dearest,” Olivia murmured, taking hold of Eleanor’s arm.

“The storm.” Eleanor stroked Scrunch, the unsettling stone in the pit of her stomach making her feel as though something was wrong. By now, Sebastian must have found her note. She wondered what he was feeling. Whether he felt even some hurt, or just relief that she had finally freed him from the bonds of matrimony.

She sucked in an unsteady breath. “The rain is coming down so strong now.”

Olivia glanced into her face, her brows drawing together. Although her friend usually had plenty to say, she had said very little since Eleanor had arrived unexpectedly, a single trunk in the carriage and the information that she was leaving her husband.

At first, she had attempted to persuade Eleanor to return, but when Eleanor had refused, she had instead promised a room for as long as Eleanor wanted. Her mother, too, seeing nothing more than a Duchess’s friendship, had agreed without any hint of irritation.

Eleanor told no one else that she was leaving Sebastian. If the news of that got out—

Well, she could not bear to bring him any shame or humiliation. He had too much pride for that.

She rested her hand against the windowpane. “And it’s so cold outside.”

“No one will be outside in this,” Olivia said, tugging gently at her elbow. “It’s late. Come to bed and everything will seem better in the morning.”

Eleanor shook her head, swallowing hard. “I very much doubt it.”

“I think that—”

“Please, Olivia. I know you mean well, but I can’t bear you telling me that he cares for me after all. I saw that list.” She swallowed past her thick throat, fighting back the tears that seemed so close to the surface now. “He acted on so many of the items on it. If I hadn’t been so foolish, so desperate to cling to a marriage neither of us wanted, I might have seen his intentions for what they were.”

Olivia pressed her lips together. “I think you’re mistaken, Ella. Lawks, I say the way he looked at you every time you were together—he couldn’t keep his eyes from you. That’s not a man who suffers from indifference. You know at the beginning he was coming to court one of your sisters, but he chose you instead.”

“For what reason?”

“Perhaps you ought to ask him yourself,” Olivia said gently. “All this conjecture—you have yet to speak with him.”

She had been about to. If she had not found the list, she would have spoken to him, and what would he have said? Would he have attempted to spare her feelings, or would he have told her the truth? Or would he have avoided the question entirely?

She turned reluctantly away from the window and the raging storm. She couldn’t remember a storm this bad. Perhaps one when she had been very small, when she had clambered onto the window ledge in her bedroom and watched the lightning strikes, the rain putting out any fires that might have sparked to life.

Back then, it had never occurred to her to be afraid.

“Let’s go to bed,” Eleanor sighed. Olivia had agreed to share her room so she wouldn’t have to be alone, but although she loved her friend dearly, she wondered if

her bruised feelings would find more reprieve from being alone. “Perhaps you are right and everything will seem brighter in the morning.”

“You never know. He might come after you.”

“If he does, tell him I have gone already.”

“Ella, surely—”

“It would be better for the both of us if we have a clean break. Promise me that, Olivia. Please. If he comes here asking for me, deny him.”

Olivia’s mouth twisted. “I dislike the idea of that.”

“Believe me, it would be for the best. I don’t want him to throw away his future out of misplaced guilt.”

“If he has been chasing you away,” Olivia said hotly, “then he deserves to feel that guilt. Why, when you have tried so hard to make things work.”

“Don’t.” Eleanor pressed her fingers against her forehead. Her head throbbed. She felt as though every breath was splitting her apart. All the small kindnesses Sebastian had shown her acted now as thorns in her skin, making it so much harder for her to leave him, even if his cruelty proved that she ought to.

She did her best not to remember the times when his cruelty had felt hollow or forced, as though he did it almost against his will.

She slid onto the bed and curled up against the pillow, material cool against her cheek. Olivia climbed into bed behind her, the weight and scent wrong. This was not the bedfellow she wanted.

“Thank you,” she whispered. A tear slid out from between her eyelids. “Thank you for giving me somewhere to go.”

“Of course.” Olivia’s hand brushed the hair back from her aching head. “Anything for you. You’re my best friend.”

“I’ve never had a best friend before. It means a lot that I have your support.”

“You will always have it,” Olivia said, snuggling closer.

Eleanor closed her eyes, wishing it was enough, and listened to the storm raging against the walls of the house.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Sebastian woke painfully wet in a ditch. He sat up, his body aching and his mind clearer than it had been for years. The memories that had taken over so quickly when he fell now seemed far away.

The storm had passed. Sunlight bloomed across the ground.

All around him, London awoke. He climbed from the ditch, noting that Silver had gone. Yet where once he might have thought about how everyone had left him, he felt compassion for his frightened horse. If he were a horse, he probably would have fled in the storm, too. He just hoped that Silver had made his way back home without getting hurt.

Dizziness surged through him and he swayed on his feet, pressing a hand to the side of his head. Pain lanced from the contact, and his hair came away sticky with blood.

For a moment, thoughts escaped him. He stared at the bright red, his clothes clinging uncomfortably to his skin, chilled to the bone. People passed by, oblivious to his state—or not caring enough to intervene.

But he couldn't let this stop him. He had to find Eleanor.

His legs threatened to give way as he began on his path. The storm had washed the world clean, causing more damage than Sebastian could have accounted for. His feet splashed in puddles as he made his way along the track, tripping over cobblestones. The world twisted and blurred, and he dug his fingers into his palm to steady himself.

He would not give in until he found Eleanor and explained himself. She couldn't leave him—not because he wished to limit her freedom, but because she did not have the truth. Once he told her, she would be able to make an informed decision.

And maybe—maybe even then she would choose to leave.

And if she did, that would be her choice—he would not stop her.

Minutes blurred, and it took him several tries to make the street where he knew Olivia and her family to live. With difficulty, he clambered up the stairs. His fingers were so cold they had turned numb, and even the warmth from the sun couldn't banish his chill.

“Yes?” The butler who answered the door looked down his nose at Sebastian, no doubt not recognizing the Duke that lay under his muddied, rumpled clothes.

“I'm here to see El—the Duchess of Ravenscroft. I know she's staying here.”

The butler's nostrils flared, and Sebastian could almost lock onto the exact moment when the man finally realized who he was.

“I—Your Grace.”

“Please tell her I wish to see her.”

“I'm afraid she isn't in the establishment.”

“Are you certain?”

“I'm afraid so, sir.”

“When did she leave? Where did she go?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know, Your Grace. She didn’t say where she intended to go. She left about half an hour ago.”

Half an hour in a carriage. Without a horse, he had no easy way to catch up to her, without so much as knowing where she might have gone—how could he find her?

He’d been too late. For all his attempts to fix things, he had failed. She had left anyway. He would never find her unless she wanted to be found.

Well, truthfully, if he wanted, he could perhaps go after her. Throw all his resources into locating her and bringing her back to his home, but in that case, did she want to be found? If he brought her back, would it be against her will?

He had promised himself that he would give her the liberty of choice. It seemed she had already chosen, and she must have been keen to leave him if she had left already. She had not waited to give him a chance to find her.

The only conclusion he could come to was that she didn’t want to see him.

“I see,” he murmured and turned away. If she was no longer here, he could see no reason to tarry. “Thank you.”

“Your Grace—if you would come inside and wait awhile—”

Sebastian kept walking. He had no desire to wait in the house she had vacated. What benefit could that bring? Yes, perhaps he was in no fit state to walk, but better this than sit and contemplate his failings.

He should not have pushed her away. The fault was with him alone—as it had been

with so many things.

He walked with no real concept of where he was going. Perhaps back home. His legs felt as though they would collapse under him after every step, but he forced himself onward.

Onward.

Onward.

A horse's clattering hoofbeats caught his attention, and he glanced up to see a carriage bearing down on him. The horse reared, feet kicking, and Sebastian swayed on his feet, stumbling to one side. A face gazed at him through the window of the carriage, her eyes wide and dark.

The world narrowed on the sight of her face. The chestnut hair around her temples, the rosy glow in her cheeks, the delicate point to her chin. He had memorized so many of these features, and for a long moment, he wasn't sure whether to believe the evidence of his eyes.

Eleanor .

It couldn't be. And yet the carriage came to a stop and the door opened, his wife spilling out without so much as waiting for the coachman to help her alight. Her boots splashed in the water of the road, and Sebastian fell to his knees against the cobblestones.

It was her. Defying all odds, he had found her.

"Eleanor," he whispered.

“Sebastian!” Her hands came to cradle his face, soft and warm despite everything.
“What happened to you?”

“I...” The world twisted dizzily.

“You’re hurt! Oh, my darling.” Tears streaked her face. “I knew something was wrong. I knew it.”

“Shh .” Every word felt an effort. “It’s all right.”

“It’s not all right. Jordan, come and help!” She looked over her shoulder, no doubt looking for the coachman, but Sebastian couldn’t have her facing in any other direction. He reached for her face, skating his fingers along her jaw even as black ate at the corners of his vision.

“Eleanor,” he whispered. “I love you.”

He knew no more.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Eleanor sat by Sebastian's bed, a cloth in her hands. His skin appeared waxy, dotted with sweat, and she bathed his forehead.

"You fool," she whispered, and when he didn't react, she clasped her hands in her lap again. The physician had arrived and left; there was nothing she could do now but wait for his fever to break.

She prayed it would.

After everything they had been through, fate would be too cruel if it stole him from her now—just when she had gained him.

He stirred, and she looked back over him, examining him closely. His long, dark hair clung to his damp neck, and his eyes moved from below bruised eyelids. Although he had not been conscious since that moment in the street, it didn't seem as though his rest was proving especially restful.

"Please," she murmured, taking his hand and threading her fingers through his. "Come back to me. I already reconciled myself to losing you once—I can't lose you again. I can't. Please, my darling. Come back and tell me you love me. Come back and tell me you hate me. Just come back to me."

In the hearth, the fire crackled, and she stared into his silent, waxy visage, clapping a hand over her face and doing her best not to give way into panic.

The door opened and Abigail pushed through. Olivia had offered to stay with them too, providing assistance where she could, but Eleanor had decided against it. Instead, she had tasked Luke with traveling to the manor for details, then relaying them back to Olivia.

At least that way, she could promote one match, even if it was not her own.

“How are you feeling, Your Grace?”

“I...” Eleanor blinked. How long had she been sitting in this chair? “I’m fine.”

“I brought you dinner. I think you should eat something, Your Grace.”

Eating was the very last thing on Eleanor’s mind, but she pinched her inner wrist. If Sebastian were well, he would tell her to eat. In fact, he would order to do so in that commanding tone of his, and she would have no choice but to obey, because she never did have a choice when it came to Sebastian.

“Thank you,” she said, accepting the tray and forcing a few ashy mouthfuls down. “Thank you. You’ve been very good to me.”

“Of course. All the staff are hoping that His Grace pulls through. For both your sakes.” With a sad smile and a curtsy, Abigail left the room, and Eleanor stared at Sebastian’s slumbering form until she finally succumbed to sleep.

Sebastian’s dreams had been tangled, dark, and angry. Yet whenever he thought he might sink under the weight of them, he was always brought back to himself by a soft voice saying his name, or a cool hand on his brow.

When he finally did push through the darkness of his mind and open his eyes, he found himself in a new kind of darkness. Embers from a fire glowed in the corner of

the room, tinting the world around him in shades of red. The shape of the room was familiar, and it took him a moment to understand that he was looking at his bedchamber back at the manor.

Eleanor!

His last waking memory had been of her. She hadn't gone—he had found her. He sat in a panic, and a languid hand pressed at his shoulder.

“Sebastian?” his wife uttered, her voice so full of hope and disbelief that his heart fair broke from the sound of it. “Don't move! Save your strength. Stay still. Stay quiet.” She eased him back into the bed. “Are you truly awake?” She struck a match and light flared, revealing her familiar face, eyes shadowed by exhaustion and grief.

He wished he could wipe the expression away. He struggled against her restraining hand. He couldn't be still and quiet until he told her all the things he needed to. A strange panic rose in him. He'd wasted too many minutes already; he couldn't waste a single one more.

“Eleanor,” he said hoarsely.

“Shh, shh. It's all right.”

“No, it's not.” He took her hand and squeezed it in both of his, wishing he could do more. But although he was awake, and he knew that for certain, his head ached and his limbs felt like water. He could not have put strength into them even if he wanted to.

Still, he had strength enough for this.

“I love you,” he told her. “I have loved you for far longer than I had ever dared admit

to myself, because of my fear that you would leave me. I admit that at the beginning, I thought my life would be easier without you in it, but I was wrong, and it has been quite some time since I realized that. My life is incomplete without you by my side as my wife, with everything that entails. There is no one else. Not for me. I love you too dearly for that, far more than I ever loved Lydia, whatever you may think.”

Her eyes filled with tears. “You always wanted her.”

“No. No . I thought I did when I was young and foolish and knew no better.”

“But the way you danced with her—”

“I only danced with her because you danced with Luke.” At the confusion filling her eyes, he brought her fingers to his lips. “I know now you meant nothing by it, but I could not bear standing by and watching you dance with him. That was an error of mine, but it meant nothing. I only ever wanted to discourage her from her pursuit—it meant nothing to her, either. She wanted me then because I had moved out of her reach.” He had come to that conclusion long ago. She’d had plenty of time to find him and seek him out since she had ended things. The fact she had only ever tried after his marriage proved to him it was a selfish pursuit, and her affections meant nothing.

She didn’t truly want to be his mistress. That would be disastrous to her reputation, and she had yet to marry. All she had wanted to prove was that she still had power over him.

Unfortunately for her, he had already fallen in love with Eleanor.

Tears spilled down Eleanor’s cheeks. “I thought you didn’t care for me in that way,” she whispered. “I thought I’d failed.”

“I was afraid once. But I am not afraid anymore.” He squeezed her fingers in his.
“Can you forgive me?”

“Forgive you ?”

“Yes.”

“Of course. There’s no question if you—” She swallowed. “If you really mean that you love me , then what is there to forgive?”

“So much. I don’t deserve you.” He pulled her closer, then hesitated. “Can you call me a bath?”

She gave a little gurgle of laughter and came to lie beside him, tucking herself against his sweat-soaked body. “I don’t mind.”

“You should.” He winced as he adjusted, but with Eleanor against him, he felt as though he could finally rest in a way he had been unable to do until then.

“When you’re well, we can consider that.”

“I feel better now.” He turned and found her face closer than anticipated. Her eyelashes brushed his cheek as she lowered her gaze to his mouth.

“When you’re better,” she promised in a whisper. “Until then, my darling, sleep.”

His heart felt lighter than it had in years. Finally freed from his certainty that everyone he came to care for would leave him, the tension in his heart left him. Terrible things happened, that was true, but he had done his fair share of alienating the people who had been close to him. Lydia had been subject to all his insecurities, and they had become too much for her—she had been too young to handle his

trauma.

Eleanor was not. And in return, he would open his heart to her once and for all.

It took a further four days for Sebastian to fully recover. Eleanor spent the majority of the time by his side, but when he slept—as he did often—she made plans for his recovery.

First was the flowers. She went into the garden and picked armfuls of roses and other blooms to place in vases on every surface. Then she continued ordering the curtains and draperies of various rooms to be replaced.

He had chosen her. Whenever she thought about it, her heart swelled as though it might burst free from her chest. He had chosen her and she would not take that lightly. And so, she made the decision to turn his house into their home.

A place where they could learn to live as one. As husband and wife for the rest of their days.

On the fourth day, she rose early and transformed the breakfast room, intending to return to his bedchamber later and escort him down herself. But upon hearing the brush of footsteps, she spun to find her husband in the doorway to the room, his eyes on the floral display behind her. She had gone as far as draping vines around the unlit candelabra.

“Oh,” she said stupidly. “You’re awake.”

“I was feeling a lot better this morning, and I missed you.” He advanced into the room, the corners of his eyes crinkling. “It seems as though you have been busy.”

“I wanted to surprise you.”

“Consider me surprised.”

“Do you dislike it?” She looked into his face, and he brought his hand to her chin, thumb brushing her skin gently. “I hoped you might come to like it.”

“I like it a lot,” he said, still looking down at her.

“I wanted this to be our house, one that we both love.”

His mouth twitched. He had changed in the days since she had discovered him half-dead as he searched for her. And perhaps she had changed too—the part of her so desperate to flee had withered and died as she had stared into his frozen face. There could be no leaving now, not when he had proven himself so desperate to keep her.

And he, in turn, had shown himself to be slower to temper, more open with his smiles and his affection. The last barrier between them, one she had not known existed before then, had fallen away.

Yet for all that, she found a new somberness in him. A new appreciation for the world around him.

“This is your home as much as mine— more , even,” he said. “I’ve had well over a decade to make it mine as much as I could want. Now you have a blank canvas. Draw on it as you would wish. I want you to be happy here, and truthfully, I’m attached to nothing here but you.”

“I should have known I’d married a flirt.”

His smile widened into something so bright, her breath caught. “Did you not know by the way we first met?”

“You swore then you had no aspirations in my direction.”

“Why, when I first arrived there, I did not. You intrigued me.” The thumb brushing her chin moved to her lip. “As you still do to this day.”

Scrunch chose that moment to burst from her pocket, running up to her shoulder. Sebastian reared back, and Eleanor laughed.

“Are you still afraid of him?”

“I am not afraid .” Even so, he regarded the rodent with a mix of trepidation and affection. “Would you mind putting him to one side?”

“Why?”

“Why do you think?” A smile creased his face. “So I can kiss you.”

She had to laugh, and she scooped Scrunch into her hand. Fortunately, she had somewhere to put him now.

“Come with me,” she said, taking Sebastian’s hand and leading him back up to her bedchamber where the wooden cage Sebastian had ordered to be made stood ready. Carefully, she deposited her pet through the door fashioned for him, then closed it properly.

Then she spun back to her husband.

“Well?” she asked archly. “Were you not about to kiss me?”

“Indeed I was,” he chuckled, sliding a hand around to the back of her neck. He brought his mouth down on hers.

His kiss was soft and gentle, tender, saying everything he had already put into words. He loved her—she knew that, understood it in her heart, but he reminded her through her body as he parted her lips with his.

“Beautiful,” he murmured, kissing the corner of her mouth, then her cheekbone, then her eyelids, her brows. “I am the luckiest man to have ever walked this earth.”

“I love you,” she whispered, her breath leaving her lungs.

“I love you. More than I could ever have imagined loving anyone.” His fingers pressed into the small of her back, bowing her body into his. They had not been intimate since the night of that awful ball, and even then, there had been something mechanical about it. As though they were following familiar paths without thought or emotion.

Now, she felt the way he bared his heart to her.

She ached for him.

And predictably, her body turned to liquid in anticipation of how he could make her feel.

“Eleanor,” he said against her lips. “I hunger for you. Will you let me?”

“Let you what?”

He leaned back so she could see the glint in his eyes. “Why, darling wife. Have breakfast, of course.”

She trembled with desire as she nodded, and he picked her up—his recent illness had not diminished his strength, it seemed—placing her on the bed.

“Let me worship you,” he said, dropping to his knees before her, his eyes dark and just as hungry as he had said. I hunger for you .

“I burn for you,” she said, the words finding their way to her lips.

He glanced at her, expression soft despite the hard edge of his desire. His hands slid under her skirts, pushing them up to her waist. His eyes glowed with anticipation and his fingers skirted the edge of her slick core. She shivered at the flash of pleasure, there and gone.

“I want you to sound your pleasure,” he told her, that command she loved so much in his voice. “Don’t hold back for me, Eleanor. Can you do that?”

So different from when he had asked her to be quiet. There was no hiding what they were doing now—no hint of shame as he brought his mouth to her inner thigh. She let her head hang back, bracing herself on her hands as he peppered soft kisses across her inner thighs, his fingers teasing her until she writhed on the table.

“My feast,” he murmured, flicking his gaze to her, a wicked gleam in his eyes she recognized. Then he brought his head between her legs and feasted on her like a man starved, licking and sucking, using his finger to press inside her. There was little to no resistance.

To think she had been prepared to leave this behind for the remainder of her days.

Remembering his command, she didn’t bite her lip to keep her gasps and moans contained. With every sound that burst from her, he moved with added urgency.

When eventually she fell apart, his name was on her tongue. He held her through the waves of pleasure, drinking in her nectar as she trembled, her arms almost not enough to hold her up.

“Sebastian,” she said when he seemed to make as though he would continue there.
“Sebastian, please. I need you.”

He rose, leaning over her, his erection hot and hard against her thigh as he kissed her, letting her taste the musk of her desire on his mouth. “I could do that forever,” he said huskily. “I love the way you sound.”

“Sebastian,” she whispered.

“I love you. I want you to feel how much.”

“I do.” She cupped his cheek with her palm, looking into his eyes. “You show me every day.”

“I haven’t. But I will.”

“You have,” she shook her head. “You made a cage for Scrunch. You see me, even when I feel like I want to hide. You let me into your house, and you have embraced me even when it terrified you to. You came after me, Sebastian. No one else has ever gone to such lengths for me.” Her heart swelled with such love, she thought she might split apart from it. “I will never forget.”

“I will endeavor to deserve you.”

“You already do. That’s what loving is.” She placed a hand against her heart. “As long as you hold me here, you deserve my love.” She smiled at his expression of wonder. “Take me now. Show me your love. And let me show you.”

His lips curved. “I already showed you with my mouth.”

“Show me again,” she whispered.

EPILOGUE

One year later

Eleanor pressed a hand to her stomach against the unusual roiling there, forcing the nausea back as she smiled at Olivia as her best friend walked down the aisle of the small church, hand in hand with Luke.

Their match had been an inevitability from almost the first moment of their meeting. But Luke, rebuilding his life back in England, had taken his time proposing. Olivia, patient to the last moment despite her runaway tongue, had been content to wait, and now they had finally committed to their love.

Sebastian wrapped his arm around Eleanor's stomach as they emerged into the sunlight, blinking after the dark cool of the church.

"I remember this place," he said, tilting his head as he looked down at Eleanor. "I believe the beginning of the rest of my life began here."

"Oh, you mean when you married me against your will?" Ignoring her nausea, happy despite it, Eleanor rested her head against his arm. "You did not know then that it was the beginning of the rest of your life."

"No, well, I was a fool." His finger touched her chin. "But I still thought you were beautiful in your wedding dress."

"Of course you did," she teased. "That's because you were ."

They reached their carriage and Sebastian handed her into it. “Are you all right?” he asked once they were seated inside. A year of learning her, and now he knew how to read every expression as though she was a book, and he, its reader.

“I feel a trifle unwell,” she sighed. “It is likely just the heat.”

“It is hot today.” He studied her. “Would you prefer to miss the wedding breakfast and go home?”

“And miss celebrating Olivia and Luke? Never! How could you say that about your best friend?”

“You are my best friend,” he said, taking her hand and bringing it to his mouth. “As much as I do love them and value their friendship, my priority always rests with you.”

Her stomach lurched again, as it did so often recently. Their life had been so full, redecorating the entire house to better fulfill their needs. She had also, that spring, begun to tackle the garden.

She still had her bedchamber, of course, but it was more out of habit; every night, she joined Sebastian in his bed. His bedchamber was larger than hers, and his bed correspondingly larger. As a result, they had set to work redecorating his bedchamber, too. No longer did it merely reflect Sebastian and his life—now it bore an unmistakably feminine touch.

All these things, alongside visits to Scotland, Yorkshire, and even Italy during the winter, had probably exhausted her. A little rest would set her to rights.

A line still lay between Sebastian’s brows, and she smiled. “I’m fine, my love. I promise.”

“And if you’re not, you’ll tell me?”

“I’ll tell you.” Despite the jerking of the carriage, she pressed her mouth to his in a soft, chaste kiss. He had come so far in trusting that she would not leave him by choice. But that did not mean he did not fear losing her in some other, crueller way. A twist of fate. A force beyond his control. Just as he had lost her parents.

“There is nothing wrong with me,” she murmured.

He held her hand tightly the rest of the carriage ride home, and when they arrived, he didn’t let her go until they met up with Olivia and Eleanor rushed across to draw her best friend into an embrace.

“Congratulations,” she said, lost in her genuine delight. Olivia glowed, a flush in her cheeks that set alight her hair. She was the most beautiful woman in the world in her joy, and by the way Luke looked at her, he thought so too.

Olivia laughed. “You know, my mother thought I would never find a gentleman content to allow me to talk the way Luke does—he says he enjoys my talking, but I suspect he’s being kind.”

“I do like it,” Luke protested.

“I am very lucky, but I do have to sometimes remember that he has a voice too and sometimes I should pause and give him leave to speak.”

Eleanor grinned. “At least when he does, it’s not to speak about hunting or the state of the roads.”

“Oh yes, I could never have married a gentleman who bored me.” She tugged Eleanor across to a side table where there were jugs of lemonade laid out, and she poured

them both a glance. “I have something to tell you, and I hope you will be scandalized .”

“What’s that?”

Olivia glanced around before leaning closer. “We did not wait until our wedding night. We ought to have done, I know, but we were already engaged and Mama left us alone and—well, it was truly wonderful. An education . Now I’m even more excited for tonight.”

Eleanor laughed. How different their respective marriages were, even if they both resulted in joy. She had waited for Sebastian to consummate their marriage, and Olivia had not even had to wait until marriage. She supposed that was the advantage of marrying for love in advance of the wedding itself.

“Why did you not tell me the things a gentleman can do with his mouth ?” Olivia demanded, still in a whisper. “I was almost shocked, and I grew up in America—there is very little that can shock me.”

Eleanor thought of the dynamic she shared with Sebastian. The way sometimes he brought his hand down on her before kissing away the sting—and how much it encouraged her own pleasure.

Everything he did encouraged her pleasure.

“I suspect there is more still that will shock you,” she smiled.

“Do you think? Like what?”

“Well—” Another wave of nausea washed through Eleanor, and she clamped her mouth shut in case she expelled her breakfast everywhere. This was truly awful

timing. Putting her glass down, she hurried through the crowd, looking for the bathroom, or failing that, a screen and a chamber pot. Something so she would not have to vomit in front of the company.

Then she would alarm Sebastian, and she desperately didn't want to do that.

"Eleanor?" Olivia hurried after her. "What is the matter?"

"I— " Eleanor found a screen and ducked behind it, finally allowing herself to give in to the nausea. Olivia's hand pressed against her back.

"Are you unwell? Should I call for Mama? Sebastian? I can—"

"No! I'll be well again soon. I just—" The sickness struck again and she heaved. "It should go away in a moment. It usually does. I'm sorry I'm ruining your day."

"You are not ruining anything," Olivia said firmly. "Did you say that this has happened before?"

"Yes, but it is not something to fret over, I promise."

"Oh, dearest, I'm not worried. At least, not in that sense." Olivia sat beside her. "Before my marriage, Mama sat me down and talked about the different things a body can do. She also discussed, in far too much detail if you ask me, the means of conceiving a child."

Eleanor's eyes widened. "A child?"

"She explained to me that my monthly cycles will stop and that I may feel nauseous, as you are doing now. Tell me, dearest. When was your last bleed?"

“I—” Eleanor blinked, trying to think past the haze in her mind. When had her last bleed been? She had been so busy, she hadn’t thought to keep track of it. It was an inconvenience, but it didn’t always come at the same time of the moon, and she had more than enough to be getting on with.

Margaret had never explained to her what might happen when she was with child. She understood that her stomach would start to swell and she would grow a babe inside her, but she didn’t know that she would feel like this .

Her last bleed had been sometime in the spring. Perhaps two moons ago.

Heavens. Did that mean... Could this truly be happening?

Yet, she had been feeling odd in herself. Not quite the way she had been. Before, she hadn’t even thought to consider that it might be this, especially as she had not grown thick with child, but now the suggestion had been posed, she felt in her heart that it was right.

“I don’t know,” she said slowly. “I think possibly—I think it might have been some time ago.”

“Oh, then perhaps this is a symptom of something greater.”

Eleanor pressed a hand against her throat. In secret, she had wished for a child, praying that every time she lay with Sebastian he might give her one. It seemed that her prayers had been answered, if Olivia could be believed.

So far, in her relationship, Olivia had not led her astray.

She sat back on her haunches. “I hope it is,” she said dazedly. “A child—I have dreamed of one.”

“Then this is perfect!”

“Sebastian. I need to—” She needed to think clearly. If she wasn’t with child after all, then what should she do? Would it be cruel to tell Sebastian, only to risk his disappointment if she wasn’t, or she lost the babe? That happened too, she knew.

But how could she keep this knowledge inside her now she knew?

No. They had promised to tell each other everything, and if she lost the child, then he could grieve with her.

“Take me to Sebastian,” she said firmly. “I have something to tell him.”

Olivia took a damp cloth from a maid and dabbed Eleanor’s face with it, wiping her mouth. “There. You look as good as new. Go and tell your husband.”

“I am so happy for you and Luke,” Eleanor said, taking her friend’s arm and pulling her into an embrace. “This is not how I intended your wedding breakfast to go.”

“Are you serious?” Olivia laughed, freckled face filled with mirth and genuine joy. “This has made the day all the better. We are friends, Eleanor, and that means we celebrate each other’s victories. To have two happen on the same day—it only doubles the joy of both.”

“I love you.”

“And I love you. Now go and tell your husband your family is expanding. I’ll find my husband, but fear not, I’ll keep this information to myself for the time being.”

“Thank you.” Eleanor patted her friend’s shoulder and left from behind the screen, her steps quickening as she made her way back to the drawing room. Soon, the

breakfast would be announced, but Eleanor had no desire to eat. All she wanted was to see Sebastian's face and watch his expression as he discovered he was to be a father.

He'd mentioned offhand that he wanted to begin a family, to have a daughter like her and a son like him. Over the course of their year together, he had also told her more about his childhood with his parents. They had been kind and loving, and until that terrible night when he was thirteen, he had been happy.

That's what he wanted for their children. That happiness in childhood, with no danger of it ending.

Of course, he had not blamed her that she had not become with child sooner, but now she could finally make that dream come true for him.

She picked up her skirts as she searched for her husband.

"Eleanor?"

"Sebastian!" She turned to him, finding his expression panicked as he looked at her.

"What happened to you? I was looking for you, but everyone said you left with Olivia. Are you well?" He cupped her cheeks in his hands. "You look pale. Would you like to go home?"

"Not yet. But I do have something to tell you."

His gaze searched hers. "Bad news?"

"You may decide that for yourself, but I would hazard a guess that it isn't." She smiled up at his handsome face, so dear to her. "Come with me. Here." She opened a

door to a small parlor, unoccupied. “Now we can be alone.”

Heat sparked in his eyes, but he remained gentle as he asked, “Are you sure you don’t need to sit down?”

“Not yet, but I think I might need to soon.” She took his hands and squeezed them. “You see, the truth is, I think—I am almost certain I am with child.”

Sebastian had been worried for quite some time about his wife’s health. Over the past few days, he’d watched her battle nausea she never wanted to acknowledge. He’d seen her toss and turn at night, and turn down food she usually adored. All that time, he’d kept that concern deep inside, knowing that his past had a habit of rearing its head when he wanted it to least.

Now this.

This.

With child .

He’d dreamed of it—of course he had. A little girl with Eleanor’s eyes and her bright smile. A boy he could take riding and teach how to take over his title one day. Children who would bear his name and carry on the generations.

“Are you jesting me?” he asked, and his voice cracked. Once, he might have been embarrassed at that sign of weakness, but he had no reason for shame in front of Eleanor. She had seen every part of him, and she loved and accepted him just as he was—even when he didn’t deserve it.

“Jesting you?” She tilted her head, and her smile was perfectly gentle. “I would not do that about such a thing.”

No, he already knew that.

Tears misted his eyes, and he brought her knuckles to his mouth, one at a time. Perhaps once, he would have feared hearing such a thing—he might have remembered about his parents and thought about all the things that could go wrong.

There were so many things that could go wrong, of course. There always were. With every eventuality came a collection of worst-case scenarios. But now, he did not default to thinking about them. He thought only of the joy that would come from starting a family with the woman he loved more than anything else in the world.

“I love you,” he said, kissing the corner of her mouth.

“Are you happy?”

“Yes. You could not fail to make me happy.” He brushed his knuckles along her jaw. “I love you more every day, and now we have something else to love.”

A smile split her face, and Sebastian put the last of his fear from him. It had been over a year since it had last ruled his life, and he would not give it more space. The only thing he would allow in was joy, and he had that in bucketfuls.

“I can’t wait to get you home,” he said, holding her close and kissing the top of her head. “So we can finally start a family together.”

The End?

7 years later

Scotland

Eleanor giggled, stumbling slightly as Sebastian's broad hands covered her eyes, guiding her forward with exaggerated care.

"How much longer?" she asked.

"Patience, my love," he murmured against her ear, the warmth of his breath sending a pleasant shiver down her spine. "You've waited this long, surely a few more steps won't kill you." His tone was laced with mirth, and she could hear the quiet laughter of their children beside them—soft, delighted sounds that only made her heart fuller.

"Papa, you're doing it all wrong," their eldest, Henry, declared with the self-assurance of a child convinced of his own wisdom. "Mama doesn't like surprises. She likes to be prepared."

His little sister, Marianne, giggled beside him, ever the instigator, adding in a conspiratorial whisper, "I like surprises."

Sebastian scoffed. "Is that so? Well, my dear wife, do you require preparation for a simple surprise?" His hands remained firm over her eyes. Eleanor sighed, long-suffering but smiling all the same.

"You forget, husband," she said, "that the moment you asked for my hand in my stepmother's drawing room, my entire life has been one prolonged surprise."

Sebastian chuckled low in his throat, and just before unveiling her eyes, he pressed a lingering kiss to the back of her neck. “Then this shall be no different, my sweet.”

Eleanor gasped the moment Sebastian lifted his hands away, her eyes widening as she took in the sight before her. Her childhood vacation home stood tall and proud, its once-weathered facade now lovingly restored. The ivy that had once crept unchecked along the stone walls had been trimmed with care, allowing the warm honey-colored brick to shine in the afternoon light. The wooden shutters, freshly painted, stood open as though welcoming her back. A lump formed in her throat as she turned to Sebastian, her hands fluttering uselessly before she pressed them over her mouth.

“How—” she started, her voice breaking. “How did you know? You did this?”

Sebastian’s eyes softened as he reached for her, his arms wrapping around her waist to pull her close. “For you. For us,” he murmured, pressing a kiss to her forehead. “I wanted you to have a place that was wholly yours. A place you once cherished, and a place we can spend our summers together, where the children can make memories. Every year after this one, we will come here as a family.” His voice was low and warm, rich with affection, and it sent a fresh wave of emotion through her.

Henry and Marianne, oblivious to the moment their parents shared, squealed in delight as they ran past them toward the house, their laughter echoing through the small garden.

“Slow down!” Eleanor called after them, though her voice was bright with laughter. She turned back to Sebastian, her hands cupping his face as she kissed him, long and lingering.

“I love you,” she whispered against his lips, and she could feel the smile that spread across his face before he kissed her back.

As the pair remained wrapped in their embrace, a distant rumble of wheels on gravel caught their attention. Eleanor turned her head just as a carriage rolled into view, the Greycliff crest gleaming under the afternoon sun. Before the driver could even come to a full stop, the door burst open, and Olivia, radiant as ever, practically tumbled out, her enormous belly leading the way. “Eleanor! Sebastian!” she cried, throwing her arms wide as if she intended to embrace the entire estate. Behind her, Luke stepped out more cautiously, guiding his wife’s movements.

“Olivia!” Eleanor laughed, shaking her head as Olivia waddled toward them. “Should you be moving so quickly in your condition?”

“I hardly think so—“ Luke began.

“Nonsense, I am perfectly capable!” Olivia interrupted, then promptly pressed a dramatic hand to her lower back. “I am merely carrying a small army, that’s all.” She turned to Sebastian with a smirk. “And what of you, Your Grace? Has married life softened you yet?”

Sebastian huffed. “If anything, I’ve been under siege since the moment I wed.” But his voice held no real bite, especially when Eleanor gave him a knowing smile. Luke clapped him on the shoulder. “I’d say you look rather content for a man under siege, old friend.”

As they made their way toward the house, Olivia suddenly clapped her hands together.

“Where are my favorite little mischief-makers? Henry! Marianne! Come out, my dears, I have something for you!” At her call, the children came clamoring to the front, their eager faces lighting up as Olivia produced a small parcel from her reticule. “I brought you the finest chocolates in all of London,” she declared.

“Aunt Olivia! Uncle Greycliff! Thank you,” they said in unison. The children squealed in delight as they took their prizes.

“Uncle Luke—” Luke tried to put in, but alas, it was too late.

Sebastian clapped him on the back. “I am sure they’ll get there someday, old boy,” he chuckled. “For now, perhaps learn to take it as a compliment, until you can invest in satiating their appetite as your wife so wisely does?”

Luke gave a wry smile. “Of course, Ravenscroft.”

As soon as the children darted off, their laughter trailing behind them, the rest of the group made their way inside. The grand foyer of the estate was awash in golden light, the scent of fresh bread and roasted meats drifting from the dining room. The staff, smiling and efficient, greeted them warmly, already preparing for the midday meal. Eleanor slipped her hand into Sebastian’s, sharing a quiet smile with him as they stepped toward the long, inviting table. Brunch was laid out in an elegant yet comfortably informal spread—fluffy scones, thick slices of ham, and an assortment of jams and preserves that Henry and Marianne immediately set upon as they returned, breathless from their running about.

Olivia, ever the center of attention, sighed dramatically as she lowered herself into a chair, patting her rounded belly with exaggerated suffering. “Oh, the trials I endure,” she proclaimed, earning an indulgent chuckle from Luke. “I swear, my dear husband is utterly useless when it comes to managing me. You’d think after years of marriage, he would have learned to anticipate my every need, but alas! He is a slow learner.” Her eyes sparkled with amusement, and Luke, shaking his head in mock exasperation, leaned forward to pour her a cup of tea.

“I believe I manage just fine, dearest,” he countered smoothly, lifting the cup toward her with a knowing smirk. “Though it does appear that your greatest need at present

is simply to be indulged.” Olivia grinned, accepting the tea with an air of regal satisfaction, while Eleanor and Sebastian exchanged amused glances.

After taking a dramatic bite of her scone, she sighed, as if the sheer weight of her burdened existence could only be mitigated by flaky pastry and clotted cream. “Do you know, I’ve decided something very important,” she declared, wiping a crumb delicately from the corner of her mouth.

Eleanor humored her with a raised brow. “Oh? And what great revelation has befallen you this time?”

Olivia set her teacup down with an emphatic clink. “That after this child is born, I am never enduring this again.”

Luke, mid-sip of his own tea, nearly choked. “You told me just last month you wanted at least five children.”

“That was before I became the size of a small carriage!” Olivia said flatly, gesturing toward her belly. “I refuse to do this again unless it is by some divine miracle in which I am unaware I am pregnant until the child simply appears in my arms.”

Sebastian, looking far too entertained, leaned back in his chair. “That seems a rather ambitious condition.”

“Oh, hush, you’re not the one whose ankles have declared war against you,” Olivia shot back, then turned to Eleanor with pleading eyes. “Tell me, dearest, did you suffer like this when you were carrying Henry and Marianne?”

Eleanor smiled, stirring a spoonful of honey into her tea. “Not terribly, though I do recall a certain Duke losing all sense of reason the moment I so much as sighed in discomfort.”

Sebastian scoffed, though the tips of his ears reddened—a sure sign that he had, in fact, been the most fretful of husbands. “You were carrying my child. Forgive me for wanting to ensure you were well.”

“Oh, I assure you, he was insufferable,” Eleanor said with a wink, earning a chorus of laughter around the table. “Though I will admit, I did find it rather sweet. He was so determined to anticipate my every need before I even knew I had them.”

Luke exhaled long-sufferingly. “Sebastian, my friend, you have set an impossible standard.”

Sebastian smirked. “A husband should be attentive, Greycliff.”

Luke arched a brow. “Yes, well, attentiveness does not mean having the nursery redecorated four times because you were suddenly convinced yellow was too stimulating for a newborn.”

Henry, who had been very focused on his pile of jam-slathered scones, perked up. “I like yellow.”

Sebastian pointedly ignored his son’s contribution. “I seem to recall a certain Viscount ordering an entire shipment of French lace because his wife once offhandedly remarked she liked the draperies at a particular inn.”

Luke waved a hand. “That was different.”

“How so?”

“...It was good lace.”

The entire table erupted into laughter, Olivia shaking her head as she rested a hand

over her belly. “Honestly, if nothing else, I shall be pleased to give birth simply so I don’t have to listen to any more debates over nursery decor.”

“Speaking of which,” Eleanor interjected, “when is the midwife expecting your little one to make an appearance?”

Olivia huffed. “Any week now, apparently, though I think it is a cruel lie to keep my spirits up. I feel as though I shall be pregnant forever.”

Henry, ever curious, tilted his head. “Can babies stay inside forever?”

Sebastian, recognizing the dangerous territory of the conversation, swiftly stood. “Who would like to go see the stables?”

Henry and Marianne shot up instantly, their interest diverted. “Yes!” Marianne clapped her hands excitedly. “I want to see the new foal!”

Sebastian sent Eleanor a knowing look—crisis averted—before ushering the children outside. Luke followed with a grin, while Olivia groaned and dramatically laid her head against the back of her chair.

“I should have had a nursemaid explain that,” she muttered.

Eleanor laughed, reaching for her friend’s hand and giving it a squeeze. “You are going to be a wonderful mother, Olivia.”

Olivia exhaled, her expression softening. “I certainly hope so.”

Eleanor smiled. “You already are.”

As the afternoon sun bathed the estate in golden light, the group eventually dispersed

to their respective rooms, for tomorrow was to be a busy day indeed, leaving Eleanor and Sebastian alone at last.

With a sigh of contentment, Eleanor turned into her husband's arms by the hearth in their private drawing room, tilting her face up to meet his gaze. "Finally," she murmured, her lips curving into a teasing smile. "I was beginning to think we'd never have a moment to ourselves."

Sebastian chuckled, tucking a stray curl behind her ear before capturing her mouth in a lingering kiss, slow and indulgent, as if savoring the taste of her. The warmth of his embrace, the solid strength of him, sent a familiar shiver down her spine—a sensation she would never tire of.

When he pulled away, his lips barely parted from hers, he murmured, "I did warn you from the start, Duchess. Marrying me meant surrendering any expectation of peace."

Eleanor sighed dramatically, though she made no move to leave his arms. "And here I had foolishly assumed marriage to you would be a sedate affair. Books by the fire, embroidery in the afternoon, a husband who never disturbs my peace."

Sebastian let out a rich laugh. "As I recall, it was not I who made it my life-long quest to disturb the peace in our house."

"Only to disturb my peace," Eleanor chided gently.

"My love, you do not even like embroidery."

"No, but I like to imagine an alternate version of myself, one who exists in perfect tranquility, unbothered by an overattentive husband who insists on whisking me away to private rooms only to thoroughly ruin me!"

His grin was positively wolfish. “I do take a certain amount of pride in that, yes.”

Eleanor swatted his chest lightly, though she remained smiling. She rested her head against him, her cheek pressed to the soft linen of his shirt, breathing him in. The faint scent of sandalwood and something purely him surrounded her, and she sighed again, though this time, there was no drama in it—only a quiet sort of happiness.

She let her gaze drift toward the large windows, moonlight spilling across the room, bathing the walls in silver. Beyond the glass, her childhood home stretched out before her, the gardens still vibrant even in the dim glow of evening.

“I still don’t know how you knew,” she murmured, trailing a finger idly along the lapel of his waistcoat. “I don’t remember ever speaking of this place to you.”

Sebastian stroked a hand down her back, slow and soothing. “You did not. Not specifically to me at least.”

Eleanor tilted her head up, curiosity dancing in her gaze. “Then how?”

He exhaled softly, his fingers absently playing with the ends of her hair. “I listen, Eleanor. Always have.” His voice was quiet, but there was a weight to it, a reverence that made something in her chest tighten.

She swallowed. “But this house... it was so long ago. A place from before everything changed. Before my father died, before my stepmother’s cruelties. I hardly think of it myself, let alone speak of it.” She let her gaze drift toward the fire, the flames flickering, casting a warm glow over them. “And yet, I do remember being happy here. Running through the gardens with my father, reading on the window seat in my old room, sneaking biscuits from the kitchen when Cook wasn’t looking.” She let out a soft laugh, almost to herself. “It was just a few weeks out of a year when Papa would bring me. I suppose I had forgotten what it felt like. Until now.”

Sebastian tipped her chin back toward him, his gray eyes steady on hers. “I never forget a thing when it comes to you.”

A warmth spread through her, deeper than mere affection, something richer, weightier.

“You speak as though I am terribly interesting.”

Sebastian’s lips curved in a slow, knowing smile. “You are terribly interesting. Particularly when you think no one is paying attention. You have a habit of murmuring in your sleep, you know.”

Eleanor blinked. “I do not!”

“Oh, you do. And one evening, early in our marriage, you spoke of this place. I don’t think you even knew it. Just a whisper of a memory—a name, a feeling. But it was enough.” He brushed his thumb along her jaw. “So I found it. I suppose I could have taken the simpler route and merely asked. But my wife deserved a novel surprise in her long life of surprises. And now it is ours.”

Eleanor felt her throat tighten, emotion rising swift and unexpected. “Sebastian...”

“I want every part of you to be cherished, Ellie,” he murmured, his hands framing her face, his voice softer now. “Even the parts you think you’ve forgotten.”

Her heart was full, too full, and she surged up onto her toes, pressing her lips to his in a kiss that was not just grateful but homecoming.

His arms tightened around her, drawing her closer, deepening the kiss with the sort of hunger that spoke not just of desire but of devotion—of years spent together, of a love that had only grown stronger with time.

She melted into him, into the warmth of his body, into the unshakable certainty of him.

But just as their kiss deepened, the sound of hurried footsteps and excited giggles shattered the quiet moment.

Eleanor scarcely had time to pull back before Henry and Marianne barreled into the room, their small hands cupped together in a careful but excited display.

“Mama, Papa, look!” Henry declared, his chest puffed with importance. “We found a mouse in the stables!” Marianne, her curls bouncing wildly, grinned up at them. “Can we keep it? We’ll take very good care of him. We were thinking... we should call him Scrunch Junior!” The children beamed at their parents, utterly oblivious to the bemused expressions exchanged between Eleanor and Sebastian.

For a moment, Eleanor could only blink, torn between laughter and sentiment. Scrunch had been her steadfast companion in the days before her life had changed forever, and hearing the name again after all this time brought a bittersweet warmth to her heart. She glanced at Sebastian, who sighed dramatically.

“Another mouse?” he drawled, tightening his arm around Eleanor’s waist as if bracing himself for the inevitable. “Must we, my love?”

Eleanor, pressing a hand to his chest, laughed softly. “Oh, you know we must.”

With identical squeals of delight, Henry and Marianne spun on their heels and dashed away, eager to share their new pet with Olivia and Luke. As their laughter echoed through the halls, Eleanor leaned her forehead against Sebastian’s, her heart so full it felt near to bursting.

“A new generation of mischief,” she whispered, and Sebastian groaned playfully,

pulling her closer.

“Heaven help us,” he murmured, before kissing her once more—this time, undisturbed.

He pulled away for a moment with a smirk. “Two perfect children. A home filled with love. And you—” He tilted her chin up with a gentle touch, brushing his lips lightly over hers. “My greatest fortune.”

Eleanor’s heart swelled at the words, at the way he looked at her as though she was his entire world. “It wasn’t luck,” she whispered, her fingers grazing his jaw. “It was us. We chose this. We fought for it. And we will keep choosing it, every single day.”

Sebastian exhaled, a sound of deep contentment, before pressing another kiss to her forehead. “Then I suppose I must ensure you never regret that choice.” His hands skimmed over her waist, his voice turning husky. “Beginning now.”

“Only now?” Eleanor laughed softly, threading her fingers through his dark hair as she leaned up to kiss him once more, lingering and sweet. Outside their room, the sounds of children’s laughter and Olivia’s exasperated—but equally amused—voice drifted back toward them. Life was never quiet, never dull. But it was theirs.

And in this moment, wrapped in the arms of the man she loved, Eleanor knew with certainty—there was no greater happiness than this.

The End.

CHAPTER ONE

The Marlingford Ball

A head of fiery red hair, caught up in bouncing curls, surrounded a pale, delicate face with verdant eyes.

Juliet Semphill at thirteen years old already stood as tall as most ladies in attendance. Her dress was simple shades of green silk to compliment her coloring. She wore no jewelry but most didn't notice, so startling was the shade of her eyes and hair. She stood in a corner of the study, surrounded by three stern-faced men.

A woman sat in a corner of the same room. The shoulder of her dress was torn and she was weeping, hands over her face. Her hair was coal black and lustrous, her gown flowed over the generous lines of her body. Juliet looked from one stern strange face to another, wide-eyed and frightened.

"Tell us what you saw, girl," muttered Duncan Kimberley, the Duke of Marlingford.

He towered over her and the other two men. His hair was iron gray and his face, Roman and patrician. His broad shoulders had taken on a slump as he had entered old age but were still wide. His stomach was bound tightly behind a buttoned coat. Juliet looked at him and swallowed, licking her lips, trying to find the words.

The issue was that she did not know what she had seen.

The home of the Duke and Duchess of Marlingford was large, even palatial and she

had wanted to explore, find a quiet corner to rest from the pitying eyes of strangers. She had wandered hallways and rooms until she opened a door to a darkened study and saw...

“Damn it, girl! Do not be disobedient. My daughter was assaulted and you were a witness!” Marlingford boomed, raising his voice.

“Juliet. You must tell us,” coaxed his son, Hugh Kimberley, the Viscount Chalford.

Hugh’s wife was the woman crying in the corner. Not a daughter to Marlingford by birth, simply by marriage. Hugh Kimberley was a pale shadow of his father. Slighter in frame and height with brown hair that seemed thinner than the silver mane his father sported. Neither man noticed Meredith Kimberley looking over at the interrogation between the fingers of her hands. Her eyes were red-rimmed from crying and there was a bruise rising on one cheek. But the look she directed at the questioning was cool and calculating.

“I was... I was exploring,” Juliet began haltingly, “I wanted to look around this fine house.”

“Yes, yes, yes. Get on with it,” Marlingford barked.

“I didn’t know where I was going or where I was. I opened a door and there was a scream. I saw Lady Chalford on the floor and a man standing over her,” Juliet stammered.

“The man was assaulting her?” Hugh Kimberley demanded, his voice growing strident.

“Would you recognize him?” Marlingford put in at the same time.

“Do you know who he was?” said the third man, who had not yet spoken. He was thin with hollow cheeks and veins bulging on the backs of his hands. Sir Graham Randolph MP, a member of the government and friend of the Duke of Marlingford.

At that moment the door to the study opened and a tall, willowy woman burst in. She had hair as fiery and red as Juliet. A dark beauty spot occupied a prominent space high on her right cheek. It was painted not unlike the similar spot on Juliet’s left cheek. A man followed her, very much in her shadow. He had neither her height nor presence. His stomach was a circle that was barely held in check by his dress clothes, as were his chins.

“May I ask what is going on here?” Margaret Godwin demanded in a voice as clear as a bell. She directed her attention to Marlingford, “Your Grace, that is my niece. What trouble has she gotten herself into now?”

Her gray eyes were hard upon her niece, finding fault and blame before their owner knew anything of the circumstances. Marlingford looked from Margaret to Juliet and took a deliberate step backward. His son licked his lips and followed suit, as did Sir Graham. Juliet found herself standing behind an invisible moat which the three men were now apparently unwilling to cross.

“Aunt Margaret...” she began.

“Do not Aunt Margaret me, young lady! You were allowed to attend on the condition that you would be on your best behavior. Now what do I find?”

“She is the daughter of the Baroness of Larkhill?” Marlingford asked, taking another backward step and wiping his hands on the front of his coat.

“She is. My sister’s daughter and only child,” Margaret replied, haughtily.

Juliet looked at the widening circle of men who, until a moment ago, had been so frightening. Now she saw the fear in their eyes and knew its cause. As much as she wanted to be out of that room, she felt dismay at their reasoning for backing away.

“It isn’t catching, you know,” she said quietly, looking at the floor, “my mother’s illness, I mean. You can be in the same room. Breathe the same air—”

“Hold your tongue, child!” Margaret interrupted.

“Apologies, Your Grace. She wasn’t always like this,” Gilbert Godwin hastily added.

“Your niece is a witness to a grievous offense committed against me,” Meredith sobbed.

She rose to her feet unsteadily and crossed the room to Juliet’s side. Glaring at the men, she took Juliet’s hand as if to show that she was not afraid of the illness.

“Lady Swindon,” she addressed herself to Margaret. “I was accosted by the Marquess of Somerset, a man I had judged to be honorable.”

She turned to Juliet and forced a smile through her tears. “Do not be afraid, Juliet. Just as I am not. Tell your Aunt and Uncle what you saw. Be truthful now.”

The act of taking Juliet’s hand meant that she could no longer hold in place a wayward piece of torn fabric at her shoulder. It chose that moment to fall, exposing the milky white skin beneath and threatening to reveal part of one breast.

Hugh Kimberley was slapped in the chest by his father with the back of one meaty hand. Thus prompted, he hastily removed his coat and draped it about his wife’s shoulders to cover her nakedness.

Juliet felt inordinately grateful at the simple gesture of a stranger taking her hand. She was used to being shunned but Lady Meredith's act made her feel as though she weren't an outcast. A little of the fear she had once felt upon being dragged into this room and questioned was assuaged.

"He was like a wild thing. Pressing his suit, and when I refused him..." Meredith stammered, voice rich with tears, "...when I reminded him that I am a happily married woman, he struck me."

"Did you see this, Juliet?" Aunt Margaret asked, archly. "Speak up!"

Juliet thought back to the scene that had been revealed upon the opening of the door. Meredith had been on the floor, one arm raised above her head as though to protect herself. A man with dark hair had been standing over her. He had been tall and broad, a giant in Juliet's eyes. But, hadn't his face been concerned? Had he been reaching down to Meredith with an open hand, as though to help her up?

She opened her mouth to speak and glanced at Meredith, who gave her a brave smile and nodded. Juliet swallowed her words. How could she gainsay Meredith? Meredith would not say she had been struck unless that had happened. It could have happened before Juliet entered the room. Then the man who struck her had regretted his action and tried to make amends. Perhaps the blow was entirely accidental?

"I heard a scream and opened the door. This lady was on the floor and a tall, dark-haired man was standing over her."

"He struck me. You saw that too," Meredith hastily added. "The door was open before he struck me. I screamed after the blow, when he was standing above me. You saw, didn't you, Juliet?" she finished firmly.

Juliet had not seen.

But looking into Meredith's pupils, she was suddenly afraid. Her hand tightened around Juliet's and there was a hardness to her stare. Juliet glanced around at the circle of hostile faces. She did not know any of them except for Aunt Margaret and Uncle Gilbert. All were staring at her, waiting for her answer. The events she had remembered clearly just a moment ago now changed. Had the door already been open? It could have been. Had she seen that giant of a man strike this nice lady? She was bruised and she had been on the floor, so she had indeed been struck.

"Without a witness, that man will never face justice for what he has done," Meredith whispered into Juliet's ear. "That would not be fair, now, would it?"

Juliet nodded, swallowed, and cleared her throat.

"He struck her. I saw it," she said clearly.

Meredith patted her hand and smiled. It was a smile of warmth and affection. It reassured Juliet that she was doing the right thing. This was not a bad person. Whomever the man was that had struck her, he was the bad person.

"He struck her down and I think he would have struck her again had I not walked in."

This was an embellishment, but she was encouraged by Meredith's broadening smile of reassurance and the fact that she still held Juliet's hand. No one, not even her own Aunt, Uncle, or cousins would hold her hand. Even those who lived with her and knew that the disease that had struck down Juliet's mother could not be caught still maintained their distance on a matter of principle.

Juliet smiled tentatively back at Meredith.

"Then there must be a reckoning," Marlingford uttered gruffly, "this is a grievous insult to my family and it cannot go unchallenged."

“...What do you mean, father?” Hugh asked, a note of hesitation in his voice.

Marlingford eyed his son for a moment and then turned away. “Nothing for you, my boy. Do not worry. I shall take care of this.”

He stomped from the room, slamming the door behind him.

“Hugh, old chap. We must talk,” Sir Graham quietly began, “I fear your father is impetuous. Let us try and remonstrate with him.”

Hugh nodded, leaving the room with Sir Graham who whispered to him as they went. Juliet looked to her Aunt Margaret who was watching her speculatively. She did not look happy, but then she rarely did. Uncle Gilbert hovered at her shoulder, waiting for his cue.

Meredith rose with a sigh. “This has been a trying evening. If you will excuse me, Lord and Lady Godwin, I believe I shall retire.”

There was no trace of tears in the Marlingford daughter’s voice now. She spoke clearly and firmly, not looking once at Juliet.

“If my niece should be needed to give further evidence, she will of course be made available, my lady,” Aunt Margaret smiled servilely. “Such ungentlemanly conduct cannot be permitted to go unpunished.”

“It cannot,” Uncle Gilbert echoed.

Meredith frowned, then nodded her head. “I trust my father-in-law will see to that, Lady Margaret. Lord Somerset shall rue the day he crossed me.”

To Juliet, that did not sound quite right. The meaning was clear but the wording was

odd. She frowned, watching Meredith as she crossed the room. There was no longer any sign of the wracking sobs, the shuddering breaths, the burning cheeks. She glided with grace and dignity. Juliet did not know what to make of it.

As the door closed behind her, Aunt Margaret rounded on Juliet with fists planted firmly on her hips.

“Now, young lady, since you have decided to entangle yourself in the affairs of this esteemed family, you will hold steadfast to your account. I will not endure the humiliation of you wavering, nor will I forfeit the connections our family stands to gain from this scandalous ordeal. You saw that despicable man strike down Lady Meredith. His name is Lord Horatio, Marquess of Somerset—Horatio Templeton. Remember the details. You can describe him, can you not?”

“Tall and broad-shouldered,” Juliet furrowed her brows in thought. “His hair was dark, and it fell to his shoulders. His face was... square. He looked strong, but not a man yet. More like... a tall boy.”

“Enough of a man for this,” Aunt Margaret harrumphed. “That is good. Remember it and remember what you saw.”

“I did not make it up,” Juliet protested, feeling as though her veracity were in question.

“Good!” Aunt Margaret snapped. “This night shall have grave consequences for the Marquess of Somerset, mark my words.”

CHAPTER TWO

Ravenscourt Castle

Horatio stood by the window of his father's study at Ravenscourt Castle, gazing listlessly beyond the glass. Outside, swallows darted from the eaves high above, wheeling playfully over the yew hedges and flower beds.

His vacant eyes drifted down the perfectly straight paths leading to the mere; the jewel of the famous Ravenscourt Gardens. At its heart sat an island crowned with a timber-framed house. How many summers had he spent diving into the lake's cool depths and lounging on the island's soft grass under a golden sun?

Those days had once felt infinite, like an endless series of reflections in opposing mirrors, like a time that never was, yet was ever-present.

He frowned, briefly closing eyes as blue as the sky, shutting on the bittersweet memories.

In their place surged another image: the Duke of Marlingford, his face a mask of shocked horror. The memory played out with cruel clarity—the iron-gray hair, a dignified face slackening as blood welled on his lips. Then he was falling, legs giving way beneath him. A flower of red on his breast, spreading insidiously out from underneath his coat. A final, shivering breath...

And Horatio stood, just as aghast, a smoking pistol in trembling hands. His right shoulder ached from the gouge which had been carved there by Marlingford's earlier

shot. A flesh wound only, but it had been enough to jerk Horatio's aim off by an inch. He had not intended to kill. Would have given anything to undo it.

Fate had reckoned otherwise.

Horatio opened his eyes now. The days of wine and summer were over. The winter of his life was about to begin. And it would be cold and lonely. The society with which he had surrounded himself at his house at Woolstone... they would evaporate like drops of water from a hot skillet.

First, the accusation of assault against a lady. Then the challenge to a duel by her father-in-law. A demand for the satisfaction of honor. All culminating in an unjust death.

A door behind him opened and was slammed shut with the force of a January north wind. Horatio sighed, careful to hide it from the man who had just entered the room.

Uncurling his posture, he twisted to face his father.

William Templeton was a gentleman in the prime of his life. Dark hair the color of coal was only just beginning to silver. The strong jaw and imperial nose that gave his son a patrician dignity was, in William's greater maturity, the aura of an emperor. Now, those Roman features were dark with fury as he strode across the study towards his son. Horatio braced himself, standing with arms folded defensively, jaw set.

William, Thirteenth Duke of Ravenscourt, stopped in front of him, and then struck him across the face with the back of his hand. Horatio's head lashed to one side. Another blow landed, whipping it in the opposite direction. Such was the force that Horatio fell to one knee. He instinctively reached for the side of his face, feeling a trickle of blood at the corner of his mouth. William stood over him, chest heaving and fists clenched.

“A great man lies dead because of you!” The old man spat mercilessly. “His Grace, the Duke of Marlingford. A soldier. A Parliamentarian. Above all, a dignified gentleman! What have you to say for yourself, boy?”

Horatio remained on the floor, staring up at his father. He tried to hide the fear that gripped him. He knew that he had lived a life of privilege thus far. A life of society balls and luncheons. Of horse racing and card games. Wine, women, and song. He was unused to confrontation or violence. The duel was the first time he had ever drawn a pistol in anger instead of sport.

“It—it was an accident. I did not intend to kill him,” he shuddered a breath.

“Did not intend it? An accident?” William muttered wryly. “So the Duke of Marlingford was killed out of sheer incompetence, was he? Not even the dignity of an honorable death, fighting for the name of his daughter-by-marriage? Murdered because you were too incompetent to miss?!”

He reached down and seized Horatio by the lapels of his coat, crushing the delicate fabric in his iron grip. He hauled his only son to his feet, drawing him close enough that Horatio could feel the man’s tobacco-wreathed breath on his singeing cheeks.

“And what of Lady Meredith Templeton?” William hissed. “What of the reason for this duel being called in the first place! Not only a murderer but a ravisher of women? What manner of man have I raised?”

Now, fury flared through Horatio. He heaved free of his father’s grip. A year or two earlier, it would have been nigh on impossible. But now, at the onset of his twentieth year, his shoulders had broadened, as had the musculature of his chest. He was not the Hercules that his father was, still slender and graceful rather than sturdy and imposing, but he was no weakling either. His father’s eyes widened at the brazenness.

“She lied! I did not touch her. Nor would I want to. I love Jane,” he growled back.

William’s brows furrowed. “Jane ? Ainsworth? Of the Darnleighbstone Ainsworths?”

Horatio nodded, impassioned, taking out a silk handkerchief and dabbing at the blood. “Now you know.”

William threw back his head and laughed.

“Daughter of the Viscount Darnleighbstone? He would dearly love to see her married to my heir. May even be prepared to overlook the scandal. Both of them. But... he will not see her married to a penniless adventurer, bereft of title or prospects.”

Horatio frowned, a chill running through him at his father’s words. The handkerchief came down slowly.

“What... what do you mean?”

“I am cutting you off. You are no longer my son and no longer Marquess of Woolstone.”

“You cannot do that!” Horatio shot back.

“That title is a courtesy. A courtesy given by me !” William roared, “I gave it and I can take it at my pleasure. I will have Woolstone torn down and the ground salted before I let you live there. You and your reprobate friends! I should have stepped in before now when I saw the ilk of people you were associating with... This is where their path has led you.”

“Reprobates ? They are good, decent—”

“A Frenchman? An Italian? A commoner? Pah ! These are the people you choose to associate with? You were born to a Dukedom and you besmirch your name? No more! I will not see the Templeton name carried by a ravisher of women and courter of blackguards.”

“I told you that is a lie!” Horatio roared again, stepping up to his father, eyes ablaze with rage. “I came across her foxed and went to her aid. She fell on her own and that silly young girl saw me trying to put her back on her feet, and she—”

“That silly young girl is a respectable member of a well-known family. Larkhill is an ancient English baronetcy with its own seat in the Lords and a lineage traced back to the Conquest. Why would that girl lie?”

“I don’t know! I wish I did,” Horatio replied desperately, “perhaps you should give your only son the benefit of the doubt over some slip of a girl!”

William turned away, sneering. He stormed to a sideboard where he took up a decanter of brandy and poured himself an unhealthy measure.

“And why would Lady Meredith lie?” he asked after taking a draught.

To that question, Horatio had no answer.

He was familiar with Lady Meredith, wife to Lord Hugh Kimberley, son of the man Horatio had killed. She had attended a number of social events that Horatio had hosted at Woolstone. Never with her husband, who always refused his invitations.

The lady had engaged in flirtatious behavior with Horatio before, despite being married. He had always tried to steer clear of her games. She was almost predatory in her sultry, alluring act, and it made him uncomfortable.

Jane, on the other hand, was fair-haired, with a heart as clear and pure as her blue eyes. As beautiful as a Renaissance sculpture and as innocent as Eve before the expulsion. She was the paragon of female virtue and it ate away at him that she might now reject him.

“You have no answer,” William muttered slowly into the deafening silence. “For there is no answer that can be given. You gave in to your base desires and have now mired me in scandal.”

Horatio ran his fingers through his hair in frustration.

“I did nothing of the sort. The Duke of Marlingford would not be denied. He called me out and I had no choice but to meet him or dishonor our family name even more. Truly, I tried to aim wide but did not expect him to be ready to fire first—”

William laughed with heavy scorn. “Duncan Kimberley was a marksman from childhood. And a fighter of duels in his youth. Of course he fired first, boy! It is a miracle that he did not shoot you dead. Perhaps that would have been the better outcome.”

That ill-conceived comment had Horatio’s heart lurching, but he did his damndest to ignore it. “He hit me in the shoulder and threw off my aim,” he countered instead, knowing that it would do no good now. “I did not mean to kill him. I would have conceded.”

William poured another brandy. He drained the glass and then strode to the colossal mahogany desk that dominated the room. Thumping into the seat before it, he opened a drawer and took out a large pocketbook. Dipping a pen into an inkwell on the desk, he began to jot.

“I am writing you a promissory note that can be redeemed at my bankers in London,

Glasgow, or Bristol. It is the last penny you will ever get from me. You can leave here with your horse and the clothes on your back. The rest of your property is forfeit. You will leave here as Master Horatio Templeton. Nobly born but reduced to the status of a commoner.”

He tore off the note and held it out for Horatio without looking up. Horatio gaped at it in horror.

“But, Father...!”

“This will not be undone. I will not allow you to drag the good name of this family into the mire you have created for yourself. Now, take it before I change my mind on that too.”

Horatio shook his head silently, feeling something inside tearing free. A gulf was opening inside him, as though he stood on an ice floe that had become separated from a larger berg and now floated on the open ocean. He saw the life he had lived drifting away from him. Saw the future he had expected even further over the horizon.

Including Jane.

“No. I will not,” he refused quietly.

Part of him ached to flee from the room, to saddle Thunder, his stallion since boyhood, and race to Jane’s home at Uffington Grange. But he could not bring himself to race towards the end that he knew faced him there. The end of his love affair. The end of the sunlit days of his youth. The end of a future in which he had seen himself as her husband... As father to her children...

Steeling himself, Horatio met his father’s glare—fear coiled in his stomach, but his resolve remained unbroken. He would bear the guilt of Marlingford’s death

forever—a weight he deserved. But the malicious lies of Lady Meredith and Miss Juliet Semphill? Those, he refused to carry.

Drawing himself to his full height, he stepped back from the desk and clasped his hands firmly behind his back.

A flicker of a smile grazed across William's face and he leaned backward, still holding out the promissory note. Then, he tore it across and let the pieces fall.

“Hmph. One last vestige of honor,” the old man muttered. “I did not think to see it. You have some strength in you boy. Some .”

“Disinherit me if you wish. Disown me. I will go into the world and make my own fortune however I may. I am not innocent. I could have chosen to refuse the duel, accepted the dishonor of cowardice. I chose to take up the gauntlet. I chose to fire. I will not deny my guilt. But, that is all that I am guilty of. Perhaps it is for the best. I do not think I wish to be the heir of a man who would believe others over his own blood.”

With that, he turned and strode from the room.

8 YEARS LATER

Wetherby

Juliet smiled as she watched a swallow flit through the air ahead of her, exuberant and joyous. She brushed aside bronze hair made darker by sweat. The air was warm, made even warmer by the close-packed woods through which she walked. To either side, large ferns encroached on the path, bestowing feathery kisses as they brushed her cheek. Her dress left her shoulders bare and she relished the touch of the sunshine and the light breeze on her pale skin.

She could have followed the path blindfolded, having explored these woods many times since coming to live with her aunt and uncle as a youth. In fact, she wondered if she might just have spent more time out of doors since moving to Wetherby House than she had indoors. She lifted her face to the sun, where it shone through the trees, closing her eyes for a moment to test herself.

In a handful of steps, her bare foot caught a root and she tumbled into a cluster of ferns. Rolling onto her back, she giggled at her own foolishness, gazing up at the blue sky framed by gorgeous green trees.

Burdop Wood lay just beyond the south boundary of her uncle Gilbert's lands, as Baron of Swindon. The grounds of Wetherby House, seat of Lord Gilbert and his wife, Lady Margaret, had been sculpted and shaped to within an inch of their life by gardeners. Lawns were kept short by an army of men with scythes and flower beds were arranged in neat patterns, pruned, and carefully controlled. It looked colorful and, Juliet was sure, very pretty to the eyes of the Godwins.

But to her, there was no beauty like the natural world. Its riot of colors, shapes, and scents, in all its apparent chaos, was her idea of heaven.

“Juliet? Juliet! Drat you, where are you?” came a shrill, petulant voice.

It shattered the peaceful woodland, destroying the aura of relaxation that Juliet had felt. A tension grew within her, one that was always present whenever she was in company with her aunt, uncle, or Cousin Frances. It came from the need to hide who she truly was, to disguise the things she loved and was passionate about. The need to fit in with them.

Juliet stood, brushing at her skirts to remove any stray pieces of grass. Glancing around, she saw flashes of color in between the trees. A white dress and a blue one. Two women following the same path that Juliet had. No time to put her stockings on, she simply stepped into her shoes and concealed the stockings among the ferns. Then she trod out onto the path and waited.

Presently, a round-faced woman with dark hair and a pretty button nose appeared. Her looks were spoiled by the petulant pout of her lips and the way she narrowed her eyes upon the sight of Juliet. Frances Godwin, daughter of Gilbert and Margaret, cousin to Juliet, stood an inch taller than she. Frances was also heavy in the hip and bosom, while Juliet was willowy and graceful.

Behind her was a woman in a sky-blue dress carrying a small book in one hand. She shared Juliet’s fiery coloring, a characteristic both shared with Margaret Godwin who was sister to Juliet’s mother. She had the Godwin’s round features and button nose, of a height with her sister and sharing the womanly hips. While Frances looked like she was chewing on a sour crabapple, Edith smiled at the sight of Juliet. A little of Juliet’s tension eased at the sight of her younger cousin.

“I am here, Fran,” Juliet began, walking towards the two women.

“Frances,” Frances corrected testily.

“Were you looking for me?”

“We were. Mama sent us to fetch you,” Frances replied, bitterly.

She looked around the woods, carefully holding her skirts out of contact with anything living.

“There were no servants free to come and find you,” Edith put in from behind her sister.

“Our dresses have arrived and Mama wishes us to try them on while the seamstress is here so that any adjustments may be made,” Frances finished.

Juliet groaned inwardly.

She could not think of a worse waste of a beautiful day than to be trying on dresses and standing on a stool while a seamstress made adjustments. Besides, there was the rabbit she had saved from a poacher’s trap and had been nursing back to health. She wanted very much to check on the poor thing’s progress. For a moment, she thought about telling her cousins that she would be along momentarily. But she did not want to excite their curiosity too much. The old cottage she had discovered at the heart of Burdop Wood served her well as a makeshift hospital for the waifs and strays she came across. The last thing she wished was for her hideaway to be discovered. So, she smiled and followed her cousins back along the path toward the boundary wall of the Wetherby estate.

Frances complained the entire way about having to tramp through wild woods to find Juliet. Even had Juliet been in her own rooms, Frances would still have found reason to be offended. She did not know why her cousin found her so objectionable, but it was clear that she did. Edith on the other hand was more likable, if often distant, her

head firmly in her books.

A wooden gate in the tall, stone wall, let the three women into the grounds of Wetherby. Immediately, the trees ceased and the ferns, garlic, and wild grass vanished. They followed a white gravel path between rose beds, rhododendrons, and hydrangeas. Water bubbled from a fountain somewhere beyond a square-cut hedge. Turning a corner, they climbed a set of stone steps kept meticulously free of moss and lichen. At the top was a glowing expanse of lawn with Wetherby House beyond.

It was of a warm, orange brick, built in the Jacobean style, and changed little in the intervening years. Windows were tall and, on the ground floor, framed by carefully controlled clematis and climbing roses. All were in full bloom, pinks and reds contrasting with the brickwork. It was pretty but in a way that Juliet found very artificial and staid. It lacked the vitality and abundance of nature.

She found her steps slowing as they approached the entrance to Wetherby. The familiar sense of anxious dread was on Juliet. She tried to forget about the annual Ravenscourt Ball each year. But when it came around, it could not be ignored. Aunt Margaret treated it with the same reverence as a coronation.

“I think I will take the air for just a moment,” Juliet murmured, suddenly unable to face going back into the house and becoming absorbed by the preparations.

“Well, do not tarry too long,” Frances snapped.

She was two years Juliet’s senior and wasted no opportunity to lord it over her. With that, she swept into the house, servants making way before her, which was fortunate as she had her chin raised so high she couldn’t possibly have seen where she was going. Edith stood beside Juliet who turned to look out over the gardens as though taking in the sight.

“You do not care for the Ravenscourt Ball, do you?” Edith said, quietly.

“I do not,” Juliet replied, “or any ball for that matter.”

“Neither do I. I would much rather be lost in a good book than dancing with some empty-headed young man. I think Frances is of the same mind as the two of us, though for differing reasons.”

Juliet furrowed her brows at that. “Truly? I had assumed Cousin Frances lived for days like this.”

Edith giggled. “She does when it is a ball to which you have not been invited. Do you not realize that my sister is deeply jealous of you? Of your having found a handsome match and of your looks.”

That last part confused Juliet. She did not see herself as pretty. She was too tall and her hair too bright a shade of red. She disliked the freckles that dusted her nose and cheeks and thought her eyes too far apart. But it did not concern her too much because the possibility of marriage was so remote. As if to remind her of how remote that prospect was, she felt a sudden sensation of breathlessness. Her head felt light, and she knew that before long the world would be spinning around her. It would result in a faint from which she would not awaken for hours. And after each episode, she felt gradually weaker.

“Are you quite well, Cousin?” Edith asked, frowning.

“Quite,” Juliet replied languidly. “The sun is very bright. I fear I have overdone it.”

That explanation would have satisfied anyone but Edith. Her frown deepened and she pressed her lips together in the way she did when in deep thought.

“I have noticed you seem to take dizzy spells quite often,” she began.

“It is just the sun, I assure you,” Juliet put in hurriedly.

All knew of the illness which had taken her mother's life. Juliet remembered well the stigma attached to it. The fear of contagion. She did not want people to look at her in the same way. Uncle Gilbert would have her packed off to a remote sanatorium at the merest hint that she had inherited her mother's condition.

"Then perhaps we should get indoors," Edith said, finally.

Still, she offered her arm as they walked. Juliet accepted it, her knees feeling weak and shaky.

"I shall be right as rain after a sit-down and a cup of tea," she grimaced.

"Will Lord Hemsworth be attending tomorrow evening?" Edith asked as they walked through Wetherby's halls to the drawing room.

"No, I am afraid he is otherwise engaged in London this week," Juliet replied.

"Such a shame. It is an annual fixture after all. Like Christmas... Such a shame that he could not have planned his schedule to allow for it," Edith commented distractedly.

Juliet gave her a quick look, wondering if she were probing at another of Juliet's secrets. There was no way that she could know the truth, of course. Both Juliet and Nigel Crickhallow, Viscount Hemsworth, had been very careful in the outward appearance of their courtship. A facade of romance to disguise Juliet's illness and Nigel's own secret. One known only to Juliet and the person who truly held his heart in their keeping.

Edith was very intelligent and quite capable of deducing the truth if she had enough information to go on. On the other hand, she had a secret of her own which only Juliet knew. That should be enough to ensure that Juliet's secrets remained safe.

"He is a very busy man," Juliet remarked, "and truthfully, I do not even know if he

has been invited. He has not said.”

They reached the drawing room and found it occupied. Juliet immediately wanted to turn around. Her Aunt Margaret was taking tea. Frances was sitting next to her, being handed a teacup by a maid, and watching Juliet with glittering eyes. Lady Margaret Godwin glanced up as her daughter and niece entered. She had the characteristic red hair of the Norton family, the line from which she and her sister Judith, who was mother to Juliet, came from. Today she had painted her dark beauty spot high onto her left cheek. Juliet also had a beauty spot, on her right cheek. But hers was part of her, not a cosmetic affectation. She had always been sensitive about the tiny dark mark, though all those around her insisted it was a desirable trait in a woman.

“Gallivanting in the woods again, Juliet?” Margaret said in a high, prim voice.

“Taking the air, Aunt Margaret,” Juliet replied.

“That is what gardens are for. It is not seemly for a young lady to be wandering alone in the wilds,” Margaret gently chided, “you must think of the image you are presenting to your betrothed. Just because Lord Hemsworth is courting you does not mean that he will continue to do so. If he knew that you tramp barefoot in the woods at every chance, dirtying your hands with wild animals, do you truly believe he would wish to marry you?”

“Lord Hemsworth appreciates my love for nature. He has even said that I could aspire to be a veterinarian,” Juliet replied stoutly.

It was a mistake. The kind of conversation best kept private.

Aunt Margaret and Uncle Gilbert would regard any lady of their family considering a trade to be a horrifying prospect. She was being truthful of course, having discussed the matter with her good friend Nigel. He had expressed the view that perhaps she should seek a veterinarian and serve as his apprentice. He was the kind of person who

did not consider such things to be beyond the realms of possibility. However, that did not stop Aunt Margaret's teacup from freezing halfway to her mouth.

"I beg your pardon!" she hissed. "I cannot believe a respectable gentleman like Lord Hemsworth would say such a thing. Therefore, you must be making it up simply to wound. Which is very wicked!"

Juliet stood, head bowed. It was to conceal the anger on her flushed cheeks. Since the death of her parents, she had no home but Wetherby and no family but the Godwins. That meant she could not stand up for herself as she would like. Could not rebel too far from their expectations or rules. But it was difficult.

"I suggest you go to your rooms until you are summoned to try on your dress. Though I hardly think you deserve to attend. If Lord Hemsworth attends and you are not present, then perhaps another young lady will take his fancy. Yes, that should teach you a lesson."

Frances smiled to herself, sipping her tea but gazing out of the window in reverie. Juliet suppressed a smile. If her cousin was considering the handsome Lord Hemsworth, she would be bitterly disappointed. No woman could hope to win him over.

"Yes, Aunt Margaret. I am sorry, Aunt Margaret," she replied meekly before turning to leave the room.

Edith made to follow but her mother brought her up short.

"Edith, remain here with us if you please. Your cousin needs some time on her own to consider her behavior, and we have much to discuss."

Edith shot Juliet a look as they passed, head lowered. She gave a grimace which her mother did not see. It told Juliet that her younger cousin had wanted to speak to her

privately. Juliet thought she knew what about and though she was happy to be Edith's confidante, even to help her with her secret, she was glad that she would be left alone. There was a letter that she needed to finish. To be sent to Doctor Alistair Carmichael of Carlisle, Juliet's last hope.