



In Scandal with the Duke (Sins & Sensibilities Book 1)

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Category: Historical

Description: #EnemiestoLovers

#Oppositeattracts

#Olderbrotherbestfriend

Jaded by fortune hunters who covet her wealth rather than her heart, American heiress Miss Elizabeth Armstrong has abandoned the pursuit of marriage. Resigned to enjoy her London visit before returning to New York, Elizabeth's deep desire for adventures is ignited after a chance meeting with the cynical yet captivating Duke of Basil.

James, a seasoned rake with a steadfast rule against entanglements with debutantes and innocents, finds himself irresistibly drawn to Elizabeth's wit and charm. Intent on indulging in a fleeting affair, he plans to savor the intoxicating pleasures she offers without any promises of tomorrow. However, Elizabeth proves far more alluring than he anticipated. As their passionate connection deepens, James becomes ensnared in a web of scandal and heartbreak.

Will they find the courage to embrace the love that binds them, or will their affair end in ruin?

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London

In the drawing room's soft evening light, Miss Elizabeth Armstrong, Bette to her friends and family, stared in mute surprise at her mother, who sat gracefully perched on the sofa with all the grace of a queen holding court.

"Surely you knew my intentions," her mother murmured, taking a few sips of her tea. "I cannot imagine why you wear such an expression of horrified shock, Bette. It is unflattering; do compose yourself, my dear."

Elizabeth lowered the book she'd been reading, a thrilling tale of love and betrayal, onto the small walnut table. "Mother," she began, trying to calm her wildly racing thoughts. "I thought we were merely visiting England for a few months. I never imagined you wanted us to move here permanently."

The very idea was simply outrageous.

Her mother arched an elegant brow. "Plans do change, my dear. Surely you know this."

Elizabeth suspected this plan had always existed, but her mother kept her in the dark. "What about our lives in New York, Mama? Our friends and family there? What about Father? He could not mean to leave his business behind to live in England!"

"We shall hardly miss them," her mother said dismissively. "And whenever we do,

we can visit New York.”

“Mama, I was happy to make the journey with you because I missed my brother and hoped to beg him to return to New York with us. I cannot stay and I do intend to return home before Christmas. Have you informed Papa—”

“Do not speak of your father to me,” she snapped, her dark blue eyes flashing an emotion Elizabeth did not understand. “As much as I love your father and trusted that he wanted the best for you, he has no say in this decision.”

Trusted?

“Has ... has something happened between you and Father?” she asked, feeling as if her entire world had been tossed into disorder.

“Other than his ridiculous decision to allow you to work in his company against my expressed wish that it was unacceptable and detrimental to your future?” A grimace flashed on her mother’s face. “That has been our only quarrel.”

Relief filled her chest. “Mama, I went to Father’s office twice, and the work I did for him in a private room was not observed by anyone. Papa appreciated the work I did and even said he would increase my responsibilities within the company.”

Her mother lowered the cup to the walnut table with a decisive clink. “It is for that reason that I insisted you travel with me to London and make here your new home.”

A short laugh of disbelief escaped her. “You insisted I accompany you because I helped Papa transcribe a few letters and reviewed some ledgers?”

“Is that the life you wish to endure, Bette? Wearing a hat and a veil to your father’s company because you might face ridicule and a ruined reputation, hiding away in a

room by yourself working, coming home to your parents' house and not a husband and children and home of your own?"

A sharp pain pierced Elizabeth's chest. "I never want to endure life. I am determined to live it happily."

"Good," her mother said with soft intensity. "Hiding away in your father's office a few times a month, working on ledgers is enduring life."

"Mama, surely, you are overthinking the matter!"

"Am I?" Her mother narrowed her eyes. "You are three and twenty, and in a few months, you will be four and twenty. This is the time to think about securing your future, Bette. You should not have these nonsensical notions that your father is encouraging, even though he knew it was to your detriment."

"There was no harm—"

"Ladies do not work. You are an heiress, a young woman of grace, beauty, and talent. You should have been married three years ago!"

"Not this again, mama. I am not married. It is not a terrible thing." Elizabeth had never been inclined to self-pity, and while her mother praised that quality, she also believed it made her daughter obstinate and without fear of living her life as a spinster.

"That your dreams were not realized does not mean you simply give up and start believing you could one day help your brother run your father's company."

"I did not envision it that far," she said tightly, fisting her hands atop her lap. "I merely wanted to do something productive with my time, and Papa understood."

“That your father said he understood is the very reason I am angry and hurt. What I understand is that you are not living, Bette. I saw that, and it broke my heart. You refused all marriage offers in New York, and what I hope for you is that you will find a gentleman here in England. We will not be returning to New York this year.” Her mother snapped her spine straight. “I have informed your father we will be in London for at least two years.”

The weight of her mother’s expectations pressed heavily in the silence between them. There was a part of her that understood her mother’s reasoning and another part that was afraid to reopen those old, fanciful dreams. Elizabeth had entered New York’s social scene when she was nineteen, yet four years later, she remained unwed. As the daughter of a man who owned a bank and several other businesses, she quickly learned that most suitors were more enamored with her wealth and connections than her character. Over the years, her heart had grown wary, and she had refused eight proposals, each suitor more transparent than the last.

For the past several months, disillusioned with the superficial bon ton of New York, Elizabeth had turned her attention to her father’s business, taking a particular interest in the financial aspects. Her acumen for numbers was undeniable, and she found the challenge of working invigorating—a stark contrast to the tedious rounds of social calls and endless parties. However, this new passion only served to horrify her mother, a woman of traditional values who saw a woman’s place as firmly within the home or, at the very least, within the genteel confines of society.

“Mama,” Elizabeth said, breaking the tense silence. “If I cannot find a husband in New York, what chances do I have in England? Have you considered I might once again fail?”

Her mother stood and crossed the room, taking Elizabeth’s hands. Her mother stared at her, assessing every nuance on her face.

A spurt of good humor shook her. "What are you looking for, Mama?"

"I am searching for a trace of the girl who once dreamt of a love like those in the novels she devoured. The girl who said she wanted a husband and three children. The girl who often teased she would marry a man who adored her as your father adored me."

Elizabeth's throat tightened, and an invisible pressure squeezed her chest. She had no words to reply, and she could only helplessly return her mother's regard.

"Do you wish to marry, my dear?" she asked softly, "or has the desire been completely removed from your heart?"

A hot surge of want went through Elizabeth's heart, and she glanced away from her lest her eyes betrayed the hunger that still lived within her for a happy marriage and children. What if she tried again and failed? To imagine it left a terrible ache inside her chest.

"Please be honest with me, Bette," her mother said.

Elizabeth felt the old longings stir within her chest, emotions she had buried a couple of years ago.

"I do," she whispered, the admission feeling like a surrender. "However, I feel no excitement at the thought of trying again. It had grown terribly tedious and an unfulfilling venture."

"Your aunt will help you wade through these waters. Sally promised me only this morning."

Elizabeth's heartbeat quickened. "Aunt dramatically wilted upon learning I am not

affianced or married and even suggested it was perhaps some fortune that I was not here to seek a husband. She said there are much younger, wealthier, and prettier debutantes that will be more favorably viewed.”

“There are some things in life worth fighting and sacrificing for. Your future ... the one you deem worthy, is something to fight for.” Her mother squeezed her hands, offering a smile that was both sad and understanding. “You will find someone, Bette, a man who sees your worth as I see it,” her mother reassured her, her words wrapping around Elizabeth like a warm embrace. “And perhaps a change of scenery will offer what New York could not.”

She smiled, feeling a flare of dread and excitement. Her paternal aunt, Viscountess Barnaby, whom they resided with at her townhouse in Berkeley Square, had informed her of several of the ton’s rigid adherence to their rules on conduct—shockingly, even stricter and more unforgiving than their society in New York. Since she released the hope of marrying from her heart, Elizabeth enjoyed a greater level of freedom. She could not imagine constraining herself so again. Or suffer condescending glances from those who might deem her a lady firmly on the shelf.

Yet, the possibility of finding someone who loved her for her intelligence and spirit rather than her fortune allowed a sliver of hope to pierce her guarded heart.

Very well, I shall dare to dream again ... and perhaps this time, I will find what I am looking for. A marriage with a man she could love and one who would cherish her in return. Elizabeth’s heart thrummed with nerves and a burgeoning hope. Maybe, just maybe, this venture to England would offer more than she had dared to expect.

* * *

A week later, Elizabeth stood on the sidelines at one of London’s grandest society balls. The room was a spectacle of elegance, illuminated by hundreds of candles

mounted on crystal chandeliers. A twenty-piece orchestra played a lively waltz, and the air was thick with music, laughter, facile chattering, and the delicate fragrance of the ladies' perfumes.

"I do hope you see that no one has asked you to dance, Bette," her aunt muttered behind her delicately painted fan.

Elizabeth was quite aware but was not perturbed. Her mother, mingling effortlessly with the other guests, often sent her sympathetic glances that indicated she had seen her daughter's lack of dance partners.

An exaggerated sigh came from her aunt. "The eligible men are perhaps thinking that you are too old. I tell you, it is that gown! I am not pleased with your willfulness."

A humorless smile quirked Elizabeth's lips, but she did not reply to her aunt. Upon entering the countess's ballroom, whispers had rippled through the crowd, tinged with scandalized delight and censure, yet Elizabeth felt a thrilling surge of empowerment. She wore a rose-colored gown that clung to her frame with an almost provocative allure. With its deep décolletage and vibrant hue, the dress was a stark departure from the demure pastels typically favored by debutantes.

Her choice of attire had been deliberate, for she vowed to be honest to her character and without stating it, inform the ton that she was a lady of bold intentions. It was a rather risky move on her part; however, it was most important to Elizabeth that this new foray into the marriage mart be done according to her designs. Her aunt, a stickler for propriety, had been visibly appalled when she first saw the gown.

"A debutante would not wear such colors," she had chided, her eyes sharp beneath furrowed brows. "This would only be permissible for widows and married women."

Elizabeth had merely smiled and drawled, "I thought I was collecting dust motes.

Never say I am once again a fresh-faced debutante. The English air has indeed done wonders. I daresay I no longer feel decrepit.”

“You are facetious! We will need a new wardrobe with more demure—” her aunt had begun, her voice a mix of exasperation and concern.

“No,” Elizabeth had cut her off, her tone resolute and firm. “Once, I listened to everyone about what I needed in a husband. I wore clothes my mother thought appropriate. I confined my opinions on subject matters deemed inappropriate for women, subdued my laughter, and my wealth was paraded before me like a beacon. This time, Aunt, my search for a husband will be on my terms.”

The room had fallen into a tense silence as her aunt and mother exchanged uneasy glances. Neither woman voiced any further objections, perhaps for the first time recognizing the iron will that underpinned Elizabeth’s genteel exterior.

“Well,” her mother said, uncurling her fan as she gracefully sashayed over. “A London ball is even more lively than what we are used to, and I thought the men would have been more considerate.”

“I am rather appalled they see a young lady in want of a partner, and so many gentlemen remain discourteous,” her aunt said, casting an accusatory stare at Elizabeth. “Most men need an enticement to approach a lady. We must let the ton know—”

“No,” she said, knowing where her aunt wanted to go. “No one needs to know I am an heiress. I will never like a man whose admiration is generated by self-interest and little else.”

“When I met my husband, only the betterment of my family drove me to accept an offer from a viscount; now I love that man with my entire heart,” her aunt said. “The

importance does not lie in how attachments start, but in how they end.”

“I will not change my thoughts on this matter; you need to respect this.”

Her aunt narrowed her eyes. “Bette! You are being too stubborn about—”

“I shall leave, given that my wishes cannot be respected.” Elizabeth softened it with a small smile. “This is important to my happiness, or else I would not ask this of you both.”

Her aunt sighed and grudgingly said, “Very well.”

Elizabeth’s belly unknotted, and as she watched the swirl of colors and movement before her, she felt an aching sense of detachment. She understood her aunt’s worries. Despite their hostess’s gracious introductions to several eligible gentlemen, none had asked her to dance. Elizabeth was not the delicate, blonde beauty her brother claimed was celebrated as diamonds and roses of each season. Still, she was pretty, owning dark brown hair with streaks of red that flattered her fair complexion. More than one admiring gaze lingered on her, but no one approached her.

Am I to always be liked first for my wealth?

“I need a breath of fresh air. I will return shortly.”

After giving her a sympathetic glance, her mother nodded. As Elizabeth hastened away, she could feel her aunt and mother’s concerned stares prickling at her back. She plucked a glass of champagne from a footman moving deftly through the crowd with a serving tray. Pushing through the throng, she reached the doors leading to the terrace balcony and slipped outside, a sigh of relief escaping her lips as she found it deserted, most of it bathed in the soft glow of moonlight.

The cool night air was a balm, and just as Elizabeth contemplated the prospect of leaving the ball early, a sudden stir from inside snagged her attention. The murmur of whispers floated out to the balcony like autumn leaves caught in a gust.

“It is the Duke of Basil,” a lady gasped, her tone infused with shock and a hint of thrill.

“Why, I haven’t seen him at one of these events in ages. Not since you know ... the scandal,” another responded in a dramatic whisper, her voice conveying disapproval and delight.

Elizabeth softly scoffed, her lips curling in amusement. It seemed that ladies in England possessed the same penchant for gossip as those in New York.

“Good heavens, is Lady Clara in town?” one queried in a hushed tone.

“Oh, Mary, do not speak of it. We do not wish for that dreadful gossip to be reignited. Clara was so devastated when he did not make her his duchess,” the first lady replied, her voice a whisper of sympathy.

Hidden behind the door and a large palm frond, three ladies engaged in fervent gossip. Elizabeth’s curiosity piqued, and she craned her neck to catch a glimpse of the infamous duke. A few gentlemen milled about, but none bore the distinct aura of nobility she imagined a duke would possess.

“It was very ungentlemanly of him; they were caught together. How could he have been so callous to her? Poor Clara has been in the country for the last two years. I was hoping she would put it all behind her by now,” one lady lamented.

“Mary, one does not simply dust off a ruined reputation and put it behind them!” another countered sharply.

“I, for one, could never admire such a man, even if he is as handsome as Lucifer himself,” declared another with a snort. “With a devilish wit and charm to match!”

“A rather macabre comparison!” was the quick retort.

As handsome as Lucifer?

Elizabeth rolled her eyes in an unladylike fashion. The idle tongues of gossiping ladies always amazed her—oh! Her thoughts scattered as a tall figure emerged through the throng, his posture regal yet distinctly aloof.

Goodness, he is handsome. Is he these ladies’ Lucifer?

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The gentleman's midnight black hair curled over his forehead and behind his ears, suggesting a need for a trim that somehow did not detract from his elegance but rather enhanced his rakish appeal. His cheekbones were pronounced, carved with an almost savage grace, and his lips held a cynical edge that did nothing to diminish their sensuality.

His attire was impeccable: dark trousers paired with a jacket, a crisp white cravat, and a striking blue waistcoat that clung to his lithe frame with flawless elegance. Elizabeth felt a flutter of surprise—almost mortification—as her heart quickened. It was not like her to be swayed by mere physical attractiveness; she had always hoped to appreciate and be appreciated for thought and charm rather than appearance.

Perhaps he is a beast in fine clothing, or perhaps he is not the duke.

The unknown gentleman disappeared through the crowd, and Elizabeth chuckled lightly at herself, realizing how tense she had been. Leaning back against the cool marble of the balcony, she gazed up at the night sky, grateful for the clarity that revealed the stars twinkling like diamonds strewn across black velvet. Knowing she couldn't hide forever before her mother or aunt came looking, she reluctantly pushed off from the balustrade to return inside.

Just then, her heart quickened as she noticed a figure approaching the terrace. Instinctively, she drew back into the shadows, her breath catching slightly. As he walked onto the balcony, he faltered into remarkable stillness. Elizabeth felt a spark of something she couldn't quite name. His gaze lingered toward her direction, thoughtful and assessing. He walked forward, closing the distance between them until he was unsettlingly close.

“It was not my imagination. A lady is indeed hiding out here,” he said, his voice low and slightly amused.

A spurt of humor danced through her. “I was relaxing, sir.”

“Your tone suggests my presence is an intrusion.”

“It is.”

His eyes flared slightly, and then the corners of his mouth hitched in a small smile. The hint of carnality in his expression stole her breath for a heart-stopping moment.

“Ah, not the reaction I am used to,” he murmured, casually plucking a cheroot from his pocket.

Annoyed with her response, she said, “Of course not; men of your privilege are accustomed to adulation of those who wish to sit under their arse and a perverse enjoyment of such fawning.”

Elizabeth clapped a hand over her mouth, appalled by her frankness. She shot an accusing glance at the empty glass on the ledge.

“Hmm, are we to blame a single glass of champagne for that egregious slip?” he asked, his tone laced with wicked amusement.

It was surprising he was not offended by her words ... or was he?

She felt the impact of his eyes as they studied her. This close, Elizabeth saw they were a bright, piercing silver.

An elegant brow arched. “Drowning sorrows?”

“Boredom,” she confessed softly, her heart strangely fluttering with the novelty of the exchange.

“That dreadful beast. There is nothing worse than a mind haunted by boredom. It might push one to presume men of certain ilk enjoy when others sit under their arse and flatter them.”

A choked laugh escaped Elizabeth, and she found herself reevaluating the man before her. Perhaps he was not the duke the ladies had whispered about.

“I had four glasses this evening, though I confess they are not entirely responsible for my candor.”

“An honest lady, how refreshing,” he replied, his voice holding a caustic edge that belied his amusement.

“I see you own to jadedness along with your conceited arrogance.”

“All part and parcel of a good duke.”

Elizabeth lightly chuckled. Who was he?

“A lovely laugh,” he remarked, lighting his cheroot and glancing at her with renewed interest. “Come into the light. I want to see you more clearly.”

“Denied,” she drawled, stepping further into the shadows.

He lifted an eyebrow, taking a slow drag on his cheroot.

“Another first for you, I can see,” she said softly.

“You are interesting. I like interesting things.”

A searing flash of awareness burned through her as Elizabeth stared at him. That soft, contemplative murmur felt decidedly dangerous.

“I have never met a rake before,” she said softly. “And I presume you are indeed the rogue ladies whisper about.”

“You are not running.”

“Should I be?” Elizabeth asked, her heart pounding with the thrill of the exchange.

“Half the fun is in the chase.”

Though she laughed, Elizabeth felt threatened by the sensuality he exuded because her heart had quickened the moment he stepped into her awareness and had not slowed. “Is that to say you will be chasing me?”

“Depends.”

“You are staring, sir, and there is nothing to see but shadows.” Elizabeth was confident he could not discern her features.

“Shadows often hide the most intriguing secrets,” he said smoothly, his gaze not leaving her. “I’ve always enjoyed unraveling mysteries.”

“I am hardly mysterious.”

“Permit me to know who you are.”

Caution pushed her to say, “No.”

“Perhaps I could entice you to reveal yourself with the promise of better company. Your boredom with the night would end.”

Elizabeth smiled. “You think highly of your company, sir.”

“As you should of yours,” he countered, stepping just a tad closer, his rousing fragrance mingling with the night air. “It is not every day one encounters a lady who is witty and laughs so beautifully.”

Elizabeth smiled, yet something in his tone, a lack of warmth, suggested a certain detachment. What a charmer you are, she thought, but his gaze carried a cynical edge, as if every interaction were merely a move in a strategic game.

“Such unabashed flattery, sir,” she said, wondering about the true nature of the man before her. “One might think you have practiced this art of flirtation quite extensively.”

Another step brought him startlingly close. His rich masculine scent surrounded her, and something heated and uncomfortable shivered low in her belly.

“Flattery is merely the currency of the ton,” he replied, his tone unapologetic, almost dismissive.

Elizabeth was struck by his candor—so different from the usual veil of nicety she encountered in her social circles. She found herself staring, intrigued and a bit unsettled.

“Do any of your words carry the weight of sincerity, or are they just well-rehearsed lines meant to chase and disarm?” Are you only a rogue?

His silver eyes seemed to flicker with a provocative light. “Are you disarmed?”

She laughed, a clear sound that filled the cool night air. “No, sir, I am not.”

At that moment, a noise distracted him, and he turned, his broad shoulders shielding her from view. Elizabeth felt a flutter of warmth—his gesture, protective and considerate of her reputation, was at odds with the cynical façade he projected.

“Basil,” a lady’s crisp voice called out, her tone laced with irritation. “Why do you insist on escaping even though you only just arrived?”

“I glimpsed the matchmaking fervor in your eyes and thought a retreat strategically best,” he responded smoothly.

The lady huffed. “You sorely vex my nerves. I am of the mind to depart early. Lady Michaels will have to forgive me. I met the most unpleasant lady. I cannot imagine why the countess thought it necessary to perform introductions to this Mrs. Armstrong. She is an American, and you know how vulgar they are with their manners, and this one ... I shudder upon recalling her laugh and deplorable accent.”

A cold sensation pierced Elizabeth’s chest, and she stiffened, the words slicing through her like a blade. The contempt and prejudice were palpable, leaving a tight ache in her heart.

“Allow me to relieve you of the horror by escorting you home,” the duke offered, his tone smooth as silk, betraying no sign of disapproval of the lady’s cutting words.

Numb, she watched him walk away with the elegantly dressed lady. Anger and embarrassment churned within her as she took a deep breath and forced herself back into the ballroom, weaving through the crowd to find her mother and aunt.

“Mother—” she started, her voice tight with emotion, only to freeze as her brother and the duke approached.

Her aunt gasped, her fan snapping up to cover her mouth. “Brandon is coming over with the Duke of Basil! I never knew he was acquainted with the duke! How fortuitous.”

Her brother and the duke stopped before them, and the duke gave no indication of their recent conversation or recognition.

Does he realize I was with him on the terrace?

Elizabeth’s heart raced when those enigmatic silver eyes swept over her in a swift, thorough appraisal, then flicked away dismissively. The painful duality of her interactions with the duke coalesced into a poignant awareness that she might never fit into ton life as her mother and aunt anticipated.

“Your Grace,” Brandon said with a warm smile, “allow me to present my aunt, Viscountess Barnaby, my mother, Mrs. Armstrong, and my sister, Miss Elizabeth Armstrong. My sister and mother arrived from New York only two weeks ago.”

As Brandon introduced them, something flickered in the duke’s eyes—a brief, indecipherable spark before his expression settled into detached politeness. Elizabeth’s aunt and mother dipped into graceful curtsies, their voices a soft murmur of pleasantries. Elizabeth stood frozen, her heart thundering so loudly in her ears that their words were lost to her.

“A delight to meet you, Mrs. Armstrong,” the duke said, offering a smile as hollow as the echo of distant laughter.

His eyes, cold and calculating, met Elizabeth’s.

The hypocrite.

Her family stared at her, a palpable sense of expectation hanging in the air.

“Bette,” Brandon chided gently. “I know it is not every day one meets a duke, but you are supposed to curtsy.”

The duke’s slightly raised eyebrow, arching in aristocratic expectation, only fueled her defiance. He appeared so aloof, so supremely arrogant—as if he were an emperor disdainfully regarding an unworthy subject. It ignited a fire within her.

“A curtsy?” Elizabeth was proud of the calmness of her voice. She lifted her chin, her gaze unyielding. “I would offer such a courtesy to those who have earned the honor. I daresay both my admiration and contempt can be earned; it must be my vulgar American manners that allow for the possibility.”

Her mother’s hand flew to her mouth, her eyes wide with shock.

“Elizabeth!” she gasped, her voice a mixture of dismay and disbelief.

Guilt twisted in Elizabeth’s chest as she saw the mortification etched on her family’s faces. Her aunt’s complexion paled as if she might faint. Around them, a few ladies tittered behind their fans, their whispers like the rustling of dry leaves.

Yet, civility demanded some gesture of politeness, however strained. With a tight smile that did not reach her eyes, Elizabeth nodded to the duke, her head bowing slightly but not nearly enough to count as a curtsy. “Your Grace, a pleasure,” she said.

“I can tell that it is anything but a pleasure, Miss Armstrong,” the duke replied, his voice icy with disdain. “Still, I find that honesty suits you far better than flattery ever could. Your lack of manners can be overlooked in this instance, even if it is unpalatable.”

His words, sharp as a blade, left a sting of humiliation. The wretch! Elizabeth turned away, her shoulders stiff. She had to walk past him to leave the ballroom, and she did so without another word, her head held high. Behind her, his soft, mocking laugh followed, kissing over her skin in a warning.

She left the ballroom, the echoes of the duke's laughter mingling with the murmur of the scandalized crowd, now wishing more than ever that she had not attended.

“Bette!”

She stopped and waited for her brother to catch up with her.

“What was that about?” Brandon demanded tightly. “Do you know what you have done?”

“Is this the friend you have been telling me about? The one you were eager for me to meet?”

“Yes.” He raked his fingers through his hair. “I know you are a lady of good sense and manners. I cannot imagine what pushed you to be so provoking and rude with His Grace.”

Elizabeth told him what she had witnessed without explaining why she was on the balcony.

“I am sorry, Bette,” he said with a heavy sigh. “I suspect that lady was the Duchess of Basil, his mother. Her words were terrible, but that does not give you leave to—”

“Do not say it, Brandon,” Elizabeth snapped. “You do not seem angry that our mother was so grossly insulted. I am going home. Please inform mama that I will send back the carriage.”

She walked away and collected her cloak, refusing to stop at the strained call of her brother. As she stepped into the cooler air of the night, the weight of what she had done—and the consequences that might follow—settled heavily upon her. Having a powerful and influential duke as an enemy would be unwise.

“More like catastrophic,” she whispered, closing her eyes.

Oh, what have I done?

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James Chisholm, the Duke of Basil, reclined on a well-padded sofa in one of London's premier brothels and pleasure palaces, Aphrodite, a venue decadent in its opulence. The low hum of anticipation filled the air of the private room in the pleasure palace as James and his friends awaited the evening's entertainment. They were ensconced in a comfortably and sensually decorated room, the walls lined with sumptuous tapestries that told tales of ancient conquests and decadent revelry. Above them, the chandelier cast a warm light that flickered like the fire in the hearth, and the gentle clink of fine whisky glasses punctuated the murmuring voices of the attendants outside.

"You wear the expression of a man suffering from my malady, Basil," Oliver, the Marquess of Ambrose, observed with a smirk as he leaned back in his winged-back chair, his eyes sharp beneath the soft glow of the chandelier.

"I agree," Thomas, the Earl of Radbourne, drawled, his gaze fixed on James with an amused twinkle. "I have never witnessed such an air of distraction for a man known for his iron will. It is ... bemusing."

James took a healthy swallow of his whisky, the amber liquid a welcome burn down his throat. He flicked a glance at his friends, both of whom were indolently sprawled in their winged-back chairs, the flickering light casting shadows across their faces that danced with devilry.

"Enlighten me about this malady you observe," he murmured, his voice low and slightly edged.

"Boredom," Ambrose said, the word hanging in the air like a challenge.

That single word struck James's heart like a hammer, echoing a soft, accented voice hidden in shadows who'd felt a similar disenchantment with her evening.

Miss Elizabeth Armstrong.

He pushed away the unbidden image of her dark blue eyes, the finest he had ever seen and directed his attention to his friends.

"Hmm, this is the second conversation tonight that has revolved around boredom."

"Ah, you met a woman," Radbourne deduced, his green eyes gleaming wickedly. "Did you meet her here? Are we to share?"

James chuckled, shaking his head. "The only young lady I met tonight is from society," he clarified, his tone laced with irony. "Not a potential lover. I do not even think I like the chit."

Radbourne choked on his drink, sputtering a laugh. "A society lady?"

"Hmm."

"We can still share her," Radbourne drawled provocatively. "Enquiring minds wish to know, Basil, why the hell were you at a ball?"

From his circle of friends, Radbourne was known as much for his enigmatic reclusiveness as he was for his striking appearance and rakish ways. It would be more possible to see a unicorn than his friend at a ton event.

"Never say you are finally thinking about marriage," Ambrose said, an eyebrow arching in mock horror.

“I merely attended the ball to indulge my mother,” James said, a slight tightness to his words as his mind wandered back to the sharp-tongued American beauty.

“My mother has also been asking me to marry,” Radbourne sighed, his expression clouding slightly. “She conveniently forgets I was once engaged, and the supposed horror of my appearance induced my fiancée to fall out of love with my undeniable wicked charms.”

The neat lines of his friend’s cheekbone and jaw were disrupted by a scar that slashed upward through to his left eyebrow. Radbourne’s finger traced that jagged edge, and a distant look entered his eyes. He took another long sip of his whisky. “It befuddles the mind how much marriage preoccupies the women in our families.”

Ambrose chuckled. “Many say there is nothing greater than the companionship of a good woman. A thought-provoking notion.”

James raised a brow at the throb of hunger in his friend’s tone. “Do you want to marry?”

Oliver grimaced and raked his fingers through his hair. “There is something that I want, but it feels intangible,” he finally admitted, his tone serious. “Marriage, in our circles, often feels more like a strategic alliance than a partnership of affection. And after seeing many such alliances falter, I have long questioned its value. I am also more certain than ever that genteel ladies of the ton are not able to meet our sexual demands. Hell, yesterday, my mistress took my cock down to the back of her throat ... and she peered up at me with this look in her eyes ... it was sweet yet wild and wanton. I cannot imagine any lady of society pleasuring me in such a manner, so it is best to simply not marry one. Yet I want more than a casual lover.”

James frowned. He had never heard his friend speak in such a manner. Oliver’s voice echoed with hunger, longing naked on his face.

James leaned forward, bracing his elbows on his knees. “Take your wife and then have a mistress to do the things you cannot do with your marchioness.”

“Never,” Ambrose swiftly said, pushing to his feet and walking over to the fireplace, staring into the flickering flames as if it would provide him with some answer.

James understood his rejection of having a mistress. Many men of their privilege had many lovers, a mistress or two, along with their wives. In his opinion, it was dishonorable to treat a woman so unless she consented to the arrangement. Many of his friends could be wicked in their illicit pursuits, but they had honor and respect for others.

James did not anticipate ever having to worry about such matters. He had always been a man of strong carnal appetites, and while Ambrose often said he could never allow his baser desires to touch a lady of society, James did not have this worry simply because he had no desire to marry. There were no benefits for him, and everything he did in life was performed with a measure of cold, analytical calculation. His lovers were all temporary, providing him with the sexual adventures he craved without any expectations from him.

Ambrose walked over to the mantle and refilled his glass with whisky.

James tipped his head back, staring at the sensually painted ceiling, which depicted a lady supposedly punished by the gods. In the painting, a voluptuous, naked goddess was surrounded by men who seemed to be kissing every inch of her body—one man licked her cunt, the other sucked a nipple, and one kissed along her neck. The lady’s face was a grimace of agonized ecstasy. Trust that there existed priggish fools who thought forcing pleasure on a woman was some sort of punishment.

Like most of his friends, James enjoyed his life in fleeting thrills, at times reveling in gambling, racing his carriage or a horse, and wicked moments with his lovers.

London's social scene was a nuisance, made sharper by his mother's constant worry that he remained unwed. His attendance at Lady Michael's ball was to soothe his mother's discontent simply because he loved her.

His mother would bemoan her dissatisfaction, and he would indulge by attending a couple of balls, a garden party or even a rout. They meant nothing to James. The duchess realized this was a dance they had performed for the last couple of seasons and grew more determined in her efforts. However, James could not be persuaded against his own will. He would have to put a stop to it, for his attending society events would only give his mother a false expectation that he would one day marry.

Something inside his chest jerked. If he stopped going to society outings, he might not encounter Miss Elizabeth Armstrong again.

Do any of your words carry the weight of sincerity, or are they just well-rehearsed lines meant to chase and disarm?

His words of flattery belonged to the ruthless part of him that went after something he wanted. Her soft laugh, her scent, and the way she spoke to him had tugged at something unknown inside of James. He'd felt as if the indifference that haunted him for the last few years had been sliced open with the sharpest blade.

Just who are you, Elizabeth Armstrong, and why the fuck are you taking up any space in my thoughts after a single meeting?

"You roused my sister's ire," Brandon Armstrong said, walking into a large room where they lounged, awaiting Madam Rebecca to entertain them with a sensual dance that was rumored she learned from the boudoir of a pasha.

"Think of the devil, and someone she knows appears," James drawled, glancing up to stare at one of his most recent friendships. "I gather provoking your sister is a

dangerous thing.” He smiled, feeling that prick of amusement. Why do I find her so interesting from that fleeting encounter?

“It is for me,” Armstrong grouched, sitting on the armchair opposite him. “Our mother and aunt are not pleased with her. Hell, I am sure my sister might never be invited to another ball, and that would defeat the purpose of everything. My mother has ordered me to fix it, and I am at a damn loss. My aunt is saying my sister is ruined.”

“Why?”

“By God, man, surely as a duke, you know! My sister was rather rude and did not consider your stature and consequences when she made her remarks.” Brandon raked his fingers through his hair. “Are you a man that others can afford to offend?”

“Your sister did not care that I was a duke.”

“Exactly,” he hissed. “She should have been mindful.”

That hollow feeling rushed inside James. “Why? She merely defended her dignity that was slighted.”

“You are entirely serious,” Armstrong echoed, his eyes widening before they narrowed. “I do not like that you sound as if you admired Bette’s willful nature.”

James’s lips quirked in a small smile. “Is that a cause for concern, Armstrong? You are sitting like a hen whose feathers are ruffled.”

Armstrong scowled. “Given your profligacy, it damn well is.”

Bemused, James stared at the man he had claimed as a trusted friend these last two years. “Are you warning me from your sister?”

“There is no reason to sound so appalled. I know she is not fit to be a duchess. That is not what I am talking about, but ...”

“But what?”

“There is a look in your eyes just now ... it was one of want, and you have said more than once you will never marry. So what is that look about? Should I not fear debauchery for my sister, who I damn well know own an impetuous and willful nature?”

In the dimly lit room, the atmosphere grew thick with tension as James fought to keep his features impassive, his voice steady. “Do not be silly. Your sister is remarkably pretty, and I am sure behind that ... sharp tongue, she is a charmer, but she is like all ladies who flit around the season attending balls. I will never be interested in any lady who is clearly seeking a husband. That is a trap I am not interested in. What you saw was mere admiration for the fact that your sister did not flatter my vanity or seek to form a self-serving connection. That is all.”

Brandon sighed heavily, his face etched with concern. Radbourne, sensing the tension, deftly filled a glass with whisky and handed it to him, a small gesture of solidarity in the face of his friend’s frustration.

“What exactly happened at this ball?” Ambrose inquired.

With clipped, precise diction, Brandon recounted the incident involving his sister. Radbourne couldn’t help but laugh while Ambrose’s smile hinted at his admiration for Elizabeth’s audacity.

“A fearless lady,” Oliver remarked. “And admirable that she did not care you were a duke or even cared for society’s reaction.”

“She left the damn ball in an uproar and our mother in tears. She’s now afraid no one will entertain Elizabeth,” Brandon snapped, the worry evident in his voice. “I am certain my sister will regret her actions once her temper cools because she is indeed seeking a husband this season.”

“That is easily fixed,” Radbourne said, ever the strategist.

“How?” Brandon asked, his eyes lighting up with a flicker of hope. “Your society can be damn unforgiving.”

“Basil was the one at fault. Let him fix it by dancing with your sister at a few balls or even taking her out in his new phaeton to Hyde Park. The attention he flatters her with will make everyone want to be associated with her,” Radbourne suggested, outlining a plan that sounded both plausible and beneficial.

“No,” James said, setting his empty whisky glass down with a slight clink.

Mocking humor danced in Oliver’s eyes. “How fast you protested, Basil.”

Ignoring him, James said to Brandon. “I thought your sister was an heiress? Let the ton know of it, and Miss Armstrong will have her husband in no time.”

“She is,” Brandon confirmed, his voice tight with frustration. “However, she does not want anyone to know of her wealth for fear of attracting fortune hunters. Bette wants to be liked and admired for her willful and opinionated character!”

Despite Brandon’s evident frustration, James detected the underlying affection and respect he held for his sister. The way she felt resonated with James’s own desires a few years ago when he had foolishly thought he could marry—to be appreciated for his character rather than his wealth. This unexpected revelation fostered a peculiar sense of kinship toward Elizabeth Armstrong. Still, he pinned Brandon a hard stare

and said, “Then she will navigate the ton how she sees fit. It has nothing to do with me.”

“By your own admission, the lady was defending her dignity,” Radbourne drawled, his eyes bright with humor. “The duchess was too harsh, even if she did not know someone was there to overhear her remarks.”

An irritated grunt left James, and he stood, walking over to the mantle to refill his glass. Something told him he would need it, especially as he felt a prick of something elusive at the very thought of seeing her once again.

Bloody hell, what nonsense is this?

“You know it is the best solution,” Ambrose persisted gently, trying to mediate the situation. “All the eligible men will start to think that Miss Armstrong is a very good catch if you dance with her once. A second dance will soar her popularity. An outing to the royal museum with Brandon and Miss Armstrong will cement the fact that she has noteworthy connections. Being seen with you will help restore what is lost.”

“I doubt Miss Armstrong will appreciate anything from me. You did not see the fire in her eyes,” he murmured, looking down into the glass as if it would answer his silent demand as to why his damn heart was quickening.

“Will you help?” Brandon asked.

“Any one of us can do this,” James said, lifting the glass to his mouth.

He felt the weight of their expectations, and his resistance waned as he pondered the potential impact of such a gesture—not just for Elizabeth but for his own sense of integrity. She was wounded because of his mother’s thoughtless words. He would crush anyone who hurt his sister or mother, so he understood the battle lines she had

drawn.

Recalling the defiant anger in Miss Armstrong's eyes, a rush of admiration for her mettle and sheer outrageousness filled him.

"I will help," he said softly, wondering at the sharp thump of anticipation.

He lowered his glass to the mantle and turned around as the door opened, and an attendant told him that a courtesan was awaiting him in his preferred room. James bid his friends farewell, his mouth quirked when Radbourne wished that his cock would be wrung dry by most decadent lips and may his body be sated and his sleep dreamless.

His friends were truly damn rakes and libertines, and they were men he was not afraid to admit he loved like brothers. James approached the door that had been tastefully decorated according to his preferences by the madam of Aphrodite, a nod to his status and the regard in which he was held. He entered the private chamber and quietly closed the door behind him, enveloped by a sense of curiosity and anticipation. Tonight, he found himself unusually eager for the evening's entertainment, hoping it would deviate from the usual and perhaps ignite something new.

Dark blue eyes with that fire in them sparked his thoughts, and he hissed in annoyance that she would once again intrude upon them.

What the hell was this nonsense?

James had long decided that young, innocent ladies, no matter how intriguing, were not to occupy his thoughts. And as was his way with anything that didn't align with his lifestyle, he decisively cut her from his awareness, setting aside any lingering curiosity as ruthlessly as he managed all unsuitable entanglements.

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Afew nights after pledging to aid Miss Armstrong in salvaging her reputation, James found himself chuckling with a sense of dark amusement. He held the latest scandal sheet, which brazenly included his full name—a rare and bold move by the gossip-hungry press.

Dear Esteemed Readers,

It seems not every lady in the ton fawns over one of society's most decadent and charming dukes. This author has it on the highest authority that a young lady, newly arrived to our shores and not yet acquainted with the delicate intricacies of our society, publicly

shunned the Duke of Basil during a recent soirée/ball. The incident has set tongues wagging across the city, and many are deeply upset by this breach of decorum. Consequently, the swirling rumors now suggest that numerous drawing room doors might soon be firmly shut against Miss A.

This author, ever a supporter of the underdog and a lover of vibrant spirits, would hate to see such a promising newcomer ostracized from our illustrious gatherings. One cannot help but wonder about the nature of the disagreement that led to such a public spectacle. Was this truly a simple misunderstanding, or is there more to the story than meets the eye?

In light of these events, I extend an invitation to my well-informed readers: Should you possess any delightful details or insights into why these battle lines were drawn, please do not hesitate to send them my way. Rest assured, I will sift through the submissions with the utmost discretion and select only the most enlightening tidbits

to share.

Stay tuned, dear readers, as we continue to uncover the layers of this intriguing drama. Your interest and contributions make our society pages the first stop for scintillating and essential gossip.

Yours in curiosity and ever faithful in providing the most tantalizing of gossip,

Lady C,

The Daily Gossip

James folded the sheet, a smirk playing at the corners of his mouth as he considered the absurdity of the situation. The ton was evidently abuzz with speculation, and here he was, at the center of it all, thanks to a far-too-bold young woman who dared to defy convention.

“You are distracted,” Lady Ellen remarked, her tone a blend of complaint and coquetry. She was supposed to be his companion for the evening, a diversion from his duties. Ellen was not a lady of the aristocracy. However, the owner of Aphrodite, Madam Rebecca, insisted all her sought-after courtesans carry the honor before their names.

Lowering the scandal sheet, which Radbourne had sent him earlier with a knowing scribble on the margins, James turned his attention to the woman before him. “What did you say?”

Ellen’s pout grew more pronounced. “I do not like that you pay me no regard.”

James arched a brow. “Am I to cater to what you like? Or are you to cater to me?”

Uncertainty flickered across Ellen's face before she composed herself, lowering her lashes in a practiced gesture of demure appeal. She reclined further against the chaise, her posture deliberately designed to entice. Her blonde hair cascaded over her shoulders in a deliberate disarray, her bodice barely containing her ample breasts, and her skirt artfully arranged to reveal a glimpse of her thighs. The deliberate pose was intended to captivate and command his attention fully.

James was unmoved. As he had been for the last few months. Or has it been a year?

"I can do what no other woman has done for you in ages," Ellen murmured, her voice sultry, laced with a promise meant to erase any distractions. She patted the cushion beside her on the chaise, her eyes glinting with invitation. "Come and join me, Your Grace."

James studied her for a moment, her allure undeniable yet suddenly less compelling than it might have been on any other night. Despite this, he was not one to rudely dismiss the company of a willing and beautiful woman.

"Tell me precisely how you will rid my mind of everything but you," he invited.

"Stay the full night with me. I promise I will make you forget your distractions," she whispered, "and then perhaps you will ask only for me going forward."

Ellen's intention was clear—prove her worth as an enchantress of the highest order, and she might secure the position as a duke's mistress.

James allowed a small smile, his gaze briefly meeting hers. "I am not interested in permanent attachments."

"I can do what no other woman has done for you in ages."

His belly tightened. Ah, they discussed him and his cock and his lack of attaining his pleasure. Dark humor washed through him. Rising from his seat, James closed the distance between them with measured steps and lowered himself onto his haunches. “Oh?”

Her pink tongue darted to wet her lips, and he imagined coaxing those lips to part and sliding his cock deep. Perhaps sensing victory, she shifted into a kneel on the sofa and placed a hand on his chest, her fingers trailing coyly up to his cravat. “No one has made you release in ... months. I want the challenge ... and I will make you break.

“Is that so?”

“I’ll allow you to tie me ... I will be at your mercy. Whatever you like I am willing to do without hesitation.”

Nothing stirred inside of James, and to his annoyance, dark blue eyes set in a stunningly pretty face rose in his thoughts.

Why the hell am I still thinking about her?

Miss Armstrong’s fresh, artless loveliness would tempt any man, but James was not led around by his damn cock. Perhaps she intruded on his thoughts because he had not yet made any amends. James frowned and stood. “I am leaving, Ellen.”

“Your Grace—”

“My man will deliver a diamond necklace for you tomorrow.”

Her eyes widened, and she gasped. “Thank you!”

“There is no need. I will take my leave.”

“Will you ask for me tomorrow?”

What would be the point? James had not been tempted to take a lover in weeks. He'd never even kept a mistress like most men, and given that Ellen was vying for that position, he would not see her again. Such arrangements and entanglement seemed far too much trouble. “No.”

Ellen masked her disappointment well. “We have a new girl,” she said. “She is a beauty, and ... she is untouched.”

He lifted a brow. “An untouched woman in a pleasure palace? How did she come to be here?”

Her laugh tinkled, and her eyes gleamed with sensual wickedness. Ellen clearly thought offering him a virgin would tempt him to stay and indulge in sensual debauchery. Or perhaps gain more favor from him.

“Would you like for her to join us, Your Grace?”

At his silence, Ellen said, “Agatha's father owes Madam, and he offered his daughter a night to pay off his debt. The girl agreed. No one has had her yet. Madam was planning an auction.”

“An auction?” Trust Madam Rebecca to come up with something that would titillate even her most jaded customers.

“If madam knows you are interested, Agatha will no longer be auctioned to the highest bidder.”

James walked over to the armchair, where he sprawled indolently. “Inform Rebecca I wish to see her and the girl.”

Ellen flashed him a smile, hopped from the sofa and slipped on a silk peignoir before sauntering from the room. Several minutes passed before Rebecca entered with Ellen and the girl. He stood and went over to where they halted in the center of the room. James maintained a respectable distance as he assessed her. She looked more like a young lady. She appeared to be around twenty years of age and was incredibly beautiful. In truth, more lovely than any lady he had ever seen.

“What is that discoloration on your face?”

The girl’s eyes widened, and she touched her cheeks. “I—”

“Just a small bruise, Your Grace, from her father earlier,” Madam Rebecca rushed to assure him. “I had a physician over to examine her. The girl is indeed untouched and healthy.”

There was nothing more despicable, more cowardly, than a man who’d hit a woman, even if he was her father. A cold feeling moved through James’s heart. “How much does her father owe?”

“Eighty pounds, Your Grace. One hundred and twenty pounds was added as interest, to which he agreed. Hence, the full amount owed is two hundred pounds.”

Merciless, but it was what could be expected of a woman as shrewd and cunning as Madam Rebecca.

“You expect this girl to earn that sum for you in a single night?”

“Given the prize that she comes with and her beauty,” Madam murmured, peeking up at him coyly, “Many men would willingly pay double for the chance to deflower her. Would you not agree? I can arrange the auction now if it pleases you, or you can make an offer and enjoy her for the night.”

An odd sort of detachment went through James, and not for the first time, he wondered why he was here. Perhaps Ambrose's disenchantment was affecting him.

He considered the young lady. She was a ravishing beauty indeed, with rich black hair that hung in a waterfall of silk to her hips and large green eyes set in an arresting face. "How old are you?"

"She is—"

"I am asking the lady, Madam."

She lowered her head in a bow. "Of course, my apologies, Your Grace."

"I am one and twenty," Agatha said, lifting her chin.

James saw no fear in her eyes, only the fires of defiance. It almost pulled a smile to his mouth. "Did you agree to this?"

She fisted her hands at her side so tightly he knew her nails must be hurting her palm.

"Two hundred pounds is a sum I would need a few years of working to pay off. Madam Rebecca is unwilling to wait. I agreed not only to one night ... but to one man. The highest bidder."

"That is if he bids high enough to release you after one night," Madam snapped. "It might take a few nights to clear the debt."

"As you said," the girl replied icily, "My prize will ... will certainly fetch the owed sum."

Her voice had cracked, and he noted the fine tremor that went through her slender

frame. James agreed life was all about choices and making ruthless and practical arrangements to survive and live. He'd inherited his dukedom at the age of twenty and had done many things to bring his family and estates back from the brink. Things many people would think unworthy and demeaning to a man of his rank and consequences.

"I will take her," he said. "Two and fifty hundred pounds, and there will be no auction."

Madam smiled brilliantly and bowed. "Thank you, Your Grace." She hastened from the room, grabbing Ellen's hand and tugging her along.

Tension coated the room, and her throat visibly worked on a swallow.

"What is your full name?"

"Agatha Woodville, sir." She took a deep breath, squared her shoulders, and walked toward him.

"There is no need to look like a lamb going to the slaughter. I am not interested in your body."

She stopped as if she had run into a wall, her eyes widening. "I ... what?"

"Do you have something more practical to wear?"

"Madam burned my gown and my boots."

A humorless smile touched his mouth. Of course, Rebecca perhaps had no intention of releasing this girl afterward. "We are leaving unless you wish to stay."

She shook her head rather vigorously. "I wish to leave, sir."

He walked past her and opened the door, making his way along the hallway. James did not look to see if she followed. The choice was hers. She hastened her steps to walk beside him, her breathing harsh and almost frightened. Descending the winding staircase, he avoided the common rooms and retrieved his cloak. He held it out to Agatha, and she took it, wrapping it snugly around her body.

"Do you wish for me to carry you to the carriage," he said, glancing at her bare feet.

Agatha peered up at him, clearly bemused and shook her head. "I can walk. It will not be unpleasant for long."

He walked toward his parked carriage, opened the door and allowed her to precede him inside. Once they were seated, he said, "Where should I have my coachman deliver you."

There was a touch of relief and uncertainty in her gaze. "Do you mean to take me elsewhere and not ... with you?"

"Yes."

As if she did not understand, Agatha asked, "Am I not to stay at your home for the night?"

"No."

She stared at him, tears pooling inside her eyes. Thankfully, they did not spill over. "God does answer prayers."

"Nonsense," James said with sardonic humor. "He did not instruct me."

Her eyes widened and she smiled. “Thank you, sir. I have no money, but I vow to repay your favor one day.”

“It is astonishing you think you have something I might want.”

“You are a complex man,” she said softly after taking his measure for a long time. “I get the sense you do not wish for me to realize your kindness.”

“I am not a kind man,” he said drily.

Her lips trembled before pulling into a smile. “Whatever your reason, sir, thank you. If I had encountered someone else, the night would have ended terribly for me.”

“I will instruct my coachman to take you home once we arrive at my destination.”

“There is a seaside cottage in Brighton,” she said softly. A faraway look entered her eyes, and a single tear rolled down her cheeks. “My father has a terrible habit ... and he goes to those vile gambling dens every night. He will only offer me to the highest bidder once again, and if I wish to protect my younger sisters, I will have to agree.”

James reached into his pockets and took out the few banknotes he had. He held them out to her.

She jutted her chin. “I do not wish for your charity anymore, sir; I already owe you a fortune that I will repay one day.”

“Do not be a fool. Take the notes.”

There was desperation and hesitancy in her eyes. “Perhaps you could help me instead ... with a job.”

“No.”

“Please, I am willing to be a servant—”

“Too beautiful,” he said icily. “You would toss my household into disorder and have my footmen turn into competing fools.”

“I see. Perhaps a recommendation to be a governess—”

“The master of the home you work in will have you on your back within days. Unless you choose to hide your figure as best possible, disfigure your face, or find a kind widow who has no preying sons.”

“I would never consent to an affair!”

“He would not care if you were willing. You have no power or connection.”

Agatha clenched her fingers tightly in her lap, and a subtle shift in her expression revealed to James that she was no stranger to being coveted for her looks.

“My beauty is a disadvantage in life,” she said, her voice tinged with despair. “Perhaps I should disfigure myself.”

“Such actions would be a double-edged sword,” James responded, his voice even. “No one would want to marry you, nor would they likely offer you employment. Your days would become even harsher. Instead, you should consider ways to turn your beauty to your advantage.”

“How?” Her voice was a blend of frustration and curiosity.

“Do I need to spell it out?” he replied with chilling softness. “How have you managed

to survive this long?”

She flushed, her cheeks reddening as she looked away. “I am learning each day, sir, that the world only respects those with wealth and power.”

“Beauty is a power. A man would willingly pay two hundred pounds to spend a night with you,” James stated bluntly.

“I am not a common tart!” she cried.

Her response was fierce; her pride clearly stung.

“Then don’t be one,” James continued, unfazed. “Entice and allure. Craft a reputation as a woman who is both unattainable and unavailable. Tease and tempt, and let men be willing to pay just to behold your beauty ... to hear you play the pianoforte. Declare to the world that you are a virgin, and they will clamor at your door for the mere chance to be the one to seduce you.”

She stared at him, her eyes wide in shock, before looking away and biting her lower lip in contemplation.

James had nothing more to add. Silence filled the space between them until she spoke again, her voice hesitant.

“Who would help me with this? You.”

“No. The very madam who took your father’s deal,” he suggested coolly.

“Would she agree to such a plan?”

“Madam Rebecca is a shrewd businesswoman. Promise her a percentage of your

nightly earnings for a private room and board and a stage to showcase your talents. Rumors suggest she knows a sensual dance taught by a pasha. Ask her to teach you. Then, when you allow people into your boudoir, refuse any private audiences and be selective with your clientele. Only five each night—the five highest bidders will get to lounge on chairs, eat grapes, drink the finest whisky and watch you dance ... or play the pianoforte or sing.”

“And they will pay for this?” Agatha asked, skepticism lacing her tone.

“Yes, they will,” James assured her.

“And who are you to suggest such things?” she inquired, a hint of awe and fear in her voice. “Madam Rebecca called you ‘Your Grace’. Are you ... are you a nobleman or is it a moniker?”

“I am no one of consequence,” he replied, his gaze steady and revealing nothing.

She fell silent, pondering his words as the carriage rolled to a stop. James held her gaze for a moment longer, imparting a final piece of unsolicited advice. “Whatever choice you make, it no longer has anything to do with me.”

He exited the carriage and instructed his driver to take the lady wherever she wished. James entered Lady Weatherby’s townhouse and handed over his invitation card. “There is no need to announce me.”

The butler bowed deferentially. “Yes, Your Grace.”

As James moved along the hallway, the sounds of laughter and music from the ballroom pulsed through the air. His unexpected appearance caused a ripple of surprise among the guests; their expressions shifted from shock to deferential politeness as they bowed and curtsied upon recognizing him. A few curious

onlookers, likely sensing a story worth sharing, discreetly trailed behind him.

He entered the crowded ballroom, scanning the assembly until he saw her. Miss Armstrong stood somewhat apart from the main throng of revelers, dressed in a striking, dark golden gown that clung to her curves in a manner both elegant and provocative. Her dark hair was styled in elaborate curls, soft wisps playfully framing her face, enhancing her natural beauty and thoughtful expression.

Her chin was held high, her posture exuding confidence. She met the gaze of the onlookers with the poise of a lady seemingly unaffected by the whispers that fluttered behind their fans.

How unflappable you are, Miss Armstrong.

James lifted a brow when he noted a slight flush on her cheeks, which betrayed a hint of awareness, suggesting that she was not entirely indifferent to their stares and murmuring. He smiled, impressed by the strength she displayed. Many ladies of the ton tended to shrink under the weight of societal disapproval, but not Miss Armstrong. There was a distinct fierceness in her expression and a resolute tilt to her head that informed one of her refusal to be cowed or intimidated by anyone's judgment.

How interesting.

James was acutely aware that there was no rational explanation for why Miss Armstrong had occupied his thoughts so persistently since their last meeting. No justification whatsoever for the intrigue she stirred within him.

It is ridiculous.

He resolved that this dance would be atonement for his mother's thoughtlessness, and

then he would firmly remove her from his thoughts.

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Lady Weatherby's grand ballroom was tightly packed with all the popular ladies and gentlemen in their fineries. The golden chandeliers above cast a warm glow on the dancers, making the silk and satin gowns sparkle as if studded with stars. Music, laughter, and chatter pulsed around Elizabeth, and as she stood by the sidelines, she hated that she had attended tonight. There was simply no use for her attending balls. Her recent public disagreement with the Duke of Basil had not gone unnoticed, and it left her standing alone, an observer of the joy she could not touch.

Whispers followed her like shadows, and the smiles she received were tight, polite, but cold reminders of doors closing one after the other. The ardent hope that the marriage mart in London would be different from New York had died a swift death. Without her fortune acting as a beacon, no one dared court her. It was her fourth ball since her arrival in London, and she felt a profound sense of isolation. At least back home, her dearest friend Cassandra would keep her company with her delightful presence.

"Mama," Elizabeth said, "I believe it is time I return home. I find no enjoyment at tonight's ball."

"My dear, only an hour has passed," her mother said softly, understanding in her gaze. "Please give it some more time."

A perverse humor darted through her. "More time for what?"

"Someone might ask you to dance."

She stared at her mother in astonishment, wondering about her ability to ignore the

obvious. “Mama, even before my ... social gaffe with the duke, no one asked me to dance. The reason for this is evident. I am not of the ton, and there is no reason to consider me when there are far more eligible ladies here. The only offers I have received are ones without honor.”

Shock widened her mother’s eyes. “Who had the audacity?”

“Two earls and a viscount,” Elizabeth said. “The letters are at home in my letter box if you wish to read them.”

“Oh, Bette, why did you not tell us about it?”

“Because it was irrelevant.”

Her mother said no more as her brother came over. She smiled when he lifted her gloved hand to brush a kiss there.

“You look lovely tonight, Bette.”

“Nonsense,” she said with a light laugh, “I always appear lovely.”

“Mama,” Brandon said, “you seem upset. Is all well?”

Their mother took a steady breath to compose herself. “We shall not speak about it here.”

He frowned. “Now I am worried.”

Elizabeth leaned closer to him and murmured, “I unfortunately mentioned to Mama a couple of unflattering and audacious offers I received. They were not offers of marriage but a far more suggestive arrangement.”

Her brother stiffened, anger darkening blue eyes remarkably like hers. “Who dared?”

“There are some who do,” she said softly. “I will not respond, and I do not think you should either. These are powerful men in the ton and it best to ignore them.”

“Men have fought duels for less,” Brandon said through gritted teeth. “I will not allow—”

She reached out and gripped his hand. “Please, Brandon. You and I both know dueling affairs are often made public, and such a spectacle will only cause more scandal. Do not let me regret informing you.”

He blew out a harsh breath and squeezed her fingers gently in reassurance before releasing her hand. Brandon shifted to stand beside her.

“Bette,” he began, his tone unusually serious, “a friend of mine will be speaking with you soon.”

“Who?” Elizabeth asked, her curiosity piqued by his cryptic introduction. When he remained silent, she prodded further, “Why are you acting so mysteriously?”

He let out a pained sigh. “The Duke of Basil.”

Elizabeth stiffened, her pulse quickening despite her annoyance. “Why does he need to speak with me? To insult us more? I assure you I have already plotted how to take him down should he ever approach me again!”

“Elizabeth!”

Her brother’s use of her full name signaled his growing frustration, a rare break in his usually calm demeanor. She glared back at him. “I am aghast that you are not angry

at the insult dealt to our family!”

“He is my good friend,” Brandon insisted. “Please give him the chance to apologize and make amends?”

“You believe a man as arrogant as the Duke of Basil would apologize?” she countered skeptically.

“Yes. He can be cutting and very arrogant at times, but he is an honest gentleman. Two years ago, I came to England for the first time, and His Grace was one of the first people to invest in our company. He paved the way for others to follow.”

“How are you friends with him?” she challenged, her tone incredulous. “When did the connection formed evolve from business acquaintances?”

“It’s a long story,” Brandon muttered, looking away briefly.

“Well, no one is asking me to dance,” Elizabeth said pertly. “I can happily lend a listening ear.”

Brandon scowled, clearly vexed by her stubbornness and perhaps by the uncomfortable position in which he found himself. She looked away from her brother as a ripple of awareness kissed over her skin. Elizabeth’s mouth dried. Without looking, she knew it was the duke, and he was staring at her.

A lady she recognized as Lady Stephenson said quite loudly, “It’s the Duke of Basil!”

A collective gasp seemed to ripple through the room, followed by a renewed flurry of whispers. Elizabeth’s first instinct was to retreat onto the terrace balcony, but she forced herself to remain inside when several guests started to look at her and whisper behind their fans. Their gazes swarmed over her, and she felt as if ants crawled over

her skin.

The duke appeared, looking devilishly handsome. His dark hair was impeccably styled, his tailored black jacket and crisp white shirt accentuating the broadness of his shoulders and the lean strength of his frame. Elizabeth's breath caught in her throat as he made his way directly toward her. The conversations around her dimmed, her pulse quickened, and every step he took seemed to stir the air, sending a wave of anticipation through the crowd.

"Are you certain he means to apologize?" she asked her brother, nervousness knotting inside her belly. "Why would he do this when he has nothing to gain?"

"I trust him. Promise me you will listen, Bette."

Elizabeth nodded once, hating the sense of nervousness scything through her. What was there to be anxious about? Possibly her alarming reaction. There was a sleek, predatory grace about the duke and wild flutters swirled in her belly as she watched him. The duke stopped before her, and the room held its breath. Elizabeth couldn't help thinking this man was the epitome of what a duke should be, his presence commanding yet enigmatic. His gaze met hers, an unreadable expression on his face that made her heart pound in a mixture of dread and an inexplicable thrill.

Elizabeth lowered into a curtsy that would make her mother beam with pride. "Your Grace."

She was acutely aware of the many eyes now fixed on them and of the keen interest their interaction was generating.

"Miss Armstrong," he said, his voice low and unexpectedly warm. The duke briefly lowered his head in a bow. "A pleasure to see you. The next set will be a waltz; provide me the honor of partnering with me for a dance."

She was shocked. For a moment, she hesitated, her mind racing through the potential consequences of accepting or declining his offer. “A dance?”

His eyes were dancing with cool humor and mockery. “Yes. Unless it is promised to another.”

His unwavering stare felt almost intimate.

“I ... all my dances are available, Your Grace. Why ...” Elizabeth’s throat closed around the question, and she flushed.

A small smile edged his mouth. “Who else but your partner in scandal would dare ask you to dance, Miss Armstrong?”

Partner in scandal? Oh, he saw the scandal sheet!

His eyes gleamed with something almost intimidating. Then, something in that silver gaze, a flicker of genuine regard, perhaps, swayed her decision. “Yes, Your Grace,” she replied, her voice steady but soft.

Elizabeth placed her hand in his and drew a collective gasp from the onlookers. As they took their positions, she peered up at him, wondering why she felt this shattering awareness. The strain of the waltz started, and the duke drew her closer than she had anticipated. Their gazes collided, and there was a wicked devilry lurking in the depths of his silver eyes. They started waltzing, the duke guiding her in the sensual dance with powerful yet graceful movements.

“Why is everyone staring at us and whispering behind their fans,” she asked when he tugged her close.

He spun her in a wide arc, drew her back in and then said, “I have not asked a young

lady to dance in three years.”

“Is this a cause for gossip? I’m impressed by the ton’s skill in transforming even the most mundane topics into tantalizing gossip. Or is there something special about a dance from a duke?”

A cynical smile touched his mouth. “Many speculate on my actions and put their own reasoning behind it. The most important conclusion they will draw is that you are a treasure they perhaps foolishly overlooked.”

A heart-pounding awareness burned through her. The duke did this to help her. Feeling tossed out of order, she said, “Thank you for asking me, Your Grace; I understand your intentions.”

He pinned her with an insouciant stare. “It is my apology, Miss Armstrong.”

As they danced, the whispers grew distant, and the world narrowed down to the man whose hand was warm in hers, whose steps matched hers flawlessly, and whose eyes’ dangerous allure quickened her heartbeat. At that moment, under the glow of a hundred candles and the watchful eyes of society, Elizabeth began to realize that the duke might not be the wretched adversary she had imagined but perhaps someone far more intriguing.

* * *

The evening had unfolded with far more ease than James had anticipated. Miss Armstrong had handled herself with poise and grace, uncaring that so many people stared at her behind lifted fans. He had not danced with any other lady, an upset he knew would be mentioned in several newssheets in the upcoming weeks. He had made his way through the ballroom, pausing only to speak with a few political allies. Yet as he navigated the crowd, a wave of shameless whispers trailed in his wake.

“Why did he dance with Miss Armstrong?”

“Perhaps there is a *tendre*,” another suggested, sparking further speculation.

“With an American, when we have so many suitable English ladies?” a third voice gasped, both incredulous and a bit disdainful.

“Do not be foolish; everyone knows the duke has an aversion to marriage.”

“But did you see the look on his face when they danced? His Grace certainly seems taken with her.”

James retreated to the quiet of the gardens, realizing he would need to dance with another lady or two to contain their speculations.

“What want is this that I am unable to bloody hide?” he hissed, irritated that the awareness he had of the lady was naked on his face for people to speculate.

Boredom crept over his senses, and he lifted his gaze to the night sky. James had never enjoyed the frivolities of balls and dancing. There were no more sessions to be held in the House of Lords until next year. Perhaps it was time to visit his sister, Alicia, Viscountess Hadleigh, and his nieces. James missed their company.

A soft sound caught his attention. Lifting his brow in curiosity, he watched as Miss Armstrong discreetly made her escape through the music room windows. She moved with a grace that belied her apparent haste, smoothly lifting herself over the sill and then pausing to glance over her shoulder, ensuring her departure had gone unnoticed.

Hidden in the deep shadows of the gardens, James observed as she made her way down the cobbled path, illuminated only by the soft glow of a lantern. His heart quickened with each step she took toward him, though she was unaware of his

presence. She paused, tipping her face up to the night sky, her expression one of wistful longing. The moonlight cast a soft glow over her features, lending her an ethereal, almost otherworldly beauty.

James's breath caught when he saw her lift a finger to swiftly brush away tears from her cheeks. The sight stirred something deep within him, a mix of concern and an inexplicable urge to comfort her.

Why do you cry? he wondered silently, his earlier resolve crumbling as he felt an unexpected pull to go to her. It was a source of annoyance that what he wanted to feel and what he felt were two different beasts.

Her shoulders shook, and more tears trailed down her cheeks. It felt as if he was driven by an outside force when he stood, tempted to reveal himself and hand her his handkerchief. James steered clear of young ladies whose eyes sparkled with matrimonial fervor whenever they spoke and danced with him. Over the past decade, he had skillfully avoided six such outrageous traps. The most recent involved a public scandal that had cost him a few notable supports in the House of Lords, which had been needed to pass a motion to relieve the horrific burdens/poverty mothers and wives faced after losing their sons and husbands in the war.

The lady's reputation had suffered greatly because of James's refusal to marry her under such deceptive circumstances. Many in society pointed condemning fingers at him, arguing that a man of honor and good breeding would have married her to salvage her good name. However, he was determined never to be deceived into any decisions he made.

James only allowed himself the company of women seasoned in the arts of romantic liaisons and discreet affairs. These women understood exactly what James had to offer and were clear about what they could reciprocate. This mutual understanding fostered relationships that were straightforward and devoid of any burdensome

expectations. For this reason he should allow Miss Armstrong to cry her silent tears and not make it known that he was present.

Fucking hell! He raked his fingers through his hair as she sobbed harder. Miss Armstrong pressed her palm against her mouth as if to contain the sounds. Her ragged sigh pierced through James's body, and the unhappiness he heard pricked at his chest. He started to walk toward her, intending to make his presence known, when she gasped, whirled and fled in his direction.

James received no chance to sidestep her unexpected flight.

"Oomph!" she gasped upon colliding against his chest.

Instinctively, he slipped a hand around her waist to steady her from falling and pressed the other over her mouth to prevent her screaming. Her scent filled his nostrils, sensual and heady. He couldn't stop himself from inhaling deeply. James was thoroughly tempted to bite, and that he wanted to was damn aggravating.

"Be quiet," he said, "It is James. Do not scream, or we will be discovered, and I assure you, Miss Armstrong, you will be irrevocably ruined."

She nodded, and he slowly lowered his hand. He could feel the harsh jerking of her heart against his body. "Your ... Your Grace?" she questioned softly.

"Yes."

"I—"

A low, sensual laugh sounded, and she stiffened against him. James glanced up and observed a lady giggling in Lord Egbert's arms. Ah, so this was the reason Miss Armstrong fled toward the darkness.

“Peter,” the lady gasped, “here? How can we be so naughty?”

The man leaned down and whispered something to the lady, and then they started kissing.

“Have they gone?” Miss Armstrong whispered.

“No.”

“They ... what are they doing?”

“Given the way they cling to each other, they are about to tup.”

She delicately cleared her throat. “Tup? What is that?”

The naivety in the question rattled James, reminding him that he should not be hidden in a dark alcove with a woman like Elizabeth Armstrong.

“They are going to do the very thing mothers warn their daughters rakes would do if caught alone.”

“Oh.” The soft curiosity and wonder in her tone tightened his gut.

“Is that what they call it here in England? Tup? How novel.”

Miss Armstrong surprised him by turning around so she could watch them. Most young ladies would have possibly fainted, started to sob, or did some other nonsense and revealed their presence. The couples were coming together in passionate haste, their kissing frantic.

The lady leaned against the water fountain, and the young viscount dropped to his

knee and pushed his head beneath her skirt.

A ragged breath slipped from Elizabeth, and James thought the lady might be unaware that she leaned against his chest as if she needed the support.

“My good sense is telling me that I should look away,” she whispered shakily.

The lady screamed and Miss Armstrong jolted.

“What is he doing to her?”

“He is licking her.”

“Where?” she said softly, her tone scandalized.

“Her sex.”

Miss Armstrong made another soft sound; this time, it kissed over his body and traveled to settle against the base of his cock. James gritted his teeth until his dam jaw ached. There was no damn reason for him to stay with her sensual curves pressed against him, watching another couple steal a moment of pleasure.

The lady’s moan grew louder, and Miss Armstrong turned around, pressing her forehead against his chest. James smiled, feeling the heat generated by her blushing. Though she hid her face, the noises they made were inescapable. He could grab her arms and tug her deeper into the garden and away from the couple, but a wicked devilry made him stay in place.

“Peter,” the lady gasped when he lifted her weight, pressing her against the fountain, and slammed inside her.

“Not so loud,” he groaned when she cried out.

Miss Armstrong had fisted his jacket, her fingers digging into the material, her heart slamming so hard James felt it. Her breathing was ragged, and she pressed her forehead more against his chest. The sounds the couple made were indeed arousing.

“You can watch,” he suggested.

“No! How wicked of you to say it, Your Grace.”

“Why are you afraid to watch?”

“Must you provoke my blushes?”

“Yes.”

“You are insufferable.”

James laughed, and even to his ears, it sounded mocking. “Why are you afraid, Miss Armstrong?”

“It makes me feel too ...” she whispered so softly James barely heard.

“Too what?” he said, his tone as low as hers.

A slight tremor cascaded through her body. “Too achy.”

Fucking hell.

“How long will they take?” she asked, sounding irritable.

Holding back his chuckle, he said, “It can be a minute, or five, or even fifteen.”

Miss Armstrong’s soft groan of denial stroked wickedly against his senses as he imagined the hot little sounds she would make if he took her. His cock rose hard and thick and sure between them, pushing at her belly. James silently cursed virulently, shifting so she did not feel his reaction to her proximity. He gripped her shoulders, and as if she sensed he was about to push her away, the damn chit pressed even closer.

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Three hundred and nineteen, three hundred and twenty, three hundred and twenty-one
...

Between her legs pulsed and burned with shocking need. All elicited from the duke's closeness and the sounds the lovers made. Elizabeth knew she should move away from the duke, for it was terribly improper to be pressed so against his body. An intuitive feeling nagged at Elizabeth, warning her that any encounter with the Duke of Basil could carry ruinous consequences, perhaps even posing a risk to her virtue.

Common sense urged her to retreat, to return to the safety and familiarity of the ballroom, yet her feet refused to comply. Inside, the ball was a tableau of shattered hopes and stifled expectations; outside, in the presence of the duke, she found a surprising sense of freedom. More importantly, standing here was her choice.

"Miss Armstrong."

"Yes?"

When he did not reply, she glanced up. The clouds scuttled across the sky, and the smallest sliver of light from the crescent moon highlighted his face. The piercing silver of his eyes were like embers in the darkness and the duke regarded her with leisurely intensity, a faintly insolent smile on his lips. Yet she did not move, held by the pulsing ache between her thighs. Now entirely caused by him. Unexpectedly, Elizabeth felt breathless and uncertain. She had not imagined encountering a tryst when she escaped the ballroom and her aunt's machinations.

"Would you like a drink?"

“A drink?”

“Hmm, earlier, I pilfered a decanter from the library.”

“Yes,” she gasped almost desperately, hating that she felt so rattled. Especially as she wanted to turn around and watch the couple so badly.

More than five minutes had passed since the couple behind her started their coupling. Their groans and cries grew more muted, and that heat low in Elizabeth’s belly bloomed and spread.

Four hundred and sixteen, four hundred and seventeen, four hundred and eighteen.

The duke gripped her shoulders and gently eased her from his body. He stepped away, and her eyes strained to make him out in the darkness of the alcove as the small moonglow vanished behind clouds. The duke pressed a decanter into her hands. Elizabeth did not ask about the contents, tipping it to her mouth and taking a healthy swallow. Fire exploded in her mouth, and the burning warmth traveled to her belly, warming her entire body.

“What is it?” she asked, keeping her voice low. Though she very well doubted even a sudden deluge of rain would part the tugging couple.

“Whisky.”

“Quite odd, it tastes ... woody.” Elizabeth tipped it to her mouth and took a few more swallows.

“Hmm.” He took the decanter, and she presumed he tilted it to his mouth.

“We should stop meeting in shadows,” she whispered.

“When there are no expectations and pretentiousness, that is where the most extraordinary encounters happen.”

Her eyes widened at that enigmatic reply. “I—” her words strangled in her throat as the lady moaned loudly.

Something hot and uncomfortable once again shivered low in Elizabeth’s belly. A most provoking reaction whenever the lady moaned or whimpered her delight.

The lady did it again, and the gentleman snapped, “Darling, you will bring people down on our heads!”

The lady giggled and murmured something. Soon after, both parties gasped, and a muffled scream followed.

Elizabeth’s entire body felt overheated. “Are ... are they finished?” she asked when no more moaning came.

“Yes.”

“Five hundred and two seconds.” She cleared her throat. “They took a bit over eight minutes.”

The duke’s low chuckle rasped over her senses.

“You counted.”

Elizabeth sniffed. “I have an affinity with numbers and did so without much thought.”

There were a few rustles behind her, and then footsteps hastened away. While

Elizabeth should have felt relieved the couple left, her senses remained peculiarly heightened, and her awareness that she was alone in the dark gardens with the duke swirled through her.

“Frightened?” His voice broke through the stillness, his tone lightly teasing yet undeniably provocative. “Do you want to leave?”

The question hung in the air, charged and waiting. Elizabeth felt the immediate instinct to say yes, to escape the scandalous intensity of the moment and the inherent risk. Yet the word that emerged was a surprise even to herself. “No. I am not afraid.”

Fear did not define her feelings—instead, there was an exhilarating rush, a curious thrill in the shared secrecy of the night.

“Why were you crying?”

Elizabeth froze, the inquiry striking closer to her vulnerabilities than she was prepared to admit.

“I ...” she began, her voice faltering as she searched for an explanation that would satisfy without revealing too much. Her emotions were a knotted web, not easily untangled for anyone’s inspection, let alone for the duke’s.

He did not pressure her to speak, and he relinquished the decanter when Elizabeth reached for it and took a few more healthy swallows. Warmth poured through her body, and she felt almost as if she floated when she stepped away from him. The silence stretched between them, filled only by the soft, nocturnal chorus of the garden. There was a part of her that wanted to share her thoughts and anxiety, and it felt absurd. She did not know this man. Elizabeth swallowed tightly, yet there was no one else she could confide in. Her brother would not understand, and certainly not her mother, who knew what her aunt had done.

“I would not betray your confidence by repeating whatever you say, Miss Armstrong”

Surprised, Elizabeth peered up at him. “After our dance,” she said, “Lord Jenson asked me to the floor.”

“That is a good thing.”

Elizabeth lifted the whisky to her mouth once more, enjoying the heat expanding through her body. “At first, I was thrilled. My second dance partner of the season and a gentleman my aunt declared very suitable. As we danced, the earl delicately queried if I was an heiress. I was so alarmed I stumbled.”

“Lord Jenson has several thousand owed in gambling debts, a mistress in Cornwall who has two illegitimate daughters,” the duke said, his tone chilling. “Why would your aunt believe him suitable.”

Elizabeth laughed, the sound without mirth. A terrible ache pushed from her chest to her throat. “I daresay my aunt has no notions of these things. She spoke about his good nature and the prestige of Lord Jenson’s title. My aunt knew I wanted the matter of my inheritance to be private. I expressed more than once that if the ton were to know that I am an heiress with greater wealth than many of their debutantes, men who were previously indifferent would now flatter me with their attention, false words, and gifts. I do not wish for such a marriage.”

Those wretched tears once more pooled and spilled over. Annoyed, Elizabeth swiped them away. “It seems that she took great care to drop tidbits here and there. When I confronted my aunt, she was apologetic and said if she knew you would ask me to dance, she would not have employed her tactic. I feel so angry and betrayed. I cannot accept any gentleman now who would pay their address to me. How could I ever trust they are interested to know who I am?”

There was a thoughtful silence. “There are many such marriages in the ton. People align with each other to strengthen their wealth and connections. These people are not unhappy. You could consider that marrying for other reasons is not as terrible as you would allow. If others find contentment in such an arrangement, you could, too.”

“Perhaps,” she said softly, feeling for the decanter, taking it and tipping the whisky to her mouth. “Would you marry someone who only wants you because of your wealth and title?”

His low law was decidedly mocking. “No.”

After several swallows, she handed it back to the duke. “Then you understand, Your Grace. I know what I want, and I cannot imagine compromising my wants. My aunt says I eventually will, but why should I?”

Elizabeth whirled to face him, gasping and then laughing when she stumbled against the duke. Oh drat. Everything felt light and wonderful. Her heart beat a frantic tattoo against her breastbone. The duke held her by her hips, and her flesh burned beneath her ball gown.

“How is it that whenever I am close to you my heart races with this intensity?” she softly asked.

“You are foxed.” His fingers imperceptibly tightened on her hips.

Affronted, Elizabeth sniffed. “I feel languorous and completely in charge of all my senses, Your Grace. I daresay it is my good fortune that I encountered you here.”

“Is that so?” he murmured enigmatically.

There was something in his tone that kissed over her skin like a sharpened blade. Oh,

Bette, he is a rake, she silently warned herself. The duke is dangerous.

Refusing to heed the part of her that urged her to flee, she glided her hands up his shoulders, teasingly stroking her fingers through the hair curling on his nape. "I know what I want ... and I daresay mean to take it."

"I gather we are no longer talking about your aunt and marriages."

"No, Your Grace."

"What is it that you want?"

There it was again, that dark flash of need in his eyes. Unable to understand the devil that drove her, but knowing something inside of her had been unlocked, Elizabeth curled her hands insistently around his neck, tugging him down to her uplifted face.

"A kiss, Your Grace. Only this morning, I thought I would finally indulge in kisses with the man who woos me. That will no longer happen."

A rigid, breathless silence filled the space between them. The duke shifted, and he brushed his lips against the corner of her mouth.

Oh, sweet heaven above. That soft touch roused her senses, sending a hot ache of pleasure down to her breasts, belly, and legs. How could a simple touch ... one that barely coasted over her skin ... be so persuasive? So tempting to reach for more, perhaps touch his skin to feel its texture.

She was tempted to deliberately brush her body against his once more. Instead of suppressing the desire, Elizabeth stepped closer to his body, feeling the impression of him through her ball gown. She could feel every hard inch of him, including the hardness against her thighs. A rather intriguing hardness, for she suspected it meant

he desired her. She acted, curving her body against his.

“Little minx,” he mocked, the silver in his eyes a brilliant hue in the shadows. “You play with fire.”

“I am feeling rather curious, and I daresay you are the perfect man to assuage it.”

His low chuckle was too sensual. “Am I?”

“Hmm.” She brushed her nose at his throat, inhaling his scent. “What is this hardness I feel against my belly? Why does it feel so...large?”

A sound hissed from him, and his chest lifted on a deep inhalation. “If you were not so innocent, I would perhaps tell you.”

She laughed, feeling oddly delighted. “I am not as innocent as you presume, Your Grace.”

“Oh?”

“Hmm, a friend of mine told me about how wickedly delightful amorous congress is. Oh, I forgot ... you call it tugging.”

“And this friend forgot the salient details of telling you about the parts used in amorous congress, hmm?”

“She did say ‘husband’s rod.’ I am presuming this hardness ... is your rod.”

Another sound came from him, one that suspiciously sounded like a low choke. “Mine is my cock.”

In the secret recesses of her heart, where a bit of wanton lurked, something uncoiled, and she murmured, “I want to touch it.”

Elizabeth heard his swallow, and the fingers on her hips pressed harder into her flesh. She slipped a hand down between the tight press of their bodies, feeling the shockingly thick ridge of flesh.

The piercing tension in her stomach tightened. “Why is it so hard and so thick? Is this common?”

A soft shudder went through his body, and awe whispered through her. The duke’s rod ... ah no, his cock, throbbed beneath her palm, she squeezed in reaction, and he groaned. How could a sound pebble bump on the skin and pierce deep inside of her sex with a sensation never felt in all her years?

Alarmed by the feeling, she released him and stepped back. Elizabeth felt the desperate ache to rub her legs together to assuage the peculiar need blooming inside. She shifted, squeezing her thighs tightly together.

“That will not help,” he drawled, brushing his mouth against the spot behind her ear.

“What?” she whispered, dazedly wondering why they were still keeping their voices low.

“Rubbing your legs together to stop the ache in your pussy. Only a few hours of hot fucking will relieve it.”

Her sex grew wet. Elizabeth trembled. “My pussy? Do you mean my flower?”

One of the hands on her hips trailed around to her belly and down to her sex and cupped her through her gown. An awful weakness assailed when a long finger

dragged over her flesh, striking a heated pleasure to her center. Her hips arched, and a moan trapped itself in her throat. “Your Grace,” she gasped.

His breath seemed uneven for a moment. “James ... call me, James, Elizabeth.”

“James,” she whispered.

“This is your pussy ... your cunt ... your sex and my cock is this hard because I want to split your legs wide open and sink deep inside you.”

Those words drifted over her skin like a flame, unsettling her composure entirely. A world of sensual delight awaited her; Elizabeth only needed to be brave enough to step off the cliff. Something evocative lingered just beyond her reach; she could feel it. His mouth found hers unerringly in the dark, and a hot ache coursed through her when he licked the closed seam of her mouth and whispered at the corner, “Do you understand?”

“No.”

“What do you not understand?”

Elizabeth tentatively squeezed his bulge. “I ... my fingers cannot ... cannot fully close around it ...”

“If I should ever give in to the madness and fuck you, I promise, I’ll make you so damn wet it fit,” he murmured with sensual roughness.

Elizabeth moaned softly, closed her eyes and breathed in the scent of him. She was perversely delighted with his crudeness. A hot sensation writhed low in her belly, and she was alarmed by the wetness pooling where he touched. Something in the air felt far too perilous. She wrenched from his embrace, pressing the flat of her palm over

her pounding heart. The duke did not allow her to go far, curving his hand around her waist and dragging her against his body.

“Ah,” he murmured with cool mockery, yet the hand that caressed over her back was soothing. “Too much?”

A striking silence fell in the space between them, and she had no notion of what to say. Elizabeth peered up at him, her heart squeezing when a coolness descended on his face, obliterating the desire that had been there earlier. Oddly, she felt relieved that whatever madness had been brewing was stopped, but she also wanted back that spark of passion. She looked away, not understanding the duality of needs that writhed inside of her.

James stepped away. “It was indeed ungentlemanly of me, Elizabeth, to speak to you so,” he said, bowing in that elegant way only men of the ton perfected to an art. “It will not happen again.”

An ache rose in her throat, and she stared at the dark shape of his silhouette, feeling helpless and unmoored. “James?”

“Yes.”

She felt herself slipping, sliding into something unexpected. “I want it to happen again.”

“No.”

If she possessed any wisp of rationality, she would turn around and leave, forgetting she had ever acted so improperly.

“I am three and twenty,” Elizabeth said softly. “I am not a young debutante who

should be afraid to be alone outside with a man or should be afraid to admit I have never been kissed and that I so badly want to feel your mouth against mine.”

The duke inhaled sharply, and before she allowed her good senses to reassert themselves, Elizabeth stepped back into his arms and pressed her mouth against his.

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Elizabeth pressed her mouth against James's with an innocent ardor that made his blood surge in his veins, and his cock hardened even more. A hot clenching need scythed through him. He wanted Elizabeth Armstrong, perhaps more than he had ever wanted another woman. It was for that reason he held himself still, allowing her exploration because he did not wish to wound her with a rejection.

However, he would not participate, for he damn well knew a taste of her might tempt him to flick her gown up and take what she so innocently offered, fucking her to a glorious release. That stab of discomfort pierced him once again, and he brushed it aside with an annoyed grunt. She eased back, peering up at him. James could barely discern her features, but as they stood very close, he saw the pique.

"I thought a person should feel fireworks inside their bodies from a kiss."

An emotion he could not identify throbbed in her voice. Bemused, he asked, "Fireworks?"

"Yes."

"I am thirty years of age, and I have kissed many lips. I have never once felt these fireworks you speak about."

An annoyed sound slipped from her. "I wonder why Cassandra lied."

"Who is this person?"

"My dearest friend. She lives in New York with her husband. She ... she felt

fireworks in her body when she kissed William for the very first time. I never thought she would fib about something this important.”

“What is important.”

Elizabeth sniffed and gently admonished, “Do keep up, Your Grace. A lady’s first kiss is terribly important.”

“I was not aware of this,” he said drily.

Somewhere upstairs a servant lit a lamp, and he was thankful for that small light for it allowed him to see more of her face. A rosy flush bloomed in her cheeks, and her lashes lowered briefly. “I cannot imagine why you would not know, considering you are a gentleman with much experience in debauchery.”

What exactly did she hear about him?

“Only the first time is important?” James asked, wondering why the hell he was having this conversation.

“Hmm,” she whispered, rose to the tips of her toes, and brushed her mouth across the underside of his jaw. “This is my first kiss, and it is supposed to feel wonderful.”

“It is a crime you believed that we kissed.”

“The rumors do say you are a rakish rogue,” she said. “And I have you all to myself.” Her eyes were bright with perhaps hope and nervousness.

“I have never heard such delight from a lady to be alone with a rogue.”

He used his thumb to part her lips and then slid it against the inside of her bottom lip.

That wicked need to ruthlessly seduce coiled in his gut.

“Hmm, I order you to make me feel fireworks, Your Grace,” she purred without giving any more information.

The challenge tugged at something raw inside of James, and a shock of lust rammed inside his gut. He lowered his hand. She also had a sweet, wild beauty that was fuckable. He lowered his nose to the curve of her throat and inhaled. By God, he was tempted. James wanted to kiss her until she was soft and pliant in his arms, her pussy wet for his taking. This incredible want felt perilous, simply for the notion that it felt beyond his ability to control it. He gently raked his teeth, then sucked at the flesh of her throat where her pulse beat like a caged bird. James willed his heartbeat to calm, his cock to stop throbbing with want.

“When you are sober, Elizabeth, we can have this conversation again.”

“You are a most peculiar libertine,” she responded tartly, her words tinged with humor.

James chuckled, surprising even himself with the sense of connection he felt toward her.

She leaned back and stumbled, then laughed before a small hiccup stopped her. “Oh, drat!”

James caught her against his chest when she stumbled again, and to his shock, Elizabeth delicately covered a yawn and closed her eyes. “Are you sleeping?”

“No,” she said drowsily. “I feel as if I am floating, and I feel so warm.”

He hadn’t anticipated such a turn of events but now found himself responsible for her

well-being. Holding her securely in his arms, he maneuvered with her through the shadows of the back gardens, away from the eyes of the other guests still reveling inside the ball. The darkness thankfully provided a cloak of anonymity that James found useful.

As they reached the perimeter of the gardens, he stopped in the shadows and glanced around to ensure they remained unseen before guiding her quickly to where his carriage waited. The coachman, alert to the approach of his master, hurried to knock down the steps.

“You need to enter the carriage.”

She peered up at him. “Is this a kidnapping?”

“No.”

“My life is too humdrum,” she muttered irritably. “Nothing thrilling ever happens.”

James smiled, helping her into the carriage. The carriage lantern was brightly lit, the golden glow caressing over her face almost lovingly. His damn heart lurched. Elizabeth appeared delightfully flushed, her eyes soft and luminous, her cheeks rosy ... and in her eyes ... there was a spark of awareness. “Where do we go, Your Grace?”

“I am taking you to your brother’s home.”

“Thank you.” She tucked a wisp of hair away, a small frown pleating her brows. “I do not think I want to see my aunt for the next couple of days.”

As the carriage began to move, Elizabeth leaned back against the plush seat. A misstep in her attempt to find a comfortable position caused her to stumble slightly,

eliciting a laugh from her lips, which was quickly cut off by another hiccup.

“I am never drinking whisky again,” she said, a blush creeping across her cheeks from the mild embarrassment. “I feel out of sorts.”

Without a second thought, he lifted her gently into his arms, intending to make her more comfortable. Elizabeth did not resist, once again snuggling into his embrace, her body relaxing as if she felt entirely safe in his hold. She was soft and pliant, her fragrance invading his senses, pushing his heart to beat much faster than he wanted. Her eyes fluttered closed, and within moments, she had fallen asleep against his chest.

“Bloody hell,” James whispered under his breath, a mix of concern and bewilderment coloring his tone.

The carriage rolled quietly through the streets, and he held her carefully, ensuring not to disturb her sleep. As they arrived at her brother’s residence, James instructed the coachman to wait. Given Brandon’s usual activities, he should be at his office at these hours, or at the home of his lover. Carefully, James carried Elizabeth to the door, his mind racing with thoughts about the implications of arriving with her in his arms.

“Elizabeth,” he murmured.

Her lashes fluttered open, and beautiful blue eyes ensnared him. What were these feelings as if he was being sucked under? He gritted his teeth until his jaw ached. “We are at your brother’s home.”

An impish smile curved her mouth. “I will sneak inside.”

Setting her down, James ensured she was steady on her feet. She walked around to the servants’ entrance with surprise stealth. He suspected the lady was intimately

familiar with slipping in and out of a townhouse.

Assuring her safety, he went with her, and she tossed him a teasing smile. “Do you mean to sneak inside with me, James?”

“No. I only mean to assure you enter without mishap.”

“Thank you.” Elizabeth smiled, opened the door and darted inside. Assured that she was safely at home, he returned to his carriage, replaying their interactions, her trust in him, and his unexpected reaction to her vulnerability.

You are refreshingly different, Elizabeth Armstrong. James leaned his head against the squabs, wondering what to do about this particular interest that had pierced his indifference with such ease.

* * *

The following morning, Elizabeth bit into her toast, the sweet tartness of the strawberry preserves barely registering as she sat at the breakfast table surrounded by her family. The lively conversation buzzed around her, full of the trivialities and gossip that her aunt, mother, and brother relished, yet she found herself disconnected, merely nodding and offering the occasional smile rather than partaking fully. She was only present because her brother had pleaded with her earlier to return to her aunt’s residence and mend their argument.

“It cannot be mended,” Elizabeth had cried. “She was thoughtless and inconsiderate of the hopes I have for my future, yet Aunt insists that she did this for me!”

“Please, Bette, we are a family. It is best to confront it head-on instead of avoidance.”

Those words were a frequent lesson from their father, and it was for that reason she

relented. Her mother and aunt had been surprised when she arrived with Brandon, believing she had run from last night's ball and was in her room. Her aunt's husband, typically a central figure in these morning discussions, had gone riding earlier and had not yet returned, which left the others to fill the conversational void with even more enthusiasm than usual. Elizabeth understood their intentions. It was their way of not addressing the issues at hand. Her mother glanced at her occasionally with deep concern in her eyes but did not mention what Aunt Sally did.

The viscountess chatted animatedly about the latest on-dits from the social whirl of London, each piece of gossip more trivial or scandalous than the last.

The memory of last night's encounter with the Duke of Basil hovered at the edges of Elizabeth's thoughts, intrusive and disquieting. Their dance had been unexpected and thrilling, yet it was their private conversation in the garden that haunted her. The snatches of memory were torturous. One moment, she felt a flutter of excitement at the remembered touch of his hand; the next, a pang of apprehension about what he thought about her behavior.

What is this?

My cock.

Why is it so hard and thick?

Elizabeth suppressed a groan of mortification. I had my fingers around it; oh, what was I thinking? I will never drink whisky again ... at least with the duke!

"What did you have your fingers around, dear?" her mother asked.

Elizabeth choked on her drink, caught off guard by her mother's words, and alarm stabbed through her chest. "I beg your pardon?" she sputtered, wiping her mouth with

a napkin as embarrassment flushed her cheeks.

“You were muttering to yourself,” her aunt chimed in, a smile playing at the corners of her lips, no doubt thinking she was catching a private daydream about a potential suitor.

Embarrassed, Elizabeth felt the heat travel from her cheeks down to her throat. “Forgive me, I had not realized I spoke my thoughts aloud.”

“Is all well? I have never seen you so preoccupied,” her aunt pressed, exchanging a knowing glance with Elizabeth’s mother.

“Is it because of the duke?” her mother added, tilting her head slightly, a speculative gleam in her eye.

“I am certain it is because of the duke,” her aunt said, “or Lord Jenson. You looked beautiful dancing with them. I wish you had not left the ball early. Many more gentlemen would have asked you to dance. Did you form a favorable impression of the earl?”

Elizabeth directed a cool stare at her aunt. “You will forgive me, my lady; you will no longer be privy to my private thoughts because you have shown your disregard and contempt for them.”

Her aunt’s eyes widened in shock.

“Elizabeth!” her mother gasped, her voice sharp as she tossed down her napkin. “You will not speak to your aunt in such a tone.”

“Forgive me, Aunt,” Elizabeth murmured, softening her voice. “I was not aware my tone was uncivil. Please reimagine I said those words as sweetly as possible.”

Her brother closed his eyes as if in pain, clearly discomforted by the tension at the table. “It was good of His Grace to dance with Bette,” Brandon interjected, attempting to steer the conversation away. “However, Aunt Sally, Mother, please remove all matchmaking thoughts. The duke is not for marriage. Aunt, you should know more than mother of the duke’s reputation about town.”

“What reputation is that?” Elizabeth asked, feigning nonchalance.

“Are you speaking about that ghastly business of that young lady trying to trap the duke into a marriage?” her aunt inquired.

“Yes, Aunt. There are truths to the rumors. Basil is so decided against marriage that he did not marry that young lady even to save her reputation,” Brandon said. “I also heard she was not the first to try such a wicked scheme.”

Elizabeth remembered the gossip she had overheard the first night she saw the duke.

Her aunt delicately dabbed her mouth with a napkin before saying, “You cannot be absolutely sure that—”

“I am certain of it,” Brandon said firmly. “The duke dancing with Bette was an apology for the duchess’s harsh words. Please do not read much into it and allow unrealistic expectations to grow for her.”

Elizabeth allowed her mouth to quirk in a small smile. “Do not be silly, Brandon. I would never delude myself about the duke. Furthermore, I am no longer seeking a husband this season, and as I will abstain from attending balls, it is unlikely we will meet again.”

Silence fell over the table. Elizabeth picked up her hot chocolate again, sipping as if her heart wasn’t quaking with pain.

“Elizabeth,” her aunt said softly after a moment.

Taking a deep breath, Elizabeth gripped her cup, letting the heat from it warm her and glanced at her aunt. “Yes, Aunt?”

“I am deeply sorry, Elizabeth,” her aunt replied, her tone earnest. “I did not mean for you to give up. That is not how I wished for you to interpret my actions!”

“What exactly did you mean, Aunt?”

“I only meant to help you to find your happiness.”

She took a sip from her cup, staring at her aunt over the brim. “With a gentleman who only wishes to know me because of my wealth?”

Her aunt waved a hand dismissively. “You are overthinking that. Many marriages in the ton are formed due to—”

“I do not care about other marriages in the ton, Aunt. I care about mine. And given that I will never be assured of a man wanting me because he cares for me, I no longer have any interest in trying.”

Elizabeth pushed back her chair and stood. “If you will excuse me, I did not rest properly last night, and I am exhausted.”

She hastened from the dining room, down the hallway, and then climbed the stairs to her bedchamber. Once there, Elizabeth tossed herself onto the bed, hugging a pillow to her chest, hating that tears once more pricked behind her lids.

A gentle knock sounded, the door opened, and her mother entered. She closed the door softly behind her and walked over to sit on the edge of the bed, her face etched

with concern. She reached out, her hand resting gently on Elizabeth's arm in a comforting gesture.

"Bette, you must keep attending the balls. You might meet someone entirely unexpected and find love and happiness," she urged gently, her voice soft but insistent.

Elizabeth sat up, facing her mother. "Mother, I am decided," she replied firmly.

The resolve in her voice left little room for argument, but her mother was not so easily dissuaded. She frowned. "It is not like you to give up! I have always known you to own a spirited and determined nature; why must you now be stubborn in this?" her mother said, her tone a mix of bewilderment and exasperation.

"I'm not giving up, Mama," Elizabeth countered, her voice rising slightly with emotion. "I'm choosing not to continue something that brings me no joy. These balls, the endless scrutiny, the whispering behind fans, the conversations that feel more like interrogations than genuine interactions—it's all so tiring."

Her mother sighed, taking a moment to choose her words carefully. "I understand it's tiring, darling, but don't you think you might be closing yourself off too soon? Not everyone will now be interested because of your wealth."

"Truly?" she drawled caustically. "They were absent before; could there be any other reason now to flatter me with their regard? I am not interested in that kind of attachment. It's transactional and superficial. I want more than that."

"Love is not something that happens at our convenience, and sometimes, it's found in the most unexpected places, even in a marriage that did not start that way. I fell in love with your father after I married him. I want you to keep that in mind. Your father would hate to see you so disheartened."

“I know,” Elizabeth whispered, her voice thick with emotion.

Her mother sighed. “I can see the stubbornness that has been defining you more and more of late in your eyes.” Finally, she nodded slowly, a reluctant acceptance crossing her features. “Then, my dear, you must do what you feel is right. But promise me this—if, at any moment in time, you felt a spark of connection when you danced with the duke or the earl, let me assure you, it is worth finding out what it might lead to. For the chance at the happiness you deserve, enjoy the rest of the season.”

Elizabeth felt a tear slip down her cheek, quickly brushed away by her mother’s thumb. “I promise, Mother,” she said, her voice steady despite the storm of emotions inside her.

Her mother kissed her cheek and departed her room. Elizabeth lay on her bed, staring at the ceiling.

A spark of connection. She had felt it for the first time in her life with the Duke of Basil. Only her brother was so certain the duke would never marry. The longing for something wild and exciting in her life had always seemed so elusive. Somehow, sitting in the dimly lit gardens, sharing whisky and conversation, had been an incredible experience. There had been something deeply comforting about his presence, a feeling that was inexplicable considering she hardly knew him.

Given the duke’s reputation, he did not fit into the expectations she had.

Yet he makes my heart ache for ... something. The ambiguity of his interest and her own conflicting feelings left her uneasy.

I must never be so foolish as to ever be alone with the Duke of Basil again. Elizabeth felt a surge of guilt, for she knew her logical reasoning was not enough to keep her

away from the duke.

Or, since I know life in England is not for me, perhaps I should chase the spark before I return home.

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It had been three nights since James last saw Elizabeth, and tonight proved once again that the mastery he once had over his thoughts was obliterated. James found himself in a rare state of introspection as he lay in the darkness of his bedchamber, unable to sleep, for Elizabeth Armstrong kept him awake and restless. This feeling of uncertainty, of not knowing what to think or feel, was entirely foreign to him—a man who had navigated life with confidence and ruthless control. Yet, Elizabeth had pierced through his control with startling ease and with a single, chaste brush of her mouth against his.

“It was not even a bloody kiss,” he snapped.

There was no justification to still feel the soft press of her mouth against his skin, or the feel of her body against his ... and the clasp of her fingers that could not encircle his cock. Or hear her teasing tone and light laughter in his sleep.

She was refreshingly unpretentious, a trait that shone brightly in their conversations, setting her apart from the many who had paraded through his life. This was undeniably her most appealing quality. It was a novel experience for him. In his thirty years, flattery had always been a constant undertone in the interactions he had, a predictable melody played out by those who sought his favor or feared his displeasure. But Elizabeth spoke with a directness and sincerity that cut through all pretenses.

Pushing himself off the bed, James glanced toward the mantle where the clock showed it was nearing midnight. He had planned an early night in preparation for an important morning meeting with his solicitors and business partners, one of whom was Brandon Armstrong. With a deep sigh, he rang for his valet. When the valet

entered his bedroom, he swiftly assisted James in dressing in dark evening trousers and a jacket, complemented by a silver waistcoat that conceitedly enhanced the grey in his eyes. The outfit was impeccably tailored, fitting his form with precision and a touch of vanity that James didn't mind admitting to himself.

Once dressed, he called for his carriage and soon stepped into the cool night air, directing his coachman to head toward Aphrodite. As the carriage rolled through the streets, James kept his thoughts calm, for he had learned a calm mind did not make mistakes.

Arriving at the pleasure palace, he was greeted by the sounds of revelry and laughter that filled the halls. Madam Rebecca was hosting her own decadent ball that night, and the air was thick with music and the scent of perfume. Ignoring the gaiety around him, James cut through the crowd, his eyes scanning for a familiar face. He spotted Radbourne on the upper floors, deeply engaged with a lady. With a subtle gesture, he indicated he wished to speak to him. Patiently, James waited as Radbourne excused himself from his companion and made his way over.

"I did not expect you tonight," Radbourne greeted, his expression curious.

James accepted a glass of whisky from a passing server, her gown provocatively clinging to her curves, and took a healthy swallow. "Is Armstrong here?" he asked, getting straight to the point.

"Yes."

"I need a favor," James continued, his voice low.

Radbourne's eyebrows shot up. "You need a favor?"

It was well known among his circle that James preferred to handle things on his own,

his independence a shield forged from past betrayals and hardships.

“Yes,” James said quietly, recalling the painful lessons learned when his father’s death had left him to rebuild his fortune amid closed doors and turned backs.

“Tell me,” Radbourne offered, his tone indicating he was ready for anything, even the gravest of requests. “Even if it’s a dead body you need help with, I am here. I’m certain Ambrose would join in, too.”

James chuckled, appreciating the loyalty. “Nothing so grave. I merely want you to find out, very discreetly, if Armstrong’s sister is at a ball tonight. And if so, which one.”

Radbourne’s mouth dropped open slightly, then he shook his head, a bemused expression crossing his features. “His sister?”

“Yes.”

“Do I want to know why?” Radbourne asked, half-joking, half-serious.

“I’m not too sure myself why I need to know,” James said, a voice inside him chiding softly. He ran a hand over his face. Bloody hell. “We had an encounter when she was a bit ... intoxicated. I want to see where we stand without liquid courage loosening her tongue.”

“And you are interested because ...” Radbourne prodded, a twinkle of mischief in his eyes.

“I find her fascinating,” James admitted, more to himself than to Radbourne.

His friend whistled softly. “Never say you have met your match. Will you marry—”

“Good God, no,” James cut him off quickly, the very thought startling him.

Radbourne raised his palms in a gesture of surrender, a grin playing on his lips as he turned to leave, the task set, and the challenge accepted.

James leaned against a Corinthian column, his eyes flickering over the throng of scandalously dressed attendees, as he waited for Radbourne to return with the information. During those few minutes, several ladies, adorned in their finest silks and jewels, approached him with veiled invitations to join them in conversation or dance. Each offer was met with a polite but firm refusal. His mind was preoccupied, his anticipation building like a low hum in his gut, an unusual feeling for him.

Finally, Radbourne reappeared at his side, a slight smirk playing on his lips. “That took all of my considerable charming skills. She is indeed at a ball, Lady Andrew’s.”

“Good,” James responded, a brief flash of relief passing through him, though his expression remained composed.

His friend’s eyes widened, a knowing look overtaking his features. “Ah ... it is that kind of interest.”

Without further discussion, James excused himself from the pleasure palace, his steps quickening as he headed to his waiting carriage. Once inside, he directed the coachman to the countess’s residence. Upon arriving, James bypassed the main ballroom and moved directly to a secluded terrace that overlooked the gardens, a spot that offered a strategic view of the ballroom through its open French doors. From this vantage point, he watched the swirling dance of gowns and coats, the room a kaleidoscope of color and light, until his eyes found Elizabeth.

She was in the midst of a lively quadrille, her smile subdued, but her moves exuberant and elegant. As he watched her move gracefully among her partners, a

surprising emotion pricked at his chest—longing to be the one dancing with her, and something else he couldn't quite name, an emotion that deepened with each turn she took.

James leaned against the cool stone balustrade, his arms crossed, his gaze fixed on Elizabeth and allowed himself to simply watch her. She seemed so vibrant and full of life, her enjoyment palpable even from a distance. This artless innocence was a side of her he hadn't anticipated being drawn to, yet there he was, unable to look away or deny the growing attraction.

As the music wound down and the dance concluded, Elizabeth made her way gracefully to the refreshment table. With a glass of champagne in hand, she mingled briefly, exchanging pleasantries with a young lady he did not recognize. Yet, it was clear from her restless glances toward the grand doors that Elizabeth was planning her exit. Subtly, she began to edge away from the thick of the crowd, her movements poised and discreet, until she finally slipped out of the ballroom altogether.

From his vantage point on the terrace, James watched with a heightened sense of curiosity as Elizabeth made her escape. He raised an eyebrow, impressed by her deftness. Turning around to survey the steps leading to the gardens, he wondered if she would choose the path that led directly below his spot. He didn't have to wonder long; within moments, she appeared, stepping into the moonlight that seemed to cloak her in a soft radiance. The night air seemed to enhance her allure, casting her features into a play of light and shadow that captivated him completely.

She strolled toward shrubberied gardens at the back of the townhouse, to the garden area barely lit by a lone lantern, where she slowed her steps. James withdrew from the shadows and made his way down the terrace steps, his footsteps silent on the cool stone. As he approached, his anticipation built with each step.

Reaching deeper into the garden, he found her standing alone, and her face lifted to

distant stars, lost in thought. Elizabeth stood under the soft glow of the moonlight, her appearance striking in a dark blue gown that melded beautifully with the night around her. The gown was cut in the latest fashion, hugging her figure gracefully at the waist before flowing out into a fuller skirt, which whispered against the grass with each subtle movement she made. Her hair was an artwork in itself, piled high in an elaborate arrangement of curls that framed her face beautifully.

James was shocked by the intense desire that suddenly pierced him. The soft rustle of his approach caused her to turn, and her expression shifted from contemplation to surprise and pleasure. The moonlight highlighted her features, adding a luminous quality to her skin and deepening the intensity in her eyes. Her prettiness once again struck his heart with considerable force, and to his shock, James felt ... helplessly enthralled.

* * *

James, his name whispered through Elizabeth's heart in a delighted cry of surprise. His evening clothes were exquisitely tailored to fit his elegant form; he looked the perfect gentleman with just an underlying touch of dangerous allure. Her heart racing, Elizabeth merely lowered into a curtsy and said, "Your Grace. I had not anticipated seeing you."

"You have a habit of sneaking away from the dancing."

"You have a habit of appearing wherever I am. You followed me."

"My chivalrous nature, I'm afraid."

She scoffed. "Chivalry?"

"Hmm, who else will protect you from wicked, unprincipled rakes and libertines

lurking in the gardens?”

She cast him a pointed stare. The duke pressed a hand over his chest, and even in the shadows of the alcove, she saw the provocative deviltry dancing in his silver eyes.

“I am wounded, Elizabeth. I am far from being an unprincipled libertine; I am another breed altogether.”

“I am sure you’ll inform me of the distinction.”

His lips quirked. “Those men only care about their pleasures.”

She heard the hidden meaning that he would pay keen attention to his lady’s pleasure. Something heated stirred in her belly, and Elizabeth experienced a surge of helpless longing in her heart, drawn irresistibly to the hint of wickedness that his eyes promised.

“You seemed as if you enjoyed your dancing, but just now, as I approached, you seemed saddened. Are you well?”

Shock froze Elizabeth for a moment, and she lowered her lashes. Was she so transparent in her unhappiness? It could not be, for her mother had no notion of her lingering discontent. A slender and far too elegant finger was placed under her chin and nudged upward.

“Why do you hide your expression?”

A knot of emotion clogged her throat. “Who are you to know the hunger I have inside of me? Who are you for me to confide them?”

The face that regarded her had an almost cruel sensuality. Yet, inexplicably, she felt a

sense of safety, and that frightened her. Elizabeth did not trust easily, and the duke was not coaxing her, but somehow, she was still pulled close.

“I could be your friend.”

Her heart began to hammer wildly, and her cheeks grew flushed. “My friend?”

“Yes.” He lowered his finger. “Why do you sound so aghast.”

“You do not seem like a gentleman one can call a friend.”

“I can tell you have no one to speak to of your worries.”

His words pierced her chest. “You offer this friendship freely?”

The duke arched a brow. “What are you asking me?”

“My brother says you have no wish to marry ... and that ... I should be careful with you.”

“Smart advice. However, I would never take anything that you do not willingly offer.”

An unexpectedly hot sensation kindled in the pit of her stomach and drifted lower. “What does that mean?”

“As I said.”

“I do not fully understand.”

His mouth curved faintly in provoking amusement. “Do you wish for me to show

you?”

That warning prickled over her skin like a dark, heady flame, and Elizabeth did not understand why she shifted a bit closer to him. Perhaps she needed to understand the danger she flirted with so that she could shore her resolve against it. A wicked instinct pushed her to lift her hand and stroke over his jaw with the tip of her finger. He closed his eyes at that touch as if he savored her light caress. The idea this man was tempted by her closeness sent a languorous ache rolling through her body. The feeling was new, but she welcomed it.

Lowering her finger she softly said, “I merely had the thought that everything is the same. This is my sixth ball of the season ... but I am already listless. I want ... I want more, more of life, more of anything, but I have no notion of where to find it. I certainly did not leave my gilded cage in New York. When I set sail with my mother, I thought that I was free to breathe at last. It has become alarmingly clear that I stepped into an even more restrictive one, and I feel as if I am suffocating.”

Her voice cracked, and flushing, she stepped back, creating a semblance of propriety. Hungers and needs long denied rushed through her with crippling intensity. “What would it be like to enjoy life a little.”

“What does this enjoyment look like for you?”

Elizabeth glanced away from his steady regard. There was something far too knowing in his gaze, and she did not want him to see too deeply inside of her heart. No one had that privilege, and certainly not this duke. “You do not think I am silly?”

“No.”

She smiled. “How unusual. I somehow got the impression dukes were puffed up prigs who expected women to always be a model of decorum and propriety.”

“They only expect it of some women.”

“Is that to say you do not see me as a lady of quality?”

“I see you as a woman who is not afraid of life but wants to reach for all that it could offer. I would never judge you for it but help you find it.”

Fascinated, she took that single, improper step closer, the hem of her gown swirling over his boots. “How would you help me?”

“There is a life in the city that you have no knowledge of. A life of freedom and revelry.”

“A life that you, as a duke, know.”

“A life that every man knows.”

“Ah,” she said softly, “I forgot these ridiculous expectations of propriety are only expected to be maintained by us ladies. What do you get from being this generous?”

“Perhaps I get to enjoy life through you.”

“Enjoy life?” Elizabeth laughed. “You are a duke. I daresay you could wave your hand, and whatever it is you want, you shall receive.”

“Not everything.”

“Is there anything you have ever wanted that you prevent yourself from having?”

“Yes.”

Astonished, she said, “What?”

Something heated shifted in his eyes before his expression closed. “We digress, Elizabeth.”

Oh. “You ... you want me.” And he is holding back his interest.

“How fearless you tread.”

“I know,” she said, loving that she could be herself with this man and had no fear of censure or judgment. “I no longer have the hope of marrying in my heart.”

He seemed surprised. “Are you certain?”

“Yes.” Her heart shook violently underneath her breast. “Since the other night, five different men asked me to dance. I refused all except one.”

“Your refusals will not be viewed favorably.”

“My aunt informed me a lady is never to refuse a partner for it will invite speculation and judgment. Everyone who approached me has seen me at other balls. They cared not to ask me then or that I stood on the sidelines without a partner, enduring pitying glances. Now that everyone knows I am an heiress, invitations have poured in, and now I am eligible to dance.”

He veiled his eyes briefly with his long, dark lashes. “Have you formed new plans?”

“Yes.”

“Permit me to enquire about them.”

After a brief hesitation, she said, “I wrote to my father and informed him I would be returning home at the end of the season. Until then, I mean to have fun ... with you.”

There was a hint of something hard ... almost intimidating about his handsome visage. “A risky proposition. Tread carefully, Elizabeth.”

“Oh?” she drawled provocatively, mimicking his earlier action by placing her finger under his chin, tugging him forward. “Afraid to be my lover?”

His eyes widened, and a thrill surged through Elizabeth.

“Never say I have surprised the unflappable Duke of Basil. Or did you believe I meant something else?”

The gleam that entered James’s eyes revealed him to be darkly amused. “I am not the kind of man you take to be your first lover. Or second.”

She took a deep breath and steadied herself against the feelings rushing through her. “Why not?”

“I want to do unspeakably carnal things to you.”

“Such as?” At his silence, Elizabeth lifted her shoulder in a shrug. “You presumed you would be my first. I am sure that there are other gentlemen who would be delighted—”

Her words cut off when he hauled her against his body with something seemingly dangerous in his gaze. Suddenly, Elizabeth felt surrounded by him. Her heart stuttered alarmingly, and her body flushed. He reached out and brushed the back of his knuckles down the bridge of her small nose. “You want to have fun for the rest of the season.”

Her heart started to skip and dance beneath her breastbone. “Yes.”

“You are the type of woman a man marries.”

“If I allow it,” she said softly.

“I will not marry you.”

She laughed. Elizabeth had never shied away from acting because of fear, and she could not do so now. “It is not marriage I want from you, James.”

His eyes gleamed with something that seemed almost savage, and Elizabeth’s heart drummed at the barely contained heat in his stare.

“You want to indulge in an affair.”

A knot of warmth unraveled just beneath her breastbone at the rough hunger in his voice. She held her breath, keeping the air tightly within her lungs, afraid to release it. Afraid to let go of the momentary calm before the storm of emotions that swirled within her rushed inside to fill her with chaotic desires. The intensity of her feelings frightened Elizabeth, for she knew she was venturing into uncharted waters. She released a slow breath, tipped onto her toes and kissed the corner of his mouth and said almost shyly, “Yes, only with you, James, only with you.”

That slow, enigmatic smile tugged at James’s lips. It was a smile that seemed to promise both thrilling pleasure and potential heartbreak. Elizabeth found herself caught in its pull, sinking too quickly and too deeply into whatever this connection was becoming with the duke. “What are you thinking?” she whispered.

He smoothed his face into an expressionless mask.

“Please ... I ... do not do that.”

“Do what?”

“Hide your thoughts. Instead of closing me out, be honest with me and tell me if I have overstepped. I apologize if I did.”

He touched her cheek. “You are ...”

“Interesting?”

“Very much so.” An unknown sensation wrenched inside her heart when he tenderly kissed the corner of her mouth. Elizabeth shifted imperceptibly so their mouths brushed against each other.

Those beautifully silver eyes caressed over her face. “The pleasure you take from the simplest joy reminds me of a time when I was not so ...”

“Cynical,” she whispered.

“I like seeing the delight and wonder on your face. I do not like this feeling of wanting to know everything about you, yet it lingers inside of me, and no rational reasoning suppresses it.”

A sense of awe filled her chest. Elizabeth closed her eyes, and as if controlled by forces outside of herself, her body tilted against his. He was a big man, tall, lean, and broad of shoulder, and she felt surrounded by his heat and strength.

Oh, be careful, she silently whispered to her aching heart. This is only a stolen season of doing what I want, nothing else.

Her mouth trembled against his, and she lifted a hand to lightly touch his jawline. She liked the want and need in his eyes, and something inside of her reached for him because she felt it, too.

Her lashes fluttered as he brushed kisses over her jaw, her cheek, and her temple. They were whisper-soft kisses. James's breath feathered over her lips, and she instinctively licked at the seam of his mouth. He made a muffled sound, his arms closing around her like iron bands. He held her like that, his strength at once intimidating yet arousing.

He put his powerful hands very gently around her throat, the feel of him holding her so sensually domineering. She parted her lips, and his tongue plunged past them, wicked and alluring. He tasted ... darkly male and tantalizing. Elizabeth was almost shocked by her eager responses and the liquid heat she could feel soaking her sex.

Oh, God. So, this is a kiss ...

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Elizabeth felt as if she had stepped off a high cliff and was endlessly falling. James's mouth was spicy and sultry, flavored with a woodsy hint of whisky. Every sense felt heightened, and her skin quivered with almost unbearable sensitivity. The muted strains of the orchestra and laughter faded. All her awareness was contracted to the sensual softness of his mouth against hers, the sinuous, slick dance of their tongues evoking a molten heat between her thighs and sparking flames under her skin.

She clutched at James's shoulders, moaning her delight. He swallowed the sound, thrusting his fingers in her hair, kissing her even deeper. Elizabeth was aware that one of his hands still spanned her throat, and there was something deeply ... erotic yet perilous about the way he held her. He broke their kiss, and she lifted trembling fingers to her mouth, which felt bruised.

Oh, God, this is happening.

Her entire body shook with nerves, alarm, and anticipation. It felt wild and reckless and something entirely forbidden. Young ladies did not act so with men known to be rogues and rakes. Only Elizabeth had never felt like this, and she wanted this moment to stay with her, for within the storm of chaotic sensations, she felt gloriously alive. Something about the Duke of Basil filled her with an aching sense of breathlessness and apprehension.

"You are dangerous to a lady like me," she said shakily.

"Of course I am."

She lifted her fingers and touched the corner of his mouth. "No denial or subtle

persuasion to say otherwise?”

“I deplore deception.”

The breath hitched inside her throat. “That is to say you will always be honest with me?”

“Yes.”

“I will be honest with you as well, James.” Elizabeth was silent for a few beats, then she said softly, “I wanted you to make me feel fireworks.”

“You remembered our conversation?”

“Yes,” she said, her voice achingly soft.

He made no other reply, and when he spanned her waist, lifted her, and walked deeper into the hidden alcove, Elizabeth lowered her forehead to his chest. She clasped James’s shoulders, gasping when he leaned her against something cool, a stone sculpture perhaps, nudged her legs indecently wide and lowered her so she straddled his body. Elizabeth could feel the muscle of his thigh against her sex, and the piercing sensation that he provoked pulled a restless sound from her throat. “James ...” she breathed softly.

“Have you taken a lover before, Elizabeth?”

“You sound hopeful that I might have.”

James brushed his fingertips along the curve of her throat, that feel of his fingers sliding over her skin sent her pulse racing.

“I badly want to spread this sweet cunt of yours open with my cock.”

Sharp spikes of sensation shot down to her core, all because of his low, evocative words.

“However, I am not the kind of lover for an innocent,” he said with soft regret, gently touching the corner of her mouth with a thumb.

Elizabeth’s thoughts raced, and she shifted her legs to hook them behind his calf muscle lest he thought about moving away.

“How do you know it is sweet?” she whispered, knowing she had to be provocative, or he might resist her.

A charged stillness followed, and then he laughed, the sound low and appreciative. “It?”

She bit her bottom lip, understanding what he wanted. Her blushes and shyness would serve no purpose between them. Elizabeth wanted something inexplicable, and somehow, she knew it would only be found with the Duke of Basil. She slipped her hands up his shoulders and around his nape. He gripped her hips and dragged her along his thigh until they were almost positioned hip to hip. Weakness invaded her limbs, and her entire body heated. She could feel the pulsing hardness of his erection.

“My cunt, James, how do you know it is sweet? Should you not find out for yourself?”

He slipped a hand over her throat in another tender clasp, arched her neck and dragged his mouth over her exposed skin, sucking at her flesh. Hot thrills of pleasure scythed through her body.

“Know what to expect of me as your lover,” he murmured. “If it is too much for you, say no. I will step back and discreetly escort you inside. Do you understand, Elizabeth?”

“Yes.”

She barely saw his outline as he tugged off his gloves and dropped them to the grass. He pressed his fingers into the soft flesh of her neck. James then traced the outline of her mouth with a finger.

“Open.”

The sensual command tightened her nipples. She parted her lips, and he stroked his finger inside. Acting on instinct, Elizabeth curled her tongue over his finger and sucked. He made a low sound of hunger in his throat and pushed his finger deeper.

“I am going to fuck your mouth, coaxing you to take my cock to the back of your throat.”

Her breath audibly hitched when she recalled the thickness she’d felt.

As if he sensed her thoughts, he stroked his finger deeper and wickedly said, “When you gag, I’ll only massage your throat until you take all of me.”

He removed his finger, and the soft brush of his thumb against her bottom lip made her whimper. His touch was warm, and even though it was light as a butterfly’s wings, it sent a shock of heat between her legs. Or was it his words that provoked the sensation?

“There are times I will eat your pussy until you release on my tongue over and over. Even when you beg me to stop ... I will not stop.”

Elizabeth swallowed tightly.

“I will not be mindful of any delicate sensibilities. I’ll place you on your belly, a pillow under your hips so that your pussy is canted upwards, spread and waiting for me. I’ll fuck you like that, hard and deep.”

Oh, God. That desperate feeling pierced her low in her belly once again. His teeth raked over her madly fluttering pulse.

“Your pussy will hurt because the fit will be so damn tight, but I’ll make it feel good, too. So damn good. I’ll not stop fucking it even if you beg,” he said with sensual ruthlessness. “In truth, there will be times I take your pussy so long and hard you’ll be sore for days afterward, but you will enjoy it. That is the kind of lover I am, Elizabeth.”

She could only shiver as wet heat scalded her neck from the open kiss he placed there. A breath shuddered from her, and Elizabeth was almost mortified by how wet she was getting. He shifted in the dark, dragging her ball gown up until it reached her thighs.

“James,” she moaned softly, arching into his fingers that trailed up to her inner thigh with carnal intent, and then his fingers were there, where she ached. He slid a hot, probing finger through her curls, dipping low until he teased the entrance of her sex.

His damp finger moved around to her buttocks, and her eyes widened when he ran his knuckle up the cleft of her arse.

“I am going to spank your ass until it blushes red, then eventually, I will be sliding my cock up this ass of yours.”

Shocked at the depraved carnality in his words, an overwhelming weakness quivered

through her. Elizabeth tried to imagine his powerful male body pinning her down from behind and that thick cock parting her back entrance, and to her mortification, her pussy grew wetter.

He licked along her lips, his scent rousing and evocative.

“I need you so damn wet you’ll soak my cock because I am not a small man. I’ll prepare your cunt with my tongue and fingers ... two or three stretching you wide ... maybe four fingers. I’ve shared my lovers with my friends,” he said with possessive sensuality, “but not you, never you.”

“James,” she whispered, her heart thrilling.

“Hmm?”

“Kiss me.”

“Ah, Elizabeth, you are not running,” he groaned. “You should be running.”

“The place I want to run is into your arms, James, not away from it.”

An inarticulate sound slipped from him; he stroked that hovering finger deep inside her sex, dipped his head and claimed her mouth in a scorching kiss. Elizabeth became lost in his taste and marauding mouth, surrendering to the raw, physical responses swamping her senses. He kissed her mouth until her lips felt bruised. He released her lips and kissed her all over, trailing his mouth over her neck, collarbone and down the valley of her breasts.

“Drag down your gown; let me taste your pretty nipples.”

She complied, wrenching the material down to bare her breasts to the cool night air.

His finger plunged in and out of her body, stroking her arousal until it felt as if lightning struck her low in her belly. She gasped, clutching his head when he licked her nipple. His breath feathered over her bare skin, nips and soft bites over her nipples and the undersides of her breasts, eliciting hot, wanton shivers through her body. His mouth closed around her nipple, sucking on it with hard, rough pulls of his mouth.

A strangled moan escaped her as exquisite tension twisted in her belly. James eased her from his body, lowering her feet to the ground. She sensed that he kneeled before her. He kissed her shin, the top of her knees, the sensitive spot on her right thigh.

“Lean back on the sculpture and widen your legs.”

Her heart slamming against her chest, Elizabeth complied. He slid his hands under her ball gown, cupped her derriere and pulled her sex onto his tongue. The stunning pleasure of his tongue lapping at her, thrusting inside her, licking the sensitive walls of her sex had her whimpering. Elizabeth leaned weakly against the sculpture, slapping a hand over her mouth. Her thighs trembled as he lasciviously licked her, curling his tongue over her clitoris. Pleasure raced over her skin and down to her belly, drawing it into a tight knot of agonizing need.

Over and over, he licked and sucked until sweat slicked her skin, and her entire body quivered. Her body reached for something, but it eluded her. Desperate, she reached down and gripped his head, wantonly pushing her pussy against his mouth. A low hum of approval vibrated against her mons.

“James, please,” Elizabeth cried, her voice cracking. She arched into his motions, growing desperate for more. “I ... I need something.”

His fingers found her wet heat and glided over her folds. Elizabeth’s moan turned into a sob of raw need when he thrust two fingers inside her quim, stretching and

rousing her body. He nudged her legs even wider, and a third finger surged inside her sex, lashing her with a bite of pain and pleasure. He sucked her nub into his mouth, stroking it with his tongue while working her pussy with his fingers.

Oh, God!

Heat bloomed through her body, spreading from the aching tip of her nipples down to contract in a tight ball low in her belly. Provocatively deeper and harder, he moved his fingers, at times opening them to stretch her. She sobbed, gripping his shoulders. All her senses were centered on the feel of his fingers inside her pussy, stroking over the sensitive tissue, stretching her snug channel.

The sensation low in her belly tightened until it splintered. Piercing pleasure washed over her senses, and wetness gushed from her. Elizabeth moaned weakly, her body shaking from the overwhelming bliss. James placed soft kisses on her inner thighs before he stood, lifted her with easy strength, and spread her legs indecently wide.

“Grip the trellis over your head,” he commanded, his voice rough with lust.

She reached back, feeling the twisting vines and gripped them, thankful she had kept on her gloves. Elizabeth bit her bottom lip when he reached between them, tucked his cock against the tender opening of her core, and started to invade her body. There was a tight stretch, painful, that wrenched a whimper from her throat.

That soft sound of alarm did not stop James. He pushed past her resistance despite her broken moans and the tautness of her muscles. Elizabeth fought to accept his girth, sweat slicking her skin.

“James,” she whimpered, gripping the trellis until her fingers ached.

He leaned forward slightly and pressed a hot, open-mouthed kiss to her throat. “What

did I tell you earlier?”

Oh, God. “That my ... my pussy will ... will ache ...”

He kissed up to the corner of her mouth. “I know your tight little cunt is hurting ... am I going to stop?”

“No,” she whispered, gasping when he pushed his cock a bit deeper.

Her lover pressed another hard, wet kiss to her lips. He held her hip with one hand and pressed the thumb from the other hand to her nub. James rubbed her clitoris with his slippery thumb, pressing and rotating until the pleasure grew excruciating. The harsh friction against that tender flesh was almost unbearable, and her arousal grew so intense her thighs shook. He worked her clitoris, rubbing, pinching, over and over until she was shaking.

“James,” she wailed, sensing another climax hovering.

Only then did he shove his cock to the hilt.

Elizabeth cried out at the shock of pain that mingled with the pleasure. He drew a deep, shuddering breath. James held himself still and lowered his head to press soothing kisses over her breasts. He started to move, keeping his rhythm slow but deep and heavy. A soft misting rain started to fall, dampening their bodies, but James did not stop his sensual ride between her splayed legs.

The pleasure was breathtaking.

He plunged over and over until a sweeter, even more intense, wicked ache trembled low in her belly, gathering in intensity. Elizabeth reached for the pleasure sucking her under until it expanded through her body. She cried as ecstasy swept through her in a

hot, unrelenting rush. James kissed her, his groan vibrating into her mouth as, with a few deep, heavy pumps of his hips, he reached close to his own release, pulling from her body to spend against her quivering belly.

They held each other for several beats before he tenderly kissed her forehead. His actions surprised her, and then an ache rose in her throat, for a part of her realized she needed this gentleness. There were a few rustles, and then he cleaned away her thighs, still covering her belly with what felt like a silken handkerchief. Then he placed something over her head, and she realized it was his jacket and he was protecting her from the light drizzle of rain. James allowed her gown to fall at her feet, and then he swept her into his arms.

“Where are we going?”

“I am taking you home. Any regrets?”

She felt warmth rush through her body. “I have no regrets,” she whispered.

Elizabeth rested her head against his chest, feeling the rapid beating of his heart beneath her ear. Gradually, the pounding softened to a steady, comforting rhythm. As Elizabeth’s eyes closed, a realization washed over her—she trusted James to take her home discreetly and safely. Without fully intending to, she had let him into a part of her heart.

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The carriage rumbled over the cobblestones, taking them to the viscountess's townhouse. After settling his lover onto the well-padded seat of his equipage, he had briefly returned to the terrace and observed her mother and Lady Barnaby were still in the ballroom. Confident no one would learn of their tryst, he'd returned to the carriage.

The night's indulgences had evidently taken their toll on Elizabeth, and her usual poise was replaced by a charming disarray. James could not explain the feelings that moved him, but he shifted and urged her onto his thighs and simply wrapped his arms around her.

By God, it felt good.

A lover had never slept in his arms before. A peculiar but very warm sensation pierced him when she burrowed deeper against his chest as if she would crawl into his skin if it were possible. His sexual encounters had always been about slaking his physical needs while ensuring his partner enjoyed herself. James had never wanted to linger over a lover, kissing her skin with slow softness, holding her against him to simply ... hold her.

Being with Elizabeth felt distinctly different. It had been a long time since he had engaged in genuine conversation with a lady who didn't gaze at him with avarice or shower him with compliments solely to gain favor with him. Even with the few lovers he'd had over the years, their connection had always been transactional.

James stared down at her face, which was soft and lovely and still flushed. It was refreshing to interact with someone who did not give a damn about his title, someone

whose passion was earnest and who was simply, undeniably charming.

“You want me again,” she murmured sleepily.

Hell. It was then James realized his cock had grown hard. He glanced down at his lover. Her eyes were half closed, her breasts rising and falling in rapid rhythm. He forced himself to silently count to ten, then twenty, to cool the fire in his blood. How could he want her again after the madness of what just happened in the garden?

“You are too sore for any more tugging.”

Her mouth curved into a small smile, the gesture gentle and content, yet her eyes remained serenely closed as she curled into his arms.

“I want you fit and ready for tomorrow’s adventure,” James murmured.

At the mention of an adventure, her eyes flickered open, and the lingering traces of sleepiness instantly vanished, replaced by a spark of curiosity. “Adventure?” she echoed, sitting up slightly.

“Hmm. A night out at Vauxhall Gardens.”

“I have not been there,” she responded, her interest clearly piqued.

“Good. Do you have any prior engagements?”

Elizabeth smiled. “My aunt accepted an invitation to Lady Chamberlain’s ball. I will wait until my aunt and mother are dressed and plead a headache.”

“Will that be believable?” James inquired, lifting his brow.

“My father always said I am a worthy actress who could grace the stage,” she replied smugly. “He only stopped saying so after my mother heard the joke once and fainted.”

James chuckled, amused by the vivid picture she painted. “You will have to be in disguise. You could dress as a lady. I will procure a dress, a face mask, and a wig. Or you could be attired as a gentleman.”

“Truly? As a gentleman?”

“Yes.”

“I have never dressed as a lad before,” she said, the idea seeming to both amuse and excite her.

“Then I will procure clothes to fit a gentleman.”

“With such short notice?” she questioned, a touch of skepticism in her tone.

“I am the Duke of Basil,” he said with a tilt of his head.

“How astonishing that I never knew arrogance could be presented so charmingly. You have broadened my horizon this night.”

James brushed a tendril from her cheek, lowering to brush his mouth against her forehead. “I can lay the world at your feet should you wish it.”

Her eyes widened, and his damn heart lurched at the naked longing on her face. James was tempted to ask, but she lowered her lashes, hiding from his stare. He frowned, realizing only a week ago, she’d planned to secure a husband for the season. That hope had been broken, and now she was in a carriage after a thorough

ravishment with a man who would not promise her anything beyond their night of passion. James's heart lurched, and he was assailed with an emotion that was unknown to him.

“Elizabeth—”

“If you say something to make me cry, I will have my revenge,” she murmured, her voice cracking.

“I would never want to hurt you.”

“You do not have the power to. I am here with you because it is what I want.”

“Good,” James said, unable to understand the piercing disquiet in his gut.

Why the hell am I so different when I am with you, Elizabeth?

* * *

Elizabeth's return to her aunt's townhouse was executed with practiced stealth, her familiarity with the layout allowing her to navigate through the servants' entrance without a sound. She paused for a moment in the shadows, her ears tuned to the nocturnal sounds of the house settling. Confident that the servants were abed, she quickly made her way up the narrow servants' staircase. Her steps were light, the soft padding of her slippers barely audible as she moved with purpose through the dimly lit hallway and up another flight of stairs to her own bedchamber.

The night was still young, and Elizabeth knew her mother and aunt would linger at the ball, reveling until the early hours. They had grown accustomed to her early departures from such events, accepting her need for solitude over prolonged social engagements. Grateful for their understanding—or perhaps their distraction—she

entered her bedchamber and closed her bedroom door softly behind her.

Elizabeth started undressing herself. With a sigh of relief, she peeled off her ball gown and stays, the fabric pooling around her feet in a whisper of silk. She removed her dancing slippers and silken stockings. Elizabeth then tackled her hair, which was in disarray. Several hairpins were missing, likely lost in the garden. With a gentle shake of her head, her curls cascaded down her back, waves of hair tumbling freely to settle at her hips.

Elizabeth climbed onto her bed, lying on her stomach. The soft sheets welcomed her tired body, and she exhaled deeply, letting the quiet of her room wash over her. As she lay there, the moonlight filtered through the curtains, casting a gentle glow across her room. Sleep eluded Elizabeth. Her thoughts were alive with memories of the evening, the sound of music still echoing in her ears, the subtle scent of the gardens lingering on her skin, and the feel of James's mouth against her pussy.

She was also acutely aware of a deep, persistent ache within her sex. Elizabeth swallowed, remembering the invading hardness and the sensation of unbearable stretching. She groaned and buried her heated cheeks into the pillow. Her pussy throbbed longingly when she recalled his heated murmur against her mouth, whispering about the filthy things he would do to her. She groaned and clamped her thighs together in an effort to resist the urge to touch herself. How can I still feel so?

Then she laughed, still disbelieving how wicked she had been with the duke.

Who am I when I am with you, James?

Unable to sleep, she pushed from the bed, slipped on her robe and left her room for the library on the second floor. Opening the door, she smiled to see a fire burning and that a lamp was lit, casting the room in a warm glow. She padded over to the writing desk and retrieved a sheaf of paper. As Elizabeth dipped her pen into the inkwell, she

paused, gathering her thoughts before she started writing her letter.

Dearest Cassie,

I miss you dreadfully and wish you were here with me in England. However, I believe should you ever visit, you would be quite rebellious and shock their priggish souls with your wonderful antics. London is as vibrant, the society at times overwhelming as ever, each ball feels like a whirlwind, where one word could soar a debutante as a diamond of the season, or another cutting word could see a young lady's reputation ruined.

I find myself caught in a peculiar situation that I am compelled to share with you, for it consumes much of my thoughts these days. You might recall me mentioning the Duke of Basil—yes, the very one notorious for his aversion to marriage. Well, fate, in its peculiar humor, has thrown us together on a few occasions. He is unlike any man I've met here: infuriatingly arrogant, devilishly charming, and undeniably captivating. When he is near, I feel a rush of feelings that I can scarcely explain. He possesses a charm that is subtle yet evocative, and when he looks at me, it is as if he sees right through the façade that society demands I uphold and somehow understands me.

I like and admire him, Cassie. Yet, with all this said, he is steadfast in his resolve not to marry, and the ton even refers to the duke as a rake. Knowing this should make things simpler, but, my dear friend, it complicates them instead. A part of me longs to indulge in the thrill and wickedness his company offers; another, perhaps wiser part, knows I must guard my heart against the very real danger of falling for someone who will never offer me a future.

I confess, Cassie, I want to have fun, to experience the exhilaration of his regard without the weight of expectations. But how does one dance on the edge of such a precipice without slipping? I also fear developing a *tendre* for the duke to only

receive his indifference. It is a delicious torment, and yet I wonder if it is wise to continue.

I long to hear from you, Cassie, and I miss you dearly. I shall return home in a few months, but I still eagerly await your reply.

With all my love and more,

Elizabeth

She sealed the letter and placed it on the salver for the butler to frank it and have it sent off later. Elizabeth retreated to her room, slipped beneath the coverlet and tried to sleep. The lingering thrill of freedom mixed with an undeniable sense of longing for something, or perhaps someone, stayed with Elizabeth, following even into her dreams.

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After the duke promised to escort her to Vauxhall Gardens and procured gentlemen's clothes suited for the occasion, a part of Elizabeth was skeptical she would ever hear from him again. As a known rake about town, it was entirely possible. She had deeply anticipated a night of entertainment, mystery, and perhaps a little mischief under the magical incognito of her disguise, but she had also prepared for disappointment.

However, the following evening, at precisely nine p.m., Elizabeth couldn't help but marvel at her reflection in the mirror. The transformation from a genteel young lady into a convincing gentleman of leisure was astounding. The tailored dark trousers and matching jacket gave her a sharp, defined silhouette, while the white undershirt and dark blue waistcoat accentuated her eyes, adding a dash of sophistication.

The silken white cravat, although a challenge for the maid to knot, eventually sat perfectly at her throat, completing the upper ensemble with a touch of elegance. Her evening shoes, sleek and properly fitted, complemented the outfit, and the short wig they managed to tuck her hair under was the final disguise that obscured her usual feminine hairstyle. Topped with an evening hat and accessorized with a walking cane, she appeared every bit the part she intended to play.

"I do look incredible," she said to her reflection, a wide grin spreading across her face. Elizabeth turned to the maid and handed her a five-pound note. She was quite aware this amount was several month's wages for the young girl.

"Remember, not a word about this to anyone."

"Yes, Miss Elizabeth," she said, her eyes wide with delight before bobbing and leaving the room.

It was thrilling to see herself like this, and her excitement for the evening ahead bubbled within her. Downstairs, the house was quiet. Her mother and aunt had already left for their own engagements, having accepted her excuse of feeling tired without suspicion. She hurried down the stairs, her steps confident and a little faster than usual due to her anticipation. Outside, the duke's carriage awaited. As she stepped out into the cool evening air and approached the carriage, her heart skipped a beat.

The duke was already there, looking exceptionally handsome in his evening wear. The sight of him, so poised and debonair, caused her cheeks to warm with a blush. An unexpected thrill surged through Elizabeth. There was a wicked, possessive gleam in his gaze. She hadn't anticipated this feeling of uncertain shyness. In the wicked, silver gleam of his eyes, the memory of how he had taken her was there. Her cheeks burned brighter.

James opened the carriage door, and she climbed into the carriage, her attire making the action smoother and somehow more fitting to her guise. "I declare you are a magician. Everything fits perfectly," she said as they settled inside the equipage.

James seemed slightly amused. "I am glad to hear it. You make a handsome, convincing gentleman."

"I do," she said, grinning. Her initial awkwardness melted away. James's exuded reassurance, and his easy demeanor helped Elizabeth relax.

The carriage began to move, rolling smoothly along the cobblestone streets toward Vauxhall Gardens. She felt nervous and excited. Not only was she embarking on an adventure disguised as a man, but she was also spending an evening in the company of someone who stirred complex and compelling feelings in her.

Elizabeth saw a chessboard on the seat and leaned forward to study it. The game set

out was intricate and challenging. “Who are you playing with?”

“Myself.”

Startled, she glanced up. “Why?”

“I have an upcoming match, and I was trying to plot the possible moves my challenger could make.”

Oh!“Would you like to practice with me?”

“You know the game?”

“Yes,” she said, plucking up a bishop and making a move.

James glanced down and assessed the board. “Hmm, interesting. I would not have made that play.”

“Of course not,” she said, “I am too incredible. You cannot match or anticipate my moves.”

His low laugh rasped against her senses with delight. “I shall introduce you to my good friend, Lord Radbourne, if you win this game.”

“Why?”

A cunning glint appeared in James’s eyes. “So I can feel the satisfaction of you trouncing him.”

“I see,” Elizabeth said, grinning. “He is the only one to ever defeat you.”

“Hmm,” James murmured, moving a knight in a play she never anticipated despite being able to plot five to ten moves ahead.

“Oh,” she said, rubbing her gloved palms together.

To Elizabeth’s delight, they started to play in earnest. The duke was an incredibly patient and calculating player, his moves bold and decisive. She matched his patience but was more careful with her moves. As the game progressed, the carriage hummed with quiet tension; the only sounds were the soft clink of chess pieces being moved and the occasional rustle of clothing.

“Your knight takes my bishop. Bold, Your Grace, very bold.”

James had made a move that significantly strengthened his control of the board’s center.

“It is a strong position, but not invincible,” James replied with a slight smirk, silver eyes glinting with amusement. “Your move.”

“Prepare to be awed.” Elizabeth leaned in closer, her mind racing through scenarios and potential counters. She moved her queen, setting up a defensive stance while also positioning herself for a more aggressive play. “There, let us see how you handle this.”

“Easy,” he drawled provocatively.

James studied the board; his brow furrowed in concentration. After a moment, he chuckled softly, clearly impressed. “Very clever, Miss Armstrong.”

“Impressed?”

“Yes.”

She grinned. Their back-and-forth continued, each move punctuated by playful banter and the growing respect for each other’s skills. Elizabeth took a risk, capturing one of James’s key pieces and tipping the balance slightly in her favor. “Checkmate.”

James leaned back, evaluating the board with a raised eyebrow. “Well played,” he conceded, his voice rich in admiration. “It seems I may indeed have to introduce you to Lord Radbourne sooner than expected.”

Elizabeth laughed. “Shall we go again?”

“Best out of three games,” he said.

They reset the board and started playing. Several minutes later, the carriage had rolled to a stop, and Elizabeth looked up, momentarily distracted from the intense chess game.

“I suppose this is our stop,” James said, observing her surprised expression with a good-natured gleam in his eyes. “Unless you want to forgo the gardens and play chess instead.”

“No,” Elizabeth replied, reluctantly setting aside the chessboard. The game had been absorbing, and she was genuinely impressed by James’s playing. The journey had flown by, filled with unexpected camaraderie and the thrill of intellectual challenge.

As they stepped out of the carriage, she adjusted her hat and straightened her jacket, taking a deep breath to steady herself. The cool night air was fragrant with the scents of the gardens, and the sounds of merriment beckoned enticingly. At the entrance to Vauxhall Gardens, the gateway was brilliantly illuminated by the array of lanterns. She was conscious of the curious glances they attracted—her disguise was effective

enough at a glance, but Elizabeth feared that up close, her softer features might raise suspicions.

“Relax,” James said, “Your disguise is impeccable, and you make a very convincing gentleman even if your derriere is a bit too lush.”

Elizabeth blushed, pleased and a bit flustered by his words. James paid the fee and they entered. The gardens were bustling with people, laughter, and music filling the air, creating a lively atmosphere that promised a night of delight and diversion. She felt a thrill of freedom mingling with the novelty of her disguise.

“Goodness. My brother mentioned this place to me in his letters, but I never imagined it would be this lovely or large! It is impossible to explore everything they have to offer tonight. Oh, James, do say we will come again.”

“We can visit as much as you want to.”

Looking about, she continued, “One of the reasons I longed to visit London was for the pleasure gardens and the museums! I confess my family has only been concerned with balls and more balls! Where else do you recommend that we explore?”

“How sturdy are your feet?”

Elizabeth gracefully stuck out her right leg. “I would say I have about four hours of walking.”

James chuckled. “We can explore the Grand South Walk, Lovers’ Walk, a couple of pavilions, and the Dark Walk. The paths are illuminated by as many as fifteen thousand colorful, glass lanterns hung among the trees.”

“Fifteen thousand?”

“Some reports say over twenty thousand.”

“How impressive.”

“We can also visit the Chinese Temples and the Cascade—a faux waterfall that is lovely. There will also be a fireworks show soon and a balloon ascent. Another section of the gardens will have acrobatic shows and tightrope acts, equestrian feats.”

“Oh, I cannot choose! Can we see them all?”

James’s mouth curved, and her heart twisted at the beautiful sensuality inherent in that smile.

“We shall see.”

They started their adventure along the Grand South Walk, the main thoroughfare lined with the promised fifteen thousand glass lanterns. The lights cast a magical glow, illuminating the path in a kaleidoscope of colors that bathed the surrounding foliage and the faces of the visitors in a warm, ethereal light. The walkway was bustling, filled with people of all ages, the air alive with the sound of music, laughter, and the distant calls of vendors selling fruits.

They paused at Lovers’ Walk—a more secluded pathway known for its romantic ambiance. That pathway was scandalously lined with smaller, more intimately placed lamps that created a soft, inviting glow. Here, couples walked hand-in-hand, stealing quiet moments away from the larger crowds.

Next, they explored a couple of the pavilions that offered a picturesque view of the gardens and a brief respite from the bustling main paths. Each pavilion had its own unique design, some adorned with intricate woodwork, others with floral decorations that complemented the natural beauty of the gardens. James then guided Elizabeth

toward the Dark Walk, a path known for its mysterious, shadowy atmosphere, and where people clearly indulged in wanton debauchery. Elizabeth paused, astonished, peering at a couple leaning against a tall elm tree, kissing each other.

“Are you also seeing this?”

“Yes,” James said, his tone darkly amused. “Are you seeing everything?”

“They are kissing.”

“They are doing more. One of his hands is under her gown. Given how her hips are arching ... and his arm moving, he is fucking her with his fingers.”

She gasped.

“Is that a blush, Elizabeth?” James drawled. “It is a bit too dark to clearly tell.”

Her cheeks heated under his provocative regard. It felt ... indecent.

She sniffed, and continued walking, his low, amused laugh following her. They continued their exploration, heading toward the Chinese Temples next. These structures were beautifully crafted, with ornate, pagoda-like designs and delicate, hand-painted decorations that reflected the ton’s fascination with Oriental décor.

“James, how beautiful!”

They continued exploring, and soon, the sound of cascading water drew Elizabeth to the Cascade. The faux waterfall tumbled down a cleverly constructed rocky outcrop and was illuminated by nearby lamps that made the water sparkle as it fell.

Almost five hours after entering, Elizabeth was awed and a bit tired. The pleasure

gardens were a captivating oasis with its multi-colored lamps and lanterns shaped like constellations, stars, and suns turning the gardens into a fairyland of blue, yellow, and purple lights. The grounds were rather lush and expansive with a canal running through with two elegant cast-iron bridges. A faux castle was also prominent and planted with several pieces of cannon, bowling greens, swings, and thatched umbrellas as a shelter from sudden rains and storms.

“Just in time,” James murmured, glancing toward the sky.

The fireworks began, painting the sky with bursts of color, and Elizabeth watched in awe. After the show, they made their way to an area where acrobats and equestrians were performing, each act drawing cheers and applause from the gathered crowds. She was captivated by the array of performances, astonished to see daring ladies who stood gracefully atop galloping horses and men who deftly traversed tightropes strung high above the ground. Each heart-stopping moment of the acrobats’ precarious acts had Elizabeth instinctively gripping James’s arm with her breath held in suspense. He bore her reactions with impressive grace.

Though she yawned behind her gloved hand, she said, “I must see the hot air balloons soar in the air tonight. I declare I cannot wait to see such a spectacle another day, James.”

He obliged whatever she wanted, and they strolled toward where dozens of people were setting up for the balloon ascent. Her belly rumbled, and she sheepishly grinned.

“I missed supper, and I am famished.”

“The Gardens is famous for its arrack punch; I will treat you to it with a cold supper.”

“Arrack punch?”

“A drink made by mixing arrack, which is a liquor derived from areca nut, rum and sugar.”

“Rum?”

“Hmm.”

Elizabeth grinned. “I am already anticipating the taste.”

“Then we shall continue onward, eat, drink, and make merry.”

She found herself laughing more freely than she had in a long time. Another hour slipped by, filled with laughter and lively conversation, drinking punch, and eating. They talked about several topics, from gossip to political debates. Elizabeth was increasingly captivated not just by the duke’s charm and looks but by his droll wit and intelligence. More so that James willingly talked about topics her mother often warned her were unsuitable for discourse with men of the ton. Her throat went tight, and an unfamiliar sensation lodged inside her chest.

He faltered and glanced at her when he noted she had stopped. His expression grew serious at whatever he saw on her face. “What is it, Elizabeth?”

She swallowed against the ache of emotions that rushed inside her. Elizabeth was trying to calm the wild pounding of her heart and the foolish ache for more with this man that had stirred to life.

“James ... thank you. This night has been incredible and far more fun than I expected. It is wonderfully liberating, being someone else for a night.”

He cupped her cheek with a hand, uncaring that a few people glanced at them in astonishment. “There are no thanks needed between friends,” he murmured, his gaze

enigmatic.

She breathed in the scent of the man, all warmth and masculinity. Longing rose inside her like a great swell, and her breathing fractured. Elizabeth smiled, knowing this night would be etched in her memory forever, a bright spot in her life, regardless of what the future held.

You are incredible, James, and I hope that during our time together, you also find me a bit wonderful.

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James felt a bemused sense of wonder, an odd pleasure lingering in his chest because of Elizabeth's enjoyment and happiness with her night out. Each time she laughed, his mouth hitched into a smile. He also desperately wanted to kiss her, just to see if she tasted as warm and sweet as he recalled. Never after he had experienced a woman did James feel the same intense need for her a second time. The desire had always lessened since he knew what he would receive. Befuddlingly, the opposite was true for Elizabeth Armstrong. He let out a slow, deep breath. James knew the taste and feel of her mouth and pussy, but instead of his satisfaction declining, his hunger had increased ... exponentially.

Her lovely eyes, which were set under delicately arched brows, gleamed with rich delight. "The night has been amazing." Elizabeth twirled, lifting her hands to the sky as if she wanted to touch the air balloon that floated away in the distance. "I want to come every night for the next week."

"I am certain your mother will be suspicious if you plead a headache every night."

She wagged a slim finger. "You forget that I am an incredible actress."

He lifted a brow, dubious about her assertion. "Show me this supposed act. I will be the judge if it can stand up for more than one night."

She looked away briefly, white teeth sinking into a plump bottom lip. Elizabeth squared her shoulders and stared at him. "Very well. An actress cannot feel any sort of stage fright."

James watched, astonished, as Elizabeth cleared her throat, placed the back of her

hand across her forehead and groaned.

“If you made such a sound tonight, I am surprised your aunt and mother even left you alone. That was a death rattle.”

Laughter poured from her, sweet and unfettered. “Well, perhaps it was not so dramatic. More like this.”

She groaned again, this time softer, but the sound was just as awful, and then she wilted. Elizabeth tumbled and cried out. James leaped forward and grabbed her about the waist, supporting her weight that she rested on one leg.

“What is it?”

A slight frown drew her brows together. “I have a cramp. In my left calf.”

He stooped and felt along her leg until he found the knotted muscle.

She groaned. “So painful.”

“We overdid it,” he murmured. “We have been walking and exploring the gardens for over four hours. I am going to carry you to the carriage.”

James stood and swung her into his arms. She gasped and slipped her hands around his neck, laughter lurking in her tone. “Oh, dear, how scandalous.”

“Why do I get the sense you are simply tired of walking, Elizabeth?”

She giggled, the sound so damn sweet his chest ached.

“There are so many people looking at us,” she said, smirking.

“It is not everyday they see a gentleman walking and holding another man so in his arms.”

Good humor danced in her eyes. “They might presume us to be lovers.”

“That they will do.”

“You do not mind?”

“What is one more scandal attached to my name?”

She laughed again, the sound far too damn sweet. It did not take long for them to reach his carriage, and his coachman looked away after a single twitch of his eyebrow. James assisted her into his carriage and entered behind her.

“Where else do we go? It is early yet.”

“I am taking you home,” he said drily.

“Oh.”

The soft, disappointed sound pierced him. Then her eyes lit up. James grunted when she tossed herself into his arms, her lush arse nestling perfectly against his cock. She slipped a hand around his nape and said, “I have been wanting to kiss you all night.”

He knocked the hat from her head, removed the wig, and unpinned her hair, letting it tumble in loose waves down her back.

“I love your hair,” James murmured.

Elizabeth did not reply, pressing her mouth against his, kissing him with artless

passion. James groaned, his heart quickened, and so easily desire burned in his veins. All James could sense was the soft warmth of her mouth, the taste of her tongue and the feel of her body against his. Blood was rushing in his ears, his head felt light, and his cock was heavy and throbbing.

She lifted her mouth from his and touched the corner of his mouth. “Have you ever tugged in a carriage?”

“Oddly, no.”

“Ah,” she said, delight glowing in her blue eyes. “I will be a first in this for you.”

Bloody hell. “The coachman might hear.” James waited for her reaction with a lifted brow.

She placed her finger below his chin, nudging his face upward. There was a wicked gleam in her eyes as she purred, “I will try and be gentle with you so that you make as little noise as possible, Your Grace.”

He laughed, and she swallowed the sound with another kiss. Their tongues glided against each other for several minutes. He broke their kiss to shift her onto the seat, then tugged off his gloves. When she reached for him, James stopped her, undoing her flaps and dragging off her trousers and boots. How alluring and wildly desirable his lover appeared, her hair spilling over her shoulders in ripples of waves. He removed the cravat and untied a few buttons of her shirt. Luckily, she had not bound her breasts. They were small but high and firm, with large, berried nipples that had his mouth watering.

“Widen your legs; let me see your pretty cunt.”

A becoming red flushed over her cheeks, and she obeyed. James ran his finger

reverently down her soft, pink slit. He lowered his head and dragged his tongue over her flesh, pressing it hard over her clitoris. A soft, keening sound slipped from her, and her entire body quivered.

James took up her cravat, balled it and placed it in her mouth. He slid his hand to her neck, holding her gently at the throat. “You’ll not make a sound. Each time you are tempted ... bite down harder ... and harder.”

Her cheeks flushed, and her eyes glittered with aroused excitement.

With his other hand, he unbuttoned the flaps of his trousers, and his throbbing cock sprang free. He squeezed his cock, then released it to brush his knuckles over her folds, then drove two fingers into her wet tightness, shuddering in delight at the fluttering sensation of her slick muscles clamping on his digits.

“Ugh,” a muffled moan came from her.

Her hips jerked as he thrust his fingers slowly inside her cunt once again. James removed his fingers, gripped his cock and brought the sensitive tip to the opening of her pussy, tormenting and teasing them both by rubbing the head of his cock from her slit to her clitoris and then down again. Over and over until she got wet, and her thighs trembled.

He released her throat, reached down, and used both hands to grip the lush curves of her backside, lifted her until she was poised right at the top of his length, and with excruciating slowness, dragged her onto his cock.

Her scream was muffled by the cravat, and sweat beaded on his forehead.

“Too ... fuck ... fucking tight,” he groaned, shoving in slow increments, watching her pussy split open to take him. “Take it just like that—all the way in.” The sight

was almost obscene, his cock red and ruddy, pushing, spearing her sex open until he reached the hilt.

Elizabeth whimpered, and James groaned at the sublime tightness sucking him in. She quivered around him, her sheath squeezing him. Sweat beaded James's brow, and a ragged groan tore from his lips. She was a study in carnal pleasure, her pretty face suffused with desire, her head tilted back in glorious ecstasy, her dark hair curling around her bare breasts.

“Look at me.”

Her lust-filled, dazed eyes met his, and he saw the pain and the pleasure.

“I know your pussy is aching at the stretch. Am I going to stop?”

She shook her head, her chest lifting with her ragged breathing, tempting him to lean forward and flick his tongue over her nipple. Another muffled moan sounded around the cravat in her mouth when he sucked it. Releasing her breasts, James gripped her hips, and she arched when he started to move, her walls rippling over his cock, almost dragging his release from him before he was ready. Though lust pounded through James, urging him to take her hard and fast, James kept his stroke deep and slowly measured.

The feeling was pure torture.

Dragging his cock from her, then stroking back deep and hard, but so damn slowly, he had to fight with all his willpower not to release his seed. Over and over, he rocked her onto his cock, until sweat glistened on her breasts, trailing from her hairline. He leaned forward to lick that bead of sweat from between her breasts, and she groaned around the cravat for that movement shoved his cock even deeper into her pussy.

Her release flooded over his cock with wet heat, and with a ragged groan, James pumped his hips hard for a few more thrusts, then pulled from her body and released against her thighs. He felt empty yet complete and more sated than he had ever been in his life. Shocked at how damn quick yet intense everything had been, he laughed. James removed the cravat from her mouth, gently caressing her lip with his thumb.

Her eyes were soft and luminous as she peered at him. “Amorous congress is indeed glorious even when it is only a few minutes.”

“It is you who is glorious.”

“I know that, too,” she said with sweet arrogance.

An indefinable feeling wrenched inside James’s heart, too deep and unreachable for him to understand. James cleaned her with his handkerchief, helped her dress and then hugged her close, kissing her mouth with a tenderness that surprised him. His heart started to pound, and he kissed the top of her head, refusing to complicate matters by wondering why everything with Elizabeth Armstrong felt so ... damn right.

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A couple of days later, James descended the grand staircase of his mother's townhouse with a hint of amusement playing on his lips as he took in the sight before him. His mother stood in the hallway, dressed in an exquisite gown perfectly embodying the latest fashion trends. Despite her fifty-three years and that silver-peppered auburn hair, she carried an air of undeniable elegance and vigor that belied her age. Over the last five years, she had received three marriage proposals but had dismissed each one, preferring to maintain her esteemed status as the formidable Duchess of Basil.

"How peculiar," James drawled as he reached the bottom of the stairs, his brow arching in mild disbelief. "The note I received a few hours ago claimed you had fainted from a dreadful megrim. And now here you are, dressed for a ball?"

"James," his mother replied with a warm smile, seemingly unfazed by his skepticism. "I thought you had left."

He chuckled lightly. "I was reading in your library, madam, waiting for the physician to arrive before I take my leave. However, given that Dr. Barnet has yet to arrive you did not summon him."

"In the library?" She turned a quelling look toward the butler, her tone one of reprimand. "I was not informed you were still here."

"Hmm," James murmured, stepping closer to press a kiss on her cheek. "If you wish for me to visit, Mother, a note without melodramatics would also suffice."

"Would it?" she countered, her eyes narrowing.

“Yes. I confess I would not have patiently sat and listened to you bemoan that you might die without meeting my children if I knew you were perfectly hale and hearty.”

His mother’s cheeks tinged with color, and she brushed away an imaginary speck of lint from his jacket, her gesture a deft blend of embarrassment and affection. “You should be ashamed I had to resort to such tricks.”

James knew his mother’s tactics well—her blend of affection and manipulation finely honed over the years. Yet, her concern for his future and her desire for grandchildren always lay at the heart of her schemes.

“My dear friend Amelia told me that her son has decided to find a bride this season,” she continued, her gaze fixed on him with an intensity that bordered on pleading. “You need to think about the future, about the family’s name and reputation. It’s not just about you, James. There are traditions and legacies that need to be honored.”

“Hmm,” he responded noncommittally, offering his arm to help her toward the carriage. “Allow me to escort you to the carriage.”

She harrumphed softly, a sound of resigned acceptance. “I suppose you are going to White’s?”

James frowned. When the urgent note arrived, he hadn’t given a second thought to his previously scheduled commitments. Indeed, his friend Lord Bainbridge had extended an invitation to a private card party. His mother’s hopeful gaze met his, and rather than the usual annoyance, something inside of him softened. “I shall accompany you for a few hours.”

She gasped, her hand fluttering to her chest in feigned shock. “Heavens! What have I done to receive this good fortune?”

“Pretended that you were ill and then sent me a note about it,” he said dryly.

His mother’s laughter rang out, echoing warmly. She took his proffered arm, and together, they made their way to the waiting carriage. As they settled inside, he could not help but feel a rush of affection for her relentless pursuit of what she presumed would enhance his happiness, even if it meant resorting to theatrical nonsense. The carriage rolled away, the streets of London passing by as they chatted about the latest antics of her granddaughters.

Several minutes later, James and his mother arrived at the stately townhouse of the Marchioness of Dawson in Belgrave Square. As they stepped into the grand entryway and joined the receiving line, a few surprise stares followed. The quiet murmur of the guests rose slightly, and predictably, several ladies whispered behind their fans, their eyes darting between him and their companions.

James was well accustomed to this attention and silently acknowledged that his attendance would likely spark more rumors and be featured in the scandal sheets by the next morning, with speculation about his intentions and possible courtship. After all, it was unprecedented for him to attend so many society balls in a short span of time.

They progressed into the grand ballroom, the opulent space adorned with glittering chandeliers and sweeping floral arrangements that perfumed the air. James discreetly scanned the overcrowded room as they walked, noting several familiar faces and the usual suspects of the season’s social elite.

His gaze collided with Elizabeth’s. Her eyes lit up with unmistakable pleasure, and James felt an involuntary response as his heartbeat quickened. He accompanied his mother around the room, who was visibly thrilled to have him by her side for the evening. She took the opportunity to point out various eligible young ladies whom she found suitable.

James indulged with a listening ear but made no comment.

“Look how lovely Lord Dawson’s daughter is! She has the grace and airs of the marchioness,” his mother said, nodding toward a young woman who moved through the dance with effortless elegance.

His mother snagged a glass of champagne from a passing servant and continued her matchmaking monologue.

“Also, Lady Payne’s daughter is demure and so lovely. I had the pleasure of listening to her play the pianoforte at a musicale last week, and I daresay even you would be impressed, James.”

She went on to praise a few more ladies, each commendation laden with hope, then, turning to him with an air of expectation.

“What are your thoughts on Miss Elizabeth Armstrong?” James did not understand which madness prompted him to ask.

“The American?” his mother asked, her tone laced with surprise and disapproval as if the mere idea of Elizabeth’s existence was somewhat scandalous.

“The young lady from New York,” he corrected with cool civility.

His mother’s eyes widened momentarily before she managed to recompose her expression into a thoughtful frown.

“I have not given Miss Armstrong any thoughts. She is not of our society and would never be,” she declared, somewhat dismissively. “Oh, I do believe Lady Dawson is coming over. I implore you to dance with her darling daughter tonight, James.”

“Hmm,” he responded noncommittally.

After exchanging mild pleasantries with their hostess, James excused himself. As the delicate strains of the waltz began to fill the air, he walked over to Elizabeth, drawn to her by an irresistible force that he did not wish to deny. He bowed and extended his hand toward her. “Miss Armstrong, would you honor me with this dance?”

The surprised gasp from her mother and the delighted smile exchanged with Viscountess Barnaby were evident, but James paid them no mind. His attention was entirely on Elizabeth. In truth, wariness filled him, for he found her too captivating.

“Yes,” she responded, her voice a soft murmur as she lowered into a curtsy, her cheeks coloring.

Tender amusement wafted through him at that blush. It belied the quiet strength, sweet wantonness, and reckless impetuosity he knew she possessed. Taking her hand, he led her to the dance floor, expertly sweeping her into his arms. Together, they soared across the floor, moving fluidly to the rhythm of the waltz.

“You are staring at my mouth, James.”

He snapped his gaze upward, his heart kicking against his chest when he saw an answering need and dancing amusement in her eyes. James’s heart lurched. He was suddenly keenly aware of the longing in her stare.

Reach for that steady gaze seemed to silently implore him.

As they danced, an unexpected impulse seized him, and the words tumbled out before he could restrain them. “Come to me tonight.”

Her eyes widened in surprise. “To your home?”

James had never had a lover in his home. “Yes. I live alone in Grosvenor Square.”

Her gaze was soft and luminous. “I will plead a headache and inform my mother and aunt I will return home early.”

“I will follow in my carriage and collect you once you send the coachman away.”

As the dance ended and he watched her walk away, an odd sensation of longing pierced through him. He stood frozen for a moment, trying to understand the surge of emotions within him.

What the hell exactly am I longing for?

His reverie was broken when he noticed Lord Prescott approaching Elizabeth, bowing over her hand with a charming smile before leading her back to the dance floor. A twisting feeling surged through James as he observed them together. Elizabeth’s smile, radiant and free, as she was twirled gracefully by another man, sparked a raw emotion he hadn’t anticipated.

“Ah, my friend, it is jealousy,” Ambrose’s voice came from beside him, his tone light and amused.

James turned sharply. “What do you speak about?”

“You have the look of a man who wants to run through another for touching what is his,” his friend said, the provoking quirk of his mouth signaling he found some amusement in James’s predicament.

Hell. Was he this transparent with his hunger?

“You like her,” Oliver said.

“Of course I do.”

“You like her more than you are willing to admit.”

James had nothing to say to that and deftly changed the conversation despite his friend's smile. He was tempted to cancel the arrangement they had just made because it felt as if he was falling into something he hardly understood. His heart trembled.

Nonsense, he coolly argued with himself. So what if I like her? There is no deeper meaning to it.

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An hour after leaving the ball, her lover gripped the sheets beneath his naked body, groaning when she licked along the muscles of his stomach. The hooded gaze that peered at her was narrowed, his expression savagely carnal.

“You are so beautiful, James,” Elizabeth said, tracing the contours of his form with open admiration.

His chest and shoulders were corded with sleek muscles; each defined line and curve showcasing a balance of power and elegance. James’s broad shoulders tapered to a trim waist, each muscle sculpted and evident under his skin. His powerful thighs flowed into lean, strong legs. Elizabeth kissed over his hips, smiling when his muscles bunched in anticipation. His erection stood heavy, thick, and hard. His breathing, too, was shallow and irregular.

I did this ...

It swept through Elizabeth then, feminine power, a sense of awe that James reacted to her caresses so powerfully.

“I want you so much, too, James. You have not touched me yet, and I am wet. So incredibly wet.”

She gripped his cock and licked his length in a slow, sensuous glide. He groaned, and Elizabeth smiled. She sucked the flared mushroom head into her mouth. Her lover made another rough sound of hunger, clutching the sheets even tighter. Her hair cascaded over her face, obscuring his view, and he gripped it, wrapping it around his hand. He tightened his fingers in her hair, thrusting his hips upward, shoving his cock

deep down her throat.

Elizabeth's eyes watered, and she made a light choking sound, wicked heat blooming between her legs when he groaned, "Fuck my cock with your sweet pretty mouth."

Elizabeth sucked him deep, loving the pleasure she gave him. She laved and explored his cock with her tongue and hand, learning what he liked, sucking the tip of his cock until he snarled, released the sheet, and shifted to pull her off.

She released his cock from her mouth with a wet, sucking sound, and he groaned. Peeking at him from beneath her lashes, she said in a deliberately sultry tone, "Tsk, ts. I thought you were supposed to fuck my throat, Your Grace."

Elizabeth gasped when he grabbed her and tossed her onto her belly. "James!" she said, laughing.

"You make me mad with hunger," he growled. "Arch your hips."

He brought his hand down sharply on her buttocks, and she moaned at the fiery sting. Elizabeth jerked at the delicious friction at the landing of a second slap. She was painfully aroused and gripped by emotions she had never felt before. Her breasts ached so much that the caresses of the sheets tormented the sensitive tips of her nipples.

"I love your sensuality," James praised, his voice ruff with need. "So damn beautiful."

Then his mouth was on her heated flesh, soothing the sting with kisses.

"I missed your smell, the taste of your skin, the feel of your silky pussy on my mouth," he murmured, inhaling deeply as if wanting to trap her scent into his lungs.

“I keep questioning how ... how is it that my want for you grows instead of waning.”

A delicious thrill went through her heart at his words. “I hope years from now you are still haunted by me.”

She felt the curve of his lips against her backside, then James bit the flesh of her arse as if in punishment for making him feel so much.

He gripped her hips, and she instinctively curved and arched her hips more, desire thrumming through her body when he placed a pillow under her hips. His powerful frame covered her like a sensual blanket, covering every inch of her back and thighs. His breath teased her ear and the side of her neck.

“Tell me you want my cock to possess every inch of your sweet, little cunt,” he murmured against her neck. “Slow and deep ... hard and fast, however I want.”

Honeyed heat washed over her senses, and a sweet ache trembled in her belly. “I want you to take my cunt,” she whispered. “However you want me, I am yours.”

James pressed a kiss against the base of her neck, soothing and arousing at the same time. He slid his hand up, stroking his fingers along the bare skin of her belly, and Elizabeth arched her buttocks higher against his body, inviting his touch to consume her entire body. His hand slid down over her belly to her sex and parted her folds to find her clitoris.

He rubbed repeatedly over her nub, and her awareness narrowed to that sweet, pulsing pleasure between her thighs. It was ecstasy, the most nerve-racking pleasure she had ever felt. A desperate heat burned low in her belly, and she grew so wet it was almost mortifying. The striking pressure against her clitoris increased when he started rubbing her there with two fingers. Up and down, then a press forward. Elizabeth was slowly losing the battle to stay in control. She felt like another creature,

one that was wild and wanton, had taken over her body.

He stroked his cock deep inside her sex, and Elizabeth's breath strangled, and her flesh burned as she adjusted to the thick invasion of his body into hers. She felt his hands slide over her bottom to help spread her pussy open for his invasion. The stretch was painful, but underneath it, the pleasure was sublime.

James started riding her, his thrusts deep and heavy with soft groans of pleasure rumbling in his throat, never altering his pace. The sound of his hips slapping against hers echoed lewd and erotic in the air. Elizabeth's breath puffed in sharp pants and moans as she surrendered to the untamed way he pounded his cock inside her sex. The pressure felt almost unbearable, and she teetered on a precipice of pleasure so intense it bordered on pain. When Elizabeth sobbed with ecstasy, he drove back in, shoving his cock even deeper. She was almost desperate to escape the ravaging of her pussy.

"James," she wailed, her fingers tightly gripping the sheets.

His fingers strummed her clitoris, and shockingly, something lush and carnal opened inside of her, and the word that pushed from Elizabeth's mouth was, "More!"

She sobbed when he pinched her sensitive clitoris, whimpering when he began rubbing it hard. Wicked bursts of ecstasy flooded her senses, and Elizabeth shattered under the onslaught of pleasure.

"Oh, God," she gasped, trembling.

Sweat slicked their skin, and she gasped as he shifted his legs between hers, widening her a little further, and then arched her hips higher. James then plunged into her sex with even more hunger. She buried her face against the sheets as he plunged his cock inside her again and again. Pleasure quaked through her as the heat low in her belly

twisted and became a tight knot of exquisite delight.

“Again,” he hissed, “let me feel your pussy fluttering on my cock as you release.”

Elizabeth moaned shamelessly, screaming as she attained her fourth climax for the night. She instinctively rolled her hips backward into his thrusts. James buried his face in the curve of her throat, thrust deeply once more, and with a ragged groan, released deep inside her body.

“Fucking hell,” he whispered, sounding shocked.

He held her trembling body and delicately bit into the curve of her shoulder, the sting an erotic pleasure before pressing soothing kisses on the spot. Her breathing and heartbeat calmed, and Elizabeth collapsed to her belly, utterly repleted. Not a single muscle in her body felt capable of holding her up even for a moment longer.

“Is this how it always is?” she whispered.

James lowered his head to press warm lips softly against hers. Despite the soft touch, his kiss was searing and possessive.

“No,” he said gruffly, “I ... this ... I have never felt like this with anyone.”

She smiled and yawned indelicately. Elizabeth did not protest when he gently pulled from her body, walked away, and then returned with a wet washcloth and cleaned her. James came on the bed and tugged her into the curve of his arms. A tender feeling wrenched through her heart when she noted how careful he was with her.

The embers from the fire in the hearth barely sparked in the dimly lit bedroom. She snuggled into the warmth of James’s embrace, unable to move. His hand stroked up her side, over her shoulder and down her arm in a caress. Her senses were filled with

the warm, masculine scent of him, and sleep beckoned. She moaned, fighting against it with all her willpower.

“I was so caught up in our moment that I did not protect you,” James said softly. “You could be with child.”

Shocked, she stared up at him, resting her chin against his chest. Will you marry me or ask me to be your mistress if I am with child? She silently wondered.

His silver eyes were dark, intent, watching her closely. “Afraid?”

A sharp tremor of uncertainty quivered through her. Then she thought about it, and Elizabeth smiled. “No.”

His brow lifted. “A rather uncommon reaction.”

“I am returning to New York soon. I am an heiress. If I am with child, I would be very happy.”

James stared at her as if he did not know what to make of her. “Happy?”

“Yes. I have decided against marrying. It would be a blessing to have a child to love in my lifetime.”

There was a calmness in his stare—lust and something infinitely tender. “What of your reputation?”

“I’ll claim widowhood. My love died in England because of his idiocy.”

He smiled, the quirk of his lips was pure, heated sensuality. “I see.”

“You make me feel so much.” She whispered it against his chest, but the stilling of his body told her that she had been heard. Elizabeth reached up and brushed locks of hair from his forehead. Then, with the tip of her finger, she gently traced the small scar, almost indistinguishable, at the corner of his mouth. “I hope you do,” she said softly. “It is almost one, James. I need to leave.”

“Stay with me a bit more, please.”

Elizabeth saw an emotion in his eyes that was unknown to her. A lump forming in her throat, she nodded. James wrapped his arms around her. His heat seemed to invade her body, filling her with a most pleasant sensation. Elizabeth took one of his hands and laced it between hers. It was then that she noticed the scars on his knuckles. They were puckered, and some were deep.

The rough scars and cuts were a stark contrast to the refined image he usually presented to the world. As she traced the lines with a gentle touch, she asked. “You have thirteen cuts on your hand. How did this happen?”

“They’re from my days as a bare-knuckle boxer.

Elizabeth’s eyes widened in surprise, her grip on his hand tightening slightly. “You were a boxer?”

“Nothing so civilized. This was fighting without the rules of conduct that governed the sport of boxing.”

Good heavens. “How was this possible?”

“I inherited the dukedom at twenty; I was saddled with a massive debt, one that threatened to ruin everything my family had built. It was a desperate time. My mother and sister needed me to provide, and I had to find a way out. I fought in the

underground pits of London, where fortunes were made and lost with each bout. It was a brutal world, but it was the fastest way I knew to pay down the debts and protect my family's legacy."

The revelation seemed to settle over them like a heavy cloak. Elizabeth looked at him anew, scanning his face as if seeing him for the first time. The scars on his hands symbolized a life fought in shadows, far removed from the glittering balls and polished veneer of high society.

She touched the corner of his mouth. "Is this also from fighting?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you seek help? Surely, there were other ways?"

James chuckled softly, a rueful sound. "Pride, mostly. And a lack of trust. I'd seen too many turn their backs on me when the news of the debt came out. The ton can be incredibly fickle. Friends became strangers overnight. I decided to rely on myself to fight my own battles."

Her fingers gently caressed the scars again. "And now?" she asked quietly.

"Now," he said, shifting to look into her eyes, "I'm free of debt and have enough wealth to last a few generations. My cousin will build upon it."

"Your cousin and not your son?"

"I am not certain I will ever marry and have an heir, but I know of my cousin's existence."

"Why are you against marrying? Did someone break your heart?"

He laughed, the sound low and rich. “No.”

“Then why?”

“Must I have a reason?”

“Is it not the natural path of life? To marry and build a family?”

“I already have a family. My mother lives, and my sister is married and has twin daughters. My cousin is also married and has seven children.”

“Good heavens. Seven?”

There was a teasing, provoking glint in his eyes. “Hmm, my cousin professes to be deeply in love with his wife and cannot stay from her bed.”

“So, you do believe in love.”

“I see the evidence of it.”

“But you do not want it for yourself?”

James chuckled, low and soft, the sound decidedly mocking. “I am not searching for it,” he said mildly, “I do not long for these romantic sentiments I realize ladies take pleasure in thinking about. I simply enjoy my life and live without constraints.”

“It must be wonderful to exist so freely,” she murmured. “You remind me of my father.”

“A rather unsettling thought, given how thoroughly I just debauched you,” James replied drolly.

Elizabeth laughed. “My father was also a second son of a baronet. My uncle, Timothy, lives in Hertfordshire with his wife and children. I have never met them. He never quite forgave Papa for marrying a lady whose father was a banker from New York. Aunt Sally, however, kept in touch with Papa through letters. My aunt was never blessed to have children, and Mama said this made aunt treasure family more.”

She shifted slightly, a pang of pain going through her heart. Elizabeth had held herself distant from her aunt, and she needed to forgive her meddling.

“My father took his modest inheritance from his grandmother and forged an empire in New York. Whenever I listened to Papa speak, I would always long to make my own mark in the world one day. Mama will be furious when she realizes Papa promised me that upon my return to New York, my inheritance will be mine to do as I please.”

“What do you wish to do?”

“I do not know,” she murmured. “Perhaps one day travel. War has torn apart Europe, and it might be years before I get a chance to visit Italy and France. I helped Mama with a few charities in New York. I might take a more active role when I return.”

“Will you ever come back to London?”

Elizabeth felt the increase in his heartbeat.

“Will you miss me, James?” she murmured.

Something mysterious lurked in the chilling beauty of his eyes, and Elizabeth wished she understood what he felt. Or perhaps it would be better if I had not asked.

“I daresay I will look back on our moments and long for you fiercely, James,” she

said, pushing aside the need to keep the revealing words to herself. One could not gain anything behind silence and noncommunication. "I shall greatly miss you. I am not afraid to admit these things."

He lifted a hand, rubbing his thumb briefly over her bottom lip, which felt puffy from his kiss. Instead of answering her, he tugged her down, kissing her mouth with exquisite tenderness. An ache rose in her throat, and longing almost broke her apart. For a wild moment, terror scythed through her heart.

I am in danger of falling in love with you, James, she silently cried. How foolish am I?

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:47 am

Elizabeth felt a momentary disorientation as she woke, the remnants of sleep still clinging to her senses. The room was warmly lit by a crackling fire in the hearth, casting dancing shadows across the walls and floor. Her clothes, stockings, and shoes were neatly arranged on the chaise, a reminder that she was not at her aunt's home but the duke's.

Her cheeks warmed with a blush when she noticed the maid, who had quietly entered the room, perhaps the source of her awakening. The young girl curtsied respectfully, her eyes wide with a mix of curiosity and deference.

"Milady, I am here to help you get dressed," the maid offered in a gentle voice.

"Thank you," Elizabeth said. She observed the maid's curious glances, and she recalled the duke that he had never had a female guest before in his home. Pushing off the covers, Elizabeth swung her legs out of bed and stood. A quick glance at the clock on the mantle revealed that it was almost three in the morning. Her mother and aunt should be returning home soon. The maid assisted her with efficiency, helping Elizabeth into her clothing.

Nearly thirty minutes later, she was fully dressed, her hair neatly arranged in an elegant chignon and feeling more composed. The maid gave a quick bob of a curtsy and hastened out of the room. Elizabeth departed the duke's bedchamber and descended the winding staircase, her steps echoing softly in the large, opulent hallway.

The soft, mellifluous sound of the piano filled the air, its notes rich and emotive, drawing her to a room on the first floor. She eased the door open a fraction, just

enough to see James seated at the piano. His hands moved with effortless grace across the keys. He was utterly absorbed in his music, his expression one of deep concentration mingled with a palpable passion for the piece he played. She stood captivated not just by the music but by the rare, unguarded moment of the man before her.

His playing was powerful. It was only when a tear traced a path down her cheek that she realized the emotional depth his playing had stirred within her. Startled by her reaction, Elizabeth turned abruptly to leave.

“Stay,” James’s voice, firm yet gentle, halted her retreat.

She hadn’t realized he was aware of her presence. Elizabeth walked over and sat beside him on the piano bench. She ran her fingers lightly over the keys. “You play beautifully, James.”

“My father taught me,” he said.

“Not a tutor?”

“It is not the purview of a duke to learn how to play musical instruments,” James explained, his fingers lightly dancing along the keys.

“Why had he chosen to teach you?”

“My father was a second son, and he was never supposed to inherit. He loved music, and his mother indulged his passion, over the years hiring several masters for him. When I was a lad of about five years, I followed the sound of music to a private room of his, climbed onto my father’s lap, and listened. He was pleased by my interest and started teaching me that day.”

“You miss him,” she said softly.

“I suppose I do,” he admitted. “My father often said he was not meant to be the duke, and that was the reason he was so poor at estate management. He focused on his passion and did not see that the people he trusted to run his estates were greedy and drove him to the brink of ruin. Even when he discovered the terrible state of our finances he still could not save us.”

For a moment, it seemed he might continue, but then he glanced toward the window where rain pattered gently against the glass. “Let’s get you safely home.”

Elizabeth nodded, feeling a complex mix of emotions as they rose from the bench. The night had peeled back layers of James’s character she had never expected to see, revealing depths that both fascinated and moved her.

James escorted her to the carriage already awaiting them outside. He assisted her up and tugged her into his arms once they were seated. He seemed contemplative, and she leaned her head against his shoulder, contented with the silence. The carriage rumbled into motion, and they reached her aunt’s home only a few short minutes later. James assisted her out, and once again, Elizabeth went around to the servants’ entrance to sneak inside. This risk she took to be with him was alarming, yet she could not stop the craving she owned for him in her heart.

Before disappearing into the shadows of the night, Elizabeth rose onto her toes and planted a tender kiss on James’s jaw. “Sleep well, James,” she whispered. Then, with a lingering glance, she turned and slipped through the servants’ door.

The house was silent, suggesting her aunt and mother were still out. In a few more minutes, the servants would also rise to start their day. With quiet, hurried steps, Elizabeth made her way to her bedchamber. Once inside, she shed her garments and climbed into bed, the soft sheets a cold contrast to the warmth of James’s embrace.

Though their night had been delightful, there was a heavy ache inside her heart. Every moment spent with James, laughing and talking at Vauxhall Gardens, playing chess, their long conversations, every kiss and touch on her body was seared into her thoughts. There was a shattering awareness that she was falling in love with him. The truth was inescapable. She might have to end their affair sooner than anticipated so that she was not caught in the agonizing coils of loving a man who did not believe in sentiments or marriage.

* * *

James stood by the windows in his bedchamber, a glass of whisky in his hand. He gazed out at the dark skies, watching the lightning fork through the clouds in intermittent bursts and the rain streaking down the glass. Luckily, he had escorted Elizabeth home before the unexpected deluge arrived.

Will you miss me, James? I daresay I will look back on our moments and long for you fiercely.

Those words echoed in his mind, haunting him with their earnest intensity. He lifted the glass of whisky to his lips, taking a deep swallow, trying to drown the echo of her voice. It had only been two hours since he last felt Elizabeth's warmth against him, her presence a source of unexpected contentment that he had never known before. Now, he found himself missing the light in her eyes when she smiled, the engaging flow of their conversation, the simple pleasure of her company.

James frowned, a sense of unease settling over him. He had never missed a lover before, never allowed thoughts to linger beyond shared moments of pleasure. Attachment was something he had always avoided, seeing no benefit in tying himself emotionally to another.

Yet here he was, feeling restless and unsettled, wanting to see Elizabeth again when

he'd loved her several times that night. Yet it was not her body he craved. James realized with startling clarity that he was not satisfied with the prospect of having her in his life for just a few fleeting weeks until the season ended. He stiffened at this awareness, shocked by the depth of his own desires.

How much more did he want from her? A few more weeks? Months? Or years? Did Elizabeth feel the same?

Recalling the sweet intensity of her gaze, the way she tenderly framed his jaw and kissed him—a mere brush of her lips against his, yet it had conveyed such longing that a part of him had reached out for her.

“I want you so damn much, Elizabeth,” he murmured into the quiet room.

The possibility that he might be falling in love with Miss Elizabeth Armstrong drew a mocking laugh from James. Romantic sensibilities had always been a notion he dismissed, yet he found no other way to describe the intense, gnawing hunger he felt for her. As the storm outside raged on, James couldn't help but feel that, perhaps, his own life was about to undergo a transformation just as powerful and inevitable.

His musing was abruptly interrupted by a ruckus emanating from the lower levels. Frowning, he left the solitude of his bedchamber and made his way down the winding staircase. The sounds that greeted him were unmistakable—loud, boisterous singing tinged with the unmistakable slur of intoxication.

He paused on the steps as the scene below came into view. His loyal butler, Mr. Brooks, was precariously supporting Alexander, the Earl of Bainbridge, who appeared to be inebriated. Alexander's uncoordinated attempts at maintaining his balance were causing both men to stagger dangerously.

What the hell? James rushed down the stairs, and they precariously wobbled.

“Alexander, are you well?” he asked, reaching to steady his friend by taking more of his weight.

Brooks, visibly relieved by James’s arrival, managed a strained smile. “Your Grace, I feared you would be abed,” he said, his voice heavy with relief.

“Help me get him up the stairs to a guest room,” James directed. Together, they maneuvered the unsteady earl up the staircase, supporting him firmly between them.

Once they reached the guest room, James gently helped Alexander onto the bed.

“I will take it from here, Brooks.”

“Very well, Your Grace,” he responded with a nod, giving a respectful bow before exiting the room.

Alexander’s clothes were drenched—whether from rain or some nighttime misadventure, James couldn’t tell. He lay on the bed, barely conscious and completely limp. Concerned for his friend’s comfort, James began by removing Alexander’s boots, setting them aside with a thud. He then proceeded to carefully undress him, removing the soaked layers to prevent any risk of chill.

Alexander, now somewhat more aware but still visibly affected by his inebriation, lay back on the bed, his expression a mix of resignation and faint irritation.

“Bloody hell, Minerva, I already told you, it is only one woman I want in this life ... even if she will not have me,” Alexander muttered, half to himself and half to James.

“I am not Minerva,” James responded dryly, focusing on getting Alexander out of his wet clothes. “You need to get out of these sodden clothes, or you might catch your damn death.”

Alexander's gaze shifted down to his own state of undress with a slow, dawning awareness. With a grumble, he managed to peel off the remaining wet garments, his movements clumsy and uncoordinated. Once freed from the clinging fabric, he collapsed back onto the bed, now completely naked.

"Is this about Lady Penelope?" James ventured cautiously, knowing the sensitivity of the topic.

"I do not wish to speak about her," Alexander replied tightly, his voice holding a sharp edge of pain.

James made a non-committal grunt in response, deciding not to press the matter further. It was well-known among their circle that Alexander harbored a deep, unrequited affection for Lady Penelope. The intensity of his feelings was almost palpable whenever he was near her, his gaze laden with a longing that bordered on scandalous indecency. For her part, Lady Penelope always seemed flustered by his attention, blushing deeply and keeping her distance, which only seemed to fuel Alexander's want.

James grabbed a towel and attempted to dry his hair.

"You are uncommonly beautiful for a man, Basil, and rumors say you have a ruddy cock and good stamina, but I am not interested in you."

He chuckled. "Dry your damn hair yourself."

James placed it aside and pulled a blanket over Alexander to ward off the chill. He watched his friend for a moment, wondering when they all became bloody fools about love. He felt a surge of sympathy for Alexander, understanding the torment of badly wanting someone, an experience James knew only since he met Elizabeth.

“Try to get some rest, Alexander.” James fed some logs into the fire to help his friend stave off the chill of the stormy night. He left the room quietly, closing the door behind him with a soft click, leaving Alexander to the mercies of sleep.

Now, Miss Armstrong, precisely what exactly am I to do about us?

James, never one to dwell on matters he had no immediate answer to, decided to enjoy their time together until she returned to New York.

We are lovers. There is no reason to needlessly complicate matters. And the sharp, unfathomable wrench in his heart was ruthlessly suppressed.

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:47 am

For the next two weeks, James enjoyed Elizabeth's delightful company, and each moment with his lover mocked his resolve to remain indifferent and simply enjoy a pleasurable affair. As he awoke each morning, thoughts of Elizabeth filled his mind, and she remained his final contemplation before drifting off to sleep each night.

There were a few nights when his lover was obliged to attend social events with her mother and aunt, whom she declared held the undying hope she would accept one of the many gentlemen now showering her with attention. Elizabeth remained steadfast that their advances were unwelcome; she, however, accepted a few dances and the flowers delivered to her aunt's home. James watched it with a mild sort of amusement at the gentlemen tripping over their feet to woo her. He felt a fierce pride in her will and determination to live life and not merely endure it on the whims of others.

On Monday, he took her once again to see fireworks at Vauxhall Gardens. James paid handsomely for the display to last much longer. It had been spectacular, lighting up the night sky with bursts of color that reflected brilliantly in Elizabeth's wide, delighted eyes. In a moment of unbridled joy, she'd turned to James and kissed him on his lips. The bold move caught the attention of nearby onlookers, causing a stir among the crowd. Some whispered and pointed, amused or scandalized as they were both dressed as gentlemen. Elizabeth merely winked and kissed him again, this time lingering over the caress.

Tuesday, James appeared at another ball, shocking many into whispering. He'd danced with three other ladies before bowing over Elizabeth's hand and sweeping her into the sensual waltz. He noted how disapproving his mother seemed while his lover's mother appeared delighted.

Wednesday, James surprised Elizabeth with a private balloon ride. He recalled the awe and longing on her face when she saw a balloon soaring in the air for the very first time. His lover had been astonished when she realized that he arranged for them to go up. She had screamed her joy once they soared in the sky, lifting her hands upward as if reaching for the stars. Elizabeth was fearless, adventurous, and, once again, uncaring of the workers who steered the hot air balloon, for she had walked right into his arms, resting her weight against his chest and watched the night sky with him.

Thursday, he had woken with an eagerness inside that his mother, who called upon him, commented that he seemed different ... happier. That night, he accompanied his mother to a smaller soiree, and not surprisingly, Elizabeth was in attendance. James's heart had pounded from the smile she bestowed when she saw him. James found himself increasingly enchanted by Elizabeth's vivacity and her fearless embrace of every new experience.

Their meeting on Friday was happenstance. James visited the Royal Observatory and encountered Elizabeth, who was in the presence of her brother. The night they flew in the skies in the hot air balloon, she had expressed a fascination with the stars. The way her face lit up as she peered through the massive telescope, the sound of her laughter as she teased her brother, was a sight that James knew he would remember forever. She asked questions, her curiosity boundless, and her enthusiasm infectious. James found himself drawn into the mysteries of the universe right alongside her. The minx deliberately brushed her hands against his several times, and their ease of camaraderie had clearly left Brandon feeling uncomfortable.

James waited a few days and then invited her to a literary salon. She daringly attended dressed in her gentlemen's attire, amused when some stared longer than proper, trying to ascertain just who this creature with the duke was. It was an evening filled with poetry readings and philosophical debates, and Elizabeth did not suppress wit and sharp intellect, laughing and chatting for the night.

Each day brought a new adventure, a new memory, and with each passing moment, James's resolve to keep their relationship light and unattached cracked, as something inexplicable slammed at it over and over.

"Are you aware that you have been staring into your drink for the last few minutes?" Oliver drawled, walking to stand beside James. "What mystery lies in this glass of whisky?"

James tipped the glass to his mouth and emptied it. "I am thinking."

"I know it," the marquess drawled. "I have never seen you like this, my friend, and I am wondering if we should be worried."

James lifted a brow. "Worried about what?"

"Tonight is the first we have seen you at Aphrodite in almost three weeks."

"This is not cause for any sort of concern. You and Radbourne are acting like wives and—" His words broke off sharply at the sight of the lady who strolled into the main ballroom of the pleasure palace.

Oliver followed his line of sight and whistled. "Is she one of Madam Rebecca's new courtesans?"

James froze. Elizabeth. He would know the curve of her lips, the jut of her chin, her sensual walk, and that smile anywhere. Her figure was elegantly clad in a red ball gown featuring a daringly low neckline that clung to her body before cascading down to her ankles in shimmering waves. The gown emphasized her slender waist and full curves beautifully. She wore a dark gold domino mask adorned with black feathers, which concealed the upper part of her face, adding a touch of mystery. Her dark hair tumbled in glorious waves down to her lower back.

Several men stared at her, the covetousness in their stare. She seemed oblivious to this, looking about, her eyes wide behind that mask. Elizabeth strolled toward an area that held several chaise longues. She pressed a hand over her heart, her lips parted in shock and perhaps a bit of wonder. Tonight, the interior of Aphrodite was dimly lit and bedecked with oriental drapes and lush carpeting. Ladies wore jewel-studded masks on their faces and their gowns had plunging necklines with sheer materials that revealed much of their legs and bodies. Elizabeth spun in a circle, seemingly trying to take in everything at once. Couples danced the waltz far too intimately, some salaciously embracing and kissing against the wall, and another lady in a black-and-blue mask reposed on a chaise, with a man clearly riding between her thighs.

“You know her,” Oliver said. “Now, this is interesting. Is it—”

“Do not say it,” James warned, ignoring his smirking friend. He strolled past the marquess, going down the winding staircase, never taking his eyes off his lover lest she vanished in the crowd.

Why are you here, Elizabeth? James silently asked, his damn heart pounding as he approached her.

As if his lover felt him, she glanced over her shoulder, and even in the dimness, he saw the spark of delight in her blue eyes. That lush mouth curved in a daring smile, and she walked away, at times stopping before couples to watch their congress.

She stopped before Viscount Hardwick and his lover for the night. Hardwick glanced up at her, a carnal smirk touching his mouth before attending to his lover, fucking deep into her throat. Several people had gathered around them watching, and James went up behind Elizabeth. She leaned against him, her chest lifting with her ragged and very aroused breathing.

“I recognize her,” Elizabeth whispered. “That ... she is his viscountess. Why ...”

“Why are they here and not at their home?”

She nodded, shifting a bit closer to observe their play.

“Some like to watch; some like to be watched.”

“Oh,” she said, letting out a sigh echoing with such longing his gut tightened.

“Why are you here?” James growled against her ear, slipping a hand around her waist to hold her to him.

“I was at my brother’s home yesterday ... and I overheard a conversation where a few wondered when you would visit here again.”

James stilled. “So you decided to come here?”

His lover turned in the cage of his arm, lifted a leg to hook it at his waist, slipped her hands over his shoulders and damn well climbed his body to wrap her legs around his hips. She shocked James by slipping a gloved finger under his chin and jerking it up.

“My brother wondered if you would be fucking one or two of the new ladies,” she drawled, something hot and provoking in her eyes. “Your cock belongs to only me while we are lovers.”

James’s cock got so hard and so quickly his head felt light. He’d never had a lover act so blatantly possessive of him or one who met his stare with such carnal confidence.

She leaned forward ever so slightly and nipped the corner of his mouth.

“Is that why you are here, my duke?”

“No.”

“Hmm,” she hummed softly, brushing her mouth against his. “It was a most enlightening conversation. It seems you like to share your lovers.”

“I am not sharing you,” leaped from him like a snarl.

Pleasure gleamed in her eyes. “I am also deeply averse to sharing you.”

She kissed him, and their tongues dueled in a sensual glide for several breathless moments. He walk-stumbled with her over to a wide armchair. James was vaguely aware of several people drawing closer, watching them as they passionately kissed. Elizabeth pulled her mouth from his, and her breathing fractured. She glanced over her shoulders, her gaze skipping over the more than twenty people who stood by watching them. Her smile surprised him, and a dark wash of lust rushed through his body.

“Are these the people I need to stake my claim before?” she drawled, shifting back to face him.

Deep inside her gaze, he saw desire and another emotion he could not identify. James realized then that the conversation she overheard had also wounded something inside of her. He stilled, awareness thrumming in his veins. If he had overheard anyone talking about Elizabeth taking any other lover, he would have likely lost his damn mind. He tenderly brushed a wisp of hair from her forehead. She smelled so sweet, so warm and alive.

“Hands off,” she whispered, holding his gaze, her emotions naked. Only he was not able to understand them.

James complied, gripping the edges of the armchair, staring at his lover, his damn

heart tumbling over inside his chest. Using her teeth, she tugged off her gloves and dropped them to the carpeted floor. Nimble fingers untied his cravat, and his senses were so heightened that James heard the whisper of silk as she tugged the cloth from around his throat. His gut was tied in knots and his heart pounded with anticipation. Her eyes gleaming, she balled up his cravat and pushed it into his mouth.

Elizabeth leaned close, placing her mouth against his ear. “You have not touched me, yet my pussy aches with want. I am already so wet, James.”

He bit down on the cloth, a soft groan rumbling from his throat. She reached between their bodies, opening his flap and freeing his cock. James bit tighter on the cloth once her delicate hands tried to clasp his girth.

“I have been wondering about you fucking and owning my arse as you’d said.” She nipped his ear sharply. “Is that what a lover here can give you that I am not giving?”

He shook his head, wanting to tug the cloth from his mouth and tell her that she was everything he could ever want in a lover. She leaned back and held his gaze. Elizabeth lifted her weight and positioned herself on the tip of his cock. It was fucking laughable how his heart pounded. Many had shifted closer, but it was his gaze she held. The picture she presented was one of erotic delight, for she forced those who watched to use their lurid imagination. Though her pussy was poised over his throbbing length, and he could feel the wet heat brushing against his cock head, no one could see.

The gown had barely ridden to her knees, revealing silken stockings tied with lace garters and delicate dancing slippers. She rubbed his cock head over her cunt, and he gripped the armchair so hard his knuckles ached.

“All of me belongs to you, James, and all of you belongs to me,” she whispered, her eyes soft and luminous. “As long as we are lovers ... this pussy is yours, my arse, the

sweet, hot throat you praised ... my fidelity and friendship are yours.”

He almost spent his load right then. Her soft promise sent a flood of warmth through his chest. James could not look away from the sweet sensuality of her face as she started to sink her pussy down on his cock. She bit her bottom lip, her eyes widening. He'd always ensured her pussy was soaked before he took her, but he could do nothing but bite down on the cravat stuffed in his mouth and clutched the armchair, knowing he must not release it until his lover wanted him to.

“I feel as if your cock is splitting my pussy open, James.”

Fucking hell. He groaned, the sound rough, garbled, and desperate. His balls tightened as she rocked onto his cock, bearing down even though he could see the hint of pain in her beautiful eyes.

“Last night, I dreamed of you licking my slit and tonguing me until I climaxed. I think of you often, James, even on the nights when you ride me to exhaustion. I still stumble into bed and dream of you.”

Another muffled sound escaped him. Never in his life had he experienced such hunger ... such want. With a sense of shock, James realized he had never moaned for another lover.

“Do you dream of me?”

Every night, he silently snarled.

Elizabeth must have seen it in his eyes, for she smiled. “There are times I feel as if you have invaded and possessed me, but when I stare into your eyes, I only see chilling beauty. I like when you look at me so ... as if I just might also own a piece of your soul.”

James itched to feel that satiny skin under his hands, to feel the silk of her hair against his body. She gripped his shoulder with one hand and slipped the other under her dress to find her clitoris. Her fingers plucked and strummed her nub, and her wetness coated his cock, sending ripples of heated pleasure from his aching balls to his entire body. He teetered on the edge. Sweat slicked his body, and he felt as if he burned. His lover bore down harder, a sharp cry leaving her as she impaled her cunt deeper.

“James,” she whimpered, her fingers rubbing her clitoris harder. “I am so hot and eager for you to fill me up.”

Elizabeth kissed the corner of his mouth, the tenderness a stark contrast to the lush way she rolled her hips, sinking deeper onto his length. “You look so beautiful, James. Your jaw is hard, the muscles of your throat so pronounced. I know you want to toss me onto my knees and punish my cunt with a hot fucking ... is that not what you told me, my duke, that this desperate want writhing low in my belly can only be eased with the hottest of fucking?”

By God ... I damn well cannot ... too soon ...

She held his gaze, her eyes dark with lust, as she sank her wet pussy inch after torturous inch onto his cock. Shock waves of pleasure shuddered through James. He felt when her pussy finally caved against the force she pushed down with, and she slid onto his cock until he was buried to the hilt. Her wild cry echoed in his ears. She was so tight sweat beaded on his forehead. Elizabeth rocked, swiveled, then slid up and down over and over, riding him with intense sensuality, provocatively murmuring against his mouth that he was not allowed to release.

She was the most ravishing thing he had ever seen. And by God, James knew Elizabeth was the only thing he would ever need in this lifetime. This woman made him so damn weak and desperate. Her breathing grew ragged, and her words petered out to moans and sobs of pleasure as she twined both hands around his nape, dropped

her forehead to his and thoroughly fucked her pussy onto his throbbing cock. She tightened, rippling over his length as she unraveled, soaking his trousers with her continuous climax.

“James,” she cried out, tightening again and ripping his release from his body.

She was beautiful in her climax, skin flushed pink, hair spread, tumbling over her body and brushing against his skin like a silken waterfall, her pussy fluttering around his cock as his release pulled another orgasm from her. His muffled groan was one of deep pleasure, and his damn body shook.

“Now you can hold me, James,” she whispered, tugging the cravat from between his teeth.

He released the arms of the chair, hugging her close. His lover kissed him, her tongue gliding sensually into his mouth, stealing James’s breath away. Finally, their kiss ended. Her breath whispered across his mouth as her lashes lifted, and she stared into his eyes. Elizabeth’s gaze was wide and vulnerable.

“You are so damn perfect,” he said gruffly. “So beautiful.”

She smiled, yawned indelicately, leaned forward and buried her face in the curve of his throat. James eased her off his length and stuffed himself back in his trousers. He stood and arranged her so that he lifted her in his arms. She did not lift her head, and given her deep breathing, James suspected she had already fallen asleep. Only a few glanced their way as he walked with her through the crowd, for they already moved on to watching others. With her mask and the dimly lit room, it would be extremely difficult for anyone to recognize Elizabeth. Still, he would not have her a minute longer at Aphrodite.

He exited the club and walked a short distance to his parked carriage. The footman

who opened the door dared not look at the lady in James's arms. He briefly woke her so they could enter without any mishap but tugged her back into his arms once they were inside and seated. He glanced down at her and met her drowsy gaze.

"Sleep," he said, "Once we are at your aunt's home—"

"No," Elizabeth said, smothering another yawn. "Take me to my brother's home. I was visiting him and had not planned to return home until tomorrow. From his conversation, I gathered he went to an ... orgy. I hope I recalled the proper word."

Bloody hell. From the bright humor in his lover's gaze, James knew she understood her brother had gone to indulge in a night of licentious excess somewhere. She closed her eyes and, within a few beats, tumbled into sleep. He knocked on the roof of the carriage, and when the coachman attended to him, James directed him to Brandon's home. Several minutes later, he roused Elizabeth and watched as she deftly slipped inside the townhouse.

James returned to the carriage, instructing the coachman to take him home. Elizabeth was unlike anyone he'd ever known—bold, intelligent, and utterly fearless. Her kisses were always filled with promises of passion, her laughter felt like a necessity, and her presence a constant challenge to his self-control. James was not a man to obsess over anything, especially a lover. For this reason, he felt as if he were tumbling into something he did not understand. He bloody did not like it, and for that reason, the following week, he resolved not to see her until he reasserted control of these maddening feelings.

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The main sitting area of Aphrodite was buzzing with activity, but James was indifferent from the revelry, lost in thought as he swirled the whisky in his glass. It had been an entire week since he last saw and held Elizabeth in his arms, and James fiercely missed her. It was unnerving.

“If I had not witnessed this myself, I would not have believed it,” Radbourne remarked, his voice tinged with amusement as he nudged James’s boot with his foot. “You are entirely detached from everything around us. Madam Rebecca went out of her way to organize tonight’s Egyptian theme and dances, and you are decidedly unimpressed. Why did you even come?”

A humorless smile quirked James’s mouth. “To gain perspective,” he replied, his gaze fixed on the amber liquid in his glass.

“Oh?” Oliver said, his attention partially diverted from the buxom beauty trying her best to capture his interest. “What do you need perspective on?”

“This unending craving I have for a particular woman,” James confessed, his voice low.

Radbourne straightened up, his casual demeanor shifting to one of keen interest. “One particular woman?” he echoed, clearly surprised. “Is such a thing truly possible?”

“Hmm,” James murmured, taking a long sip of his whisky. “I have deliberately stayed away from her for the last seven days, thinking this feeling will surely pass. Instead, every damn day I must talk myself out of sending her a note to meet me or seek her out.”

“A note?” Radbourne laughed. “How ... sweet.”

James, unable to suppress a smirk, grabbed a cushion and tossed it at his still laughing friend.

“Take a woman upstairs to your rooms,” Oliver suggested casually. “See if—”

“I gave up my rooms earlier,” James cut him off, a hint of irritation in his voice.

Radbourne sobered immediately, and Oliver looked at James with astonishment. The atmosphere around them shifted, the earlier mirth cooling into something more contemplative.

James chuckled dryly. “I haven’t taken one of the ladies here in months. Hell, there was a time I was tugging, and I felt so damn empty I just stopped without climaxing. That happened three times before I just lost interest.”

He paused, emptying his glass before setting it down on the table before them. “I still found a measure of amusement coming here, but since ... since her, Aphrodite is like a damn afterthought. The only time I feel a measure of excitement is when I think about bringing her here.”

“Ah,” Radbourne murmured, “that lady who teased us with your riding so exquisitely is her.”

James’s usual detached facade cracked slightly, revealing a depth of emotion that he seldom allowed others to see. A man known for his dispassionate dalliances and libertine lifestyle, now it appeared he was caught in the throes of something far deeper and entirely consuming.

It was bloody laughable. It was also an alchemy he might never understand.

“Who is this lady? Do we know her? Never say—” Radbourne’s words broke off sharply, and he with a devilish glint in his eyes, said, “Armstrong. We have not seen you in a couple of weeks. I heard a most interesting tidbit, that you are enamored with one of Madam Rebecca’s girls and you are hoping to set her up as your mistress.”

Surprisingly, a flush mounted on their friend’s cheeks as he dropped his weight onto one of the armchairs.

Radbourne chuckled and continued, “Beatrice, I think her name is, but you fondly call her Bea.”

The flush on Armstrong’s face deepened, indicating the topic touched a nerve. He took the drink offered by a woman in a revealing gown with a distracted nod.

“I have no time for your ribbing, Radbourne. My sister was in a carriage accident, which still has me rattled, and Madam Rebecca is annoying me by insisting I cannot ask for the same lady each time I visit. I believe she is trying—”

An emotion James couldn’t quite identify twisted through his gut. “What did you say, Brandon?”

He was momentarily confused by James’s intensity. “Madam Rebecca says—”

“About the carriage accident,” James interrupted sharply. His heart felt like it would pound outside of his chest.

Brandon paused, the levity draining from his expression as he registered the seriousness in James’s tone. He hesitated, then spoke with more caution, “My aunt’s carriage was involved in an accident a couple of days ago. My sister was the only person aboard.”

“Was she hurt?” James pressed, his tone sharp, each word clipped with concern that he could not be bothered to disguise.

“I ... what is happening?” Brandon was visibly shaken by James’s reaction.

“Was she hurt?” James demanded again, his patience wearing thin.

“She had a small bruise on her shoulder and complained of some pain there,” Brandon responded. “The physician was called, and he gave a good report, thankfully.”

Without another word, James was on his feet. He moved swiftly, cutting through the crowd of guests dressed in the opulent finery of an ancient Egyptian-themed event.

He barely noticed the surprised looks from those he brushed past, his concentration entirely on getting out of the pleasure palace and finding out more about Elizabeth’s injury. The idea of Elizabeth hurt, even slightly, was enough to set his world off its axis, exposing the depth of his feelings for her even if he wanted to bloody hide from them. As he pushed through the doors, the cool night air hit him, and he took a steady breath.

James rattled off instructions to his coachman and went into his carriage. They moved with an urgent but careful pace through familiar streets. The carriage stopped, and he dismounted, nodding to his coachman, who had stopped a few houses down.

James stealthily moved toward the side gate leading to the back gardens.

The moon provided scant illumination, casting long shadows that helped conceal his movements. He remembered her once mentioning that her room was on the second floor, conveniently away from her aunt and mother’s rooms on the third floor. James selected a few small pebbles from the ground, their rough edges cool and solid in his

palm, and tossed them gently against a window. He waited, hoping for a sign of response. The first window remained dark and silent, as did the second. A twinge of frustration nudged him as he aimed at the third window, a bit more forcefully this time.

That window finally shoved open, and Elizabeth's head appeared, her hair loose, cascading around her shoulders as she peered down into the darkness. James's heart leaped at the sight of her, an unknown feeling momentarily flooding through him. Keeping to the shadows, he watched as she scanned the garden below, her expression a mix of confusion and concern.

Elizabeth withdrew, closing the window softly. Seizing the moment, James approached the wall beneath her window where a climbing trellis, laden with ivy, offered a precarious but viable path upwards. He began to climb, the old wood creaking under his weight, his hands finding holds among the thick vines.

Reaching the small balcony, he hoisted himself over the railing with a quiet grunt. The balcony window was not latched, and he pushed it open, stepping into the dimly lit room. His sudden appearance elicited a startled scream from Elizabeth, followed by a sharp gasp.

"James! Have you taken leave of your senses?" she said, her voice a mix of shock and relief as she recognized him.

Then in the very next breath she hurtled forward, laughed, and jumped into his arms, hooking her legs around his hips, all but climbing his body. Her unbound hair rippled in glorious waves down her back. A few wisps enchantingly framed her face. Elizabeth twined her hands around his neck. The feel of her fingers against his nape sent a spark of want through his entire body. He closed his arms around her back, aware of his pounding heart.

“You scoundrel,” she murmured, then lightly laughed. “I am astonished you snuck into my bedchamber. What if you were caught?”

“I have many experiences sneaking—”

She pinched his side, seemingly with all her strength.

“What villainy is this?” he muttered.

“It’s a pinch,” she grouched. “How dare you mention stealing into other women’s bedchambers before me.”

James grinned. “My apologies.”

A softening touched her eyes, and though a faint smile played on her lips, it was tinged with exasperation.

“I had to see you to make sure you were well,” he said. “Brandon mentioned the accident.”

“You could have called on me tomorrow; my aunt would have been delighted,” she teased lightly, though her voice quivered with emotion.

“But where’s the adventure in that?” he replied, pressing his mouth to her forehead.

James held her firmly, walked over to the bed, placed her in the center and then climbed beside her. Her face flushed a delicate, rosy hue, and her eyes searched his face, a question he did not understand in her gaze.

“Let me see your shoulder.”

She gave him her back, and he tugged at the nightgown, baring her creamy shoulders. There was a red bruise. “Does it still hurt?”

“No.”

“Are you certain?”

“I am.”

He brushed his mouth over her nape, and she jerked away, giggling.

“You are ticklish.”

“Frightfully so!” Elizabeth rolled toward him, nestling close and throwing her arm over his chest. “I missed you these last few days.”

He lowered his head and tenderly brushed a kiss across her mouth. I missed you too, James silently admitted, refusing to say the words aloud lest they opened a door he could not step back from.

“Let me hold you,” he said.

“Your heart is pounding so, James,” she said softly, resting her cheek on his chest. “I can hear it.”

“You could have been hurt or killed,” he said gruffly.

“It was not such a serious accident,” she murmured, tenderly brushing her finger over his brow. “You worry for naught. The pain in my shoulder has eased.”

Relief washed through him. “What happened?”

“A carriage pulled by a team of four seemed to have lost control. It careened into aunt’s carriage. Luckily, I was the only one who visited Hatchard’s. No one else was harmed.”

“Good.”

“Your heart is still pounding.”

“You are reposing atop me in a very provocative manner.”

She giggled, and her sweet laugh sunk deep inside his bones, filling him with a warmth that banished the chill of the night.

“What books did you get?”

“Othello and Richard III and The Castle of Otranto.”

“Ah, all excellent.”

“You read them all?”

“Hmm.”

“What else do you like other than tuppung, chess, the pianoforte and reading?”

“You,” he said, shifting to deeply kiss her. She moaned, parting her lips to sinuously glide her tongue against his. The beat of her heart against his chest was felt in every part of James’s body.

He broke their kiss, and she smiled, resting her chin on his chest.

“You also like kissing,” she drawled. “Do you wonder about me?”

“Every hour of the day.”

She narrowed her gaze in mock outrage. “Only every hour?”

James chuckled. “Other than chess and reading ... and tugging and kissing, what do you like?”

“I enjoy fishing.”

“Fishing?”

“Yes.” Another laugh came from her. “My father usually stole me away to teach me how to fish. When mama found out, she was enraged. Young ladies do not fish, but somehow, she never stopped me from tagging along with papa and Brandon.”

How wistful she sounded.

“Then we shall go fishing together at my country estate in Derbyshire.”

“I would be delighted, she said, grinning. Elizabeth delicately cleared her throat. “James?”

He frowned. “It is not like you to sound hesitant.”

“I am not with child,” she said softly.

He closed his eyes, for in her tone, he heard the echoes of disappointment and longing. James had no words to offer her and only held her in his arms until her breathing evened out and she fell asleep.

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The morning sun streamed through the window, casting a warm glow across Elizabeth's room as she woke. Her eyes darted around, half-expecting to see James still there, half-believing the previous night had been a dream woven by her own longing. But the indentation on the pillow next to hers was unmistakably real, tangible proof of his presence. She let herself fall back onto the bed with a thump, a silly grin spreading across her face as she stared up at the ceiling. The memory of James holding her until she drifted off was vivid and comforting.

She remembered waking briefly in the middle of the night, and there he was—still by her side.

“You are still here,” she had gasped.

“I could not leave; you fell asleep with my body as your pillow. How could I wake you?” James had replied, his voice low and tender.

In response, she had kissed him, and he had groaned, a sound mingled with longing and restraint. “I did not come here to ravish you. I just needed to hold you.”

“I know,” she had whispered back, a thrill bursting inside her heart. She had pressed her lips to his again, losing herself in the moment before curling back into the crook of his arm and falling into a deep sleep.

Now, as Elizabeth rolled over, her hand brushed against something under her pillow. Curious, she reached under and pulled out a piece of paper. Unfolding it, she read.

You are an atrocious sleeper. I will forever remember nodding off and waking with

your finger in my nose. I will be leaving town for a few days to visit my sister and nieces in Hertfordshire. I do hope to see you at the ball upon my return.

“I did not,” she gasped, the humor of the situation washing over her as she laughed aloud. “What ball?”

Her thoughts already flitting to the next time she would see him, Elizabeth rang for the lady’s maid she shared with her mother. After a soothing bath, she dressed in a lovely dark yellow day gown, arranging her hair in a simple, elegant chignon. She decided to write another letter to Cassie and her father, perhaps even planning a visit to the Royal Museum with Brandon.

With a sense of contentment and anticipation, she descended the stairs to the breakfast room. She enjoyed a simple meal of toast with strawberry preserves and thin slices of ham. Afterward, she joined her mother and aunt in the drawing room, ready to share the morning and discuss the plans for the day.

“Bette,” her mother said with a warm smile. “How are you feeling?”

“I am quite well, Mama. My shoulder no longer hurts. The liniment Dr. Parchman gave worked rather well,” she said, sitting on the smaller sofa opposite her mother and aunt.

“You can help me sort out these invitations,” Aunt Sally invited. “I am astonished at the amount we have received in recent weeks.”

Elizabeth reached for a few envelopes, looking through them to see if any letter was from New York.

“Gracious,” Aunt Sally cried, excitement gleaming in her eyes. “We have received an invitation from the Duchess of Basil!”

Elizabeth's heart lurched. Is this the ball James mentioned?

Her aunt wilted against the cushions. "I am completely overwhelmed."

"Is this not a good thing? Why are you overwhelmed?" her mother asked, setting aside the delicate embroidery she was stitching.

"I have never been lucky enough to be invited to one of the duchess's yearly midnight balls. Only the top echelon of the ton is usually favored." Her aunt continued to fan herself slowly, clearly trying to recover from her initial shock. "I just cannot believe our good fortune. The Duchess of Basil's invitations are like golden tickets, and here we are, suddenly among the chosen."

Her mother looked on with delight, clearly pleased with the unexpected social elevation. "It's all thanks to you, Bette."

"Mama, please, it's just an invitation. The duke is simply being courteous," Elizabeth tried to temper her mother's excitement with reality, though her own heart fluttered.

Her mother and aunt exchanged a look that Elizabeth had come to recognize—one full of plans and hopes, the kind that usually led to incessant talks of potential suitors and matrimonial strategies. She internally groaned at the prospect of enduring another round of their matchmaking efforts. Just then, her eyes caught sight of a letter bearing her father's familiar handwriting. A surge of excitement replaced her frustration. "It's a letter from Papa!"

"I see you are eager to read it," her mother said, her voice warm with understanding. "Go ahead to your room or the smaller parlor. Your aunt and I need to discuss something important."

Elizabeth quickly agreed. "I shall return in a few minutes."

She gingerly picked up the letter, her heart quivering with anticipation. She swiftly left the drawing room, her thoughts already racing with the possibilities of the news her father might have sent. Upon reaching the solace of her own room, she could hardly wait to sit before breaking the seal of the letter. Elizabeth unfolded the paper eagerly, her eyes darting across the lines, searching for news of her family's well-being, her father's business, or perhaps some updates about Cassandra and William.

My dearest Bette,

It seems scarcely a day has passed since your departure, yet I find myself deeply missing your presence and the many questions you would ask me about work at the end of the day. I am eagerly awaiting your first letter, which I hope will be as expansive and detailed as our usual conversations. I am keen to hear about every aspect of your six-week journey to England. I trust you found wonder in each day and that the seas were kind to you.

Tell me everything about the places you have visited. I unashamedly confess I want to live vicariously through your adventures in England. And what of your brother? How is Brandon faring? Has he managed to keep healthy? Does he seem content? His letters are so focused on business that he forgets his father is more interested in his son's happiness than his commercial success. Please let me know about his well-being, as he seldom gives away much in his correspondence.

Bette, I must also express a father's concern. If you find that life in England does not bring you joy, do not feel obliged to stay. Remember, your happiness is paramount, and if that means returning to New York, do so without a second thought. Though your mother has grand plans for matchmaking, I trust that you will follow your heart in these matters. I hope, sincerely, that if you do find someone, he is a gentleman worthy of your love and one who cherishes you deeply in return.

Should circumstances lead you back home, know that a place awaits you in our

family business. Your insights have always been invaluable to me, and I would be delighted to teach you more about our operations. Whether working closely with me or from the comfort of your home, I am confident in your abilities and would relish the opportunity to have you by my side professionally. Do not think about what your mother will say or feel. She will eventually come around.

Until we meet again, remember that you are never far from my thoughts. Take care, my dear daughter, and write soon.

With all my love, your father,

Archibald Armstrong

“Oh, Papa, I miss you too, and dare you speak to Mama about me working?” she asked, wincing at imagining her mother’s reaction. She glanced back at the line that had wrenched emotions she did not want to break apart through her heart.

I hope, sincerely, that if you do find someone, he is a gentleman worthy of your love and one who cherishes you deeply in return.

“How I wish I could give you the happy news that I found a man I love ...”

James’s silver eyes and a sensual smile rose in her thoughts. Wild flutters went off in her belly, and an almost agonizing ache rose in her heart. Pushing aside her longing, knowing the futility of sliding too deep, Elizabeth folded her father’s letter and placed it in her hatbox. Today, she would visit Kensington Gardens and perhaps the bookstore again. What she would not do is yearn for impossible things, muddling her heart more than it already was.

* * *

A few days after receiving the duchess's invitation, Elizabeth, along with her aunt and mother, stepped into the opulent townhouse in Berkeley Square. The grandeur of the ballroom immediately captivated her. It was a vision in white, gold, and touches of blue, all set against the backdrop of richly draped velvet curtains adorned with golden tassels that framed the massive front windows. The room was alive with a harmonious blend of music, laughter, and spirited conversation. At the far end, the ballroom extended to meet the glazed doors that opened onto the small, meticulously curated gardens, leaving the drapes unclosed to integrate the lush greenery into the evening's ambiance.

"I wonder if the duke will be here tonight," Aunt Sally murmured softly, her voice tinged with curiosity.

"The duchess is his mother," Elizabeth reminded her, a hint of amusement in her tone.

Her mother and aunt exchanged a knowing glance, causing Elizabeth to frown slightly in apprehension. "Mama ... please do not read too much into our receiving an invitation."

"The duchess has hosted this ball annually for the last six years. This is the first time we have ever been invited," her aunt noted, fanning herself lightly while hiding a sly smile behind her fan. "I can say with confidence that we received it because of the duke's regard for you, Bette."

Just then, a ripple of excitement swept through the crowd. Aunt Sally's eyes sparkled with delight. Elizabeth turned, her cheeks warming with a blush, as she saw James approaching directly toward her. While she was thrilled to see him, she knew she would now have to navigate the evening carefully to keep her mother and aunt's matchmaking ambitions at bay. She caught the brief look of surprise in his mother, the duchess's, eyes before she composed her features into a polite mask.

“Miss Armstrong,” James greeted her with a low, slightly teasing tone, wicked deviltry gleaming in his eyes. “Would you honor me with the next dance? I have it on the highest authority that a waltz is the next set.”

Elizabeth knew without a doubt that he had arranged for a waltz to be played next. She gracefully curtsied and placed her hand in his, letting him lead her onto the dance floor. Being held in his arms felt sinfully delightful. As they danced, James smiled and drew her closer, guiding her through the steps with masculine grace. They moved in perfect sync, the world around them blurring into a swirl of colors and sounds.

“Within the next hour, meet me in the library.”

Her heart skipped a beat. “James!” she said softly, half in protest, half in anticipation.

He winked. “It’s the fifth door on the left. Worry not, I will not ravish you.”

As their dance concluded, he escorted her back to her mother, engaging in a few minutes of polite conversation with them. Gratefully, he then turned his attention to other ladies, dancing with them and thereby deflecting the speculative gazes from Elizabeth.

During the next hour, she engaged in polite conversation with her aunt and mother, who introduced her to several ladies whom she had not met before. Though she tried to find a moment to slip away and meet James as planned, extricating herself proved challenging. She noticed James discreetly leaving the ballroom and realized, with a hint of disappointment, that nearly another hour had passed without an opportunity to see him.

As her mother continued to monopolize her time, Elizabeth resigned herself to the likelihood that she wouldn’t meet him that evening. Her aunt approached, a hand pressed to her forehead. “I have the most dreadful migraine coming on,” she

lamented. “The noise is not helping.”

“We shall leave,” her mother decided swiftly.

Very well,” her aunt agreed. “It is so dreadful to come now. I am sorely vexed.”

Elizabeth said, “Aunt, once we reach home, you will need a tisane.”

Aunt Sally squeezed her arm. “Oh, no, my dear, I would never forgive myself if you had to leave too. This is a great opportunity.”

“No, Aunt, it is not,” Elizabeth responded, her voice tinged with exasperation. “It does not mean anything that our family received an invitation. The duke has no intention of marrying, and the most our family can claim is a friendship.”

“I still will not forgive myself if you have to leave as well,” her aunt insisted, her tone firm. “The night is young, not yet midnight. Enjoy yourself and dance the night away. We will send back the carriage for you.”

“Are you certain?” Elizabeth asked.

“Yes,” her aunt confirmed with a nod.

“Are you not worried I shall be alone without a chaperone?”

“Pish,” her mother dismissed lightly. “You are a young lady of three and twenty and with good sense.”

If only they knew the scandalous nature of her planned meeting with the duke, Elizabeth thought wryly, her mother might indeed expire from shock. With a mix of relief and anticipation, she watched as her mother and aunt departed from the ball.

She waited a few more discreet moments before slipping away, her heart beating with excitement and nerves.

She hurried down the hallway and knocked softly on the library door before entering. Inside, James was lounging casually on a large oak desk, a glass of whisky in his hand. At her entrance, he set the glass down and stood up, his eyes lighting up with amusement and something warmer. Elizabeth closed the door and locked it.. Laughing, she rushed toward him and leaped into his arms.

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James chuckled and effortlessly caught Elizabeth. She wrapped her legs around his hips, her arms sliding around his neck.

“Your Grace,” she drawled playfully. “I’ve kept you waiting.”

James responded by spinning her around and setting her gently atop his desk, her legs still wrapped securely around his hips. He traced the bridge of her nose with his fingertip, his touch light and sensual down to the hollow of her cheek and the shape of her bottom lip. His fingers, long and warm, stroked down her neck

“I have an unusual confession,” he said softly.

“Oh?”

His eyebrows quirked teasingly. “I missed you.”

Elizabeth’s breath caught and her heart ached. She wanted this man with a breathlessness that knew no bounds. “I am remarkably lovely; of course, you would miss me.”

His eyes danced with amusement and something tender. “Ah, now I see the appeal of charming arrogance you mentioned.”

She smiled. “I missed you too, James, so very much. How was your trip?”

“It was good. I will let you know more about it tomorrow.”

“Where are we going tomorrow?”

“We will visit The Royal Museum and then have a picnic in Kensington Gardens. I will collect you in my phaeton.”

Her heart stuttered, and she stared at him, almost frightened by what he suggested. This meant he was making a public show of courting her.

“James?” she breathed, hunger crawling through her for this man. “What are you saying?”

“I will call on you tomorrow at your aunt’s house. We will speak more then.”

A burst of happiness darted through her heart. “Yes.”

He kissed her forehead. “Let me not keep you here too long, lest your mother or aunt starts looking for you. I only needed to tell you of my intentions for tomorrow and this,” he said with gruff tenderness, cupping her cheeks to tilt her head up and softly kissing her.

He moved his mouth downward, gently kissing her chin, drawing a light laugh from her.

“So ticklish,” she whispered.

James kissed the hollow of her throat and teased his teeth over her fluttering pulse. Then he lifted his head and brushed his mouth against hers. He threaded his fingers through her hair and melded her mouth more firmly to his, deepening their kiss with exquisite thoroughness, wild passion, and sensual greed. She twined her hands around his neck, holding him close, returning his kiss with all the aching emotions inside her heart.

I am falling so deeply in love with you, James.

Their mouths parted, and she whispered, “My aunt and mother have departed early.”

He arched a brow. “They left you alone here?”

“My aunt felt a terrible migraine coming on, so my mother went home with her. They will send the carriage back for me. I could stay with you longer.”

“I’ll not tup you here,” he said, his tone warm with desire.

Elizabeth felt the heated length of his cock through their clothes, hard, pulsating against the soft pad of her belly. She smiled at his restraint. “I want to stay with you but not for tugging. We could play chess by the fire or watching the stars in the garden—”

“Good heavens! What is this?”

She gasped, her eyes widening. James straightened, positioning himself protectively in front of Elizabeth as she slid off the desk. Her face heated with embarrassment and shock. His calm demeanor was a stark contrast to the chaos erupting in the doorway.

“What is the meaning of this?” the voice screeched again. “Elizabeth?”

She moved from behind James. Her mother’s eyes were wide with disbelief, her expression vacillating between shock and dismay.

“Mother?” Elizabeth’s voice was a mix of confusion and plea. “I thought you and aunt had left—”

“We have been waiting to leave,” her aunt interjected, her tone high-pitched and

frantic. She dramatically pressed a hand to her chest, her eyes darting accusingly between Elizabeth and James.

“We had to ask the duchess for help when we could not find you, my dear. I recall you said you had a terrible headache and wondered if you had gone to lie down. This was the only door that was locked, so Her Grace had to ask the housekeeper to assist us with opening the door. But I never imagined you would be caught ... in a tryst with the duke!”

Elizabeth felt a creeping sense of unreality wash over her as the room seemed to spin. The disapproving stares from the group in the doorway, led by her visibly upset mother and the stern-faced duchess, made her feel like she was trapped in a nightmarish tableau. Had she and James been so caught up in each other that they did not hear the opening of the door?

“Ah, you were the one with the headache, hmm?” the duke said mockingly, focusing his sharp gaze on Elizabeth. “How interesting. Now I understand the insistence that you wanted to stay.”

She stared up at him, uncomprehending, then pain bloomed in her heart.

“No, I—” Elizabeth started, her voice trembling slightly, not sure how to begin explaining without exacerbating the scandal.

James turned toward everyone, his voice calm and authoritative as he addressed the room. “Ladies, I assure you, your concern, while appreciated, is unwarranted. Miss Armstrong and I were merely discussing some literary interests in a place free from the noise of the ball. Any misunderstanding is regrettable.”

His composed explanation did little to alleviate the tension in the air. The duchess, stepping forward with an air of authority that befit her status, spoke sternly, “This is

most irregular, James. You must understand how this appears to everyone involved.”

Elizabeth, gathering her wits, added hurriedly, “Yes, I apologize for any concern I caused. It was never my intention to worry anyone or create such a misunderstanding.”

Despite their attempts to clarify the situation, the damage seemed done. Whispers and murmurs filled the room as the duchess nodded grimly, her expression softening slightly as she looked at Elizabeth.

“This will go no further than this room,” the duchess declared sharply, stepping further into the library with an air of command. “There need not be any sort of scandal.”

Relief rushed through Elizabeth, and then her aunt surged forward. “I agree; however, Your Grace, we both know the damage has been done! His Grace knows what he needs to do to render my niece respectable.”

“Aunt!” Elizabeth cried.

James dragged a hand through his hair, his expression one of exasperated pain. “I see. Will you continue this charade too? Such commendable acting from all of you.”

“What ... what charade?” Elizabeth managed to say, her voice barely above a whisper, her mind racing with panic and disbelief.

“Your Grace,” her aunt interjected primly, her eyes flashing with a mix of indignation and opportunism. “You took my niece behind a closed door and were so scandalously positioned. I am certain you know what it is!”

“Good heavens, have we truly interrupted a tryst?” one of the unknown ladies chimed

in with a staged, dramatic whisper, adding to the theatricality of the moment.

“Never before has anyone attempted a trap with such spectacle. I am almost impressed,” James replied, his tone dripping with chilling incivility, his expression growing foreboding.

A trap? As in a deliberate compromise? Elizabeth’s heart thudded painfully slow, shock rooting her to the spot. She was mortified to see that James’s face was etched with an arrogant disdain, his expression darkening further as the gravity of the situation sank in. The evening was unraveling into a nightmare.

Tears burned Elizabeth’s throat. She wanted so desperately to allow her tears to fall, but she couldn’t. She fisted her hands at her sides, understanding the stage had been set, and everyone was now doing their part. She saw the knowledge and the disgust in the duchess’s gaze.

“Is this how gentlemen of the ton treat young ladies?” Her mother demanded, her voice laced with accusation and a calculated glint in her eye.

It was clear she was a part of this dangerous game, gambling on James’s honor to sway the outcome. Elizabeth’s heart fractured at the realization that her mother and aunt planned this awful deceit. Compromised, betrayed, and potentially ruined, she felt the weight of their actions like an anvil on her chest, crushing her.

A harsh breath escaped James, his gaze turning grimmer than Elizabeth had ever seen. “Somehow, I thought you were smarter than this, Miss Armstrong.”

“No,” Elizabeth said, shock and pain echoing through her voice. How could he believe she would engage in such deceit? A breath-crushing tension wrapped its arms around her chest.

“I would never do this,” she insisted, her voice trembling with emotion. “How could you even think so for a moment?”

A humorless laugh escaped from James, and the gaze that raked over her was cold and mocking. “You’ve won nothing but a ruined reputation, Miss Armstrong.”

Her mother’s eyes widened, a flicker of doubt passing through them before she quickly composed her expression. She shared a glance with her co-conspirator.

“I will expect you to present yourself to my husband first thing tomorrow, Your Grace,” her aunt demanded crisply. “It is the only honorable recourse.”

Another low, mocking sound came from James. “Oh?” he queried with disdain.

“Mother, Aunt, we will discuss this in the privacy of our home,” Elizabeth said, stepping toward them. “We must leave now, and I implore everyone for discretion in this matter.”

Her aunt avoided her, aiming her glare at the duke. “Your honor demands you to do the right thing, Your Grace. My niece’s reputation—”

“Do not be foolish, Viscountess Barnaby. Others have tried this distasteful scene to their loss. You will most certainly wait in vain. An offer will never be forthcoming from me.”

“Your Grace,” her mother began, her hand fluttering to her throat in a gesture of genuine distress.

Her words strangled in her throat when James brushed past her and the few strategically chosen witnesses. The pain and betrayal nearly brought Elizabeth to her knees as she watched him leave, her world spinning out of control around her.

* * *

“James, I had no knowledge of this!”

Ignoring Elizabeth’s strained cry, James walked away, slowly emptying his mind and suppressing the emotions writhing inside his chest. It felt as if he had lost something that was infinitely precious. The notion of marriage had always felt intangible, but the awareness that he could not envision a life without Elizabeth tossed James’s world into disorder.

“Who is it that has you so distracted?” his sister had teased only a few days prior.

James had surprised himself by telling her, “Miss Elizabeth Armstrong. She has me in knots that I never want to untangle.”

“Then marry her.”

At that moment, James knew the only woman who could boldly hold his hand and walk by his side was Elizabeth. A deep sense of betrayal pricked at his chest, stabbing too deep. A calm, logical mind could allow one to overcome anything, and that was what he needed to do now. With each step along the hallway, he felt as if he had left something important behind.

He walked outside, lifting his face to the sky. Closing his eyes, a mirthless laugh that felt empty slipped from him. To think he had been about to confess his growing feelings and his desire to woo her, but she had been plotting a compromising trap with her family.

“Why would you do this?” he hissed harshly, wanting to slam his fist into the wall to stop the damn sensation that writhed through his chest. It was a feeling unknown to him, but it was damn painful.

“Because, like many other young ladies, Miss Armstrong wanted to capture herself a duke,” a voice said crisply behind him. “How conniving and deceitful. What is this, the fifth attempt?”

The seventh. Each scheme is more complicated than the last. The lengths many would go to marry into his family would forever perplex and disgust him. James eased out a slow, steady breath as his mother came to stand beside him.

“I do believe I am right. This is the fifth trapping you have avoided. However, this is the first I have seen this look of betrayal in your eyes. You are holding yourself so rigid.”

James composed his expression, aware of his mother’s regard on his face.

“Did you love her?” she quietly asked.

His heart felt as if something stabbed through it. Love? What the hell was love? Surely, the obsession he felt for her went deeper than love. “I have no wish to discuss Miss Armstrong,” he said with chilling politeness. “Not now, and not ever, Mother.”

His mother sighed. “You are my son and I know you. I have been watching you with Miss Armstrong, and I am discerning enough to see he regard you own for her. If you love her—”

“I could never love a deceptive wretch or even think of aligning myself with a family so unsuitable in conduct, good sense, and propriety. Do not speak of them to me again.”

A soft sound of agony reached his ears, and he glanced over his shoulder to see Elizabeth frozen, her face pale and her eyes glistening with unshed tears. James slammed his eyes closed. How could that one soft sound of pain wrench his chest

open and shake him to his very core?

He opened his eyes. Evidently, she had hastened after him. Her mother and aunt were close behind her, and given their aghast expression, James deduced they'd overheard his remarks. For long moments, Elizabeth stared at him, unmoving. He could see the tension that suddenly tightened her body and stiffened her shoulders.

“James, after everything, do you have no notion of who I am?”

He swept his gaze over her, making no effort to conceal his indifference. James dismissed Elizabeth, her mother, and her aunt from his thoughts.

He bowed respectfully to his mother. “Please, attend to your guests, Mother. I assure you, I am quite well,” James said with a calm composure. Without allowing himself a backward glance at his lover, he walked away, distancing himself from her and the reckless decision he had narrowly avoided.

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:47 am

Elizabeth woke, and for a moment, she had forgotten the turmoil of the last few days. The memory rushed in, scalding and heartbreaking. I shall shed no tears today, she silently whispered, getting off the bed. She rang for a lady's maid to assist her with morning toiletries, and an hour later, Elizabeth was dressed in a dark golden day gown, with her hair artfully styled in a simple chignon.

She descended the stairs of her aunt's townhouse. It was quite early still, only ten in the morning, so she made her way to the breakfast room, only to be informed she was needed for a family meeting in the drawing room. Elizabeth did not respond right away to the summons. She went into the breakfast room, took up a plate, and placed slices of ham, bacon, three thinly sliced and buttered toast, and some strawberry preserves onto her plate. She ate, drank two cups of hot chocolate and then made her way to the drawing room.

Her mother and aunt sat, their heads lowered over a newssheet.

"Mother, Aunt Sally," she greeted, making her way over to the sofa and sitting on the sofa opposite them.

Her mother did not speak, merely handing her a section of the newspaper. Elizabeth unerringly found the piece that concerned their family. A tight knot formed in her belly as she read.

Dearest readers,

Another disgraceful scandal involving one of our favorite dukes is spreading like wildfire through the ton. It has been seven days since a certain Miss A was seen in a

most salacious embrace with one of society's most delicious dukes. As we all know, Miss A's efforts to secure the hand of the duke is not the first wicked trap the Duke of B escaped. When will our young ladies learn that a certain duke can never be trapped in marriage? Why do they insist on trying?

Given the duke's known apathy to the entire affair, one cannot presume that Miss A might be made respectable through marriage. At least not marriage to the duke! Someone else will have to be brought up to scratch and given that Miss A is an heiress of great wealth, I daresay there will be a line of suitors from which she can make her pick.

This author also wonders if we will soon hear of a duel should Mr. A seek to defend his sister's honor. I declare that Miss A should be ashamed of her social-climbing attempts and return to the shore of her country. This author has learned that the Duchess of B stands in support of her son's decision and would never invite such a bold-faced, outrageous lady to join their family.

I will update our faithful readers more as soon as she ferrets out the truth.

Lady C,

The Daily Gossip

Elizabeth lowered the scandal sheet to the walnut table, glancing up at her mother and aunt, who sat opposite her. They wore the gravest expression as if there had been a death in the family. Her aunt's eyes were reddened by the copious number of tears shed for the last week. She had taken a social blow, for several ladies had thought it necessary to write and withdraw their support for a few charitable endeavors and an invitation to a ball.

"I have called the family meeting to decide what we need to do," Aunt Sally said,

staring at her. “We do not have the social influence or power to bring the duke up to scratch.”

“I cannot believe a gentleman could be this callous,” her mother said faintly. “I keep expecting that he will call and make an offer. His cruel callousness—”

A laugh escaped Elizabeth. “Callous? The duke is not callous.”

Her aunt’s spine stiffened. “Do you dare defend him after the disgrace that was laid at our door? Have you read the scandal sheet I gave you?”

“It is quite evident I am caught in a most dreadful scandal with the duke. However, this disgrace was brought by both your actions! How could you do this and then lay the blame elsewhere? If I am ruined, it is only because you—”

Her mother pinned her with a fierce glare. “I did what I did for you to secure your future, Bette.”

“Mother, you ruined whatever reputation I had! You ruined ... ruined the friendship ...” Her voice cracked, and her throat closed over the words.

“What is that?” she demanded scathingly. Her mother directed a quelling look at her. “Friendship? Did you think I had no notion of the times you slipped away from a ball to be outside in the gardens with the duke? I saw you both kissing. I had to do something to push his hand, and I promise you will thank me for it.”

Elizabeth’s heart was shattered. She said, “You will never get my gratitude for compromising me and someone in that shameless manner.”

“I caught you a duke!”

She felt a sharp thump of panic, recalling the cold disdain on his face. “You caught me a duke?” Elizabeth cried, tears burning her eyes. “He will never come and make an offer for me. You caught me disgust and resentment from a gentleman who believes I had something to do with this compromising trap! Once his disgust fades, I will then endure his resentment! How could you, Mama?”

“Do not be foolish, Elizabeth. I had the chance to make you a duchess. Do you even try and understand my efforts? There was nothing more important to me than securing a marriage for you. Can you not understand the dread I felt at the thought of you being alone and empty with no children or a husband to call your own? What else can be more important?”

Shocked, she stared at her mother. Who was this creature before her? Surely not the woman who had grown her on tales of falling in love with her father before he had become a magnate, a shipping tycoon revered in their elevated circles in New York.

“Love,” Elizabeth said softly, tears stinging her eyes. “Even if not a burning, passionate love, I would hope for a measure of friendship, respect, and affection from the man I marry.”

Her mother’s expression crumpled. “I only wanted to help you, Bette, and—”

“I did not need that help! I never dreamed of being the Duchess of Basil! I did not dare. When have I ever been so elevated in my ambitions that I thought I could be a duchess? Ladies who are duchesses are born, not American misses who hardly understand the rules of the ton. They are ladies who are taught how to be the perfect hostess for a duke. Duchesses have powerful families and connections to assist their dukes in their political endeavors. I never hungered for that!”

A harsh sob tore from Elizabeth. “I admit it ... I fell hopelessly in love with the duke, but I did so knowing our connection was only a moment in time. I would never marry

someone through deceptive means, and, Mother, I assure you, His Grace would never bow to such manipulations. He might have returned my sentiments. Then I recall the contempt His Grace had in his eyes when he looked at me and knew I was only being foolish and fanciful. You did not help me. You hurt me terribly.”

“You must marry, Bette,” another voice said. “If not the duke, someone else. It is the only way to fix this.”

She whirled around as her brother walked into the room. His eyes were dark with unnamed emotions, but she was familiar with the way he braced his shoulders in preparation for a fight.

“You are nonsensical,” she said, brushing away the tears on her cheeks. “I feel as if my heart shattered, and you speak to me of marrying someone else?”

“Mother told me she saw you clutched in a very intimate embrace with the duke,” Brandon said quietly. “That was a few balls ago. She then realized he was taking advantage and tried to force his hand. We cannot blame mama—”

“Do you know so little of my character that you would believe someone has the power to take advantage of me,” Elizabeth said softly, standing and walking toward Brandon. “I walked into the duke’s arms ... willingly. Mama could have spoken to me; she could have tried to understand me or wait to see if what we had could become more. Instead, she was manipulative and deceitful to a man who loathes dishonesty. How ... how ...”

Her voice cracked, and she pressed a palm over her mouth, desperate to suppress the awful emotions tearing her apart. “How many times has someone tried to trap the duke into marriage?”

Brandon sighed. “Bette, please—”

“How often,” she cried.

“Several times.”

“Precisely so. Why would he see mother’s effort in a less contemptible light than all others who tried? Why would he see me as different? How can I ... resent him for blaming me?”

Her brother tugged her into his arms and hugged her. Shaking, Elizabeth clutched him, sobbing.

“I expect different from Basil,” Brandon murmured, “for if he spent time with you, he should have known the measure of woman that you are.”

Elizabeth slammed her eyes closed, the pain she had been trying to suppress pouring through her with such intensity that she trembled. For her brother’s awareness was one she realized the very first night he walked away from her, that cold, burning contempt in his gaze.

“I am begging you, Bette, please forgive mother and aunt. We need to rally and find a solution, not fight. Marriage is the only way to fix your reputation.”

Pulling away from his arms, she stared up at him. Elizabeth gritted her teeth to muster up a rebuke, wanting to let her frustrations and anger at being betrayed out. But what came were more silent tears coursing down her cheeks and a pain so deep she pressed a palm over her chest.

“Bette,” Brandon said, sounding shocked. “This is ... you ... you really love the duke?”

She flinched, lifting her shaking fingers to wipe away her tears. “I never want to

Speak of the duke again. I am going home.”

Her mother frowned. “We are home—” her words broke off sharply.

Elizabeth held her mother’s gaze for a few beats, then her aunt’s and her brother’s. “I am going home to New York, and I am never returning to England.”

A reproachful silence lingered, and then her mother sighed heavily. “Must you always be this ... decided?”

Elizabeth did not reply. She hastened from the room, ignoring the strident calls of her mother and aunt. Elizabeth went to the library, took a decanter of the viscount’s finest brandy, and rushed to her room. She took several swallows, and warmth rushed through her body and unknotted the cold knot of pain and doubt. She drank until the pain blurred, then dropped the empty bottle to the ground, crawled into her bed, burrowed her head beneath the pillow and sobbed.

Elizabeth could not understand the loss she felt. James had not promised her anything beyond their moment, yet how they parted was a burning pain inside her heart that seemed it would never quench. Exhaustion claimed her, and as she slipped into sleep, she silently prayed he would no longer enter her dreams and pierce her heart with love and longing.

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:47 am

James rolled over in his bed and with a frustrated growl, he punched his pillow for what felt like the tenth time that night, each thump a futile attempt to expel the building tension. The bedclothes were in disarray, the sheets twisted, and the coverlets crumpled at the foot of the bed.

“This is damn nonsense,” he muttered into the plush, fragrant pillows that did nothing to soothe his restlessness.

His mind was a whirlwind, replaying every moment, every glance, and every word exchanged with Elizabeth. Exasperated, James threw back the covers and swung his legs off the bed. He raked his fingers through his tousled hair and stood up, his movements sharp and agitated. Padding over to the window, he drew back the heavy drapes with a swift tug. The cool night air brushed against his skin as he opened the window, leaning out slightly to gaze into the dark, starless sky.

It had been nine days since he had walked away from his lover with a firm resolve to end whatever had been budding between them to prevent future regrets. As he stood there, the chill of the night air seeping into his bones, James wrestled with how to handle the strong connection that refused to fade despite his best efforts. The coldness that he anticipated to shroud his heart never arrived. Knowing that he had lost Elizabeth and would no longer wake up with her nestled in his arms, nor witness her smile, hear her laughter, or experience her vibrant spirit was unbearable. These nights of longing for her left him with an ache so deep that it almost destroyed him.

A rough sound of annoyance left James, and he tugged on trousers and boots, dressing well enough without the aid of his valet. He bounded down the stairs and went outside, inhaling the crisp air into his lungs. It was his fortune that one of his

friends lived only a few houses down from him. A few minutes later, Oliver's butler opened the door and informed James that his lordship was not at home.

"I will await the marquess in the room he reserved for boxing," James clipped, already shrugging from his jacket, and he walked down the hallway.

Thankfully, the sandbag that Oliver used to practice his boxing was still mounted. James did not bother to wrap his wrists with thin strips of linen. He merely removed his clothes and boots, standing bare feet and only in his trousers. He went to pounding on the bag, sharp jabs that ricocheted up to his elbows. Still, he did not stop his punishing pace, pushing his body until his muscles screamed for mercy. If this did not calm the demons riding him, James would find an underground fighting ring and pick one of their most ruthless bare-knuckle fighters to get in the pits with.

As James assaulted the sandbag with relentless force, each punch unleashed more of his pent-up frustration and regret. That sound of pain she'd made haunted him like a specter. Her eyes had been wounded, and the very memory of it plagued James's dreams.

I hurt you, Elizabeth, and I am so damn sorry.

He increased the strength and speed of his punches. The fabric of the bag thudded under the impact of his fists, a satisfying sound that momentarily drowned out the chaos of his thoughts. The sound of footsteps approached. James paused mid-swing, his chest heaving, sweat dripping down his brow. He turned to see Oliver striding into the room, his expression a mix of concern and resolve.

"You look like hell, Basil," Oliver said, eyeing the unbound wrists.

James wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand, a grim smile touching his mouth. "I need a partner," he said, his voice rough with exertion.

Oliver, without saying another word, began to strip off his jacket, waistcoat and shirt. He moved to a corner of the room where the linen wraps lay discarded and started to bind his wrists methodically.

Knowing that he needed a vigorous outlet, James said, “Are you certain?”

“I could use a good fight,” Oliver said, finishing with his wraps and moving to stand opposite James.

They squared off, their bare feet shifting on the soft matting of the floor. They began to circle each other, each feint and jab a silent conversation. As the bout progressed, their movements grew faster, more forceful. Oliver was a skilled boxer, his punches precise and calculated, but James met each attack with equal ferocity, his own strikes a blend of raw power and honed skill. For James, each punch thrown was a release, and with Oliver, he could be as fierce or as calm as he needed to be without the need for words. They moved around each other with the grace of dancers, punching and feinting for almost an hour. Eventually, they both stepped back, chests heaving, skin slicked with perspiration.

Oliver clapped James on the shoulder, a gesture of solid, unquestioning support. “Better?”

“Better,” he affirmed, feeling a measure of peace settle over him. “I have been a damn fool.”

Ambrose lifted a brow. “It takes special awareness for a man to realize he is a damn fool.”

James made no reply to this, merely watching his friend walk over to the mantle and pluck up a pressed newssheet.

Walking over to him, Oliver held it up. “Have you seen this? Is this the reason you seem so out of sorts?”

“Seen what?”

“A scandal sheet mention of that disgraceful wretch, Miss Armstrong.”

Cold fury lit in James’s veins. “What did you call her?”

A smile quirked the marquess’s mouth. “Ah ... you do not agree.”

“Who dares call her so?”

Oliver handed him a newssheet, and James found the mention of her. As he read, certain phrases raked at his heart like poison-tipped talons.

Social climber

Disgraceful and scandalous

Shameless

Not welcomed in the ton

She should return to New York

James’s heart pounded, and a hollow sensation settled in his belly. These derisive applications were undeserving, especially for a woman as kind, giving, and unpretentious as Elizabeth. He crushed the papers, the fury burning colder. “How do they fucking dare?”

“You really were not aware,” Oliver murmured.

“No. I would not have let it stand.”

“Your scandal with Miss Armstrong is being talked about in several drawing rooms. When we did not see you at Aphrodite or White’s, we presumed you were dealing with it.”

“Only a few witnessed what happened,” James said icily. “And they spread this nonsense to hurt her even more than ...” Than me. He raked his fingers through sweat-dampened hair. “I need to go.”

“What happened?” his friend asked. “The scandal about town seems to be worse than the ones that usually mentioned you. Did Miss Armstrong truly plot a trap to force you into marriage?”

James stood still for several beats, and then he said, “A trap was plotted, but she was not a part of it. I was a damn fool for not realizing it sooner. The woman I know—compassionate, clever and honest, a person determined to live a life that was happy and one that she decided upon would never do something so underhanded as to steal my choice from me. Her mother and aunt plotted the compromising trap. I hurt her with my words and lack of faith in her character.”

“You like her,” Oliver said, sounding a bit shocked.

“No,” James said gruffly, scrubbing a hand over his face. “I love Elizabeth Armstrong with everything inside of me.”

The realization hit James harder than expected, leaving him to grapple with feelings he hadn’t acknowledged until now. The clarity of his own desires and feeling settled over him with unsettling certainty. “I must go to her.”

Oliver winced. “You might have a problem there.”

“What?”

“I saw Armstrong earlier. He ... his sister left England yesterday for New York and has vowed to never return here.”

A crushing weight descended on James’s chest. “She is gone.”

“Yes. However, her mother remains in England. I heard that Viscountess Barnaby and Mrs. Armstrong lost a few friends in their social circle. Brandon seemed crushed. Apparently, once his sister decides on a matter, she never changes her mind. Some of the words he snarled into his drink were ‘wilful,’ ‘stubborn’ and ‘hellion.’”

James let out a sharp exhalation. The reality of Elizabeth’s situation struck him with painful clarity—she would likely never wish to return to England, a place now marred by betrayal, public disgrace, and the bitter memory of having been let down by those she should have been able to trust the most. Her family’s scheming had done irreparable damage, and he himself had added to her hurt with his doubts and harsh words.

James quickly grabbed his clothes and began dressing with hurried movements. “I have urgent matters to attend to.”

His friend, sensing the seriousness of the moment, simply nodded. He offered no words, but his expression was laden with curiosity and concern. James left the townhouse at a brisk pace, his strides lengthening into a run by the time he reached his own residence. Upon entering, he was met with the surprised look of his butler, Brooks, who noted his master’s unusually disheveled appearance but wisely chose to remain silent.

“I have several letters that need to be sent out today,” James said.

“Yes, Your Grace,” Brooks responded promptly, preparing to handle whatever tasks were necessary.

Once in his study, James pulled out several sheets of crisp paper from the top drawer of his desk. His mind was set; he would do whatever it took to repair the damage done to Elizabeth’s reputation, even if it meant leveraging or severing long-standing relationships within the ton. He was prepared to use his influence ruthlessly if required.

The first letter he wrote was to David Pettigrew, the Earl of Darlington, a man whose financial troubles James was uniquely positioned to exploit in exchange for a favor that would aid Elizabeth.

Darlington,

It has come to my attention that your estates are currently facing financial challenges, and you are in pursuit of investors for your forthcoming venture with Viscount Lynton. I am prepared to offer substantial investment, though it would require a particular concession on your part.

As you are aware, your wife, the Countess of Darlington, holds significant sway within the social circles of the ton. Her influence could prove invaluable under the current circumstances. A family of my acquaintance, the Armstrongs, has recently suffered undue social detriment. I am seeking to rectify this situation, and her intervention could facilitate their reestablishment in society.

I trust the countess will exercise her considerable capabilities with discretion and efficacy. Please convey to her the importance of this matter and the mutual benefits our cooperation would ensure.

I look forward to your prompt and favorable reply, ensuring our mutual interests align for the betterment of all parties involved.

Yours sincerely,

James, Duke of Basil

After sealing the letter, James leaned back in his chair, his mind already plotting the next moves. He would have to be careful and precise in his approach, using the influence he held as a duke not just to threaten or coerce but to negotiate and align interests. His next letter was to another influential member of the ton, the Marquess of Hadleigh, whose wife was held in high esteem. He wrote with a clear, forceful hand, making it evident that the marquess's cooperation would be mutually beneficial. James even promised the marquess one of his prize studs for this favor.

James wrote three more letters. Each word was measured and deliberately aimed at weaving a network of support that would be difficult for anyone to untangle. It was clear his displeasure would be earned if they refused. His last letter for the day was to the Daily Gossip. After dispatching his butler, Brooks, with the letters, James walked toward the window overlooking the gardens.

Elizabeth, I am so damn sorry for the hurt you must have endured.

Even if he were to never see her again, today marked the beginning of his fight not just for Elizabeth's honor but for her heart, proving that his love was not merely a fleeting passion but a committed force capable of righting the wrongs she had endured.

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:47 am

Elizabeth lay in her bed, the rhythmic sounds of knocking and hammering from nearby construction sites filled the morning air, providing an oddly soothing backdrop to her thoughts. The burgeoning city of New York buzzed with energy as wealthy businessmen, much like her father, expanded their empires by buying up plots of land to erect grand mansions. These sprawling homes, each more opulent than the last, were symbols of success and power in the bustling metropolis.

Elizabeth had returned home just three days ago, completing a six-week voyage from England—a journey she had hoped would clear her mind and soothe her wounded spirit. Yet, the familiar sights and sounds of New York did little to ease the ache in her heart. Instead of the warm embrace of home, she felt a stark disconnect, and the sense of belonging Elizabeth anticipated feeling once home was deplorably absent. She felt unmoored, her heart no closer to healing than it had been a week ago.

The nightly dreams had not stopped. Staring at the ceiling, she fought to recall her dream, for in that realm with James, there was only laughter and happiness, a feeling of pure contentment, and those sensations lingered with her as she drifted from sleep into awareness. Once fully awake, only a sense of heartbreak plagued her. She pushed from the bed, ringing the bell to summon her lady's maid. Once Magda arrived, she helped Elizabeth perform her morning toiletries. An hour later, she was presentable in a bright golden gown that flattered her shape, with her hair caught up in an artful chignon. She ventured downstairs, seeking out her father in his study.

“Bette,” he said warmly, rising to enfold her in a hug. “How I’ve missed you. Have I told you?”

“Yes, Papa,” she said, smiling. “At least six times.”

He chuckled, pressing a kiss to the top of her head. They parted, and she went to sit on the sofa close to the window, curling her feet beneath her legs in a rather unladylike manner. Her father did not rebuke her, and even if he had, Elizabeth would have ignored it.

Her father sat behind his rather impressive oak desk and stared at her with quiet contemplation. Elizabeth knew he sensed her despondency, but he had not probed. It was one of the qualities she appreciated most about her father: his gentle understanding and patience.

“I received a rather enlightening letter from your mother, Bette.”

Swallowing her groan, she met her father’s steady regard. “Oh?”

“Hmm.” He plucked up two envelopes. “It seems you left a scandal behind in London, one that you were remiss in telling me about.”

“Did mama inform you it was a scandal of her own making?”

Her father’s expression softened. “She explained the whole of it to me, Bette. Your mother is shattered.”

A spark of ire lit in her chest, but it quickly vanished, for she felt that even then, she had no more emotions to give. “I am sure mama is only out of sorts because the duke did not fall in line with her machinations. I presume mama told you the full truth of it, Papa?”

“She did.”

Elizabeth smiled tightly. “Who knew someone could be so against their choices being stolen from them,” she said caustically. “Mother and Aunt Sally certainly never

imagined it.”

There was a ponderous silence while she held her father’s regard. Regret and pity gleamed from his gaze. Unable to bear that pity, Elizabeth glanced away and peered out the window to the lovely side gardens where lilies were in full bloom.

“Bette, your mother is deeply regretful that she wounded you. She is shattered because she fears that she lost your love and trust.”

A lump formed in Elizabeth’s throat, and tears stung her eyes.

“Your mother apologized and—”

“She has, and Aunt Sally, too. I know I will eventually forgive her and Aunt Sally, but it will be done on my time, Papa.”

He sighed. “I understand. I wish your mother had returned so we could best discuss everything as a family.” Her father held out a small envelope to her. “Your mother sent this for you. I have not read it, and she urged you to read it right away.”

Elizabeth paused for a moment, gathering her thoughts before she rose from her seat and approached her father to take the envelope he offered. She opened it and frowned, for she expected to find a letter from her mother. Instead, it was a folded piece of newssheet clipping.

“It is not a letter,” she murmured. “It’s another scandal sheet mention.”

Dearest readers,

It is my duty to share a letter I personally received from the Duke of Basil. I never imagined I would be honored to receive a letter personally from the duke. I was

shocked and fascinated by his sincerity. Who knew one of society's most scandalous rakes could be this poignant and threatening in the same breath? This author sincerely apologizes to Miss A and retracts the baseless gossip I erroneously shared without proof. It was never the Daily Gossip's intention to be slanderous and injurious. I share the duke's letter with you all for this author believes it reveals the duke has finally met his match, and I daresay he might have found love.

Her heart hammering, Elizabeth stumbled to sit on the sofa, already feeling as if the floor had vanished from beneath her legs. She had truly thought herself beyond the possibilities of such hope again.

Lady C,

My honor demands that I address a matter of grave concern that has been brought to my attention. Recent publications under your direction have chosen to promulgate slanderous and unfounded accusations against a young lady of exceptional character, whom I hold in the highest esteem. It is a gross misjudgment to propagate such scathing and condemnatory remarks about circumstances outside your understanding. I find it unforgivable.

You will consider the impact of your words, which have not only sullied Miss A's reputation but also deeply offended me. I will not stand idly by while her character is so wrongfully maligned. I will defend Miss A's honor without hesitation or remorse against anyone perpetuating these baseless claims. Should you or anyone wish to challenge the veracity of my intentions, be assured that my actions will be swift.

This correspondence, while perhaps fueling further gossip, is necessary to uphold the principles of decency and respect. The speculation it incurs should remain within the realm of private contemplation, as the public discourse on the matter will only further impugn my honor and that of Miss A, whom I deeply respect for her kindness, warmth, and compassionate spirit.

Miss A has never sought to manipulate me into marriage or any other obligation, understanding that she already commands my deepest regard and utmost respect. Any such action would be beneath her dignity and honor. I demand an immediate retraction of all statements made against her. This retraction should be published prominently in your next issue and all other newssheets that have participated in disseminating these falsehoods.

I trust you will act accordingly.

The Duke of Basil

Tears stung Elizabeth's eyes and blurred her vision, and no matter how hard she tried to blink them away, she couldn't stop them.

"My dear," her father said softly, "what is it?"

Unable to speak past the knot of emotions in her throat, she held it out to him. Her father took the clipping and read it. After a few beats, he said, "This is the gentleman your mother acted so egregiously against."

"Yes."

"He has done rather well in defending you," her father said, "He also has the reputation and connections to stand by his words. It is rather interesting that he chose to do this."

Her heart squeezed painfully, and she wiped the tears from her cheeks. "I ... we ... we were friends."

Elizabeth could not say more, nor would she dare to hope that this act of salvaging her reputation meant more.

“Perhaps this gentleman loves you and—”

The laugh that came from her felt as if it scraped against her throat. “I have no wish to speculate on His Grace’s meaning. I am only thankful he realizes I had nothing to do with it. But Father, please do not believe this means anything or that he forgives mama and aunt’s deplorable actions.”

She stood and lifted her chin. “Today, I shall take a walk.”

“Do you wish to go to him?”

Shocked, she stared at her father. “No.” Each time she recalled the cold disgust in his gaze on the steps of his mother’s townhouse, her chest squeezed, and it felt as if her heart shattered again.

“Love is worth fighting for,” her father said, intently searching her face. “I suspect you love this gentleman. I have never seen your eyes so dull.”

His soft words pierced her heart. She rose onto her toes and brushed her mouth against his cheek. “They will brighten again, Papa, in time.”

Then she turned and hastened from the room, unable for him to see the deep unhappiness that must be naked on her face.

She already commands my deepest regard and utmost respect.

Those words were knocking around in her heart. They were not words of love or affection, though she doubted any sane person would profess such intimate thoughts to the gossip sheets.

I am overthinking the matter.

It would be silly and outrageous to attach more meaning to his letter to the Daily Gossip than what the duke meant.

What love am I to fight for, Papa? But I want to because I love him so very much. I shall write to him and express—

Elizabeth's thoughts fractured, and she froze, staring at the man walking down the long hallway of her father's home. She closed her eyes tightly, and when she snapped them open, he was closer, appearing windswept and dashing handsome. Her heart skipped into an uneven cadence. The memories of their time together leaped between them—every kiss, each dance at a ball, each time they tumbled together into making love, their shared laughter and long conversation. "James?"

She heard a sharp inhalation and knew her father was behind her, but James only had eyes for her. Elizabeth felt such chaotic emotions she could only press a hand over her chest and stare at him.

"How can you be here?"

The duke stared at her solemnly. "Elizabeth, I am so damn sorry. There should not have existed even a second where I doubted the honesty of your character."

He sounded so sincere, so deeply honest, that she wanted nothing more than to believe in him.

"I ... why are you here ... how ... I ..." She pressed a hand to her throat, her heart slamming far too painfully inside her chest. "I have only been home a few days; that day would mean ..."

"I left England the day after you departed. Your brother mentioned that you vowed never to return." His eyes were pools of molten silver, filled with love and regret.

“There are so many things I wanted to say to you ... so many nights I stared at the ocean and practiced, for they were words unfamiliar to me because I have never said them to another soul. Now that I am here ... and you are before me ... I am fucking breathless and without any damn words. I can only feel and what I am most certain of is that you are my beloved.”

Oh!Elizabeth almost sobbed at the fierce emotions tearing through her.

Her father made another sound of shock, and Elizabeth could feel the color rising hotly to her cheeks. Then, she heard the sound of a door closing behind her, and she realized he had retreated to give them privacy.

“I do not know where to start,” James said gruffly, taking another step closer but still maintaining a respectable distance.

“I ... my mother sent me the newssheet with your letter,” Elizabeth said softly, taking a single step toward James, tears running down her cheeks. “I daresay you have started another scandal.”

His intense and unyielding gaze locked onto hers, conveying a depth of sincerity that pierced her defenses. “I love you, Elizabeth, so much it damn well hurts. Forgive me for being a fool. If you would do me the honor by being my wife, my friend and my duchess, I vow I will never give you cause to regret it. If you have no wish to live in England, we will live here, and I will travel for my duties in Parliament.”

“You would ... you would do this?”

A tenderness entered his gaze, and he smiled. “Yes, Elizabeth, I will.”

She dashed into his arms. James hugged her tightly as she burrowed against his chest. Elizabeth pressed her nose into his chest and greedily inhaled his intoxicating scent.

James's heat and scent wrapped around her body like an embrace, caressing and soothing her in a way she had never felt before. "I am not afraid to return to England," she whispered.

Strong fingers threaded through her hair, and she felt her head pulled back—gently but insistently. Their gazes collided, and the emotion in his eyes squeezed her heart.

"Will you marry me?"

She smiled and sniffled. "Yes."

James pressed his mouth to her forehead. "Your tears slay me, Elizabeth. I am sorry."

A breath shuddered from her. "They are happy tears," she whispered. "I am so very happy you are here."

"You forgive me."

His voice was awed, as though she gave him a precious gift.

"Yes," she said softly, easing from his arms to peer into his eyes. "The moment I read your letter, a part of me felt hope, but I was still unsure. The moment I saw you ... I knew only love would make you chase me across the seas. I love you, James, so very much."

Lowering his head, he pressed his lips to hers in a slow, languorous kiss. She cupped his cheek and gently broke their kiss. "James, I am so very sorry for what my mother and aunt did. I cannot express my sorrow enough."

He brushed the back of his fingers over her cheek. "I do not agree with her methods, but I came to terms with it and even understood her intentions."

She stared wordlessly up at him. “You do?”

“Yes. Somehow, your mother understood I thoroughly debauched you and knew a man like me sometimes needs a ruthless means of persuasion to marry. Only she could not have known that I fell in love with you, desperately so, and had planned to start my courtship in earnest.”

A strangled sound of outrage came from behind them. Her eyes widened. “My father ... I thought he left.”

“No,” James murmured, his mouth quirking in a smile. “I gather the gentleman staring at me with death in his eyes is your father.”

Unexpected humor bubbled forth, and her laughter spilled down the hallway. She could not explain or understand why, but Elizabeth laughed and cried, gripping James’s jacket with such strength that her fingers ached. He held her for a long time until her emotions were spent. She turned around and her father was gone. Elizabeth smiled, leaning against James’s chest, feeling such happiness it almost scared her.

“I love you, James.”

His arms tightened around her waist, and he kissed her shoulder. “I love you. Now, take me to meet my father-in-law.”

Laughing, she slipped her hands in his and tugged him toward the study to introduce her father to her beloved.

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“The Duke of Basil, the Duchess of Basil, and the Dowager Duchess of Basil.”

The Countess Longmore’s ball was among the final grand events of the social season, and Elizabeth was keenly aware that their appearance was a significant moment that the countess would proudly recount for years to come. Positioned just outside the grand entrance to the ballroom, Elizabeth heard the surprised gasps and sharp intakes of breath from the guests.

“Ah,” he murmured, “the stage has been set.”

Elizabeth smiled. They had quietly returned to England only a week prior and had exchanged vows using a special license in the private chapel of his Derbyshire estate. The small, private affair was attended only by close family members: her mother, Aunt Sally and her husband, her father, James’s mother, sister and brother-in-law, and his two adorable nieces. His friends, Lord Ambrose, Lord Radbourne, and Lord Bainbridge had also attended.

Despite having sent a formal announcement to the newspapers following their marriage, the palpable disturbance within the ballroom suggested that their news had either not been published or had missed the notice of many. Elizabeth’s anticipation mingled with a hint of amusement as she realized that their entrance was about to stir the high society waters more dramatically than any printed announcement could have.

“Did he say the duchess and the dowager duchess?” a far too loud whisper said.

“Surely, we misheard. How can the duke be married!”

“His Grace has been missing for almost three months from society and now he has

returned wedded. To whom?”

“Did you anticipate another outcome given the letter he wrote for all to see?”

“I declare it must be to Miss Armstrong. Whenever they danced together, I always said they made a lovely couple.”

“Oh, how gloriously romantic.”

“I cannot recall you saying anything of the sort,” another voice groused.

Elizabeth laughed, a soft, joyful sound that filled the space between them as she looked up at her husband. James was particularly striking tonight; even his hair, which begged for a trim, seemed to add to his roguish charm rather than diminish it. Elizabeth herself was dressed in a striking green gown that hugged her curves gracefully, her hair styled in an exuberant mass of curls that framed her face beautifully. She felt a surge of confidence in her appearance and poise, her heart swelling with love that rendered her almost breathless.

Hand in hand, they made their grand entrance into the ballroom, immediately capturing the attention of the assembled guests. Elizabeth, feeling the weight of numerous gazes, held her head high and allowed a demure smile to play across her lips. The room was filled with the cream of society, many of whom had only weeks ago looked upon her with indifference. Now, their eyes sparkled with curiosity and intrigue as James led her through the crowd, introducing her to select guests.

As they navigated through the conversations, Elizabeth sensed a change in perception. Her presence now elicited interest and respect where there had been none before. When the orchestra struck up a waltz, and she stepped onto the dance floor with James, Elizabeth felt as though they were floating.

“I love you,” she whispered as they started to soar to the sensual waltz.

He tugged her closer than proper, a thing noted by the bevy of fans that unfurled and vigorously waved.

“I love you, wife. Somehow, we will need to sneak into the gardens. I am already desperate to kiss you senseless.”

“Outrageous,” she teased.

Their love, so fiercely private and now so publicly celebrated, filled her with a sense of triumph and contentment.

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