



Keeper of Secrets (The Duke Fraternity #1)

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Category: Historical

Description: A fake marriage to a cold DUKE is the last thing she wanted...

He's a scoundrel.

A wastrel.

The man who just ruined her.

And worst of all...he's her new guardian.

The moment Ryker, the Duke of Helmsworth meets Chloe Fairchild everything changes.

Not because with a single look, he falls in love. That horse s**t is for fairytales.

She's half his age and so sweetly innocent she makes his teeth hurt.

She was meant to be a simple diversion. One little taste of decadent temptation in a world so dark and bitter.

But that was when he learned the truth.

Chloe wasn't just some random girl meant for fun, she was his new charge. The very innocent he'd been tasked with protecting. The one woman he should never touch.

Too bad he's had a taste. And Chloe...

She is delicious.

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PROLOGUE

The Club With No Name...

Masks were a necessity. The flickering candlelight cast the room in shadow, but the covering of their faces ensured that their identities remained a secret.

That was part of the fun...

Much of Ryker's position at the club was to make certain that their meetings, their games—even the club itself—was kept in complete confidence.

Only one man knew all the members' identities, and he was called Emperor. Ryker had suspicions about who the Emperor actually was, but he kept those to himself. Wasn't it his role as the Keeper of Secrets to guard what should not be shared?

And besides, life had trained him not to say what should not be said. Likely why he'd been given the position in the first place.

His job was usually easy.

The Club was made up of men with power and position, and most wanted their activities here to remain out of the public's eye.

Only the occasional fellow decided he wished for others to know about his illicit activities. And that's when Ryker stepped in.

But that wasn't what tonight's meeting was about. Tonight's agenda had a far darker subject matter...murder.

Specifically, one that had occurred three nights prior when one of their members had been killed just outside The Club's doors in Hadley Square Park. Across from the club, the man had been on the way to their monthly meeting when the unfortunate event had occurred.

The question on everyone's mind was this... was the murder random, targeted to the man in question, or somehow related to The Club?

The third seemed unlikely and yet...it had happened right outside their doors.

"Can we know his name, now that he's dead?" a man called from the end of the table. The other nine members turned to the Emperor, whose only reaction was to grimace.

"How can we determine the cause of his murder if we don't even know who he is?" another called.

The Emperor leaned forward, his dark eyes narrowing under his black mask at the impertinent speaker. He commanded with unparalleled dominance. "We keep our identities secret to protect all of us."

"Except we're not all safe, are we?" a third called, a man with a ruby red mask, his dark hair sweeping back from his high forehead. He was known behind these walls as the Master of Sins, and he created the games the members often played.

Well-liked for this fact, and for his easy way, the other men murmured their agreement.

Behind the Emperor, the Summoner cracked his knuckles, silencing the murmur. A

massive man, the Summoner never spoke, Ryker believed he was mute, but it was entirely possible that he just chose not to speak. Who could say?

Either way, as the Emperor's second, and the one man who delivered their written communication should it be needed, and therefore, knew several of the men's identities, it made everyone more comfortable that he was built like a brick house and was equally silent.

"We don't know that," the Emperor barked, spreading his hands out on the table. "If you're that concerned, perhaps you should give up your seat."

Silence fell.

No one wished to give up his seat. The occasional man decided that he tired of the play, but the club's turnover rate was incredibly low.

To act with such debauchery and then have a group with which to share without the worry of consequences. It was just too good.

"That's what I thought." The Emperor sat back in his seat. "Now..." He glanced about the table. "I've considered your words and have decided to create a subcommittee to investigate the death."

There was a rumble of assent about the table that Ryker did not share. Because, if he wasn't mistaken, the Emperor's gaze, from behind his jet black mask, fell upon him.

He didn't need a murder investigation to add to the list of problems that landed upon his door.

Just this week he'd received a letter from his father's sister. Never married, Lady Mildred Somerset had spent much of her adult life meddling in Ryker's. It wasn't that

he didn't care for the old crow. She was the closest thing to a mother he'd had, his own gone far more than she'd ever been available to Ryker.

But Aunt Mildred had a way of always disapproving of his life and his choices. And now, some distant country cousin had died and his daughter, according to Mildred, was in Ryker's charge. What the fuck was he supposed to do with a child? A girl no less?

His lip curled into a sneer. Aunt Mildred would be filled with all sorts of thoughts on the matter. Love her, treat her like your own. You're too much like your father, Ryker. Don't you want to be different from him?

He could hear Aunt Mildred already and she hadn't even arrived with the girl. Inwardly he bristled at her imagined words, words she'd actually said often enough. He was different from his father. Aunt Mildred was wrong.

He ticked off the mental list of ways he was different. He wouldn't neglect a wife or a child. And he didn't make promises he had no intention of keeping.

Despite being the new Duke of Helmsworth, Ryker had vowed not to marry. In that way, he'd never repeat his father's mistakes. Wasn't that different enough?

Shifting in his seat, he turned to more fully face the Emperor. "Who is going to be on this subcommittee?"

"Messages will be sent to the chosen men," the Emperor rumbled. "In the meantime, I will turn the meeting over to our Master of Sins. Since our meeting three days ago was interrupted, we've yet to receive our next challenge."

The energy shifted in the room, but for the first time in years, Ryker was not all that interested. Be it a sexual conquest or a physical challenge, Ryker only listened with

half an ear as the Master stood. “This month’s activity will be lighter than usual since we’ve suffered a loss and everyone is in preparation for the upcoming season...”

Ryker looked at his folded hands, studying the pale skin where his signet ring usually sat. He took it off for the meetings to help hide his identity, but he wished he hadn’t. Even the challenge reminded him that his aunt would be coming to stay for the foreseeable future. As events for London’s season would begin in just a few weeks, she’d likely spend the remainder of the winter and most of the spring in his home.

“With that in mind,” the Master continued, “you are to collect, at minimum, a kiss from a perspective debutante. She must have never experienced a season.”

Ryker’s head snapped up. A kiss? That was it? Normally the challenges were much more... risqué.

“Remember, you’re not to get caught and neither is she. If you do, these are the most innocent of ladies and marriage will be the consequence. Along with your removal from the club, of course. With all that said, you’ll need proof. There is a public masquerade this Friday. I’d recommend partnering with another member to attend anonymously. And as a reminder, any man who does not obtain evidence will be on duty at Esmerelda’s.”

Esmerelda’s was the nearby gentleman’s club where ladies of the evening entertained men of their class. Being on duty was not as glamorous as it sounded. Depending on how handily a man lost, he might be washing the beds of the whores.

Cleaning up another man’s spunk was never appreciated and an excellent motivator to complete the task.

“Who chooses to participate?”

Men were allowed to skip one challenge a year but no more. Choosing which one was important. Last year, Ryker had saved his pass until nearly the very end when the challenge had been to... well... challenge a man to a duel.

While most members didn't choose to leave, some were forced. The year prior, an earl had been caught debauching a lady and had been forced into marriage.

But in the case of the duel challenge, two members had died.

Two ways in which seats sometimes opened.

So as much as Ryker had little interest in stealing some paltry kiss and even less in investigating a murder, he threw in his coin to signal his participation.

Perhaps the kiss would be fun.

Perhaps the Emperor hadn't chosen him to be part of the subcommittee.

But as the meeting wrapped up, and the men began to leave, making their way to their unmarked carriages, a large finger tapped Ryker's shoulder.

He turned back to stare in the dark, humorless eyes of the Summoner.

Well. Fuck.

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CHAPTER ONE

Miss Chloe Fairchild snapped her mouth closed, so as not to gawk. She peered out the window, the burning lanterns of London dancing in her eyes. The big city.

She'd wished to visit since she'd been a small girl. Compared with the tiny northern village she'd grown up in, London was so busy.

Carriages, horses, and people milled everywhere, even in the dark of night. Lanterns lit the streets and hung from the passing vehicles, filling the night with life.

Nothing of note happened where she was from. Unless one counted death. Which sadly, seemed to affect a person no matter where they lived.

But traveling to London had been a dream of hers and this trip was the small consolation of losing her beloved father so unexpectedly.

The other comfort had been the great kindness of her father's third cousin, Lady Mildred Wayland. A woman who'd not even known Chloe prior to the solicitor dropping Chloe on Mildred's door. Mildred had been a wonderful comfort and friend over the past year.

The woman's soft laugh filled the carriage now. "Impressive, isn't it?"

Chloe straightened away from the window, smoothing her skirts. She was showing her country upbringing by being so obviously beguiled. People from the city were rarely interested in anything as far as she could tell, and they certainly weren't awed

by the city in which they lived.

She tried to emulate that bored disdain now. “It does smell rather boorish.”

Mildred smiled, still visible in the growing darkness of the carriage. “It does. It’s one of the many reasons I’ve always preferred Berkshire. Fresh, clean air.”

Mildred drew in a deep breath, as though she were back in the country, smelling the crisp pine scent that permeated the air this time of year. Mildred never appeared bored or disdainful. The woman was constantly on the move, filled with sunshine and purpose.

“How often do you come to London then?”

“Quite often.” Mildred leaned closer to give Chloe a conspiratorial whisper as though they weren’t alone. “My nephew needs a great deal of guidance.”

Chloe gave an involuntary shiver at the mention of the duke. Mildred’s nephew, the Duke of Helmsworth, was Chloe’s new guardian.

Even in Mildred’s home, rumors swirled about the man. Dark, dangerous, a rake, a debaucher, a gambler, he was called wild, and that was the nice word...

According to Mildred, he was an untamed man with a good heart. Chloe had no idea how true that statement was. During her brief stay with Mildred, Chloe had learned that Mildred tended to see the best in life and in people. Not that Mildred was a pushover, as far as Chloe could tell, the other woman ran her house and her affairs with exceptional competence. She just did so with a smile and a kind word.

A fact that Chloe greatly appreciated. Except for when it came to Helmsworth... she didn’t wish to see the man for what he might someday be, she needed a decent

guardian now. One who could help her find the right future. And by future, Chloe meant husband.

At the age of nineteen, she was more than ready to marry. And it didn't need to be for love. She was adrift at sea, and marriage would most certainly be the port she required.

She was through her mourning period, and with a bit of luck, the right connections, and a little money, she could make a decent match.

But her new guardian would need to dress her for the season, perhaps fill in some parts of her education, and provide a modest dowry that her father hadn't given her.

Vicar Fairchild had been good at many things but managing finances had not been one of them.

Chloe sighed, her thoughts returning to the duke. Financial backing was a big ask for anyone. But she suspected the favor would be enormous for the duke, who'd yet to find the heart in his chest.

Though she wasn't without assets in the hunt for a husband. She'd been told she was very pretty. And she had a natural understanding of people, but particularly of men, and how to illicit her desired reaction from them.

She smoothed down the simple skirts of her wool gown, a traveling gift from Mildred, and tried to calm her racing thoughts. She'd have no idea how to win the duke's support until she met him. It was silly to worry about the topic now. "Will your nephew be in attendance when we arrive?"

"Difficult to say..." Mildred's lips pursed as she sat back in her seat. "He's a man who is used to the freedom that comes with his position. He comes and goes as he

pleases.”

These were not words that filled Chloe with even a bit of confidence. “You’re certain he wants me here?”

“Want, dear?” Mildred’s hesitation was gone, an easy smile touching her lips now. “It’s not a matter of want but duty, and he understands that very well.”

Chloe didn’t answer, returning her gaze back out the window. She had Mildred. That was enough. She didn’t need the duke to like her or want her just... help her. A little.

The carriage slowed as the large metal gates swung open. Chloe tried not to stare. She’d never seen the likes of this home with its vast stone front and sweeping manicured lawns. Were they not still in London?

She drew in a tremulous breath as the front door opened and she saw an army of staff coming down the massive stone steps to meet them.

Mildred exited first, her tall, graceful figure looking completely at home in the grand landscape. “Is my nephew home?”

Chloe took the hand of a footman, exiting as well. “No mum,” one of the servants answered. “Away on business for a few days at least.”

Mildred nodded and then looked back at Chloe with a wink. “Perfect. We’ll fill our time preparing for the season while we wait for his return.”

Chloe didn’t answer as she followed Mildred inside. “I’ll write a note to my dear friend, the Countess of Milford. She’ll know which events we should attend. We’ll have tea with her tomorrow, I think, after we’ve gone shopping.”

“Of course,” Chloe’s stomach filled with nervous butterflies. She’d guess even afternoon tea was different here.

“She’ll also know which gentlemen are on the make for a wife,” Mildred raised a finger as she entered the house, stopping in the three-story marble entry. “Though I’ll need to first speak with Ryker about your dowry. That will give us an idea of which men to target.”

Ryker. The name tickled over her skin as she stared up at the massive crystal chandelier that glistened above. “Any amount will do.”

“Don’t be silly, Chloe. You’re now the charge of a duke. It will need to be as grand as the rest of your showing in society. And don’t worry about Ryker. I’ll handle the boy myself.”

“Boy?”

Mildred shrugged. “When you’re my age, one and thirty seems young.”

Chloe covered her mouth with her gloved hand. “Then I must seem very young indeed.”

“Indeed,” Mildred waved her forward. “We’ll have a quiet meal tonight and then we’ll be up first thing in the morning. We’re late in getting you outfitted but we’ll make up for it by being the first customers in the dress shop tomorrow.”

Chloe gave another nod, but in her stomach, the butterflies continued to beat their wings. She wouldn’t rest easy until this meeting with the duke was over.

* * *

Ryker scrubbed his hands down his face. The past few days had been a near failure. He'd been sent by the Emperor to some inn on the North Road to investigate a scarred man who had been seen near the crime scene the night of the murder.

Before he'd left, he'd learned the identity of the victim. Lord Hershem Maxwell. A second son, he was known even among rakish lords for his debaucherous lifestyle. The club barely contained his antics. Most likely, it'd been one of his other exploits that had gotten him killed. A theory Ryker found very comforting.

The one unsettling detail was that the killer had not even attempted to hide his identity. Maxwell had been stabbed by a man with six horizontal scar lines across his cheeks, making him easily recognizable. Several witnesses had been able to corroborate.

It made the killer easier to find with such striking markings, but it also spoke of a man who wanted to be found.

How the Emperor knew to look at this particular inn, Ryker couldn't say, which was another irritant. Outside the club, Ryker was the man who gave the orders. But he digressed.

The people at the inn knew the man with the scars well. He went by the single name of Adam, and no one knew of any other address. Prone to violence, he was a religious zealot, and had started more than one altercation at the inn over behavior he'd deemed amoral.

But where he was now or when he might return was anyone's guess.

Three days, miles of roads, bug-infested mattresses, and Ryker had left with a single name and a pattern of behavior. Could he have discovered more? Perhaps. But tonight was the masquerade. And though some might consider the antics of the club

fun and games, Ryker took them seriously. He'd been made a man in that club, and he'd honor any commitment he'd given within its walls.

He'd partnered with the Master. They'd agreed to meet fully masked at the masquerade. At precisely eleven, they'd both be at the bottom of the grand stair. That way, they'd be able to keep their identities private.

Ryker would do his utmost to already have a lady chosen and waiting so that he could spend as little time on this game as possible. Truth be told, tonight, all he wanted was his own bed and some peace and quiet.

Perhaps it was time to leave the club. Murders and investigations were not what he signed up for. Then again, what else might he do with himself?

The club wasn't just a diversion... it was... a shared purpose. Some might think that voluntarily seeking out duels was foolish, but Ryker didn't agree. The club members were men with no family, no responsibility. These activities filled their lives with meaning, discipline, competition, and skill.

And fun.

It was said that some of the greatest leaders had moved through the doors of the club. Of course, no one could confirm these rumors since their identities had been protected, but Ryker felt the truth deep in his gut. The Club was where men were made.

So, when he arrived home, he immediately took himself upstairs and began to change. His manservant, Thomas, entered. "May I assist you, Your Grace?"

He raised a hand. "I'll see to myself this evening."

“And your aunt? She’s requested an audience.”

“She’s here?” He grimaced as he knotted his cravat. “Already?”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

“I’ll see her and our new guest tomorrow, assuming she brought the girl?”

“She did,” Thomas gave a single nod of affirmation.

Ryker’s frown deepened. He struggled with the knot, his thoughts elsewhere as his fingers tangled in the fabric. Thomas finally crossed the room to assist him. Once done, Thomas reached for his cufflinks, attaching the metal holders despite Ryker’s assurance he didn’t need help. Ryker held out his wrist, knowing he’d leave more quickly by just accepting the aid. Thomas inserted the cufflinks, opening them to secure his cuffs. The diamond-encrusted pieces glittered in the candlelight. “Tell my aunt I shall see her and my new charge when I break my fast tomorrow morning.”

Thomas nodded, smoothing the shoulders of Ryker’s jacket. “I’m sure she’ll agree. They are also about to leave.”

Leave? He reached for his over coat, shrugging on the garment. It was rather late to take a child out, but he was certain his aunt had her reasons. Perhaps they were going to a dinner party with other nobles who had children the same age.

After reaching for his mask and gloves in the chest of drawers within his dressing room, he gave the knot at his neck a final tug before he made his way back downstairs and out to his waiting carriage.

The trip to the public hall was short, the event blessedly close to home. Unlike a private party, the refreshments here would be sparse, ratafia one of the few beverages,

and every person paid a few coins at the door. All fine with him.

He didn't wish to be seen as a lord tonight. Just another man here to meet a lady.

The Master was already standing by the stairs when he entered. "You're early," he rumbled. This evening had not been going to plan.

"So are you."

He frowned. "I just got back into town after being gone for several days. I thought it best not to stay home long or I might not have left at all."

One of the Master's brows rose above his black mask. "Ah. Yes. Investigating the murder."

Ryker cocked his head to the side. Who else knew he'd been put on the task of investigating? "I see at least one member is not as keen on keeping secrets as I am."

"That's why you're the Keeper," the Master gave him a one-sided grin. "But as it stands, most members noted that you were tapped at the end of the meeting. I think we all assumed you'd been chosen to aid the investigation. As was I, but my searching took place here in London."

He grimaced. Had he known that was an option...

He swept a gaze over the crowd to make certain no one was inadvertently listening to their conversation.

"Shall we discuss what we've each discovered?" the Master asked, shifting closer.

It was his turn to raise a brow, his gaze finding the Master's once again. "You're

asking me, of all men, to divulge information at a public event?"

The Master gave a single low chuckle, or perhaps it was a grunt, as his arms crossed over his broad chest. "A tidbit that you'll share with the entire group. No more."

Ryker scoffed, a low sound that rumbled in his throat. "He was murdered. I can confirm that fact."

The Master's low chuckle bloomed into a loud, easy laugh. "Well played."

Speaking of play...

As his gaze swept the crowd again, he noted the open door at the back of the hall. Positioned perfectly in the arch of the doorway, a woman stood outside, resting her arm on the stone rail that encased the veranda, her porcelain skin glowing in the cool moonlight.

She was perfect.

"I've just found my quarry," Ryker said.

"You're deflecting."

"I'm winning," he answered, adjusting the mask over his eyes. "Now, keep up. This should be quick and painless."

"I should hope so. It's just a kiss."

Just a kiss. Something heavy settled in his limbs as he started for the woman. Why was it that with some women, this one in particular, the idea of even a kiss was thrilling?

He paused. Perhaps, he ought to go home. Lose. Clean up the spunk at the whorehouse.

Because he should not be this thrilled at the idea of a simple peck on the lips.

But she turned then, her profile catching the light that glistened off her blonde hair. Damn, but she was a beauty.

He forgot his misgivings as he made his way out the door.

CHAPTER TWO

Chloe inhaled in a fresh breath of air, her eyes closing. She'd never seen so many people at once. The most significant events in her village were a quarter of this size and the sheer volume of guests all packed into such a small space had overwhelmed her senses.

Mildred had assured her that this was particularly raucous, being a public event, but also an excellent place to start as many of the social rules were more relaxed here than they'd be at a private party.

Chloe could afford to make a mistake or two in a place like this...

So, when Mildred went to get a cup of tepid punch, she'd managed to slip outside, taking a moment for herself. Next to her, a gas light buzzed, the noise so odd. In the winter at home, not a sound filled the night air, but here, it was always loud one way or another...

"Beautiful night, isn't it?"

The rumble of the deep voice behind her had her spinning in surprise. That was another difference from home. Handsome men did not just appear out of nowhere during balls. There were hardly any to go around in her old village.

And dear lord, this man was handsome. Even with the mask, she could tell he was a cut above. Dark hair swept back from his forehead, looking both wind-tousled and perfectly styled all at once.

His cheekbones were covered but his jaw had that perfect masculine cut, sharp and strong, and his lips, by contrast, were full and delicious.

His shoulders were broad, the kind a lady might really like to hold onto, his body tapered down to a trim waist and long, powerful legs, highlighted by the tightness of his breeches.

Chloe realized she'd gone too long without speaking. She cleared her throat before answering, "It is."

"Do you come here often?" The deep baritone of his voice shivered through her. Ought she go inside? Find Mildred? But she didn't wish to leave. This might be the most exciting moment of her entire life.

"Never," she answered with a smile. "I've come to London for the first time in my life."

"Interesting," he rumbled moving closer. "So you've never had a season?"

"No," she said, and blushing to admit how much experience she lacked.

He didn't appear concerned as he moved a bit closer. "Where do you hail from?"

"Durham," she answered, looking back out at the small courtyard beyond the veranda.

"You're a long way from home."

Home. It wasn't her home. Not any longer. She had no place to live there, no family to speak of. She was adrift in this world and desperate for an anchor. "You live here in the city?"

“Sometimes,” he said, his gloved fingers brushing her hand on the rail. When had he gotten so close? “I too spend a fair bit of time in quieter parts of England. London is no place to spend a summer.”

She looked over at him where he now lounged against the rail. He was close enough, she caught the scent of his pipe, mixed with pine, something dark and delicious underneath. She drew in the smell of him, her eyes closing for another moment as she... savored.

Did she drift closer or did he? Their shoulders bumped and she jerked back. “Pardon me,” she gasped, her eyes flying open.

He let out a low chuckle, the sort that tickled deep in her belly. “No apologies required. In fact, it’s cool enough out here and enough of your skin is exposed...” His gaze meandered down her throat to the cleavage that her gown revealed. “That you ought to lean into me for a little warmth.”

Tempted didn’t even begin to describe how she felt. Never in her life had she experienced anything like this man. “My apologies. I didn’t catch your name...”

He chuckled again. “I’m just another fellow who paid his coin at the door hoping to meet a beautiful woman. And I have.”

More heat crept into her cheeks, her chin dipping at the compliment and the magic of this moment.

This is why she’d always wished to come here. She’d known London was where great adventure and romance would happen.

His finger hooked under her chin, lifting her face to his. He had a half-smile playing with one side of his sumptuous mouth, the sort that made her breath catch. “You

should never look down. You are a woman who should always be seen.”

Her lips parted even as his other hand reached behind her head, plucking at the strings of her mask. The ivory silk slipped down her face, falling into her hand as she gasped in a breath. “Look at you...” he murmured, his eyes, behind his mask, seeming to drink in every detail of her face. “How did I manage to find you tonight, my delicious little treat?”

“I...”

But he was leaning closer, his smell overpowering her, his proximity overwhelming her. He was everything...

And then he closed the distance between them, his lips brushing over hers in a kiss that was so gentle, so light, she wondered if she'd imagined it except... he was close, his scent wrapped all about her, his dark eyes glittering behind his mask.

She wanted to speak, to ask him anything but a warm tingling had spread through her, rendering her body near useless as all she did was stare. “That...”

He quirked that smile again.

“Chloe?” Mildred called, the sound of the other woman’s voice breaking the spell as she spun around, turning away from the mysterious stranger.

She felt as much as she saw her mystery man withdraw, disappearing into the shadows. “Mildred.”

“What, in all that is blessed, are you doing?”

“I...” What was she doing? “I was getting some air. I...”

Mildred stepped close. “Did you expect him to blow it into your chest?”

Chloe might have laughed except she’d never heard Mildred sound so... distraught. “What’s wrong?”

“Wrong? You can’t go about kissing men,” Mildred whispered in a hiss. “If you were seen... your mask isn’t even on.”

Chloe fumbled to return the stiff fabric to her face, hiding her identity as Mildred’s hand gripped her elbow. “Dear, you’ll be done with London before you’ve even begun. Being caught kissing any man is cause for ruin. You’ll go home a spinster.”

Home? She had no home to return to, Mildred knew that. “I can’t.”

“I know. Which is why, you of all people need to follow the rules. You’ve got nothing on which to fall back.”

Chloe’s face dipped again, this time shame pulling her chin to her chest. “I’m sorry.”

Mildred’s head snapped up, her gaze scanning the shadows. “Don’t be sorry, be careful. Now, who was the cad who had the audacity to do such a thing? He looked familiar...”

Chloe shook her head. She hadn’t a clue. Which made her the worst sort of fool.

* * *

Ryker joined the Master in the alcove under the stairs. “Done.”

“It sure was.” The Master peeked around Ryker, looking at... Chloe. That was the name Mildred had called. Who was Chloe to his aunt? And had Aunt Mildred noticed

it was him? Surely she would have said something if she had?

He let out a long breath. That had been far too close for comfort. He shouldn't have dallied so long with the chit, it was just that Chloe was exquisite.

Truly, the most beautiful woman he'd seen in some time, her combination of beauty and innocence had made him wish to... savor the moment. A mistake.

"Did you get her full name?" the Master asked, still gazing around his shoulder. "Know who the older woman is?"

"Why?"

"If you've ruined her, I'd like to look her up. I could use a new mistress."

Something raw and sharp tore through him, his teeth gritting together, as he snarled at the other man. Chloe belonged to him. If anyone was going to make her his mistress...

Not that he usually kept mistresses. Even that was too much commitment for Ryker. "I need to go so you'd better collect your kiss quickly."

The Master gave a nod, his dark hair falling over his forehead as he casually brushed it back.

Two ladies moved past them, each in decadent layers of silk. Neither were even close to being as beautiful as Chloe.

Her blonde hair had shone in the moonlight, her blue eyes so clear, they sparkled, framed by thick lashes.

Her high cheekbones had only highlighted the perfect bow of her mouth and he didn't even wish to start on her cleavage...

The very thought of her generous curves had every muscle in his body tightening.

The Master reached out a hand, swiping his fingers down the arm of the second girl. "Hey, love."

She gave him a giddy smile, a small titter falling from her lips as he pulled her into the alcove.

One of his arms wrapped about her back and just like that, he plucked a kiss from her lips, her gasp of excited breath filling the small space.

And then the Master let her go. "Much obliged."

She giggled again, scurrying after her companion, giving the Master several glances over her shoulder as she hurried away.

"Done." The Master winked behind his mask.

Ryker quirked a brow. "Extra points for efficiency, but you forgot to ask if she was a debutante."

"Shit. You're right." The Master, frowned, his eyes scanning the crowd again.

But Ryker didn't wish to wait for the man to complete the task properly. He had thinking to do at home. "I allow it, considering I'm in a rush."

"How do I know you won't tell everyone, sending me to Esmerelda's?"

“I’m the Keeper, aren’t I? Your secret is safe.”

“You still topped me. You managed a rare beauty.” The Master looked back out where Chloe had been.

Ryker followed the other man’s gaze. He had managed a rare beauty. He knew he’d be thinking of Chloe for a long time to come. But he’d also have to make certain his aunt was none the wiser. That was of the utmost importance too.

What cursed luck that she was acquainted with the only family member he cared about.

With that in mind, he started out the doors, and called for his carriage, making his way back home.

Oddly, he didn’t feel the normal rush of having completed a game, the surge of triumph somehow lacking.

In its place were memories of the softness of his conquest’s mouth and the silky texture of her skin under his fingers.

Chloe was exceptionally beautiful. A woman, if he were a different man, he would savor. But the only thing he savored was his liquor. Which was his cue to leave...

He returned home, heading to his study, where he promptly poured himself a tall snifter of scotch. Removing his coat and cravat, he pushed up his shirt sleeves and then downed the drink in a single swallow.

Glancing at his desk, several pieces of correspondence lay on top. The first was clearly marked with the King’s seal. He grimaced. He didn’t need to open the letter to know the contents. The King was most eager for Ryker to marry and make an heir. It

was not a task Ryker relished, in fact, he looked upon it with a great deal of dread.

He mostly ignored the King's requests, but of late they'd grown more... pressing. He crossed the room, a second letter catching the plain wax seal with no crest. He lifted the note, intent upon opening it when the sound of carriage wheels outside alerted him that his aunt had arrived.

He gave her time to make her way upstairs, having another drink before he started up the stairs toward her chamber.

She'd been a mother to him, so he saw nothing odd about knocking on her door despite the late hour. "Aunt Mildred?"

"Come in," she called back.

He entered the room to find Aunt Mildred sitting at her vanity removing her own jewelry. She looked older than he'd ever seen her and for a moment, he forgot all his own minor irritants, concern blooming for his aunt. "Are you all right?"

"Fine," she answered with a thin smile. "Just tired from the journey."

"You're never tired."

"I am well past sixty, young buck." But her smile softened as he approached, dropping a kiss on her cheek.

"I suppose that means you'll be staying for a while."

"I will. Not only am I getting older, but I've got business here in London."

Right. The charge. What was her name? Mildred likely mentioned it in one of her

letters, but he'd forgotten.

Did his aunt think that having a child about would tame him? She was sorely mistaken. But the idea of Mildred being ill... that turn of fate might just stop him in his tracks. "Let's talk business tomorrow. Right now, I'm glad to see you."

"Now it's my turn to ask. Are you feeling all right?" She turned toward her nephew. "You're never happy to see me."

He scoffed, straightening up. "I am always happy to see you."

"Humbug," she replied but she gave him another warm smile. "And I agree that tomorrow is the time to talk. Tonight, I am content to sleep in your excessively luxuriant house and lavish in the comforts of the dukedom."

"Now I know you're not feeling well. You never want to lavish..."

She shook her head. "Nonsense. Now be a dear and fetch me a nightcap. Let's drink it together before we retire."

That was the Mildred he knew, sipping from the cup of life. "Your wish is my command."

She snorted as she removed each of her rings. "You must be worried about me. You are never this agreeable."

"We can agree that we're both not ourselves this evening."

Mildred shook her head. "We are not. I know the reason I'm out of sorts." Her face fell again. "I'm not sure I was meant to be the keeper of another female."

Ryker paused in the doorway. Was the child giving his aunt trouble? That's what boarding schools were for. And this would be so much easier if his aunt also wanted to send the child to school instead of blathering on about how children needed love.

Of course, he'd been the beneficiary of her affection as a child. It was Mildred's home he'd visited on holidays. Her house that had made him figgy pudding, and Mildred herself who'd taken him to cut bows to decorate the mantels. She'd filled his life with the only love he'd ever known. "You are well over sixty."

"I'm allowed to say it, you aren't," she fired back, sounding far more like his feisty aunt. "Now fetch my drink. I'm nearly ready for bed."

He smiled at her as he started for the study again. He could have sent a servant, but Mildred was right. She was the one person that he would service without reservation.

CHAPTER THREE

Chloe woke to the feeling of her stomach cramped with nerves. She'd hardly slept last night, despite the amazingly comfortable bed, because her thoughts had refused to quiet.

First, Mildred had barely spoken to her after they'd left the masquerade. Chloe could ill afford to upset the only person who cared for her. Her need to be settled in a comfortable marriage swelled in her chest once again.

Mildred was wonderful but a husband could not leave her when he became irritated the way Mildred could. And might after last night.

Which led her to the second reason for her nerves. Today was the day she'd meet the duke. His support could make her dream come true. Or send her hopes crashing to the ground.

But she had yet another reason to be worried. Yesterday, the duke had been the man to determine her entire future. But today...

He might have been trumped by the one who'd kissed her last night. That man would not make her life, but he might destroy it.

Or was she the person in danger of ruining her own future? She'd been so eager for the adventure he'd offered even though she'd known better. He'd been so handsome, and she was exceptionally lonely and inexperienced. Still, it was no excuse. Mildred was right about that. Chloe pushed back the covers and rang the bell for a bath. She

might as well be fresh for whatever the day brought.

An hour later, she was bathed and dressed, with her thick hair getting twisted into an elaborate coif as a light blue muslin gown for her to wear was laid out by the maid.

A knock sounded at the door, then Mildred swept into the room with her tall regal stature, and fit for a woman half her age. “Good morning.”

Mildred no longer sounded angry. In fact, she was her usual chipper self. “Good morning.”

The maid put the final pin into Chloe’s hair and then crossed the room to prepare the dress. Chloe followed, Mildred stepping around the bed to help as well.

“You slept well, I hope?” Chloe asked, nipping at her lip as she stepped into the skirts.

“I did. I’m feeling much refreshed and looking forward to the day. We have tea with my dear friend, the dowager Countess of Strasmore.”

“Excellent.” The maid finished fastening the gown’s row of intricate buttons and then curtsied as she turned and left the room.

Silence fell between Mildred and Chloe as she turned to the one person who’d held her up all these months. “Please say you forgive me.”

Mildred made a pishing noise, sweeping her hand. “Already forgiven. You think I didn’t kiss my share of men?”

Chloe blinked in surprise before a small smile tugged at her lips. Even older, Mildred still cut a striking figure. “I’m sure you did.”

“I was the sister of a duke. I have always been able to afford freedom, Chloe. You do not have that luxury. You’re going to have to be smarter, I’m afraid.”

Chloe’s fingers knotted together. “I know. You’re right. I won’t let it happen again. I just got caught up in his good looks and charm. There are no men like him in Durham.”

Mildred’s shoulders softened. “I shouldn’t have allowed you to wander off last night, untrained as you are in men of his ilk. There are a thousand like him here in London. Handsome, charming, but rakes. They’ve been hardened and they’ll take what they can get without giving you anything in return. You can’t just give any man free liberties. He has to earn them.”

Chloe shifted, hearing the truth in Mildred’s words. “I’ve heard every word you’ve said, and I’ll stay out of trouble in the future. I promise.”

“Good girl.” Mildred patted her cheek with a brilliant smile. “You’re smart enough to learn. Now...” The older woman dropped her voice. “My friend knows all the gossip, so she’ll know if there are any rumors.”

“Will we have to tell her what I did?” The butterflies beat in her stomach again as her chin dipped with her embarrassment.

“We will. But we can trust her with the information.”

Chloe didn’t wish to tell anyone but she had no choice. Mildred knew best how to survive here in the city. “Whatever you think best.”

“Let’s go down to breakfast and meet your new guardian.” Mildred laced her fingers in Chloe’s and began walking with her toward the door. “All you need to do is nod and smile. He’ll provide what I ask of him. Don’t you worry.”

Chloe was worried. But she pushed those fears aside as she followed Mildred out the door. Facing the duke was the moment she'd been waiting for.

* * *

Ryker raked a hand through his hair, knowing he was ruffling the carefully combed strands. But the gesture had become a bad habit when he was agitated.

First, he'd had too many drinks too close to bedtime, so his head ached this morning. After he'd left Mildred's room, he'd imbibed several more. The events of last night had been too... personal.

He'd dreamed of the woman he'd kissed all through the night. Broken dreams that had been fueled by alcohol, but nonetheless, in his sleep, he'd held her and kissed her, until she suddenly slipped away, leaving him as lonely as his mother had always left him feeling. And then his father— Ryker hadn't dreamed of the old duke in years—had appeared laughing at his son and proclaimed that Ryker was even more useless than he himself had been.

Ryker shook his head. He knew better than to drink that much so close to bed.

The dreams had shaken him. He didn't get emotionally involved with anyone.

He was in no state to deal with club business. Still, he had a meeting with the Emperor this afternoon, where he'd have to explain how little he'd discovered about Adam.

His correspondence still sat in front of him, the letters he'd received waiting to be opened. His head ached, his temples throbbed, his mood too sour to open anything now.

He shuffled past the king's note and the unmarked envelope until he saw the bit just under it. A bill of sale from a dress shop.

His aunt had spent a king's ransom on dresses. Why in the bloody blue blazes had she needed so much?

He rose from the desk, the bill in hand, and started for the breakfast room where his aunt's laugh filtered down the hall.

His head gave a decided throb as his long strides carried him down the hall.

Turning into the dining room he saw his aunt in her usual seat at the opposite end of the table from his place.

But she wasn't what caught his gaze. Because sitting with her back to him was another woman.

Not a girl.

Her thick blonde hair was twisted up in a beautiful style that highlighted the lushness of the locks and the delicate column of her neck. One graceful hand rested on the table. Her entire visage looking very familiar.

His stomach dropped, beginning to churn.

She turned then, her profile coming into view. The high arch of her brow, clear blue of her eye... the fullness of her petal pink lips and... He'd forgotten just how beautiful she was and he knew exactly how sweet those lips tasted. How in the hell could he hide this from his aunt? "Fuck," he muttered under his breath, but he could have sworn Mildred heard him the way her gaze narrowed.

He looked back over at his new charge, seconds feeling like an eternity until she rose from her chair and turned to fully face him, her gasp filling the silence, her eyes clashing with his. Familiarity sparked in them, as her lips parted in surprise, her brows lifting as her hand came to her throat.

There was no denying who stood before him. It was her. Even more lovely in the morning light, she might have been a radiant goddess crafted from the finest marble having been pulled from Greek mythology.

“Your Grace,” Mildred’s voice echoed about the room as all the color drained from Chloe’s face. “I’d like for you to meet your new charge, Miss Chloe Fairchild.”

His teeth gnashed together, his hands clenching into fists as he tried to process all these events. The woman he’d kissed, the one that had filled his dreams. She was his charge? It was too ridiculous to be true. “You said she was a girl,” he said.

“Did I?” Mildred didn’t sound the least bit concerned.

“She called you a boy,” Chloe whispered, her voice trembling as she gripped her chair for support, her face as white as the linen on his bed.

“Chloe? What’s wrong?” Mildred asked as she quickly stood and stepped around the table.

Chloe wobbled on her feet. With another muttered curse, he stepped closer, wrapping a hand around her back. “Stay with me.”

Her eyes seemed to focus on his face again, widening as she stared at him. “I think that might be my sentiment, not yours.”

“What does she mean?” Mildred demanded, her hand coming to his arm to give it a

decidedly hard squeeze. “Ryker?”

But his eyes were fixed on Chloe. The girl who was no girl at all. His charge was a debutante and the most beautiful woman he’d seen in a very long time. Maybe ever.

But the ridiculousness didn’t stop there. She was also the very lady from whom he’d stolen a kiss. And any moment now, his aunt would discover the truth.

“Ryker,” Chloe whispered, her hand coming to his other arm, a far more gentle touch.

“Ryker... I think I might faint.”

He pulled her against his chest a moment before she went limp.

CHAPTER FOUR

Chloe woke slowly as she attempted to get her bearings. Where was she? Why was she so warm and comfortable?

That's when the rumble of voices filled her ears, individual words and phrases penetrating the fog of her mind...

"I didn't know." The deep rumble of a male voice.

"You know now," Mildred replied, Chloe recognizing the lilting soprano of the other woman's voice.

"It was innocent."

"It's grounds for her to be ruined," Mildred said, her words sounding more agitated and clipped. Chloe's eyes fluttered open, the strong line of a man's jaw coming into view. Was she in his arms?

She blinked several slow blinks as the room, a lavish dining room, came into focus. It was as unfamiliar as the rest of the situation. Where was she and how had she gotten here? Her mind refused to focus as she attempted to puzzle out the circumstances. She was with Mildred...

She looked back at the man who held her in his arms. A few memories tickled the back of her thoughts. Masks and gaslight...

And a lovely kiss.

Suddenly, the entire situation flooded her memories, last night's kiss with a stranger, meeting that very stranger this morning, the man who kissed her, a duke—and her guardian.

Was that good or bad? The pounding of her heart told her that whatever came next was going to be bad.

“Ryker Helmsworth. You will do your duty?—”

“Mildred,” He cut off his aunt. “You might think that you can dictate my choices but?—”

“Oh not me,” Mildred's voice had grown deadly calm in a way Chloe had never heard before. Not even last night. “But my cousin... the king of this country, I think he might have a thing or two to say to you about your future.”

Ryker's arms about her stiffened, his jaw growing so taut, he looked as though he could chew nails. Chloe didn't think... she just reached up a hand and touched his jaw, her fingers sliding over the stubble already beginning to roughen his skin.

He looked down at her then, his teeth audibly gnashing together. “You're awake.”

“I...” She dropped her hand again, realizing the touch was likely not appropriate. “I am.”

“Are you all right?” He searched her face, one hand coming to her neck and settling over her pulse.

“I'm fine, I'm certain. I was just surprised that you were... you.” Did that even make

sense? “I’m not normally prone to fainting.” In addition to recognizing the man who’d kissed her last night, the lack of sleep, coupled with the shock and the strain of the last several months, hadn’t helped. “I’m sorry.”

She wasn’t certain what she apologized for. Her weakness or the situation in which he found himself.

Her gaze shifted to Mildred, who stood straight and tall a few feet away, her arms crossed over her chest.

Mildred was a force of good, but the woman was... a force.

“You’re not the first fainting woman I’ve caught.”

“But she is your last,” Mildred replied for her, her chin notching up.

He spun with Chloe in his arms, striding out the door without answering his aunt. Chloe nearly asked where they were going, or what was happening, but his arms were like iron bands and his face was hard and angry. So she kept silent.

He entered a sitting room, crossing over to a settee before setting her down. She half expected him to dump her on the furniture like dead weight, but he was slow and gentle as he lowered her to the ridiculously soft cushions.

The moment he rose, Chloe caught sight of Mildred entering the room. “Mildred,” she started her plea.

She had no interest in forcing the duke to do anything. A small dowry was all she hoped for, and even that felt like a decadent favor. If no one knew who’d kissed her, there was no harm. Was there?

She'd always known when to push and when to leave something be, and in this moment, he did not seem like a man to force.

"Quiet, dear." Mildred stared at her nephew with hard eyes.

"Mildred," he rumbled, saying the exact same name but sounding completely different from Chloe.

He sounded irritated. Dangerous. In command.

Mildred didn't bat an eye. "Ryker."

"You are not forcing me?—"

"I am. You are one and thirty and show no signs of changing your ways."

He let out a sound that reminded Chloe of a snarl.

"If I involve the king, everyone will know of the scandal, which is why..."

"Fuck me," he spit.

Chloe half jumped, sitting up. "It's all right. We don't even know anyone saw... there is no need."

"Chloe," Mildred bit out. "Do not speak again."

She snapped her mouth shut, pressing her lips tightly.

Ryker assessed her, his keen eyes staring into hers, before they drifted to her mouth, and then lower, his gaze seeming to take in every detail. There was no passion in his

gaze, however; it was an assessment that made Chloe shrink in on herself.

“I need a drink.” Ryker turned away then, crossing to the buffet where a line of crystal decanters sat in a neat row.

“It’s not even ten in the morning,” Mildred huffed. “Have ale.”

“Woman, cease telling me what to do,” he spit back. “You’ve always been meddlesome.”

“Someone has to help you find the right path. As advanced in years as you are, you’re still completely lost.”

“Lost?” He spun back a full glass in hand. “In my own house?”

“You know what I mean.”

“As a matter of fact, I do not know. I am on the exact path I choose to be, for the reasons I choose to be there. I have indulged your mothering because?—”

“You needed it.” Mildred’s chin raised higher.

“Because I care for you.”

Mildred snorted. “If you cared for me, you would have had children already while I’m young enough to love them the way I did you.”

“You should have had children of your own,” Ryker tossed back.

“You think I don’t know that?” Mildred looked down at her then and she reached out a hand, brushing a stray lock of Chloe’s hair back from her forehead. “But life has

provided me with two children I didn't birth, and I intend to take care of them both."

Ryker let out a long, frustrated breath. "Damn meddling woman."

Chloe reached for Mildred's hand, holding it in her own. "Might I ask a question?"

Mildred scowled down at her even as Chloe silently pleaded with her eyes. "Fine," Mildred answered, squeezing her fingers.

She wasn't certain this information mattered to Mildred, but it did to Chloe. She looked at Ryker, plucking up the courage to ask her question and hopefully gain some clarity. "Why did you kiss me last night?"

* * *

Why did he kiss her last night?

His aunt's brows rose, her eyes sharp on Ryker. She was clearly also curious about the question. But he couldn't very well tell the truth...

You were a bet. The sort of behavior he engaged in regularly because that was what men did. At least the men he spent his time with. He rolled his head, cracking his neck. This was an impossible situation. His charge was the woman he'd compromised. Used and then left. "You're stunning."

He didn't add that he was the sort of man who took what he wished when he wished. Even he had the decency to not utter such words in front of his aunt. His heart shrunk in his chest. Bollocks. He could see the disappointment in Aunt Mildred's eyes, and he didn't wish to keep upsetting her. Damn the woman; she meddled, but she cared for him.

Not that it mattered. Mildred clearly intended to press the issue. What were his next plays? Strong-arm his aunt into silence. That was the first choice.

His aunt was as kind as she was energetic, but that did not mean she was easily manipulated. And she had a will of iron when she chose. It ran in the family...

He thought of the unopened letter on his desk. The king was growing increasingly impatient. Apparently, he didn't like his dukedoms being left to chance. He wanted the title and all its influence to remain close to the throne. And the king could only be held off for so long.

His gaze flitted to Chloe. She was beautiful. Easily coerced into kissing, easily controlled by his aunt. She was a scared little mouse who'd fainted at the very sight of him.

He could make a stand against marriage as he'd been doing for the last fourteen years or...

A plan began to form.

He looked at Chloe again, those large blue eyes begging him for... he wasn't entirely certain, but he could guess.

She was alone in the world, save for his aunt. She needed a secure position and that was something he could use to his advantage.

The possibility wasn't ideal. In fact, it was the opposite of what he'd sworn he'd wanted, but even Rome had had to fall eventually. Considering the situation in which he found himself...

"There's no need to involve the king."

One of Mildred's brows rose as she assessed him. Chloe sat with her arms wrapped about herself.

"You're certain?" Mildred asked, her head cocking to the side.

He didn't dignify the question with a response. "Aunt Mildred, Chloe and I need to have a word."

Mildred's eyes flashed with indecision as she looked down at her new charge. It was Chloe who answered. "It's all right."

Mildred paused for a moment longer before she gave a quick nod and then turned toward the door. "I shall be just across the hall in the dining room should you need me." She turned to go, her skirts swishing about her legs as she made her way to the door. But just before she left, she stopped and gave him a narrow-eyed glare over her shoulder before she finally disappeared.

Silence fell as he crossed to the mantel, staring into the flames of the fire.

"Your Grace?" Chloe finally whispered, breaking the silence.

He looked back at her then. Scared, vulnerable, alone. A little country mouse. Didn't she know, she'd entered the lair of a predator?

"We are going to wed."

"Oh," she gasped, her eyes widening.

He straightened up. His chest broadened as he drew in a deep breath. "But if I'm going to make you my duchess, we need to make a few points clear."

“Points?”

“I don’t intend to go public with our marriage right away. I’ll need time...” If he played this right, he could pacify his aunt and the King without changing his life.

Chloe struck him as the sort of woman he would be able to control. To dictate the terms. It would be his aunt who might be problematic with the arrangement he had in mind.

“I see?” Her brow furrowed, her teeth nipping at her bottom lip.

“Don’t worry. You’ll be well cared for financially. I’ll see to your every need from here on out.”

Desire coursed through him at the idea of meeting one need in particular, but he tamped down the thought. There was no room for it here. Now.

Her features relaxed, her shoulders slumping. “That is a relief.”

“I won’t require much from you in return. Your cooperation, of course.”

Chloe nodded, her hesitation evident, in the quaver of her chin. “Of course.”

He would quietly tell the King he’d wed. His aunt should be happy with the match. But to the rest of the world, he’d remain as he’d always been for as long as he could.

“Is there anything else you require?” Chloe asked, her trembling hands clasping in front of her.

“Such as?”

She shook her head, the soft strands of her blonde hair catching the morning sun. His eyes followed the movement and then slid down the delicate column of her neck.

Her mouth opened and then closed. “When do you think we would tell others we’d wed?”

Did she want a timeline? That wasn’t likely to happen. “When I see fit.”

Her head cocked to the side as she stared up at him. “But what if I become pregnant? Surely then...”

His jaw clenched as he stared down at her. He didn’t even want a wife. He most certainly didn’t wish for a child. He knew what everyone else in the world expected from a duke, but that was their problem. He’d not create an heir. There would be no exception. “You won’t become pregnant.”

Chloe blinked in surprise. “I beg your pardon?”

“You won’t become pregnant.”

“But how can you know?—”

“I know because we won’t have that sort of relationship.”

Her lips parted in shock, her eyes clouding with confusion.

“That is my other caveat, Chloe. If we wed, there will be no intimacy. I won’t touch you.”

She gasped in a breath, falling back on the settee, her wide blue eyes becoming impossibly large. “You can’t mean it.”

“I do. Every word.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Chloe stared at him attempting to understand. A duke who didn't want an heir? It was ridiculous. Absurd.

What would Mildred say if she heard all this? But of course, Mildred had been asked to leave. Ryker didn't want his aunt to know what he was proposing.

Cad.

But it wasn't Chloe's position to judge. She needed this man to finance her future one way or the other.

What would he do if she rejected his proposal? The very idea that he'd still provide her a dowry after she'd told him no...

She nipped at her lip again. She had created this situation. Indulging in that kiss was having the most unimaginable consequences. "You don't want a physical relationship with your wife?"

"Technically, I don't want a wife at all. I never have. But as the situation requires it, I can find some benefit in our match."

"Such as?"

"Well, my aunt will cease playing matchmaker. The King will stop sending me increasingly aggressive missives..."

He was tired of being harangued.

“And if the lady understands what I require, a match of... convenience could work in my favor.”

Chloe blinked at him. In his favor? Worry niggled down her spine. Generally, when something was designed for one person's convenience, it would be far from convenient for the other.

But he would be meeting her most basic needs. She needed her financial future secured and that, he could provide. And she'd be settled. She'd have Mildred as a permanent family member...

She shook her head, looking at her clasped hands. “I don't know...”

He moved closer then until he stood next to the settee, close enough that she could reach out and touch his thigh. Her fingers curled tighter together. What was it about this man that provoked such a reaction? This senseless need to touch him?

He ran the pad of his thumb over her cheek, then hooked a finger under her chin, lifting her face. “Chloe. What's there to decide? This is beneficial for us both.”

It was true. Except... she found him so tempting, she couldn't deny it, it's why she'd allowed him the liberty of kissing her last night. And then there was the fact that she wanted companionship. She missed the security a real family had always provided. Not just financial but emotional. “How would it work? Us not being together...”

He withdrew his hand. “You could choose which of my estates you'd like to reside. You'd spend your time there... I would be mostly here...”

She was going to be shunted off like some dirty secret. That knot of dread tightened.

“And if no one discovers that we kissed. Would you still want to go forward with this plan, or could I find someone else?”

He stared down at her with unreadable eyes. “The plan is now the plan. Even if I agreed, you know Mildred. She’s decided that she’d like both her adopted children settled. You could marry someone else, but then she’d return to meddling in my affairs. The unique thing about you is that with you, I can be honest with my wishes.”

She shook her head, forcing herself to stand. With the low table in front of the settee, she found herself trapped so that their bodies nearly touched. She still needed to tilt her chin a ridiculous amount to look at him. “You’re a duke. Plenty of women would make all sorts of deals...”

He smiled then, so charming and handsome that her breath stuck in her throat. “Not women that look like you, Chloe. Women of both breeding age and with the correct temperament, who might understand my requirements, are very difficult to find.”

“My temperament?”

His smile broadened. “You know what I mean.” His smile disappeared.

“I’m not certain I do.” She pressed her hands to her stomach, knowing this was her moment to ask for what she needed most. “Which is why I must implore you to fund a modest dowry?—”

“Out of the question.”

His tone left no room for debate as her shoulders curled in. “But...”

“Chloe, it’s marriage to me or find your own future. Those are the choices I’m offering.”

Her breath caught in her lungs as she realized he held all the cards, and he'd use every one to get his way. She hated this deal. But what choice did she have? A shiver ran through her, tears pricking at her eyes. She didn't have any choice at all. "Fine. I accept."

"Good girl. I'll leave you to tell Mildred the good news. As my wife, I'll expect your confidence. The details of our arrangement are for you and me alone. No one else needs to know."

"Of course." She might hate him. Had she kissed him last night? Found him handsome this morning? He was a cold-blooded snake. One who planned to shunt her off to the country to live as a well-paid spinster.

"Good." He turned away, and her stomach plummeted. She had to do something. She couldn't lose like this... so completely. Her future and happiness were at stake. So, she attempted to draw herself up, and find some well of confidence inside her that she hardly knew even existed.

"I have one request." The words fell from her lips in a breathy rush.

He looked back at her then. "You're hardly in the position?—"

She lifted a finger. If she didn't stop him, she might never get this out. "It's been my lifelong dream to travel to London. I'd like to stay for the season."

"The season?"

"I don't need to participate in high society. I just want to experience the city a bit. If I do go out, I can go out with you as your charge or some such thing, but I've only just arrived. Please don't send me away yet." She held her breath, knowing that she wanted more than just to explore London.

She was about to tie herself to this man. She'd learn what she was dealing with before they were formally wed. "And I'd like a fortnight before our ceremony."

"I'm not posting the banns."

He wouldn't. That would be a public announcement. "It's not about that. I just wish for a bit of time to adjust."

He grimaced. "Chloe."

"Please," she heard the begging in her voice, her gaze surely pleading as she stared back at him.

"Fine. But no more time than that."

She nodded, relief making her limp again, as he turned, leaving, without so much as a goodbye. Not even a kiss on the hand of the woman he'd just asked to marry.

She had a fortnight to decide if she wished to change her mind, to stay and honor the arrangement or leave, which was good. Because she might have just made a deal with the devil.

* * *

Ryker climbed into his carriage, raking a hand through his hair, surely making the strands stand on end. He had a meeting with the Emperor to share his findings about Adam, and it was the very last thing he wished to do today, especially after everything that had transpired this morning.

Ryker was a man used to keeping private matters private. The idea that he'd just proposed to a woman and planned to marry, had unsettled him. Remaining single was

the one absolute in their ranks, even more important than the secret identities they maintained at the club. If any of the men found out about Chloe, he'd be out, no longer allowed among their ranks.

And other than Mildred, the club was all he cared about.

And then there was the matter of Chloe's request to remain in London. How the hell was he going to manage that? The attraction that crackled between them was palpable. It was a grave detriment to his plan because if he impregnated his wife, he would truly be in danger of becoming his father.

Perhaps Chloe was right. Mayhap he should choose a woman who was less... well... just less.

But the idea rankled. He was a man who had the best of everything and Chloe... she was the best.

He tied on his mask, pushing his hair back once again as the carriage arrived at the club. He exited his unmarked carriage and took the steps two at a time, then pushed open the door.

The interior immediately calmed him, and he drew in a deep breath of the air, which was infused with the scent of expensive liquor and cigar smoke. This was the place he was most free to be himself.

No facades, no pretense of civility. His shoulders relaxed. It would be much easier if he could just send Chloe away, but as it stood... she seemed to understand what he wished to accomplish. She'd said if they went out together, she'd pretend to be only his charge and not his wife.

He'd send Mildred back to Berkshire, saying he and Chloe needed time together or

some such thing.

The plan could still work. He'd pacify his aunt and the King while maintaining the life he enjoyed. Simple.

His thoughts straight, he started down the hall and then up the back stairs to where the members usually met.

He found the Emperor and the Summoner sitting at their meeting table, both men masked. In the corner, the Master also lounged, his legs spread out in front of him.

"Cozy," Ryker rumbled, taking his usual seat.

The Emperor quirked a brow above his mask. "We heard you played the game well last night."

Hardly. In fact, he'd lost as badly as a man within their world could. Then again, he was the Keeper of Secrets. What was one more?

"We're not here to discuss that, are we?"

The Emperor shrugged. "We're here to discuss all things club related."

He waited for the man to explain, his curiosity piqued.

"I am reaching an age where I may need to retire. You two," and the Emperor looked back at the Master, "are our most senior members. I was glad to see you paired last night and I think you might consider an even more meaningful pairing."

"You're retiring?" Fuck. This place was as important to him as any other. He'd learned to be a man here when his own father had refused to teach him. But could he

take the reins of the club when he was secretly married?

Then again, did he want to leave the club? Allow another man to lead? Ryker always took the best from life. And being the Emperor...

The Master scraped his feet along the floor, the noise echoing through the room. "You don't look that excited, Keeper."

Ryker rumbled deep in his throat. "I'm wearing a mask. How would you know?"

"Because I saw you excited... also in a mask, last night." He tapped the Emperor. "You should have seen the lady he caught. Stunning."

His teeth gnashed together, wanting to tell the other man to shut up. "That was different."

"We all love the thrill of the chase." The Master chuckled. "But I've seen you on the hunt before and I've never seen you so enthralled."

"What are you trying to say?"

"Maybe you want to retire too." The Master gave him the falsest smile he'd ever seen.

"Fuck off and mind your own damn business."

The Master didn't look the least bit put out. "Did you get her name? Is she from a good family? I told you I was interested. But if her father is powerful enough, perhaps the Emperor might like an introduction. You are in the market for a bride, aren't you, Emperor? She really was exceptional."

A snarl pulled from his lips. “I don’t share.” And besides, he knew what the Master was doing. He was trying to remove Ryker from the club so that he could take over leadership himself.

The Master let out another chuckle. “This is the man you want me to partner with? Charmed, I’m sure.”

The Emperor looked from one to the other. “Perhaps we should discuss my possible retirement later. I can see there are some details to work out, yet.” He cleared his throat. “Our other topic is the unfortunate incident outside our doors.”

Ryker’s gaze narrowed. “Are the two related? You leaving and the murder?” Ryker asked, knowing that the Master had riled him, and he was being churlish. But he’d had enough bullshit for one day. And besides, he didn’t want leadership of the club if he was just going to inherit a very large problem.

The Master got up from his seat in the corner coming to the table to join the discussion. “You might be a real ass, but you’re a smart ass. That is an excellent point.”

The Emperor let out a long sigh. “This is why we don’t discuss anything beyond games. It never goes well.”

The Summoner grunted. Ryker’s head jerked back in surprise. He’d never heard the man make a single sound. Apparently, he wasn’t completely mute.

He flexed his fingers, forcing them to relax. The Emperor was clearly not going to divulge his motives.

So Ryker was not surprised when the man shifted the topic back to the investigation, “Keeper would you go first, and tell us what you discovered?”

Ryker grimaced. “In terms of my investigation, several of the inn’s workers recognized the man I described. Goes by the name of Adam. He stays occasionally but not with any regularity. I hired a young man to watch out for him and follow him no matter where he goes. Should he travel to the inn again, this boy will take pursuit. Paid the boy a king’s ransom so I sincerely hope he does his job.”

The Emperor nodded. “Excellent. But as it stands, I suspected it might be Adam.”

Another rumble of frustration. “Perhaps you should have traveled to the inn to investigate for yourself.”

“He is extra touchy today,” the Master volunteered, tapping the table as he leaned forward. “What’s the matter, Keeper?”

Ryker ran another hand through his hair, knowing the man had a point. “For our next challenge, I’d like something more physical. Hand-to-hand combat or boxing or...”

“Join another club for that.” The Emperor frowned. “Let’s get back to the subject. Adam is known to me because he is quite close to Lord Severus Whitehouse. A Gothic revivalist whose brother is a bishop. Zealots, the lot of them, though Severus plays more mainstream because he likes to stay in the favor of the King. I happen to know that Severus is having a gathering tomorrow evening, and I would guess that all of us are on the list of invitees. I can’t attend, I have other matters.”

Ryker frowned. He saw where this was going.

“Neither can I.” The Master waved his hand. “I already promised another member I’d be his eyes as proof at the Wilmington ball.”

“Leaves me, does it?” Ryker’s voice dropped low and menacing with his irritation. Today was not the day for him to hand out favors. “What am I supposed to do there?”

The Emperor gave him a rare smile. “Our Keeper is not the friendliest man, Master, but you have to admit, he gets the job done.”

The Master leaned back in his chair. “The yin to my yang? I’m the charm and he’s the whip.”

Ryker ignored the other man, looking back at the Emperor.

“Watch for Adam, of course. He sometimes attends Whitehouse’s events. Listen to whatever private conversations with Lord Whitehouse that you can. Feel free to search his private rooms.”

“I’m searching for...”

The Emperor shrugged. “Anything that might tie Whitehouse, and his gang of zealots, to the murder or the club. It’s not a lot to go on but...”

Ryker let out a long breath. “Ought we hire men who do this professionally?”

“Mayhap. But first I wish to know if we need to involve ourselves at all. If this was all a coincidence, and the death had nothing to do with the club, I’d rather not have any record of our involvement. And that includes putting investigators on the payroll.”

Ryker shook his head. “I’ll go tomorrow night. But that is the end of my involvement with the investigation. I am in danger of tying my name to this thing, and that would be damn hard to explain.”

“What’s the danger there?” the Master asked.

Ryker tapped his finger, resisting the urge to just punch the man. “None of us wish to

claim that Maxwell was our friend. It ties us to the murder and endangers the club.” He looked back at the Emperor. “If you’re truly considering retiring, perhaps it would be best if it was you who hired an investigator.”

The Emperor gave a nod. “Fine. But even if he proves Adam did it, without knowing about the club’s existence, no one can prove if it’s related to us. Only we can do that.”

Ryker saw the man’s point. Still. “If you don’t want to hire out, then I suggest you both make time to help. The choice is yours. But I’m not your errand boy. This is my last favor to the investigation.”

Then he rose.

A leader did not take orders, he gave them. And if the club needed a new Emperor, he was up for the challenge.

But he did things his way and no one else’s. Furthermore, the Master was not his friend, he was another man of whom Ryker needed to keep a careful watch.

CHAPTER SIX

Chloe softly closed the door of Mildred's room, nipping at her lip.

Mildred wasn't feeling well. Just the sniffles the doctor had said but, at her advancing age, he'd recommended a week of rest and recovery.

Chloe pressed her hands down her skirts, as though she might soothe her rising nerves. Mildred was getting on in age, and though Chloe had only known the other woman for just a year, she'd come to depend on her. What would she do if Mildred weren't here?

She wished she could confide in Mildred, tell her about Ryker's cynical but practical proposal. She could use the woman's advice. Mildred understood the duke so much better than Chloe did.

She frowned down the hall toward the room she knew belonged to Ryker. It didn't seem that the man she'd agreed to marry would be a companion or caregiver, at least any other way than financially.

Important, sure. But the very idea of being completely alone for the rest of her life made her shiver with dread.

She gazed down the hall at the closed door of her fiancé. She hated their arrangement. She was a woman meant to be placed firmly at the side of a strong man. She knew that about herself.

Her father had always supported Chloe. Now that he was gone, she'd need to find another man who could truly care for her.

Which meant one of two things: either she cried off their arrangement or she attempted to convince her husband to have a more traditional marriage. She had a fortnight to determine which was the more prudent course.

But that meant spending time together.

Drawing in a deep breath, she made her way down the hall. She paused in front of his door, lifting her hand to knock and then dropped it again.

She didn't normally force a situation like this. Instead, she'd watch and read, understand the other person, but the clock was ticking.

Straightening her spine, she lifted her hand and knocked on the door.

"Enter," a deep voice rumbled, one she instantly recognized as Ryker's.

She reached for the knob, pausing for only a moment, before she finally pushed the heavy mahogany door open and then she stepped into the room.

"Good, you're here," Ryker called from an adjoining room that Chloe assumed was the dressing room. "I need your aid after all. You know how I am with cuffs and cravats."

Chloe didn't answer as she moved deeper into the large room, the giant four post bed in the center causing her stomach to flutter.

It was a masculine room with dark burgundy curtains about the bed and on the windows with deep rich wood furniture and paneling on the walls.

But her gaze soon fixed on the man she'd agreed to marry when he stepped from the dressing room.

He had on breeches, skintight, and his boots. But his shirt was undone, showing the rippling muscles of his chest, and his cuffs were loose.

"Chloe," he growled out with a frown. "What are you doing here?"

She stopped, taking him in from his tousled damp hair, down the strong cords of his neck, over his broad shoulders, to his large, masculine hands.

Dear lord, but he was the sort of man that could make a woman forget her principles. "I wanted to speak with you about Mildred."

"The housekeeper has already informed me of her ailment. She's ill enough to stay in bed but nothing to be concerned about."

She cleared her throat, realizing her thin excuse for coming had been dismissed in an instant. "Yes. That's right."

"No need to keep me apprised of Mildred, I have long been keeping tabs on my aunt." He began to work a cufflink through his cuff, not looking at her at all.

Still. It was good to know that he cared for someone. "Is that how it will be for us as well? The housekeeper will tell you how I fare?"

He stopped, his gaze lifting to hers, his jaw flexing. "You're not pleased with our arrangement."

It wasn't a question, and it didn't bear answering. Instead, she stepped over to him, reaching out to aid him with his cufflink.

He straightened, a muscle in his jaw ticcing as his gaze narrowed. “What are you doing?”

“Helping.” And then she reached for the small metal clasp, feeding it through the equally small holes and opening it to secure the fabric. Silently, he extended the other cuff and dropped the metal cufflink into her hand.

Chloe fingered the jewel-encrusted piece for a moment before she placed it on his wrist. Her fingertips brushed his skin, the warm, course feel of him making her breath catch in her throat. But he either didn’t notice or care as he turned away, tugging the fabric of his sleeves and shrugging on his vest before he reached for his neck cloth. Chloe didn’t hesitate.

She’d tied her father’s often and moving in front of Ryker again, she reached up to his neck. “Let me.”

“Chloe,” his voice held a warning that she did her best to ignore. “I thought I was clear.”

She began to knot the fabric, her small fingers making quick work of the piece. “You were.”

“I said no touching.”

“I assumed you meant touching of the intimate variety, like the kiss we shared or...” Her lips parted as she finished the elaborate knot, smoothing the fabric into place. “Passionate embraces.”

“Passionate embraces?”

She nodded. “When we begin being seen publicly, we’ll have to have some level of

intimacy.”

“Publicly?”

A tendril of apprehension snaked down her spine. “Didn’t you say that you’d announce our match eventually?”

He looked away then, assessing the knot in the mirror. “I suppose I did.”

Did he never plan to tell anyone other than the king and Mildred that he’d wed? He didn’t really expect his aunt to remain silent, did he? Or was his plan to stuff them both in the country? This did not bode well.

She drew in a shaky breath. Would he keep his promises? Any of them? She thought of her request to see a bit of London. “Do we have any events coming up?”

“Events?”

Now she was certain he wouldn’t. Drat. The man was distracting as sin, but he could not be trusted. A characteristic of note. “You promised to take me to lesser events to see London.”

“So I did.” He turned to look at her then, his gaze sliding up and down her as though he was seeing her for the first time, which was ridiculous. “We’re going out tonight.”

“Tonight? Where?”

“The Whitehouse ball.” He shrugged on his jacket, pulling at the lapels, as he straightened the coat.

She looked down at her simple frock of cotton. “What time?”

“As soon as you’re ready.” He fingered the knot she’d tied, a frown pulling at his lips. “I’ll be waiting in the entry.”

Just when she thought there was no hope.... The man had to go and give her what she’d asked for in the most annoying way possible. Chloe hurried off to dress, sure Ryker had won yet another round of their sparring and she had landed on her back foot yet again.

* * *

Ryker tapped his toe as he waited for Chloe to arrive. He hadn’t given her much time, he knew that, but he wasn’t the most patient man.

He’d only been waiting a half hour, and he’d helped himself to a tall drink of scotch in that time. He’d like another but he needed his wits tonight. Both with the investigation he was supposed to conduct and in dealing with his soon-to-be wife. He was far more affected by her than he ought to be.

Just the memory of her hands on his skin... her gentle touch as she affixed his cufflinks in his sleeves and tied his cravat, had his cock stiffening with need. Damn it all to bloody hell.

Asking her to come tonight, had been a last-moment decision. He’d made a promise to her, and he’d needed to find a way to keep it. This event was an ideal choice. First, he knew very few people from his circle would attend the Whitehouse event. But second, Chloe was just the sort of distraction he’d need.

He shifted again, contemplating going back to the study for another drink after all, when Chloe appeared at the top of the stairs.

Dark blue velvet hugged her torso, her hair tied back in a simple chignon that

accented the delicate planes of her face.

She looked stunning. All achieved in under an hour. If a man were in want of a wife, he suspected it would be difficult to do better than Chloe.

Some competitive part of him puffed with pride to know she'd be his in name.

Perhaps she was right. After a year of running the club, he'd retire too. Announce to the world that he was off the market, quiet the debutantes who regularly set their cap on him.

They'd still have to live apart. She was far too tempting to be under his roof. But some part of him actually wanted to tell the world that she belonged to him.

He thought back to the Master's comments yesterday, the man's obvious interest in Chloe. He didn't care who the Master was in the real world, he'd knock the man's teeth out if he tried to make a move on the woman that Ryker had claimed for himself.

Well, secretly claimed.

A nigger of a problem started in the back of his thoughts. If he never publicly announced their marriage, no man would know she wasn't available.

And then there was the issue of her fulfillment... publicly, privately.... His jaw clenched. He'd offered her a life where her financial needs were met but not much else.

Chloe came down the stairs in her large skirt, lifting the hem to expose her trim ankles. His body responded with the most inconvenient tightening. Who the hell became turned on by ankles?

Her clause to take her out was going to be the death of him. Having her on his arm without publicly claiming her would be a sweet torture.

Had she done it on purpose? He paused at the thought. He didn't know Chloe at all, really. What if his assumption that she'd be easily subdued was just wrong?

He reached out a hand, her gloved fingers sliding into his. "You look ravishing."

She smiled with a nod. "As do you, but I knew that already."

"Thank you again." He smoothed his cravat. She tied a better knot than his manservant, which was impressive. "Where did you learn the art?"

"My father," she answered her smile slipping. "It was a ritual of ours right up until the end."

Ryker had also lost his father, but it had not been more than a passing sadness of a relationship that had never been. "You were close?"

"Very," she whispered, her fingers slipping from his again. "My mother passed when I was a newborn and so we only had each other."

His chest ached a bit at her obvious pain as he wondered which was worse. A dead mother or a mother who obviously found her child a nuisance at best and a reminder of her absent husband at worst. "My mother didn't die when I was young. She just didn't like me."

Chloe paused, her head cocking to the side. "That can't be true."

"It is." He held out his elbow, surprised that he actually felt a pang at the words. He'd not lamented his mother's disdain for him for a very long time. He supposed he

blamed his father. “In her defense, my father barely had time for her either. Perhaps, if the duke had loved her, she would have had some affection for her son.” Why was he sharing all this? He never talked about his past.

But Chloe’s honest admission, the quiet way in which she stated her past without complaint, had stirred something in him.

Chloe slipped her hand into his arm, her clear blue eyes searching his. “I don’t care what your father did or didn’t do. A mother should love her child.”

He looked down at her, his jaw locking tight. “You really think so?”

“I do.”

“If you were to have a child, you’d love that child no matter how much of a beast you were married to?” It was a lovely thought. A woman who’d give her child all her love no matter the circumstances.

“Are you calling yourself a beast?” she asked, her head cocking as she assessed him with a small smile.

Right. “I already told you. I don’t plan on having children.”

“Too bad. I was looking forward to being a mother, myself. I think I’d be a good one.”

He had no doubt she would be excellent. It was a shame... but he couldn’t trust himself to be a father. And now that he’d committed to this plan, he wasn’t certain he could let Chloe go.

Leading her out to the carriage, a footman opened the door, and Ryker helped her in

the vehicle.

As he watched her settle in her seat, he was reminded of why this concession of escorting her about London was a terrible idea. How could he trust himself with Chloe? This woman was made to weaken him until he broke every rule he'd carefully set in place.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Chloe stood next to Ryker, watching the parade of dancers. She didn't dare ask him to dance, certain it violated one of his many rules. All right, perhaps there weren't that many, but every time she spoke with him, he was telling her no for one reason or another.

It was tiresome, really.

Was she allowed to accept the invitation to dance from another man?

Would any ask with her standing next to the very large and rather intimidating duke?

"Is this not the dulllest party you've ever seen?"

Chloe turned to see a stunning brunette standing just to her right. She might be from a small village, but she'd made enough friends to know, some women were kind while others... "I haven't attended many events in London, so I have little to compare the evening with."

The woman gave her a genuine smile. "You're the duke's new charge."

"I am."

The other lady's gaze flitted up and down Chloe. "I expected you to be younger."

"So did the duke."

Ryker glanced over, finally noting Chloe was having a conversation. He'd been silently scanning the crowd since they'd arrived an hour prior.

"Countess Green."

"Your Grace." The countess dipped down into a curtsy. "A pleasure as always."

There was no subtext to the woman's voice, no stealthy glances. Her tone was just forthrightly pleasant. Chloe furrowed a brow, trying to decide why the woman might have approached.

"How do you fare?" Ryker asked, his gaze already back on the ballroom.

"Very well but I wondered if I might take your charge on a tour of the room?"

Ryker's mouth pinched but he gave a quick jerk of his chin to give his permission, and in a moment, Countess Green was pulling her into the crowd.

"My name is Caroline," the countess whispered, her arm threading through Chloe's.

"Chloe."

"A pleasure to meet you."

"And you. Though I have to confess, I'm curious to know why we are on this stroll."

Caroline leaned closer. "You simply looked as bored as I felt." Then the woman winked. "And I am friends with Mildred. She asked me to look out for you at events, not that I attend many. I did wonder why she wasn't here this evening?"

Relief made her breath rush out of her lungs. "Mildred asked you."

Caroline looked back over her shoulder. “And, as I said, you looked as bored as I felt. You’d think having a guardian as handsome as yours would be thrilling, but it did not appear to be the case. In fact...”

Was Caroline interested in Ryker? Was the woman insinuating that Chloe wasn’t holding his attention? She stiffened, some possessive need making her bristle. “He has other business to attend tonight. Otherwise, I’m sure he’d be more attentive.”

Caroline raised a hand, her gaze filled with a question. “I’m certain he would. Mildred mentioned that your relationship with him might be developing.”

Chloe started in surprise. This woman already knew of their possible arrangement? Ryker would not be happy. “He would not appreciate hearing you share that. He’d prefer to keep our relationship more private.”

Caroline sighed. Shaking her head. “Men.” Then she leaned closer, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. “My next husband will be as uncomplicated as he is kind, if I marry at all.”

Well, that certainly did settle a few things. “Next husband?”

“I’m a widow,” Caroline stated matter-of-factly. “My first husband was an earl, three times my age, and not particularly friendly. I’m done with emotionally unavailable men.”

Sympathy coursed through Chloe. “His Grace,” she said carefully, “is as exhausting as he is detached.”

“Hmmm.” Caroline stopped near a dark corner of the room. “It’s interesting because while I noted that he neither talked to you nor looked at you, he touches you quite often.”

That was interesting and it mirrored her own feelings. One minute he seemed indifferent, the next anything but...

“I understand what you mean but honestly he’s very complicated.”

Caroline gave her a sympathetic smile. “You’ll have to decide if you wish to be the duchess or not. Being a powerful man’s bride isn’t always an easy position.”

“And if I didn’t?” It was the very question she’d been asking herself these past few days.

Caroline’s smile widened. “Do you wish to be rich or titled?”

Chloe blinked in surprise. “I beg your pardon?”

“You might be able to accomplish both with your beauty, but if you had to choose...”

Chloe cocked her head to the side. “Financial security is most important along with companionship.”

“Oh, that will be easy, then. Merchants are making money like lords and many of them would love to marry the relative of a duke. You’d have your pick of men, no dowry required.”

Was this true? She shifted closer to Caroline. “Really? You’re certain?”

“For you? Very. Tell me more about what you wish. I’d love nothing more than to play matchmaker tonight. It would give me something to do.”

She drew in a breath. “Kind and caring would be nice.”

Caroline laughed. “No complicated men for you either. Understood. But what about attractive?”

She thought of her reaction to Ryker. How he made her forget herself. Would any man compare to that? She began to answer but a deep voice rumbled behind her. “There you are.”

She turned to see Ryker just behind her, his gaze as unreadable as ever. “Here I am.”

“I require your assistance.”

“Of course.”

“Demanding too,” Caroline softly whispered, making a small smile pull at Chloe’s lips. “If I can’t help you tonight, I will call on you tomorrow so that we might plan another evening in which to hunt for husbands that are to our liking.”

Chloe let out a rush of air. “You are an angel.”

Caroline laughed at that, but didn’t have a chance to respond as Ryker took her hand, whisking her toward a hall. “Where are we going?” she asked.

“It’s better that you don’t ask.”

She looked at him then, her heart climbing into her throat. Couldn’t anything be simple with this man?

* * *

Ryker had spotted Adam. The man was difficult to miss with those scars on his face but with the large crowd and the low light, he’d almost missed the man.

He watched Adam slip down a hall, cursing softly under his breath. He shouldn't have let Chloe go off with the countess. It had meant that Ryker had had to collect his charge before they could follow Adam down the hall.

Had he lost him?

His gut niggled at the idea of coming this close to following the man and then losing him again. Not that he was beholden to this investigation, but he'd like to hand it over to the next man with a solid lead.

It was his pride at stake.

And Chloe was the perfect cover. If caught in the hall, she could pretend illness, faintness, and his excuse was that he was just attending her. Or perhaps they could stage a kiss. In the dark, no one would know who they were, and everyone would assume they'd slipped down the hall for some privacy.

But he'd been delayed in retrieving her and as they entered the dark hall, he was certain he'd lost the man.

"Damn."

"Damn what? What are we doing down here?" Chloe asked, squeezing his hand. A gesture he ignored.

Instead, he scanned the hall, looking for any sign as to where Adam had gone. "Start opening doors. Look for a study. If anyone asks, you're searching for the lady's repose."

She let out a small gasp, her hand tugging out of his. "You're serious?"

“You think I’d come to an event this dull willingly?”

She stared at him, her mouth opening and then closing. “Is that why we haven’t danced?”

“Danced,” he snorted. “Is that what you consider fun?”

“What do you consider fun?” she asked, still not searching.

“I shall tell you later after you’ve done as I’ve asked.”

She let out a long breathy sigh before she finally began trying doors on the left side of the hall. He followed suit, checking the right.

All the rooms were either locked or dark and silent, the only sound was the soft swish of Chloe’s skirts. And then, down the hall, a knob rattled.

In an instant, he was across the hall, spinning Chloe away from the door and toward him, pressing her back against the solid wood paneling, her front crushed against the solid wall of his chest.

A mistake.

Her luxuriant softness molded to him, her body fitting his perfectly.

She tilted her chin up to him, her eyes wide with surprise.

He didn’t hesitate. Clasp ing her chin in his hand he crushed his mouth to hers. This was not the gentle brush like their first kiss. He’d like to say that he was attempting to sell the embrace, but the truth was, she just felt too damned good.

Touching her like this, he wished to devour her.

Her lips, so soft and yielding, melded to his, one of her arms snaking around his neck.

Her embrace only fueled his passion higher. He forgot about the reason he was in this hall, his mouth slanting hers open so that he might plunder her sweetness.

His tongue tangled with hers as he swallowed her gasp of surprise. Instead, he coaxed her tongue to respond, brushing against hers until she tentatively used hers to stroke him back. It was his turn to groan into her mouth, Chloe so delicious that all he could think was that he wanted more of her. More of everything...

“Just about what I’d expect from the Keeper.”

Those words were like cold water being poured on his head. Who recognized him as the Keeper? He spun, careful to keep Chloe covered by his body. He turned to find himself face-to-face with Adam. Though he’d never seen the man, his scars were unmistakable even in the dim light. “Do we know each other?”

“I know you...” The other man smiled, twisting the scars on his face, his dark hair pulled back in a severe style. “But why don’t you introduce me to your whore.”

Chloe gasped behind him, but he only stood taller. “How dare you speak to her that way.”

Adam’s smile only grew. “I dare. Just like I dare to punish.”

“Punish me? Who do you think you are?—”

“You and all your debaucherous friends at that filthy club.”

Ryker's chin reared back. Adam knew about the club and its members. Sick dread tightened his stomach. "Is that a threat?"

"A threat. A promise. Take it for whatever you like, but I will see you again, Keeper. Honestly, I expected to meet you before now."

"And why is that?"

But the man didn't answer as he started down the hall again, his slow saunter proving he wasn't the least concerned that he'd just threatened a duke.

"Keeper? What does that mean?" Chloe asked, her hand coming to his back.

He tensed at her question and the feel of her delicate hand, so small and fragile against his skin. "I'll explain later... right now, it's time for us to leave."

He tucked her against his side and started back toward the ballroom.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The silence in the carriage was deafening.

Outside, the gaslights illuminating London's streets hummed as horses and carriages passed, street vendors still selling their wares as they called out to passersby.

But Ryker hadn't spoken a word, and Chloe had so many questions. She gave him a side-eye glance since he'd settled on the forward-facing bench next to her. Another oddity.

"What do you want to ask, Chloe?" he finally said, his tone sharp and not at all conversational.

But she didn't hesitate. This was her future too and that man they'd met had been as frightening as he was enlightening. She shivered, remembering his words. Ryker was a man of many secrets. "Why did he call you Keeper? What does that mean?"

"It's a nickname some of my friends have given me."

"That man didn't act like a friend. What does it mean anyway?"

"Some say I don't share very much. That I keep information about myself a secret."

Now that rang with truth. "Oh. I see. Who was that man?" She had to press him. The stranger had called her a whore. But if he wasn't a friend, why else would he know Ryker's nickname? She wanted to believe her fiancé wasn't engaged in suspicious

behavior, but how could she know for sure? She touched her chest, feeling her heart gallop.

“Doesn’t matter,” Ryker snapped. “Never speak to him again, Chloe. Do you hear me? He’s not a man you should ever be near.”

“Are you worried?” There was a protectiveness to his words that had her pulse fluttering wildly.

“Of course I’m worried. He’s dangerous and you are about to be my wife.”

Those words melted her hesitation away. Of course, that kiss in the hall hadn’t hurt either. But him calling her wife... She leaned against his arm, then, her hands wrapping about his biceps. “You’ll keep me safe. I’m certain of it.”

He rumbled, a guttural sound that sent a thrill racing down her spine a moment before his lips crashed over hers again.

She gasped at the riot of sensation, but he swallowed the noise and her breath as he kissed her like a drowning man gasping for air. She did her best to give him all that he needed, kissing back as their lips ground together, their tongues tangling.

This was so much more than she’d ever dreamed possible as wave after wave of passion crashed over her, her body humming with a need she’d never imagined possible.

An ache had begun at the apex of her thighs. As if he sensed her discomfort, he pulled her into his lap. The moment her behind settled against his powerful thighs, she gasped into his mouth again.

He was just so... much.

But he wasn't done. Leaning her weight back against one arm, he half laid her across his lap, his other hand running the length of her leg where his fingers circled one of her ankles. "So small," he murmured against her lips before his hand began travelling back up her leg. But this time, his fingers were under her skirts and petticoats, skimming over her stockinged calf.

His touch tickled and tingled as he slowed the pace of their kiss, his palm tracing every angle and line of her leg until he reached the ribbon of her stocking. And then, all five of his fingers pushed up above her stocking and onto her bare thigh.

She gasped and then let out a low moan as he moved higher and higher, smoothing over her thigh until his thumb brushed over the curls at her center.

A wave of pleasure rolled over her at the light touch, her head falling back, her body opening to him as her legs parted.

He chuckled into her mouth. "So soft."

And then he touched her again, this time with more pressure, more insistence, parting her sex and tracing the seam.

Sparks lit behind her eyes as he slid his hand up and down her sensitive flesh. "So wet," he said against her lips before he kissed a trail over her cheek, his fingers continuing their rhythmic stroking, her hips matching the pace to seek more pleasure from the touch.

And then, without breaking the pace, one of his fingers slid into her channel, the heel of his hand coming to the sensitive nub of her pleasure.

She bucked into the touch, the sensation threatening to overwhelm her as she gripped at his shoulders.

She'd wanted companionship, attention. But this... she'd never imagined passion like this. Didn't even know it was possible.

He slowed his touch, allowing some of the building tension to ease, but she realized, he was playing her body, completely in control of her. It was delicious and a bit frightening. "Please," she begged, wanting him to give her more.

He sucked her earlobe into his mouth, a small chuckle filling her ear. "Patience, love. If we're going to do this, I am going to enjoy it for as long as possible. You are as tight as you are wet, and by God, woman, you feel even better than I imagined."

She whimpered, his words both filling her with satisfaction and more need. She was desperate for release and her fingers bit into his shoulders. "Ryker. Please."

His answer was to nip at the sensitive flesh of her neck, his finger burrowing deeper inside of her as the heel of his hand pressed even harder right where she needed.

She felt the first tremor of her finish build and she chased his hand with her hips, gasping and whimpering as her body begged him to give her more.

He held off for a second more and then, he pumped his finger in and out of her, giving her body the exact friction it craved for her to finish.

She cried out, her orgasm exploding in a riot of pleasure, her entire body going stiff as a keening cry fell from her lips.

And then she went limp, draped across his lap.

"Ryker?" she asked, not sure what came next. Did she get up? Stay? Touch him? He didn't remove his finger. Not for some time, his arms holding her in his lap. In the dark, he stared down at her, his gaze unreadable and distant, making her shiver all

over again but for a very different reason.

He now had even more power over her, her body responding to his touch like nothing she'd ever dreamed of.

She was at the mercy of a predator.

* * *

Ryker sent Chloe to bed the moment they arrived home, cursing that he'd even considered the word home where she was concerned. This was his home. Not hers.

Why the fuck did it seem right that she lived under his roof, called the same place home that he did?

He couldn't help himself, he brought his fingers to his nose, smelling her sweet scent that lingered on his skin. Damn, but she'd been all he ever dreamed.

Her country legs were divinely muscular while still feminine, her sheath so silky and tight.

And he didn't even dare to think of the way her body had moved under him, the noises she'd made.

If he did... he might throw out every fucking rule he'd ever made for himself, for her, and march up to her room and take her right now.

She'd been liquid fire in his arms. Everything was better with her.

A simple kiss was more satisfying and a deep one even better. Fingering, better. Fucking... he already knew the answer.

He scrubbed at his scalp. He'd been with beautiful women and passionate women, but when had he ever been with one who was so stunningly both? A woman who pulled him to her like a beacon, who coaxed him to share intimate details of his life?

The very idea of touching her more...

This senseless desire had to end. He had a plan and he intended to see it through.

Trying to put Chloe out of his mind, he penned a quick note, addressing it to the Summoner. Summoning a footman to deliver the letter immediately to the club. Hopefully, the man would receive it tomorrow. His information on Adam was urgent.

With the task done, he poured himself a whisky, settling by the fire in his study. He stared into the flames, attempting to erase the memories of the evening. Instead, they haunted him. Maybe he could drink the memory of Chloe away. It was worth a shot.

Of course, he risked getting drunk enough to toss his inhibitions away...

A knock at the door interrupted his thoughts. "What?" he barked, wondering who the hell would be knocking at his study this time of night.

The butler entered, tugging at his vest. "There are two men here to see you."

"Two men?" He stood, his glass thumping on the table. "Who are they?"

"They called themselves the Summoner and the Emperor." His butler, who rarely showed emotion, furrowed his brow in worry.

But Ryker relaxed. This was the exact sort of distraction he needed. He'd keep his mind on the enemy. "See them in."

It only occurred to him after the butler was gone that he didn't have on a mask. Then again, if the Emperor knew where he lived, he knew who Ryker was, but the entire charade seemed to be unraveling rather quickly.

It only took a few moments for the men to enter, the Summoner filling Ryker's study with his massive frame. Neither man wore a mask, Ryker seeing their faces for the first time. The Summoner had a large scar that cut through one eye while the Emperor, older than Ryker, was still a devastatingly handsome man and decidedly familiar. Ryker might be jealous. "That was quick."

"We were about to visit when your note arrived." Emperor pointed to the Summoner. "Max also attended the Whitehouse ball. He was aware of your brush with Adam."

Ryker did not like being spied on. "You have got to be fucking kidding me."

"Relax," the Emperor took the other seat next to the fire. "It was for your protection."

"Still."

The Summoner stepped closer, his amber eyes penetrating Ryker. There were very few men he was afraid of but this one... he might be the exception. "Who..." The words came out excessively slow and deliberate. "Was..." And then another pause. "She?"

Ryker's brows rose. The Summoner talked. "Max have a family name?"

"Why?"

"I'm not divulging personal information without knowing personal information."

"Winter." The Emperor raised his hand, waving the question away. "And I am the

new Duke of Strongborn.”

Shit. He’d known the Emperor’s older brother. Attended some events with him at the palace. “I am sorry for your loss.”

The Emperor nodded. “Now you know why I plan to retire from the club. Duty and all that. But I’d like this business settled first. Tell us what you learned.”

“Who was she?” Max repeated, stringing the entire sentence together. Was the man slow? When it came to swinging his fists, he seemed intelligent enough.

“No one.”

“Someone,” the Emperor quickly answered. “The Summoner saw you return here with her. Who is she?”

He let out a frustrated rumble. Clearly, these men were keeping an eye on him. “Spying for my benefit, were you?”

“If you wouldn’t mind answering the question.”

“She is not your concern,” he said with his teeth bared, the protective need he felt toward Chloe always just under the surface.

“She’s now involved in all of this, so you ought to answer the question.” Strongborn leaned forward, his gaze piercing into Ryker’s.

He looked down at his desk, trying to control his irritation. But as he drew in a slow, steadying breath, the note on his desk caught his gaze. The seal with no crest. Odd... because in the corner of the folded paper he noticed a small but distinct cross. He blinked twice. How had he missed that?

He'd been distracted.

Not answering the Emperor's question, letting the man wait, he pulled out his letter opener and broke the seal instead, unfolding the sheet.

His eyes skimmed over the excessively neat scroll, phrases jumping out at him. Sinners. Damnation. Hell. Retribution. And then...

Your time is coming. I've already planted the seeds which will be your downfall. Check your house, Judas has arrived.

Ryker read the words again, his hand clenching the sheet far harder than necessary.

"What is it?" the Emperor asked, reaching for the paper and taking it from Ryker. His eyes scanned down the page. "It's from Adam."

"How do you know?" he asked the question for more information, though he was certain the Emperor was correct.

Emperor tossed the sheet back on the desk. "Who is new in your house?"

Ryker sat heavily in the chair taking a large swallow of his brandy. He couldn't avoid the question any longer because every line of questioning was coming back to one person. "Only Chloe."

"Chloe?" Winter asked.

He raked his fingers through his hair. "Chloe is my charge and the woman I was with tonight."

Max looked over at Strongborn. "Beautiful."

Strongborn looked at Ryker. “You are surrounded by beautiful women of late. First the masquerade and now a new charge.”

If only the other man knew... Ryker only glared, not wanting to give away any more information about Chloe.

So the Emperor looked at the Summoner instead. “How beautiful?”

It was Ryker who answered. “None of your business.”

Strongborn cocked his head. “Is it possible that she is mixed up with Adam?”

“No.” But insidious doubt made him take another large swallow of his drink. What did he know about Chloe? A distant relative who suddenly landed at Mildred’s door who enticed him into a kiss and to whom he was now engaged. She’d slipped past every defense he had with ease.

The Emperor stared at him with an assessing gaze.

“He kissed her,” the Summoner said slowly.

“Perhaps you’re not interested in taking over my role after all.” The Emperor cocked a brow.

Fuck that. The club was his passion, his escape. And after all he’d just learned, Chloe was suspect at best. “I am committed to taking your place when you leave.”

“Is that right, Helmsworth? Good.” He rose then, crossing to the buffet and helping himself to Ryker’s whisky. “There is another event the night after tomorrow. The Rightly ball. We’ll have our next challenge to fulfill, but it’s also hosted by a friend of Whitehouse’s so the chance of meeting Adam is high. Why don’t you tell me what

you've learned?"

Quickly he explained what Adam had so casually shared and what he'd threatened. While he talked, Max also helped himself to the whisky, his grimace easy enough to read. No one was pleased with the information.

As Ryker finished, Strongborn finished his drink in a single swallow. "Should I cancel tomorrow night's meeting?"

"And hide like cowards?" Ryker demanded. "No."

"I agree," the Summoner nodded, finishing his drink as well.

The man's words came easier every time he spoke. Ryker didn't ask, but his curiosity was piqued.

"Good." Strongborn set down his glass. "Our identities remain private to everyone else who is not in this room," he said. "And the Master's challenge is to bed a widow. While I expect you at the meeting tomorrow, I'll ask you now to partner with me to complete the challenge. The night after, at the ball, we'll fulfill both objectives. Secure the widow and further the investigation."

Bed a widow... A noise just outside the door caught his attention, a slight rustling. He crossed the room, opening the door to find the hall clear.

"Everything all right?" Strongborn asked.

"Fine." He closed the door again, swearing to himself that someone had been outside the door. Was he just paranoid? Did he have a spy? Was it Chloe?

He shook his head. The idea of a challenge so salacious should excite him. He'd

never been faithful to a woman. But Chloe danced through his thoughts. The woman he wished to bed was her. But that was ridiculous. He was the one who was adamant about remaining in the club and her actions were now suspect.

The other two men headed for the door then, bidding him goodnight. Ryker considered pouring another drink but opted to stare into the fire instead. He'd erred somewhere critical, and he needed to figure out where and correct the mistake.

He wanted to say that sliding his finger into Chloe was the error, but that had felt more right than anything he'd done for a long, long time.

CHAPTER NINE

The next morning, Chloe swallowed down a lump as she sat waiting to receive guests for calling hours.

She'd hardly slept and as she thought of last night, tears threatened to fall from her eyes once again.

Silly, silly fool , she chastised herself.

Just because Ryker had touched her in the carriage didn't mean he wanted her or cared about her at all. Their intimacy hadn't changed anything between them. Not his feelings and certainly not the arrangement he'd proposed.

While he had no intention of bedding his wife, apparently he intended to lie with other women.

Why hadn't this occurred to her sooner?

She bit down on her lip, remembering the events of last night. Her bedroom was at the front of the house. She'd heard the carriage arrive, and then the ringing of the front bell.

Still dressed, she'd made her way down the back stairs and stopped outside of Ryker's study. She knew it was wrong to listen to a private conversation but also...

There was so much she didn't know and only a little time to decide about her future

with Ryker, so she'd stood just outside the door as the men had talked. But she'd learned far more than she'd bargained for.

She drew in a trembling breath, trying to steady her nerves as the butler arrived to announce Countess Green.

Chloe rose from her seat, taking the other woman's hands and kissing her cheeks, but even she could tell her actions were stiff, automatic.

Ryker had sworn her to secrecy on the details of their arrangement, but did she even owe him her loyalty after what he was planning?

She looked at Caroline, worry knitting the other woman's brow. Did she trust the countess with her secrets? They'd only met the day before. And while she was a simple country girl, even she knew to divulge secrets carefully.

"I have a problem that I do not know how to solve."

"What sort of problem?" Caroline asked as they both sat down on the settee in front of the fire.

Chloe cleared her throat leaning closer. "The duke..."

Caroline's gaze lit with understanding. "Has he pressed his suit?"

Chloe nodded. "But also..." And then in a whispered hurry she told Caroline about Ryker's plans to bed a widow, a bet between friends, though Chloe suspected they were more of a... club. But she didn't tell that detail to Caroline. Instead, she focused on the possibility of their match and the fact that he had no plans to be faithful.

The rest she kept to herself. The club, the proposed moratorium on touching, the fact

that he'd ship her off to some private corner of the dukedom.

It was enough. Caroline's gaze filled with worry. "Oh dear. Your situation is very complicated."

"How can I marry him knowing that he'll bed other women at every opportunity? But if I don't? Where will I go and who will even want to marry me? He determines whether I have a dowry. Without one, I'm lost."

Caroline shrugged. "Some women are able to look the other way. I don't think I'd be able to either." She sighed. "You really do need a simpler, less complicated husband."

Chloe shook her head. "I don't think I have much time to find him, before I find myself attached to the duke."

"At what event is he going widow hunting? The Rightly ball?"

Chloe nodded but Caroline tapped her chin. "Plenty of eligible men will be there. You could both begin hunting for new prospects and catch the duke in the act of seducing another woman."

Chloe's gaze widened. She'd never imagined attempting such a task and her breath caught at the idea of confronting Ryker in such a manner. But then again, what good had being more agreeable done for her?

"How will we catch him?"

Caroline leaned forward. "We'll simply observe. Though, if that does not work... If only we knew a widow that could set a trap..." And then she gave Chloe the most devilish smile.

Chloe's mouth fell open. "I am both impressed and?—"

"Appalled? I know. But being married has made me steadfast in my commitment to not being a man's victim. I'll use my newfound strength to help my friend. Now... can we visit Mildred? I've missed her."

"She'd love the company. Being idle is not her way and the forced bedrest is making her mad."

Both ladies rose, Chloe leading the way out the door.

The two women began to discuss safer topics, but half of Chloe's thoughts lingered on Ryker. She didn't know him that well, but even she'd learned enough to know that when she called him out... he was going to be furious.

He was a man who usually got his way.

* * *

Two nights later, Ryker's manservant knotted his cravat, preparing him for the ball.

He'd attended last night's club meeting but he'd hardly paid attention and the ball held just about as much appeal.

But he continued to dress, knowing that if he wanted to be the Emperor's successor, this was the path forward.

The idea had him frowning in the handheld mirror as he assessed the knot at his neck. Chloe's had been better.

But every time he thought of Chloe, his gut churned. He didn't wish to believe she

was involved but was that his emotions overriding his judgment?

Dismissing the manservant, he grabbed his cufflinks and started for the door. He'd not seen Chloe since their carriage ride. She'd been taking meals with his aunt, or she'd remained sequestered in her room.

Despite his worries about her motives, he missed her. And he knew the cravat and cufflinks were an excuse, but he needed something just to see her. Somehow, looking into her eyes would help him find answers.

Reaching her room, he gave a quick knock before he opened the door, not waiting for an invitation.

But he stopped short the moment he entered, his heart stopping for a second before it began hammering against his ribs.

Not one but two maids lowered a deep sapphire silk gown over Chloe's head. Just before the gown fell, draping over her luxurious curves, he caught sight of her bare shoulders and back above her corset cinched tightly around her tiny waist.

The dress settled about her, not buttoned but still managing to hug her bust and waist as their eyes connected in the mirror.

"Ryker," Chloe gasped. "What are you doing in here?"

His jaw hardened, his teeth snapping together. "What are you doing in that dress?"

Color flushed her cheeks as one of the maids stepped behind her to begin closing the tiny row of pearl buttons at the back. "You're dismissed," he barked, sending both maids scurrying toward the door as he closed the distance between himself and Chloe.

“Ryker.” She didn’t sound fearful this time, just annoyed. “What will they think?”

“Everyone in this house knows we’ll wed. They won’t think anything.”

She spun toward him in a swirl of silk. “Even I know servants talk. If every one of them knows we’re getting married, how do you propose to keep our match a secret?”

How did he tell her that once she left London, their match would only be rumor and speculation. Gossip. Unless someone asked his aunt, and he’d send her with Chloe.

Or they asked the king. And he didn’t make it a habit to talk about anyone other than himself.

“That is my problem.” He stopped a mere foot from her, her large blue eyes locked with his. “Now turn around.”

“Why?”

“I’m going to button your dress and you’re going to tell me why you’re wearing it.”

“That is my problem,” she answered, her features growing harder than he’d ever seen them.

His gaze narrowed as he circled about her and reached for the tiny buttons, beginning the slow process of fastening each one.

Her sweet scent, floral with a hint of musk, filled his nose as his gaze traced the curve of her bare shoulder. “All of your problems are my problems, wife.”

She made a pishing noise. “I’m not your wife yet.”

“You’re my charge and soon you’ll be my wife. It’s my job to care for you.”

She looked away, her mouth tightening, as she purposefully didn’t answer.

He frowned in response. He’d never seen Chloe like this, something was amiss. What was wrong with her? He much preferred those lips under his in a kiss instead of pursed with disapproval.

He reached the top of her corset, finishing the buttons over the skin of her back, which was softer than the silk of the dress. He dropped his face closer, wanting to taste her skin. His fingertips danced across her back, gooseflesh rising on her arms.

He smiled, catching her gaze in the mirror again. “Tell me, wife. Where are you going?”

“I’m not your wife. Not yet. And even when I am your wife, you’ve been clear that to the rest of the world, you’ll continue to play the part of unattached duke.”

Her hands had pressed to her stomach, her elbows out. It only emphasized her narrow waist and the swell of her ample breasts, her cleavage visible in the reflection. His entire body responded, his cock swelling in his breeches. “I won’t ask again. Where are you going tonight?”

Her chin notched up. Where had the demure woman from a week ago gone? “The Rightly ball.”

He should be furious. She’d not asked him if she could attend events without him, nor had he any idea with whom she planned to attend. But relief pulled at his shoulders. They’d be in the same place at the same time. He could watch her, make sure no other man swooped in and plucked her fruit. Because the way she looked tonight...

“You’re not going.”

“I have to go,” she cried, spinning toward him. “Countess Green is on her way here to fetch me. It would be so rude to cancel now.”

But he’d remembered that Strongborn would be there as well. They were widow hunting. Not that a night’s fun would deter Strongborn. The man was also in the market for a wife... and Chloe, suspicions aside, was the most beautiful debutante of the season. The competition wasn’t even close, which meant Strongborn would be interested. But Ryker couldn’t very well tell the other man that Chloe was already attached.

His hand on Chloe’s shoulder tightened. “Chloe.”

“You promised. It was my only request, that I get to attend some events before I leave London.”

Damn himself to hell. Because Chloe’s happiness mattered to him. If he made her stay home after he promised, he knew she’d be upset. And he’d missed her these past few days.

But to bring her meant that she’d meet Strongborn. That he’d fail at his Club task. That London would see her in that dress. It hugged every lush curve, complimenting her large blue eyes and thick blonde hair. She’d have her pick of men.

His plan was falling apart, and he knew it. It had been a stupid plan to begin with, but the moment she’d added that addendum, he’d been doomed. And he’d allowed it. Why?

Because... he was enamored. Had been since he’d first laid eyes on her. Christ.

Now, however, he had to choose. Honor their agreement, knowing that it would be the end of his plan, the end of his involvement in the club. And what if Chloe was in league with Adam? What if she was the Judas? He didn't want to believe it, but her timing was suspect. Either way, it was a fool's errand to allow her out this evening.

He turned toward the door. "Sorry, love. But you're staying in."

And then, walking to the door, he grabbed the key from the lock, closed the door behind him and turned the lock with a decided click.

CHAPTER TEN

Chloe stared at the door.

Had he just locked her in?

Crossing the room, she twisted the knob but it hardly budged. Then she pulled. Nothing. Letting out a cry, she pulled again, finally raising her fist and banging on the door. “Ryker!”

No response. She hit the door again. He’d not seriously closed her into this room? “Ryker!” she called again. “Let me out! You can’t trap me in a room!”

Still nothing. And then she heard it. The sound of carriage wheels. Crossing to her front window, she watched as his carriage rolled away out into the night. Disbelief and anger rolled over her, her hand coming to her mouth.

He was going to bed a widow tonight and no one knew better than Chloe just how persuasive he could be. She let out a soft sob, her hand coming to her mouth.

Her plan with Caroline had been simple. The other woman would keep an eye on Ryker, Chloe herself being too obvious. Then, when he chose a woman, they’d follow him, calling him out.

But that plan had gone to hell the moment he’d stepped into her room and realized she was going out.

She pressed her hand to her forehead, her eyes closing. She couldn't marry Ryker. She knew that now.

Despite the security he offered and the attraction she felt, or maybe because of it, she could not be literally and figuratively locked away while he did as he pleased.

It would break her heart.

Lifting her head from her hands, she crossed to the bed and holding onto the bedpost, she sunk into the soft mattress, resting her face on the cool wood of the post. Her eyes fluttered closed.

What a fool she'd been to kiss Ryker that first night.

What a fool to allow her heart to become attached. She shook her head, feeling the buttery soft wood slide against her cheek.

Would Mildred support her after this? Would Caroline help her find one of those merchants she'd mentioned?

A rattling at the door pulled her from her thoughts. She lifted her head, staring at the door as the lock clicked and the door creaked open. "Ryker?"

But as the large wood panel swung wider, it wasn't Ryker, but Mildred who stood in the doorway. "Tell me that boy did not lock you in your room."

She rose from the bed, hope filling her chest. "He did."

"Cad." Mildred rolled her eyes. "Men think they are so smart. How could he not know I had keys made for every door in this house? I lived in this place before he was even born."

“Smart,” Chloe whispered, looking at the floor, embarrassed that she’d been so easily trapped.

“The question is, why would he do such a thing?”

Letting out a trembling breath, she realized there was no point in keeping Ryker’s confidence if they weren’t going to marry. Sitting back down, the story of what Ryker had proposed all the way to what she’d overheard and how she’d intended to stop him came spilling out.

Mildred came to sit next to her, listening to the entirety of what had transpired without interrupting until Chloe finally reached the point where he’d locked her in her room.

Silence fell, stretching out a moment and then two before Mildred huffed. “That stupid boy.”

“He’s a man, Mildred, and far stronger and more powerful than me.”

“You can’t deny that he’s acting like a spoiled, petulant child.”

No. Chloe could not deny it. “I was the apple of my father’s eye. I must confess that it did little to prepare me for the taming of dukes.”

Mildred tapped her chin even as the butler appeared. “Countess Green has arrived, my lady.”

“See her up,” Mildred called back. “We’re going to need a solid plan here.”

“I’m not marrying him, Mildred,” Chloe whispered. “I can’t.”

“He’ll come to heel with time. Women always win the long game.”

Chloe shook her head. “I think I might love him.”

“Of course you do,” Mildred patted her hand. “He’s handsome and charming when he’s not being an ass. And try to understand. His mother all but ran away and my brother was far too hard on the boy. Used the rod far more than he ever gave affection. What Ryker needs is your love. Show him that and you’ll tame him in no time.”

“But...” Chloe shook her head. “I risk so much.”

Mildred’s eyes set in determined lines. “It’s time to be brave, my sweet girl. You’re on your own and what you’ve lacked is fortitude. It’s time to learn. The prize is worth the risk.”

Chloe swallowed down a lump. She hoped Mildred was right. “What did you have in mind?”

Caroline entered the room and both Chloe and Mildred rose. “Since Caroline will be with you tonight, she should also know the plan. We know that Ryker is jealous of other men. We’re going to use that to our advantage.”

“Oh, yes.” Caroline nodded. “That’s the perfect weapon.”

“We know he’s been lacking in love, and that, my dear, you can give him in spades if he’d allow himself to be open to it.” Mildred tapped her chin. “And we know he wishes to be nothing like his father, which is why he’s been so resistant to marriage. You need to make him understand that he’s just as cruel and selfish in his own way.”

“Oh Mildred,” Chloe shook her head. “I don’t know if I can. I’m not used to doing

such things. It will hurt him terribly, I'm sure of it."

"Strength girl." Mildred patted her knee. "He locked you in your bedroom, he deserves some of his own medicine."

"Caroline, you distract his friend so Chloe can speak to him privately. Just get his hackles up first."

Caroline nodded.

"Don't let him ruin you, Chloe. Take it to the line but don't cross it. Because you're right, if he chooses to be truly stubborn, we'll have to find you another husband. I want you to tame him, but don't ruin your future to do it."

Be strong, be brave, tempt, and then resist. Chloe swallowed down a lump of doubt. There was no way she was actually going to succeed. Was she?

* * *

Ryker stood on the edge of the ballroom, scanning the crowd for Adam. Perhaps he should have brought Chloe after all. He could have watched her. Seen if she tried to meet with the zealot. Once again, he'd been thinking with his emotions instead of his brain. Chloe was going to be the death of him.

"I see someone interesting," Strongborn rumbled, shifting next to him.

"Is it Adam?"

Strongborn quirked a brow. "No. It's the Widow Smith."

Ryker let out a frustrated breath. Even the Emperor was less focused on the

investigation than Ryker. But everything in his life was tied together.

Images of Chloe in that dress had been flitting through his thoughts all evening.

No lady here held a candle to her beauty. Would his remembrances fade once he sent her away? Because he'd sworn not to bed her, but he couldn't find another appealing. It was damned frustrating.

He scanned the room again.

She was going to be furious with him. He grimaced. He should have just stayed home with her. He'd much rather have his hand up her skirts...

But he forced himself to stop. Touching Chloe was a one-time event. And he'd have to suffer her anger because he intended to make her his wife if for no other reason than to keep other men from taking what should be his.

But how was he going to prevent anyone else from touching her if he sent her far away? She'd been so warm and soft and eager in his arms. Was it fair to suppress that sensual side of her? To deny her needs?

And what if she really was an agent of their enemy? His thoughts swirled in another useless circle, no answers becoming clear.

Across the room a flash of blonde hair caught his gaze. He let out a rumble. That hair looked like Chloe's. So few women had such thick, luxuriant strands. It wasn't lost on him that he was now imagining her in the ballroom even though he knew the truth. She was tucked safely at home.

But then the woman turned toward him, their gazes locking. "Chloe," he said through clenched teeth. Worse still, around her was a gaggle of men. His hands clenched into

balls at his sides. He'd strangle each one of them slowly.

"Who's Chloe?" Strongborn asked. "Your charge, Chloe?"

"None of your fucking business," he answered, leaving Strongborn to intercept his charge. She was going to be his wife. Why did she need the attention of those egits?

Once he was close enough to hear the trill of her laugh, he stopped. Crossing his arms over his chest as he glared at her. How had she managed it and what was he going to do about it?

"Who is that?" Strongborn rumbled from behind him.

Ryker could hear the interest in his voice. His teeth ground together. He'd never wanted to declare Chloe his more than right at this moment. Adam be damned.

Chloe be cursed. The woman needed to leave London. "My charge."

"You're jesting," Strongborn said, choking on the words.

"About?" He stared at Chloe, who was pointedly ignoring him, her chin rising higher in the air. Had she wished to punish him for locking her in? She was succeeding.

"You live with that woman? In your home? Every day?"

"I do." He beat his clenched fists against his outer thighs, his jaw hard enough to cut glass.

"She's your charge? And you keep your hands off her?"

"She is." His teeth ground together as he ignored the second question. "She isn't for

you.”

“Oh, I know. You’re keeping her for yourself.”

Ryker’s mouth pressed into a firm line. To say no, he wasn’t keeping her would mean that Strongborn was free to pursue her.

To say yes would mean giving up the club. “I didn’t say that.”

“Are you fucking her already?”

A snarl pulled from his lips as he turned back to the other man. “Here, you are not my leader. We are equals.”

“Still a fair question. If you’re not marrying her, or fucking her, then I am free...”

“Touch her and I will kill you.”

A chuckle rolled from Strongborn’s lips. “Now see. That explains everything. Was that so hard?”

Ryker knew what he’d just revealed. What it meant for his future. But if Strongborn pursued her, he might win her. He was a duke who offered all that Ryker himself did, only he’d give Chloe a real marriage. One where she could remain in London. Have children. Have a duke in her bed. “I will become the next Emperor.”

“The Club is child’s play,” Strongborn answered. “A woman like that is the real prize. Arguably the one for which the club has trained you.”

His brow slashed into a thin line as the natural question rose to his lips. How did debauchery prepare him to be a married man?

But he didn't get a chance to ask.

Someone else in the crowd caught Strongborn's attention. Ryker followed the other man's gaze, catching sight of Countess Green as she moved through the crowd.

Strongborn followed her with his eyes, a sinful smile playing at the man's lips. "Excuse me," he murmured and then he was disappearing into the crowd.

Even better for Ryker.

Placing one hand over his other fist, he cracked his knuckles. Those men around Chloe had to go. It was time to knock some heads off...

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Chloe stood in the circle of men, trilling another fake laugh. She felt better in one regard. If Ryker was all that she feared he might be, she had options.

Several pairs of adoring eyes stared back at her.

But that was a consideration for another time. Because she'd spotted Ryker across the ballroom, and she could swear that she felt him moving closer. With every second that passed, the tension that crackled in the air threatened to break.

"Miss Fairchild." Ryker's voice shivered over her skin.

"Your Grace," she answered, dipping into a curtsy as she turned toward him. She did not meet his gaze, however, choosing to look at a point just over his shoulder. Meeting his eye now would surely shrivel all her determination.

He was bound to be furious, and she could not let either fear or attraction pull her from the path she'd laid out tonight.

The men around her turned toward Ryker as well, each bowing. But Ryker ignored them all, stalking toward her, only stopping when he'd breached the circle of admirers and stood just in front of her.

"Gentlemen, have you met my guardian, the Duke of Helmsworth?"

A murmur of assent went about the ring of men, but Ryker continued to stare at her

until she had no choice but to meet his gaze.

His hand snaked out, grabbing her elbow. “We need a word, my charge.”

She did her best to bat her eyelashes. “About what, my duke?”

But he was already pulling her away from the men and toward the edge of the ballroom.

Before she knew it, they were in a quiet hallway, where a set of stairs led up to the next level. Without pause, he turned and lifted her into his arms, carrying her up the stairs. “Put me down,” she gasped.

Ryker ignored her completely, testing doors until one opened.

It was only when they were in a room alone, a small sitting room, that he set her down. But he didn’t let her go. Instead, he crushed her to his chest. “What are you doing here?”

She looked to the side, presenting her profile. “Attending the ball.”

“Collecting admirers,” he growled out.

She drew in a fortifying breath, remembering Mildred’s advice. “Maybe. Someone will have to keep me company when you leave me all alone.”

He began moving forward and she backed up until her rear was against the wall.

The hard length of him pressed to her front. She ought to be frightened. Or irritated at least. But raw desire coursed through her as his thigh wedged between her legs. “No one touches you but me.”

“But you said you won’t touch me.”

His jaw hardened, his mouth aching close to hers.

“Will you also be abstaining?” She already knew the answer to that question.

“I am a duke.”

She forced herself not to rub against him like a cat in heat. Angry and determined as she was, she still couldn’t quite control her reaction to him. But he didn’t deserve to know the effect he was having on her, despite the fact that he was a complete ass. “And if we should wed, I will be a duchess.”

“If? You mean when.”

Her heart thudded painfully in her chest. How far did she go? “You locked me in a room. You want to continue to lock me away. I don’t know that I want to be your wife.”

His lips curled. “You think another man would be better?”

She looked at him then, her chin lifting, her fingers biting into his arms. “I have needs too. Who is going to meet them?”

“Is that what this is about? Your needs?” One of his hands came to her hip, pulling her more firmly against his leg. The shock of pleasure that coursed through her cut off her breath as her eyes widened, meeting his.

He closed the distance between their mouths, taking hers in a scalding kiss. Heat and want flooded her body. She couldn’t stop herself from rolling her hips, more sparks of pleasure heating her entire body.

Her hand came up behind his neck as she pulled him closer, deepening the kiss, wanting all that he had to offer. She wanted to show him that she could give him all types of love if he'd let her.

He held her hips, their bodies grinding together as her pleasure spiraled higher.

But before she could reach the apex of her pleasure, he pulled back, not enough to break their contact but just enough that her body's reaction slowed. His dark eyes filled with raw need as he searched her face. "I thought you were a little mouse."

Had he thought to easily control her? Mildred had been right. It was time to be brave. "I'm being chased by a very aggressive cat."

He still held her hip in his hand, his thigh between her legs. "True. Which means you can't win."

She shook her head, knowing she was about to hurt him. But it was what she had to do. "Just like your mother didn't win."

He pushed away, looking physically revolted, as he put several feet between them. "How dare you."

She shuddered then, her arms wrapping about herself for strength. The air in the room was already cooling her skin. "You want to separate yourself from your father? Don't be indifferent to me the way he was to her."

"You don't know anything about it."

"Then tell me."

"It's time for you to go home."

Her fists tightened as her chin notched up. “Stop running away from me.”

“I’m not running,” he rumbled, moving closer again but this time she shivered despite his heat. “I just don’t want you.”

His words cut into her. She’d known he was going to hurt her back. It was inevitable. “Fair enough,” she whispered, swallowing down a lump. “Then let me go. But don’t tie me to a man who doesn’t want me.”

She felt the rumble in his chest. He reached for her, but his hands weren’t rough. They were gentle as he tugged her from the wall and opened the door.

“You’re still sending me home?”

He stopped, his mouth twitching. “I’ll escort you.”

And then, lacing his fingers through hers, he pulled her out the door.

* * *

He was an ass... Ryker knew it.

Not only had he just lied, he was too selfish to admit it.

Christ, she was right, he was just like his father. She sat across from him in the dark carriage, staring out the window.

He was losing her. He could feel it. She was gaining strength and rapidly acquiring knowledge. Most important of all... she had options.

She didn’t need to marry an emotionally stunted prick of a man. He scrubbed his

hands down his face.

He did have one weapon at his disposal. She was attracted to him...

He'd felt the roll of her hips when he'd had her pressed against that wall. Which brought him back to the reason he'd locked her in her room.

It was becomingly increasingly obvious he had to choose. Her or the path he'd laid out for himself.

There would be no middle ground.

But he didn't want to think about that tonight. What he wanted...

Was her.

To keep her close enough to give himself the time he needed to make the decisions about his future. Again... selfish.

But it didn't have to be.

"Chloe," he rumbled, leaning his elbows on his knees. "Look at me."

She shook her head. "I don't want to."

"Why not?"

She nipped at her lip. "You just told me you didn't want me."

He was worse than horse dung. "I didn't mean it." There. He'd said the words. He pushed further out on his seat, reaching out a hand to brush her knee with his fingers.

She turned to the side, pulling her legs as far away from him as the space in the carriage would allow.

“No?”

He let out a long sigh. “You’d told me that I was like my father, and I wanted to hurt you back.”

She looked at him then. “Was your father a philanderer too?”

His brows drew together. She’d mentioned his fidelity twice now. And then he remembered... he’d heard a noise outside his study the night that Strongborn had come calling. “It was you who was eavesdropping.”

Her chin dropped then. “I...”

He sat back, crossing his arms over his chest. She knew why he’d gone to that ball. “Why were you listening? Tell me. What did you hope to hear?” He sat forward, his legs spread wide, his elbows on his knees. Had she been instructed to do so? Was she in league with Adam after all?

Her hands pressed tightly together, her breath catching, as her gaze swung back to him. “You only gave me a fortnight. I had to know if I was making the biggest mistake of my life.”

The words cut him. “You think marrying me will be the biggest mistake of your life?”

She shook her head. “I’m not meant to be shunted off alone, Ryker. I just wanted to know if you would ever really desire me. I got my answer. You went to that ball tonight to...” She shook her head, refusing to speak anymore.

He might have been angry, but satisfaction filled his chest to think she was jealous. “Did you plan to go with Countess Green to stop me?”

“I planned to end our engagement.” Her chin notched up. “And to find a new prospect.”

He swallowed down his growl of protest. For a moment he just stared and then he sat back on his bench seat, his legs still wide and powerful. Her gaze moved down him as she swallowed a visible lump. “I wouldn’t have done it.”

Her mouth opened and then closed. “Easy to say now.”

He noted they’d only discussed their personal matters. “And what did you learn about Adam?”

Her confused stare met his. “Who is Adam?”

“You tell me.”

She shook her head. “I’m sorry. But I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You listened to our conversation, so I know you heard him mentioned. You’re lying to me.”

Her eyes widened. “I only heard a few sentences. A club, a challenge, the master of something or other, a widow.” She scooted out on her seat. “And if you don’t trust me, or don’t want me, Ryker, send me away. I’ll go. I’ll find another husband and you’ll never hear from me again.”

For a moment, Ryker stared at her. He had a choice. Believe her or not. He had no new evidence, nothing but his own intuition. He closed his eyes and drew in a deep

cleansing breath.

Chloe was telling the truth.

He opened his eyes and his arms to her, a clear invitation. “Why don’t you come over here so I can prove to you that I can hardly think of anyone other than you?”

Indecision flashed in her eyes. “Ryker.”

“What, love?”

“It only muddles...” Her hands clenched and unclenched.

He opened his stance even wider, inviting her into his space.

“I’ve managed to avoid complete ruin,” she whispered, her voice trembling in a way that assured him she was weakening. “I shouldn’t tempt fate.”

“I won’t take your maidenhead,” he answered, giving her his most charming smile. “I just want to make you feel good.”

“Me?” She scooted toward him the slightest bit and his smile widened. “You’re worried about making me feel good? What about you?”

He didn’t want to talk about that. He’d nearly ruined his relationship with Chloe over doubts and suspicions. And bad behavior. He and Chloe shared an intensely special connection that he’d come close to destroying with a tryst that would have been mediocre at best. “Chloe.” He knew he skirted dangerously close to admitting real feelings. Feelings he would not wish to divulge even to himself. “My satisfaction is irrelevant tonight. What I want is to bring you pleasure.”

Her breath hitched and her knees pressed together. Was she trying to alleviate the ache between her thighs? Good.

“What do you say, love?”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Chloe knew she ought not to accept his invitation. He was a rake. This is what rakes do... they seduce.

He'd been mean. He'd been distrustful. He looked absolutely tantalizing in the moonlight.

Could she tame him? Go right up to the line ... That had been Mildred's advice.

Some part of her wanted nothing more than to curl up in his lap and allow him to touch her like he'd done the other night.

It had been deliciously wicked. Another skill of a rake, she would imagine.

She shook her head. "No." Her thighs squeezed together as she tried to calm the pulsing need that radiated out from her core. Despite that, some part of her sensed that she needed to make Ryker work for her affection.

Ryker leaned forward again, slowly reaching down until he grasped her ankle. "You won't accept my apology?"

"For what? Telling me you don't want me, trying to bed another woman, or thinking I'm affiliated with some man who doesn't even have a full name?"

He wrapped his fingers about her ankle as though taking its measurement. "I love your ankles, did you know that? You have a great many attributes and yet..." He

lightly massaged the stockinged skin, making her gasp. “I can see I have a great deal to apologize for.” And then he slid his hand up her calf.

She should say no. But lord help her, she didn’t want to. His touch, the pressure of his fingers on her skin, had her aching with need as his hand climbed higher. And much to her dismay, when he reached her knee, her legs parted for him, her body so eager for the pleasure she knew he’d bring.

Her skirts bunched in her lap, the layers of petticoats blocked her view as his other hand rested on her right knee, both hands tracing up her thighs. She couldn’t see but she could feel, and her legs spread wider as her head fell back, her whole body opening to him.

Her eyes fluttered closed when he reached the V of her thighs, one of his thumbs brushing through her curls. He pushed her thighs even wider apart.

In this, she trusted him completely. She settled herself deeper on the seat prepared for the next swipe of his fingers, anticipating the light brush.

But it didn’t come. She opened her eyes just in time to see him drop to one knee on the floor of the carriage. Her brow furrowed as she looked down at him while he pushed even more of her skirts out of the way. “Ryker?”

He looked up at her, his smile absolute sin before he disappeared under her skirts, his shoulders pressing her legs even further apart.

She only had a moment to comprehend his intentions when the flat of his tongue swiped against her most intimate parts, sending sparks of pleasure through her entire body. She curled in, gasping as he licked up her seam, swirling his tongue around the bud of her pleasure.

She clawed at her skirts, attempting to find his head so that she might pull him closer. He obliged by licking her again with even more pressure. Over and over, he used his tongue against her flesh, whimpers and moans falling from her lips as her hips matched the rhythm of his movements. He was as relentless in this pursuit as he was in all others and soon she was so close, her body was one aching ball of tension.

As if he could sense her need, he inserted a finger into her channel, the sensation of fullness and the pressure on just the right place causing her to break, her body spasming as an orgasm ripped through her.

He was up in a second, surging to capture her lips with his. The kiss was sloppy and desperate and filled with the passion that always built between them.

“We were meant for this,” he growled against her lips. “You were meant for me.”

Her head lolled back, her eyes half closed, her body limp, but her mind rang with a bell that sounded like a warning. “I thought this little tryst was an apology.”

“It was.” From this angle she could see the bulge that pressed against the tightness of his breeches and, lord help her, her body responded, her hand itching to touch him.

“Then don’t try to make it something else.” Her skirts were still up, and she reached to push them back down her legs, but he stopped her, his hand covering hers.

“I’m not. I’m simply saying we work like nothing I’ve experienced before.”

She wasn’t certain why she did it, but she reached for his hand then, bringing it back to her most intimate parts. He automatically cupped her, a possessive growl filling his chest. The only light from the swaying carriage lantern hanging on the side of the carriage, casting him in and out of shadow.

“It could be better. So much better.” It was the truth. Their bodies worked. Their hearts and minds? Not yet. She didn’t know if they ever would.

“How?” He leaned closer. Kissing her again. “Tell me.”

“I’d have to show you,” she whispered against his lips. “But first you have to consent to allow me to stay in London after we marry. With you.”

“No. Chloe. You know I can’t give that to you.”

She shook her head, trying to push him away. “Then I can’t give you my hand.”

He didn’t move, somehow remaining suspended over her as his eyes held hers. “You can and you will. Whatever you think we lack, one way or another, we will wed.”

His voice dropped so low, it made her shiver. “I will give you the protection that being a duchess can provide. You are mine to keep safe.”

She pushed him again and this time, he allowed her feeble attempt to send him backward so that he landed in his seat. “It seems we are at an impasse.”

“Fortunately, I know just how to weaken you.”

She pushed down her skirts, sitting up straighter. “Funny. I was going to say the same to you.” He was here in this carriage and not at the ball, wasn’t he?

He gave her another devilish grin. “It’s war then?”

“It’s war.”

“My victory is going to taste so sweet.” He laced his hands behind his head, leaning

back at a cocky angle.

“Your victory?” She traced the edge of her gown with her finger, over her shoulder and along her chest. His eyes darkened as he watched. She had a few weapons too. She’d used every one and this rakish duke was going down. She didn’t want just his body or even his hand. She’d take nothing short of his heart.

It was war all right. And this country mouse was going to win.

* * *

The next evening, Ryker sat in the sitting room just off the entry waiting. He knew he was positioned like a predator waiting to pounce on its prey.

But he’d heard Chloe preparing for the evening and he knew she intended to go out.

Had she made plans with the widow?

Did she intend to use his jealousy against him? It was a smart play. Here he was, sitting at home on a Friday evening, waiting to see what she might do, rather than being out at his club or attempting to complete his next challenge.

He was going to be cleaning the whorehouse for certain at this rate. But the competition that Chloe presented was much more interesting.

The stakes were higher and the reward of being intimate with Chloe so much more gratifying.

He knew it had been his goal to avoid that very situation, but he reasoned a bit of satisfaction might do them both good.

He tried not to think too hard about how he was losing his original goals or how she'd accused him of being as selfish as his father.

She had a point.

But what she didn't know about was the man's cruelty. What if he was same sort of father? It was a risk he wasn't certain he could or should take. He'd only know the answer when it was too late.

His chest tightened and for a moment, he considered calling off this entire charade. Should he do as she requested and let her go? Allow her to marry a man who could give her the future she deserved?

He heard the soft tap of her footfalls on the marble stairs before he saw her. Rising from his seat, she reached the entry, coming into his line of view.

Her low-cut gown clung to her body, exposing a fair bit of her breasts and all the smooth skin of her chest and neck.

He let out a low rumble as he drew himself up.

Let her go? No fucking way.

But he didn't move either. He knew what game she was playing, and he had to admit, she was playing it well.

Tempting, teasing, making him jealous. But he had a few games of his own. He'd let her go out, let her get comfortable in the ballroom, and then...

He'd pounce.

The front door opened, the Countess Green coming into view. The two women kissed on each other's cheek.

"My apologies for leaving the Rightly ball so suddenly," Chloe murmured, grasping the other woman's hands. "My night got very complicated."

Lady Green gave a low laugh. "Worry not. So did mine."

"What happened to you?"

If he wasn't mistaken, the countess's cheeks flushed a delicate pink, her dark hair cascading over her shoulder. "A situation that I shall never find myself in again."

Ryker's brows lifted. Did that situation concern Strongborn? The challenge was to bed a widow and Countess Green was that. His eyes moved over her, realizing that she was also quite lovely. How had he missed that until now?

And then he looked back at Chloe. He'd missed Lady Green's beauty because of Chloe... she had completely filled his gaze.

Even now, the details of the other woman faded away. All he could see was Chloe's large blue eyes. Her lush hair, the lines of her body.

His teeth clenched as he finally stepped out of the shadows of the sitting room and into the entry. "And where are you ladies off to this evening?"

Chloe jumped, clearly surprised as the countess turned to him. "Your Grace." She dipped into a deep curtsy.

"I could ask you the same." Chloe looked at him, clearly assessing his evening wear. He didn't answer her question either, but not because he was being intentionally

evasive. The truth was, he intended to follow her this evening.

Was he the predator he'd hoped or had he just been leashed? Difficult to say. "But you didn't, love. So why don't you tell me, where are you off to?"

"Whites," Chloe answered, knowing it was her duty as his charge to at least inform him. "I've always wanted to see the inside of those famous clubs and Countess Green is a member."

Ah. Yes. Her wish to explore the city. "My aunt really spared no expense on your wardrobe," he murmured moving closer. That gown was made for sin, and he could just imagine taking it off her. But every man in that club would be thinking the same.

She looked away. "You don't approve?"

He stopped a few feet away. Close enough that he could have trailed a finger over her bare skin. "If it's attention you want, you'll surely get it."

Chloe shifted, nipping at that supple bottom lip as Countess Green cleared her throat.

"Should we?" she asked.

"Let's," he answered with a toothy grin that he was certain made him look more like a lion than a man.

Both women started. "Oh. But..." Chloe fumbled.

He took a half step closer. "If you think I'm letting you out of my sight in that dress, you are sorely mistaken."

The countess cleared her throat again. Louder. "Right. Shall we all take my

carriage?”

“Perfect. I’ll have mine follow,” he answered, offering the countess his arm. “We’re going to have a wonderful time tonight.”

Chloe fell in step behind them. “I highly doubt that,” she said. “I don’t know why you insist on being such a beast.”

He looked back at her, devouring her with his gaze. “That is one of my best qualities.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Whites was crowded, and smelly, and the refreshments were lukewarm and tasted about as good. Chloe had to confess, this was not the experience she'd hoped it would be.

And then there was the fact that a large and very intimidating duke was doing his absolute best to frighten away any prospective suitors.

How was she supposed to make him mad with jealousy if he wouldn't give her the chance?

He glared at every man who even glanced her way. In terms of the little game they'd constructed, he'd made a very strong strategic move using his position and his physically dominating presence to limit her options. Well played.

She huffed a breath. "Console yourself in one regard," Caroline whispered, clearly understanding Chloe's frustration. "He's been completely distracted from his original goal, and he's absolutely focused on you."

"How can I make him mad with want if another man can't even come within feet of me?"

"Oh, he's plenty jealous," Caroline returned in a whisper.

"What are you ladies discussing?" he asked, his voice dropping dangerously low as he leaned in as well.

She turned to him with a glare. “I had no idea you were this nosy. Gads.”

He quirked a single brow a moment before he moved so close, his lips grazed the lobe of her ear. “I’m going to trail the tip of my nose over every inch of your body until I reach your?—”

“Ryker,” she hissed, heat flushing up her chest and into her cheeks. He was most definitely winning.

She looked back at Caroline, her eyes wide, knowing that she needed help. How did one win the heart of an unrepentant rake?

Caroline’s lips had pressed into a tight line, her gaze flitting back and forth between the two of them. “I’m in need of a repose. Will you join me?”

She slumped her shoulders in relief but a hand at her waist stopped her as Ryker pulled her torso scandalously close to his, sending a shiver through her. “Don’t be long.”

Ignoring him, she linked her arm with Caroline’s and the two women moved about the edge of the ballroom.

“What’s going on?” Caroline hissed.

“I might have made a mess of things,” Chloe whispered back. “I only wanted to make him jealous but?—”

“He’s following us.” Caroline said glancing over her shoulder and then pulling Chloe faster. “He’s like a man obsessed.”

Chloe paused, cocking her head the to side. “Do you think that’s a good thing?”

“How would I know?” Caroline asked. “I want a simple man, remember? Not some complicated duke with all sorts of entitlement and power.” Caroline attempted to move faster again, but Chloe held her back.

“Don’t bother. We’ll never move faster in these skirts than he can and besides... the faster I go, the more likely he is to chase. This is as close to a private conversation as we’re going to get.”

Caroline’s brows lifted. “My dear, you are learning quickly.”

Chloe shrugged. “He’s determined to marry me and the more I resist, the more insistent he grows.”

“Then you’ve won.”

Chloe shook her head. “While the marriage is permanent, his interest is likely temporary. What I want to figure out is how to win his affection. Not just now but well into the future.”

Caroline wrinkled her nose. “I don’t know, Chloe. My experience is rather limited. And what you’re attempting, it’s...”

Caroline didn’t need to finish. She knew. It was difficult. Worthwhile endeavors often were. “You go ahead.” She let go of Caroline’s arm. “Ryker and I need to talk.”

Caroline wrinkled her nose. “That’s better than him just stalking after you. People are starting to stare.”

Chloe looked around to see that Caroline was correct. Several groups of women were talking behind their fans, their gazes darting from herself to Ryker, who was in turn watching her with a look of aggressive intensity that might make another woman

shrivel in fear. Or swoon. That was a possibility too. But it only made her heart beat with excitement.

She let go of Caroline, turning back to her surly duke.

Ryker continued toward her, the crowd seeming to part for him until he stood in front of her.

“You’re acting beastly again.”

“I’m feeling beastly,” he grunted back. “I hate the way they are all looking at you.”

“I’m fairly certain most of the ladies are looking at you and the spectacle you’re making, not me.”

“Not the ladies. The men.” A man passing by looked up at Ryker’s words. Ryker snarled at the fellow, who promptly dropped his head and scurried off.

Chloe shook her head, turning on her own heel and trailing Caroline, knowing that Ryker would follow. Whatever conversation they were about to have, it needed more privacy.

And for whatever reason, they only conversed when they were out.

Ryker followed her down the hall toward the ladies’ repose. But Chloe, the hall empty, continued down a set of stairs. She tried a few doors and blessedly found one that was open.

She stepped inside, not even bothering to close it as Ryker slipped in behind her a moment later.

A small window lit the room, with only a table and a few chairs. “What is this?”

“A private meeting room for club members, I’m sure.” Ryker closed the door with a decided click.

Now that she had him alone, she struggled to decide which questions she ought to ask first. Why are you so aggressive this evening? What are we moving toward?

“Why don’t we ever interact at home?”

He turned back to her, the moonlight casting over his face. His face was set in taut lines, tension evident around his eyes and mouth. “I don’t know.”

She paused, assessing him carefully. She’d never heard him utter the words I don’t know . Some people might say such a thing all the time, but Ryker always knew...

“Why are you upset tonight?”

“I’m not upset, just frustrated.” He ran a rough hand through his hair, keeping his distance. He’d been hovering over her all night. And now he remained three feet away.

“Frustrated by what?”

He let out a long breath. “Leave it, Chloe.”

“And what?” She couldn’t be timid with this man. If she wanted her way, she had to push. She’d learned that much. “Allow you to ruin me with your glares alone?”

“I can’t ruin you with glares.”

“Really? All of London will be talking tomorrow about the duke and his charge. If keeping our match a secret is your game, you’re losing.”

“Fuck,” he muttered.

A smile tugged at Chloe’s lips. She was fairly certain she’d just scored a significant point.

But how to win...

* * *

Chloe was working her way closer to the truth. How had she realized he kept his distance at home because she was just too tempting? If he allowed himself access even once in the privacy of their home... There it was again. That word... home.

He pushed that thought away for later. Their two trysts in the carriage had only whetted his appetite, but then again, he’d not been satisfied either time.

The idea that he’d tie them together and not have her in his bed was so unsatisfying that he scrubbed the back of his neck, his teeth gritting together. His plan was falling apart, his original goals dying a slow death.

She moved closer, the sway of her hips in the moonlight mesmerizing as she studied him. “How come...” she began, and he tensed. These questions only spelled trouble for him. “You only touch me?”

His mouth went dry. “Chloe.” His voice was tellingly rough.

“What will happen if I touch you?”

“I don’t...” He’d been going to say he didn’t know. Again.

“The older women in my village used to warn the young ladies. Don’t give a man your body without a promise. A commitment. He’ll only tire of you after he’s had you.”

“Good advice.” She was so close, her floral scent filled his nostrils, her large blue eyes looking at him. And that was when she began to unbutton her glove.

He could leave. Turn and go. But he wanted her so damned much...

The glove came off, dropping to the floor, her bare fingers lifting to the top of his collar. And then she ran her fingers over his bare skin. He nearly groaned aloud. Her fingertips so soft and light, her touch was like being caressed by a feather.

She slid even closer, her breasts pressing to his chest as she placed a kiss into the spot her fingers had just been. “You know me intimately.”

He did. That’s what scared him. He just wanted more.

“I want to know you too.”

Fuck. He was in trouble.

“Will you...” Her lips were sliding closer to his ear as she pressed her body to the length of his.

He couldn’t help himself. With both hands he grabbed her hips, pulling her into him and letting out a feral noise at the pleasure of the pressure on his aching cock.

“Will you let me know you?”

He groaned then, burying his face into her neck. He should say no. This is what he'd been attempting to avoid. He knew he was losing, but her combination of passion, beauty, and innocence cast a spell over him, and he couldn't deny her. Instead, he let her hand wander down his back, tracing his body as he ground their hips together, creating friction and pleasure.

When was the last time he'd enjoyed a bit of grinding? He'd been a young, inexperienced buck.

But everything was different with Chloe. He was learning that. He was learning everything he thought he'd known all over again. Because she was more, unique, better.

He pushed them both back, until they reached the table, the back of Chloe's legs pushing into the wooden top. He had visions of laying her down, burying his face between her legs again...

But she pushed against his chest. "It's your turn."

His turn. His eyes closed as he let her turn them both, the table bumping his legs as she pushed him down on the top.

And then she was undoing the falls of his breeches. The moment the last button gave, he pulled them down his hips, exposing his stiff cock, which already wept his seed. Christ.

Ryker heard Chloe gasp. He opened his eyes to see her staring, her mouth agape. "Ryker," she whispered. "It's so..."

What was she going to say? Big? Scary? But he didn't ask, and she didn't say, as her hand wrapped about the thick length, her thumb coming to the tip, sliding over the

pearl of seed that had collected. She smeared the milky liquid over his skin, pulling a half-strangled groan from his chest.

“Can I taste it?”

He lifted his head then, just in time to see her lick her lips.

Ryker blinked several times, sliding his hand into her hair, sending pins cascading to the floor. He knew he shouldn't ruin her hair but in this moment he just knew.

Chloe was his. Not his for tonight. Or his until the wedding, or his after he tired of the club. She belonged in his arms. All. The. Time.

Her tongue darted out, swirling over his tip, his entire body jerking at the feel of her warm, wet tongue on his most sensitive flesh.

And then she placed a soft kiss where her tongue had just been. Words began to fall from his lips.

“Chloe, please, more.” She obliged, tentatively at first, but his hand in her hair guided her movement until she understood the rhythm, her mouth taking him over and over, her breasts pressed to his thighs.

And Ryker just knew. He needed her in his bed. Needed to explore every inch of her. She'd won because he was going to marry her and then he was going to keep her in London where he could make love to her over and over.

All his other goals fell away as he touched her face, his body drawing closer and closer to the orgasm he'd needed for days.

And that's when the words he never thought he'd say fell from his lips. “I love you.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Chloe nearly bit into his staff as he cried out his declaration of affection. Her heart answered, I love you too .

Her mouth, however, was a bit busy.

Because a moment later, a moan ripped from Ryker's chest, his body spasming as hot liquid filled her mouth.

Slowly, she pulled away, looking up his body at his half open eyes. "Ryker?"

"Yes, love?"

Part of her wanted to ask if he'd meant the words. But now was not the moment to be insecure. It was the time for strength. "I feel the same."

"How's that?" He tossed an arm over his eyes not moving.

She was glad he'd not seen her grimace. Did he not remember? Not want to admit he'd said them too.

Was she about to be crushed? She drew in a deep breath. "I love you, too."

He looked up then, his arm falling away, his head picking up from the table. "You shouldn't."

“Why?”

“Because I’m a selfish prick.”

Her brows lifted as her heart skipped a beat. Was this the part when he told her that he was too selfish to ever really love her?

“But I’m going to do better.”

She wasn’t certain what that specifically meant. Was he not going to send her away? Not marry her? But rather than ask, she lay her head down on his stomach. “Me too.” Because if she were honest, trying to make him jealous didn’t exactly seem loving or caring. Not that she’d gotten that far in her plot. But still, that was only because he’d outplayed her.

He shook his head, pushing up as he cradled her head in one hand. “Love. You don’t need to do better. You are practically a saint?—”

But a noise out in the hall cut off his words. She sat up, Ryker off the table in a second, pulling up his breeches. “I’ll be right back,” he whispered as he crossed to the door, silently opening the panel and looking out into the hall. She stood too, furiously attempting to stuff her hair back in its pins.

Who was in the hall? Just a servant? Another guest?

The door pushed open again. “Is everything all right?” she asked but then gasped when it wasn’t Ryker who filled the door but another man. Scars slashed across his cheeks, his teeth bared as he stalked toward her.

She let out the very start of a scream, but in a moment, the man was on her, a cloth over her mouth and nose, his other hand like a vise around the back of her neck.

She only fought for a moment or two before the world went dark...

* * *

Ryker made his way down the dark hall, checking the shadows until he'd reached a dead end.

Turning back, he started toward Chloe, knowing there was so much more to say. He needed to tell her about how he wanted to give her a real future, not just his name. But he didn't know how to really give so freely, and he was afraid to repeat his father's mistakes.

But as he rounded the corner, from the kitchen, a man stepped into the hall. "Hello, good sir," the man slurred. "I've lost my way."

Ryker sighed. He had no time for drunks. "That way and up the stairs to reach the assembly room."

"Which way, now?" The man looked down both directions, his brow furrowing.

Ryker let out a growl, not wanting to leave Chloe any longer. "That way." And he started to move past the man who promptly bumped into him, attempting to send Ryker off course.

Ryker didn't move, the other man bouncing off of him instead.

"Watch it," he barked back, continuing down the hall. He rounded the next corner, his blood running cold.

Because, by the light of the moon in the open door to another alley, he saw Chloe's limp form, her arms dangling, hanging over a man's shoulder.

He ground his teeth and broke into a run.

The other man turned, looking back at Ryker, who recognized him instantly. “Adam!”

Pushing through the door, Adam started down the alley. Chloe’s weight slowed him, as Ryker closed the distance between them.

But just when he thought he’d reached them, he realized that Adam was running straight toward a parked carriage.

The villain reached the vehicle and practically dumped Chloe inside. “Go!” he yelled, the driver snapping the reins. Ryker pushed himself faster, diving for the carriage, just missing the back, as the vehicle lurched forward.

Hanging by the handle, Adam swung himself into the carriage as it started down the street, picking up speed, the wheels rattling over the cobblestones.

Ryker, vaulting himself up from the hard stone street, sprinted behind, following the carriage from the quiet alley onto the main thoroughfare.

But he knew he’d never reach the carriage, not even on the more crowded London streets.

Turning this way and that, he spotted a hack pulled to the side. “Hey!”

The driver looked at him.

He didn’t hesitate. “Twenty shillings to follow that carriage.”

“Twenty!” the man crowed. “Get in!”

Ryker waved for the man to go, hopping into the carriage after it had begun to roll. He'd only just told Chloe he loved her. There was no way he was losing her now.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Chloe woke slowly, the rocking motion of movement making her stomach roll.

She opened her eyes, and the back of a man's legs came into view. Slung over his shoulder as she was, she couldn't see much else. A door opened, and the man carrying her entered a room, the door slamming behind them.

She couldn't help it, she winced.

His arm tightened over the back of her legs a moment before he dropped her onto a bed.

She instantly scrambled toward the far edge, unsure where she intended to run but just wanting distance.

His hand shot out, tightly gripping her ankle. "Hold still or I'll tie you down."

His rough, stern voice made her freeze, her body curling into the fetal position as a sob pushed out from between her lips.

He stared down at her with hard eyes, his hand so tight on her ankle, she was sure he was leaving bruises.

"Please," she whispered, knowing that it was a foolish thing to say.

His gaze only grew harder. "He told you about me, your duke?"

She shook her head, not looking into his eyes, but staring at a spot on the far wall. The room was sparse, the walls dirty. Fear clutched her heart.

“Nothing?” He leaned over, gripping her chin, his hot breath blowing across her face. “He didn’t warn you that Adam was hunting him?”

Adam? This was the man Ryker thought she was involved with for some reason? And had Ryker said he was hunting him? She forgot the pain as she tried to concentrate. “But...” Her tongue darted out to lick her parched lips, but she instantly pulled it back in when his gaze caught the movement, his eyes darkening. “But why?”

He sneered down at her. “The whole lot of them is full of sin. They are supposed to be our leaders, the men who provide for the masses. What do they do? Waste themselves in liquor, and games, and whores. The filthiest sinners of them all and they deserve to be punished. To be scourged.”

He shoved her face back down, her head bouncing off the bed. He let go of her ankle as well, and for a moment she breathed a sigh of relief until he shrugged off his coat. More fear made her shrink as far back as she could as she desperately searched for an exit.

“Look at you,” he continued, pulling at the knot in his cravat. “Your body on display, participating in vile acts in meeting rooms. Playing a whore for him.”

A gasping sob tore from her lips.

“Please,” she begged again as he yanked off his vest and then began tugging at his shirt. “Whatever you think of me, please don’t hurt me.” Her voice shook and broke as terror threatened to overwhelm her senses. This couldn’t be how she lost her innocence.

He tugged the shirt over his head and dropped it into the wooden chair in the corner before he crossed to a small chest. Her eyes were wide, unable to look away as he pulled out a small whip from its depths.

A tremble so violent that it made her teeth rattle wracked through her. Was he going to rape her? Whip her first?

She realized tears were streaming down her cheeks as he held the whip straight out. It didn't have one thong but several, balls replacing the crackers.

Her breath pushed out in jagged little huffs, her eyes so wide and still watering of their own volition.

And then he lowered his hand. For a moment she thought he might be relaxing but he only prepared for the upswing, his arm tensing as the whip arched through the air.

Her gaze flew shut then, her body tensing for the hit.

But it never came.

The whip still whistled through the air, she heard it hit, the deep thud of flesh being pummeled filling the room.

Her eyes flew open as the whip moved through the air. But Adam didn't hesitate, with startling strength, the whip cracked through the air again, slicing into the flesh of his own back. This time she heard his grunt of pain.

Her own gasping sob escaped her lips.

He hit himself two, three, four more times before he looked at her again.

“I’m repenting,” he said to a question she hadn’t asked. “Lustful thoughts.” And his eyes raked over her again.

He stepped over to the side of the bed, the whip hovering over her, close enough that despite its black leather, she could see the shine of deep dark red on the individual balls. His blood...

“You should repent too, Chloe Fairchild. Pain will set you free from your sins.” And then he raised the whip again.

This time, she couldn’t confine her panic ripping through her veins, and she screamed, even while knowing her fear wouldn’t stop the madman.

* * *

Ryker reached the delapidated inn and tossed the promised shillings at the driver. “Stay here and I’ll give you another twenty.” From a distance, Ryker had seen Adam’s carriage stop in front of this place, seen him carry the unconscious Chloe through the doors. He was only a minute behind.

But as he entered the inn, he looked at the peg board on the wall. Keys for rooms two, four, five, and eight were missing.

Into which one had Adam taken Chloe?

“Can I help you?” An older woman in a threadbare apron, and frazzled hair coming out of her bonnet, asked in a thick cockney accent.

“Adam. Which room?”

“Can’t say...” The woman held out one hand, the other scratching at her chin.

He rumbled out a frustrated breath as he grabbed several coins from his pocket, slapping them into her hand.

She curled her wrinkled fingers around them, bringing one to her mouth, and biting into it, showing several gaps in her teeth.

“Well?”

“Eight. Only one on the third floor.”

He didn’t say another word, instead he started up the stairs, taking them two and three at a time until he’d reached the third floor.

Just one door stood in front of him, and he paused for the barest second.

A woman’s scream ripped through the air, and the sound reverberated through him. Chloe. His pulse raced, a pianoforte sitting on his chest.

Barreling forward, he dropped his shoulder, the door crashing in on its frame as it burst open.

Chloe lay on the bed, curled into herself, Adam over her with a whip held up in the air.

“You!” he snarled, charging forward.

Adam instantly changed direction, swinging the whip in a wide arc through the air and coming at him from the side as Ryker hurled himself around the bed.

The whip whistled as Ryker tried to sidestep it but, he was moving too quickly, with too much purpose, so intent upon protecting Chloe, he’d charged in too fast. The

leather balls cracked into his ribs, pain exploding through his chest.

He grunted through the pain, unable to think for a single moment, before he came to his senses. Unsheathing the knife tucked under his jacket, he swung at Adam in one fluid movement, slicing toward the man's stomach.

Adam jumped back, but not enough, and Ryker felt the knife sink into flesh, a thick red line appearing on the man's midsection.

It didn't keep Adam from raising the whip again.

Ryker knew he'd have to take the hit, but he didn't brace himself. Instead, he ran full force into Adam, his superior height and weight sending the man crashing into the wall as the whip came down on his back, pain throbbing through his torso.

Chloe screamed, scrambling across the bed to move away from them.

"Get out of here," he ordered through the agony. Whatever happened next, he'd keep Chloe safe, or he'd die trying.

Spinning them both, Ryker pushed them toward the far wall, away from Chloe. Adam raised the whip, bringing it down on Ryker's back once again.

This time, when the whip cracked, Ryker faltered, loosening his grip, and Adam spun away. He stopped, whip in hand, his eyes meeting Ryker's.

Ryker paused too, readying himself for the next attack. Every bone in his body ached, but he had to pull through.

"This isn't over," Adam snarled. "Judas and I are coming for you."

“Not if—” But Ryker stopped, his words dying as he watched in horror.

Adam, a sick smile curling his lips, vaulted himself through the closed window.

The sound of shattering glass filled the air as Ryker ran to the window’s edge just in time to see Adam land on the roof of a carriage.

“Adam!” he roared into the night as the driver cracked his own whip and sped off into the night, with Adam collapsed on the top.

Ryker watched him go, fists clenched at his sides. He couldn’t follow.

“Ryker?” Chloe’s teary voice called from the far side of the bed. He turned back to see she’d dropped to the floor, only her large blue eyes peering over the top of the filthy covers.

“It’s all right, love.” He left the window, striding to Chloe. He had his jacket off by the time he reached her, the back of it shredded from the whip. But it would still cover and warm her, and so he dropped it about her shoulders and pulled her into his arms. “I’m here.”

“He was going to...” She let out a soft sob, burying her face in his shoulder.

“Did he hurt you?”

She shook her head. “No. You came just in time. I... how did you...”

“That doesn’t matter. What I need you to know is that I will always come for you. Always.”

She wrapped her arm around his neck. “I was so frightened.”

He cursed himself, a hundred times the fool. He'd brought her into this. She never would have been part of it otherwise. He could see that now.

He'd been so stupid trying to protect the club when he should have been protecting her.

"He said I was a whore," she whispered, her voice breaking. "He said that your club was full of sin and that you all deserved to be scourged."

He held her tighter as he swung her into his arms, his back protesting, though he ignored the pain.

She must have felt his grimace though. "What's wrong?" she asked, her fingers splaying out on his neck.

His back was likely a mess, not that he was setting her down. He'd carry her through the pain. She deserved nothing less and he'd be the man she needed in this moment.

But as he held her close, he couldn't help but think Adam was at least partially right. He'd been living the wrong life. He could see that now. A life of sin and degradation only led to pain and danger.... It was time to change.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Ryker had Chloe home within an hour.

They'd been delayed as he'd searched Adam's room, and then he and the driver had emptied the sparse contents, taking them back home for Ryker to inspect again later.

He'd also paid the innkeeper generously for the damage and promised more coin if Adam returned and she sent word.

Chloe had never been happier to see Ryker's home and hear the clang of the gates.

It was late, the house dark. Ryker carried her inside, bringing her up the stairs. He didn't hesitate, taking her into her room and setting her on her bed. Then he lit several candles before returning to her side. She hadn't moved a finger, she realized, as he brushed his palm down her cheek. "Let me undo that dress for you."

She turned, feeling nearly numb as his fingers deftly worked the buttons, the gown falling away as he started pulling at the strings of her corset. Layer by layer, he stripped off her clothes, even rolling down her stockings until she wore nothing but her chemise.

He turned his back on her and that was the moment she came to life. "You can't leave me." She could hear the fear lacing her voice as she stood from the bed, her legs wobbling. "Please, Ryker. I'm frightened."

A string of curses filled the room as he turned back to her. "I'm not going anywhere,

love. Just undressing.”

She sat back down. “You’ll stay with me?”

“Of course.”

His words gave her permission to lay back, her body sinking into the bed. She was beyond bone tired; the only time she remembered feeling like this was after her father’s death. It might have been five minutes or twenty-five, Chloe didn’t know. Had she fallen asleep? She woke to Ryker lifting her so that he could pull down the covers.

Setting her down again, he tucked her in and then moved to the other side of the bed. He’d stripped bare to the waist and removed his boots.

He climbed in next to her and she instantly burrowed into his strength and heat. It felt divine to have his large frame curled around hers and she sighed out, “When we wed, I want to sleep like this every night.”

She felt him tense, her brow knitting in confusion. But she was heavy again, and this time, warm and protected, she fell into a deep sleep.

When Chloe woke, the sun was high in the sky.

She tried to stretch her aching body but could hardly move. She looked back, confused to see Ryker still sleeping behind her.

The events of the night before flooded her thoughts, the good and the bad. The way Adam had nearly hurt her, but also the way Ryker had rushed to her rescue. Aches aside, she snuggled deeper into him.

Which caused him to give a low moan.

Her breath caught, the sound reminding her of another event that had happened the night before. The way she'd touched him.

Her body warmed at the memory. But Ryker didn't tighten his grip on her, instead, he rolled away.

She turned over too, and that's when she saw them, at least a dozen walnut-sized bruises peppering his back in clusters. She gasped, covering her mouth with her hand.

He looked back, partially turning, and that's when she saw more on his side.

He'd taken a beating defending her.

She rolled too, gently pressing to his side, as she wrapped her arms about him. "Oh Ryker. Look at you." Her hand gently swiped down his side so as not to cause him more pain.

"It's nothing. I'm used to it. I've had a lifetime of this sort of treatment."

"Used to it? Lifetime?"

He grimaced. "I box."

She shook her head. "Boxing is not a beating like that. My father boxed in his younger days. He never came home with bruises like this."

Ryker let out a long breath of air. "I'm still used to it, so try not to worry."

"I am more worried about your words."

He reached up to cup her cheek. “My father wasn’t in my life very much. But about once a year, he’d come to check on his heir. And when he did, he believed the rod would cure me of all the ills I’d accumulated over the year.”

He grimaced. “Come to think of it. He’d always visit between the holidays and before the season began and parliament opened. No wonder I hate this time of year.”

Chloe squeezed him tighter, understanding forming a lump in her throat. “That’s why you don’t want to have children.”

He looked at her, surprise making his eyes wide. “You remembered that?”

“He ignored you, made your mother miserable, and on the rare occasion he came, it was far worse than just miserable.”

It all made sense.

Ryker looked away. “Don’t feel sorry for me now.”

“Why not?” Her chest tightened as he shrugged away.

“Because, Chloe, I am the reason you were in danger. I...” He sat up, his feet hanging off the edge of the bed, his elbows on his knees. “I accused you of being in league with that man. I...” His lips tightened over his teeth. “I ought to let you go find a man who might make you truly happy. A man without a dark past like mine.”

He couldn’t be serious. After all this time of insisting they wed, now he wished to end their engagement? Had the man lost his senses?

* * *

Chloe raised up on her knees, her hands coming to her hips. “You want to let me go now?”

It had been a thought. He’d brought her nothing but trouble. “Well... I...”

She pointed a finger at his chest. “Everyone at White’s last night was aware of your interest. You didn’t bother hiding it.”

That was true, though she was his charge. Surely, they’d understand his job was to protect her.

“We’ve been completely intimate.”

“You’re still a virgin?—”

“And now I’m in danger from a madman that we watched jump out a third-story window after he knocked me out and kidnapped me. And you want to set me free?”

Those were all very valid points. His chest ached at the idea of letting her go. “Try to understand. This time, I’m doing what’s best for you.”

“What’s best for me?” Her voice rose with every word. “What’s best for me?!”

“Yes,” he answered holding up his hands. He’d been selfish, he could see that now. And this time, when he acted, he’d think of her.

Her hands went back to her hips. “Retire from that ridiculous club. That would be best for me.”

She had a point there. He nearly grinned at the way she ordered him about.

“Marry me.”

He had a hard time arguing with that. By Jove, she was glorious. “Anything else?”

“I’ve seen London. I prefer the country.”

His heart stalled as he stared at her. Did she still want to live separately? He’d made the demand. How did he go back on what he’d made her promise?

But last night when he’d held her in his arms, he’d fully understood. There was no halfway with Chloe. He was either all in or he was likely drinking himself to death. “Chloe, I can’t live apart from my wife. I know it’s not fair to say after I made the demand but?—”

“Don’t be a fool. Of course we’re not living apart. It was a ridiculous request to begin with, and besides, I need a husband who is going to keep me warm at night and safe during the day.”

He stood up, his knees against the bed and stared down at her upturned face. “You want me to move to the country with you?”

She nipped at her lip, looking vulnerable for the first time during this conversation. “We can move back and forth between London and your preferred country estate but...”

He didn’t let her finish. Hooking an arm under her ass, he dragged her up against his body, pressing her torso down the length of his. “Are you sure? I’m a lot to handle.”

She smiled, a soft, sweet smile right before she gave him a slow kiss. “I know.”

Of course she did. He’d been on full display since she’d crashed into his life. “I don’t

know if I'll make a good father. My examples were dreadful."

"Mine was excellent. I'll show you if you'll let me."

He kissed her again. The passion was there, simmering under the tender touch, but more than he wanted to devour her, this kiss was meant to show her that he loved her.

"Promise?"

"Promise."

And then she threaded her hands into his hair, opening her mouth under his for a kiss that scorched his soul.

This was his woman. And he was her man. End of story.

"Chloe." He managed to say between long, steamy kisses where their tongues tangled and their mouths melded.

"Yes?"

"I'm going to make love to you now."

"Yes," she answered, one of her legs hooking around his waist. "Yes."

And with that he laid her back down on the bed, his body coming on top of hers. He was so glad that he got to do this during the daylight. He wanted to see everything.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Ryker's weight pressed her to the mattress as their kiss went on and on. Not that she wanted it to end. She could kiss this man forever.

She was going to kiss him forever, or at least for the rest of her life.

She wrapped her legs about his waist, her chemise riding up her thighs. He still wore his breeches, but that didn't stop the hard length of his shaft pressing her in just the right spot.

The ache between her thighs pulsed, growing more intense with every roll of his hips until she could hardly catch her breath, her body so taut, she thought she might snap.

But just as she reached the apex of her pleasure, an orgasm about to break, he pulled back. "Not yet."

She cried out in protest, pushing up on her elbows as he rose.

But her objection died on her lips as he tugged at the buttons on his breeches, stripping them down his hips and revealing powerful thighs.

Her mouth went dry.

The man was magnificent.

"Chloe," he rumbled standing straight and tall over her. "I want to see you too, love."

Giving a tiny nod, she started to rise up again as Ryker grabbed the hem of her chemise, skimming it up her thighs, over her hips. To her waist, and then higher.

The fabric brushed her nipples, making them tighten, until the fabric was over her face and then sailing through the air.

The rest of her pins had long since fallen out and her mass of tangled curls trailed down her back.

For a brief moment, she considered covering herself with the long strands. But Ryker leaned closer, his eyes dark with desire. “You are perfect, my love.”

A flush climbed her cheeks as her chin dipped. She wasn’t lean like him, her body softer, weaker.

But he touched her rib cage, his thumb stroking the underside of her breast as his mouth dipped to her nipple and she forgot to be worried, the feel of his hot, wet mouth making her cry out with desire.

She tipped her head back as she arched into the touch, her fingers threading through his hair again.

He settled on top of her, paying the other breast equal attention as the hair on his chest tickled her belly.

She made a half gasping, half laughing noise as her hands traced the thick muscles of his back. “You’re so beautiful.”

He lifted his head then, the intensity of his gaze having only increased. “You are beautiful. The curves of your body are enough to bring a man to his knees.”

“I’m not chiseled like you... I...”

“You are perfectly soft,” he answered, beginning to trail kisses down her body. “If you want a man to keep you warm and protect you, love, I want a woman to dull the sharp edges of the world. Can you do that for me, Chloe?”

She had been made for that. She could feel it deep in her soul. “Oh, yes.”

He placed a kiss along the seam where her leg met her torso. “Good.” And then he kissed along her thigh, her entire body tensing in preparation.

The flat of his tongue slid through her folds, causing her already-overheated sex to shiver. “Ryker,” she moaned, grabbing onto his scalp to pull him closer. She was desperate for relief, and he obliged, using his tongue to bring her wave after wave of pleasure until he thrust two fingers into her channel, giving her the exact pressure she needed to break apart into a thousand tiny pieces. Her cry echoed through the room, her body going limp.

* * *

Ryker pushed up, looking down at Chloe, her body relaxed, her eyes half closed. Had she been embarrassed by the way she looked?

The woman was as perfect as he’d ever seen. Every curve, every angle made to please.

With one hand he pumped his cock, seed already leaking from the tip, with the other, he ran his hand from her ribs to her waist and over her hip. Her skin was like silk under his palm, and he knew with certainty what he’d suspected from the first. One time with Chloe was never going to be enough.

It would take him lifetimes to love this woman properly.

He thought of all the silly notions he'd held onto, when he tortured them both. What a fool.

He positioned himself between her legs as she lifted a hand, running her fingers over the muscles of his chest, her gaze meeting his.

"I love you," she whispered, her body splayed out for him.

"I love you too," he said but the truth was, love did not begin to describe how he felt. He'd protect this woman until his last breath. He'd give all he had to keep her safe and warm.

Slowly, he pushed inside her, the tightness of her sheath making his eyes roll back even as he fought for control.

Her face pulled into a wince, a small whimper falling from her lips. He held still, pressing closer to kiss her lips, holding her body against his.

As she relaxed, he tried again, sinking deeper into her sheath until finally, after several agonizing minutes, he was fully seated inside her.

His balls tingled from the effort, and he knew he'd not last long. Slowly sliding out, he pushed back in, being careful not to hurt her, her arms locked tightly about his neck.

The effort to move slowly only added to the anticipation, his entire body taut with the effort.

One more slow stroke, then two, and his body shook with the effort to maintain

control. When one of Chloe's legs hooked about his waist, he lost the fight, and with one more deep thrust inside her, he came undone.

He let out a loud groan, his orgasm tearing through him. Chloe held him tightly, her murmured words in his ear lulling him closer as he collapsed on top of her. He had no idea what she said. The words didn't matter.

It was the feeling. The promise of love and care that had him rolling to the side, cradling her body into the front of his.

This was what he'd always needed and never knew.

Chloe fell asleep in the circle of his arms and for the longest time, he just watched her sleep, completely amazed that this woman had consented to be his.

When she was deep in sleep, he rose, pulling on his breeches. He had no intention of going far, but he did need to write to Strongborn and tell him what had happened, and turn over Adam's belongings to the other man to further the investigation.

And he'd need to tender his resignation. Chloe was right. It was time he quit the club.

Not that he entirely regretted his time. As he thought back to the many challenges he'd completed over the years, a fair number of them had prepared him for his fight with Adam and for the task of keeping Chloe safe.

He'd learned to be a man behind those doors, though he could confess, there might have been a more moral way to accomplish the task.

That was the difficult part about Adam's words. Some of them were true. Adam might be a religious zealot, too far in the other direction, but he wasn't wrong.

He, Strongborn, the others, they ought to lead by example.

With that in mind, he crossed to the small writing desk in the corner and pulled out a sheet of paper, penning a quick note.

Then he rang the bell to summon a footman to deliver the note.

But it wasn't a footman who came to the door, but his Aunt Mildred. Pale, her features taut, his aunt looked seriously upset...

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Ryker stood straight and tall as his formidable aunt glared at him. “We need to have a word.”

“Fine,” he stepped out into the hall, still shirtless, but not wanting to wake Chloe. “But I will tell you that?—”

“Good heavens, what’s happened to you?”

He looked down realizing the bruises on his torso had darkened overnight. “It’s a very long story and I will tell you all of it, Aunt Mildred, but first, let’s talk about what you came to discuss. Chloe.”

“I know about your ridiculous plan.”

Of course she did. Another way he’d been a complete fool. But he digressed. “I’ll be posting the banns by this Sunday. We’ll be married in a fortnight.”

“Posting the banns? Does that mean you’ve given up on your preposterous idea of keeping the match secret?”

“I have.” He grimaced at his aunt.

“And are you still sending Chloe to another estate?”

“Yes, but...”

“No buts. If you send her away, I shall never speak to you again.”

He sighed. “I’m going with her, Aunt Mildred, and you’re coming too. My apologies but we’re going to have to miss this season.”

Aunt Mildred’s eyes widened in surprise. “I think you might want to start from the beginning.”

“I’ll tell you all of it, but first, I need to send word to a few men. The gentleman,” he used that term loosely, “who did this is still out there and I’m going to need some help.”

Aunt Mildred looked at him, surprise widening her eyes. “You are asking for help? That’s a welcome change.”

He only smiled. His aunt didn’t know the half of it. But the footman arrived, and he handed the man the letter. “See these delivered. And on your way out, stop by the kitchen to have a bath sent up.”

The footman left and Ryker turned back to his aunt, leaning over to kiss her cheek. “Are you recovered?”

“I’m fine,” she answered, her face contorted in lines of disbelief. “Are you sure you’re well?”

“Fit as a fiddle and finally in tune.”

His aunt let out a burst of laughter. “I thought maybe that girl had what it took.”

“To what?” he asked, just wanting to hear his aunt say it.

“To tame a wild beast of a rake.” And then she turned and headed back down the hall, chuckling as she went.

* * *

Two hours later, freshly bathed, he kissed Chloe. “This shouldn’t take more than an hour.”

He’d heard back from Strongborn. The duke had agreed to meet Ryker here this afternoon. While he knew that Chloe was perfectly safe tucked in his home, he didn’t wish to leave her.

And so he made his way down to the front sitting room, where Strongborn was already waiting.

But he wasn’t alone. The Summoner and the Master were both with him.

“Gentlemen,” he rumbled entering the room.

“Helmsworth,” Strongborn rumbled back. “I’d worry about protecting your identity, but I already know why you’ve called us here.”

“Do you?”

“You’re leaving us.”

He couldn’t deny it, nor did he want to.

The Master, masked, chuckled. “So, you’re giving up the position to me.”

“If you want it,” he answered back, not the least bit sorry to quit that competition.

“And I wish you luck.”

“He doesn’t care, Master, because he’s decided to marry Miss Fairchild.”

“The woman he kissed?” the Master asked.

“No. His charge.” Strongborn answered. “A beautiful blonde who has managed to twist him into knots.”

The Master looked at him, a single brow arched above his mask. “Well, that’s curious, because the Miss Fairchild he kissed at the ball that first night was also a beautiful blonde who had all sorts of potential for twisting a man into knots.”

The Summoner cleared his throat. “D-don’t be daft. She-she-she’s the same woman.”

All of them chuckled, but it was the Master who answered. “I got that part. What I’m curious to know is did Helmsworth know before he kissed her. Did you set me up?”

Ryker let out a long, frustrated breath of air. “The amount of trouble that kiss caused, I can assure you that I did not choose her on purpose.”

“This is a story I’d like to hear,” Strongborn said, pushing back in his seat.

“Another time.” Ryker leaned against the mantle. “We have more pressing matters to discuss than my impending marriage.”

“Adam,” the Summoner answered. Ryker still wasn’t used to the sound of his raspy voice.

“That’s right. He kidnapped Chloe from a ball last night.”

Silence fell about the room as Ryker detailed the rescue and how the man had attempted to hurt the woman he loved. “I’ll see him hanged,” Ryker grit through his teeth. “But what matters to you is that after he jumped?—”

“I can’t believe he went out the window like that. Surely he didn’t survive.”

Ryker wasn’t certain Adam was that lucky. “I’d assume he did because a wounded snake is the most dangerous. But in any event, I confiscated every item in his room, including his chest with a great many documents.” He pointed down to the floor where the simple chest sat open.

Strongborn didn’t waste any time, he dove in, pulling out several rolls of paper. “It’s a list of men in the Order of the Righteous.”

Ryker looked down, recognizing several names. “They keep better records than us.”

“They’re not hiding,” Strongborn answered. “They believe they’re in the right.”

“Murdering men is right?” the Master snorted. Then he glanced up at Ryker. “Glad you made it to Miss Fairchild’s side before too much damage had been done.”

He nodded, appreciating the man’s consideration toward Chloe.

“And I’m also grateful you collected all this evidence,” Strongborn added. “This is a great help.”

Ryker nodded. “Let me know if you find anything of significance. I’m sure you understand, but as soon as Chloe and I are wed, we’ll leave London. After what happened, we need a bit of quiet and I want my bride somewhere safe.”

The Master gave him a nod. “I’m almost jealous.”

He quirked a smile. “When you quit the club, come find me in real life. We’ll have dinner.”

“How dreadfully boring,” the Master chuckled.

“I’m going to accept that invitation, even if it wasn’t directed at me.” Strongborn rose from the box he’d been searching. “I’m going to need friends who are on the other side of the club but still understand.”

“The invitation is open.” He swept his hand over the pile of evidence. “My footmen can load all of this into your carriage, though take as long as you’d like to search it here. I hope you’ll forgive me, but I have other business to attend.”

All three of the men gave him a knowing stare.

“Go see your bride. Tell her we send our regards.” The Master saluted him.

Ryker jerked his chin in response, but he would most certainly not relay that message. Chloe did not need to know just how interested these men were. She might have told Ryker she loved him, but he was no fool.

Chloe was a treasure that he’d guard closely from now on.

EPILOGUE

The day of Chloe and Ryker's wedding dawned bright, sunny, and unusually warm for February.

But truthfully, Chloe wouldn't have minded if it had been pouring rain. She was marrying Ryker, that was all that mattered.

She rose from her bed, stretching as Aunt Mildred opened her door. "Are you finally up?"

Chloe blushed. Ryker had stayed in her room until just before midnight, and then she'd struggled to sleep without his warmth wrapped about her. "I'm up."

"Good, Caroline will be here soon."

Caroline would be attending the wedding and had agreed to help Chloe get ready. Truly, it would be nice just to have a distraction. She wasn't exactly nervous—more excited—but conversation was definitely in order.

And Aunt Mildred was wonderful, but she'd surely only tell stories about Ryker. Which just made Chloe wish to hurry the time along so she could be by his side again.

Once they'd wed, they'd have a small breakfast and then leave for Ryker's closest country estate. He said it would only be a day's ride, which was why he'd chosen it, but they'd be away from London and its bustle.

And they'd both feel safer out of the eye of the Order of the Righteous.

Chloe shivered. She'd known so many good religious men. But the Righteous Order was not that. She supposed good and bad could be found on both sides of any dichotomy.

Still, she'd be glad to leave London behind. Though, she'd miss her new friend, Caroline.

She took a quick bath and then began to dress, putting on her chemise, corset, petticoats, stockings, and shoes. She left her dress for later, as her maid tended to her hair.

Caroline arrived, sweeping into the room, smiling brightly. "It's finally here!"

Chloe rose, embracing her friend, another pang filling her chest. "Tell me you're going to visit me soon."

"As soon as the season is over," Caroline promised.

Chloe hugged her tighter.

"But for now, let's get you married."

The rest of the morning flew by in a rush, and before Chloe knew it, they were leaving for the church.

She could hardly keep still as the carriage arrived. A footman helped her exit, Mildred and Caroline just behind her as she swept up the large granite stairs. The door to the church opened and an usher welcomed her into the vestibule.

She peeked through the next set of double doors where Ryker stood at the front of the church looking relaxed and so handsome, he stole her breath.

All her nerves vanished to see him. She looked down at the pale pink gown she'd chosen for the day and touched her hair to make certain it was all still in place.

He caught sight of her then, their eyes locking. Even from the distance that separated them, she felt his gaze warm, watched his shoulders soften.

The music began and Chloe found herself floating down the aisle. The rest of the ceremony passed in a happy haze of love and joy, but the feelings were etched on her heart.

This man was hers. Forever.

He leaned down and kissed her lips, the vicar pronouncing them husband and wife. Ryker's arm was strong around her as they made their way back down the aisle. Today was the first day of the rest of their lives.

They stopped outside the doors of the church to greet their guests.

Aunt Mildred kissed them both as Caroline gushed over her again. A few relatives of Ryker's paid their respects.

And then a dark blond man came down the steps, whistling as he walked. His devil-may-care attitude tickled at her memory.

"You," Ryker said, his voice dropping low.

"Me," the man answered with a one-sided grin. "Duke of Ironheart, at your service."

“Ironheart... doesn’t ring a bell.”

“Scottish title,” Ironheart waved his hand, dismissing Ryker’s words.

“You didn’t retire?”

“No,” Ironheart shook his head.

Chloe gasped. “You were with him that first night when you kissed me.”

Ironheart bowed. “I was, Your Grace, and may I say, it’s a pleasure to finally meet you. I tried to convince your husband to make the introduction, but he was... resistant.”

Chloe’s brows rose as she looked at Ryker. Had he been that possessive from the very beginning?

“What do you want?” Ryker asked, his teeth gritted around the words.

Ironheart cleared his throat. “Just a moment of your time.”

Ryker looked at her and she nodded. Much as she’d like to know what Ironheart wished to say, she understood this was a private word. And Ryker would tell her later.

With that in mind, she let him hand her into the carriage.

* * *

Ryker looked back at Ironheart, irritated as all hell. This was his wedding. “What’s so fucking important, Master, that you are here?”

But Ironheart winced, his charismatic smile slipping from his lips. “There’s been another murder.”

Ryker felt his heart drop. “Adam?”

“We think so. It was exactly the same as the last but knowing that he’s part of an order makes it more difficult to tease out.”

Ryker let out a string of curses.

“Either way, be careful as you travel. Bring extra men. Keep that bride safe and keep her tucked in the country.”

But for the first time, Ryker was worried about the men he was leaving behind. “You are now only nine. How do you plan to stand against them?”

“Strongborn will be in touch, but several men in the Order are part of Strongborn’s investments and more than a few of them part of yours. I believe Strongborn plans to use completely legal means to press them to leave the order and weaken their roster.”

It was an excellent plan. “I’ll help however I can.”

“I know.” And then Ironheart smiled. “What you lack in personality, you’ve always made up in commitment and competence. Keep that in mind in your marriage. You’ll surely infuriate her more than once but stay true to the marriage and she’ll forgive your shit personality.”

Ryker chuckled. “Truer words. Now that I’m leaving, I might actually like you.”

“Don’t be too effusive.” Ironheart laughed too. “And we’ll see each other again. I’ll take you up on that invitation in another decade or so.”

Ryker really laughed then. Because little did Ironheart understand, love would surely come for him too, and the timing was never convenient.

But that was for Ironheart to learn. Because Ryker had a bride to protect, honor, and cherish and he was very eager to start.

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Baby making...

January 1837

Lady Caroline Green stood next to her friend, Miss Chloe Fairchild, and attempted to breathe.

Around them, the throng of dancers swirled past, the noise of the crowd making it near impossible to hear.

And yet, she could swear she heard him exhale. The Duke of Strongborn. Wickedly handsome, his wavy dark hair curled back from his face, only accenting his strong jaw and powerful shoulders. And his eyes...

They were the eyes of a man used to being in charge, a man who might command armies, who controlled the fates of entire nations, who could surely lead one countess through her journey of carnal knowledge.

Of which she had none...

Candles flickered about the room, a romantically mysterious glow. She nearly laughed at herself. She'd been in hundreds of ballrooms in her time, first as a debutante and then as the countess, and she had never thought the lighting romantically mysterious before tonight.

"I need to get the Duke of Helmsworth alone," Chloe murmured. "It's time he and I had a chat."

Caroline had practically forgotten the man standing next to Strongborn, Chloe's love interest, Helmsworth.

Also handsome and a duke, Chloe had her hands full attempting to tame that man...

Caroline had no wish to tame any man.

A widow after five years of marriage, now twenty-three, her only goal was to make certain that she kept what was already hers.

There hadn't been a great deal to recommend her first husband, but she could say this... he'd left her with a lovely home and plenty of money to run it, provided no one discovered her secret.

Her marriage to the earl had never been consummated.

If anyone of any influence found out... she'd be stripped of her inheritance, her marriage seen as not legal.

Her first plan was to remain a widow. The only other person who knew the truth was dead. But after a few years, she'd grown lonely.

So her second plan was to marry a simple man. One who was sweet, kind, and loyal, who would keep her secret.

But tonight, as heat and longing filled her, a new plan emerged.

She could have a tryst. A night of passion, something that other widows indulged in regularly, and then she'd be free of her virginity.

Had she thought this through? No.

Was it surely a foolish plan? Likely.

But she was tired of sitting on the sidelines of life. Couldn't she indulge just this once?

"You need to speak with Helmsworth alone?" Caroline gave Chloe a bright smile. "I'll distract Strongborn for you."

"Thank you," Chloe breathed, her shimmering blonde hair falling over one shoulder.

Caroline fingered her own brown strands, wishing she looked more like Chloe. Strikingly beautiful were the words she'd use to describe her friend.

But she cast that thought aside. She knew she was pretty enough. Hopefully, she'd tempt the duke into a night of passion.

Cutting through the crowd, she made her way to the two men, curtsying as she reached them. "Your Grace," she said, not to Strongborn but to Helmsworth since they were already acquainted.

Helmsworth nodded to her. "Countess Green." And then he turned to Strongborn. "Countess Green, may I present the Duke of Strongborn. Your Grace, this is the widow Green."

He leaned into the word widow. Caroline knew why. The two men belonged to some secret, illicit club where they completed challenges. And this week's challenge was bed a widow. Which she was.

It was a fact she ought not to know but her best friend had overheard Strongborn and Helmsworth talking.

She curtsied again, looking up at the man through her lashes, her breath catching in

her throat. Would he take notice? Pass her by?

Her heart hammered in her chest as his gaze made a slow perusal down her frame. “My lady, say you will grace me with a dance.”

Her pulse jumped as she gave a quick nod. He held out his arm, leading her onto the dance floor.

A waltz...

He danced as he stood, with power and command, and Caroline found herself completely swept away by the brush of his strong, lean body, the speed of the dance, and his scent: leather, sandalwood, and a male musk. Her body tightened as she leaned closer.

They’d hardly spoken, words didn’t seem necessary, and as the dance ended, he tucked her hand in his arm, leading her not back to their friends, but out onto the patio. And then into the shadows, the cool night air making her shiver with her low-cut gown.

“You’re cold,” he murmured, shrugging off his jacket and dropping it around her shoulders. Warmth instantly surrounded her as they moved down a path through a garden that wrapped about the side of the house.

Caroline almost felt as though she were floating through a dream.

And then she was certain this moment couldn’t be real when the duke reached for a glass door and the handle opened, leading them into a cozy study where a fire already burned brightly.

Her brows went up as she stopped on the threshold. “How convenient.”

Strongborn chuckled. “Come in from the cold and warm yourself by the fire.”

That was the moment it occurred to her that she didn’t know this man at all. And rather than taking a step in, she took a partial step out. “Your Grace, please understand...”

Tall and straight, he cocked his head to the side. “I’ve made too many assumptions, haven’t I?”

No. Technically, he hadn’t. She’d known his game from the first, but now that she was here. “It’s not that.” She drew in a deep breath, stepping into the room. “I just... I’ve never... my husband...”

His lips parted, full sensuous lips that she longed to kiss. “You’ve not been with anyone since your husband?”

She shook her head, knowing that she was not telling the truth, but she hoped... would he even notice she was untouched?

He offered her a hand and tentatively, she took it, allowing him to draw her closer. “If it’s slow you need, my lady, just say the word. I aim to please.”

Those words settled low in her stomach. She so wished to be... pleased. Had she been cold? Her skin tingled with heat even as he touched her cheek, skimming his fingertips down over her cheek, along her neck, and over her chest to trace the neckline of her gown. Which wasn’t at her neck at all.

The dress was cut low enough that he touched the top her breasts.

Goose pimples erupted on her skin and her head tilted back, her body arching into his touch.

This is what she wanted... his hands on her skin.

Until he leaned in, placing an equally soft kiss on the column of her neck. Gasping in a breath, she shivered anew at his touch, his jacket falling to the floor as her arms wrapped about his neck.

She'd never imagined that such a small touch could make her feel so much. She tried to breath in, but it caught, growing jagged as his mouth slid lower.

He slid one of his hands behind her head, cradling its weight while the other wrapped around her waist pulling her closer.

She'd never been held like this. He was so strong, supporting her weight, and became aware of just how difficult it was to stand alone.

Even when she'd been married, her husband had never been a partner. Not in any sense.

She gasped as his mouth dragged over the top of her exposed breast.

"Tell me your name," he murmured into her flesh.

"Caroline."

"Caroline," he rumbled. "I wish I could strip this gown off you, but we'll have to make do."

She didn't want to make do. She wanted everything. This was her chance to experience what she craved her entire life. Passion. Excitement. Euphoria.

His arm tightened even more around her waist and then he lifted her off the floor, carrying her to the fire where he gently lay her down on a thick fur rug. "Watch your

hair,” he rumbled as he carefully lifted her skirts so as not to crease them.

She appreciated the care but something about it niggled in the back of her thoughts. He was so good at this... too good.

But she pushed the concern away.

This was one night of blissful pleasure for both of them. It didn't matter where he'd been or where he was headed.

Only that they enjoy the moment.

He knelt between her legs as she lay in front of him and with her skirts about her waist, she had a moment to feel insecure before one of his hands circled her ankle. “Perfect,” he rumbled, giving her ankle a little squeeze.

She looked away, heat creeping into her cheeks. “I'm sure they are like every other lady's ankles.”

He chuckled, the palm of his hand sliding up her calf. “Don't be ridiculous, Caroline. Your legs are as perfect as the rest of you.”

She didn't argue, it was foolish. But she was well aware that she was no great beauty. His hand climbed higher, past the ribbon that held her stocking to the bare skin of her thigh. The feel of his rough palm dragging over flesh had her body tensing with excitement. He kept going, the gentle brush of his fingers passing over her woman's flesh.

She shivered with desire, chasing his hand for more of his touch. He laughed again, low and deep. “Don't worry, my sweet. I will make sure you feel so good...”

“Yes,” the word fell from her lips, as she pushed up onto her elbows, trying to see

past her layers of skirts and petticoats.

She wanted to see his large hand between her thighs. His skin was darker than hers, she'd always been pale despite her darker hair, and even imagining his large, rough hand increased her internal temperature.

He brushed her apex again, but this time he didn't laugh. Instead he let out a sound that resembled a growl. "You're so wet for me."

She whimpered in response. "I want..." What did she say that didn't reveal too much? "Please touch me more. Please."

In answer, he parted her seam, his finger sliding along her lips, the feeling so wonderfully intense that she cried out.

He grabbed her derriere with his other hand, angling her hips higher as he slid his finger through her folds again.

And then he inserted his digit inside her channel.

She moaned out her pleasure, not prepared for just how good it would feel. "Jesus. You're so tight."

She wanted to lie back, her head falling down, her elbows weakening. "Don't stop."

"Your hair," he rumbled, but he leaned over her more, his hips pressing into the cradle of hers as he kept his finger inside her.

"I shall have to leave after. I don't think I can..." And then she let out a half sob as he slid in and out of her. "So good."

"So good," he returned, pumping in and out of her as he let go of her hip to slide his

hand up her body and squeeze her clothed breast.

She knew they were large for her frame. And even as big as his hand was, her breast filled it, making them both groan.

She couldn't stay up anymore, and her elbows gave as she collapsed on the rug, her arms lifting over her head as her hips ground deeper into his touch.

He pressed his chest to hers, his teeth grazing the lobe of her ear. Finally, her body succumbed to the building pleasure, and she contracted around his finger, stars lighting behind her closed eyes.

She let out a keening cry, her entire body pulsing with pleasure.

He was up in a second, tugging at the falls of his breeches and pulling them down his hips.

She couldn't see his member, his shirt falling in the way before she could.

But she was too relaxed to be concerned.

Which might have been a mistake. Coming down on top of her again, he pressed into her slick folds, the flesh giving way to him.

Until it didn't...

He'd only just begun to push inside her when a burning pain spread through her and she stiffened.

"You're so tight," he grunted, his eyes closing. "Sweetheart, you feel so good."

She tried to hang onto that, but as he pushed in deeper, the pain spread until finally,

she could stand it no more and she let out a cry.

That was when his body stilled. “Caroline?”

“It... it’s all right.” She pushed out between little huffs of breaths. “It’s been a long time...” Would he believe the lie?

He seemed to as he sunk deeper into her, his eyes closing again.

She took several deep breaths to cleanse out the pain as he pulled out and then pushed back in her.

It still hurt like anything, but she thought it might be less as she clung to his shoulders.

He started a rhythm, slow and steady, which helped her to breathe, her face buried in his shoulder, her arms wrapped tightly around his neck.

Even though their coupling was the source of her pain, holding him was like an anchor, a port in the storm.

She’d never known being with a man could be like this...

She didn’t need another complicated marriage, but being touched like this... even with the pain, it felt like nothing she had ever experienced.

The fire slowly died as he increased the tempo, his body growing so taut, she knew he’d break.

And when he did, his body shuddering as he held onto her, she thought she’d never felt anything so wonderful.

He kissed her forehead as he withdrew, pushing up on his knees and pulling up his breeches before he began adjusting her skirts. She sat up too, heat filling her cheeks despite the cooling room.

“Caroline that was...”

She shook her head. “Don’t say anything. It’s not necessary, but would you please help me to my carriage? I can’t be seen like this.” She didn’t know how she looked but she’d guess it was dreadful.

“Of course,” he answered, standing and then reaching down to help her stand. Her legs hardly supported her, and they wobbled a bit under her. She was a woman who liked a brisk walk and so the fact that she was so weak surprised her.

His arm was instantly around her, his lips brushing her forehead. “If you need anything, you contact me, Caroline. Promise.”

“Promise,” she answered. Another lie. Strongborn was not the sort of man she planned to speak with ever again. He was a fantasy, a night she’d remember like a dream. A chance to experience just one night of real passion before she found her perfectly boring, easy husband with whom she never shared the truth.

She’d been a virgin widow. Until tonight.