



Married to the Duke of Ice

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Category: Historical

Description: "This is not a game, Duchess. I will never touch you again."

There is nothing Duke Duncan hates more than physical touch. So he never expects the barest brush of skin from the most infuriating lady to make him lose control.

Of all the ways Lucy imagined getting married, scandal was never even on the list. Until she's caught alone with the Duke of Ice on top of her...kissing her.

Now, her new husband's lips haunt her every thought. Yet Duncan vows never to touch her again. No matter how much she begs for it...

*If you like a realistic yet steamy depiction of the Regency and Victorian era, then *Married to the Duke of Ice* is the novel for you.

Total Pages (Source): 28

CHAPTER 1

"O h my, she's here? How dare she show her face? Was her sister not caught in a scandal a few years before?" Lucy Hatcher's heart raced as she entered the grand hall of the esteemed soirée. She hadn't even fully crossed the threshold yet and whispers had begun rippling through the crowd like a gust of wind.

"Is she the one?" Another voice barely whispered as she sucked in a sharp breath. She spied the trio of ladies a few feet away from her with thinly veiled disdain on their faces.

"Oh, she's the one all right. She's hard to miss. They have the same face. A pair of hungry faces, they are." Lucy stopped in her tracks as the words sliced through the air. She felt like the center of attention and could swear there were a hundred pairs of eyes on her. She fought to keep her composure as she sucked in greedy gulps of air, but it was a lost battle.

"Listen here, you little chits. Just because?—"

"No, Lucy," Patience Hatcher, the Viscountess of Pemberton, clamped a firm grip on Lucy's wrist. "Ignore them, my dear." But Lucy wasn't giving up.

"But Mother?—"

Patience's grip tightened on Lucy's arm. "It's not worth it. Don't let them get to you."

Her mother was right. It was not worth it. Her family responsibility weighed heavy on

her shoulders, and she strengthened her resolve, no matter how hard each barb pierced.

Pull yourself together, Lucy . She took a deep breath and snapped out of her haze. Only then did she truly notice the numerous pairs of eyes on her along with hushed whispers. Panic bubbled in her chest threatening to erupt.

Willing herself to ignore everything, she trudged ahead. She was here for a mission, anyway. Still, Lucy couldn't shake off the feeling of unwelcome that settled over them like a heavy fog.

At the foot of the grand staircase stood Lady Grenville herself, resplendent in a gown of shimmering emerald silk, her diamonds flashing like stars against the velvet night sky. Lucy felt a tad conscious about the state of her dress. It surely was no emerald silk, nor did it glitter. And she certainly did not have flashing diamonds on her neck or anywhere else.

Sharp eyes cast accusing glances at those deemed unworthy of their lofty company. Lucy and her mother, no doubt, belonged in the second category. She felt like a pariah and fought the urge to turn around and flee home. Wherever they went, a space seemed to magically clear, and they would be left alone. Despite the warmth of the room, a chill settled in Lucy's bones.

We are not welcome here, Lucy thought as her fingers fidgeted with the hem of her worn dress. She couldn't bear the thought of her presence being a burden. After all, her sister's scandal rang in every mouth as it was. But it didn't matter.

She would bear every scorn. She would swallow every barb. She would do whatever it took to restore her family's reputation. Society was cruel. And all she wanted was to bury herself in the comfort of her covers and hide away most of the time. But she knew better than to do that. Her future and that of her family was on the line.

You will not cower away. You will hold your head high.

"Come on now. Let us pay our respects to Lady Grenville. We can't be rude to the hostess now, can we?"

"No, we can't." But even as Lucy smiled, she couldn't hide the growing trepidation in her belly. Still, she followed her mother until they stopped right at the side of the resplendent lady in green.

"It's a pleasure to be in your residence, Lady Grenville. It's a beautiful gathering you have here." Her mother drew Lady Grenville into a warm embrace.

"They're really here." She heard a voice whisper in the corner. "And look at them groveling at the countess' feet." The derision was hard to miss.

"I heard they were invited but I did not think they would be stupid enough to attend. Looks like I was wrong. What a shameless pair." Lucy stilled as she struggled to contain her temper. Could a moment not pass without someone mocking them?

"Oh, thank you, Lady Patience. You sure know how to turn on the charm," Lady Grenville winked and Lucy's jaw hung open. She had never seen this degree of warmth, playfulness, or friendliness in any member of society, let alone an esteemed woman like Lady Grenville. She had only ever been acknowledged with disdain, scorn, and downright hostility. This was a pleasant surprise.

"You may want to close your mouth, little one. We wouldn't want flies getting in now." Lady Grenville said with a smile playing on her lips. Warmth flooded into Lucy and for the first time that evening, she finally felt like she could breathe. "And who might you be?" Lucy's mouth felt like paper as she struggled to get the words out.

"Of course, she feels too big to answer the lady." Someone in the corner made a scathing comment.

"Nothing but the daughter of a lowly viscount, the sister of an adventuress at that. And yet, she deems it difficult to answer to the Countess of Colwick. I wonder why Lady Grenville insists on inviting underbellies like this. It's not like there's a shortage of noblemen in all of England."

Lucy gasped at the cruel words. How could one be so unnecessarily mean? Her heart thundered at the thought of being perceived as rude by the countess. She chanced a glance at the lady and the kindness in her eyes was all she needed to continue.

"I apologize, my lady. I am Miss Lucy Hatcher, daughter of the Viscount of Pemberton and I am delighted to be in your presence this evening. It's a lovely manor you have." That much was true. Despite the trolls gathered in almost every corner, Lady Grenville's manor screamed class and taste.

Crystal chandeliers hung from the vaulted ceilings like glittering stalactites, casting a warm, golden glow over the assembled guests below. Tapestries adorned the walls, their colors vibrant against the backdrop of polished mahogany.

In one corner of the hall, a table groaned under the weight of silver platters and crystal goblets, laden with delicacies fit for a king. The scent of roasted meats and freshly baked pastries wafted through the air, mingling with the heady aroma of fine wines and exotic spices.

"What a lovely young lady you've got here, Lady Patience. So beautiful." She smiled kindly at both of them and Lucy wondered whether she was hallucinating. So, members of society could be kind? She blinked rapidly as she tried to regain her composure.

"Thank you, my lady." Lucy's mother beamed.

"All right, you two have a lovely time. Enjoy the rest of your evening," Lady Grenville nodded and turned her attention to the other guests.

"I can't believe it, Mother. Lady Grenville is as beautiful as she is kind."

"Society might be cruel, but there surely are some gems out there. They may be rare, but they do exist."

"I am amazed." Lucy could barely contain her excitement until it was snatched from her.

"Would you look at them, sucking up to the countess? What a miserable pair. They're only trying to get to Lady Grenville's son, I'm sure of that. He's an earl, after all." Lucy's excitement immediately came to a crashing halt as she snapped back to reality.

Ignore them. Just ignore them. Lucy chanted to herself. But this time, the words held little comfort. She had no idea the countess had a son. Yet, she was being judged for it. What had they done to deserve this?

Disappointment gnawed at her insides as her mother led her through the throng of guests, her hopes dimming with each whispered barb. They were relentless now and she felt utterly exposed and chilled to the bone, even though she was fully covered.

Lucy had hoped this Season would be different, that she might finally find a suitor, and hopefully secure her future. But, she'd had no such luck. Instead, her prospects had only dimmed further.

As they passed a bevy of ladies, Lucy couldn't help but catch snatches of their conversation, their tongues wagging about what was no business of theirs.

"She tried to trap a marquess—Lord Nicholls of Bromington. She had planned it perfectly. Turns out, he was nothing but a rake." It was a lovely brunette in blue with her lips downturned in a sneer. Lovely indeed.

"Was she that desperate?" asked a sparkling blonde with jewels intricately woven in her hair.

"It shouldn't be a surprise. It's no secret that they're under the hatches. They hardly have a tanner to their name. That's why she planned to trap Lord Nicholls." Tears pricked Lucy's eyes as tales of her supposed wanton sister went on. And as if that wasn't enough, her family's financial woes had entered the conversation.

"And how would you know they are under the hatches?" the bejeweled lady pressed on, not ready to let go of such a juicy piece of information.

"You can't be that blind. I mean, look at her. If I were Lady Grenville, I would give instructions not to let her in with her cheap rags. What with the odor of it? Appalling."

Shame washed over Lucy as she looked down at her dress. Truly, it was old and fraying at the hems. She had done her best to cover its holes by sewing patches of colored threads to give it a renewed look. Apparently, it hadn't worked. She looked around the room and she could no longer deny it—she stuck out like a sore thumb in her dress.

The ladies went on and on, leading anyone who cared to lend a listening ear down the path of her sister's downfall and the supposed desperation of a family on the brink of financial ruin. Lucy's fists clenched at her sides, her nails biting into her palms as she fought to keep her emotions in check. They would not see her tears.

The ton could be merciless in its judgment, but it was not Theodosia's fault for

attracting the attention of a rake. Blast him to hell and back! Her sister was the victim. Why couldn't people see that? Why did she have to pay for his sins when he went scot-free?

She'd had enough. She'd pay no heed to those gossiping lots who had nothing better to do than discuss other people. They could spin all the tales they wanted but she knew the truth.

She set out to mingle with the guests, but they seemed to give her a wide berth wherever she went.

“Oh hello, Lady Lucy.” Her ears rang at Lady. She knew it was just to mock her. “That’s a lovely dress you have on.” Lady Annabelle went on with a mischievous look on her face.

“Tha—thank you,” Lucy sputtered.

“The Season is almost here! Do you have plans already?” Annabelle chatted animatedly.

“Not really,” Lucy held her tongue. Annabelle wasn't really a friend. She was an acquaintance in the least. And as far as she knew, no one could be trusted.

“My goodness! That's a travesty. You should not say that out loud. It is going to be wonderful. I can't wait! Do you see Lord Frederick over there?” Annabelle gestured with her eyes. Lucy looked ahead and sighted the dashing young man a few feet ahead.

“I do.”

“His eyes have been following you. I think you may have a good match,” Annabelle’s

eyes glittered.

Lucy could feel it in her gut. There was something off. She looked closely and it finally hit her—it was Lord Frederick! One of London's most unrepentant rakes! And to her growing horror, she noted that Annabelle was stirring her in his direction!

“My lady, I have to go.”

“What now, Lucy? I did not take you to be a killjoy.”

“Forgive me, my lady, but I must see to my mother immediately. She is of poor health and cannot be left alone for too long.” Lucy hoped she was convincing enough. The last thing she needed was to be in a compromising situation.

“All right then. You may take leave.” Lucy didn't miss the glower on the lady's face.

“Thank you.” And she swiftly left, relieved to have escaped a precarious situation. She sighted her mother who was engaged in an animated conversation with two older women. As if knowing she was there, her mother whipped around. Excusing herself, she left her acquaintances and walked to Lucy.

“Where have you been, my child? I have been looking for you.”

“I was just...here,” Lucy replied vaguely. She could not tell her mother of her narrow escape. She would only be worried about history repeating itself.

“Are you sure? Something is troubling you. Talk to me, Lucy.” Lucy cursed inwardly. It was just her luck that her mother was too perceptive for her own good.

“It's nothing, Mama. I just wonder how you can smile and talk with all this gossip hanging over our heads.” The viscountess sighed deeply, a long and troubling one.

"Truly, it is not as dire as it seems. Look at it this way. At least, we still get invites to society events."

"That's it, Mother? That's the good thing?"

"What else would you have me say, Lucy?" The viscountess sighed again, suddenly looking small and older than her age. She looked worn and frail. "How will you find a good match if you're not invited to events? Please, think about it."

"I know. But it's just so unfair."

"I know it's hard, but you have to ignore it, my child. Don't pay them any heed. The important thing is we know the truth."

She had been ignoring it all. But how long could she continue? Would she keep ignoring them for the rest of her life? And of what use was the truth if they were the only ones who knew it?

"Dry your tears, my dear. Don't let them fall for these people." Her mother dabbed at Lucy's face with her kerchief, its floral fragrance soothing her wounded soul.

"They won't. They don't deserve it." Lucy sniffed, her eyes stinging with unshed tears. But she wouldn't let this deter her. Theodosia didn't deserve it. But her sister had paid the price. That was it then. It would end with Lucy. And by the heavens, it would be so. No matter how many tongues wagged. No matter how long it took.

"That's more like it," her mother encouraged.

"I swear it to you, Mama. I will find a good match. I will do whatever it takes. For Caroline and for Stephen. They will never have to deal with any of this. I will make sure of it."

Her mother's eyes shone with unshed tears. She wouldn't deny that it was looking bleak for her. At twenty years of age, with no prospects in sight, she was well on her way to a life of spinsterhood. That and the fact that her family was no doubt on the list of eternal damnation from London's social circles.

Their family's future hung in the balance and Lucy felt the weight of responsibility heavy on her shoulders. She had to secure a match to safeguard her family's future. And there was the issue of her younger sister. She had to salvage her sister's prospects. And she swore under her breath to protect her little sister from the harsh judgments of society.

"Good. Now, let us go back in with our heads high." Her mother smiled, a real one. Lucy couldn't help but return her smile.

And they went back in with their arms interlocked, forming a fortress against the onslaught of gossip against them. But the whispers and stares followed them like a relentless tide, proving too strong for their human fortress. She would not let that deter her.

And Lucy went, a permanent smile etched on her lips until she thought her face would split in half as she tried to join the clusters of guests. But she was subtly hushed, with some outrightly turning her away. Hurt bubbled in her chest. She could take it no more.

"I need some air, Mother." Lucy was almost gasping under the scrutiny of the numerous eyes on her. Seeking respite from the suffocating judgment, she didn't wait for her mother's reply and slipped away for a solitary walk in the cool night air.

Her feet carried her through the labyrinthine corridors of the sprawling manor. With each step away from the grand hall, she breathed easier, enjoying the tranquility of the night.

Making up her mind not to return to the soirée, she wandered through the estate until she came across just what she wanted. She knocked twice with no answer. Certain that there was no one inside, she entered the dimly lit chamber and sighed in relief. She relished the quiet, a welcome offering from the madness she'd been subjected to all evening.

Her eyes darted to the balcony where she saw a lone figure.

I hope this isn't what it seems.

The figure stood, towering and oozing power even without doing anything. But she didn't miss the melancholy. She couldn't even if she tried. And even in the dark, she could see that the figure was powerfully built. It sent a wicked jolt up her spine.

Her heart thrummed loudly. She placed a small palm on her chest, willing it to slow down.

She peered into the darkness, hoping she was wrong. She saw it and her heart dropped.

No .

She had to get out of there immediately! She turned to flee when she heard footsteps echoing.

This cannot be happening. This will not happen!

She had escaped what seemed like an unfortunate situation with Lord Frederick. And now this! Panic seized Lucy's chest as she darted behind a nearby curtain, her heart pounding in her ears. Her breath came out in short, shallow pants as she pressed herself against the wall, toying nervously with the loose strands of the fraying edges

of her dress.

Through the thin veil of the curtain, Lucy glimpsed the lone figure standing on the balcony, his silhouette bathed in the moonlight. Her pulse quickened as the footsteps drew nearer, her mind racing with a thousand dire possibilities.

A loveless life. Her younger sister's prospects were ruined forever. Her family's eternal social and financial damnation.

No, dear God, please no.

She hoped against all hope that whoever approached would not discover her sanctuary. She couldn't afford to be found alone with a gentleman. Not again. It would spell doom for her already precarious reputation.

No. Fate could not be so cruel as to strike the same spot twice.

Or could it?

Page 2

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CHAPTER 2

"Y our Grace, how wonderful to see you!" Lady Evelyn exclaimed, her voice carrying above the din of the rowdy crowd. He could do without it. He'd seriously considered it. But as much as he wanted to, he couldn't sit out Lady Grenville's invitation.

Oh no, too late, Duncan Elkins, Duke of Northwick thought as he forced a polite smile, though inwardly he groaned. He'd made the mistake of locking eyes with her, and she'd intercepted him with a graceful sweep of her skirts. Seeing her eyes alight with excitement, he knew it would take a while before he could make a clean escape.

"The pleasure is mine, Lady Evelyn," he replied with practiced courtesy, though his mind was already searching for an escape.

"Good to know, Your Grace," she purred with a feline smile that she surely practiced for hours in the mirror. On another man, it might have worked. But Duncan was no other man. He saw through antics like this as often as he breathed.

The likes of Lady Evelyn only wanted the glamour and wealth that came with being a duchess. Unfortunately, he was in the pool for a bride. And, for some reason, numerous ladies and their mothers deemed him a more-than-eligible bachelor, including his mother.

"I wasn't expecting to see you here, Your Grace. Perhaps, we could have a twirl. The music is perfect for it." Duncan's smile froze on his lips as Lady Evelyn's fingers brushed against his arm, sending shivers of discomfort down his spine.

Struggling to contain his breath, he glanced at her with a cocked brow. For some reason, she took it as an invitation and leaned in closer as she prattled away.

Of course, she's obnoxious, talks too much , and clearly doesn't understand boundaries. What exactly does Mother see in her ?

"I heard you are undergoing some repairs at your estate. How is that going?"

"Very well." Hopefully, she would take a hint and leave him be. But no such luck. Lady Evelyn launched into a breathless account of her latest society conquests while he wondered if she ever stopped to breathe. Duncan took a little step back, avoiding her animated hands. He wanted no part of her touching him.

"Your Grace?" Her sugary sweet voice snapped him out of his reverie.

"Yes, Lady Evelyn."

"Am I boring you?"

Yes, you are .

"No, you are not. But I do have to speak to Lord Tivington right away. It is a matter of urgent importance."

Her eyes widened and he felt a momentary trill of satisfaction. Lady Evelyn's incessant chatter grated on his nerves. He could already feel the beginnings of a headache forming in his temple. He could do without hearing any more of her voice.

"But Duncan?—"

"That's Your Grace to you." His patience had worn out.

"Your Grace..." Evelyn reached out to touch his arm again, her fingers grazing his sleeve. Duncan recoiled instinctively.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," Duncan said stiffly, prying her fingers off with a firmness that bordered on rudeness. The lady's smile faltered, but she persisted, undeterred by Duncan's lack of interest.

"Your Grace, did I do something wrong? Am I not woman enough to be of interest to you?" Lady Evelyn trailed her dainty fingers lightly across his arm. Duncan's skin crawled at the contact, a primal instinct urging him to flee. This was it. He had reached his limit. His patience had worn thin.

"I fear I must beg your pardon, Lady Evelyn," he murmured, his voice strained with polite regret as he extricated himself from her vise-like grip. Her smile finally slipped from her lips, her eyes flashing with wounded pride.

"Your Grace?"

"I apologize but I must attend to some pressing matters at the moment. Do enjoy the rest of your night." Duncan tipped his hat before turning on his heel and striding away, leaving her flustered in his wake.

He knew his abrupt departure might be deemed rude. But he couldn't bring himself to endure any further discomfort. His chest and arm burned fiercely. Would it ever end? And when?

Stealing away into the cool embrace of the night, Duncan sought solace amidst the shadows of the estate's balcony. Moonlight spilled like liquid silver across the marble floor. The scent of jasmine hung heavy in the air, its heady perfume mingling with the earthy aroma of damp soil. The silence enveloped him like a comforting embrace, offering much-needed respite from his tumultuous thoughts.

He breathed a sigh of relief as the cool night air washed over him, the distant strains of music fading into the background. His moment of solitude, however, was short-lived as soft footfalls approached, shattering the tranquility of the night. He sighed, wondering who must have spied on him.

"Duncan, there you are!" Modesty Elkins, the Dowager Duchess of Northwick exclaimed as she swept toward him, her skirts rustling with each step.

"Of course, it is you, Mother."

"Of course. Where have you been?" Her voice tinged with reproach as she reached out to straighten his cravat. "I've been looking all over for you."

"I needed some air, Mother," Duncan replied, his tone clipped as he struggled to mask his frustrations. He knew his mother had put Lady Evelyn up to whatever it was she tried to do.

"You have your gloves on again?" Duncan said nothing, only scorching her with a withering gaze that made her shift uncomfortably. "Why did you leave Lady Evelyn unattended?"

His patience wore thin under his mother's watchful gaze. "Lady Evelyn's company proved...rather taxing," Duncan concluded for lack of a better word.

"What do you mean rather taxing?"

"I do not appreciate the questioning, Mother. However, she was overwhelming." The atmosphere was as tense as it was silent.

"I still don't get you, Duncan. Aren't we here because you decided it was time to find a wife?"

"I know what I said. But Lady Evelyn and I don't see eye to eye." His mother sighed, visibly weary.

"Duncan, this is the fifth match we've found for you now and she's still not enough for you?"

"She was not to my liking, Mother. We just have to find another match," he said tersely.

"Duncan, but?—"

"I asked for your advice. not your meddling. And please, do not meddle in my affairs again. When I find the right match, you will be the first to know." Duncan said, his voice unmistakably tight and controlled.

Modesty shifted from one foot to the other, uncomfortable under the piercing gaze of her son. "I know, Duncan, but you are not getting any younger. You are twenty and nine already. Noble men your age are married and raising their first child already."

"I am not other noblemen now, am I?" he asked pointedly. Modesty let out a long sigh.

"That you are not, Son. But what if something happens?" There was terror in her eyes.

"Something like what?"

"Like—"

"Like nothing, Mother." She'd never gotten over it. Nor had he. In fact, he was still petrified. But he'd learned to live with it. "I'm not going anywhere."

"I see you're still wearing your gloves," Modesty observed softly. Duncan stilled, loath to have been caught unawares.

"A precautionary measure, Mother." His face darkened as his mother's brows furrowed with concern. She reached out to smooth a stray lock of hair from his brow, but he stepped away, evading her touch. Modesty's face fell.

"My dear boy, whatever is the worry?" Duncan tensed, the memory of Lady Evelyn's unwelcome touch still fresh in his mind.

"It's nothing, Mother," he replied dismissively.

"Talk to me, Duncan. What really is the matter? You know you can talk to me. I am your mother," Modesty probed gently. "Besides, you know they only serve to draw more attention to you."

Duncan stiffened, his jaw tightening. "They serve their purpose." His heart clenched at the memories he tried desperately to keep locked away. He would never admit the reason why he wore them to a soul, not even his mother. It was his secret to keep, his shame to bear.

"Of what purpose does it serve you, Duncan? Please, talk to me."

"It is of no consequence, Mother. Now drop it," he said tersely, unwilling to confront the ghosts that still haunted him. He hid his trembling hands behind him, away from his mother's hawk-like eyes.

How would she understand that he couldn't stand Lady Evelyn or any other lady touching him? How could he explain that her hand on his arm burned through layers of fabric and seared him like a branding iron? How could he explain that anyone touching him made him swirl and go numb? How could he explain that it was a result

of those years ago?

If only—No. He wouldn't go down that road.

It made no sense. Not to anyone else but him and he would take it to the grave.

“Duncan,” the dowager duchess stepped forward, “you are my son, my only...” her voice caught in her throat, but she continued. “I know I was not the best mother you had, and I regret it sorely. Maybe if I had been, it would not have happened.”

Her eyes shone with unshed tears and Duncan looked away. He was not one for emotions and felt at odds with himself in situations like this.

“But I am here now. I am here for you. You are all I have, and I will do whatever it takes to?—”

“I appreciate your concern, Mother. However, you don't have to do all it takes to do what it is you want to do. I can handle things myself. I have been handling my affairs since I was naught but a boy. I don't need you handling my affairs now.”

His mother staggered like a huge blow had landed on her. But he didn't mean it to be cutting at all. He was only stating the fact.

“How can you say that to me, Duncan?”

“I was only stating the truth. I don't need you or anyone handling my affairs.”

“You say you don't need me handling your affairs but yet, you are unable to find a bride. It is not right for a fully grown man like yourself to be all alone. Why, tongues are already starting to wag. Do you know what they are saying? That you are a rake! Can you imagine? My son, the Duke of Northwick, a rogue? Oh, the horror!”

Duncan's blood ran hot. But his voice was as carefully cool as ice. "I do not care for wagging tongues. And I decide what is right or wrong for myself."

"You are about to hit the thirty years mark and you have no child or bride to show for?—"

"Enough, Mother!" he all but snarled. "That is enough. I want to be left alone," he turned his back, effectively dismissing her.

"Duncan."

"I said I want to be left alone. Go back in before you catch a cold out here."

Before Modesty could press further, they heard a ruckus coming from the grand hall. The sound of ripping fabric and raised voices echoed through the night air. Duncan and his mother exchanged a glance, their curiosity piqued.

"What could that be?" Modesty craned her neck as she looked behind her, but it was futile.

"I don't know but I do not think you'll find out from here."

"I'll go take a look. Don't stay out here too long, all right?"

"I will do as I please." Out of words, Modesty all but sighed, her eyes downcast as she turned to leave. Duncan watched her, a pang of guilt almost winding in his gut. But relief flooded him. Conversations with his mother tired him. And all he wanted was to be alone with his thoughts.

Alone once more, Duncan removed his gloves with trembling hands, his fingers tracing the jagged lines that crisscrossed his skin. The memories flooded back with a

vengeance, threatening to overwhelm him in a tide of despair. It was a relentless pain that refused to be banished. Yet, he drew strength from within.

He did need to get serious about finding a match. At least, it would keep his mother from shoving different ladies down his throat. And ambitious mothers would stop throwing their daughters at him. He was fed up as it was.

Maybe, it was finally time to pick a bride. And maybe, just maybe it would work out.

What do I have to lose?

Except at that moment, a sudden sound shattered the silence—a loud, unmistakable tear of cloth and a loud thud, followed by a muffled gasp, all in that order. He saw the small figure buried under fabric and panic seized him immediately as his eyes darted around.

And he realized with a start that maybe, he did have a lot to lose.

CHAPTER 3

Their conversation was...baffling, for lack of a better word. No one listening to them would believe they were related, let alone mother and son. They were cordial, to say the least. And the atmosphere was tense. Lucy could feel it even from her hiding place.

“Do you know what they are saying?... A rake!”

What? Were the tongues blind? Lucy had not seen the entirety of him. But the little she had was enough. He was a man all right, more male than any other gentleman she had come across in all her twenty years. He was a man in every aspect.

Lucy wondered how much longer she had to stay there. Her mother must have gotten worried. She was hot, tired, and thirsty. And she was beginning to get an itch from the curtain wrapped around her. She blamed no one but herself for her predicament. If only she had just ignored the accusing eyes and invisible wagging fingers, she would not be here. Could they be done already?

At that moment, Lucy heard the sound of footsteps. She peered through the curtains and saw that the lady was leaving. She nearly leapt for joy before she remembered the situation she was in. She held her breath, plastering herself to the wall as the lady walked past.

She froze in place as the lady's eyes landed on the curtain. She could swear the lady had seen her. She had been found out. She shut her eyes firmly, willing this nightmare of a ball to be done and over with. And the footsteps faded as the lady left

the room.

Lucy breathed a sigh of relief. It was now left for the gentleman to leave. What in the heavens was he still doing? Didn't he want to check what the ruckus was about? Lucy herself itched to find out what it was. She was fast running out of patience and was in dire need of fresh air when she saw the gentleman take off his gloves.

She swallowed the gasp building in her throat at the sight. Even in the dimly lit room and the barrier of the curtain, it was hard to miss. How could he cover such powerfully built palms? She watched him trace the lines of his fingers as if just discovering them for the first time. How odd. He seemed to be in a trance, in a world of his own. His fingers were...trembling?

Lucy felt like she was intruding on a very personal moment. At the same time, she wished she was the one tracing lines on the gentleman's fingers. Oh Lucy, what is the matter with you? She was in a lot of trouble already and here she was thinking of palms and fingers. Could the day get any crazier?

It was because she was tired. And thirsty. Yes. That was the explanation. It had to be the reason why. And not because the gentleman elicited strange feelings in her.

Her legs were beginning to lose their feeling. She made to shift her weight to her right leg, but it was a gross miscalculation. She stepped on her dress, pulling her weight on it and causing it to tear. Struggling to find her footing, she staggered and fell to the floor, landing flat on her face. She gasped as waves of pain washed over her and remained on the floor as she tried to catch her breath.

Until she remembered where she was.

Blazes! Who the hell was she? It was without a doubt a she, judging by the small, shapely figure. The figure was hard to miss despite being buried under all that fabric.

What in the heavens was he doing getting sidetracked?

Studying her from a close distance, Duncan took in the sight before him. She had long hair that seemed to be spun out of golden silk. Was it him or was it glittering in the dim light of the room? He felt the strong urge to thread his fingers through the finely spun strands of golden hair that fanned about her head.

He tried to ignore the warm buzz in his blood as he surveyed the length of her. She filled out the ugly dress nicely. And it was an ugly dress. Who in their right senses would wear such a thing? To a soiree, nevertheless?

Truly, it was the ugliest thing he had set sights on. It had blotches of color, as if some painter not in their right senses had thrown paint on it haphazardly. He suddenly had the feeling to take off the offensive dress that covered her delectable skin. He felt a kick in his groin at the thought.

The lady muttered a string of curses that amused him until she looked up at him and his breath froze. Her eyes were of the warmest brown; eyes that dripped raw, pure honey; eyes that reminded him of sturdy oak. He felt himself drowning in them until she gasped, a faint sound that brought him crashing back to reality. And then, it hit him.

His hands! His gloves! His mother! Blazes! How much had she heard? And how long had she been standing there, listening to their conversation?! Goodness! What if she knew everything about him? He couldn't have noticed her behind the curtain. And if she'd been listening, then she must have heard it all.

The lady's eyes were rounded in surprise as if shocked to see him there. As if . He eyed her suspiciously, unsure of what to do next. If she was anything like most of the ladies in attendance, he was done for. The rumors would spread. His image would be tarnished. He would never recover from such disgrace.

No. He could not let that happen. The lady had questions to answer.

He stalked towards her, almost menacingly, and didn't bother about the slicker of fear that lit her eyes. He didn't care one bit. His mission was to find out what and how much she knew and stop her from wagging her tongue. Gathering her skirts, the lady scrambled to her feet, struggling to find her balance through the overflowing ugly fabric.

“You there,” Duncan nearly snarled as he stood to his full height, merely inches away from her. “Who are you? What are you doing here?” he fired.

“I—”

“How long have you been here?” He thundered, not giving her a chance to reply. “Speak!”

“I didn’t...I was only...”

Duncan barely listened as his eyes trained on her bare shoulders. That must have been the rip he heard. How did one get skin so pale? He could swear she glittered under the soft glow of the night. He gulped painfully at the delectable flesh that seemed to call out to him to have, even if just a taste.

He got a whiff of her, an enticing jasmine that filtered his senses and nearly had him reeling. That and...peaches. Yes. It had to be. It was a fruity scent that suddenly had him wishing he was back in his estate with a bowl of peaches. Her scent drew him in, like a stubborn fly to a headless corpse, nearly clouding his senses. Nearly. Until he saw her puzzled face and all stray thoughts flew from his head.

“Lady, I asked you a question,” Duncan growled, irritated with himself for getting distracted.

“I did not mean to intrude, I promise. I only wanted time alone?—”

“You only wanted time alone or you came here to spy?” He caught a flash of skin and couldn't help but look. His eyes darkened at the sliver of creamy skin that peeked through the ripped slit of her skirts.

Damnation. Hell and damnation.

Heat flashed through his veins, nearly clouding his senses. He felt a slight stir in his groin, one he tried his hardest to ignore. It made no sense. Why, he had seen women even more beautiful, and certainly not in a dress so off-putting. So, what was it about her that seemed to make his highly intelligent brain shut down?

He tried to deny it. But, deep down in the recesses of his mind, Duncan knew. That delectable piece of flesh had been seared into his brain forever, much to his irritation. And even worse, he craved the feel of it. On his arm. And wrapped around him.

This was madness. Pure madness.

He had no doubt she planned this, planned this entire sham to look like an innocent wanderer. What type of woman wandered through an estate unchaperoned? And she had been hiding in the room all along! Rage took over and Duncan let it consume him. Better that than where his mind was determined to go. That was a dangerous road to tread.

“I asked, who are you?” Duncan stepped closer to her when a thought hit him. Could it be...no. It was impossible. His mother would never stoop so low as to orchestrate this poor joke, let alone with a lady of apparent lower social class. No. Try as hard as he could, he couldn't shake the thought out of his head. He hoped dearly that his mother had no hand in it.

She could not do such a thing. Or could she?

“How dare you accuse me of such?! What manner of gentleman mishandles a lady like this? You have treated me no less than a common criminal!”

Oh, she was sorely mistaken—this was no gentleman. Barking questions at her? And what sort of gentlemen would hold a lady in such a vise-like grip? She was no thief. And even if she was, he had no right to hold her like that. She was a lady for heaven’s sake!

Talking about spying! Who did he think he was? And who did he think she was? A lady with so much time on her hands to follow people around aimlessly? Absolutely not! She had had it with everyone treating her like nothing all night. And she would give him a piece of her mind!

But why was he staring at her like that? With such... heat ? Why, he was scowling at her only a few minutes ago. And now, he looked at her with such intensity, that it unnerved her. She tried to hold on to her anger. She hated him already; wanted to do so badly. But it was hard to when the beast of a man had a face that turned out to be not so beastly .

Still, he was an arrogant beast of a man. An arrogant beast with intense blue eyes that seemed to suck her into its depths. A beast with raven black hair that swirled atop his head, and gleaned under the moonlight. He was a beast all right, a beast with no manners. But a fine-looking beast, nonetheless. Oh, how she loathed to admit it. But the way he looked at her, the way his eyes burned into her...

“You call yourself a lady, yet here you hide in the shadows, pilfering information to spread among your fellow gossipmongers,” he all but sneered.

Lucy sniffed, miffed at being called the very thing she had been escaping all evening.

“I am a lady if I do say so myself. And what can you say for yourself as a gentleman who clearly sees a lady in distress and does nothing to help her?”

“But you don’t deny being a gossipmonger then?”

How Lucy itched to put the sour fellow in his place. But she wouldn’t pour out her frustrations on him. He was clearly dealing with something of his own. But that didn’t give him the right to take it out on her. She didn’t know who he was, but it was obvious from his attire that he was of high class and station. And she hated to be rude. So, she took a deep breath to calm herself.

“I am no gossipmonger. And quite frankly, it offends my senses to be called one.”

“Then what were you doing hiding behind the curtain, listening to a conversation that is not of concern to you?” The gentleman was not giving up.

“It is of another matter how I came to be there. But I assure you, I neither bear nor listen to gossip of any kind.”

“And why should I believe you?” Lucy did not know how that was possible, but his eyes thundered, almost like an angry storm was gathering.

“Because I say so!” an exasperated Lucy half-screamed. She had had enough of the day. All she wanted was to go home and bury herself in the familiarity of her sheets.

“You say you bear no gossip and yet, you have nothing to defend yourself. How rich is that? There is nothing you can say to deny it. I know what you are,” he said too coolly for Lucy’s liking. She hated to be associated with those who had scorned her, but she had no idea how to convince him. She certainly would not tell him how and why she came to be there.

“Sir, if you would only listen—” Lucy tried to explain but was cut short once again.

“I will do no such thing as to listen to the likes of you.”

“Oh, you...” Lucy trailed off, her patience finally giving way to frustration and then to anger. How hard was it to simply listen? It was no wonder he could speak to his mother in such a manner. Still, the fellow spurred on, undeterred.

“You stand there proclaiming your innocence, but you have yet to give reason or proof as to your presence in this room. And whilst I am willing to let go if given reason, do note that I do not forgive liars nor a gossipmonger.”

“Well, if you would only come off your high horse, you would find that I am neither,” Lucy declared loudly. “You claim to be a gentleman, but all this while you have acted nothing like one. You have little care that I’m a lady, but have gone all the way to accuse me falsely.”

“You still refer to yourself as a lady when you clearly are not.”

“Enough of this!” Lucy heard herself yell. She prided herself in her ability to keep cool in all situations. One needed a thick skin to navigate the treacherous waters of society. But whoever this was, he had managed to get under her skin.

“I will not allow myself to be questioned by a man and one such as yourself. I am no spy.” The fellow had suddenly gone quiet. “And what do you think you’re doing?” Lucy asked in alarm as the man shrugged off his coat.

“In case you did not notice, your dress is ripped. A respectable lady would know to cover herself up or wear something of better quality,” he bit out. Lucy couldn’t deny it—it stung.

“And of what concern is your coat with my dress?” Lucy whispered, her voice caught in her throat.

“Are you that dim-witted that you cannot see that I am trying to keep you modest?” He ground out in an almost strangled voice. His face was pinched as if he was in pain. Why did he pretend to care about her modesty when he had made it clear he thought the worst of her? What sort of oddity was he, blowing hot and cold? It nearly made her dizzy—dizzy with anger.

“Keep your bloody coat to yourself! I don’t need anyone to keep me modest, least of all you!”

“Could you think for a bloody second? You’re hardly decent,” he glowered.

“I don’t care! I don’t want anything from you.”

“Don’t be pig-headed. Have you seen the state of your dress?”

Lucy looked down and saw that truly, she wasn’t decent. Her dress had ripped in a straight line from her waist down to her ankle. And her shoulders were bare, to say the least. She couldn’t go out looking like this. This was the worst thing that could happen. She would be the subject of gossip again.

“Here. Cover up with this.”

Lucy felt the heavy fur of the coat drape on her and she jumped, shrugging it off. “I said I don’t need your hel—” Lucy trailed off as she pushed him away, losing her balance and knocking into him. They both went down, with the man turning her over so that he landed on the floor, while Lucy landed on top of him. Blazes!

She gathered her skirts, willing her limbs to move faster as she scrambled to get up

when she felt an unmistakable hardness poking through her dress.

“Will you stop doing that?” He bit out through gritted teeth as he held her in place with his hands on her hips. Lucy nearly jolted at the fierce heat that seared her skin. As much as she loathed him, she couldn’t deny the tingling of her skin under the weight of his palms.

She froze, all energy seemingly zapped from her as she lost herself in the damned beauty that was his face. How did one get eyes so blue, so misty that they looked like endless pools of the clearest seas? And his jaw, that Grecian jaw that looked like it was sculpted by Zeus himself.

And those brows. Why, it should be criminal to have such full brows that women would kill for. His hair? She itched to run her fingers through it, to distill their unnatural stillness.

Lucy couldn’t resist looking into his eyes once more, and only then did she register the shock in them. She trailed his line of sight to his hands on her hips. Just like him, she was shocked as well. Why did he elicit such strong emotions in her?

Her heart nearly leapt out of her chest as his hand moved to her face, caressing it. His touch was featherlight and soothing and she nearly sighed as she further leaned into him. His hands dropped to her neck, and she gasped, surprise casting a warm buzz on her. She shouldn’t be doing this. And she certainly shouldn’t be enjoying his touch. Damn him to hell and back but he felt so good . Why?

“What are you doing? Get your hands off me, you arrogant brute of a man.”

“You are the one who knocked into me when all I did was try to help. You just cannot help but be a pig-headed airhead.”

What? How dare he? “How dare you? What gives you the right to speak to me in such a manner?”

“I will speak to you as I bloody well please. Not only are you a nosy spy and gossipmonger. But here you are, also a clumsy pea-brained hen.”

Lucy gasped in disbelief. “Why, I have never met a fellow as obnoxious and vexing as you a—” The words died in Lucy’s throat as he seized her lips in a searing kiss. Shock registered in her brain and then, just then, a fiery heat all but consumed her.

Hell. Bloody hell and damnation. He was kissing her. And to her disgust, she wanted it too. She had never been kissed. She felt the familiar stirring of heat pool in her belly as she felt her body spring alive, buzzing with energy.

Had she been living at all? She didn’t think so. She felt herself opening up. She could swear she was drinking from the well of life. And she drank happily.

He was sweet. And sour, just like his personality. He tasted like mint, bright and fresh. Her tongue tangled with his, the most sensual and exotic dance she had ever known. He was relentless, not slowing down. She moaned, not quite sure it was her voice. She was lost. And she had also lost the last vestige of her so-called modesty. And sanity.

And she almost wept when they broke apart. She had never done that before. But the intensity in his eyes burned through her and she wanted nothing more than to plant her lips on his again. Until—

“Your Grace!”

“It is her! The sister of the adventuress!” Another voice screeched.

“Heavens! What is this?”

And Lucy knew there was nothing worse than this. She was done for.

CHAPTER 4

“S on?” Duncan looked up as a soft voice broke through his thoughts.

“Yes, Mother?”

“You have been quiet. Whatever is the matter?” Modesty glided into his study. The years had hardly done anything to her, and she seemed to only age gracefully as the years went by.

“It is nothing.”

“Are you thinking about that chit?”

He had finally learnt her name amongst the ruckus of the night before. Lucy. A beautiful name not befitting of the owner. This was all her fault. He was almost certain she’d planned it all. Or had she?

He wanted badly to believe it. But something kept niggling in the back of his head. She bore little resemblance to the ladies of high society, those who peddled gossip like it was their lifeblood. She looked a little like them. Then again, looks could be deceiving.

If she wasn’t a gossip peddler, she surely was a desperate chit who wanted to trap him. That much was sure. She looked the part. She was no doubt of poor financial standing. With that dress, she looked like she had not a nob to her name. Either that or she was dicked in the nob. Or...he hated to conceive the notion in his brain...his

mother put her up to it.

He hated to think in that direction, but it was a possibility. No. His mother wouldn't go that far. She wasn't that desperate to see him married. She wouldn't have acted that surprised if she had truly sent the lady. The dowager countess looked downright scandalized. That was not the look of someone who had orchestrated this madness.

Besides, Lucy wasn't the type of lady his mother would typically go for. She went for the likes of Lady Evelyn, pretty and polished to a fault. Not unrefined and certainly not poorly dressed. No. His mother wasn't behind this. Which meant the lady was the mastermind.

But her eyes...they told a different story. He could swear he had seen terror in her honey-brown eyes. Pure, unadulterated fear. Could that be faked? But the feel of her rich velvety skin against his palms continued to haunt him. She was the first person he had touched in years, touched without feeling lightheaded. Or nauseous. Or clammy with sweat.

It was strange...and... nice ? She felt good in his arms. Warm. Soft. Female. It was a good feeling. He could never forget the feel of her rounded hips in his hands. Oh, she was rounded all right. But that damned dress...why the devil would she hide all that under that monstrous dress?

His groin stirred as he remembered her grinding on him, albeit mistakenly, but potent, nevertheless. No woman had lit him like this. None. She didn't even do too much, and she had already set fire to his blood.

And her face? It might have been an ugly dress, but she had a face that could offset it, if observed clearly. She had a delectable-looking jaw that called out to him to nibble on. She had a carefully sculpted face with ingrained high cheekbones that gave her an air of royalty, even though she wasn't.

Her lips? They were soft and full. And tasted of sherry, sweet and drowning. They sucked him in like waves pulling him to see. And oh, he drowned in their sweetness. She was wet. And sweet. The embodiment of sin. But at that moment, he didn't mind being a slave to sin. She was temptation itself. And he didn't seem to mind it.

And when his hand wandered to her neck? He lost it. What would it feel like to trail kisses on that elegant neck, and feel the life that pulsed there? What would it feel like to—

No. He shouldn't go there. He wouldn't go there. He had enough to think about as it was. But why her? What was it about her? Why was she different? Why wasn't her touch revolting? And why did he crave more of it?

He had touched someone for the first time in years! Without gloves! And nothing happened? It was a surprise. A huge one, akin to a miracle. No one had been able to achieve this.

Or was he reading too much meaning into things? Was he overthinking it? Could it be that he was just distracted? He had been shocked after all. Maybe that was why he hadn't noticed it. Yes, that was it. He had been in a state of surprise. That was why he hadn't felt anything. Of course.

Duncan felt at ease now that he had come to his conclusion. He no longer felt at sea, analyzing every single detail. He was meticulous to a fault and always sought to get to the root of whatever he worked on.

“Do not fret over it. It shall pass in due time.” Duncan's eyes widened in surprise. “It is nothing of huge consequence. You are, after all, a duke.” He remained silent. Was this truly his mother? He had been expecting a different reaction. He wasn't sure what, but not this.

“There is much we must discuss, Duncan,” she continued. “Who was the lady?”

“I gathered she is Miss Lucy Hatcher, daughter of the Viscount of Pemberton.” He hadn’t finished talking when his mother’s face fell, her nose turned in the air. Her entire demeanor shifted, her features hardening with disapproval. He could only wonder what the matter was.

“Lucy Hatcher? Of the House of Pemberton, you say?” Modesty’s voice was quiet, but he didn’t miss the subtle disdain in her voice.

“Yes. And why do you look so distraught?”

“Son, that lady is not a good match.”

“Why do you think so, Mother?”

“Surely, Duncan, you jest. She is hardly a good match for a duke of your status.”

“Why? Because she is not of noble birth?” He arched a brow.

“It does not matter why. What I do know is that Lucy Hatcher is not the right match for you. Come first light in the morrow, I shall begin to search for a suitable bride for you. We must act fast. Otherwise, we would have a hard time finding you a bride with the scandal.”

“You need not bother yourself on my account, Mother. You do not have to search for a wife for me. There will be no need for that since I will be asking for Lucy’s hand.”

He watched as his mother’s face grew red with alarm. Her lips had formed a thin line as she regarded him with what could only be a mixture of disappointment and concern.

“I sure hope you jest, Duncan. That can be the only explanation I will accept.”

“You should know by now that I do not jest, Mother,” Duncan scowled. “It is not for you to accept. It is my decision, and it is final.” He may be her son, but he was the Duke of Northwick. He did not take kindly to being challenged.

“Duncan!” Modesty near-screached, “you aren't serious about this, are you? Have you not heard about them? It is not just about her being of noble birth or not. She has far fewer qualities valuable than a title or wealth! That is the sort of person you intend to make your duchess?”

“Enlighten me, please. I still do not see what you mean.”

“Oh, Duncan, do you not know that the Hatchers have a tainted reputation? They are not to be trusted. And Miss Lucy being their daughter only serves to further tarnish her own reputation and yours by extension. Don't you see it?”

Quite frankly, he did not. “Mother, if you do not have hard facts, then you are wasting both our time.”

“Please, try to understand, son. To marry into such a family would be folly. That family is cursed. Her sister was caught in a scandal just like this a few years back but with a rakehell. It was said that she tried to trap him into marrying her, but it backfired. She was shamed and ridiculed for it. I mean, how desperate could one get? A lady at that matter!

Worse, it was said she planned it to secure her family's future. That family hardly has a nickel to their name. The viscount is well known for his silky ventures and gambling. It is no surprise he has gambled his family fortune. And it is no wonder they would send their daughter to do their dirty bidding. Unfortunately, it backfired on them all.

She was exposed for what she truly was—a scheming seductress who laid siege on the wrong castle. And now, it looks like her younger sister is following in her footsteps! Look at it. It is exactly as her sister did! I have no doubt, that she planned this all. She had you in her mind for her evil schemes. Do you not see it?”

Silent now, Duncan mulled over her words. It did make sense the things his mother said. His mind did wander in that direction. But something was not adding up. For some reason, he couldn’t seem to reconcile the image of Lucy with an adventuress. He had a keen sense of judgment and it had never failed him.

“Pray, do tell, how sure are you about all of this you have said to me? A handful of times, I did hear you say that ‘it was said.’ Is that the truth or do you peddle the words of gossipmongers?”

“Duncan,” Modesty gasped, “this is as real as it gets. The Hatchers are bad news. You’d best do well to stay away from them. Why, they break all the rules as if they are some form of royalty. They have no sense of propriety in society. It is always one scandal or the other whenever they are out in society. And now, they have dragged you into it.

Oh, Duncan, do not fall for their wiles. ‘Tis a trap! You’d best not fall into it wide-eyed. That lady is not fit for a duchess!”

Lips pressed into a grim line, Duncan pondered on what to do. It was a precarious situation. He couldn't think about himself only. There was a whole other person to take into account. As bad as it was, he could weather the storm. He was not so sure about the lady. Yes, he might be tainted. And gossip would surely peddle about him. But no one would dare disrespect him in public. He could not say the same for Lucy.

She would no doubt be scorned. And if what his mother said was true, then she was done for. She and her entire family would be damned for all eternity. Could he let that

happen? She was not the only one caught in this tumultuous web. But she would definitely bear the brunt of it. And if he did according to his mother's wishes, Lucy would be ruined for life. Why would he let her take all the blame for something they both did?

He was the one who kissed her, after all, even though she was very responsive. He had gotten caught in the moment, he would admit. It was both their cross to bear. He would never abandon her to bear the brunt of it. He was a man of honor, and he did not intend to abandon his values, least of all now.

"Oh, dear Lord, pray tell me you are not considering this, Duncan. That is not the kind of family you marry into," Modesty cried out, but his mind was made up. He would do the honorable thing, scandal be damned.

"I have heard all you have said, Mother. But it has been decided, I will marry Lucy anyway."

"What?! Decided by whom?" Modesty screeched, appalled. His face went dark immediately, not appreciating having to explain himself.

"Decided by me," Duncan said in a deceptively calm voice. His mother's eyes widened in shock.

"Duncan, you cannot possibly be serious about this. Think of the consequences, the scandal..." she broke off in horror, her mind swimming with terrible images of the very possible future.

"I shall marry Lucy, scandal be damned." Duncan rose from his chair, meeting her gaze with steely determination. "I can and will never let her take the blame for this alone. I will not let her face this like it was solely her fault."

“Duncan—”

“Enough. I shall not be interrupted again. I am no dishonorable man. I shall live up to my values. Leaving the poor girl to weather the storm is cruel, don’t you think? No, I shall not do that. I will do the right thing. I have made my choice, and I shall stand by it. And I will not condone any questioning. Get ready, the wedding preparations will begin in earnest.”

And with those words, Duncan turned away, effectively dismissing his mother. He would make Lucy his wife, regardless of the scandal it would bring.

But he would not touch her again. No matter how much he had enjoyed it. No matter how much he craved it.

He would not touch her again, even if it killed him.

CHAPTER 5

“Lucy!”

The sudden sound of hurried footsteps shattered the stillness. Lucy looked up just in time to see her mother rush into the room, her face a mask of distress. Tears streamed down her cheeks, her usually composed demeanor shattered.

“Mother,” Lucy’s heart shattered at the sight of her mother so defeated. Patience’s sobs filled the room as she clutched a handkerchief to her mouth, her whole body trembling with emotion.

“Oh, Lucy,” she managed between sobs. “What have we done? Our family...our reputation...’tis all in tatters!” Lucy felt a pang of guilt tighten around her heart. She moved to her mother’s side, wrapping her with an arm around her as the events of the previous night replayed in her mind with a relentless torturous clarity.

She had always believed herself to be cautious, to have learned from her sister’s grave mistake. Yet here she was ensnared in a scandal so profound that it threatened to engulf her family’s tenuous reputation entirely.

Oh, Theodosia, I haven’t been so wise, after all. Her fingers clutched the folds of her dress, wrinkling the fine muslin as she trembled with anger and despair.

“A duke, Lucy! How did this come to be?”

Duncan, the Duke of Northwick as she had learned a little too late, had been a perfect

stranger until that fateful evening. Now, their names were entwined in whispers throughout London, with hers being the culprit, no doubt.

Her mind wandered in all directions. It was all she had strength for as she traced her fingers absently over the hem of her dress.

The Duke of Northwick .

“I am most sorry, Mama. I had no knowledge of his standing.”

“Oh, Lucy. We are done for. It is all over!” Her mother cried in despair.

She had suspected him to be of high standing, judging by the swell of his clothing and arrogant air. But she had never expected that he'd be a duke. A duke! And she had kissed him, allowed herself to be mauled on the floor like a common...a common...she hated to think of it but a common adventuress. She had turned out to be the name she'd been called by the wicked tongues of society.

But he kissed her first. It doesn't matter , she thought, you kissed him back just as fervently. It is also your fault . Oh, how stupid she had been, getting carried away and allowing herself to be nothing but baggage. How could she have been so silly? Wasn't this what she had been actively avoiding all these years? And yet, somehow, she had managed to ruin it all in one night.

“Who knows? It could be all over the papers as we speak.” Patience said dejectedly.

Oh no, Lucy thought with dread in her gut, The Times! She was more than likely the hottest topic in the papers right now! Lucy buried her face in her hands, hot tears spilling anew. How could I have been so foolish, she chided herself, the words, a harsh rebuke. I was to be the one who restored our family's honor, not plunge it further into disgrace.

She couldn't shake the memories of the faces, a mix of shock, pity, and glee. She could never forget it. It was burned into her consciousness. She had done the most logical thing she could think of—she ran. And what a sight she must have made, running through the estate like a headless chicken in her torn dress. It was just the kind of thing that was splashed on the front page of *The Times*.

The room seemed to close in around her, suffocating her. Its not-so-opulent decor—a reminder of her family's glory—now only seemed to mock her plight. The weight of the scandal pressed down upon her chest, constricting her breath, and she fought to keep the sobs from overtaking her completely.

She stood abruptly, crossing the room in a flurry of motion. The reflection that met her in the mirror was almost unrecognizable—her usually composed countenance was now a mask of sorrow and self-loathing. Her golden hair, once meticulously arranged, now fell in disarray about her shoulders. And her eyes, red-rimmed and swollen, bore witness to a night of sleepless torment.

“Curse you, Duncan,” she muttered, though she knew the blame lay equally with herself. “How could I have let this happen?” But she knew. She had allowed herself to be drawn in, and had let her guard down, despite the ever-present shadow of her sister's fall from grace.

Lucy's thoughts drifted to her sister, the scandal that had nearly destroyed them once before. They had never fully recovered from it. It had taken years to re-enter society, years of careful maneuvering and stringent adherence to propriety. And now, with one reckless moment, she had undone it all. The thought was unbearable.

“Oh, Lucy, my dear. I do not know if we can survive this”

Lucy paced the length of the room, her mind a storm of regret and self-recrimination. There seemed no way out, no path to redemption. The ton was merciless, its memory

long and its judgment swift. She would be whispered about, shunned, and any hopes of a suitable match dashed against the unforgiving rocks of her indiscretion.

“I am such a fool,” she hissed, her nails digging into her palms as she clenched her fists.

“Do not beat yourself up, my child.”

“I should have known better. I should have been stronger!”

The image of her parents’ disappointment loomed large in her mind. They had pinned their hopes on her, the one who would secure a prosperous future for their family. How could she face them now? How could she endure their silent reproach, their resigned acceptance of her failure?

“Oh, Mama, I have failed you.” Lucy sank to the floor, her dress pooling around her in a cascade of fabric. The fight seemed to drain out of her, leaving her a hollow shell of despair.

“What will become of us now?” Lady Patience wailed, a fresh wave of tears hitting her.

“Mama, please, try to calm yourself,” she implored, wrapping an arm around her and guiding her to the upholstered chair beside her bed. It was the only still-living piece of furniture in her room.

“How could this happen, Lucy? After everything.”

A fresh wave of tears threatened to onslaught Lucy. She squeezed her eyes shut, not willing to make the situation worse than it already was. “‘Tis not as dire as it seems,” she hoped.

Lady Pemberton shook her head, her eyes red and swollen. “How can you say that? You were seen with him, in such a compromising position. The Duke of Northwick! How could this have happened?”

The memory of the previous evening resurfaced vividly. “I never intended for any of this to happen,” Lucy said softly as a thought crept into her head. She tried to banish it, but it kept coming back, refusing to be banished into netherland. “But Mother, there is a possibility that the duke might propose. That could set everything to rights.” Her heart thudded as hope, mayhap too high, bloomed in her chest.

Lady Pemberton looked at her daughter, hope and desperation etched on her face. “Do you truly believe that he will?”

Lucy hesitated, her own doubts gnawing at her. “I cannot say for certain, but it is a possibility we must consider. If he does, it could salvage our family’s reputation.” Oh, what it would do to alleviate her family’s problems. She could only hope and dream.

Lady Pemberton’s grip on her daughter’s hand tightened. She could clearly see the wheels in her mother’s head turning. “And if he does propose, would you marry him? Could you marry a man you do not love?”

No. It was on the tip of her tongue to declare that she would not sacrifice her future for a man she barely knew. How could she marry a man she did not love? And live out the rest of her life with someone so grim? But his kisses...his touch...no. She would reminisce on that. That was what got her into this predicament in the first place. The thought of being the duke’s bride made her eyes sting with unshed tears.

But could she really do that to her family? Could she abdicate her duty? It was her fault, after all. She knew the weight of her family’s expectations and the precariousness of their social and financial standing. They would not have been in

this situation if not for her stupidity and carelessness in the first place. It was the least she could do. She owed them this much. Besides, she did want a family of her own.

“Do not worry for me, Mama. I will do whatever is necessary for our family,” she said, her voice steady despite the turmoil within her.

Lady Pemberton regarded her daughter with a sad smile. “My brave girl. My sweet Lucy,” a tear escaped her left eye as her mother caressed her cheek soothingly. “I only wish for your happiness. Even if you do not marry, you will always have a home here with us. Love has a way of finding us when we least expect it. Do not lose hope.”

“Yes, thank you, Mama. I really needed it,” Lucy sank into her mother’s embrace, feeling a bittersweet comfort in her words. Of course, her family wouldn’t turn her out. They would never abandon her. How silly she was for entertaining such thoughts. Push came to shove, she would end up with Theodosia. She had heard the countryside had a quaint view. Maybe, it wouldn’t be so bad. Besides, she would be reunited with her sister.

Her heart sank at the possibility of never having the family she dreamed of. It was looking to be the case with each moment that passed. But there was not much she could do about it.

Just then, the door to her room creaked open, and Caroline bounded in, urgency quickening her steps.

“Oh my, Caroline. Whatever has you hot on your heels?” Lucy asked in alarm. Her younger sister was always in a rush. But this time, she wasn’t so sure it was the usual. Trepidation rose in her belly. He was here. She just knew it.

“Mama, sister,” Caroline said breathlessly, “the Duke of Northwick is here. He has

come to speak with you,” she gestured to Lucy. Lucy heard her mother exhale a sigh of relief. If only she could feel the same way. Instead, she felt her heart begin to race.

Oh no, he was here! Why? She had not truly expected him to come. And now that he was here, the reality of the situation felt overwhelming. No. She wouldn’t let fear control her. She would go and see what the duke wanted. It was a good thing he was here. Wasn’t it?

She stood, smoothing her dress with trembling hands, and exchanged a look with her mother.

“Be brave, Lucy,” her mother whispered, giving her hand a squeeze that did little to reassure her. She nodded and made her way to the foyer, her steps heavy with anticipation and dread. She felt like a lamb being led to the lion’s den.

She stopped in her tracks as she saw him in the not-so-far distance, aloof. His back was to her as his tall frame cast a shadow in the dimly lit hall. The gravity of the moment hung in the air, palpable and suffocating. Lucy took a deep breath, steeling herself for whatever was to come.

The future of her family hung in the balance. He held the key. And she said a silent prayer, not knowing what to expect.

But one thing was sure: whatever happened would make or break her future.

CHAPTER 6

“Y our Grace,” Augustus Hatcher, Viscount of Pemberton, a man of portly stature and jovial disposition beamed as he stepped forward with an animated smile playing on his lips. He seemed to be in unusually high spirits, barely containing his excitement. “It is an honor to welcome you to Pemberton Hall.” There was a hush and buzz in the air at the duke’s unannounced but welcome arrival.

Tall and imposing, his very presence commanded immediate attention. Duncan Elkins, Duke of Northwick, was every inch the nobleman, from his impeccably tailored coat to his polished Hessian boots. His dark hair was swept back from his face, accentuating his piercing blue eyes and strong jawline.

Duncan inclined his head, his expression inscrutable. “Lord Hatcher, Lady Hatcher,” he acknowledged, his voice smooth but devoid of warmth. “The pleasure is mine, Viscount.” His gaze shifted to Lucy, lingering for a moment longer than propriety dictated. Seeing her in the daylight, he could see now that she was as fair as a dove to which his chest did a swift kick. Miss Hatcher.”

Lucy curtsied. He could swear she was trembling. “Your Grace.” Patience and her daughter, Lucy exchanged furtive glances, each woman clearly grappling with her own apprehensions. He did not blame them.

Lady Pemberton’s eyes looked clouded with what he presumed to be suspicion with a hint of concern as she regarded him. Lucy, on the other hand, looked to be a conflicting mess. A good judge of character and reader of emotion, he could tell she was feeling a tumult of emotions.

Anger, no doubt. Fear was hard to miss, no matter how hard she tried to brave or hide it. She was shaking like a brittle leaf in the coldest of winters. And there was an aching sadness etched on her face. Guilt arose in his chest, threatening to consume him.

“I have matters of some importance to discuss,” Duncan continued. A hush fell over the room.

Lord Pemberton, oblivious to the tension, clapped his hands together in delight. “Of course, of course. Come, we shall make ourselves comfortable.”

The duke took a quick glance around the room, no doubt looking down on it and them all. In its glory days, the drawing room of Pemberton Hall, affectionately called the Sable Room, exuded an air of timeless elegance. Rich tapestries adorned the walls, and the furnishings, a mix of dark mahogany and plush velvet, spoke of the Hatchers’ storied history. Now, the Sable Room stood, a shadow of its past glory.

There were no rich tapestries anymore. The furniture had been eaten down to its skeletons by termites. They did look almost ghastly. And, the once plush velvet had weathered down to the seams unraveling and the hems fraying. It was truly a sorry sight to behold. But the floors gleamed from Lucy’s polishing. And the delicate china ornaments her mother treasured seemed to sparkle.

As they settled into the warm but comfortable settee, the atmosphere grew taut. The unspoken questions in her mother’s eyes spoke volumes. And Lucy? She was doing a good job of concealing her anxieties.

“Miss Hatcher,” he greeted her again, his voice steady and composed. “I apologize for the unannounced visit, but I felt it necessary to speak with you and your family directly.”

Lucy curtsayed again, her voice catching in her throat. “Your Grace, thank you for coming.”

Duncan stood near the hearth, his presence commanding yet oddly dispassionate. “I shall come straight to the point,” he began, his gaze shifting between Augustus and Lucy. “The events of the previous evening have left a mark on us both. I regret that our unfortunate encounter has caused you and your family some distress.”

Lucy’s eyes closed tightly shut as if she was in pain. She took a deep breath, summoning her courage. “It was an accident, Your Grace. One that I wish had never happened.” She kept her face to the ground, not quite meeting his eye. How could she? Humiliation burned through her., no doubt.

Duncan nodded. “I understand. However, the reality is that it did happen, and now we must face the consequences. I seek to rectify this. My intention in coming here is to offer you a solution that might preserve both our reputations.” A hush fell over the room, the air heavy with anticipation.

A tumult of emotions washed over her face in less time than it took to blink. How was that even possible? “And what solution do you propose, Your Grace?” She all but whispered. The Viscount of Pemberton leaned forward eagerly, almost like an excited pup, his eyes alight with hope. “Yes, what is it you propose, Your Grace?”

Duncan turned to face Lucy, his gaze steady and unflinching. She preened under the heat of his stare, and if she was uncomfortable, she did not show it. Or tried not to.

“I propose marriage, Miss Hatcher. It is the only way to quell the rumors and restore honor to both our families.”

Blast him! Blast him to hell and back! Why did he look so composed? So unperturbed? Of course, unless he was used to it. He was a duke after all. He could

have his pick of any woman he wanted. With a man of his station, he no doubt had women flocking after him. She was the victim here, used and discarded like a piece of rag. Resentment bloomed in her chest.

Her heart pounded in her chest, her mind racing with uncertainty. What could the duke possibly want? The scandal had already marred her prospects, and she dreaded the thought of further humiliation. But it seemed that was exactly what the duke had come to do. Did he really have to mention her...their mistake of the night before? That again, in the presence of her parents?

Lucy's heart thudded painfully as shame washed over her. It was one thing to be ridiculed by society. It was another to watch her parents being reminded of her stupidity. If only the ground could open up and swallow her, maybe everything would be all right again.

His blue eyes pierced through her, keeping her in place. She felt like an errant young girl again, being reprimanded by her governess. Damn him! Why did he have to have such a straight face? Could he not show some emotion on his face like a normal human?

"I propose marriage, Miss Hatcher. It is the only way to quell the rumors and restore honor to both our families."

The room seemed to tilt on its axis, Lucy's breath catching in her throat. She stared at him, unable to mask her shock. Marriage? After the scandal? It seemed inconceivable. The words hung in the air between them, and Lucy's mind raced. She had imagined this, anticipated this, yet hearing it spoken aloud was another matter entirely.

This was it, the opportunity she had been looking for—a good match. He was a duke at that. Attaching herself to his name might not completely erase the scorn she was sure

to face. But it would give her and her family some leeway. Getting married to the duke would give her family some shield. And their finances would certainly be better.

And Caroline? Her younger sister would surely get better prospects than her. This marriage would lift the veil of shame from them. and Caroline would have better suitors. Oh, she wished fervently for her sister's success.

Even if neither Lucy nor her older sister, Theodosia, could live the life they wanted, let one of them be able to do so. She did not mind sacrificing her happiness for her sister. She had a year left until she turned eighteen and had her whole life ahead of her. Lucy, on the other hand, was already twenty years of age.

She was almost on her way to spinsterhood, what with the scandal of Theodosia following her everywhere she went. This was a golden opportunity. So why was she not happy about it?

Oh, she knew. She knew very well that she wanted more. She had hoped for a love match all her life, something akin to her parents' union. Lord and Lady Pemberton had weathered it through the good times and the storms, their unfailing love for each other sailing the family through.

The thought of being in a loveless marriage, and with someone so cold made her sick to the bone. She could not do it. It was a huge sacrifice to make. But the image of her mother's tear-streaked face slithered into her mind. And though her father would never voice it out, she knew he nursed a silent disappointment.

She thought of her sister Caroline and the opportunities she would get if she married the duke. And her brother, Stephen. He would have access to things their father would never be able to provide.

And Theodosia? Oh, how could she be so ungrateful? Why could she not see the

bigger picture? Theodosia never had such an opportunity. And here she was, overthinking her own good fortune. She could not be selfish. Her family depended on her. She held the key to their future. And she doubted she would get such an opportunity ever again.

The room was silent. Not a sound could be heard. She risked a glance around and saw her father's eyes shine with joy. Her mother sat quietly with a pinched look on her face, holding her breath, as she dared to hope. But Lucy felt a cold dread settle in her chest.

"Your Grace," Augustus began, "we are honored by your proposal. However, I must ask my daughter's opinion on this matter."

The duke's brows furrowed slightly, a flicker of surprise crossing his features. "You seek her approval?"

"Indeed," Augustus replied firmly. "In matters of such importance, I believe it is only right."

It was evident he had not anticipated her father seeking Lucy's consent. In the rigid hierarchies of their society, such decisions were often made without the woman's input. But her father had never been that way. He believed in the individuality of people and never failed to seek her mother's advice in all things. It was clear the duke didn't think that was of importance.

Augustus, his face flushed with excitement, glanced at Lucy. "What say you, my dear? This is an unexpected but most fortuitous offer." All eyes turned to Lucy. She had been noticeably silent, but she couldn't avoid it any longer. She had to give an answer. But marriage? Was the duke aware of her family standing? Was he sure about his proposition?

“Do you mean this, Your Grace?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

“I do,” he replied solemnly. “I believe it is the best course of action for both of us. We may not know each other well, but I am confident that with time, we can build a respectful and amicable union.” Her heart sank. That was precisely her misgiving. They did not know each other at all, let alone knowing each other well.

But the kiss ...no. She did not know him at all. It didn't matter that her body craved for him. It didn't matter that deep down, she knew she had been ruined for anybody else. She had a suspicious feeling that no one would ever match up to the duke. But none of this mattered. She knew not one thing about him.

“My dear, what do you say? Do you accept?” Her father urged. Lucy hesitated, her mind a whirlwind of thoughts. The duke's proposal felt less like a gesture of honor and more like an inescapable sentence. Oh father, please do not make me do this. But she knew it was futile.

She took a deep breath, meeting the duke's gaze. His expression was inscrutable, his eyes locked on hers with an intensity that made her feel... flattered ? No. That was crazy. She was obviously going mad from the stress of it all. What she felt was trapped.

“Your Grace,” Lucy began, her voice steady despite the turmoil within, “I am grateful for your offer. However, I must admit to being surprised, given the circumstances.”

A flicker of something—annoyance, perhaps—crossed the duke's face, but it was gone in an instant. “The past is the past, Miss Hatcher. What matters now is our future.”

Lucy glanced at her father, who watched her with an encouraging smile. She knew she had little choice. To reject a duke, especially after such a scandal, would be social

suicide. She was fortunate to receive such an offer.

She felt her mother's hand squeeze hers. She didn't miss it—a silent but insistent plea—a gentle reminder of the expectations placed upon her. Lucy looked into her mother's eyes, hope and resignation evident there. She understood clearly— this marriage was their only salvation.

Lucy looked into Duncan's eyes, searching for any hint of insincerity, but found none. She knew she had little choice. Swallowing her despair, she nodded slowly. "I accept, Your Grace," she said softly, the words tasting bitter on her tongue as she lowered her eyes to hide the tears that threatened to spill.

Augustus beamed, his joy palpable as he clapped his hands in delight. "Splendid! Truly splendid! This is truly a blessed day for our family." Blessed indeed, Lucy thought sadly. He moved to shake the duke's hand, but Duncan made no move to reciprocate, his face impassive.

"There shall be no need for that. Formalities can wait until the proper arrangements are made," the duke said in a voice devoid of emotion that made Lucy shiver.

Augustus paused, his hand hovering awkwardly in the air. "Of course, of course. I understand completely." Though momentarily taken aback, he had recovered quickly. "Ah, well, then. We are most pleased."

But Lucy, watching the interaction, felt a fresh wave of resentment. The duke's refusal to engage in such a simple gesture struck her as callous, an affront to her father's genuine goodwill. She sat in stunned silence, his refusal striking her like a physical blow.

The minutes that followed were a blur, filled with the mundane details of their impending union. Lucy's thoughts drifted in a fog of despair. The future seemed a

bleak, unending path of duty and regret. She knew she had no choice, her family's honor was now bound inexorably to this marriage. But as she looked at Duncan, his face a mask of detachment, she could not help but feel a deep, abiding sorrow for the life she had lost to a moment of indiscretion.

Her mind drifted to the future. What kind of life awaited her as the Duchess of Northwick? She envisioned a cold, loveless existence, overshadowed by a husband who saw her as nothing more than a pawn in his social machinations. The very thought filled her with a sense of loathing—not just for Duncan, but for herself, for having allowed herself to be caught in this snare.

Her mother's gentle squeeze on her hand brought her back to the present. Patience's eyes, filled with unspoken concern, met hers, and Lucy forced a faint smile. There was no escaping it now; she was bound by duty and circumstance, her fate sealed by the very scandal she had sought to avoid.

"I shall make the necessary arrangements as soon as possible."

That did it. Lucy had had enough. She needed some air. "Your Grace, Papa, Mama, do excuse me. I shall be back in a moment." And without waiting for a response, she fled the Sable Room. Augustus watched her go, his enthusiasm undimmed.

She burst into her room, chest heaving and eyes burning with tears she had been holding back, and threw herself on her bed. She was just about to give in to despair and frustration and let it all out when she heard someone come in.

"Oh, my dearest Lucy," a soft voice near-whispered. Lucy whirled around, her heart lighting up a little.

"Caroline!" she cried, launching herself into her sister's embrace. "Oh Caroline, I am losing my mind. Everything has gone to ashes!" Lucy wept bitterly, clinging on to her

sister for dear life as Caroline patted her back soothingly.

“Dry your tears and talk to me, sister. Whatever is the matter? And what is going on? You, Mama and Papa, and the gentleman have been in the Sable Room for a while now.”

“He is no gentleman!” Lucy breathed furiously. “No gentleman of proper breeding would behave in the manner he did.”

“Why do you say so?” Caroline furrowed her brows, confusion marring her pretty features.

Lucy wiped her face, anger fast overcoming her sadness. “Do you know that Papa offered his hand—in good faith, mind you—for naught but a simple handshake, only to be met with such haughty indifference.”

“What?” Caroline gasped. “Does the gentleman know who Papa is? Does he know he is Lord Augustus Hatcher, the Viscount of Pemberton?”

“Does he care? He is the Duke of Northwick. No doubt, he sees everyone as peasants below him.”

“Oh my. That must have been embarrassing.”

“Scornful! Derisive, it was. How dare he?” The scene played out again in slow motion in her mind, her father’s hand extended, his face alight with genuine pleasure, and then Duncan’s cold, dismissive step back, his expression as impassive as stone.

“Did not the duke say anything? Mayhap an acknowledgment of some sort.” A perplexed Caroline queried. Of course, her younger sister by three years had more common sense, decency, and manners than the so-called duke.

“Oh, he said something all right. There shall be no need for that. That was all he said.” Lucy forced herself to remain calm.

Caroline’s eyes bulged. “This is worse than I thought.”

There shall be no need for that indeed.

The words echoed in Lucy’s mind, each one a sharp, stinging rebuke. She remembered her father, his momentary confusion quickly masked by his unflagging optimism. How easily he brushed it off. But she saw it for what it was—an insult, a deliberate slight. Why, Lucy was surprised in the least. If he could treat his own mother with disdain, why would he not her father as well?

“But why is he here?”

Lucy clenched her hands in her lap, nails biting into her palms as she struggled to conceal her trembling fingers. She could not tell her sister everything. Caroline still had ears too young for such news.

“He—he came to propose a union,” Lucy stammered. It was still the truth. She would tell her that much. She risked a glance at Caroline, afraid that her eyes would give her away. But the overwhelming sadness in them fueled the guilt in her. “What is the matter, Caroline?”

“Do you still think of me as a child, Lucy? Why would you conceal such important news from me? Am I not your sister?”

“What do you mean?” Lucy’s voice trembled. It could only mean one thing—Caroline knew. Oh, dear God. Her little sister knew. This was more shame than she could bear.

“I know what happened, Lucy. I stood outside the door, and I heard everything.”

“Oh, Caroline,” Lucy collapsed on her bed and wept. “I am so sorry. I didn't want you to know about such. I wanted to protect you from it all.”

“You can't always shield me from everything.”

“I can and I will!” Lucy brushed the tears from her cheeks furiously as she took Caroline's palms in her shaky ones. “You are my little sister, and I will do whatever it takes to protect you.”

“I understand, Lucy, and I love you for it. But we are all we've got. Theodosia—” Lucy inhaled a sharp breath as Caroline's face dropped. The subject of their older sister was never an easy topic. “All we have is each other. Please, do not hide anything from me. You do not need to.”

Lucy struggled to contain her emotions. When had her younger sister become so wise? “How did you grow up so fast?” Caroline only smiled; a sad one that didn't reach her eyes. “I am so sorry.”

“It is all right now. But what are you going to do? Will you accept the duke's proposal?”

“Do I have a choice? There is no better option now, is there?” Lucy sighed.

“But such an ill-mannered fellow.”

“Ill-mannered does him no justice. His arrogance is insufferable. His actions are a clear indication of how little he regards our family. He has made it clear how he feels about us.” This marriage, a supposed act of honor, now felt more like a transaction, a consolidation of power.

“What can we do? He is a duke, after all,” Caroline soothed. Of course, her sister was the voice of reason. Perhaps, if Caroline had gone with them to the soiree, she would not be in this situation.

It does not matter what position one holds. It costs nothing to be kind. He only seeks to show his power, to show that he can do as he pleases.” To show that he owns me now. Her heart dropped. Oh, dear God, what had she done agreeing to marry such a person?

“What sort of man refuses a handshake from the father of his intended bride?” Caroline opened her mouth to speak but Lucy continued. “I’ll tell you what; a man without common decency,” she continued bitterly. “A man who sees himself above the simple courtesies that bind society together.” Her anger simmered beneath the surface, mingling with her despair and deepening her sense of hopelessness.

“Do not think that way, Lucy. I do not like it when you are sad.”

“I can't help it, sister. This is supposed to be a good thing. We will be protected. You and Stephen will have a better chance at life. We shall no longer be at the mercy of the ton. And I shall not be shamed. But why does it feel like I have signed a deal with the devil?”

Lucy’s shoulders drooped. She could not shake the bitterness that clung to her heart. In her mind, the duke’s refusal to shake her father's hand became a symbol of everything that was wrong with this arrangement. It was a reminder of her own powerlessness, her inability to change the course of her life.

“Oh my!” her mother cried as she burst into the room. Lucy hastily dried her eyes. She would rather die than give her mother more cause to worry. “How lucky we are. A fine match it is, Lucy, my dear! A duke! Imagine that!”

“It is, Mama.”

She felt the back of her neck prickling and knew that Caroline was boring holes in the back of her head with her eyes.

“Lucy?” Caroline’s voice was small but sharp.

Please, Caroline, let this go, Lucy begged with her eyes as she turned to face her sister. “Yes, Caroline?”

“Won’t you say something? Because if you do not, I will.”

Their mother frowned, sensing the unease between both sisters. “What is the matter with you girls?”

“Lucy is not sure about this union.”

“What?” Lady Patience Hatcher gasped in surprise. “But this is such a good match. And an honorable man at the core, taking responsibility for his actions. Oh, you will be protected, Lucy. Tell me, is this how you truly feel?”

“No, Mama, I am most happy. This is the best we can get.”

“Are you sure, Lucy? You can talk to me.”

“Yes, I am, Mama.” Lucy beseeched her sister with a pleading look. If this was to be her fate, then so be it. She would gladly do anything to save her family. But Lucy only felt a growing sense of unease. She turned to her mother, who held her hand. “Mama, he was so cold.”

Patience patted her hand reassuringly. “Do not fret, my dear. A man of his station

must maintain a certain decorum. You shall see, in time, he will show you the warmth and affection you deserve.”

Lucy forced a smile, but doubts lingered in her mind. She could not shake the feeling that her life was about to change in ways she had never imagined—and not all for the better. The arrangements had been finalized and Lucy had resigned herself to a fate she had neither sought nor desired.

Lucy felt a strange sense of calm wash over her. The decision had been made, and there was no turning back. Her path had been set. She would become the Duchess of Northwick. She could only hope that, as her mother had said, love would find its way to her in the most unexpected of places.

But she knew, oh, she knew, that it was only a futile hope.

CHAPTER 7

“ I believe we are in agreement, then,” Duncan stated, his voice sturdy in the calm authority of a man used to getting his way. His dark eyes flicked briefly to Lucy, who met his gaze. He felt a warmth he did not want to acknowledge trickle in him. “Miss Hatcher and I shall be wed at the earliest convenience.”

Still, her gaze didn't waver. If anything, it grew stronger. What was it about her that elicited these foreign emotions in him? Sure, she was not hard on the eyes. But he had surely encountered women of the same beauty, if not more. Something niggled in the back of his brain. What was it then?

Was it the rich pools of gold in her eyes? Or was it her bee-stung lips that reminded him of fresh strawberries that heralded summer? Perhaps, it was the feel of her, the wondrous softness of her lush curves.

He could not for the life of him figure it out when she kept looking at him with those hardly readable eyes. For some reason, he wanted to know what she was thinking; what she was feeling. He hated that he cared to know. But it could not be helped.

Only moments before, she had fled the room with her mother hot on her heels. Mayhap, she did not want this match? Well, if she did not, all she had to do was give her word and it would all come to a halt. He would never force anyone to be with him.

He thought it the right thing to do to restore her honor, to give her a bearing of dignity by making an honest woman out of her. But, if she did not see the need, then

they could call it off. He preferred for it to come from her and not him. Let it be on record that he had stood by her and she had turned him down.

Even now as she sat opposite him demurely by her mother's side, and her hands clasped tightly on her thighs, she still arrested him with her heavy gaze. He felt unsettled. And he hardly ever felt unsettled. Hardly anything offset him. Her delicate frame was swathed in a simple muslin dress. Her face was drawn; resigned. Her hair flowed around her shoulders this time like a golden halo on her head.

There was an undercurrent of tension in the drawing room which made no sense as her father was bustling with excitement. Her mother seemed content enough. And the lady—

“We are most grateful for your magnanimity, Your Grace,” Lucy replied, pulling him out of his reverie, her voice strained yet polite. Duncan inclined his head slightly, acknowledging her.

“Lord Pemberton, Lady Pemberton,” he said with a formal nod, his deep voice commanding the room's attention. “I would like a moment alone with Miss Hatcher before I take my leave.”

A collective gasp echoed through the room, followed by a tense silence. Lady Pemberton's eyes widened with concern, while Lord Pemberton's brows furrowed in worry. It was not customary for an unmarried gentleman to request a private audience with a lady, even one he was betrothed to under such unusual circumstances.

The couple exchanged uneasy glances as they prepared to leave the room at the duke's request. “Are you certain, Your Grace, that you wish to speak with my daughter alone?” Lord Pemberton's voice wavered slightly, betraying his concern.

Duncan's face pinched considerably. He did not take kindly to being questioned,

certainly not by people of clearly lower station. They would not dare disobey a duke. He did not care whether this was the family he was marrying into. He would personally teach them a lesson on manners. He had half a mind to rebuke the viscount but thought better of it. But his resolve remained clear.

“I am, Mr. Hatcher,” Duncan said, purposefully not calling him Lord Pemberton. The older man preened considerably, knowing he had been scolded, although not so directly. “There are matters that need addressing between us, privately.”

Lord Pemberton exchanged a hesitant glance with his wife. Lady Pemberton, her face pale but composed, tightened her grip on her husband’s arm.

“Very well, Your Grace,” Lord Pemberton finally managed although his voice wavered slightly. “You may speak with His Grace. We shall take our leave now.” Reluctantly, Lucy’s parents acquiesced and left the drawing room. The heavy oak door closed behind them with a soft thud, leaving them in a hushed silence, the crackling of the hearth the only sound breaking the stillness.

Lucy’s heart pounded at the duke’s unusual request. What more did he want now? Had she not agreed to their marriage? What else could he possibly want to discuss with her again?

Smoothing the folds of her lavender muslin day dress, Lucy stood willing her racing heart to slow. She looked at the shelves stacked on the wall, bursting with books. She smiled, enjoying the little comfort it gave. It was her own little sanctuary and basked in the familiar scent of aged paper and polished wood.

But then, she got a whiff of him that stirred her senses, that tempted her to go closer and take a deep sniff of him. There was no explanation for this—she had clearly lost her mind.

She loathed to admit it, but he had done her a huge favor. He was a duke, after all. He owed her nothing. She was only the daughter of a viscount who had lost almost all his money to bad businesses. Her family was not the best. In fact, they were banned from society. Unofficially, but banned, nevertheless. But, he had stepped in to cover her shame.

She had no idea where this union would end up. But in the meantime, her family would not be eternally damned.

“Miss Hatcher, I must speak frankly with you,” the duke started.

Lucy straightened her shoulders, standing to her full height. Still, the duke dwarfed her considerably. “I am at your service, Your Grace.”

He acknowledged her with a nod. “Your cooperation in this matter is appreciated. The scandal we were involved in last night was...regrettable, to say the least. However, I believe this arrangement will benefit us both.”

Lucy’s ears rang. Regrettable? Of course, that was how he felt. How stupid of her to have thought otherwise. And of course, she regretted it as well. It was the most stupid thing she had ever done. And it had cost her dearly. It was an unfortunate event. And she detested it. Yes. She did.

So, why then did her chest feel hollow at the duke’s words?

She did not care. She would not care. It was one moment of stupidity that had cost them both. And he had come to realize it, and protect her from the harsh judgment of the ton, still. That was of the most importance. And she would not sweep that under the rug.

“Thank you,” Lucy began, her voice barely above a whisper. She stood with her

hands clasped before her, her eyes fixed on the floor. “Thank you for proposing, Your Grace. Given the circumstances, your offer is most generous.” As much as she didn’t know what the future held for her, she was no ingrate. The duke had given her one magnanimous offer, one she may never have gotten, scandal or not.

The duke’s brows furrowed slightly as he regarded her. “It was a given, Miss Hatcher. Generosity had little to do with it, I assure you. After everything that has transpired, it was merely the logical course of action.”

Lucy shook her head, her curls bouncing softly. “No, Your Grace, it was not. You had no obligation to make such an offer. Many men would have chosen to ignore the matter entirely. You did not, and for that, I am grateful.”

Duncan’s gaze flickered with something unreadable before settling into a cool, distant look. “You speak of your sister, do you not?” he asked, his tone deceptively mild.

Lucy stiffened, a dangerous fire lighting instantly in her eyes. “I do. But if you mean to insult her?—”

“You will not speak to me like that ever again,” Duncan disapproved in a deceptively calm tone that chilled her to the bone.

She reined her tongue, clenching her fists behind her. “My apologies, Your Grace. ‘Tis just that my sister has suffered a lot at the hands of the ton for no fault of hers.”

“I mean no insult. I am well aware of the scandal that befell your family. Your sister was wronged by a rake who failed to honor his commitments. And your family has suffered the consequences ever since.”

Lucy’s heart clenched at the familiar tale of her sister. “Theodosia was not at fault, Your Grace. She was a victim of circumstance,” Lucy said defensively, her voice

half-trembling with anger and the other half, sadness.

“I do not intend to disparage your sister. I merely wish to point out that the situations differ. Unlike the scoundrel who wronged your sister, I am a man of honor.”

“You say that, yet you propose a union of convenience. What honor is there in that?” Her heart beat furiously, almost as if it would fly out of her chest. There she was, questioning the duke again. But she could not help it. She had to know.

Duncan took a step closer, his misty blue eyes piercing into hers. “It is precisely because I am a man of honor that I make such an offer. You do not deserve to bear the brunt of the ton for both our mistakes.”

“And for that, I am grateful, Your Grace. My family and I shall be indebted to you.”

Were her eyes playing tricks on her or did the duke’s expression soften? “Be that as it may, Miss Hatcher, but we must dispense with any misconceptions.” It was definitely her eyes because his tone remained firm.

“Do not mistake my intentions—our marriage will be one of convenience, nothing more. You will have my name and my protection, but there will be no intimacy between us. I have no intention whatsoever of consummating this union.”

Lucy blinked, the words sinking in with startling clarity. “I see,” she replied, her voice barely above a whisper. “Then why—why did you kiss me last night?” A flush crept up her cheeks, her earlier gratitude morphing into bewilderment and hurt. It had been her first kiss—stolen albeit. But he had lit a fire in her with that one kiss.

Stop it, Lucy. You are no better than a loose woman. Why was she even hurt? It was for the best. She would not have to bother about satisfying her husband. Yet, she would be protected and provided for. And so would her family. It was the best of both

worlds. Then why did she feel a pang in her chest?

A flicker or something—regret, perhaps—crossed Duncan’s face, but it was gone in an instant. In its place was his usual stoicism. She wondered if she had seen it at all. His jaw tightened, and he turned away, his gaze focusing on the delicate porcelain vase on the mantelpiece.

“It was a lapse in judgment, a mistake born of a moment’s indiscretion, nothing more. It will not happen again. I give you my word.”

Her heart ached with confusion and hurt. A mistake? A lapse in judgment? How could he say this to her? How could he use such cruel words to describe what they share—she would not go there. He truly was cold as he was heartless. And she let rage consume her.

“A lapse in judgment, you say?” Lucy ground out through clenched teeth.

“It is a matter I do not wish to discuss,” his eyes narrowed to slits.

“You speak as if it were of no consequence, Your Grace, but it has had significant consequences for me and my family.”

The duke faced her squarely, his eyes cold and distant. “I am aware, Miss Hatcher. Which is why I am offering you a way out of this scandal that would otherwise ruin you. I understand your sister was not given such an offer. I am giving you a chance to avoid a similar fate.”

Oh, how dare he! How dare he mention Theodosia’s misfortune so casually? So, he was a saint now, offering to shroud her in a cloak of white. Her eyes lit in a flash of anger.

“Do not speak ill of her, Your Grace.” Lucy struggled to keep her tone as cool as possible.

“I had no intention of doing so,” he replied just as coolly. “I merely wished to clarify the nature of our arrangement.”

“Then we are to be married, but as strangers?”

“Exactly,” the duke replied, leaving no room for argument. “You shall have your own rooms, your own life as it were. I shall not interfere.”

In her mind’s eye, Lucy saw her future in blazes. She had known in the back of her mind that she might not get a love match. But she hoped that with time, whoever her partner was, they would learn to love each other. But as she stared at him, trying to decipher the man who stood before, she knew it would never happen. He was cold as ice.

He was handsome, undeniably, with his cropped dark hair that layered on his head in thick waves. His sensuous lips sent flashes of their moment of indiscretion flying about in her head.

His eyes were mayhap her favorite feature of him. They were the color of the clear skies in all its blue glory. But there was a hardness in them, one she could never penetrate.

“But, Your Grace, what if?—”

“This is the only condition for this union,” he cut her coldly with no emotions whatsoever.

Lucy’s cheeks flushed with embarrassment, but she didn’t miss the subtle threat. She

had not expected a love match, but his coldness was more than she could bear.

“You expect me to enter into this arrangement without understanding your intentions?” Her frustrations mounted. “Without knowing why you?—”

“Enough, Miss Hatcher!” Duncan interrupted in a firm voice. “My reasons are my own. Suffice it to say, I am bound by duty, not desire.”

A tense silence settled between them. Her hands trembled slightly as she struggled to process his words. She searched his face, hoping to find some semblance of warmth or compassion. But all she got was his impassiveness.

“I see,” she finally said, her tone clipped. “Then, I suppose I should thank you again, Your Grace, for your sacrifice.”

“I assure you, Miss Hatcher, the sacrifice is mutual.” Lucy’s head whipped up at the duke’s words. Surely, he had no idea what he had just said or what he meant. Mayhap, she was reading too much into it. Yes, that had to be the case.

“The situation is far from ideal for either of us,” Duncan continued, “but it is necessary. We must face it with as much grace and fortitude as we can muster.”

The room fell silent once more, the weight of his words settling over her like a heavy cloak. “Very well then, Your Grace,” Lucy said finally, her voice steadier than she felt. “I will do my duty. I accept your terms.”

Duncan nodded, satisfied with her response. “I am glad we understand each other.”

Lucy felt a pang of disappointment, though for the life of her, she could not say why. “Of course, Your Grace.”

“Good. Now if that is all, I shall take my leave.”

“Very well, Your Grace.”

“I shall make the necessary arrangements as soon as possible. Thank you for your time. Good day.” And with a curt nod, the duke turned around and left the room, leaving Lucy to her thoughts, his departure as abrupt as his arrival. She watched his retreating figure, her emotions an odd mix of gratitude, confusion, and a bludgeoning sense of injustice.

She tried to steady her racing heart. Why, she felt like she had just run the full length of Pemberton Hall. And all she had done was have a meeting with the Duke of Northwick.

It was barely a day since the night that turned her life upside down. But she felt like it had been a hundred years already. She felt weak and spent. The duke sure did know how to feed on one’s energy. He was indeed an enigma, a man of apparent contradictions. His departure left her feeling relieved. And unsettled.

She could not imagine a house devoid of laughter and mutual companionship. That was all she had ever known. Life as a duchess was not so appealing and Lucy felt more apprehensive the more she thought about it.

Still, he had offered her salvation—his name and protection—yet he kept his own heart firmly locked away. It was a huge price to pay for security and stability. But it seemed she had paid in full. For all his arrogance and aloofness, she couldn’t deny that there was something about him that intrigued her, something she could not quite place a finger on.

He was a mystery—one she was bound to, scarcely knew, yet oddly fascinated by—she was tempted to unravel. No. There was no point in doing that. It would lead

to nowhere. And she doubted he would be happy about it.

She did her best to ignore every thought of him as she rejoined her family in their little parlor.

“Well, what is it, my dear? Pray, do tell.” Her mother’s anxious gaze met hers.

Lucy forced a smile. “It is nothing, Mama. Do not fret. The duke and I have come to an understanding as you well know.” Her gaze darted to Caroline who scorched her with a knowing look.

“Wonderful! That is good news, my dear,” Patience beamed, her joy evident. But Lucy’s thoughts were far from joyous. She could not shake the feeling that her future, though secure, would be a lonely one. Oh, what a travesty that would be. She could no longer bear the heat of her sister’s gaze and sought to flee.

“I shall be in my room, Mama.”

“I shall be with you too, Lucy. Papa, Mama, please excuse us.” Caroline waited not a moment longer and left with Lucy. Away from prying ears in the safety of the room, Caroline pounced on Lucy.

“Do not fret? Really? By the look on your face, you were more than fretting. And do not deny it.”

“What would you have me do, Caroline? I have to do this,” Lucy cried.

“This is killing you. I cannot bear to see you go through this,” Caroline spurred on.

Truly, Lucy could not go through with it. She could not imagine living in a house with no love or laughter, at the very least. It was all she had ever known all her life.

She couldn't begin to fathom life as a duchess. It was looking more grim by the moment.

“Tell me, what really happened? I know you are hiding something.”

That was all the encouragement Lucy needed. “Oh, Caroline, what an arrogant man! The sheer audacity to declare ever so coolly that our marriage would be one of convenience. What does he take me for? A mere chess piece to be moved at his discretion?”

“What? He said that to you?” Caroline asked, aghast.

“He most certainly did. His arrogance is astounding!” The duke’s words replayed in her mind, each one sharpening her growing ire. How dare he speak of duty and honor, as if those concepts excused his high-handedness? His presence had filled the room with an imposing certainty, a confidence that bordered on presumption. She did not like it one bit.

But his penetrating gaze, the way he looked at her, not with warmth but with a calculating coldness—it unnerved her. And it set her blood boiling. Why, he completely avoided her question, brushing it aside as if it were of no consequence.

The kiss...that kiss...it had shattered her completely, igniting a spark within her that she had never felt before. And yet, to him, it was merely a matter he did not wish to discuss.

“Are you sure about this, Lucy? This duke seems to be of unreputable manners.”

Her sister was a good judge of character. But if only it were that easy. “There is not much I can do. This is our only way out.”

But the more Lucy thought about it, the angrier she became. Had he not ignored her father as well, evading his handshake as if he were some leper? Of course, he was used to having his own way, accustomed to deference and obedience. But she was not a simpering debutante, ready to bow to his every whim, scandal be damned.

Arrogant he may be, but she would not be a passive participant in her own life. If he believed that this marriage would be a mere convenience, he was sorely mistaken. She would show him that she was more than just a convenient bride.

Oh, it was on.

CHAPTER 8

“Y our Grace!”

The viscount boomed, his voice brimming with an enthusiasm that seemed to grate on the dowager duchess’s nerves, if her pinched face was anything to go by.

Lucy had watched in painful apprehension, a nervous tremor running down the length of her spine at the sight of the carriage. It finally drew to a halt at the Hatcher residence and images of the dowager duchess assaulted her mind. Her Grace's spontaneous visit, a mere few hours after her letter had been received, felt more like an impending storm than a social call.

Lucy straightened her simple muslin gown. The Dowager Duchess of Northwick, her future mother-in-law . What was she like? She was renowned amongst the ton for her severe propriety. In fact, during her heydays, many believed the duchess more ruthless and formidable than her husband, the late duke.

Taking a deep breath, Lucy braced herself. The arrival of the dowager duchess was announced in booming tones by the footman, and soon, a tall, slender figure swept into the drawing room. Modesty, despite her advancing years, held herself with an air of icy regality. Her gaze, sharp as a hawk's, swept across the room, taking in the Hatcher family with barely disguised disapproval.

The Viscount and Viscountess of Pemberton huddled together on a small sofa, their faces creased with worry. Augustus rose to greet Modesty with a warm smile, a sharp contrast to the composed indifference on the dowager duchess’s face. Patience,

despite the occasion, wore a vibrant green tea gown, a color that clashed with the muted tones of the drawing room.

“Such a delightful surprise! Please, do come in.” Augustus carried on, oblivious to the suddenly strained atmosphere. Lucy did not miss the older lady’s not-so-subtle scrutiny of her mother. Patience, also not missing it and noticing Modesty's frown at her attire, offered a hesitant smile.

“Your Grace, it is an honor to welcome you into our home. I must say, this might be the first time our home would host first the duke, and now, the Dowager Duchess of Northwick, all within a full day. Would you care for some tea?”

Of course. What a monstrosity to behold! So unbefitting of the next Duchess of Northwick. What was Duncan thinking, marrying into such a family? Oh, the horror! The shame! The streets of London would go agog with such insanity. The Duke of Northwick marrying into such peasantry!

And tea? What in the heavens was that?! And what on God’s green earth was she doing here? It was all Duncan’s fault. Oh, she could feel a swoon coming. This was no place for a lady of her status to be.

“Thank you, but I fear chamomile is a touch too... bohemian for my constitution,” Modesty said, her voice clipped. “If only this visit had been more of will than duty.”

Patience's smile faltered slightly, a blush creeping up her cheeks. “Forgive me, Your Grace. ‘Tis only that it is a touch soothing.”

“Certainly. I understand it is a staple among the lower folk.” Clearly. Modesty noticed a young chit standing in the corner with a little boy, no doubt, the youngest in the family.

“Now, where is the girl to whom my son is to be wed?” Modesty continued, her voice devoid of warmth. Her eyes wandered for a brief moment before settling on... her. She just knew. And the disappointment hung heavy in her eyes.

“Your Grace,” she answered in a hushed tone, “it is I.”

With a glance to Lord and Lady Pemberton, Modesty made a slight wave. “I would like to address your girl as regards her roles and what is expected of her now that it is inevitable that she is to be married to my son,” Modesty sniffed. She still couldn’t accept that Duncan was hell-bent on marrying the girl. She tried not to think about it, but it kept her up at night.

“Oh,” Patience muttered and then turned to Lucy, “Is that okay with you, dear?”

Dear Lord, Modesty thought in alarm, seeking her permission? The family was worse than she thought.

“Yes, Mama,” Lucy replied meekly. She did not fail to notice the similarly shocked expression on the dowager duchess’s face as it had earlier been on her son, the duke.

The viscount and viscountess excused themselves and went about ushering the younger children out of the drawing room, only to be interrupted by the dowager duchess.

“Oh, there is no need to leave on my account,” Modesty offered, her tone of voice leaving little room for arguments. “Please, you are all welcome to stay. I only wish to educate the young lady and shall be on my way.”

Lord and Lady Pemberton shared a worried glance, but none could refuse the dowager duchess. “As you wish, Your Grace.” Patience replied, forcing a smile onto her cheeks.

“I wish it so,” Modesty said sternly.

Oh dear, Lucy’s thoughts flew in different directions. This was bound to be bad. She felt Caroline’s gaze and looked at her sister, acknowledging the strength in her eyes. It was all she could do to avoid fleeing the room altogether.

Modesty cleared her throat, her gaze settling on Lucy with an intensity that made her skin prickle. “There is much to learn, young lady,” she began, her voice laced with condescension. “As Duchess of Northwick, your life will be a far cry from the... informality... you are accustomed to,” the dowager duchess sniffed as if offended by Lucy’s very sight.

Lucy bristled internally. “Of course, Your Grace,” she replied, forcing a smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. “I understand the importance of my duties.”

Modesty leaned forward, her voice taking on a more instructive tone. “We shall talk about the household first, Lucy. ‘Tis a vast operation, with dozens of staff members who all have their specific roles. Most of what you have learned here would be useless. Nevertheless, there are expectations to be met. Unfortunately, the standard has been set so low. You will do well not to lower it any further. Is that understood?”

Lucy’s fingertips dug deeper into her dress, the strain on her fingers causing them to shine a bright pink. Her mind wandered in all directions. Was this how her life was to be? Forced to a condescending, prideful woman of a mother-in-law. And married to an insufferable man who had all but promised to be closed to her both in mind and body? Not that she yearned for his touch on her skin or his kiss on her lips... Focus, Lucy!

The duke had made it clear that it was a mere marriage of convenience, a union born from a mistake too dear to simply brush away. And from all indications, the dowager duchess had no intention of letting her displeasure go unnoticed.

Oh, how she wished a miracle could happen where the dowager duchess stepped on her dress. How amusing it would be to see her take a tumble.

“There's Mr. Higgins, the head butler, who oversees the entire staff and ensures the smooth running of the household. Then there's Mrs. Davies, the housekeeper, who manages the day-to-day chores and ensures the house is clean and comfortable. We have footmen who attend to the guests' needs, scullery maids who clean the kitchen and wash dishes, and a whole team of others who keep everything running like clockwork.

“So, I'll be responsible for overseeing all of them?”

“Precisely,” Modesty replied. “It is not like I stuttered now, did I?”

“No, you didn't, Your Grace,” Lucy sniffed.

“You will ensure they perform their duties efficiently. That would entail managing the household budget, ordering supplies, handling any staff grievances that may arise, and scheduling leave.”

“Sounds like a lot to manage,” Lucy admitted, a hint of nervousness creeping into her voice.

Modesty offered a curt nod. “It is. But a good duchess has a firm grasp on her household.” Lucy did not miss the double meaning behind the lady's words. “You will need to be organized, fair, and a good judge of character.”

Lucy straightened her shoulders, determined to meet the challenge. “I am a quick learner, Your Grace.”

“We have yet to see that. The Elkins have maintained their name and stature in

society for generations. And I intend for it to remain untainted any more than it already has.” Modesty cautioned.

Just then, Stephen stumbled from the chair he’d been sitting on whilst playing with his toys. Caroline reached him first, checking for bruises on his knees and elbows. Within moments, Patience had all but pulled him from the ground and placed him on a stool at the same time searching for bruises and cuts.

“You naughty scoundrel. I have warned you to stop being rough, but you never listen. You exhaust me, child.” Caroline huffed to which everyone except the dowager duchess laughed at. It seemed the little incident had caused them so much worry they had forgotten about their guest.

Lucy, however, did not forget. And for a moment, she saw what looked like disgust and...was that a hint of sadness written on the dowager duchess’s face? But it was gone in the blink of an eye, to be replaced by her usual condescending demeanor. Lucy must have imagined it.

Once again, Lucy was reminded of her family’s status and how little the family she was soon to join thought of them. With that look, there was no doubt that the dowager duchess thought them lowly to behave in such a manner.

“After you are wedded to my son, you must relinquish such sordid behaviors and act as required by your station.” Modesty advised.

But Lucy had had enough of the dowager duchess’s snide remarks. “Of course, Your Grace. I will ensure to close my heart and mind, and never do anything to cause even the littlest bit of laughter.” Lucy replied with a faint bow.

Modesty regarded Lucy for a moment and then slowly rose to her feet. “I have seen what I came to see, and I have said what I can. I shall take my leave, but shall say one

more thing,” she drew closer to Lucy.

“Whether or not you and your family have managed to entrap my son, I will uncover in due time. You counted on his honor to make him do the right thing. My only advice to you therefore is to remember your station, girl, and from whence you came. For he might be the Duke of Northwick, but I am his mother. And I shall not sit back and watch you all hang on to him for a lifeline.”

Lucy stilled, her blood turning to ice. Patience, who had by now noticed the tension in the drawing room rushed to their side. “Is anything the matter, Your Grace?” Patience asked and then turned to Lucy hoping for any sign at all. Bless her mother.

“I believe all to be well, Lady Pemberton.” Modesty replied and began to walk towards the door. “Oh, and lest I forget, the archbishop has graciously agreed to officiate the wedding ceremony two days from today. It shall be a small and quiet event. Good day Lady Pemberton, Miss Hatcher, and have a lovely evening.”

Lucy stormed up the stairs, the dowager duchess’s words echoing in her ears. Each cutting remark felt like a fresh wound. Reaching the sanctuary of her chambers, she slammed the door shut with a bang, the sound barely registering over the roar in her ears. Tears welled up in her eyes, blurring her vision.

Collapsing onto her bedding and pillows, she buried her face in her hands, sobs racking her entire frame. This was not the future she had envisioned. This marriage, born of necessity, felt like a prison sentence. A life devoid of love, of laughter, replaced by cold formality and a constant battle to maintain appearances.

A small voice startled her. “Lucy?”

Lucy quickly wiped her tears at the sound of Caroline’s voice, forcing a shaky smile. “Just a bit of dust in my eye, that’s all,” she called back, her voice thick with tears.

“Are you all right?” Caroline asked, stepping into the room.

Lucy sniffled, trying to maintain the facade. “Everything is fine, truly. I am only a bit overwhelmed.”

Her brows furrowed as she marched right up to Lucy. “Don't even try to lie to me, Lucy Hatcher. The duke's mother... her words... they hurt you, didn't they?”

The dam broke. Lucy threw her arms around Caroline, burying her face in her sister's shoulder as she let out a torrent of tears. Caroline held her sister tightly, her small hand stroking Lucy's hair in a comforting rhythm. “I'm so sorry, sister,” she murmured softly.

When the storm of tears subsided, Lucy pulled back, wiping her cheeks with the back of her hand. Shame burned in her eyes. “I'll be fine, sister.”

Caroline met her gaze, a fierce glint in her eyes. “You deserve better, Lucy, so much better. This duke, with his fancy title, doesn't deserve you.”

“But what choice do I have?” Lucy cried, her voice cracking. “This is the only way to save our family.”

Caroline's lips formed a determined line. “There has to be another way. We'll figure something out, together. But you can't throw your happiness away for this... this sham of a marriage.”

Lucy took a deep breath, trying to find a sliver of hope amidst the despair. But there was none.

“Oh, Caroline, I wish I could,” Lucy cried harder, “I have no choice. We are doomed if I don't do this. All of us! This is our only hope.” Stephen, his face streaked with

dirt, peeked in.

“What is the matter? Are you two all right?” A voice sounded at the door.

Caroline sighed. “This is girl talk, Stephen. You wouldn’t understand.”

But Stephen, for once, wouldn't be dismissed. He marched into the room, his small chest puffed out with determination. “I may not be a man,” he declared, “but you don’t look happy. Just know I’m here for you if you need me, Lucy. Always.”

Lucy’s heart swelled, her chest nearly bursting from emotions as she drew him in for a hug. “My little brother is all grown up. Thank you, Stephen,” she whispered, touched by his unwavering support. “That means the world to me.”

Stephen, satisfied that his presence was needed, nodded curtly and scurried out of the room, leaving his sisters alone. Caroline settled back onto the bed, her eyes fixed on Lucy.

“All right, he’s gone. You can tell me what the matter is.”

Lucy hesitated. She knew there was a spark, something so forbidden that had ignited within her. Could she confide in her younger sister? She didn’t even know how she felt. But seeing the genuine concern in her sister's eyes, she decided honesty was the best policy.

“It is not just the wedding, Caroline,” Lucy confessed, her voice barely a whisper. “It is... it is him.”

Caroline's eyebrows shot up. “Him? The duke?”

Lucy nodded, a blush creeping up her cheeks at the thought of him . “The dowager

duchess... she made it very clear they believe we're entrapping him.” There was a loud silence for a few seconds until the absurdity of it all hit Caroline, and a laugh escaped her lips.

“Entrapping him? You? Lucy, you wouldn't know how to entrap a fly, let alone a duke,” Caroline finished, her laughter softening into a warm smile.

Lucy couldn't help but smile back, a flicker of amusement chasing away the gloom. “Perhaps not,” she admitted. “But still, the idea that they see us in such a light...”

“It's infuriating, I know,” Caroline interjected. “But honestly, Lucy, who cares what they think? They are a bunch of pompous aristocrats who wouldn't recognize genuine affection if it bit them in the...”

Caroline's voice trailed off, a playful glint in her eyes. Lucy knew exactly what her sister was about to say, and a blush crept back up her cheeks.

“Don't even think about finishing that sentence, Caroline,” Lucy warned, though a smile tugged at the corners of her lips.

There was a brief moment of silence where both sisters simply stared, both aware that nothing they could do or say would change what was to come. And with a sigh of defeat, Lucy accepted that the dowager duchess was within her rights to imagine the worst.

It was neither inconceivable nor far-fetched to think that all of this was an elaborate plan to save her family's name. But how was Lucy to prove her innocence when all the facts lined up conveniently to point the other way?

Lucy turned to find Caroline deep in thought, and she smiled sadly. It would do her good to ponder over what already was. If there was a misconception about her family

and values, it was up to her to prove everyone wrong. Most especially the dowager duchess and that damned duke!

CHAPTER 9

“Y our Grace, will you be staying here tonight?”

She tried. Oh, she tried so hard but Lucy couldn’t help it. It had been an eventful day, and not in a good way. She just had to know. Duncan looked at her with a glimmer of astonishment as his eyes jerked up.

“Will I stay here?” he asked in a deep, rumbling voice.

She still couldn’t believe it. She was a married woman. This man, standing here in front of her was now her husband. It was hard to fathom.

And now, I pronounce you man and wife.

The words kept ringing in Lucy's ears, tormenting her with their falsehood. A farce. A bloody farce. That was all this marriage was. There was no other reason for him giving her the briefest of kisses in the corner of her mouth. Not when he had...No. She wouldn't go down that road.

Here she was—Lady Lucy Elkins, Duchess of Northwick. She felt like a fraud. Her body agreed and it stood, rigid from nerves and exhaustion. Her wedding ring felt oddly ominous on her finger; it was a thick band of gold set with a single, cold sapphire.

The previous hours had been a whirl of nervous meals in a room large enough to feed a small army, where Lucy sat opposite Duncan at an unending table, picking at her

food, her appetite stifled by the deafening silence.

Now, she couldn't take her eyes off the dark gloves on his palms. A persistent hunch had been festering in Lucy's head all day. She couldn't get rid of the impression that Duncan had purposefully left his gloves on during the wedding. Was it just a coincidence, or was there another reason?

Maybe he couldn't bear the thought of touching her. He couldn't stand the feel of her skin. Maybe he hated everything about her. That would not be far-fetched.

It was almost as if Lucy was attending a funeral and not her own wedding feast. But something had been niggling her brain. No. She should be quiet. After all, a good wife was to be seen and not heard. But she had to know their living arrangements.

Lucy's cheeks flushed. "I mean, in my chambers. Or am I to stay in your chambers?" Her heart hammered painfully in her chest. There was a tense stillness for a while.

"Do you even realize what it is you are asking, Duchess?" he finally said, his voice laced with a dangerous glint in his eyes. Duchess. She shivered at the word as her heart raced.

"I...I think so," she stammered, a flicker of defiance rising within her.

What else could it mean? Wasn't it the norm for couples and newlyweds to spend the night in the same room? Or was she mistaken? At least, it was what she assumed Papa and Mama did whenever it was time to retire for the night.

Lucy remembered noticing the slight look of worry on her mother's face just before she had followed the duke into his carriage. Was there something she was supposed to know?

The look the duke gave her was a mixture of amusement and something darker, something that sent a shiver down her spine. He pushed back his chair and rose to his full height, towering over her.

“This is a marriage of convenience, Duchess,” he said, his voice a low rumble. “We made a deal. I will never touch you. It was a promise I still intend to keep.”

Lucy's breath hitched. “Touch me?” she echoed, a bewildered frown creasing her forehead. “I...I didn't think you meant...” she trailed off.

Duncan's eyes narrowed. “And what did you think I meant?”

Lucy's cheeks burned scarlet. “Well, I...I thought you meant...” she stammered, unable to voice the unspoken desire that had bloomed within her during their stolen glances throughout the day.

Lucy stared as he took a menacing step closer, the air around them crackling with tension. Lucy stood her ground, her chin held high, though her heart pounded a frantic rhythm in her chest. They were mere inches apart now, the heat radiating from his body a sharp contrast to the chill in his eyes.

She was trembling. Oh, she knew it. It was the way he looked at her — like he would consume her if he could.

She was small, compared to his large frame, and he towered over her. She wanted him to touch her, to hold her, to caress her with those strong hands that seemed so close, yet so distant. And maybe even a kiss...

She allowed her eyes to linger over his body. She was his wife. She allowed her eyes to stray ever so slowly further from his face, losing her breath as her gaze fell upon the opening on his shirt created by a few loose buttons.

“This is not a game, Duchess,” Duncan finally said, his voice a low rasp as he moved away from her reach. “There will be no... misunderstandings.”

Lucy met his gaze, her own blazing with a mixture of anger and defiance. “Perhaps not,” she whispered, her voice surprisingly steady. “But I will not be treated like a... like a... possession.”

His jaw clenched and his eyes darkened even further. For a long moment, they stood locked in a silent battle of wills. She could swear there was a crackle in the air — one with unspoken emotions, the weight of their unspoken desires hanging heavy in the stifling silence.

But he wanted her . Or was she now seeing things? But she had seen the desire in his eyes. And she wanted a taste of it. It was the same as that night when they had been overcome by foolishness. Why had he leaned in then, but refuses to now when he had the rights?

And just as she had thought he might kiss her...he stepped back abruptly.

The tension dissipated as quickly as it had risen, leaving a cold emptiness in its wake.

“Get some rest, Duchess,” Duncan said, his voice devoid of emotion, as he turned to leave. “We have a long life ahead of us.”

Oh, she was very much aware. He never tired to remind her of it. “Is that it?” Lucy blurted, regaining her voice.

Duncan paused in his stride and turned to face her, “Is what what?” he asked, his voice not missing that familiar impatience and annoyance. However, this did little to deter the young duchess.

“Is this how our marriage is to be? How my life is to be?” Lucy near-yelled, the anger and frustrations of the last few days slowly creeping into her voice. “I never asked for any of this. I never asked for you to come to my father’s house and propose to me!”

“Neither did I.” Duncan near-growled. She didn't miss the tight control in his voice. “Neither did I. I have told you before and I will repeat it again since you seem hard of hearing. This marriage is one of convenience. And I’m quite certain your family received the longer end of the stick.”

“I—”

“And I will remind you that I do not appreciate being spoken to in such a manner. You will regard me with respect.” He bit out through clenched teeth.

Lucy stared back in shock. This was a fact she had known and come to accept, but having it thrown at her, and by her newly wedded husband caused a lump to form in her throat.

“I would not have accepted your generosity if I had known it would only be thrown back in my face.” Lucy replied in a quieter voice. “We would have found a way.”

He remained silent, not bothering to give a reply. Apparently, she wasn't worthy of one. This was it. This was her life now. And she had never felt so low.

“Have I offended you in any way, Your Grace?” Lucy asked, drawing closer to the duke.

“Not that I can recall.” He was distant. Aloof.

“If that is so, then why do you intend to deny me of your touch and the pleasures of marriage? Or do you only see me as a means to father an heir?” Lucy enquired.

If she was to be forcefully joined to a man as cold as the duke, she wished to at least get certain assurances that he would be gentle with her. She knew better than to envision a blissful marriage. If their wedding was any indicator, she would be lucky to grow old and happy.

Should the duke fail to provide her with happiness, she would find it in her children. And she would raise their offspring with all the love and care that she could muster. Her children must not grow up to be like their father. No! Not if she had anything to do with it!

“I believe you are mistaken...wife,” the duke’s voice pulled Lucy from her reverie. “I will not touch you. There will be no consummation. And therefore, there shall be no children. I hope that is crystal clear enough for you.”

His voice held no room for argument. And his words? They pierced harder than Lucy would ever admit. She had believed his words to mean he would deny her the joys and pleasures of a wife. But to think that he would deny her the pleasures of a mother...

“I... I...” Lucy stuttered. No words could quite capture the hollow feeling gaping in her chest; the devastation that threatened to envelop the entirety of her being.

“Get some rest, Duchess,” was all Duncan said in that time that brooked no argument before walking out into the darkness, leaving Lucy in the hall.

And like a ship captured by a raging storm with nowhere to lay anchor, Lucy wept harder than she had ever done before. Only this time, she had neither her mama nor Caroline to ease her worries.

For the first time in Lucy’s entire life, she felt truly alone.

CHAPTER 10

“Duchess.”

Duncan began, surprising Lucy as he broke the silence. “I believe it is time you familiarize yourself with your duties as the Lady of Northwick.”

Lucy startled out of her reverie, looked up from her breakfast of bacon fried to a crisp, the sunniest eggs she had ever seen, rich sausages, and the most delicious beans she had ever eaten. Only her taste buds seemed not to be working. Her tongue felt like paper.

“My duties?” A flicker of curiosity sparked in her honey-colored eyes.

“Indeed,” Duncan said, his gaze unwavering. “Managing the servants, overseeing household affairs, attending social gatherings – there is much to learn.”

Several days had passed since her arrival at Northwick Estate. The initial awkwardness of their new life together had settled into a tense familiarity. Breakfast was usually a silent affair, the only sounds were the clinking of silverware against china and the occasional muffled cough from a nearby servant.

The prospect of Lucy managing his household filled Duncan with a dull pleasure he hated to admit. He wondered if she was pleased. Maybe it could be a welcome distraction from the melancholic routine they seemed to have developed since their wedding night. Not that he didn't like it as it was.

“I would love to learn,” her small voice filtered through the air surprisingly steady.

Duncan nodded curtly and rose from the table. “Then shall we begin?” He waited a beat, debating whether to give her a hand. No. He wasn't changing for anyone, let alone her. He turned away but not before catching her crestfallen face. His heart threatened to pump harder at the sight, but he willed it away. This was who he was. There was no changing that.

“Follow along. We don't have all day.”

And in the corner of his eye, he saw her face drop even further. Good, I guess?

The vastness of the estate unfolded before them as Duncan led Lucy on a tour. He pointed out the sprawling gardens, the meticulously maintained hunting grounds, and the impressive stables that housed a collection of magnificent horses.

Lucy stopped short at the stable entrance, her eyes widening in delight. “Oh, good heavens, they're magnificent!” she exclaimed, her voice filled with genuine enthusiasm.

She moved closer to one of the stalls, a powerful black stallion with a coat that shimmered like polished obsidian. Duncan, a flicker of unease crossing his features, placed a gloved hand between her and the stallion.

“Careful, Duchess,” he cautioned, his voice devoid of warmth. “Horses can be unpredictable.”

“I understand,” she replied, a hint of defiance in her voice. “But surely a duchess should know how to handle a horse, wouldn't you agree?”

Duncan's jaw clenched. “There's a difference between understanding and actually

riding them,” he said stiffly. “It's hardly a ladylike pursuit.”

Lucy's smile faltered. “Unladylike?” she echoed, a touch of offense coloring her voice. “Since when did a woman's worth depend on her riding a horse or not? Whether she can ride a horse?”

Duncan hesitated, surprised by the fire in her eyes. “It is simply not...customary.”

“Customs be damned, be that the case,” Lucy retorted, a mischievous glint sparking in her eyes as a scandalous thought filtered into her head. “Tell you what, Your Grace, race.”

“A what?” Duncan's eyes widened.

“A race, Your Grace! When I win, you will admit that horse riding does not diminish a lady's worth.”

Duncan stared at her, momentarily stunned. He had to admit, he found her audacity and playful spirit strangely refreshing. Once again, he recalled the night they had met, and how much her eyes had glowed with a similar fire.

A smile, a genuine one, the first she had ever felt, tried worming its way to his face.

“A race?” he echoed, raising an eyebrow. A picture was beginning to form in his head. And liked he liked it. “Are you sure you would not be outmatched, Duchess?”

“Only one way to find out,” Lucy said, her chin held high. “Do you accept my challenge, Your Grace?”

Duncan's smile widened. This was unlike any duchess he had ever known. Hell, she was unlike any lady he had ever heard of. Here was a woman who wasn't afraid to

speaking her mind, a woman who wasn't afraid of a little friendly competition. It was invigorating.

"Very well," he said, a glint in his eyes. "But be warned, Duchess, I do not lose."

"Neither do I."

"Then, it shall be a hefty price." Duncan's eyes went brilliantly dark. She trembled ever so slightly but he didn't miss it. He hardly missed anything.

"What shall it be, Your Grace?" Lucy whispered.

"I know mine. You better know yours." And he tore himself away from her, lest he did something stupid. He got himself busy summoning a groom to prepare two horses. And soon they were both mounted, side by side in the vast training arena. The crisp morning air whipped at Lucy's hair as she adjusted her reins, a thrill of anticipation coursing through her veins.

"Ready, Duchess?" Duncan asked, his voice a low rumble.

Lucy met his gaze, her heart pounding in her chest. "Ready when you are, Your Grace."

And with a flick of his wrist, Duncan spurred his horse forward.

Lucy followed closely behind, the wind whistling past her ears as she urged her mount into a gallop. They were neck and neck, a blur of motion against the backdrop of the sprawling estate.

As they raced, the tension that had hung between them for days seemed to dissipate momentarily. Lucy reveled in the feeling of the wind in her hair, the sun on her face,

the exhilarating freedom of the ride. Glancing over, she caught a glimpse of the duke on his horse, a rare smile playing on his lips.

With a renewed burst of energy, she nudged her horse forward, pushing it to its limits.

Just as the marker for the finish line came into view, Lucy surged ahead, her mount crossing the threshold a hair's breadth before Duncans. She reigned in her horse, a triumphant grin plastered across her face.

Turning in the saddle, she scanned the field, searching for Dunan. There he was, a few lengths behinds horse slowing t a trot. An unexpected pang of disappointment shot through her. He hadn't even tried to win.

He dismounted with a practiced grace, his tall, imposing figure silhouetted against the clear blue sky. Lucy hopped down from mount, a triumphant glint in her hazel eyes.

“Looks like I win, Your Grace,” she declared, her voice slightly breathless but brimming with exhilaration.

Encouraged by their playful exchange, Lucy decided to savor the moment. Stepping away from her panting horse, she took a deep breath, filling her lungs with the crisp morning air. The sun, now climbing higher in the sky, cast a golden glow over the sprawling fields beyond the training arena. A gentle breeze rustled the leaves of the nearby trees, sending a symphony of rustling whispers through the air.

Duncan, having tethered their horses to a low-hanging branch of a nearby oak, walked towards her. As Lucy turned to face him, a shocking sensation shot through her. His hair, usually meticulously styled, was windblown and slightly disheveled, adding a touch of untamed charm to his handsome featues. The sunlight glinted off the silver embroidery that adorned his riding jacket, a stark contrast to the deep blue

of his eyes.

Suddenly, she felt a warmth blooming in her chest, a feeling that went far beyond the thrill of victory. She closed her eyes for a moment, picturing a life wheredukeduke wasn't so distant, where their relationship wasn't built on a foundation of unfortunate circumstances and wary glances.

What if, she thought, his eyes were always filled with such amusement, what if his lips were always curved in a playful smile like they were moments ao? Could they build a life together, a life filled with laughter, shared dreams, and a love that defied the constraints of their prearranged marriage?

Just as quickly as the vision materialized, it dissolved. Opening her eyes, she found him standing a few feet away, his expression unreadable. The playful banter, the shared moment of connection, seemed like a distant dream.

He cleared his throat, breaking the comfortable silence. "So, Duchess," he said, his voice a low rumble, "enjoying the view?"

Lucy realized she had been staring at him, lost in thoughts. A blush crept up her cheeks as she forced a smile. "The view is lovely," she stammered, gesturing towards the sprawling fields that stretched out before them. A patchwork of emerald green and golden yellow, dotted with vibrant wildflowers, painted a breathtaking landscape. In the distance, a few chickens clucked around a makeshift coop, and a gaggle of ducks waddled toward a glistening pond. The scene was idyllic, a stark contrast to the turmoil brewing within her.

"Yes, it is," he said, his gaze following hers. His voice softened slightly, "These fields are the lifeblood of Northwick. Hard-working farmers who toil from sunrise to sunset."

His words brought her back to reality. “Farmers?” she echoed, a flicker of curiosity sparking in her eyes. “I haven't had the pleasure of meeting any of the townspeople yet.”

Duncan's expression turned slightly guarded. “There will be time for that soon enough, Duchess,” he said, his voice regaining its usual formal tone. “There's much you need to learn about the responsibilities that come with your position.”

A glimmer of disappointment flickered across Lucy's features, a tiny flame extinguished before it could truly ignite. She had yearned for a more personal conversation, a glimpse of the man who resided beneath the duke's mask of stoicism. A connection, however fleeting, beyond the formalities and unspoken tension that hung heavy between them.

Just then, a group of men emerged from a nearby copse of trees, their faces etched with worry. Duncan's shoulders tensed as they approached, their caps clutched in their hands.

“Your Grace,” one of them began, his voice raspy, “we were hoping to speak with you regarding the upcoming planting season.”

Duncan nodded curtly. “What seems to be the problem, Thomas?”

“The grain stores, Your Grace,” Thomas continued, his brow furrowed. “The harsh winter has depleted our reserves, and we fear there won't be enough for the coming planting season.”

A thoughtful frown settled on Duncan's face. He glanced at Lucy, who was listening intently to the conversation. Her brow was furrowed in concern, and a flicker of something akin to admiration sparked in her eyes. Perhaps, he thought, there was more to her than he initially gave her credit for.

“Do not fret, Thomas,” Duncan said finally, his voice firm yet reassuring. “We shall see to it that your stores are replenished. I shall have one of my merchants send a shipment from the reserve soon.”

Relief washed over the men's faces, replaced by a chorus of grateful thanks. Lucy watched the exchange, a newfound respect for the duke blossoming within her. Here was a man who took his responsibility as duke seriously, a man who cared for the well-being of his people. It was a side he had kept from her.

Was he truly this compassionate and caring? If that were the case, was there a way to breach the walls of his heart?

As the farmers dispersed, Duncan turned back to Lucy, his expression unreadable. “There you have it, Duchess,” he said, a hint of challenge in his voice. “A glimpse into the daily affairs of a duke.”

Emboldened by their playful exchange, Lucy felt a surge of curiosity mixed with a newfound desire. She moved closer to Duncan, the air crackling with a sudden tension that wasn't entirely unwelcome. His presence was an irresistible force, drawing her in like a moth to a flame.

Lucy's gaze drifted down to his hands, strong and sure in their leather riding gloves. They weren't the pale, delicate hands of the noblemen she was accustomed to. These hands spoke of a life lived beyond the confines of opulent drawing rooms, hands that had gripped reins and wielded swords, hands that held the strength of the land itself.

Driven by an irresistible urge, Lucy reached out, her fingers brushing against the worn leather of his forearm. A jolt shot through her, a spark of awareness that sent a blush creeping up her neck. She could feel the solid muscle beneath the fabric, the undeniable strength coiled within him.

Intrigued, she traced a finger along his arm, a silent question hanging in the air. What secrets did these hands hold? Somehow, she imagined they would be rough and weathered, a map of his experiences etched into every callus and crease.

Just as her fingertips brushed against his glove, a flicker of something dark crossed Duncan's features. His hand shot up, swatting hers away with a force that surprised her. The warmth in his eyes was replaced by a chilling coldness that sent shivers down her spine.

"Don't," he said, his voice a low growl. The playful banter had evaporated, replaced by a tense silence that hung heavy in the air.

Lucy recoiled, her hand stinging from the unexpected contact. Confusion and hurt clouded her features. "What's wrong?" she stammered.

Duncan stared at her, his jaw clenched tight. He seemed to be battling an internal war, his emotions a tempestuous sea beneath the surface. Finally, he took a deep breath, his voice regaining a semblance of control.

"Just...stay away from me," he said, his words clipped.

Lucy stared at him, her heart sinking. The playful camaraderie they had shared moments ago felt like a cruel illusion. "But why?" she whispered.

Duncan turned away from her, his gaze fixed on a distant point. "It's not that simple, Duchess," he said, his voice laced with a weariness that belied his age. "There are... things you don't understand."

Lucy longed to press him, to demand an explanation, but something in his demeanor held her back. An unspoken plea, a vulnerability she hadn't seen before.

Taking a deep breath, she forced a smile, her voice trembling slightly. “Or what?” she challenged, a flicker of her earlier defiance returning.

For the first time since their wedding, a strange sense of pride settled in his stomach. Having her by his side, witnessing her concern for his people, filled him with a warmth he hadn't felt in years. It was a feeling he couldn't quite define, a tangled mess of emotions woven with a thread of... something more.

His gaze lingered on her slender arms, the way the sunlight danced across the soft skin peeking out from beneath the rolled sleeves of her riding dress. He was mesmerized by her boldness, by the way she challenged him with her playful banter and her unwavering curiosity. Only a few days ago, she had been a stranger. Now, he didn't know anymore.

He could not deny it – he liked the way her fingers felt against his arm, a fleeting brush that sent a jolt through him. It was a spark of awareness, a sudden awakening to a desire he hadn't allowed himself to acknowledge. Standing perfectly still, every muscle in his body tensed with restraint. He yearned to reach for her, to press his body against hers and drown himself in the warmth he craved.

The air between them crackled with a forbidden desire, a tangible current that made his breath hitch. He watched, mesmerized, as her gaze drifted down to his hands. The boldness in her eyes sent a tremor through him.

He detested it. Hated it. But he ached for more. The touch, fleeting as it was, had ignited a fire within him, a hunger for a kind of intimacy he had long denied himself.

But as she attempted to remove his gloves, a sudden fear threatened to engulf him. Moved purely by instinct, he retreated. It was the only way he knew how to handle such matters. There was no telling how she would react if he were suddenly to freeze at her touch.

Then, Lucy's voice, laced with a hint of defiance, shattered the fragile tension. "Or what?" she challenged.

Duncan's blood ran cold. Here he was, trying to shield her from a curse he had come to claim as his own. Here he was, trying to keep his distance, to protect himself from her, and she went ahead and threw down a gauntlet. Frustration and anger flared within him.

He took a menacing step towards her, his jaw clenched tight. He saw the flicker of fear dance in her eyes – a fear he desperately wanted her to feel. If she were only a bit more wary, perhaps she wouldn't be so inclined to test his boundaries.

He closed the distance between them, his movements predatory. Her back hit the rough bark of a nearby tree, the sudden movement catching her breath. He leaned closer until his shadow engulfed her. He wanted to intimidate her, to make her understand the gravity of his warnings. But he saw no fear. Instead, he saw a spark of defiance ignite in her hazel eyes, eyes so deep and captivating they threatened to pull him under.

Why? Why was she so stubborn? Why wouldn't she see this was in her best interest? She was pushing him. And he could feel the fire raging in his blood. He had tried to keep his distance, to keep her away from him. But she just would not stay put.

And before he could fully comprehend his actions, he closed the remaining distance between them. Her skin was smooth and her lips... inviting. Her jutted chin, arched in defiance, called to him. The beating of his heart against his chest intensified, and Duncan feared for the thoughts that swirled within his head.

He wanted to take her there and then, to bend her to his will, to show her a tip of what would happen if he were to let himself go.

The thought of Lucy pinned beneath him lingered longer than he wished, and in that moment, the yearning simmering beneath the surface boiled over. He leaned in further, the space between them shrinking to a mere whisper. The curse, the danger – it all faded away as his lips met hers in a searing kiss.

Her lips were soft, parting in surprise at the suddenness of his advance. But the surprise quickly melted into a hesitant exploration.

His earlier frustration forgotten, Duncan devoured her response with a hunger that surprised even him. He tasted the sweetness of wild honey she'd enjoyed earlier that morning, a hint of rebellion dancing on her tongue.

It was a storm, a whirlwind of all the repressed desires and unspoken emotions he had felt. He pressed his body against hers, the solid warmth of him a stark contrast to the cool bark at her back. One hand cupped her cheek, his thumb tracing the soft line of her jaw, a silent apology for his earlier brusqueness.

She responded with a fervor that mirrored his own. Her arms, which had been pinned by his proximity to the tree, snaked around his neck, her fingers digging into the crisp fabric of his riding jacket. She met his heated kiss with a passion that both surprised and exhilarated him.

The taste of her, the feel of her body pressed against his, sent a thrill of exquisite sensation coursing through him... It was a forbidden pleasure, a reckless indulgence he knew he shouldn't allow himself. Yet, he couldn't seem to tear himself away. The curse, the darkness he held within, seemed to recede for a moment, pushed back by the intensity of their connection.

The world around them faded, replaced only by the sound of their frantic panting hearts. The rustling leaves and chirping birds were muted by the intensity of the kiss.

Consumed by his passion, he traced the curves of Lucy's back, his touch sending shivers down her spine. Her fingers tangled in his hair, urging him closer when suddenly, a chilling numbness spread through his hand like a wave of icy water, dousing the flames of desire and jolting him back to reality. He tore away from her, his breath ragged.

Lucy, confused and breathless, stared up at him with wide, questioning eyes. Shame washed over Duncan as he saw the disappointment cloud her features. He clenched his fists, the numbness creeping up his arm.

Keeping his distance, he realized with a jolt of fear, was far harder than he ever imagined.

CHAPTER 11

“Welcome, Your Grace,” Lucy greeted, her voice overly bright and cheerful, “We've been expecting you.”

Modesty inclined her head in a curt nod, her gaze sweeping over Lucy for a fleeting moment before landing on the grounds beyond. “I suppose seeing as you're married to my son, the duke, I ought to refer to you as Your Grace from now on?” she asked with a chuckle. And without giving a moment's rest, she added, “The journey was... acceptable.”

Lucy offered her arm, a gesture Modesty ignored as she walked past her towards the entrance and her heart sank. Inside, a fire crackled merrily in the hearth, casting flickering shadows across the opulent drawing room. A young maid hurried forward, her hands laden with a silver tray bearing a steaming teapot and delicate porcelain cups.

“May I offer you some tea, Your Grace?” Lucy inquired as the maid set the tray down on a low table.

Modesty sniffed the air disdainfully. “Chamomile again,” she declared, her voice laced with disapproval. “Too common. Perhaps a Darjeeling would be more appropriate.”

The young maid, clearly flustered, curtsied and hurried out to rectify the mistake. Lucy watched her go, a tight smile plastered on her face. Modesty's disapproval, though subtly delivered, was unmistakable.

Taking a seat across from the dowager duchess, Lucy tried to make conversation. “I trust your journey was uneventful?” she ventured.

“Uneventful,” Modesty repeated, her eyes darting down to Lucy's gown. “Though perhaps a bit dusty. One would expect the roads leading to a duke's estate to be kept in better condition.”

Lucy fought back a frown. “The recent rains have been quite heavy,” she offered mildly.

“Indeed,” Modesty continued, her voice dripping with condescension. “Being a duchess requires a great deal more than simply existing. One must learn to act, to speak, and yes, even to dress befitting of one's station.”

Lucy's heart sank. This was not the warm welcome she had hoped for. Modesty's comment, though seemingly innocuous, was a clear critique of her riding attire. It was the first of many subtle jabs Lucy would receive that afternoon.

Through gritted teeth, Lucy attempted to maintain a pleasant demeanor. The conversation, however, remained strained. Modesty spoke of court politics and societal expectations, subjects that felt distant and irrelevant to Lucy.

After what felt like an eternity, a knock on the door brought a welcome interruption. It was the duke, his brow furrowed in concern as he noticed the strained atmosphere in the room.

“Mother,” he greeted, his voice laced with a hint of tension. “I trust your journey was pleasant?”

Modesty offered him a tight smile. “Pleasant enough, although one would think the Duke of Northwick would ensure the roads are properly maintained.”

Duncan's jaw clenched briefly. "We shall get to it soon, Mother."

His sentence was interrupted by Modesty's raised hand. "Enough about the weather, Duncan," she said, her voice sharp. "What I truly find concerning is... your wife's... attire."

"And what about it?"

"It is most concerning. It is so dull and cheap, nothing befitting of her status. And?—"

"I will not tolerate you speaking down on my wife, Mother. I will let you know that."

"But, Duncan, I am only stating the fact. She is?—"

"Mother, enough!" Duncan said with an exasperated sigh.

Lucy felt a flush creep up her neck as she became the subject of scrutiny.

"But, Duncan?—"

"You forget your place, Mother. I have made my decision. And her attire is entirely appropriate for a ride through the country."

"Appropriate for a ride, perhaps," Modesty retorted, "but hardly suitable for a duchess. A woman in her position must learn to dress the part, wouldn't you agree, Lucy?" Her eyes gleamed with a malicious glint.

Lucy, determined not to fall for her baiting, met her gaze head-on. "Indeed, Your Grace," she replied, her voice calm and resolute. "I understand the importance of proper attire for a woman of my position. Perhaps you could offer some guidance? I wouldn't want to make any further faux pas."

The challenge in her voice was subtle, but Modesty clearly recognized it. A flicker of surprise crossed her face, replaced by a haughty sniff.

“Guidance, you say? Very well then. A duchess must project an air of elegance and refinement at all times. Her wardrobe should reflect that – no more of these... utilitarian riding garments.” She gestured dismissively towards Lucy's emerald gown, a clear dismissal of her taste.

“I see,” Lucy said, a spark of defiance in her voice. She had grown tired of everyone turning their noses up at them. “Perhaps a visit to a seamstress is in order? One who specializes in the latest fashions for ladies of the court?”

A triumphant smile played on Modesty's lips. “An excellent suggestion, Duchess Lucy. There's a very talented woman in the village square. I believe a Mrs. Hawthorne?”

Duncan, who had been a silent observer until this point, cleared his throat. “Actually, Mother,” he interjected, “since the duchess's sense of propriety is in question, perhaps you should accompany her, as you yourself are a woman of such fine tastes?”

The suggestion hung in the air. Lucy watched as a flicker of something akin to annoyance crossed Modesty's face. Clearly, she hadn't anticipated an outing that included both of them.

“Together?” Modesty echoed, her voice laced with disbelief. “I would rather gobble down on that awful tea her family so distastefully prefers.”

“I can have that arranged, Mother.” Duncan offered. His eyes held a boldness in them that both encouraged and frightened Lucy. Even the imperious Modesty stood no chance against the sternness of his face.

But however pleased she was at Modesty being cautioned, it did little to sway the feeling of discomfort she felt knowing that his mother would turn her displeasure on her once the duke was out of the way.

Duncan, however, didn't miss the shift in Lucy's composure. He knew all too well the lengths his mother could take in order to have her way in certain matters. Perhaps he had been too hasty to pair his mother and Lucy for a shopping trip. There was only one way to ensure chaos could not ensue.

"There is, however, the matter of the roads in my domain lacking maintenance," Duncan announced, eyeing Lucy's reaction. "I shall accompany you on your trip as a way to take stock of the issues myself."

Modesty protested the idea. "Isn't that a bit unconventional? Surely there are more pressing matters that require a duke's attention." But Lucy heaved a small sigh of relief. She was loath to spend a moment alone with her mother-in-law.

Duncan's jaw tightened slightly, but his voice remained steady. "Your antics tire me mother, and my patience has grown thin." Then he added as an afterthought, "Besides, perhaps you could offer some much-needed guidance to Mrs. Hawthorne as well."

The dowager duchess's lips pursed in a thin line. She clearly wasn't thrilled with the idea, but she couldn't find a valid reason to object. With a sigh of resignation, she conceded.

"Very well then. A visit to the seamstress it is. But I must warn you, Lucy, Mrs. Hawthorne's taste can be a bit rustic at times."

Lucy offered a gracious smile, the challenge in her eyes still lingering. "I'm sure I can manage, Your Grace. After all, a duchess must be adaptable, wouldn't you agree?"

The following morning dawned bright and clear. The carriage rattled through the cobbled streets of the village square, drawing curious glances from the townspeople. Lucy, adorned in a simple traveling dress, felt a tremor of excitement course through her. This wasn't just a shopping trip; it was a subtle battleground, a test of wills between her and the formidable dowager duchess.

The shop itself was a quaint affair, its windows adorned with mannequins draped in an assortment of colorful fabrics. A tiny bell chimed as they entered, and a plump woman with a warm smile emerged from the back room.

“Welcome, welcome!” she boomed, her voice as bright as the floral print dress she wore. “The Duchess of Northwick! And the dowager duchess as well, what a pleasure!”

Modesty offered a curt nod, her gaze already scanning the racks of clothing with disdain. Lucy, however, couldn't help but be charmed by Mrs. Hawthorne's infectious enthusiasm.

“Now then, Duchess Lucy,” Mrs. Hawthorne chirped, her eyes twinkling. “Tell me all about the kind of gowns you envision for yourself. Something elegant for court functions? Perhaps a riding ensemble that's both practical and stylish?”

Lucy glanced at Duncan, his piercing gaze offering her some comfort. “I trust your judgment, Mrs. Hawthorne,” she said, deciding to take the lead. “Perhaps something that reflects my own style, but also adheres to the expectations of my position.”

Mrs. Hawthorne clapped her hands together in delight. “Exactly! Now, let's see what treasures we can find...”

The next hour flew by in a dizzying display of fabric and lace. Mrs. Hawthorne unveiled gown after gown, each one more breathtaking than the last. Lucy's gaze

lingered on a sapphire dress. The dress struck a perfect balance between elegance and practicality. It flowed into a slight train, graceful for a grand entrance but wouldn't snag on a saddle.

As she held the dress up to herself, she caught a glimpse of Modesty's reflection in the mirror. The dowager duchess's lips were pressed into a thin line.

Lucy knew that disapproving look all too well. It was a silent judgment, a clear message that the sapphire dress, while lovely, wasn't quite "Duchess material" in Modesty's eyes. Undeterred, Lucy turned towards Mrs. Hawthorne, a playful glint in her eyes.

"This one is quite beautiful, wouldn't you agree, Mrs. Hawthorne?" she asked, her voice dripping with feigned innocence.

The seamstress beamed. "Absolutely, Duchess! The color compliments your complexion perfectly. And the fabric, oh my, it's the finest silk! Perfect for a lady of your stature."

Modesty cleared her throat, the sound sharp and dismissive. "While the color is passable," she drawled, "the style seems a tad simplistic, wouldn't you say? A duchess requires a certain level of grandeur in her attire."

Lucy felt a flicker of annoyance, but she maintained her composure. "Perhaps, Dowager Duchess," she countered politely. "But I also believe a duchess needs an outfit she can feel comfortable and confident in. This dress strikes a balance between elegance and practicality, which I find quite appealing."

Mrs. Hawthorne, sensing the subtle tension in the air, chimed in with a solution. "Of course, Duchess Lucy! We could always add a touch of grandeur! Perhaps a beautiful jeweled brooch or a detachable train for more formal occasions?"

Lucy's eyes lit up. "That's a wonderful idea, Mrs. Hawthorne! It allows for versatility, which is something I truly appreciate."

Modesty, however, wasn't finished yet. Her gaze drifted to a rack adorned with a gown of emerald green velvet, the fabric stiff and heavy. "Now, this is more like it," she declared, her voice dripping with approval. "A rich color, a luxurious fabric... a true statement piece for a duchess."

Lucy turned to the emerald monstrosity, her heart sinking. It looked like something a dragon might wear to a ball, cumbersome and far from practical. "It is quite... striking," she managed, her voice devoid of enthusiasm.

"Striking?" Modesty scoffed. "It's magnificent! A gown like that would surely turn heads at any court function."

Duncan, who had been watching the exchange silently until now, finally spoke up. "Mother," he said, his voice low and firm, "Lucy can choose whatever gown she feels comfortable in. I'm sure Mrs. Hawthorne can alter anything to suit her needs."

Modesty's lips pursed into a thin line, but before she could retort, Lucy noticed a particular dress hanging at the back of the shop. It was a simple yet stunning creation, crafted from pale lavender silk that shimmered like moonlight.

But the thought of the dowager duchess's disapproving sniff was enough to send a shiver down Lucy's spine. She wouldn't dare wear anything that might bring down the formidable woman's wrath. With a defeated sigh, Lucy turned away from the alluring lavender dress, her heart heavy with disappointment.

"Here, try this," Modesty suggested from the few she favored.

Lucy eyed the dress suspiciously. The fabric, a luxurious blue silk, flowed from a

fitted bodice into a skirt that cascaded down like a waterfall. It was undeniably elegant. But a shiver ran down Lucy's spine. The icy blue felt a touch... severe, entirely different from the kind of dresses she loved.

"A most intriguing shade, Dowager Duchess," Mrs. Hawthorne purred, hurrying towards the gown. "A perfect choice for the new duchess when she shows herself to society for the first time."

Lucy felt a pang of apprehension. While she admired the gown's cut, she couldn't help but worry the icy blue might wash her out entirely. As Mrs. Hawthorne held the dress for the dowager duchess's inspection, Lucy stole a glance at Duncan. His brow furrowed slightly as if he sensed her growing unease.

"What do you think, Lucy?" Duncan asked, breaking his silence.

Lucy hesitated, caught between the dowager duchess's suggestion and her own desires. "It's...certainly stunning," she admitted, her voice lacking conviction.

"It's marvelous, that's what it is." Modesty declared triumphantly.

Lucy managed a weak smile. The dress was indeed beautiful, but it did little to offset the gnawing feeling at the pit of her stomach. The dress would hardly look natural on her frame. It was a far cry from her usual attire, and although now a duchess, she knew the dress would only sate Modesty's antics but for a little while.

"If I might impose on you, Your Grace, I would like to retire for the day," Lucy asked, turning to Duncan. "I fear being away from our home for so long might put me under the weather."

Modesty seemed to be enjoying herself and was reluctant to leave, "Perhaps the duchess is overwhelmed by the countless dashing dresses on display?"

Lucy strained to contain her distaste for the dowager duchess's rude remark. Duncan, on the other hand, gave her a nod of approval.

"If you'll excuse me, Your Grace," Lucy said, excusing herself and returning to their carriage stationed outside without waiting to see the look of disapproval on Modesty's face who soon followed along.

Meanwhile, Duncan, who had earlier noticed Lucy admiring the lavender dress, without a word, approached Mrs. Hawthorne and discreetly purchased it.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 1:04 am

CHAPTER 12

“Come in,” Duncan called out, his voice laced with a hint of surprise at the soft knock on his study door that had startled him from his paperwork.

The door creaked open, revealing Lucy standing hesitantly on the threshold. A mischievous glint sparkled in her eyes, and her smile hinted at a secret to be revealed.

“Wife,” Duncan greeted, a genuine smile warming his features. “There you are. I was just about to send for you.”

“Can it wait, Your Grace?” she asked, her voice bubbling with excitement. “I have something wonderful to show you!”

Earlier that morning, Lucy had discovered two mannequins adorned in the spoils of her recent shopping trip lying in wait for her in the drawing room.

One was the breathtaking icy-blue gown, a vision of delicate elegance that had stolen the show at Mrs. Hawthorne's. But her gaze had immediately snagged on the other – the gorgeous lavender dress Duncan had purchased. A surge of warmth washed over her. Determined to express her gratitude, Lucy had then set off in search of her husband.

“Okay, what is it?” Duncan replied, setting aside the document in his hand.

With a flourish, she held out a wrapped package, her voice bubbling with anticipation. “Close your eyes!” she commanded playfully.

Intrigued, Duncan complied, a chuckle escaping his lips. The rustle of paper filled the air as Lucy unwrapped the package, followed by a moment of teasing silence. Finally, she spoke, her voice laced with a barely contained thrill. "Open your eyes!"

Duncan obeyed, and his breath caught in his throat. There, before him, hung a stunning silk lavender gown. The light caught the fabric, making it shimmer with an ethereal glow. But it wasn't just the dress itself that stole his breath away; it was the way Lucy's eyes lit up with pure joy as she held it up.

A slow smile spread across Duncan's face. "Do you like it?" he asked.

He knew, with absolute certainty, that he had made the right choice. The dress accentuated Lucy's every curve in a way that sent a pleasant jolt through him. It was elegant yet playful, perfectly capturing her vivacious spirit.

"It's... it's beautiful, Duncan," Lucy breathed, her voice filled with awe. "But how did you..."

"Intuition, I guess," he replied. "We are man and wife now. Of course, I would give you whatever you desire."

Lucy's cheeks flushed a rosy pink. Overcome with a wave of emotion – joy, relief, and a deep appreciation for Duncan's thoughtfulness – Lucy rushed towards him.

Before he could react, she was across the room, her arms wrapping around him in a spontaneous hug. Duncan's breath hitched. The sudden contact was a jolt, sending a wave of disorientation through him. In that fleeting moment, his vision blurred, and for a horrifying instant, he saw not Lucy, but his younger sister, Gertrude, clinging to him in a desperate embrace.

Panic surged through him. He reacted instinctively, pushing Lucy away with a force

that sent her staggering back a few steps. The look of hurt and confusion that washed over her face was a punch to the gut.

Her eyes welled up with sudden tears. “I... I just wanted to thank you,” she stammered, her voice trembling.

He ran a hand through his hair, his expression a stormy mixture of guilt and anger. “There's no need,” he muttered, avoiding her gaze.

Lucy, her heart heavy with a growing sense of betrayal, took a step back. “I apologize,” she choked out, her voice laced with hurt. “I won't... I won't make that mistake again.”

Each word, though intended as an apology, dripped with unspoken anger and resentment. It was entirely different from the warmth and enthusiasm she had felt only moments ago.

The silence stretched, thick and heavy. Lucy watched Duncan, desperately trying to decipher the turmoil brewing behind his icy blue eyes. Finally, unable to bear the tension any longer, she turned and walked away, leaving a trail of unspoken hurt in her wake.

Duncan watched her go, a knot of guilt tightening in his stomach. He knew, deep down, that he had overreacted. The brief contact, the innocent hug, had triggered a torrent of unwanted memories – the warmth of his sister's embrace, the hollowness of her loss.

He had pushed Lucy away, not out of malice, but out of fear. Fear of the past resurfacing, fear of getting too close, fear of allowing himself to be vulnerable again.

But as the door shut softly behind Lucy, leaving him alone in the sterile confines of

his study, another emotion washed over him – a fierce protectiveness. He had seen the hurt flicker across her beautiful face, heard the tremor in her voice, and a primal urge to comfort her coursed through him.

He slammed his fist against the mahogany desk, the sound echoing through the room. The anger at himself was a bitter pill to swallow. He had to fix this. But how?

The sound of footsteps approaching from the corridor gave him pause. He straightened his tie, schooling his expression into a semblance of calm as the door creaked open. It wasn't Lucy, however. It was Charles, his manservant.

“Your Grace,” Charles began, his brow furrowed with concern. “Is everything all right? I heard a noise...”

Duncan forced a smile. “Just a minor frustration, Charles. Nothing to worry about.”

“Very well, Your Grace,” Charles replied, his gaze lingering on Duncan for a moment longer than usual. “However, if there is anything I can do...”

“Thank you, Charles,” Duncan cut him off, appreciating the man's loyalty.

With that, Charles exited the room. Duncan used the moment to collect himself. He needed a plan. An apology. A way to bridge the chasm his overreaction had created. He admired Lucy to an extent, and the thought of her hurt because of him made his heart ache.

Nearly an entire week had passed since his outburst, and the once vibrant warmth in Northwick Estate felt shrouded in a veil of simmering tension. Lucy kept herself meticulously occupied, her laughter now a distant echo in the vast halls. Duncan, burdened by guilt, found his days consumed by work and his nights restless.

One afternoon, a carriage pulled up, bringing the familiar herald of a delivered letter. Duncan had just arrived from an inspection at the stables and was on his way to his study when he was approached by a young maid named Anna carrying a silver tray piled high with envelopes.

Duncan stopped, his gaze scanning the letters. "Good afternoon, Anna," he greeted politely. "The post has arrived already, I see?"

Anna bobbed a curtsey. "Yes, Your Grace. Fresh from the village this morning."

As Duncan moved closer to the tray, his fingers brushed against a letter with a London postmark. It was addressed to Lucy. Here, he saw an opportunity – a chance for a reconciliation, however fragile.

"Ah," Duncan murmured, feigning disinterest as he glanced at the remaining envelopes. "And is there anything else that requires my immediate attention?"

Anna scanned the tray. "No, Your Grace. Just the usual household correspondence."

Duncan cleared his throat. "Excellent. In that case," he said, picking up the letter addressed to Lucy, "Take the rest to the drawing room. I shall deliver this myself."

"Your Grace," Anna greeted, and departed, leaving Duncan to go in search of his wife.

He found Lucy in her favorite nook by the window in their private chambers. Sunlight streamed through the lace curtains, bathing the room in a soft glow. Lucy sat curled up in a plush armchair, a book open on her lap, but her gaze was distant, lost in thought.

Duncan hesitated for a moment at the doorway, the weight of unspoken apologies

clogging his throat. Then, he cleared his throat softly.

Lucy's head snapped up, her eyes widening in surprise. A flicker of something akin to pain crossed her face before she schooled her expression into a polite smile. "Duncan," she greeted, her voice slightly strained.

"Lucy," he replied, his voice husky with unspoken emotions. He held up the letter in his hand. "This came for you."

She rose gracefully and walked towards him, taking the letter with a murmured thanks. The paper was crisp and white, the familiar Pemberton family crest embossed on the seal.

Duncan watched her as she broke the seal, a pang of guilt twisting in his gut. He longed to reach out, to comfort her, but the memory of her hurt expression held him back.

"Everything all right?" he finally dared to ask, his voice gentle.

Of course everything could not be all right, Lucy thought.

"It's from Mother," she replied, her voice devoid of its usual warmth. "Just family news, nothing urgent."

The silence stretched, heavy and uncomfortable. Duncan knew he couldn't leave it like this. He took a deep breath, his resolve solidifying.

"Lucy," he finally choked out. "I owe you an apology."

She remained silent, the tension in the room thick enough to cut with a knife.

“The way I reacted the other day...” he continued, his voice low and strained. “It was... unforgivable. I had no right to push you away.”

Lucy finally turned back to him, her eyes filled with a mixture of sadness and defiance. “It was my fault, Duncan,” she said, her voice surprisingly steady. “I should have been more... mindful of your boundaries.”

“Boundaries?” he echoed, his brow furrowing in confusion.

“Yes.” She took a deep breath. “Where I come from, we are open with our feelings, and we show our affection through hugs, kisses... ‘tis how we were brought up.”

A pang of longing shot through Duncan. He'd grown up in a household where affection was a carefully measured commodity, dispensed with a stiffness that made warmth seem like a distant dream. He could only imagine a life where hugs were commonplace, where closeness wasn't a guarded privilege.

The image of Lucy, however, brought a different kind of ache to his chest. He replayed the memory of their last encounter in the fields – the way her body had fit perfectly against his, the unexpected jolt of his heart as he felt the warmth of another human being, a beautiful, intriguing human being like Lucy. The affection he'd harbored for her had grown steadily, making her sudden coldness all the more unbearable.

“But I am sorry. I shall henceforth refrain from such gestures.” Lucy added.

“No,” Duncan interjected, his voice firm. A pang of envy shot through him. He craved the warmth of a family, the comfort of uninhibited affection. “I know,” he confessed, his voice rough with unspoken longing. “And... that's what I want. I don't wish for you to hold back, Lucy.”

Her eyes widened in surprise. “You... you don't?”

He shook his head, a reluctant smile playing on his lips. “No. The truth is, Lucy, seeing your openness, the way you express your affection... it makes me realize what I've been missing all my life.”

He paused, his gaze drifting out the window for a fleeting moment. “People are shaped by their environment, Lucy,” he continued, his voice thoughtful. “I grew up in a world of cold formality, where emotions were kept tightly under wraps. The warmth, the freedom you have with your family... it's something I've never known.”

“In fact...” He hesitated, then took another step closer, the air crackling with unspoken desire. “I wouldn't mind if you hugged me again.”

Lucy couldn't help but be bewildered by the duke. Just a few days ago, his harsh words and forceful push had left her feeling like a stranger, an unwelcome presence. Now, with a single phrase, he believed he had bridged the distance he himself had created. His voice tinged with a husky vulnerability that both confused and intrigued her.

His voice tinged with a vulnerability that both confused and intrigued her, sent a shiver down her spine. A flicker of doubt, bitter and unwelcome, bloomed on her tongue. The memory of his unpredictable actions was a potent reminder of the precarious nature of their connection.

Every time she thought they were making progress, their steps falling into a tentative rhythm, he would retreat, his actions shattering the fragile trust they were building. Bit by bit, they'd begun to construct a foundation for their love, only for him to come along with a figurative wrecking ball, leaving them amidst the rubble of confusion and hurt.

Why?

But even before the question had formed in her head, she had found her answer. He had told her. However, even before that, she had always suspected. His relationship with the dowager duchess was enough evidence to show the disparity in their upbringing.

And as much as she hated to admit, she wanted to help him, to guide him in overcoming the hole in his heart.

She also knew that if she were to open herself to him and accept him once again, there was a need for unbridled honesty.

CHAPTER 13

“Y our Grace, there is something I wish to discuss, something that has been weighing heavily on my mind.”

He turned to face her fully, his gaze searching. “Whatever is the matter?” Lucy paused, unsure of her next words now. She could only imagine how this would go.

“Have you never dreamt of having a family of your own?”

“A family?” Duncan’s brows furrowed.

“Yes,” she continued, her cheeks flushing a delicate pink. “A home filled with laughter and the pitter-patter of little feet.”

Recognition dawned on his face “Children,” he murmured, the word seeming to hold a multitude of emotions.

“Yes,” Lucy confirmed, her voice barely a whisper.

“And what about them?”

“It's a dream I hold close to my heart.”

Silence descended upon them, heavy and stretching. Lucy's gaze drifted towards the window, a poignant sadness settling in her heart. She had known it would end up nowhere. But she had still tried. Only to be met with his painful silence. It hurt.

“But I understand if... if this is not a dream you share.” Silence. “I will stay away from you if that is your wish.” Even though her heart ached terribly. Still, all she got was silence. It was too much for one person to bear. She could take it no more.

“Duncan,” she said, her voice barely a whisper, “do you... do you find me hideous? Do you hate me?”

He looked startled as his eyes bore down on her. “Hate you? Why would you think that?”

“Isn’t that the truth? You can’t stand the sight of me. I know it.” It killed her but she had to know. She couldn’t spend the rest of her life wondering what that man she married thought about her.

“I could never hate you. And hideous? Where is this coming from? You are far from hideous. You are radiant. You are beautiful.”

“Then prove it,” she whispered, a challenge shimmering in her voice. “Prove to me that you find me radiant.”

Had she gone crazy? Did she know what she was asking for? His traitorous body was already burned with need. He felt a primal urge to bridge the gap between them, to feel the warmth of her body against his. He leaned forward, their faces a breath apart. “Lucy, this is insane.” His breath was ragged.

Before he could speak further, she surprised him. Her hand, hesitant at first, then with newfound boldness, she cupped his cheek. “Kiss me, Duncan,” she whispered, her voice barely audible. “Kiss me.”

That was all he needed. And Duncan allowed himself to be overcome by the desire that rocked them both. He cupped her face in his hands, his thumbs gently stroking

the soft skin of her cheeks as he closed the distance between them, taking her lips in a fervent kiss.

His was a desperate hunger he feared would never go away now. He pulled her closer, his body yearning for her warmth. He scooped her up and settled her on his lap, their limbs tangling. The world around them ceased to exist. There was only Lucy, and her moans that fueled his desire. He explored her lips with a newfound intensity, his fingers tracing the delicate curve of her spine.

His hands, no longer content with cupping her face, began a slow exploration of her back. It sent a tremor through him, a silent plea urging him to delve deeper. His fingers brushed against the soft silk of her dress, the whisper of the fabric against his skin a tantalizing prelude to what lay beneath.

“Lucy,” Duncan whispered in husky breaths against her neck.

With a gasp, Lucy arched her back, pressing her body closer to his. The movement ignited a fire within him, a blaze he could no longer contain. He reached for the delicate buttons at the back of her dress, his fingers fumbling with an urgency that surprised him. One by one, the tiny fastenings yielded, revealing a glimpse of creamy white skin that sent his breath hitching in his throat.

The dress pooled around her waist, cascading down to the floor in a forgotten heap. Bathed in the soft afternoon light, Lucy stood before him, a vision of breathtaking beauty. Her bodice, a delicate lace creation, barely contained the swell of her breasts, the peaks straining against the fabric in a silent invitation.

Duncan felt a surge of possessiveness wash over him, a primal urge to claim her as his own.

“I am going to kiss you now,” he said, more to himself than to her.

He leaned forward, his lips trailing down the slender column of her neck, leaving a trail of hot kisses that sent shivers down her spine. His touch lingered on the delicate curve of her shoulder, then drifted down her arm, his fingertips tracing the path of a hidden vein that pulsed with an undeniable life force.

Lucy gasped, her body arching into his touch. Her own hands, previously tentative, had become bolder, exploring the hard planes of his back, the broad expanse of his shoulders.

“Duncan...” Lucy moaned.

A low groan escaped his lips as her fingers brushed against the sensitive skin at the nape of his neck, sending a jolt of raw desire through him.

Their kiss deepened. The taste of her, a delicate blend of lavender and something distinctly Lucy, intoxicated him. He felt himself falling, falling into a world where only she existed. He wanted more, much, much more.

Suddenly, Duncan’s hands began to tremble. And once more, a mixture of fear and uncertainty coursed through him.

Only this time, he didn’t care. He was too far gone to stop now.

Guiding her towards the bed, he kissed her passionately on her lips, and then made her lay down. Like the moon on a bright and cloudless night sky, he loomed over her, absorbing every detail, every inch of her delicate frame.

“Beautiful...” he whispered inaudibly, and then leaned down for a kiss.

The kiss was slow and gentle, like the evening breeze caressing a flowery field. With her lips pressed against his, he allowed his hands to wander, tracing lines over her

flesh, memorizing every curve of her slender body.

Gently, he pulled his lips from hers, and after a moment shared staring into her eyes, he began to trail kisses from her neck downward. He could feel her body heave and quiver beneath him as the pleasure and sweet sensation sent shivers down her spine.

Wherever his lips touched seemed to ignite a multitude of fireworks within her body. Nothing in this world could have prepared her for this.

His hands were everywhere, sending sparks flying about in her mind. And no matter how much pleasure she thought she had gained, the duke found a way to please her more.

Reaching her bosom, she felt him fiddle with her bodice loosening the strap at her back. The strands seemed to tangle up amongst themselves, but before she could offer any assistance, he abandoned the piece of clothing and instead went for her legs.

But just as she made to protest, she felt as though a bolt of lightning had struck her body. Hot fiery sensations washed over her as he pressed his lips against her thighs. She knew no words to describe the sensuous feeling of ecstasy that befell and clouded her mind.

With her head thrown back, and her mind blank, Lucy reveled in the intense pleasure of the duke's lips against her bare flesh.

Sliding her stockings off her feet, he replaced them with wet kisses. This he did on both feet, and when he had finished, he slid off her drawers, slowly.

Tears brimmed at the corner of her eyes. Her hands lay beside her, her fingers gripping the sheets. No one had ever seen her naked before. And now she lay bare before him, relying solely on her instincts, she pressed her legs together.

She was scared.

“Do you trust me?” She heard the duke ask.

But even as her eyes were closed, she felt him reach for her hands and give them a gentle squeeze. Somehow, that act alone was enough to reassure her.

Slowly she parted her legs again, and as she did, she felt his kiss on her lips. Only this time, she brimmed with anticipation as his tongue trickled lower down her body.

Good Heavens, she thought, as her mind struggled to grasp control. Her breath caught in her lungs as he moved ever so slowly to her center. Her emotions scrambled for cover. Her body squirmed on its own accord. And just as she thought she could know no greater torture, she felt his breath upon her open flesh.

Bolts of pleasure shot through her spine, her legs thrashing about as he brought his mouth to her mound. She gasped, unable to breathe, unable to think. She could only feel his mouth and tongue parting her lower lips, causing moans of pleasure to escape her mouth.

Her fingernails dug into the bedding, searching for some way to anchor her to the ground.

“Duncan,” she whispered, her voice trembling. “Duncan...”

But he said nothing. Fueled by the sounds of her moaning, he continued with renewed fervor.

Why wasn't he answering? Why was he driving her off towards the edge? The edge...

A sudden storm began to build within her. Waves of ecstasy raged within her body. Lucy twisted and turned, but his grip kept her in place. She felt like crying. Tears welled up in her eyes. Her mind was rolling, tumbling on itself.

With his mouth plundering on her member, Lucy surrendered herself to the waves.

And in a great burst of pleasure, she fell, long and hard towards the direction of the waves.

Duncan, his own breath ragged, reluctantly pulled back and laid beside her. Though the fire within him still burned bright, a spark of reason flickered back to life. A frustrated groan rumbled in his chest. He craved more, ached for the chance to explore the depths of this newfound connection.

It was a long time before their breaths returned and any of them could speak. Duncan lifted himself to his side and stared deeply at Lucy's heaving bosom as she took deep breaths to calm herself.

He had done it again. He thought to himself. But now, he had gone even further than he had ever anticipated. He always found it hard to think clearly whenever she was within range. But now that he had tasted her, there was no denying that she intoxicated him.

Was he developing feelings for her?

Duncan shook his head at the thought. Emotions he had long since thought buried now welled to the surface. How much longer could he keep his oath to himself?

No. He had to be strong. Stronger than this. He couldn't get carried away. He couldn't let this happen again. But how? His body craved her so much that it hurt. It wasn't enough. He wanted more. He was in serious trouble.

“We shall have no children.” And he loathed himself for the look in her eyes. But it was for the best. “You’re Duchess now. You can do whatever you want. You could have your family over. It may be a welcome change.” It would also keep him away from her.

“I believe having my family over would be a welcome change,” she muttered in a low voice.

“There is a ball we are to attend in the coming days. Perhaps after that, we could have your family come spend some time with us, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Yes,” Lucy answered. “I have missed my papa and mama a great deal. Not to mention my dear sister, Caroline.”

“Good,” Duncan added. “Well, I shall leave the arrangements to you, Duchess.”

“Your Grace.”

“I have to leave. I have to attend to matters of the parliament.”

“But Your Grace-” Duncan stood evading her touch. Better that than the raging thoughts in his head.

CHAPTER 14

“ M y, my, what a striking display,” Modesty drawled, her lips pursed in a disapproving frown. “This was not what I spent precious time picking out for you, is it?”

Lucy had anticipated a moment like this, but having been caught off guard, she struggled for cogent words. “Uh... It is a bit different, yes.” She stammered.

Behind them, the grand ballroom buzzed with chatter and laughter. Crystal chandeliers cast a warm glow on the polished wood floor, where couples twirled in a mesmerizing waltz.

Lucy, adorned in the lavender dress Duncan had gifted her, stood out amidst a sea of silks and satins. The dress hugged her curves perfectly, the color mirroring the flush that rose to her cheeks as she surveyed the scene.

“Hmm,” Modesty scoffed. “And the duke, my son... where is he?”

Lucy scanned the ballroom eagerly, also wishing greatly for Duncan to appear. “I believe he is around, somewhere. He went to—”

“Leave him be,” Modesty interrupted. “He is a man, and he can handle himself. You, on the other hand... one would have expected a lady of your... background to possess a tad more... decorum.”

Lucy strained to maintain her composure. The dowager duchess’s constant critiques

and unsavory remarks were proving impossible to contain. She balled her fists in anger, hoping the sensation of her pinching at her palm would help her keep focus.

Lucy steadied herself, her smile faltering for a fleeting moment. “I assure you, Lady Elkins,” she replied, her voice surprisingly steady, “I am quite capable of conducting myself as befits a lady.”

“But—”

“No buts!” Lucy said, in a low and commanding voice that surprised even herself. “Your Grace, I have tried... Oh, I have tried, repeatedly, to win your favor, but with you, nothing works. I have cried for days on end thinking of the next vile things you might say about me, or my family. I have done everything within my power to accommodate your proclivities. And oh, what a fool I have been. Nothing I do or say would ever please you.

In your eyes I am but an opportunist, and you’ve taken every chance you could get to ensure I never once forget what you think of me. But I will not have you shame me or my family any longer. I am not what you think I am.”

Lucy paused to catch her breath. She tried to hide her shock at being able to speak in that manner. She had imagined herself standing up to her mother-in-law on many occasions, but the thought had only seemed like a dream. Perhaps she should be grateful for the chance to speak her mind for the first time. But now, it was certain what would happen next.

Her thoughts were all over the place. If only Duncan were here, she thought. His presence was the only covering that seemed to keep his mother’s antics at bay. Or she could apologize.

No! The words were out already and there was no return. If there was to be a

confrontation, now was the best time. At least now whilst she still had her wits about her.

Modesty cocked her head to one side, wild disbelief covering her entire face. The dowager duchess was stunned, and her eyes held a shock Lucy had never seen on the seldom flustered woman.

Modesty scoffed, inching closer to close the gap between them. But before she could retort, a hand materialized on Lucy's shoulder. Duncan stood beside her, his expression a stormy mix of anger and protectiveness.

“Is there a problem, Lucy?” he inquired, his voice low and dangerous.

Lucy squeezed his arm in grateful relief. “Nothing of consequence, Duncan,” she replied, her gaze fixed on Modesty. “Mother was merely offering some advice.”

A flicker of recognition crossed Duncan's face. He inclined his head towards Modesty with a curt nod. “Mother,” he acknowledged, his voice devoid of warmth.

Modesty, clearly taken aback by the turn of events, managed a weak greeting, “Your Grace.” Turning to Lucy, she added, “Perhaps we shall continue this conversation another time. Hmmm?”

Without waiting for Lucy's response, Modesty turned away and left. Relief washed over her as the dowager duchess flounced away, leaving them in a tense silence. The murmurs and curious glances from the surrounding couples confirmed Lucy's suspicion – the encounter had left a sour taste in the air.

“Are you sure you are all right?” Duncan asked again, this time staring straight at her face.

Lucy met his gaze, a grateful smile gracing her lips. “I am now,” she confessed, her voice a soft murmur.

Sensing Duncan's simmering anger, Lucy decided to take a chance. With a playful tilt of her head towards the dance floor, where couples twirled in a graceful waltz, she offered a suggestion.

“The music sounds particularly inviting, wouldn't you agree, Your Grace?” she inquired, her voice a gentle melody amidst the cacophony of the ballroom. “Perhaps a turn on the dance floor would alleviate the tedium of the evening?”

Duncan's jaw remained clenched for a moment. Dance? He couldn't remember the last time he did that. And he wasn't sure he was up for that. It had been so long. The last time was when-

No. He wouldn't go down that road. Maybe it was just what he needed to take his mind off it.

“While I must confess that I typically find such frivolous activities rather tiresome, I see no reason not to oblige.”

Lucy's smile widened, the color blooming across her cheeks like a blooming rose. And a warmth blossomed in his chest, something that only Lucy seemed to be able to do these days. With a graceful curtsy, she offered him her hand. “Lead the way, Your Grace,” she said, the smile never leaving her face.

As they stepped onto the dance floor, the music swelled, a romantic waltz filling the air. Duncan placed his hand on her waist, reveling in the feel of her body against his. They moved in sync, almost as if they had been doing it forever. He couldn't tear his eyes off her even if he tried.

She was radiant, resplendent in that dress. The lavender complemented her skin well. He made a good choice and felt a swirl of pride in his chest knowing he was the reason behind it.

He could swear they were all alone, in their very own world. Every other thing, every other person had faded. It was just them. Just Lucy. And he basked in her presence, even if only for now. He would worry about everything else later. Or maybe not. A soft gasp broke him out of his thoughts.

“Your Grace...” she near-choked, “...your gloves.”

Duncan glanced down at his hands. “What about them?”

Lucy yearned to press for reasons, but decided against it. “Uh nothing. I was only surprised to see you without them.”

But he remained silent, not offering any explanation. He would admit his palms did look a little strange, not swathed in the thick wool material. He was still not used to it.

“Whatever was the matter between you and my mother?” He felt safer not talking about it at all.

“Oh, it was nothing. We were just having a talk.” Lucy’s eyelashes fluttered down. Why didn’t he believe that for just a moment?

“Are you certain? I know my mother sometimes takes propriety too far.”

Lucy chuckled, the sound light and musical. “What an understatement,” she muttered under her breath.

“What was that?”

“Nothing, Your Grace.” She countered, her eyes sparkling with warmth. “Your mother and I may not share a lot in common. But where we do, I am sure that with time we shall find common ground.”

Duncan smiled. “Indeed,” he conceded, his voice tinged with amusement. “You look absolutely stunning tonight, Duchess.” His voice dropped to a husky whisper.

It sent a blush creeping up Lucy's neck. “Your compliment is most welcome, Your Grace,” she replied softly, her eyes locked on his.

The air was thick with the scent of roses. And perhaps his own longing. Their bodies swayed to the rhythm, moving in perfect harmony. He felt the tension in her hold, the restraint. It mirrored his own. Why did it feel so good to be with her? This was no normal marriage. But here, now, it felt like more.

Their gazes locked, the world around them blurring. The music swelled, the violins crying out in harmony. He felt her heartbeat against his own, a wild desperate rhythm. The music reached its crescendo, and they spun faster, his eyes never leaving hers.

And the music slowed, slowing them too. She tilted her head slightly, her gaze meeting his. With a soft sigh, Lucy rested her head lightly against his chest. The music drifted around them, a gentle melody that seemed to cocoon them in a world of their own.

“Your Grace!” came a voice from behind them as the dance came to a momentary halt. And they stepped apart, the spell broken. Lucy looked up to see Lord Castings, the viscount of a neighboring territory, walking towards them.

Duncan's smile faltered for a fleeting moment, a flicker of annoyance crossing his features. He excused himself with a gracious nod to Lucy. “Forgive me, Duchess, but

it seems duty calls.”

Lord Castings, oblivious to the interruption, grasped Duncan's hand in a handshake, his jovial demeanor at odds with the tension that settled upon Duncan. “Your Grace! Delighted to see you this fine evening! I was hoping to catch you at your leisure.”

Duncan offered a strained smile. “Indeed, Lord Castings. What can I do for you?”

“Business, Your Grace, business! I was hoping to broach the subject of that parcel of land bordering the eastern ridge of your estate. You see, I've been considering expanding my sheep flock...”

Duncan listened with polite disinterest as Lord Castings droned on about sheep and grazing rights. His gaze, however, kept flitting back to his hand where the lingering touch of Castings' calloused grip seemed to repulse him. Lucy noticed his discomfort. His usually composed posture seemed slightly rigid, and a frown etched itself onto his brow whenever his eyes settled on his hands.

Lord Castings, finally catching his breath, finished his proposition with a flourish. “So, Your Grace, what say you? A mutually beneficial arrangement, wouldn't you agree?”

Duncan cleared his throat, his voice devoid of warmth. “Indeed, Lord Castings. I will review the matter and send you a letter with my findings soonest.”

Lord Castings beamed, oblivious to Duncan's lack of enthusiasm. “Excellent! Excellent! A pleasure doing business with you, Your Grace.” He clapped Duncan on the shoulder with a hearty backslapping motion, sending a shudder through the duke.

As Lord Castings finally lumbered away, Duncan turned back to Lucy, his face etched with a mixture of annoyance and something akin to disgust. He offered her a

wan smile, the playful glint in his eyes replaced by a shadow of something darker.

“Forgive the interruption, Duchess,” he murmured, his voice tight. “Would you excuse me for a moment?”

Without waiting for her response, he strode purposefully out of the ballroom, his brow furrowed in concentration. Lucy watched him go, a pang of concern tugging at her heart. His sudden shift in demeanor and his fixation on his hands left her bewildered. She worried about him.

CHAPTER 15

“Lucy, my darling!” Patience cried, her arms outstretched.

Before Lucy could react, she was engulfed in a bone-crushing embrace. The air whooshed out of Lucy's lungs, a touch of amusement battling with apprehension as she glanced towards Duncan, who stood a few paces away.

“Mama,” Lucy managed to gasp, patting her mother's back happily. “It's so lovely to see you.”

Lucy had been alerted as the carriage bearing her family's crest approached the Northwick mansion. Her parents had emerged first, followed by a gangly Stephen, and lastly, Caroline, her one and only confidante.

Patience finally released her, her gaze flitting past Lucy to land on the duke. “And there you are, Your Grace!” she exclaimed, entirely oblivious to the undercurrent of tension.

Before Lucy could intervene, Patience surged forward with another enthusiastic embrace. Duncan, caught off guard, stiffened under her touch. A flicker of something akin to panic crossed his features, but he managed a strained smile and a curt bow.

“Viscountess Pemberton,” he acknowledged, his voice tight.

Lucy felt a surge of protectiveness towards Duncan. Her mother's well-meaning gestures, while born of affection, were clearly causing him distress. She needed to

redirect their attention before things escalated further.

“Mama,” Lucy interjected gently, placing a hand on her mother's arm. “Perhaps we can retire to the drawing room and allow Duncan to greet the rest of the family.”

Patience, finally noticing Lucy's discomfort, blushed slightly. “Oh, of course, my dear,” she chirped, her usual boisterousness tempered by a touch of sheepishness. “It's so wonderful to see you settled in such a grand home, Lucy. And such a handsome duke as your husband! My heart is truly blessed.”

Patience's enthusiastic embrace was momentarily interrupted by the entrance of Augustus Hatcher, Viscount of Pemberton.

“Your Grace!” he boomed, his voice a friendly rumble.

Duncan offered a relieved smile, the tension that had been radiating from him easing a touch. “Viscount Pemberton,” he acknowledged, his voice warm with a hint of amusement. “A pleasure to welcome you to Northwick.”

Augustus strode across the room, his gait steady despite his years. He extended a hand towards Duncan, his grip firm but respectful. “The pleasure is all ours, Your Grace. Lucy has written wonders about your estate – a truly impressive manor.”

Stephen and Lucy came in next, each offering their greetings to the lord of the house.

“Come, you must all be tired,” Lucy directed. “Let me show you to your quarters.”

Duncan took that as his cue to leave and soon disappeared into his study.

Lucy directed the servants to fetch clean water for her family and to show them to their room.

Having seen to it that everyone was settled into their respective guest chambers, Lucy, feeling the pleasant weight of exhaustion, finally found herself alone with her mother in her private sitting room. A fire crackled merrily in the hearth, casting a warm glow on the plush armchairs and the ornately framed portraits adorning the walls.

Lucy sank into a chair, the soft cushions sighing beneath her weight. Patience, her crimson skirts a vibrant splash against the ivory silk upholstery, settled gracefully beside her.

“Well, my child,” Patience began, her voice brimming with maternal curiosity, “tell me everything! How fares your life as a duchess? Do you find yourself overwhelmed by your duties?”

A soft smile curved Lucy's lips. “There have been moments of adjustment, Mama,” she admitted, “but the staff here are delightful and incredibly helpful. Mrs. Davies, the housekeeper, has been a godsend, ensuring everything runs smoothly.”

“And the duke?” Patience pressed, concern written boldly on her face. “Tell me all about him. Is he truly cruel and harsh and dissolute as all the ton whispers, or are they all baseless rumors?”

Lucy felt a warmth bloom in her cheeks. “That he is not, Mama,” she replied, a touch of pride coloring her voice. “Duncan is a kind and intelligent man, with a surprising wit.”

Lucy's smile widened a touch, a playful glint entering her eyes as she recalled the moments she and her husband had spent together. “We have also enjoyed some lovely outings together. Duncan is quite skilled at horsemanship, and we have explored the vast grounds of Northwick on horseback.”

“Horse riding, you say?” Patience exclaimed, a hint of excitement creeping into her voice. “That’s wonderful... I had assumed you would lack the time for such activities, what with being a duchess and all.”

Lucy chuckled. “Mama, the fresh air does wonders for the complexion. And I can ride quite excellently, and even the duke agrees.”

Patience's lips broke into a smile. “Well, as long as he takes good care of you, that's all that matters. But Lucy, darling,” she continued, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper, “is he... kind? Does he treat you well?”

Lucy squeezed her mother's hand, unsure how to address her relationship with Duncan. “Mama, the duke is a good man,” she replied, pausing to gather her thoughts. “He is a bit... reserved, but he is considerate and thoughtful. Sometimes I feel like we have reached common ground. And then on many other occasions, we are like water and oil, never seeming to hold that bond for long. He can seem cold or distant sometimes as well.”

Seeing the worried look on her mother’s face, Lucy quickly added, “Although, we are still getting to know each other, and I feel some sort of a connection with him, a respect that goes beyond duty. I believe that with a bit more time, we shall grow to understand each other and be all the better for it.” Or not .

Who was she fooling? Her mother or herself? Being hopeful about the duke was like pouring water into a basket and expecting it not to pour out of the holes.

Patience's gaze softened, a mother's intuition sensing the truth in Lucy's words. “A connection, you say? That's wonderful, my dear. As long as you are happy, that is all that matters. You are happy here, are you not?”

“Yes, Mama,” Lucy replied, her voice filled with a somewhat genuine contentment.

“I am happy here. Duncan is a good man, and Northwick is a magnificent estate. There's so much to explore and learn.”

Patience's smile widened briefly, “Yes, but does he love you?” she asked suddenly.

“Mama, I...” Lucy started, unsure of how to proceed. She wished to share the true details with her mother. If there was anyone else in the world who could understand, it would be her, right?

She had confided in her mother in the past, but from whence would the courage come to tell her mother that she had no idea whether or not she was loved by her husband? Or that on the night of her wedding, the man she had only just wedded informed her that he had no intention of allowing her to partake of the joys of motherhood?

But the thought of revealing secrets, details of Duncan... of her husband to anyone else, even her mother filled her with great trepidation. Somewhere within her, she felt like saying anything would constitute a terrible betrayal.

“He treats me well, Mama.” Lucy managed to say. She was unsure of her mother’s reaction and religiously searched for any hint of suspicion.

“That's all a mother wants to hear, my darling!” Patience beamed. “Oh, I’m so glad to hear that. I knew the duke had it in him. All he needs is someone to love him and he will come out of his shell. Oh, I can already see you both having lots of children.” Patience said, squeezing Lucy's hand with affection. And Lucy’s heart sank with each sentence her mother uttered.

“You can say that, Mama,” Lucy lied through her teeth although her heart hammered, and she wondered how her mother didn’t hear it.

“As long as you're happy, I’m happy.” Lucy nearly folded. Happy ? Would she ever

be again?

Lucy leaned in and kissed her mother's cheek. "Thank you, Mama," she murmured. "For everything."

There had been times, whilst still young when Lucy had suspected her mother knew more than she let on. At the moment, she was having a feeling akin to that.

A comfortable silence settled between them for a moment. Lucy knew her mother needed time to unwind after the journey, and she herself felt the pleasant fatigue of a stimulating conversation.

"Perhaps you should retire to your chambers, Mama," Lucy suggested gently. "The journey must have been tiring. I wouldn't want you to be overly fatigued for dinner this evening."

Patience nodded in agreement. "Yes, my dear, you're right," she said, rising from her chair with a sigh. "A good rest will do me wonders. We can catch up again before dinner, can't we?"

"Of course, Mama," Lucy confirmed, leading her mother towards the door. "I will come and fetch you when it's time."

"You are such a cheerful child, my dear Lucy," Patience said, beaming with smiles. "I bless the day I birthed you."

With a final hug, Lucy bid her mother farewell.

The dinner table at Northwick Manor bustled with lively conversation as the Pembertons regaled Lucy and Duncan with tales from her childhood. Augustus recounted a particularly embarrassing incident involving a mud puddle, a prized new

dress, and a stubborn pony.

“There you were, Lucy,” he boomed, gesturing dramatically with a fork laden with roasted pheasant, “no more than five years old, covered head to toe in the most dreadful muck! Your poor mother nearly fainted, and the scullery maids spent an entire afternoon scrubbing the stains from your dress.”

Lucy, cheeks flushed a delicate rose, sent a playful glare at her father. “Honestly, Papa,” she chided, “must you dredge up such old memories?”

The rest of the table erupted in laughter, even Duncan, whose lips quirked into a reluctant smile. He had found himself surprisingly enjoying the Pembertons' company. Their easy camaraderie and genuine affection for each other were a stark contrast to the formality he was accustomed to.

“But it was all part of growing up, wasn't it, my dear?” Patience interjected, her voice laced with a fondness that transcended the memory. “A little mud never hurt anyone.”

The conversation flowed on, weaving tales of Lucy's childhood adventures – from picnics gone awry to triumphant victories in the annual village flower show. With each story, Lucy observed Duncan. His initial reserve had melted away, replaced by a quiet amusement that sparkled in his blue eyes.

However, a subtle shift in the atmosphere jolted Lucy from her reverie. As Viscount Pemberton launched into a particularly animated joke, he threw his head back and let out a hearty laugh, his hand instinctively reaching for his shoulder with a slight grimace.

A flicker of concern crossed Lucy's face. She had never considered that the boisterous interactions of her family might cause discomfort to someone so accustomed to a more subdued manner. She needed to subtly deflect the attention.

“Papa,” Lucy interjected gently, “that reminds me! Did I tell you about the time I snuck into the kitchens and attempted to bake a birthday cake for Stephen? Let's just say the results were... less than stellar.”

Her father's attention, momentarily diverted, launched into a new story about Stephen's cake-related disaster, successfully redirecting the conversation away from physical humor.

As the laughter subsided, Lucy took a subtle risk. Reaching under the table, her fingertips brushed against Duncan's thigh. A tremor of apprehension ran through her at the thought of him recoiling from her touch.

But to her immense relief, there was no flinch. Instead, Duncan's weary smile deepened slightly, and he squeezed her hand in silent reassurance. Thankfully, the act of passing a dish down the table effectively concealed their secret handhold from prying eyes.

As their feet brushed beneath the table, a silent message passed between them. Lucy felt the tension drain from his muscles beneath her touch, a sign of the growing connection between them. A warmth spread through her chest, replacing her earlier worry

CHAPTER 16

After dinner, Lucy ushered everyone into the drawing room where Caroline settled at the piano, the lingering warmth from the fireplace following closely behind them. Her slender fingers danced across the ivory keys. The room filled with the gentle strains of a Mozart sonata, the melody weaving its way through the air like a calming balm.

The final notes of the Mozart sonata faded, leaving a gentle silence in its wake. Lucy, nestled beside Duncan on the plush velvet settee, couldn't help but steal a glance at him. The firelight cast a warm glow on his face, highlighting the strong lines of his jaw and the way his brow furrowed slightly in concentration as he listened to her father's booming voice.

He seems to be enjoying himself, Lucy thought, a small smile playing on her lips. Earlier, his discomfort with her family's boisterous gestures had been evident. Yet, as the evening progressed, a subtle shift had taken place. He participated in their debates with a quiet wit, his own laughter rumbling in his chest, a sound that sent a delicious tremor down her spine.

A pang of guilt pricked at her conscience. Perhaps she hadn't fully appreciated her family's warmth before. In a bid to find balance in navigating her new life, she had failed to realize how much she missed their open affection, their ability to laugh freely without fear of judgment.

"That was delightful, Caroline," Augustus boomed, his voice tinged with genuine admiration. "Your talent never ceases to amaze me."

Caroline blushed a delicate rose. “Thank you, Papa,” she murmured, rising from the piano with a graceful curtsy. “I can play another one if you'd like.” This she said, referring to the duke.

“Go ahead, Miss Hatcher,” Duncan encouraged.

As the music swelled and ebbed, Augustus leaned towards Duncan, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. “Ah, Your Grace,” he began, “I've been mulling over a business proposition...”

Lucy caught a flicker of concern flit across Duncan's face. His brow furrowed slightly, and his gaze seemed to pierce through the room, analyzing some unseen detail.

“Hold on a minute, Viscount,” Duncan interjected, his voice a touch sharper than usual, “what exactly is the nature of this venture?”

Augustus, surprised by the interruption, blinked in momentary confusion. “Well, Your Grace,” he began hesitantly, “it's a new cotton mill, Lord Harrington assures me it will be a goldmine. Promises the latest technology, booming demand, the whole shebang.”

Duncan's lips pursed into a thoughtful line. “And what is the asking price for this investment?”

Augustus puffed out his chest slightly. “A hefty sum, to be sure, five thousand pounds.”

A low whistle escaped Duncan's lips. “Five thousand pounds for a venture with such...uncertainties,” he mused, his voice laced with concern.

Augustus's initial bravado faltered. "Uncertainties? What do you mean, Your Grace?"

Duncan leaned forward, his posture radiating an aura of quiet authority. "Viscount Pemberton, if I may be frank, the textile industry is a fickle beast. The market saturates quickly, and new technologies often become obsolete within a few years. This Harrington fellow, is he reputable? Does he have a proven track record of success?"

Augustus shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "Well, I wouldn't say proven, exactly," he admitted sheepishly, "but he seems like a genuine sort, wouldn't you agree?"

A grateful look flickered across Duncan's face. "Indeed," he agreed, his tone softening as he addressed Augustus directly. "Viscount, I wouldn't want you to make a hasty decision you might regret later. Perhaps I could take a look at the details of this proposition? I may have some insight that could be helpful."

Augustus's initial apprehension melted away, replaced by a spark of hope. "Your Grace, I would be most grateful! Your expertise would be invaluable in this matter."

He reached out, his hand hovering instinctively towards Duncan's shoulder in a gesture of camaraderie. Lucy, mindful of Duncan's earlier discomfort with such physical contact, discreetly placed her hand on Augustus's arm, gently deflecting it.

"Perhaps, Papa," she said gently, "a handshake might be more appropriate."

A flicker of heat rose to Lucy's cheeks. She realized the sharpness in her tone might have been perceived as rude. "Oh, forgive me, Papa," she stammered, her voice laced with apology, "I didn't mean to sound so harsh."

Augustus, ever the jovial soul, boomed with laughter. "Nonsense, my dear! You're quite right, a handshake it is." He extended his hand towards Duncan, who grasped it

firmly in a formal greeting.

Stephen, ever the mischievous one, piped up from his corner. “Well, well,” he quipped, a playful glint in his eyes, “it seems our Lucy is becoming quite the protective wife.”

His remark sent a wave of laughter rippling through the room. Lucy playfully swatted at her brother's arm, a blush creeping up her neck. The warmth that spread through her wasn't solely from the crackling fire. Duncan's quiet defense, his willingness to offer his expertise to her father, had touched her deeply. It spoke of a kindness and a genuine desire to help that she found incredibly endearing.

“Stephen!” she exclaimed, a mock scolding lacing her voice. “Must you always tease me so?”

Stephen, unfazed, merely grinned. “Someone has to keep you on your toes, sissy,” he retorted, his voice laced with a fondness that belied his teasing.

Duncan, observing the playful interaction between Lucy and her siblings, couldn't help but smile. A stark contrast to his own upbringing, where formality and decorum reigned supreme, the Pembertons' openness and affection for each other was refreshing. He felt a flicker of something unfamiliar stirring within him, a warmth that spread through his chest at the sight of their close-knit bond.

However, the memory of his earlier discomfort with their physical gestures – the casual pats on the back, the friendly arm nudges – returned. Despite the growing connection he felt with Lucy, a part of him remained hesitant. Years of social distancing and emotional restraint could not be undone in a heartbeat.

As if sensing his silent struggle, Lucy reached out and subtly squeezed his hand, her touch warm and reassuring. He glanced down at their intertwined fingers, a silent

conversation passing between them. It was a small gesture, barely noticeable to the others engrossed in their conversation, yet it spoke volumes.

He was touching her! He half expected his hands to seize up at any moment, but they remained perfectly calm.

He used his thumb to stroke the back of her hand, feeling the slenderness of her hand against his, and the urge to have her alone to himself, to explore what other textures her body could provide, surged powerfully in his mind.

But decency had the better of him.

The rest of the evening flowed by in a pleasant haze of conversation and laughter. Through it all, Duncan found himself drawn into their world. He participated in their debates, offering his own witty observations and insightful commentary. He even found himself laughing along with Stephen's outlandish tales, a genuine smile gracing his lips for the first time that day.

As the clock struck ten, Viscount Pemberton rose from his seat, a hint of weariness in his eyes. "Well, I daresay it's getting late," he announced. "Perhaps we should all retire for the night. We have a busy day planned for tomorrow, with the hunt and all."

There was a chorus of agreement, and the Pembertons rose from their various seats. Lucy, feeling a pang of regret at the evening's end, led Duncan towards the grand staircase.

"That was a delightful evening, wasn't it?" she whispered, her voice laced with a hint of melancholy.

Duncan offered her a genuine smile, the warmth reaching his eyes. "Indeed," he agreed, his voice a low rumble that sent a shiver down her spine. "Your family

is...unique. In the best way possible, of course.”

Lucy chuckled. “Unique? That's one way to put it.” She hesitated for a moment, then blurted out, “Duncan, I apologize for Papa's...enthusiasm earlier. I know it can be overwhelming at times.”

Duncan shook his head, a hint of amusement twinkling in his eyes. “Don't worry about it. Though boisterous, Augustus' intentions were good. I simply...am not accustomed to such physical displays of affection.”

Lucy felt a wave of relief wash over her. “I see,” she murmured, understanding dawning in her eyes. “Well, you needn't worry. I shall endeavor to keep them at bay, at least until you feel more comfortable.”

Her throat seized at the unmistakable heat in his eyes. Heavens, his eyes were too clear. Too intense. Too dark. They called to her, to drown her in their endless depths.

“Duncan,” Lucy whispered, unable to stop herself from stepping forward and reaching out to him. She found her fingers trailing up the length of his arms and resting on his hard chest. He reached out and tucked a stray curl behind her ear, shooting sparks through her entire being.

“Lucy.” Duncan all but whispered, making her shiver. His hand snaked to her waist, pulling her closer. How wonderful he felt against her, all hard and male. All she could think was how warm he felt against her skin. Her eyes rested on his lips, urging, inviting, yearning for him to bring them to hers.

It seemed he read her mind, as he lowered his head ever so slowly, nearly killing her with anticipation. It was any moment now. They were merely a breath away, mingling breaths as neither dared to close the gap.

Her senses were heightened in the quiet of the hall. She couldn't deny the raw hunger in his eyes. All she'd known was his kiss, his touch, him. And yet, something within her ached for him. For more of him.

As though in answer to her inner pleas, his lips parted. Her heart raced and she closed her eyes, tilting her chin up, waiting for that familiar burst in her belly.

And then, nothing.

Her eyes flew open. There was no one there. The halls lay empty, and her husband—disappeared. Her heart sank. A wave of sadness and disappointment threatened to consume her.

What use was it to crave the touch of a man who would treat her in such a manner, to abandon her without so much as a word or a ... kiss. Perhaps, 'twas futile to hope that a man such as him could care for her in the ways that she wished.

Fighting off the urge to further wallow in self-pity, Lucy began the slow and arduous journey up the steps towards the only place that seemed to offer her comfort.

The crisp air whipped Lucy's hair around her face as she stomped along the gravel path with Caroline. They'd been doing these morning walks every day for the past few days, a chance to catch up and escape the usual early-morning hustle.

They reached the familiar weathered sign that pointed towards the stables. The familiar whine of horses was a comforting sound, instantly transporting Lucy back to childhood days spent learning to ride and sneaking cuddles with her favorite horse, Starfire.

“They're magnificent,” Caroline whispered, awestruck.

“Indeed,” Lucy agreed, running a gentle hand down the flank of a chestnut mare. “Duncan prides himself on his stable. Each horse has its own distinct personality, just like people.”

They spent the next hour exploring the stables, chatting with the stable hands, and learning about the newest additions to the herd. As they stepped back out into the crisp morning air, Caroline announced, “Mother informed me yesterday that I shall be making my debut into society next season!”

A wave of excitement washed over Lucy. “Oh, Caroline, that's wonderful! I'm so happy for you.”

Caroline's smile faltered slightly. “I'm a bit nervous.”

Lucy's smile softened. “Of course you are. It's a daunting prospect, isn't it?”

Caroline nodded, a flicker of apprehension in her eyes. “The endless balls, the scrutiny, the pressure to find a suitable match...”

“But you'll do brilliantly,” Lucy assured her, squeezing her sister's hand. “You're intelligent, beautiful, and possess a wit that could disarm a dragon.”

Caroline chuckled, a hint of light returning to her eyes. “That's quite an image, Lucy. But thank you, truly.”

The conversation took a more personal turn. Caroline's gaze swept over Lucy, a question lingering in her eyes. “Speaking of dragons,” she began hesitantly, “how is your life as a duchess? I know everything happened so suddenly.”

Lucy took a deep breath. “Different, that's for sure. But surprisingly pleasant. The duke...Duncan...is...not what I expected.”

“Not what you expected?” Caroline echoed, a brow raised. “Explain yourself, my dear.”

“No, he’s not,” Lucy replied with a warm smile.

“And he's not a snobbish brute, then?” Caroline interjected, a playful smile dancing on her lips.

They both burst out laughing, the sound echoing through the crisp morning air.

“No,” Lucy admitted, wiping tears of laughter from her eyes, “thankfully not. He's a good man, Caroline. Kind, intelligent, and surprisingly...amusing.”

Wiping a tear from her eye, Caroline linked her arm with Lucy's once again. “Now, back to the important matters,” she declared with a mock frown. “Who should I set my sights on next season? Tell me, does the duke have an eligible bachelor friend lurking about somewhere?”

Lucy chuckled, picturing Duncan's stoic expression facing an onslaught of matchmaking attempts. “Let's not push our luck, Caroline. But fret not, I'm sure there will be plenty of worthy gentlemen vying for your attention next season. And I, for one, can't wait to witness your grand debut!”

As Lucy and Caroline continued their walk, their laughter echoing through the crisp autumn air, they spotted two figures standing amidst the trees in the distance. Upon closer inspection, they recognized Duncan and Stephen, both clad in sturdy walking boots and breeches, each holding a long-barreled hunting gun. A flicker of apprehension crossed Lucy's brow.

“Do you see who that is, Caroline?” Lucy squinted, shielding her eyes from the rising sun.

“It appears to be Stephen and...the duke,” Caroline replied, her voice laced with a hint of curiosity.

Intrigued, the sisters quickened their pace, their silk skirts rustling against the dew-laden grass. As they drew closer, the scene became clearer. Stephen, clad in his usual hunting attire – a worn leather jerkin and breeches stained with mud from past escapades – stood impatiently, a hunting rifle clutched in his hand. Beside him, Duncan, looking slightly out of place in his finely tailored coat, held a similar rifle with an air of bemusement.

“Stephen! What in heaven's name are you doing?” Lucy exclaimed, the worry in her voice evident.

Stephen, startled by his sister's sudden arrival, whirled around, his youthful face breaking into a wide grin. “Lucy! Caroline! Just enjoying a spot of morning exploration with His Grace,” he announced, his voice booming through the still air.

Duncan, a hint of amusement twinkling in his eyes, offered a polite bow. “Good morning, ladies. Stephen and I were merely following a deer trail. We seem to have lost the scent, however.”

Lucy's brow furrowed. “A deer trail, Stephen? At this time of day? You know perfectly well Papa wouldn't approve of hunting before breakfast.”

“He doesn't know now, does he?” Stephen replied, his voice low and shy. “‘Tis not quite hunting. More like...investigating. But the blasted beast seems to have gone into hiding. No doubt they caught our scent and scurried off to a safer corner of the woods.”

Lucy shook her head, a smile tugging at the corner of her lips despite herself.

“Well,” she declared, her voice regaining its usual authority, “lost or not, you both look like you could use a good washing up. And I daresay breakfast will be ready soon. You wouldn't want a cold breakfast now, would you?”

“Quite right,” Duncan readily agreed, his gaze fixed on Lucy for a beat too long. “Perhaps we should be ready to head back to the house.”

Stephen slung his rifle over his shoulder. “Okay...”

As they started their walk back, Duncan fell into step beside Lucy, a comfortable silence settling between them. Caroline, with a mischievous glint in her eyes, lingered behind with Stephen, their conversation punctuated by bursts of laughter.

“Forgive Stephen's enthusiasm, Your Grace,” Lucy said finally, breaking the silence. “He possesses a boundless energy that can be...trying at times.”

Duncan shook his head. “Not at all, Duchess. In fact, I rather enjoyed our little...expedition. Stephen's enthusiasm is infectious.” He paused for a moment, then added, “Besides, it provided a welcome distraction from the usual morning routine.”

As they retreated towards the mansion, the duke, with a boldness that surprised even himself, reached out and gently intertwined his fingers with hers.

Lucy's breath hitched in her throat. The touch was unexpected, sending a jolt of electricity through her. The feel of his warm, calloused fingers against her own, delicate and pale, was a stark contrast that somehow felt perfectly complementary.

For a moment, they walked in comfortable silence, the only sound their footsteps crunching on the gravel path. Lucy stole a glance at Duncan, his profile bathed in the warm glow of the morning sun. His lips were curved in a faint smile, his gaze fixed intently on the path ahead.

Lucy felt a blush creep up her neck, a warmth spreading across her cheeks.

CHAPTER 17

“Y our Grace, I must apologize for my family’s conduct. I know they can be overbearing. They get carried away most times. But they meant no harm, I can assure you.”

Lucy’s family had finally left, and she wasn’t sure about Duncan’s disposition. He seemed almost jovial at some points and subdued at others, restrained even as if he was holding himself back. She didn’t know what to make of it.

Who was she kidding? Of course, she knew. They had gone too far, especially her father. But it was only the norm. Viscount Pemberton was jovial to a fault. If only Duncan could understand. But he had been quiet, not uttering a single word or even acknowledging her presence. It was a bad sign. The duke was angry. Oh, this was bad.

“I promise, Your Grace, it was unintended. I know they must have crossed some boundaries. They did not intend to make you uneasy. Physical affection is only our way of showing our love for each other. I would make sure to educate them on not overstepping bounds around you. But I am terribly sorry for—”

“Don’t apologize.”

What? “Your Grace?”

“Do not apologize. There is nothing to be sorry for,” his voice deep and reassuring.

“Really? Are you absolutely sure? I could talk to them. It is not a problem.”

“Don’t. There is no need for that. You have a lovely family, warm and inviting. It is a pleasure to be with them.”

Who was this person and what had he done with Duncan? Her boisterous family being a pleasure to be around? It wasn’t like she didn’t enjoy her family’s company. Of course, they were absolutely delightful. She knew that firsthand. But the duke?

“I feel good whenever I am around them. It is something I never did with my own family.”

Was she dreaming right now? Oh, it would be such a disappointment. But she couldn’t be dreaming. She hoped not. She looked up, catching the sincerity in his eyes. It was rare and struck her heart like a chord.

“Are you certain, Your Grace?”

“I am, Lucy. It was a welcome change.” Duncan’s lips curled in a rare smile, one that reached his eyes, and softened her features, making her breath hitch.

In that instant, Lucy felt a rush of emotions. It was like the world had shifted, the ground beneath her feet more solid than ever before. Her heart swelled, a disturbing realization settling within her. She was in love.

Oh no.

He had been clear from the beginning. This was a union forged by necessity. She had tried, began to accept it. She had resigned herself to a life of cordial detachment. Yet now, seeing him smile, a genuine smile that softened his entire demeanor, she felt an unexpected warmth spread through her chest.

Her heart pounded, each beat a reminder of her own foolishness. She had promised herself, warned herself not to fall in love; to keep her emotions in check. But as she gazed into his eyes, she felt her resolve crumbling. Here was a rare glimpse into the man behind the title. It spoke of unguarded tenderness, one that made her almost hope against all reason.

A swirl of emotions flooded her senses – fear, anger, longing, hope, and an aching sense of vulnerability. She was drawn to him—not as the duke, but as Duncan—in all his mystery, aloofness, and kindness. The walls she had carefully constructed around her heart had begun to dissolve. They were being replaced by a yearning she could no longer deny.

“Your Grace,” Lucy said softly, taking a tentative step closer. Her voice trembled, betraying the storm of feelings within her. “I am glad you felt their affection. It means a lot to me.”

“I am glad for that as well,” the duke’s smile widened, his eyes shining brightly.

The world outside ceased to exist. They stood together in the dimly lit parlor, the air thick with tension as hearts raced. The flickering candlelight cast long shadows on the walls, illuminating the rich tapestries and heavy drapes that adorned the room.

She tried, oh, she tried to banish the thought from her head. But Lucy couldn’t stop herself from believing, even if for a moment, that their marriage could be more than a mere arrangement.

What if, just what if theirs could be a union of hearts, bound by love and mutual respect? What if she was his beloved, his wife, in every sense of the word? What if?

Duncan’s gaze wandered to her lips, his brows furrowing in thought. The tenderness that had illuminated his features only moments ago was replaced by a shadow of

regret. And the spell was broken. What could have gone wrong?

“Lucy,” Duncan began, his voice low and measured, “I must beg your pardon.”

Her heart fluttered in apprehension. “Whatever for, Your Grace?”

His eyes met hers, sorrow further darkening his usually steadfast countenance. “For denying you the one wish you hold dear—to have children.” His tone was heavy with disappointment. “I know how dearly you desire it.”

Lucy’s heart ached with his words. She had longed for children, dreamed of filling her home with the laughter and light only a family could bring. Yet, Duncan had been resolute with reasons she could only hope to understand.

He didn’t think it was possible to hate himself more than he already did. He hated to be the cause of her crestfallen face. But he kept going. He had to.

“I believe that our marriage ought to remain uncomplicated.” He thought he heard the self-reproach in his voice. “I thought it best not to entangle our lives any further.” Yes. That was the right thing to do. The sensible thing. So why did he feel like he was doing something wrong? Why did his chest feel so hollow?

“I know how deeply this desire runs within you. But I am sorry I cannot fulfill it.” He wanted to stop talking, but he could not.

“Why, Duncan? Why? It is not yet too late. We can still—”

He shook his head, a melancholic smile gracing his lips. “It is not merely a matter of time, Duchess.” If only she knew.

“Why, Duncan? Why would you subject me to such torture and pain? Is it not enough

that you deny me the pleasure of your touch? Now you deny me the joy of motherhood.”

“Lucy—”

“No, Your Grace. No.”

Lucy and Duncan stood close, the air between them nearly suffocating him. The silence that had once felt comforting now crackled with tension.

“Your Grace. I have seen certain things, subtle signs that trouble me. I need to understand.”

Duncan stiffened, a cold dread creeping up inside. “Whatever do you mean?” he asked, unable to keep the defensiveness from creeping into his voice.

She met his gaze, her eyes unwavering. “I see you. I see how you never go about without your gloves. I see how you recoil at the touch of someone. You can't even stand my touch. On our wedding day, you had your gloves on. I see it all.”

Duncan sucked in a sharp breath, his teeth grounding silently. “You are mistaken, Lucy.”

“No, I am not. I may be perplexed but I am not blind. You are my husband and I wish to share your burdens. I will stand by your side, no matter what. You only have to let me in. Let me share your burden. Please...” her voice trailed off.

His jaw tightened and he turned away, his posture rigid. “There is no need to concern yourself with such matters. It is not your burden to bear.”

“Duncan,” Lucy pressed on, “I am your wife. If something is troubling you, I wish to

know. Please, let me in. I beg you.”

He shook his head, the walls around him fortifying. “Some things are best left unspoken. And I will have you remember that you are my wife in name only. Nothing more. You need not trouble yourself over my matters.”

Her face fell and his heart clenched. He would bear it. It was better than the alternative. How could he let her know? What would she think? That she married a weakling? He couldn't bear to imagine. It was better this way. He would continue to bear his greatest shame.

He did not need anyone to share his burden, least of all his wife, no matter how tempting that was. No matter how much he wanted her. “It is no matter of your consequence. Let it be.”

Her heart ached at his words. Just moments ago, she had thought they were making some headway. How she wanted to believe it badly. But this? She didn't know what to make of it. He was unyielding. And back to his old self. She wanted so badly to reach out to him, to touch him. But she restrained herself.

“You do not have to face it alone. Whatever it is, we can confront it together. You cannot stand the feel of me? Is that it?”

Duncan whipped around with a ferocity that scared her. She didn't miss the storm in his piercing blue eyes. He cupped her face in his face, his touch gentle yet firm. A jolt of electricity coursed through her.

“Lucy, know this—I have no issue touching you.” She felt the warmth of his hands, the intensity of his gaze. But she could see the conflict in his eyes. She would be blind not to.

“Yet, you still do not claim me,” Lucy challenged, frustrated. “Why do you hold back?”

His eyes darkened and he drew her closer. His grip on her waist tightened and the warmth of his body enveloped her. “There is nothing I want more than to take you, to make you mine completely.”

His voice was a rough whisper, gathering a pool of warmth in her belly. His words ignited a fire within her. “Then why do you hesitate?”

The silence stretched between them. His eyes bore into hers, a tumultuous blue that threatened to consume her. And consume he did as he closed the distance and kissed her with a fierceness that zipped shock right through her.

She stood frozen at first, shocked to the marrow, but then succumbed to his kisses, melting against him. Oh, how wonderful it felt to be in his arms. And if she didn't stop, she could pretend he loved her.

He kissed her deeply, their lips meeting in perfect sync. She felt all the anguish that was in his soul. His hand slid down her arm, capturing her hand in his and hooking both their hands in the small of her back.

Her body arched closer to his. His chest was as hard as a rock. Her bosom felt heavy. And deep in her belly was a heat that promised to swallow her whole.

He bit gently at her lower lip, urging her to open up to him. She obliged, feeling his tongue collide with hers in a sensual battle of mouths. They kissed and his every breath, every stroke of his tongue caressed his soul like a soothing balm.

“I need you,” Duncan whispered harshly as his chest rose and fell.

Her body tingled all over. “Then take me. I am all yours.”

And he scooped her up in his arms, wasting no time in getting her to his chamber. He laid her gently as one would handle an egg. She felt every bit as fragile as he made her feel. Taking an eyeful of her, he kissed her again, trailing his mouth down her neck.

His breath was hot against her skin, his tongue lapping and tasting her. They spoke not a word, only gazing into each other’s eyes as Duncan unfastened the ties of her nightdress, loosening it as he slid it down her body. The fireplace was lit, illuminating the bedchamber and chasing the night chills. Yet, she shivered.

His eyes were heavy on her. Overcome with shyness, she hid herself, covering her breasts with her small palms.

“Don’t,” Duncan growled. “I want to see you, every inch of you. You will not deny me that, will you?”

Oh, she wanted this. How she had waited for this. But she preened under his intense gaze. It was her first time, after all. And he looked at her, his stormy eyes piercing her being as if looking for something only he knew.

And she knew when he knew, watched the exact moment realization dawned on him.

“You have not done this before.” It was no question. It was a statement. She nodded, words failing her. And if it was possible, his eyes grew darker.

His hands caressed her breasts, stroking the sensitive buds. His thumbs teased lightly on her nipples. He stilled his hands and gazed up at her. Without breaking eye contact, he leaned and took her nipple in his mouth.

She wriggled against the silk sheets, heat flashing through her, threatening to burn her. “Duncan,” his name left her mouth in a breathless whisper. His mouth was hot and moist against her. And she nearly melted when his tongue began to flicker against the swollen bud. She whimpered, arching her back and driving her breast deeper into his mouth.

He plagued one breast with his mouth while his hands worked magic on the other. His hands trailed to her hips and drew her to him and her thigh brushed against his hard length. Without a word, he slid off her and stripped off his pantaloons, ridding himself of every piece of clothing.

Her breath hitched at the sight of him; tall, muscled, and naked. His chest was broad and defined with a sprinkle of dark hair. And that beautiful chest narrowed to his waist, leading down to his manhood. She swallowed at the sight of it. He was a beauty to behold.

His skin glowed in the golden light of the candles. She wanted him. Needed him. She did not look away. His eyes were deep and dark and sensuous. And his lips descended on her again, demanding and giving.

Their bodies clung together. His ragged breathing sent a thrill of pleasure shooting through her. Her heart raced. And a wet warmth pooled between her legs. She lay, open and ready to receive him. And he slid into her silken heat, bit by bit.

Lucy gasped, adjusting to the foreign feeling. And when at last, she welcomed him fully into her, she marveled at the fullness she felt. She tried the dull throbbing and was rewarded as Duncan captured her lips, kissing her thoroughly. And finally, he moved, rocking her until she found her rhythm.

They moved together in a partnership, their breaths ragged and bodies slick with sweat. She was all too aware of this moment, this man. Duncan filled her senses,

filled her body. She felt the remaining walls around her heart collapsing.

“Duncan,” Lucy gasped, not quite understanding the sensations going on in her body. And then, she exploded, white-hot pleasure consuming every inch of her. “Lucy,” Duncan growled. And she reveled in the warmth of his seed spilling into her.

His body buzzed with energy, a myriad of thoughts assaulting his senses. Lucy lay in his arms, her soft breaths slapping against his chest. It felt good. It felt right. How he had held off from her for this long was a surprise to him. He gazed at his bare hands, digesting the fact that he felt good. He felt no negativity. And he knew there was no going back.

“Duchess?”

“Yes, Duncan?” Hearing her call his name sent waves of pleasure rocking through him. Her soft voice and very naked body pressed against him sent all the blood rushing south.

“Mayhap, we should try for an heir. What do you say?” Duncan grinned mischievously.

Lucy paused, a shy smile playing on her lips. “Most certainly, Your Grace.

CHAPTER 18

“Tis is a glorious day,” Lucy sighed wistfully. If anything, the past couple of days had been glorious. It was nothing short of a dream. It was all she wanted and more. And the joy and peace in her heart were overflowing.

She had never been this happy before. In all her life, she never thought such happiness could exist. She had seen it with her parents. It was a different thing altogether seeing it happen to her. No wonder Mama and Papa were always in good spirits! She was so happy. She felt so light. And free!

She was grateful to experience this. She could have had a similar fate to Theodosia's. She could have ended up in a loveless marriage. Not like it didn't happen anyway. But by the heavens, they had come so far. And she was grateful for it.

“Tis indeed, Duchess. What a glorious day. And a glorious view.”

Lucy blushed furiously, her face getting uncomfortably warm. She didn't miss the meaning behind his words. She couldn't even if she tried. Duncan smothered her with his intense gaze.

Getting flustered, she averted her gaze. It truly was a beautiful day. The morning sun bathed the estate in a golden glow, casting a soft light over the rolling hills and blooming gardens. They had taken a much-needed walk after being cooped up in Duncan's bedchamber for days. She was sure the servants were beginning to talk.

Now, Lucy and Duncan stood by the stables, the scent of fresh hay and the sound of

horses neighing in the air. Duncan was saddling his stallion, a proud, ebony steed, while Lucy prepared her mare, a graceful, chestnut beauty when a thought popped into her head.

“Shall we take a ride, Your Grace?” Lucy asked, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

Duncan looked up, a playful glint in his eye. “Indeed, Duchess. The day is perfect for it.”

They mounted their horses, the cool morning breeze brushing against their faces as they set off down the winding path that led around the estate. The rhythmic clapping of hooves on the gravel was soothing, but she couldn’t deny it – the air between them was charged. It was a newfound intimacy that shook her to her very core.

As they rode side by side, Duncan glanced at her, a smile playing at the corners of his lips. It was as if he was a different person altogether. Who would have thought that behind that austere personality was a caring, passionate, and attentive lover? And even better, jovial and playful? It was a refreshing change. And she was happy and proud to have been part of the reason for the change.

“I see you’ve still got that blush on your face, Duchess. Care to indulge me on what you must be thinking about?”

Oh, the nerve of the man. As if he wasn’t the cause of it all. “It’s just a sunny day, is all.”

“Are you absolutely sure, Duchess?” Duncan cocked a mischievous brow.

“Most certainly, Your Grace.”

“I must admit, Lucy, there is something quite exhilarating about riding with you.”

She laughed, the sound light and joyful. “And what makes it so, Duncan?”

They were trotting at a peaceful pace now, and he leaned closer, his voice low and teasing. “The thought of what I might do to you once we return.”

A furious blush crept up Lucy’s cheeks again. She thought she might explode. She still wasn’t used to this naughty, playful side of Duncan.

“Is that so? And what might those things be?”

He smirked, a devilish glint in his eye. “Oh, my dear, the list is rather extensive. But rest assured, each one is designed to bring you the utmost pleasure.”

Her breath hitched at his words, the boldness of his admission sending a thrill through her. Memories of their nights assaulted her. She could already feel a warm buzz coursing through her. Duncan knew just the right things to say to get her off. And the accuracy with which he knew her body was scary at times.

Determined not to be outdone, she lifted her chin, a competitive spark igniting within her. “Well then, Your Grace, what say you to a little wager?”

Duncan raised an eyebrow, intrigued. “A wager, you say? Do elaborate, my dear.”

Lucy’s eyes twinkled with mischief. “A race. If you win, you may do as you wish with me.”

He laughed, the sound rich and filled with genuine amusement. “And if you win, Duchess?”

She leaned in, her voice a sultry whisper. “If I win, you must confess your deepest desire to me.”

Duncan's smile widened, his eyes darkening. "Very well, Duchess. You have yourself a wager. But be warned—I do not play fair."

Lucy grinned. "Then you might make a worthy opponent."

Her competitive spirit flared. Oh, she would give this husband of hers a challenge he wouldn't forget anytime soon.

They urged their horses forward, the beasts leaping into a gallop. The wind whipped through Lucy's hair, her laughter echoing in the open air. He could swear she was a vision sent from above to torture him.

Duncan rode alongside her, his stallion powerful and swift. They raced across the fields, the landscape blurring around them, neither man nor wife wanting to give up. Duncan pulled ahead, his stallion's hooves thundering against the ground. Lucy urged her mare on, lessening the gap between them. They rode hard, neck to neck as the horses' hooves thundered against the earth.

Duncan glanced at Lucy, his heart swelling at the sight of her laughter, her face alight with unbridled joy. "You're quite the rider, Duchess," he called over the wind, his voice filled with mirth.

She turned to him, her eyes sparkling. "And you, Your Grace, are not as slow as I expected," she teased, a playful challenge in her tone.

The thrill of the race coursed through Duncan's veins, a heady mixture of speed and adrenaline. For the first time in years, he felt unburdened, as though an enormous weight had been lifted off him. The wind whipped through his hair, the world a blur of vibrant colors and the intoxicating scent of blooming flowers.

Lucy's laughter was like music to his ears, her happiness infectious. She urged her

mare forward, the horse responding with a burst of speed. “Come, Duncan! Do not fall behind!” she called, her voice filled with glee.

Duncan grinned, spurring his stallion onward. “I shall catch you, Lucy. Do not think you can outrun me.”

The sheer joy of the moment was overwhelming, a rare and precious gift. Duncan felt lighter than he had in years, as if the shadows that had long haunted him were finally dispelled by the sunlight.

But then, in an instant, everything changed.

Lucy’s mare stumbled on a patch of uneven ground. Her laughter turned to a gasp as she struggled to maintain her balance. His heart lurched as he watched her teeter, her arms flailing.

“Lucy!” he shouted, his voice thick with panic.

Time seemed to slow as she was thrown from the saddle, her body twisting in the air before hitting the ground with a sickening thud. The sound of the impact resonated in Duncan’s ears, drowning out all other noise.

“Lucy!” Duncan’s voice was a roar of panic as he reined in his horse, dismounting swiftly with a speed borne of sheer desperation.

“Lucy!” he cried again as he sprinted to her side. His heart pounded in his chest, fear gripping him like a vice. He dropped to his knees beside her, gathering her limp form into his arms.

“Lucy, speak to me,” he urged, his voice choked with fear.

Her eyes fluttered open, pain etched across her face. “Duncan,” she whispered, her voice weak and strained.

He cradled her head, his hands shaking. “Help! Someone, fetch the valet! Now!” he bellowed, his voice raw with desperation.

Memories assaulted him — Gertrude, lying pale and still in his arms, her life slipping away, the profound grief. He could not lose Lucy too. The thought was too unbearable to contemplate. His breaths came in ragged gasps, his mind a whirl of dread and helplessness.

“Stay with me, Lucy,” Duncan pleaded, his voice breaking. “You will be all right. I promise.”

But his eyes betrayed his words, wide and frantic. She was the only thing that kept him going, the only thing that gave him hope. She was so fragile, it terrified him. He brushed her hair back with trembling fingers, his touch gentle despite the fear coursing through him.

“Hold on, please.

“I...I’m here Duncan,” she muttered weakly with a wince as she smiled. More like grimaced. Footsteps pounded towards them as the valet arrived in a flurry of movement.

“My goodness! What happened?”

“Where the bloody hell have you been, Robert?” Duncan snarled.

“I apologize, Your Grace. I came as fast as I could. Your Grace, what happened?” he asked, eyes wide with alarm.

The valet nodded, moving quickly to assist. Together, they lifted Lucy with as much care as they could muster, her body limp in their arms. Duncan's mind raced, fear tightening its grip around his heart like a vice.

"Everything will be all right," Duncan chanted, more to himself than to Lucy. "Everything will be all right, you'll see."

Who was he pretending to? Everything was not all right. And he wasn't sure it would be. It was all happening all over again. It was just like before. And in his mind's eye, he was no longer Duncan Elkins, the Duke of Northwick. He was little Duncan, with his little sister in his arms again. He could not unsee it, despite how hard he shook his head to rid it of the thought.

Terror plagiarized him. His hands trembled furiously. His brain felt foggy. He could swear he was walking on air. None of this felt real. But he couldn't deny the gash on Lucy's forearm that was dripping bright red blood.

He felt lightheaded. Unsettled. The contents of his stomach threatened to make their way back to the surface. His breaths came out in shallow spurts. All he saw was red. And all he saw was Gertrude.

Focus Duncan! This isn't about you. Get yourself together.

Yes. He had to get himself together. His wife needed him. This wasn't about him. This was about Lucy. And he needed to get his head straight.

"Your Grace?" The valet's voice grounded him back.

"I'm fine, Robert." But try as hard as he could, he was not fine. He held her hand tightly, fear clouding his eyes. "Unhand her," he instructed his valet, who immediately obliged. Duncan gathered her in his arms, resting her head on his chest

as they hurried back to the manor.

“Fetch the doctor, Robert. At once!”

Duncan laid her gently on his bed as Lucy groaned. He knelt beside her, clutching her hand tightly as if his very life depended on it. He watched her, his heart aching. How had he let this happen?

He should never have agreed to the race. He should have talked her out of it. They should have never gone to the stables in the first place. The guilt gnawed at him with relentless torment. A wave of helplessness washed over him.

“Lucy, stay with me, please. I cannot lose you too.”

Too? What was he on about? Why would he lose her?

“Duncan, I am right here. I am going nowhere,” Lucy reassured him, but she could tell she wasn’t doing a good job at it. His eyes were glassy as if he were staring at a ghost. She wondered if he could see her at all.

“Duncan, look at me. I am here with you.” She ground her teeth at the pain that racked through her.

“I need you to be all right.”

Duncan pressed his lips to her uninjured hand, her heart breaking at the sight. There was definitely more to this than her injuries. It was a mere scratch. It looked worse than it was. She wouldn’t deny that she felt out of sorts though. But that was to be expected. She did take a tumble from the horse.

“I’ll be fine, Duncan. Do not fret.” But he only looked worse. She was troubled but

she could only do so much.

“Your Grace, the physician,” the valet announced.

“Your Grace,” the balding older man greeted.

“Please, save her,” Duncan implored. “My wife took a tumble from the horse. Do whatever it takes.” Duncan moved aside, still not letting go of her hand. Lucy could only stare at him with wide eyes. Looking at Duncan, one would think she was going through the rigors of childbirth.

“It is not so much as His Grace makes it to be, really...”

“George, Your Grace,” the physician told her.

“It is only a little cut on my arm and a nasty headache, is all.”

“It is to be expected, Your Grace. I shall see to them immediately.” He turned to Duncan. “If you don’t mind, Your Grace, please step out of the room.” Lucy stilled, watching with bated breath as Duncan’s eyes turned to a stormy blue.

“You dare command me in my manor?” Duncan’s voice was deceptively calm but she didn’t miss the thunder in his eyes.

“N–no, Your Grace. I was only suggesting because—”

“I will not move an inch. Now get to work.”

“Of course. As you wish, Your Grace.”

The room was silent save for the murmur of quiet instructions and Lucy’s labored

breathing. The physician worked with careful precision, tending to Lucy's injuries as Duncan hovered nearby. She drifted in and out of consciousness, but she didn't miss the tremble in his hands, nor the way he stared at them. It was disturbing and she felt ill at ease, but was helpless to alleviate it.

Time seemed to stretch endlessly, the minutes ticking by with agonizing slowness as he felt weaker and weaker. The darkness called to her, but she fought it. Thoughts of Duncan weighed heavily on her mind.

Finally, the physician stepped back, his expression reassuring.

"She will recover, Your Grace, but she must rest."

Duncan merely nodded as the physician gathered his tools and left, leaving him alone with Lucy. He knelt beside her, clutching her hands in his. Her eyes widened in alarm as they still trembled.

"Duncan?" she muttered weakly.

"You must rest, Lucy."

"But—"

"Shhh," he breathed, squeezing her hand gently. "I was so afraid."

She tried to smile, to offer him some comfort. "I am here," Lucy said softly, though her strength was fading. "It is nothing to worry about."

"Rest now. I will be here when you wake."

It was all she needed to hear as she gave in to the darkness that consumed her

immediately.

When Lucy woke again, the light had changed, casting long shadows across the room. She blinked, her mind slowly clearing from the haze of pain and exhaustion.

“Duncan?” she called softly, but the room was empty.

She struggled to sit up, wincing at the pain that shot through her body. “Duncan?” she called again, louder this time, but there was no response.

Panic began to creep in. She needed to see him. He needed to see that she was all right. With great effort, she reached for the bell pull beside the bed, summoning a maid.

The door opened, and a young maid entered. “You called for me, Your Grace?”

“Where is the duke?” Lucy asked, her voice edged with worry. “I need to speak with him.”

“I do not know, Your Grace. He was here earlier but has since left.” Dread settled in her gut.

“Left to where?”

“I’m afraid I do not know.”

“What do you mean you do not know?!” Lucy near-screamed. Noticing the scared look on the maid’s face, she called herself to order. “Have you seen my husband around?”

“No, Your Grace.” Lucy exhaled a long breath.

“Ask everyone. There must be someone who knows of his whereabouts.”

“I shall do just that. Do you need anything else, Your Grace?”

“No.”

The maid scurried off to do as she was asked. With slow movements, Lucy struggled to sit up, wondering if she could get up to go look for Duncan herself. A knock sounded on the door and the maid trailed in again.

“Your Grace, I’m afraid no one has seen His Grace. I asked everyone but no one seems to know where the duke went.”

Lucy’s heart dropped. Something was terribly wrong.

CHAPTER 19

The grand estate of Scriven was a sanctuary of peace and refinement. Its stately gardens and elegant halls spoke of nothing but elegance. No one would envision anything less for the Dowager Duchess of Northwick, let alone herself.

Modesty sat in the drawing room, her needlework in hand as she hummed softly to herself. The sun streamed through the tall windows, casting a warm, golden light over the room.

It was then she heard it, the familiar sound of footsteps – light against the floor. They were so light you could miss it. But not her. She knew those footsteps anywhere, even in her sleep. But they were footsteps she had not expected to hear for some time. She looked up, her heart quickening. Duncan stood in the doorway, his face drawn and pale. His eyes were shadowed and sunken.

“Duncan, my son,” Modesty exclaimed, rising to her feet, her needlework forgotten. “What brings you here?”

“It is nothing, Mother.” But it didn’t look like nothing. In fact, it looked like everything had gone wrong with the world.

“Give me some credit, Duncan. We may not be as close as I’d like us to be, but I am no fool. ‘Tis not nothing. Something is bothering you.”

“It is of no consequence. Do not worry over it.” But she was already worried. His voice was grave and his eyes seemed to further sink into their sockets.

“Please do not tell me that, Duncan. I can see it on your face. Something is troubling you. Of what use am I as a mother if I cannot try to alleviate my son’s pain? Your pain is my pain, Duncan. Please, do not shut me out. I beg you.”

But it was as if she had been pouring water on a stone. Duncan wasn’t budging. His impassive face was set in stubborn lines. She should have known better than to try to pry information from her son. Not that she didn’t know. But she could try. There was no harm in trying now, was there?

“Duncan, please. I am your mother, and I can’t bear to see you this way without being able to do anything. We can solve this together. Your pain is my pain. Why do you not see that? Please, talk to me.”

Duncan hesitated, his tall frame nearly sucking up all the space from the drawing room. Modesty didn’t miss the slight stoop in his shoulders. Duncan never stooped for he was a man of prideful height. Something had gone terribly wrong.

“Do not fret, Mother. As I said, it is of no consequence. I only needed some time away, is all.”

“Time away, you say? Time away from what? Is anything the matter with Northwick Estate?

“No. The estate is in good condition. I only needed to get away.”

From what? Oh dear. This was worse than she thought. Her heart ached at the sight of her son in such distress. She crossed the room to him, her hands gentle as they clasped his. Duncan stared at their conjoined hands, long and hard. Deflated, Modesty unclasped hers, feeling uncomfortable. She had never been able to hold her son, just like any other mother, in years. And it killed her.

“Come, sit with me,” she urged, leading him to a nearby settee. “Tell me what troubles you.”

Duncan shook his head, looking away, his jaw set in a hard line. “I cannot, Mother. Not now.”

She studied him, her keen eyes noticing the tremor in his hands, the tightness around his eyes. “Is it something to do with Lucy?” she asked softly, careful to keep her voice neutral.

Duncan’s eyes moved to her in a flash, the silence suffocating, before resting on his trembling hands. “Yes,” he admitted, offering no further details.

Oh dear. She knew it. She just knew. That gold-digging chit was up to no good. She had never liked her. There was just something off about her. She was conniving. Nothing about her was real. She saw right through her and her leeching family. She would have to do something about them all.

“Whatever it is, my dear, you do not have to face it alone.”

Duncan’s eyes met hers, a storm of emotions swirling within them. “I need time, Mother,” he said finally, “time to think.”

Modesty nodded. “Of course, Duncan. Take all the time you need. You are always welcome here.”

She watched him, her heart heavy with a mother’s worry. She had always known Duncan to be strong, and resolute, but this...this was different. There was a fragility to him now, a vulnerability that she had rarely seen, and it worried her.

As the silence stretched between them, Modesty’s mind raced. She hadn’t known

what to make of their marriage. She had hoped it would be manageable. But now, seeing the pain etched on Duncan's face, she feared something had gone terribly wrong.

"Duncan," she began gently, "whatever has happened, know that you have my support. I am here for you, always."

He looked away, a shadow crossing his features. "I fear I have failed," he confessed, his voice breaking. "I have failed."

Modesty's heart ached for him. "You are facing a difficult situation, and it is natural to feel overwhelmed." Duncan said nothing, only shutting his eyes tight.

She would never forgive Lucy nor her family for what they had done. Whatever the issue, she would help him find a way through it. For now, all she could do was offer her unwavering support and love.

She had a strong feeling about what had happened. She knew what had gone wrong. It was exactly what she had been trying to avoid. She would do whatever it took to help her son find his way back to peace. She knew in her heart that the solution might not involve Lucy. But Duncan came first.

The days stretched endlessly, passing with an agonizing slowness for Lucy. She wandered through the empty halls, each room a painful reminder of his absence. Each passing hour without Duncan's return gnawed at her soul. She could not bear the loneliness, yet she stayed, hoping he would come back.

One afternoon, as she sat by the window, staring out at the empty drive, a carriage pulled up. Her heart leapt with hope, but it quickly faded as she recognized the crest. Lucy stood, her heart pounding. She could already sense the impending confrontation. The doors flew open, and Modesty swept in, her posture rigid and

expression stern.

“Good day to you, Lucy,” she said, her tone icy. A chill immediately descended on the room. Her presence was commanding and cold.

“Lady Modesty,” Lucy replied, curtsying. She kept her voice steady, but Modesty’s piercing gaze unsettled her.

Modesty wasted no time. “I have come to speak plainly,” she began, her voice sharp. “This marriage should never have occurred. I told Duncan so, but he was too blinded by honor. It was a mistake from the beginning.”

Lucy flinched at the harshness in her voice. “We are married now. That cannot be undone.”

Modesty’s eyes narrowed. “Cannot it? Duncan has been gone for days. You are here alone, pining away. This is not how a duchess should live.”

Lucy lowered her gaze. “We have had our challenges, but I believe we can work through them.”

“Work through them?” Modesty scoffed. “You are from a family of no standing, no reputation. You bring nothing but trouble and distress to my son.”

Lucy swallowed hard, her voice trembling. “I did not ask for this, Lady Modesty. I have done my best to be a good wife.”

“A good wife?” Modesty scoffed again. “A good wife would have understood her husband’s needs. She would have insisted he not marry beneath his station.”

The words stung. “I love Duncan and I am doing my best to support him.”

Modesty's laugh was cold and mirthless. "Love? You speak of love as if it were a simple thing. Love is not enough, Lucy. Status, propriety, duty—are what holds a marriage together. You know nothing of the responsibilities and duties that come with being a duchess. Your frivolous ways are not suitable for this role."

Tears pricked at her eyes, but she fought them back. "I am learning. I am trying."

"Certainly not hard enough." Modesty stepped closer, her eyes blazing. "You will never be worthy of him. Your presence in his life is a burden. He needs someone of equal standing, someone who can truly support him."

Lucy kept her head bowed, her voice barely above a whisper. "Duncan chose me. Despite your disapproval, we are married."

Modesty's eyes narrowed dangerously. "You are a fool if you think this marriage will survive. I came here to tell you that you should leave. Return to your family. This charade has gone on long enough."

Lucy met her gaze, her eyes flashing. "I will not abandon him. No matter what you say."

"Duncan will see sense soon enough. He will realize that you are not what he needs."

Tears of frustration welled in Lucy's eyes, but she stood her ground. "Be that as it may. If that is what he decides, then so be it. But until then, I will remain here, waiting for him."

"Very well. Stay in this house if you must. But do not think for a moment that you belong here."

"This is my home. Duncan is my husband."

Modesty sighed, a sound filled with exasperation and disdain. “You are determined to be stubborn, I see. Very well then. Duncan, my son, is with me at Scriven estate. He will be there for a long time, most probably after what has happened.”

Modesty’s eyes arrested Lucy with her piercing gaze. Lucy stilled, a myriad of thoughts running through her head. She knows. She knows! Goodness! And Duncan had been at his mother’s all this time? Without bothering to let her know?

“I should never have allowed this sham of a union to happen. I should have known better than to trust my son with you, you lowlife, scheming opportunist. And now, you have hurt my son. I will never forgive you if anything happens to Duncan. Mark my words.”

“I—”

“I believe you both need to live apart. It is the best thing for my son and the very least you can do.” Lucy breathed harshly, her ears ringing loudly as Modesty took a menacing step closer. “Heed my warning, girl. Duncan is my only child. And I will not see him come to ruin because of you.

“I will stand by Duncan no matter what.” On the outside, Lucy squared her shoulders. On the inside, she believed something in her had died a little.

“You may find that a lonely endeavor, my dear. Good day.”

With that, Modesty turned and swept out of the room, leaving Lucy standing alone, her heart heavy. The door closed with a decisive click, the sound echoing through the silent house. Lucy sank into a chair. Her limbs were weak, and she had no doubt she would collapse to the floor if she kept standing.

It was that bad. Whatever had happened that fateful day had driven Duncan over the

edge. How could things go so wrong in the blink of an eye? No doubt, he wouldn't ever want to set eyes on her again let alone touch her. It seemed her mother-in-law was right. She had no place here again. And with that, she headed to Duncan's chambers and packed her belongings.

She took only what she came with, leaving behind whatever Duncan gave to her. She caught sight of the lavender dress. Dropping all else she was doing, she picked it up, caressing it as memories assaulted her. She could no longer hold the tears back. And they poured from her eyes with a vengeance.

She couldn't bear to leave the dress behind. But she had to. She had to move on with her life. She didn't need reminders of a life she couldn't have. There was no use for her staying here without Duncan. Who was she without him here anyway? Who was a duchess without her duke? Nothing.

And so, she dropped it and finished with her packing. She didn't have a lot. It wasn't like she came with a lot. Perhaps, it was a good thing. She could leave as if she was never here.

She didn't want to cause him any more pain. She would rather die than do that. Perhaps it was true. She had caused him untold misery. Staying at the manor would only worsen it. There was no place for her here anymore.

She could stop all the pretense and go back to her life. Her real life. Her time was up. She took a last look at the place she had come to love, a place that told the story of their love. Duncan's scent still hung strongly in the air.

And with tears blinding her vision, she picked up her trunk and left.

CHAPTER 20

“Lucy, my dear, you have been so quiet. Please tell me, what is the matter?”

Lucy sighed, her spirit lower than ever. She'd returned to Pemberton Manor right after her mother-in-law's scathing visit. She saw no use being there anymore, playing pretend duchess when the Lord of the Manor was nowhere in sight. And so, she had returned, back to where it all began.

The days had stretched into a blur since she arrived, each one marked by an aching sense of loss. She kept her troubles to herself, unwilling to burden her family with the weight of her sorrow. But Patience was not one to be left in the dark.

Lucy forced a smile that did not quite reach her eyes. “It is nothing, Mama. I am only tired.”

Her mother frowned, not convinced. She had to do a better job if she wanted her family to let her be.

“You are not yourself. You barely eat, and you look so pale.”

“That's what I'm saying, Mama. It's because I'm tired. I just need to rest more,” Lucy weakly offered, not quite looking her mother in the eyes.

“When have we ever kept secrets from each other, Lucy? Do you not trust your mother enough to share your burden?”

“You worry too much, Mama. Do you not think I would tell you if it was of any importance?” Lucy lied through clenched teeth. She hated to shut everyone out. But she had no choice.

“I know you better than that, my child. You carry a heavy burden, and you give none of us the chance to help you out. Tell me, is it the duke? Has something happened between you two?”

Lucy’s heart lurched painfully. It was as if a dam broke and all the painful memories she’d been keeping at bay had finally let loose. She held her breath, lest the tears she’d been holding come to the surface.

She shook her head, avoiding her mother’s gaze. “It is nothing truly. Please, do not worry on my account.”

Patience sighed and sat beside her, taking her hand. “Lucy, you can tell me anything. You know that.”

Tears welled in Lucy’s eyes, but she blinked them away. “I know, Mother. But I cannot speak of it now.”

Patience pulled her daughter to her, resting her head on her warm bosom as she patted Lucy’s head gently. “Oh, my poor child. Whatever has happened? I hate to see you this way, for you are a cheerful one. But very well. Do remember, we are here for you. I am here for you, whenever you need me.”

Lucy sighed, enjoying the comfort of her mother’s presence. “I know, Mama. Thank you.”

“All right. Rest well, my child. Supper will be ready in no time.” Lucy nodded and Patience left. Her mother's insistence had pulled her back into the dark hole she’d

been trying to crawl out from.

All her thoughts turned inward, and she replayed the events of the past days in her head—her fall, Duncan’s panic, and his sudden departure. Her heart ached with the memory of his trembling hands, and his haunted eyes. What had she done wrong? Why had he left her, without even as much as a word?

She felt trapped in a haze of sorrow, her heart heavy with the weight of uncertainty. She longed for Duncan, for the comfort of his presence, but he remained a shadow in her thoughts.

At night, she lay awake, staring at the walls, her mind racing with scary thoughts.

What if he never returned? What if their marriage was truly over? The thought was unbearable, yet it haunted her relentlessly.

Lucy found herself drifting through the house like a ghost. She felt no joy, no spark in her life. It had all been crushed under the heavy weight of despair. She could not bring herself to speak of it, to share the burden with anyone. It was hers to bear alone, a silent agony that gnawed at her soul.

Her mother and sister watched her with worried eyes. She didn't miss their subtle glances or unspoken words. They tried to cheer her up. But she remained distant, lost in her own world of grief.

The soft click of the door pulled her out of her reverie. Caroline walked in, a tentative smile playing on her face.

“Lucy, come take a walk with me in the garden. It will do you good.”

Lucy shook her head. “I do not wish to, Caroline. I am not in the mood.”

Caroline sat across from her, studying her with keen eyes that made Lucy shift uncomfortably. "Something has happened. You are not yourself. Please, tell me." Sometimes, Caroline was too perceptive for her own good.

Lucy looked away, her voice barely a whisper. "I cannot. It is too painful." That was as much as she could tell her sister. Nothing more. She would not burden her younger sister with tales of her disastrous marriage if at all, she still had a marriage.

"Did Duncan hurt you?" Caroline's voice was sharp with worry.

"No," Lucy said quickly. "He would never. It is just complicated."

Caroline frowned, her brow furrowing. "Complicated how? You are my sister. You can confide in me." That exactly was the problem. She was tired of having to burden everyone else with her issues. She needed to deal with this alone.

"It is nothing for your little ears, you twat," Lucy attempted as a joke.

"I see what you're doing, Lucy. It is not working. Why won't you talk to me?"

Lucy lowered her eyes, afraid to confront the hurt and accusation she knew she would see in her sister's eyes. "In due time, Caroline. In due time." With that, she turned her face to the window, signaling the end of their conversation.

"I love you, Lucy. Never forget that."

I love you too, Caroline. But she had to figure things out herself first.

"Since you won't talk to any of us, maybe you will make an exception to this one."

Her eyes darted to the door and in walked... Theodosia?

“Theodosia!”

Throwing the covers off of her, Lucy leapt from the bed and shot into her older sister’s waiting arms. This was the best surprise of her lifetime. She hadn’t seen her sister in over a year. And seeing her now lightened her heart. Maybe, just maybe, life would be better.

“Oh, Theodosia. How I have missed you,” Lucy breathed as she wrapped her hands tightly around her sister. She buried her face in the crook of her neck, breathing in that sweet apricot scent she had missed dearly.

“And I have missed you terribly as well, dear sister. Come, come, we have so much to talk about.” Theodosia pulled Lucy gently and they settled on the bed. “Tell Mother, I’ll be with her shortly, Caroline,” Theodosia smiled deviously to which Lucy laughed. Caroline grumbled as she stepped out, mumbling about gossip and fairness.

“So now that the busy bee is out of the way, you can start talking to me, dear sister. What is the matter with you? Why have you been moping around with a long face?”

Lucy wasn’t sure she was ready to answer those questions. But one thing she was sure of was her uncontained joy at seeing her sister again after so long.

Lucy sighed, not ready to be bombarded with questions. “Shall we get to that later, please? I have missed you so much, sister. How have you been? How has life in the countryside been treating you?”

Theodosia smiled, a happy content smile playing on her lips. “What can I say? I have been faring just well. Life has been peaceful. Worth living. There’s none of all that gossip or scheming of the ton. Everyone is good to me. And if they know of my story, they do not act like it. In fact, they do not care.”

Lucy listened in awe. It was as if her sister was a changed person. Only now, she radiated peace and contentment. “Are you really serious, Theodosia?” She couldn't believe her ears. She'd always thought life in the countryside was dreadful. But it didn't seem like the case with Theodosia.

“I assure you, Lucy. Life is slow and peaceful. It is the most peace I've ever had. Everyone is kind to me. I mean, it is a far cry from the city life here. I wake up to the bleating of sheep, in the early hours of dawn. I milk the cows, collect eggs from the chicken coop—” Theodosia stopped at Lucy's awestruck face. “Whatever is the matter with you, Lucy?”

“I just—tis only—you look so happy, dear sister. I never thought I'd get to see you again, let alone happy,” Lucy gushed. “I love this for you, Theodosia. I am so, so, so happy for you, my sister. You have no idea the joy it brings to my heart seeing you like this.” And before she could stop them, the tears came flowing.

“Oh dear. What now, Lucy?”

“I am so happy for you, Theodosia. Life in the country is treating you well. If there is anyone who deserves to be happy, it is you!” Lucy cried. “If only I can be half as happy as you, I will be content.” Lucy choked on her tears.

Theodosia rushed to her sister's side. “I know you are happy to see me. But this is more than just happiness. Tell me, what has happened? And don't hold back anything. You know you can trust me, Lucy.”

Lucy contemplated holding back. But she was tired of bearing it all. Even if it was just one person who listened to her, she would gladly take it. And who better to understand her than Theodosia? And with that, she launched into her tale, telling Theodosia all about her ill-fated marriage.

“Goodness! You went through all that? Oh, my dear sister. You should have sent word. I would have come to you in a heartbeat.” Theodosia rubbed Lucy’s back in soothing circles.

“You were dealing with your own issues. I could not add to that.”

“Nonsense! You are my little sister. Your worries are my worries. Never forget that.” And Lucy smiled, her heart finally feeling lighter in days. “So, what now? What are you going to do about your marriage?”

Lucy felt the tears she had been holding back begin to spill. “I don't know. He left, Theodosia. He left me without a word. I do not know if he will return.”

Theodosia reached out, taking Lucy's hand in hers. “Oh, Lucy. I am so sorry. But you must have faith. He loves you. He will come back.”

Lucy shook her head, her tears falling freely now. “I am not so sure. His mother came to see me. She said our marriage was a mistake.” Lucy cried harder.

Theodosia’s eyes widened. “Lady Modesty said that? How cruel!”

“Maybe she is right, don't you think? This cannot be a coincidence, can it? Maybe, we are a terrible mistake. Maybe, we were never meant to be together.”

“Hush now. Do not reason that way. Lady Modesty does not speak for Duncan. You must believe in your love.”

“I want to,” Lucy whispered. “But it is so hard.”

“You must. Do you know how lucky you are, to love and be loved? Tis only a misunderstanding. Do not give up on this beautiful thing you both have.”

“Tis not so easy. What if he has given up on us? What if it is too late? If only you had seen the look on his face when he carried me back to the estate after I fell. It was so bizarre. He looked as if I was dying. It was such an intense reaction to a mere fall I had. I don't know what to make of this, but I know there is more to it.

“Which is the more reason why you should try. Don't give up. Get to the root of it and find out what went wrong.”

Lucy perked up. Perhaps her sister was right. Maybe she needed to find out why Duncan reacted that way to her. Maybe then she might begin to make sense of it all. “You think so?”

“I know so. You never know until you try. And what is the harm in trying?”

“You're right. There is no harm in trying.” Lucy nodded vigorously, hope filling her spirits.

“Of course, I always am,” Theodosia said with a twinkle in her eyes and a sad smile on her lips. “I have to go now. I told Cousin Betty I'd be gone for only a few hours.”

“You're leaving?!” Lucy was aghast. She'd hoped to spend some quality time with her sister and now she was leaving already.

“Yes, I am. You know why, Lucy. I do not wish to cause a scene. My presence is not exactly welcomed in these parts.” Theodosia smiled sadly.

“Oh, Theodosia, you have only just arrived. Please do not leave so soon, I beg you.”

“I wish I did not have to, dear sister. But I have no choice. Look at it this way—you have a choice. You do not have to live in the countryside like me. You still have a chance to get things right. So do that. Fight for your love.”

Theodosia was right. She did have a choice—a choice to back away like a coward and a choice to fight for their happiness. A few days ago, she might have taken up arms.

But now, after everything, particularly her mother-in-law's visit, Lucy wasn't sure she was any better than a coward.

CHAPTER 21

“That girl should be gone soon,” Modesty hummed, as she cut into her smoked chicken, cooked to perfection. Duncan stilled, his palms fully gloved.

“Who do you refer to as ‘that girl?’ And what do you mean she should be gone soon?”

Pushing her food aside, Modesty observed her son carefully. “Duncan,” she began, “how have you been finding your time here?” Her tone was deliberately casual. He knew his mother only too well. She was hiding something.

Duncan glanced up, not bothering to smile. “It has been restful, Mother. I believe I asked you a question.” He fixed his mother with a piercing stare.

Modesty nodded, taking a delicate sip of her wine. “Indeed. Sometimes a little distance provides much-needed clarity.”

Duncan nodded absently, his thoughts drifting to Lucy. He missed her, yet the fear and confusion kept him away. But there was a jiggling thought in the back of his head, a thought that his mother was up to no good. And he was fast losing his patience.

“Mother?”

“I visited your estate the other day.”

Duncan looked up sharply. Her tone was light, almost offhand. But he was no fool.

“You did? Why?”

“Oh, just to check on things,” Modesty replied, waving a hand dismissively. “I wanted to ensure everything was in order in your absence.”

“And Lucy?” Duncan asked, his voice tightening. “Did you see her?”

Modesty hesitated, her fork pausing mid-air. “Yes, I did speak with her.”

Duncan's eyes narrowed. “And how was she?”

Modesty set her fork down, taking her time to respond. “She seemed well enough. A bit forlorn, perhaps. Understandable, given the circumstances.”

Duncan's frown deepened. “What did you say to her, Mother?”

Modesty sighed, looking slightly uncomfortable. “We exchanged a few words. Nothing of great consequence.”

“Mother,” Duncan said, his jaw clenching dangerously, “what did you say to her?”

Modesty glanced at him, her expression guarded. “I merely inquired after her well-being. I was concerned, naturally.”

Duncan leaned forward, his eyes fixed on his mother. “Concerned? About what?”

Modesty sighed, looking down at her plate. “About how she was managing, alone in that large house. It must be quite a burden for her.”

There was more to this. He just knew it. “And what else did you discuss?”

“That was all, Duncan.”

“Now, why don't I believe you? And why would you go to my estate without informing me?”

“Duncan.” He nearly laughed at the sadness on his mother's face. He saw right through her. “I only wanted to make sure everything was in order. Did I do any wrong in looking out for my son?”

Duncan looked at her through narrowed eyes. She could try as hard as she liked but she was fooling no one, least of all him. Duncan stood abruptly, his chair scraping loudly against the floor.

“Duncan, please, do not leave.” Modesty implored.

Duncan stood by the fireplace, staring at the cackling flames, his back rigid with tension. “What more is there to say, Mother? I am certain you have done enough damage already.”

Modesty swallowed hard. “I owe you an apology,” she began, her voice trembling slightly. “And I must make a confession that weighs heavily on my conscience.”

Duncan turned to face her, his expression one of wary curiosity. “What is it?” he asked, his voice tinged with suspicion.

Modesty wrung her hands. “You see, the...the scandal...”

“What about the scandal, Mother?” Duncan's voice dipped dangerously low.

Modesty's gaze dropped to the floor. "It—it was my doing."

The room fell silent, the crackling fire the only sound. Duncan stared at her in disbelief. He hoped to God that he hadn't heard correctly. "What do you mean it was your doing? You arranged it?"

Modesty looked up, unmistakable guilt in her eyes. "Yes. You were avoiding marriage, refusing every suitable match. I feared for your future, for the stability of our family's name. So, I took matters into my own hands."

Duncan took a step back, his face contorting into a mask of shock and anger. "You did this? You set it all in motion?" He had suspected it, but he didn't believe his own mother would stoop so low. He had put her above it. How wrong he was.

Modesty nodded, her voice barely above a whisper. "I arranged for a lady to be found in your company, to create a scandal that would force you to marry. But I never intended for it to be Lucy. That was a mistake, a terrible oversight on my part."

Duncan's hands clenched into fists at his sides. "How dare you?! How dare you meddle in my affairs? You meddled in my life, in my future, without a thought for the consequences?"

Modesty's eyes filled with tears. "I thought I was protecting you. I only wanted what was best for you. I thought I was ensuring your future. But I see now that I was wrong. I should have arranged a proper match for you earlier, instead of resorting to such measures."

"You are impossible!" Duncan gaped at his mother incredulously. "You still insist that you should have arranged me a match?"

"Is that not the pride of any mother? I longed to see you settled and happy with a

family of your own.”

Duncan turned away, his mind reeling with the revelation. “You had no right, Mother. You have no idea what you have done.” How could she?! How could she resort to such extreme measures? And dragging an innocent girl into it?

Oh no. He had hurt Lucy badly. She was as much a victim as he was. And he had treated her and her family with disdain. “You have jeopardized my marriage, my happiness, all because you could not trust me to make my own choices.”

Modesty stepped closer, her voice pleading. “I am sorry, Duncan. Truly, I am. I never intended for things to turn out this way. If I could take it back, I would.”

“It is a little too late for that now. Sorry will not fix this. You have done irreparable harm.”

“Please, my son, please forgive me. I never intended any harm. I am so sorry.” Tears streamed down the sides of Modesty’s face.

“You deserve no forgiveness, least of all from me. How dare you meddle in my life like that. You had no right!” He could never forgive her. She had crossed a dire line.

“I am so sorry, Duncan. Please forgive me.”

“What else did you discuss?”

“What?” Confusion etched Modesty’s face.

“What else did you discuss with my wife? Spill it, woman!” Duncan fumed hot now and barely held himself together.

Modesty jumped, fear clouding her features. “I—I might have suggested that this marriage was perhaps not the best decision.”

Duncan's eyes widened in shock. “You did what?!” he roared. “You said that to her? Why would you do such a thing?”

Modesty raised a placating hand. “Duncan, please. I was merely expressing my concern. You must understand, she is not suited to the responsibilities of a duchess. I wanted her to consider what was best for both of you.”

Lucy would never forgive him. She would never come back to him. Oh, this was bad.

“And what did she say?”

Modesty avoided his gaze, looking at the fine china and gleaming silverware on the table. “She was understandably upset. But I thought it important to be honest with her.”

“Honest?” Duncan thundered. “Telling her our marriage was a mistake? How could you, Mother?” This was the final straw. She had overstepped her bounds with her overzealousness.

Modesty finally met his gaze, her expression stern. “Because it is the truth, Duncan.” She wiped her face furiously. “You deserve someone who can support you properly, who understands the demands of your position.”

“You had no right!” he said through gritted teeth. “Absolutely no right to interfere.”

Modesty remained calm, her voice firm. “I did what I thought was best. You are my son, and I want what is best for you.”

Duncan turned away, his hands clenched into fists. “Lucy is my wife. I chose her. And you had no right to undermine that choice.”

“Son, please. Try to see reason. This is not about undermining your choice. It is about ensuring your future.”

“My future is with Lucy,” Duncan said, his voice fierce. “And you have made that future even more uncertain.”

“That is even better, son! Can't you see? Now you can send her away to another estate and live your life!”

Duncan stood in disbelief. Who was this woman and was she truly his mother?

CHAPTER 22

Duncan stormed out, his mind a whirlwind of fury and disbelief. How could his own mother do that to him? Her words refused to leave his head. They echoed in his ears, and each word pierced him like a dagger. This was the biggest betrayal ever. He could hardly fathom the depth of her selfishness. Did she even realize the extent to which she had manipulated his life?

“Duncan, wait. Please, listen to me,” Modesty called after him.

He spun around, his eyes blazing white. “Listen to you? Why should I, Mother? You have done nothing but manipulate me!”

Modesty’s eyes filled with tears. Those silly tears that meant nothing. Duncan could not stand the sight of her. “I only wanted to protect you, to secure your future.” Impossible! She was still going on about this! Was she that oblivious or just pretending not to know the gravity of what she had done?

“Protect me?” Duncan’s voice rose, echoing through the hallway. “You have destroyed my trust. You have shattered the very foundation of my marriage! And you stand there and claim to protect me?”

Modesty took a step forward, her voice trembling. “I am so sorry, son.”

“Don't you dare call me that! No mother would ever do that to her son.”

“How can you say that to me, Duncan?!” Modesty shrieked. “I never meant for it to

be Lucy. I had no idea she would be the one caught in that scandal.”

Duncan clenched his fists, struggling to control his rage. He’d had enough of this charade. “It matters not who it was. Your actions have cost me a lot. But know this, Mother,” he said, his voice growing cold and determined, “I will never leave Lucy. She is the only person I will never let go of.”

Live apart from Lucy? The thought was unbearable. Inconceivable. He would rather die. He couldn’t fathom it. He had come to cherish her. She had woven herself into the very fabric of his life. And now he couldn’t see himself going through life without her.

Modesty’s breath caught, her eyes widening in surprise. “What are you saying, Duncan? Surely you cannot mean that. There are other, more suitable matches?—”

He cut her off, his voice sharp as a blade. “No, Mother. Do not dare complete that sentence. Lucy is my wife. I will never let her go. I want you to know this.”

Modesty’s lips trembled, her eyes pleading. “Think of your future, of the family’s legacy! Lucy is not suitable to bring the next heir. We cannot be affiliated with such a family. Can you not see that I am trying to help you?”

Duncan shook his head, his expression resolute. “My future is with Lucy. Our legacy is one I will build with her, not one dictated by your machinations. And I do not need your help. Not now, not ever. Let this be the last time you ever meddle in my affairs again.”

“Duncan, please. I beg you to reconsider.”

Modesty had turned to pleading. He was sorry he had not seen his mother for what she truly was. And he was sorry he had discovered it too late.

“There is nothing to reconsider,” he said firmly. “I will return to Lucy, and I will make amends for the pain your actions have caused.”

His mother’s shoulders slumped. “I only ever wanted what was best for you.” She reached out a trembling hand, but he recoiled, stepping back as if her touch might burn him.

“And I never asked you to do that.”

“I never intended for it to be Lucy. I never knew—”

“Intentions be damned!”

Modesty’s voice was barely a whisper. “I thought it was for the best. I was afraid of losing you, of you never settling down, of our family’s name tarnished by your bachelorhood.”

Duncan’s gaze hardened, his jaw set in a firm line. “And in doing so, you almost cost me the one person who truly matters. Lucy is my wife. She is the only one I cannot let go of, the only one I can touch without seeing... without feeling...” He stopped, his breath catching in his throat.

Modesty stilled. “I do not understand, Duncan. What are you talking about?”

He breathed deeply. He needed all the strength he could muster. “Gertrude.” It was too quiet. Even the fire stopped roaring. It was as if everything had stopped with that one word.

“What about your sister?” Modesty whispered, as if afraid to interrupt the silence.

“It is because of her. She is the reason I never take off my gloves.” His heart clenched

painfully.

“You’re not making any sense, Duncan. What do you mean?” Modesty asked tentatively, as if afraid of what the answer may be.

Duncan's eyes were distant, haunted. “I was there, Mother. I held her in my arms as she took her last breath. I felt her life slip away, and I could do nothing to save her.” And the memories flooded back, assaulting him with a vengeance.

His mother sucked in a sharp breath as she collapsed to the floor, sobbing. Duncan could do nothing but stare. He felt dead inside and had nothing to offer, not even sympathy.

“Oh no! My son. My poor child. You had to witness that. I am so sorry, Duncan. I should have been there. You should never have seen that. Oh Duncan, I am so sorry,” Modesty sobbed.

“She died in my arms,” Duncan whispered with vacant eyes, eyes that no longer saw anything around him. “She died in my arms, and I have never been the same. I could not save her.”

Modesty gathered herself from the floor, moving to Duncan to hold him in her arms. But he stepped out of her reach. “You were but a child, son. There was nothing you could have done.”

He shook his head, his voice thick with emotion. “I should have done something. I could have done something,” Duncan wrestled with himself.

“No, Duncan. Don’t do that to yourself, please.”

“It haunts me. It has tormented me ever since. Every time I touch someone, I see her,

over and over again, dying in my hands. I cannot hold physical contact without reliving that moment.”

Modesty's heart broke for her son. “Oh, Duncan, how can I ease your pain? Tell me, son?”

He didn't answer, holding up a gloved hand instead. “These gloves...they are my shield. They keep the memories at bay. I wear them always, to avoid the touch that brings such pain.”

Modesty took a tentative step closer. “And Lucy?”

Duncan's eyes softened at the mention of his wife. “Lucy is different. She is the only one I could ever touch, the only one I can touch without fear. The only one whose touch does not bring back the memories. She is my sanctuary, my solace,” he concluded with a faraway look in his eyes. “This is something you must understand. Something you never considered in your schemes and plans.”

Modesty looked at him, a new understanding dawning in her eyes. “Oh, Duncan, I am terribly sorry. I had no idea.”

“No, you did not,” he said bitterly. “Because I never spoke of it. I tried to bury it, to move on. But it haunts me, Mother.”

“Why did you never tell me? You should have told me. You should have said something.”

“It was not for you to know.”

Modesty, her eyes filled with tears, reached out towards him, her voice trembling. “Please forgive me, son. I thought I was doing what was best for you.”

“Don’t you dare, Mother.” His voice was way too controlled. “Don’t you dare. I cannot fathom the depth of your betrayal. You have meddled in my life, in my marriage, without a thought for the consequences.” No. This couldn’t be right. It had to be a dream. His mother would not do such a thing. But a look at Modesty’s tear-stained face was enough to tell him it was no dream.

“Duncan, please, I never meant to—”

“No, Mother,” he cut her off sharply, his tone firm and resolute. “You have said enough. There is no excuse whatsoever for what you have done. You orchestrated a scandal, Mother. You brought Lucy, an innocent girl into all of this against her will.”

Modesty’s shoulders slumped, her words choked with regret. “I thought I was protecting you, ensuring your lineage did not end with you.”

Duncan blazed with a fury he had never felt before. “Protecting me?” he spat, the words laced with venom. “Well, you thought wrong. And I never want to hear you say those words again. You thought of no one but yourself. You were selfish to the core.”

“No, Duncan. I promise I was only thinking of your well-being. I swear on your father’s grave,” his mother’s voice tinged with desperation now.

“You destroyed my trust, shattered my peace. You have done more harm than good. How could you?”

“I never knew, Duncan. I am so sorry.”

He shook his head, a bitter laugh escaping his lips. “Sorry won’t fix this, Mother. You have to understand—Lucy is my salvation. Without her, I am lost.”

Modesty stepped back. “What can I do? How can I make this right?”

Duncan’s eyes hardened. “You can do nothing. This is for me to fix.”

“Son, please understand—”

“I understand perfectly,” Duncan interrupted, realization dawning on him. “I understand that I must find Lucy. I must make things right.”

He turned, striding towards the door, each step fueled by the urgency to reach his wife. As he grasped the latch, he paused, his voice low and determined. “I will never leave her. She is my heart, my life. And I will fight for her, no matter what.”

“Duncan! Duncan!” His mother called, but he didn’t stop. With that, he flung the door open and stepped out into the cool evening air. The carriage awaited, its driver standing by. Duncan climbed in, his thoughts consumed by the need to see Lucy, to hold her, to explain everything.

His thoughts raced. He had never gotten over his sister’s death, wearing his gloves as a shield from it all.

But with Lucy, it was different. She was the one exception, the only one person who had broken through his defenses, who had shown him what it meant to love and be loved in return.

Love. Love? Duncan stopped in his tracks. Love! “I love her,” he whispered to himself. “I love Lucy.” Heavens! He loved her dearly. The thought had his chest racing. It had taken the threat of losing her to understand his feelings, to recognize that she was the center of his world. And now, he would do whatever it took to win her back, to show her the truth of his heart.

His mind was consumed by thoughts of Lucy—her smile, her laughter, the warmth of her touch. He needed her, now more than ever, and he would not rest until he found her, until he had the chance to make amends.

As the carriage pulled away from the estate, Duncan looked back one last time at the home that belonged to his mother. Things would never be the same. Wounds had been opened that might never fully heal. He didn't know if he would ever step foot in Scriven estate.

His mother had gone too far. But he wouldn't bother himself about that anymore. His future lay with Lucy, and he would fight for their love with every ounce of his being.

"I'm coming, Lucy," he vowed in his heart.

And with that, Duncan set off on his journey, his mind and heart focused on the woman who had saved him from himself.

CHAPTER 23

“Please, let me in! I have to see her!”

It had been hours since he arrived at the Pemberton estate. Yet, he had not stepped foot inside. Nor had he set eyes on her. But he didn't blame them. If he were in their shoes, he wouldn't open his gates to them either. He had come to make amends, to reclaim his wife. He knew it would not be easy but for Lucy, he would do anything.

“Lucy!” Duncan knocked at the heavy oak doors. “I will not leave without seeing you. I do not care if I have to spend all night here. I will see you before I take my leave.” The only thing that greeted him was silence.

He sighed heavily. Who would believe he was getting such treatment? A whole duke! But he didn't mind. All he knew was that he wasn't leaving until he spoke to Lucy.

Soon the doors flung open, and Augustus emerged, his face locked in a stern look. In his years, he had never felt this nervous. He had no reason to. But now, he couldn't stay the same. His heart beat wildly.

“Lord Pemberton,” Duncan greeted the older man with an outstretched hand.

Augustus's eyes narrowed, and he did not extend his hand. “Your Grace,” he replied coolly, his tone formal and distant. “To what do we owe the pleasure of your visit?”

Interesting. Duncan straightened, meeting Augustus's gaze with a determined expression as he withdrew his hand. “I have come to speak with Lucy.”

At this, Lady Pemberton's eyes widened, and Caroline glanced anxiously at her father. The silence was deafening. It was thick and pregnant as the older man stared him down with obvious displeasure in his eyes.

"Have you now?" Augustus fixed him a rigid stare that nearly made him shift uncomfortably. But Duncan stood his ground, refraining from showing any signs of fear. He was a duke after all.

"Yes. And I have no intention of leaving until I speak with her." Duncan spoke without mincing words. His father-in-law's face remained impassive, but Duncan didn't miss the storm that brewed in their brown depths.

"I see," Augustus said, his voice cold. "You must understand, Your Grace, that you are not particularly welcome here."

Duncan nodded. He expected as much. "I understand your sentiments, Lord Pemberton. But I beg you to allow me a chance to speak with my wife."

It was only then he noticed Lady Pemberton and Lucy's younger sister, Caroline, looking at him with faces awash with curiosity and concern. Augustus hesitated, then turned to his wife and daughter. "Sweetheart, Caroline, would you excuse us for a moment?"

The two women exchanged worried glances but did as they were told, retreating into the house. Augustus then gestured for Duncan to follow him, away from prying ears.

They walked a short distance to a secluded corner of the garden, where the evening shadows lengthened under the fading light. Augustus stopped and faced Duncan, his expression grave.

"What is it you wish to say to my daughter?" Augustus asked, his voice low and

serious. It was hard seeing the man not being his usual jovial and bubbly self. “She has refused to speak with any of us and I know it has everything to do with you. You have caused her immense pain.”

Duncan’s heart clenched at the thought of Lucy suffering. He would take it away in a heartbeat if he could. This was his one chance to get things right. He knew he had to be honest, to bare his soul if he were to have any chance of winning her back.

“I came to explain,” Duncan began, taking a greedy gulp of air. “And to make things right. I love Lucy, Lord Pemberton. More than I ever thought possible.”

Augustus’ eyes flickered with skepticism. “Love? You have a peculiar way of showing it.”

If Duncan was hurt, he didn't show it. He nodded, accepting the rebuke. “I know I have made mistakes. But I did so because I was grappling with demons of my own. Demons I never shared with her.”

Augustus folded his arms across his chest, his gaze unyielding. “What sort of demons?”

Duncan took a deep breath, settling himself. “I’m afraid I have to speak to Lucy about this first. She should be the first to know. But I will tell you this much.

“I lost my sister when I was young. She died in my arms, and ever since, I have struggled with physical contact. I see her death every time I touch someone. It is a torment I would not wish on anyone. But with Lucy, it is different. She is the only one who brings me peace, who makes me feel whole.”

Augustus’s expression softened slightly, though his eyes remained wary. “And you expect me to believe that now, after all this time, you have come to this realization?”

Duncan's voice grew more fervent. "Yes, because it is the truth. I left because I feared I would bring her pain. But in leaving, I realized I was causing the very thing I sought to avoid. I cannot live without her. She is my heart, my soul. And I will do whatever it takes to make her happy."

Augustus studied him for a long moment, weighing his words. Finally, he sighed, a look of reluctant acceptance crossing his face. "Very well. I will allow you to speak with her. But you must promise me one thing, Your Grace."

"Anything," Duncan replied, his voice earnest.

"You must promise that you will never hurt her again. That you will do everything in your power to ensure her happiness."

Duncan met his steely gaze, his own eyes filled with determination. "I swear it, Lord Pemberton. I will dedicate my life to making her happy."

The intensity of their exchange had softened somewhat, but Augustus' protective nature had not waned. He took a step closer to Duncan.

"Your Grace," Augustus began in a sturdy voice, "I need you to understand something very clearly. Despite everything, I think of you as family. You are my son-in-law, and for that reason, you hold a place in my heart."

Duncan looked at him, hope lighting his eyes. "Thank you, Lord Pemberton. That means more to me than you can know."

Augustus nodded, but his face grew serious, his eyes boring into Duncan's with an intensity that left no room for misunderstanding. "However," he continued, his tone firm, "if you ever hurt my daughter again, you will have me to contend with. I will ensure you pay dearly for it. You may be a duke, but no title will protect you from my

wrath if Lucy's happiness is compromised.”

Duncan sniffed at the severity of his father-in-law's words. This was the depth of a father's love and the fierce protectiveness that came with it. It was a pity he wasn't used to it, didn't feel much of it himself.

“Lord Pemberton, I give you my word. I love Lucy with all my heart. I will do everything in my power to ensure her happiness. I will never hurt her again.”

Augustus searched his face, looking for any hint of insincerity. Finding none, he finally allowed a small, genuine smile to touch his lips.

“Very well, Your Grace. I will hold you to that promise. But I repeat again — if you fail her again, you will answer to me.”

“Very well. I understand.” Duncan replied, bowing his head in respect.

Augustus nodded slowly. “Then you may speak with her.”

With that, Augustus led him back to the house. His heart pounded with a vengeance. He had never felt this way in all his life. Fear licked at the edges of his vision. He was about to face Lucy, to lay his soul bare.

As they entered the house, the very air seemed charged with tension, every step bringing him closer to the woman he loved more than life itself.

“Lucy is in the drawing room,” Augustus said, his voice gruff but not unkind. “You may speak with her there.”

Duncan nodded, gratitude flooding his heart. Swallowing hard, he made his way to the drawing-room before he paused for a moment, gathering his thoughts. He worried

himself with thoughts of Lucy. What if she didn't want to see him still? He had hurt her badly. How had he fumbled so carelessly?

He wouldn't blame her if she turned him away. It was all his fault. Doubts began to creep into Duncan's mind. Steeling his resolve, he knew he had to be strong. For Lucy. For their future.

He stood in front of the huge mahogany doors and took a deep, steadying breath. This was it—the moment he had been waiting for. He had to make her understand, to convey the depth of his love and regret.

Duncan knocked gently, the sound echoing in the stillness. The door opened, and there stood Lucy, wide-eyed with shock.

“Duncan?”

And in that moment, he would have died happily.

CHAPTER 24

“Duncan,” Lucy breathed. She couldn't believe he was here, standing right in front of her after all this time. Perhaps she was dreaming. But he looked too vivid to be just a dream. She'd be sorely disappointed if he was only a figment of her imagination.

“Lucy?”

She wasn't dreaming. He was here! He was here in all glory. And all the hurt came flooding back.

“Lucy, can we talk?”

She turned her back on him and walked back into the drawing-room, staring out the window. Her heart ached with the torrent of emotions that coursed through her.

“Lucy, I am terribly sorry, please.”

But she didn't budge. She wished she had never met him. She wished she had never set her eyes on him. She wished he had just let her be. She wished she didn't love him. Oh, she wished a lot of things.

“Lucy,” Duncan called softly.

“What do you want, Duncan? Haven't you done enough? Why do you insist on causing me untold pain over and over again? Why will you not just let me be?”

“I am so sorry,” Duncan approached her slowly. “Please, allow me to right all the wrongs.”

She turned slowly, her eyes meeting his. For a moment, they simply looked at each other, the room filled with a heavy silence. Duncan took another tentative step forward, but Lucy held up her hand, stopping him in his tracks.

“Stay where you are,” her voice was soft but firm. “If you want to talk, then we need to do this properly. No more half-truths, no more secrets.”

Duncan nodded, swallowing hard. “I understand. I owe you everything.”

Lucy’s eyes softened slightly, but she remained resolute. “Then start by telling me everything. I need to know the whole truth, Duncan. No more evasions, no more holding back.”

He took a deep breath, his hands trembling slightly as he began to speak. “Very well. I will tell you everything.”

She gestured to a chair, and he took a seat, his eyes never leaving hers. Lucy remained standing, her posture rigid. Perhaps, she was bracing herself for what was to come.

“Where do I even begin?”

Duncan muttered to himself, running a hand through his once-glossy dark but now disheveled hair. This was going to be harder than he thought.

“I had a sister — Gertrude. She was everything I wanted and more. She meant the world to me.” He paused, swallowing hard. It was never an easy tale.

“One day we were playing in the garden. She had strong legs, Gertrude,” he smiled wistfully. “She challenged me to a race.” Lucy sucked in a sharp breath. “We took off running, not knowing my sister was running to her death. Gertrude slipped and landed on the ground, hitting her head on a stone.

The impact was too strong for her fragile body. She slipped away. The life drained from her eyes, and there was nothing I could do. She died in my arms. I have not been able to crawl out of the depth of the trauma it left me with.”

He was no longer in the drawing room with Lucy. He was in that realm only he seemed to be able to go. He was back in the fields with his sister. A tear escaped Lucy’s eyes, and she covered her mouth with a hand, stifling a sob.

“I blamed myself,” Duncan continued, his voice barely above a whisper. “Every time I touched someone, I saw her face. Her lifeless body. It became a prison, one I couldn’t escape. So, I withdrew. These gloves?” He gestured to his gloved hands. “I wore them to shield myself from the world, to keep the memories at bay. It’s the only way I can cope.”

He paused, taking off the gloves. He looked down at his hands, now bare, and then back at Lucy. “But then you came into my life. And everything changed. Somehow, the memories fade when I’m with you. The nightmares recede. You brought me peace, a kind of peace I never thought I would find again.”

Lucy stepped closer, her hand gently resting on his cheek. Oh, Duncan,” she whispered, her voice trembling. “I had no idea.”

He leaned into her touch, closing his eyes and savoring her warmth. “You are the only person I can touch without fear, without pain. You make everything better, Lucy. With you, I feel whole again.”

Lucy's eyes softened. "Then why did you leave? Why did you push me away?"

Duncan's voice broke, the pain wrenching through his gut. "Because I was afraid. Afraid that I would hurt you, that my demons would destroy our happiness. I thought I was protecting you, but I see now that I was only causing more pain."

Lucy took a step closer, her eyes searching his. "And what about now? What has changed?"

Duncan looked up at her, his gaze unwavering. "Everything. I've realized that I can't live without you. That my fear of losing you is greater than my fear of the past. I want to face those demons, but I need you by my side. I love you, Lucy. More than words can say."

The silence was loud. Deafening. Even the air had stilled. The soft wind had stopped howling. Lucy took a deep breath, gathering her thoughts. This was the moment she had been waiting for.

"Oh, Duncan, I love you too. So much that it hurts." Tears streamed down the sides of her face.

"Please don't cry, Lucy. My heart cannot take it."

"You do not get it, Duncan. I love you but I cannot do this anymore. I cannot take this kind of treatment from you again. My heart can't bear it."

"No, Lucy," Duncan whispered, his eyes going white. "You cannot mean that. You must understand. I have been a fool, letting my fears drive a wedge between us. But no more. I love you, Lucy. Truly, deeply. And I want to be with you, to stay by your side for the rest of my days."

“Duncan, can you truly move past this?” Duncan remained silent. “I need to know that you’re truly committed. That you’re willing to share every part of yourself with me. No more walls, no more barriers.” He remained silent, his eyes tightly shut. “Duncan?” Lucy called out softly.

“I am, Lucy. I swear it.” His eyes burned with an intensity that shook her.

“Are you certain of it?” She stepped closer, her hands trembling slightly as she took his. “I am only human. I will get hurt and sick at times. I am not invincible. When I saw the panic in your eyes, it broke me. I cannot bear to see you in such pain.”

Duncan’s brow furrowed, his grip on her hands tightening. “Lucy, I...”

She shook her head gently. “Let me finish, please. I was so hurt when I saw your face that day. I hate to think that I was the cause of your distress. I do not want to see you hurting because of me.”

Tears welled up in her eyes, but she held his gaze steadily. “But I also know that life will bring its share of trials and tribulations. We cannot avoid them. We can only face them together.”

He pulled her into his arms, holding her tightly. “Oh, Lucy, I have been such a fool. I was so consumed by my fear of losing you that I failed to see how my actions were hurting you. But no more.”

He pulled back slightly, looking deeply into her eyes. “I promise you, I will never leave you again. No matter what. We will face everything together, come what may.”

“Duncan...” Lucy trailed off, uncertainty clouding her eyes. Duncan didn't miss it and sought to reassure her.

“I swear on my life, Lucy. We are in this together. I will hold nothing back from you. I will share everything with you, no matter how painful. I can’t lose you. You are my heart, my soul. Please, give me another chance.”

For a moment, they stood there, the tension palpable. Then, slowly, Lucy reached out and took his hand. “All right, Duncan. We will face this together. But I need you to promise me one thing.”

“Anything,” he replied, his voice fervent.

“No more running. No more hiding. We confront this head-on, as husband and wife.”

He nodded. “I promise, Lucy. No more running.”

Her heart swelled. The atmosphere suddenly seemed brighter. She rested her head against his chest and savored the feel of him again.

“That is all I need, Duncan. To know that we are in this together. That we will stand by each other’s side, through thick and thin.”

He kissed the top of her head, a sense of profound relief washing over him. “We will, my love. I swear it.”

“I love you.” She peered at him from her fluttering lashes.

“And I love you, my Duchess.” Lucy nearly leapt for joy. “And I would like my duchess to be back in her home. What do you say?”

“I say we return to Northwick immediately, Your Grace. We did have a wager.” Lucy winked.

Duncan's eyes darkened to a smoldering blue that sent a lick of heat pulsing in her belly. "We wouldn't want to not fulfill our ends of the bargain now, would we?"

"We certainly would not," Lucy's eyes twinkled as she pulled him down to her and latched her lips to his. She kissed him tenderly, her heart full and near-bursting at the seams.

Her hands snaked to his hair, grabbing a fistful. She earned a throaty moan from him, sending liquid pools of fire between her legs. His hands roamed all over her, touching and teasing. She felt hot. She could swear she was on fire. And somewhere in the back of her head, she remembered where she was — in her father's home.

"Duncan," she rasped. "Duncan?"

"Is there a good reason why you're interrupting us?"

Lucy laughed, a low throaty sound that sounded strange even to her ears. "We're not really in the best of places. Anyone could walk in."

Duncan sighed, obviously disgruntled. "What do you say we take this home. Duchess?"

"I say we do, Your Grace."

They had hardly crossed the threshold when Duncan grabbed Lucy and pinned her against the wall, capturing her lips in a searing kiss. His hands sneaked underneath her dress to play with her breast. He rubbed against her nipple gently and she felt desire shimmer right through her.

But the part of her that desperately held on to the last vestiges of common sense spoke to her. "Duncan," Lucy breathed.

“Not again, Lucy.” Duncan growled.

“The servants...oh” she moaned as his fingers trailed to her wet heat. “They might see us.” She moaned again.

“Then you just have to be quiet,” he smirked. That was next to impossible with the way her body wantonly responded to him.

“I do not think it will help.” Duncan laughed, a rumbling sound she had come to love.

“Very well, Duchess.” And he picked her up and took them to his bedchamber. Wasting no time, he peeled all her garments, sliding them off her body to the floor and kissing her fervently. She wrapped her arms around him and kissed him back with equal fervor.

He ran his hand over her overly sensitive body, stroking and caressing with a gentle but possessive touch. He stepped back, breaking the kiss as her fingers worked his buttons.

She needed him with an urgency that shook her. She wanted him, all of him, flaws and all. She wanted his body on hers, his warmth that soothed her. It was more than mere desire, more than physical intimacy. She needed his strength. His tenderness. His pain.

He lay with her and kissed her all the more. She opened up to him, wanting him, needed him. She would give anything to have him inside her.

“Duncan,” she groaned. She needed him to hurry. She was going to combust. And for all her haste, his movements were controlled. But she could sense the urgency beneath.

His mouth left hers and traveled to her breasts, tasting and suckling. Her nipples were unbearably hard, and she grew even slicker between her legs. His hard length poked against her, teasing. She was mad with need.

“Duncan, I need you, please,” Lucy moaned. Having decided to stop the torture, Duncan positioned himself at her entrance and slipped into her silken heat.

He rode them both, their breaths ragged and bodies slick with sweat. She loved and was loved. That was all there was.

She stiffened, the pressure building in her belly. And she screamed as she was flung headlong into the realm that only Duncan could take her to.

Their breaths were ragged, limbs tangled as they reveled in the feel of each other.

“I never thought I could have this again, you in my arms.” Duncan pulled Lucy closer, wrapping his hands around her.

“I’m never leaving your side,” Lucy placed a soft kiss on his chest.

“But there is something else I must tell you.”

She looked up at him, her eyes soft and filled with trust. “What is it, Duncan? You can tell me anything.”

“What did I do to deserve you?” He reached for her hand, clasping it tenderly.

Lucy smiled, humming in satisfaction. “Now tell me, what is this about?”

“It is about my mother,” Duncan began. Lucy stiffened in his hold, bracing herself for whatever was to come.

“What about her?” Lucy’s voice was tightly controlled.

“It concerns the scandal that brought us together. My mother was the grandmaster. She planned it all.”

Lucy’s eyes widened. “Your mother?”

Duncan nodded. “She was determined to see me married, and in her desperation, she orchestrated the scandal that ensnared us both. She never intended for it to be you, but once it was, she hoped you would leave.”

There was a moment of silence, the weight of his confession hanging in the air. But to his astonishment, Lucy burst into laughter. It started as a soft chuckle, growing into a full, melodious laugh that filled the room. It even surprised her, but she couldn't hold it in.

Duncan looked at her, bewildered. “Lucy, why do you laugh?”

She wiped a tear of mirth from her eye, her smile radiant. “Oh, Duncan, for all her efforts to make me go away, your mother has inadvertently played the part of Cupid! The irony is simply too delicious.”

Duncan’s eyes softened as he watched her, the sound of her laughter a balm to his soul. “You are remarkable, Lucy. Here I feared this revelation would cause you distress, and yet you find humor in it.”

She shook her head, still smiling. “How could I not? It seems fate has a sense of humor. Your mother, in her bid to control your future, has ensured our happiness.”

Duncan pulled her closer, a smile tugging at his own lips. “Indeed, she has. Even though I take no pleasure in the manner she went about it.

Lucy nestled into his embrace, her laughter fading into a contented sigh. “We should thank her, really. Without her meddling, we might never have found each other.”

Lucy really was grateful. For all of Modesty’s machinations, she had given her the one gift she had longed for in her life—true love.

What else could she ask for? Thank you, mother-in-law !

EPILOGUE

“T his is all so beautiful. Tis amazing!”

Lucy took in the ball with awe. The grand ballroom was lit with the soft glow of chandeliers, their crystal prisms casting shimmering reflections across the marbled floor.

Guests in their finest attire milled about and engaged in animated conversation and laughter. The air was filled with the strains of a lively waltz performed by a skilled orchestra. The Duke and Duchess of Northwick, Duncan and Lucy Elkins, stood at the center of it all.

“I am glad you like it,” Duncan smiled.

“Like? I love it!” Lucy squealed, planting a soft kiss on his lips.

“You know that will not be enough for me, Duchess.” Duncan pulled Lucy to him and kissed her thoroughly.

“You do know there are guests here. They can see us,” Lucy giggled.

“Let them. It is my manor, after all.”

You are so arrogant!” Lucy laughed.

“Tis a good thing you love me like that.”

“Unfortunately, I do.”

Lucy gazed into his eyes and a trill of heat shot through him. She was so beautiful, it hurt. Lucy’s dress, a rich sapphire silk, complemented her radiant smile, while Duncan, in his impeccably tailored evening coat, exuded an air of composed dignity.

They greeted their guests with warm smiles, unable to keep their hands away from each other. Duncan sighted the Hatchers and nudged Lucy into attention. Her eyes sparkled as she saw her father leading the family into the ballroom.

“Your Grace,” Augustus boomed with a beaming face as he approached Duncan with an outstretched hand. “I must extend my heartfelt thanks for your recent assistance. Your investment in my latest venture has proven immensely beneficial. The returns have been substantial already.”

“You and Papa have been in business?” Lucy whispered.

“You can say that,” Duncan winked and turned his attention back to the viscount, grasping his hand firmly, a genuine smile playing on his lips. “Lord Pemberton, it is a pleasure to see you. I am delighted to hear of your success. Assisting you was my honor.”

“I must thank you again for everything,” Augustus insisted. “I do not think I have seen my daughter, Lucy, so happy.”

“Lord Pemberton, it has been my pleasure. Lucy’s happiness is of utmost importance to me. We are family now, and I will always assist in any way I can.”

Augustus smiled, his eyes glistening with gratitude. “You have my deepest thanks, Duncan. I am proud to call you my son-in-law.”

Lucy watched with pride, her heart swelling with happiness. Augustus' eyes twinkled as he glanced at his daughter.

"Lucy, my dear, you have married a man of great integrity. I could not be more pleased."

Lucy's smile widened, her eyes meeting Duncan's. If it were possible to die of a happiness overload, she probably would. "Thank you, Papa. I could not have asked for a better partner."

As the orchestra began a new tune, Duncan turned to Lucy, extending his hand. "Shall we dance, my love?"

"With pleasure," Lucy flushed.

They moved to the center of the ballroom, joining the other couples in a graceful waltz. The music swirled around them, and for a moment, it was only the two of them in the room, until a sudden hush descended on the guests.

The soft hum of conversation in the ballroom stilled as Modesty entered. Duncan stiffened, noting his mother's expression — one of uncharacteristic humility. That was unusual.

Modesty moved with deliberate steps towards Duncan and Lucy, her usually sharp eyes softened by an unusual gentleness.

"Duncan, Lucy," she began, in no more than a whisper, "may I have a moment of your time in private?" Modesty glanced around the ballroom, at the eyes that made no show of hiding to look. Whispers were already floating among the throng of guests.

Duncan exchanged a cautious glance with Lucy, who gave a subtle nod. "Very well,"

he said, gesturing towards a corridor.

Once settled, Modesty took a deep breath, her hands clasped tightly in front of her. “I have come to offer my most sincere apologies to you both.”

Lucy tilted her head slightly, her eyes wide. Duncan's expression remained guarded but curious.

Modesty's voice trembled as she continued. “I should not have meddled in your lives. I was wrong about you, Lucy. I judged you unfairly, and for that, I am deeply sorry.”

Lucy blinked. Her mouth gaped open. And if not for the severity of the situation, Duncan would have laughed. Modesty turned her gaze directly to her.

“You have been there for Duncan in ways I failed to be. You have shown him the love and support he desperately needed. For that, I must thank you.” Lucy's heart softened at the dowager duchess's words.

Turning to Duncan, Modesty's voice broke slightly. “Duncan, I am so sorry for everything you had to go through because of me. Tis all my fault. If only I had been an attentive mother. If only I had been a real mother and not spent every waking day at different balls, my Gertrude would still be here with us.” Modesty swiped a stray tear away. “Her death haunts me every day.”

Duncan's jaw tightened as he wrestled with himself, trying to stop his mind from going back to a painful past.

“I tried to make amends for my failure by being overprotective of you.” Duncan's head flew up. “I was scared of something happening to you and I tried my hardest to prevent it. I only wanted to be in your life. But I realize I went about it the wrong way. I only caused more harm. I am so sorry, my son. I failed you, too.”

Tears welled in her eyes as she spoke. “I promise I will never interfere in your lives again. You deserve happiness, and I will not stand in the way of that. I only ask for your forgiveness before I take my leave. I wish you both all the best.”

She turned to walk away, but stopped in her tracks as Duncan reached out and took her hand. Modesty looked down, her eyes widening when she saw his bare hands.

“Duncan,” Modesty whispered, “your gloves.” She looked up in awe.

“Yes, Mother. I am not wearing them much these days.”

“Duncan, I am deeply sorry for the hurt I have caused you. I would take it all back if I could.”

“Mother, I do not wish for you to leave. You are the only family I have left. We are all we have. Your actions have caused me immense hurt. But I cannot deny that they have worked out for good. They have all led up to this moment. I am not happy with the way you meddled in my affairs. But I forgive you. And I still desire that we remain close,” Duncan said without letting go of his mother’s hand.

Modesty’s eyes widened and her lips trembled. “Duncan,” she whispered, her voice breaking, “I am overjoyed to hear that.”

Duncan gave her hand a reassuring squeeze. “We have been through much pain and misunderstanding, but I believe we can heal. Together.”

A smile, tentative but genuine, spread across Modesty’s face. “I promise, Duncan, I will do everything in my power to make amends.”

Lucy, who had been quietly watching this exchange, stepped forward, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. She opened her arms and embraced Modesty warmly.

“Without you, we would not be here, together. You have brought us together without meaning to. I guess it is fate.”

Modesty’s breath hitched, and she returned Lucy’s embrace with equal warmth. “Thank you, Lucy. Your kindness humbles me. I am so lucky to have you as my daughter.”

Lucy choked, not missing the double meaning of Modesty’s words. And if she did not get herself together, she would be a bawling mess. “I think we have had enough of the tears for one night. Why don’t we go in and have a twirl? What do you say, Mother?” Lucy winked.

Modesty sucked in a sharp breath. It was not lost on her. “I say we go,” she smiled a watery smile.

“All right ladies. Let us go.”

And with his mother and wife flanking him on either side, Duncan locked their hands and walked back to the ball. He felt an unaccustomed but profound sense of completeness. Curious whispers went up through the crowd. Eyes followed their every step.

Lucy sighted the ladies of the ton, those who had been thorns in hers and her mother’s flesh. And to her dismay, they were walking towards her mother with all too sugary smiles. She knew a fake smile when she saw one. What were they up to now?

“Lady Pemberton,” one of them cooed, her tone dripping extra sweetness. Lucy nearly howled in laughter. “How wonderful to see you! It has been so long!” Was it now? A rueful smile graced Lucy’s mouth.

Patience, her posture regal and composed, met their gazes steadily. “Indeed,” she

replied, with a polite smile. “However, I must excuse myself. I find I have far better company at present.” With that, she turned and moved to Modesty’s side, linking arms with her. Wow! Her mother was incredible! But she expected nothing less.

Modesty, surprised but pleased, returned Patience’s smile warmly. Lucy felt an overwhelming sense of joy as the two ladies exchanged a look. The spurned ladies faces frozen in shock, quickly masked their disappointment with strained smiles. Unable to contain herself any longer, Lucy laughed.

“And what may be amusing you now, wife?” Duncan asked with a smile. His wife looked radiant and peaceful, and he swore to himself to make sure it remained the same.

“Ignore me, husband. Tis nothing of importance,” she grinned. Truly, they were of no importance.

“In that case, I have a surprise for you,” Duncan whispered in her ear as he led her away from the prying eyes to his alcove.

Lucy looked up at him, curiosity shining in her eyes. “Oh? And what might that be?”

He leaned in, his lips brushing her ear. “A trip to Scotland, just the two of us.”

Her eyes went wide. “Heavens! Do you mean this, Duncan?”

He cupped her cheek, his thumb tracing her jawline. “You have given me more than I ever thought possible, Lucy. This is nothing.”

Her eyes glistened. And she willed the tears not to drop. “I love you, Duncan. So much. And it sounds wonderful. I cannot wait.”

“And I you. Thank you for loving me, Duchess.”

And he leaned into her, drawing her in and joining their lips in a tender, lingering kiss, sealing their promises to each other.

The End?

CHAPTER 1

“Surely my feelings must count for something?” Dorothy argued. “I do not disagree that rank and fortune are advantageous, and I will do my duty in seeking them, but I cannot ignore my preferences entirely in the person of my future husband.”

This was a vexing conversation but not one that she could avoid on the brink of her second London Season. It was time for Dorothy to find a husband, and she knew this as well as anyone, but she wished to go about this necessary task in her own way, rather than in accordance with cold rules and instructions.

“Feelings?” said the white-haired and frail Solomon Hoskins rather querulously, pulling a woolen blanket more closely around his legs. “Making a match is not about feelings, Daughter. It is about money and name. You must listen to your brother on this, for he will be Lord Prouton after I am gone. Feelings can come later, as they did for your mother and me.”

“That’s not what Mother told me,” Dorothy objected, thinking of the cheerful and spirited woman from whom she had inherited her glossy chestnut-brown hair, rosy cheeks, and sparkling brown eyes flecked with gold. “She said she was always aiming to marry you, Father, from the very first time she saw you in a family friend’s garden at sixteen years of age.”

“Be that as it may, be that as it may...” Lord Prouton said, and then drifted into a silent reverie at the mention of his beloved wife, now dead for almost five years.

In this daydreaming pause, Dorothy sighed and helped her father secure his blanket.

He had suffered a stroke not long after her mother's death and was now largely housebound and ruled by the will of her older brother Patrick, a man of excellent sense, at least in terms of business and money matters.

Any hopes that the discussion of her future marriage might now be at an end were quickly scuppered as Patrick entered back into the fray.

“What Father is saying is that the family's fortunes rest significantly on you making as advantageous a marriage as possible, Dorothy. Your feelings cannot be allowed to obscure that goal. I might be only a baron's heir, but my investments have brought our family a significant fortune. But if you were to marry a viscount, an earl or marquess, or even a duke...”

Patrick halted briefly to sigh longingly at the prospect and then continued to lecture his younger sister.

“If you were to find a husband of significant rank and fortune, our family's connections and my own potential marriage prospects would be boosted immeasurably. As the only daughter in the family, you must step as high on the social ladder as you can. That is your contribution, as mine has been multiplying our fortune. Marriage is an opportunity to be exploited, not an occasion for sentimentality.”

“I've heard all this before, Patrick, and I'm not ignorant of social realities. This is my second Season in London, not my first.”

“Precisely why I must reiterate it. I did not press you to make a match in your first Season, did I? Regardless of your beauty, and the favor showed to you by the Queen and some of her household, I agreed that it was better to show the goods at the auction house long enough to attract the highest bidder possible rather than accept the first to offer.”

“Is that how you both see me, Patrick? Goods in an auction house?!” Dorothy snapped at him.

He looked at her in surprise at this retort. At four-and-twenty, Patrick Hoskins had the appearance and manner of a man at least ten years older, including the style of his clothes and hair. To Dorothy, he had always seemed middle-aged and stuck in his ways with little capacity for fun, humor or even ordinary human feeling.

“It was only a metaphor, Sister. Do not be hysterical. You must admit, I did not encourage you to accept that viscount who offered for you in your first Season, did I? It was because I guessed that you might be of interest to a higher ranking and richer noble in your second Season. But we cannot sit back and wait for this—we must make it happen.”

“You did not press me,” Dorothy conceded, thinking with some revulsion of the middle-aged and pot-bellied Lord Capstone, who had indeed offered for her hand early last Season while making it clear that he expected to continue to maintain his vulgar mistress and her offspring after their marriage.

Even if Patrick had pressed Lord Capstone’s suit, she did not think she could ever have gone through with a marriage to a man who would evidently hold his wife in such contempt.

“Very well, we are in agreement on the important issues. Now is the time to strike while you are still relatively young and new to the ton, but your beauty and grace are known and acknowledged. So, I will be hosting a dinner party here next week, in advance of the formal opening of the Season. I’ve invited our new neighbors.”

Dorothy nodded wearily. She could cope with sitting through a dull dinner with neighbors in this new and affluent district that Patrick had decided their family must occupy in order to showcase their increased wealth.

Sadness flashed through her at the thought of their small but comfortable old house on the northern outskirts of London where she had so many happy memories of her mother and childhood.

Patrick had decided that they should move to fashionable Mayfair for Dorothy's second London Season, and so here they were in a big house on an affluent square, where many high-profile balls and events would doubtless be held over the coming months. Dorothy had a completely new wardrobe for the new Season too, underlining the importance that Patrick placed on her success in this year's marriage mart.

"Which neighbors should I expect at this dinner?" Dorothy asked, personally disinterested but still wishing to be prepared for whomever she might face.

"Two earls—not one but two! The Earl of Granford and the Earl of Hinderton," Patrick pronounced delightedly. "Best of all, even the Duke of Dawford has accepted my invitation. With three of the ton's most eligible bachelors at the table, you must be at your best, Dorothy. It will give you a real advantage over other girls before the Season officially begins."

"I see," Dorothy said, tight-lipped. "Among these men, is there one in particular to whom you wish me to pay attention?"

"Well, the Duke of Dawford, of course," Patrick replied, as though it were obvious. "He will be the most senior ranking man at the table, and his fortune is one of the largest in the kingdom. Dawford has completely turned around his estate's material position through his investments, you know. The City fellows speak of him like a prophet."

"Do they indeed?" Dorothy commented, still uninterested in the face of such praise.

"Yes, he's very well thought of in the Lords too. His speeches are often printed in full

in the newspapers, and he has the ears of all kinds of influential people, from merchants to royalty...”

In his comfortable chair, Lord Prouton was now dozing gently, ignorant of his children’s continued conversation. Dorothy doubted that he would have anything to say even if he were awake, beyond exhorting her to be guided by Patrick.

“Apparently, Dawford took up the reins of his estate at only fourteen years of age after a challenge in the courts. The financial guardian willed by his father had died, and a blackguard son had run down the Dawford fortunes to his own advantage. Once Dawford got wind of it, he ran the fellow out of town and made his own investments—every one a success. What a man!”

“Yes, that would impress you, wouldn’t it, Patrick?” Dorothy said with sarcasm that her brother failed to detect as she made for the door. “In fact, if you’re so very taken with this duke, why don’t you marry him?”

“Don’t be so facetious, Dorothy. You’re not a child to imagine that English law would allow such a thing between two men, and even if it did...” Patrick reacted hotly at first but then collected himself. “Anyway, I will not be distracted with nonsense. Yes, the Duke of Dawford impresses me greatly. It would be a feather in our family’s cap if you could capture such a man’s favor.”

“Is our family’s cap very much in need of urgent feathering?” Dorothy asked, knowing that Patrick’s view of an ideal husband’s qualities was unlikely to match her own. “Remember that until I’ve met the man, we can’t even know whether that particular feather will suit...”

If she were to be tied to a man for life, Dorothy wanted more from him than the same obsession with investments and returns that occupied her older brother. Was it unreasonable to ask for some personality, principles, and maybe even love of the kind

she had witnessed between her parents?

Patrick rolled his eyes at this remark, drawing a supportive tutting noise from their father.

“Again, I must caution you to rein in your levity, Sister,” he said seriously, wagging a finger at her. “We’re speaking of a man of great power and influence, and you must show some respect. If the Duke of Dawford comes to think ill of our family or, God forbid, we cross him in some way, his disfavor could do real damage to our social position.”

“I understand, Patrick,” she sighed, having now had enough and moving towards the drawing room door. “There’s no reason to suppose I would ever be less than civil and polite to a guest in our home.”

“Be more than civil and polite to the Duke of Dawford. Make sure you pay particular attention to your toilette and conversation for dinner. You should wear Mother’s pearls, I think. It would also be as well for you to look up the Dawford family in Debretts so that you have some background knowledge...”

Dorothy gave a non-committal gesture of farewell, and Patrick made no attempt to detain her, seeming satisfied that she would cooperate with his scheming to capture a rich husband with an elevated position.

After she had closed the door, she could hear him continuing to regale her father with stories of the Duke of Dawford’s accomplishments.

“Foolish, affected little man!” Dorothy muttered to herself.

She knew that saying such things to Patrick’s face would only result in a tiring argument that changed nothing. Her brother simply couldn’t understand anyone’s

views but his own.

Drawing a cream cashmere wrap around her pale blue muslin day dress, Dorothy made for the back garden to cool her head.

This Mayfair garden was larger and better designed than the one at their former home, with flower beds and trees arranged to the precise plan of some previous owner or gardener. Still, it lacked the charm and comfort of their rickety old garden with its creaking swing, murky pond and the ancient sprawling apple trees that she had climbed as a child.

Regardless, Dorothy appreciated the peaceful atmosphere of the new garden. She only wished she could find a climbable tree just to scandalize Patrick. Perhaps she would sit in it and wave to their neighbors. That would certainly be an unforgettable introduction to the Duke of Dawford!

She actually had no idea yet which of the neighboring houses belonged to Patrick's new idol. The ton had largely been absent at their country estates when the Hoskins family moved to Mayfair. It was only this week that Society was beginning to return for the Season.

"Pompous Patrick and his damned ambition!" Dorothy cursed as she walked now, confident that she was far enough from the house to be unheard.

If Patrick didn't care so much for fortune and status, they could have stayed in their old home and she could have had years to find and marry the man of her choice...

Dorothy was jolted from this resentful reverie by the unexpected sight of an elderly and confused-looking woman wandering among the lavender bushes. Her black dress and white cap perhaps indicated that she was a widow, and she looked somewhat unsteady, although not as frail as her father.

But who was she, and what was she doing there?

“Help!” the old woman suddenly called out, genuine fear in her voice. “Oh my! Someone, please, help me!”

CHAPTER 2

Dorothy raced quickly along the path, unable to see the cause of the elderly woman's distress but quite convinced of her need for help given the tone of her cries.

"Madam, how may I assist you? Are you unwell?" she asked quickly.

"I am trapped, and that creature is watching me!" the woman said in a frightened voice.

For a moment, Dorothy was baffled, looking around and still seeing no cause for alarm on either score. Then she realized that the woman's skirts had become tangled in the short canes that the gardeners had placed to guide the bushes in the flower bed where the elderly intruder had stumbled.

The "creature" turned out to be only Tabitha, the cook's black cat, who had the run of the servants' quarters and gardens. She was an unusually large animal but perfectly well-tempered and no danger to anything larger than a bird.

"Shoo!" Dorothy said, waving her shawl at Tabitha and causing the cat to sprint away to another part of the garden.

Then she bent and untangled the old lady's skirts from the canes.

"There, you are free again, and the cat is gone. She's a dear old thing really, but I can see Tabitha might give you a shock if you weren't expecting to see her."

“Thank you, thank you,” the woman said, tears of relief in her eyes. “I cannot thank you enough, but I do not know what I should do now...”

Dorothy was still puzzled at how frightened this unknown visitor had been and what she was doing in the Hoskins’ garden.

“Good afternoon,” she said gently, not wanting to give the woman any further scares. “My name is Dorothy, and I am Lord Prouton’s daughter. May I help you?”

“Lord Prouton?” the gray-haired widow echoed in confusion. “I know no Lord Prouton. Perhaps my son will know him. He has such a good memory, my son. He never forgets a name or a face.”

Dorothy swiftly formed the view that the elderly lady was not entirely well, whether in body, mind, or both. Her voice was certainly not strong, but it wavered less as she talked of her son. Might she have somehow wandered in from the street and he was out there looking for her?

“The ground is a little rough among these lavender bushes, isn’t it? Apart from the canes, I wouldn’t want you to catch a foot on those ornamental rocks.”

Offering an arm, Dorothy carefully guided the elderly woman back from the woody bushes and rocks and onto the paving stones.

“There. Now, do you know where you are?”

“Yes, this must be the path to my home,” the woman said, looking around in puzzlement at the garden. “How strange. I can’t quite remember...”

Clearly, the old lady was not fully compos mentis. Dorothy supposed that she should take the poor woman inside and send some servants out to search the streets for

someone who might be her son or another relative. She hoped Patrick would not be tiresome about that. He hated Dorothy getting involved in any charitable works or other activities he deemed best left to spinsters.

“May I ask your name?” Dorothy enquired. “I could ask my brother and our servants to make inquiries about your son and find him for you.”

“I am Mary Clark, Dowager Duchess of Dawford, of course,” the woman said with a little laugh, as though it should have been obvious. “Whom else should I be?”

“Ah.” Dorothy smiled with recognition of the name, given the conversation she’d had that afternoon with her father and Patrick. “Then we are neighbors. My father, Lord Prouton, took on this house two months ago.”

“Lord Prouton?” the Dowager Duchess repeated, non-plussed all over again. “I don’t know Lord Prouton, but I shall ask my son. Aaron never forgets anything...”

Dorothy sighed at this further evidence of the elder lady’s failing memory and looked along the garden wall. Towards the bottom of the garden, she spotted an old gate standing slightly open, presumably leading to the Duke of Dawford’s property.

Both the gate and the garden wall looked older than the houses, and Dorothy guessed that they must once have been part of an earlier settlement. The houses had been built separately, but the gardens remained in some ways linked.

“I think that we might reach your house through that gate down there, Your Grace. What do you think?”

“Why, yes, I came in through that gate only a short while ago.” The Dowager Duchess smiled with some relief. “I could not see it before. My eyes must be tired.”

“Then I shall walk you safely back home,” Dorothy reassured the old lady and led her charge down the path to the gate, swallowing her natural hesitance about venturing into the territory of the awful being Patrick had described. “Tell me, Your Grace, do you like living hereabouts?”

“I have always liked this house,” the Dowager Duchess replied. “My husband loved it, and so does my son. Aaron has made so many improvements to the property. We have running water! When I was a girl, I could never have imagined such a thing, but the world is a different place now, I suppose.”

“How very modern.” Dorothy smiled. “I wish we had running water. I expect my brother will take an interest if I tell him that the neighbors have already installed their own pipework, although I don’t think he’d know where to start with finding workmen and making plans.”

“Aaron is so very clever.” The Dowager Duchess nodded. “I’ve been lucky to have a son like him. I was forty when he was born, you know, and my husband and I had given up on children. Then our miracle arrived. When Aaron sets his mind to something, he always achieves it. He has been that way from when he was a young boy...”

Dorothy listened patiently to the Dowager Duchess’s childish intimacies and let her extol the virtues of her only son. Because the words were spoken with love, she found it easier to listen and believe than she had with her brother’s money-oriented praise of the same man earlier.

Still, Dorothy cautioned herself that a mother’s love could be blind and her son might still be as cold, small-minded and ruthless as she had earlier imagined him when described by Patrick. She must not let down her guard.

As they walked up the garden path towards the Dowager Duchess’s home, Dorothy

looked ahead and saw a dark-haired and rather severe-looking butler in what must have been a garden-level drawing room. When he caught sight of them, he stepped out of the French windows and onto the terrace.

“Good afternoon, young Toynton,” the Dowager Duchess called cheerfully as he came into her view, her recent distress entirely forgotten. “Isn’t it a beautiful day?”

“Your Grace, I am glad to see you there. There was some concern when Miss Hughes could not find you, and the household has all been searching for you. His Grace was about to personally lead a search party of servants out into the streets. I must inform him immediately of your safe return.”

“Why, I was only in the garden, Toynton.” The Dowager Duchess laughed, seeming more confident now that she was back on home ground. “Your father never fussed half as much as you when he was the butler, you know.”

The serious-looking butler acknowledged her words with a polite bow of his black-haired head on which not a hair was out of place.

“Indeed, Your Grace. But that was another time. Miss Hughes!”

This last address was a call to a short, round and bespectacled woman of around fifty who had just walked briskly around the side of the house, her silvered brown head turning here and there as if seeking something, presumably the Dowager Duchess. With her size and movements, Miss Hughes reminded Dorothy of an attentive, little bird.

“Your Grace!” the woman exclaimed and came hurrying over to take the Dowager Duchess’s arm. “I was worried that you might have gone out into the street by yourself and there were so many carriages out there, with everyone arriving for the Season. His Grace is still searching for you. He has been frantic and highly displeased

that we left you alone with the doors open.”

“You fuss just as much as young Toynton, Louisa.” The Dowager Duchess sniffed. “A walk in the garden should not be the cause of such dramatics, either for you or my son. Wouldn’t you agree, Dorothy?”

“I do enjoy a walk in the garden myself.” Dorothy smiled diplomatically, taking no sides in the matter. “I am only glad to have met our neighbor on the other side of that gate. It was open, by the way.”

“Oh, that gardener!” Miss Hughes tutted crossly. “He does all the gardens in this little row one after another, and I suppose he forgot to lock it. Toynton will speak to him about it, but His Grace will be extremely displeased with such carelessness. First, the French windows left open, then Her Grace left alone, and now the gate too...”

The birdlike woman shook her head sorrowfully at this catalog of errors as though it was likely to send the head of the household into a fit.

“Well, none of that is for you to worry about. I shall only thank you for accompanying Her Grace home, Miss...?”

“Miss Hoskins,” Dorothy answered. “Miss Dorothy Hoskins. My family recently moved to the house next door.”

“Well, thank you again, Miss Hoskins. I am Her Grace’s companion, Miss Louisa Hughes. Now it is past time for Her Grace’s medicine and afternoon rest, so I will not detain you further. Good day.”

With a kind but hurried smile, Miss Hughes walked the Dowager Duchess back into the house and away. Dorothy realized that Toynton the butler had also vanished while she had been talking to the Dowager Duchess’s companion. She was now left

standing alone outside the open French windows of the rather grand drawing room.

Glancing inside, Dorothy could not help catching sight of the large portrait hanging on the far wall. There, a handsome man and woman in fashionable clothing from the last century looked at one another adoringly amid a rustic landscape. It was a lifelike and lively portrait that made you feel the people within it might turn and talk to you.

Without thinking, she took a step into the room and approached the painting. The woman's hair was a mass of fine chestnut-brown, not unlike Dorothy's hair, and the tall, handsome man clasping her hand had black hair and deep blue eyes. Whoever they were, they looked to have once been very much in love. Dorothy wondered what had become of them.

She did not know how long she had been standing there before the drawing room door opened without warning. Dorothy flinched, remembering where she was and knowing that she should have retreated to her own garden rather than entering this room. Guilt made her blush.

She started again when she found herself face to face with one of the tallest men she'd seen, broad-shouldered too, and every bit as handsome as the man in the painting, who must have been his father. Unlike the image of his father, who was smiling tenderly down at his wife, this duke was frowning most forbiddingly as he regarded Dorothy.

She knew she had committed a breach of manners and etiquette by stepping into this room, and the result was that she now found herself alone and unchaperoned, with this strange, forbidding and presumably rather angry man.

How on earth was she going to explain this to her brother?

"You must be Miss Hoskins," the tall man said curtly. "I had no idea you were

actually on the premises... I am the Duke of Dawford. Miss Hughes informed me that I have you to thank for my mother's safe return. As you will have gathered, her health is not good."

The Duke's words and stance were reserved and almost unfriendly, his own surprise at the encounter evidently equal to that of his unexpected guest. It seemed that Miss Hughes had been right about his displeasure with the afternoon's events, and Dorothy was sorry to be in his presence at all.

At least he was fully dressed in light-colored breeches, a dark blue jacket and a waistcoat, a stock tied smartly at his throat. Dorothy's embarrassment would have been even more acute if she had come across their neighbor in shirt sleeves or with an unfastened stock.

"I was pleased to meet the Dowager Duchess and glad to be able to help," she replied as smoothly as she could, pulling her cashmere wrap firmly around her shoulders.

Although Dorothy knew the Duke's temper had likely already been roused by circumstances beyond her presence, it did take some effort not to wilt or stammer under the gaze of this imposing man. She reminded herself that she was not some shy schoolgirl or shrinking violet, but a mature and educated young woman entering her second Season. She was also known among friends and family for speaking her mind.

"We have only recently taken over the house next door," Dorothy continued boldly. "My father is Lord Prouton. I believe that my brother, Patrick Hoskins, has already made your acquaintance."

"Yes," the Duke confirmed, his tone still somewhat disapproving. "That is all very well. However, I would have preferred to call on your father to introduce myself and offer my thanks in a proper manner. I did not anticipate so informal an interview as this."

He gestured towards Dorothy alone in his drawing room, and her cheeks colored further at the implied criticism of her behavior. She knew she had been in the wrong but hoped that her offense would be seen as minor and innocent.

“I must apologize,” she said with a small bow of her head. “It was only that the painting over there interested me, and I wasn’t thinking when I stepped inside. I shouldn’t be in here, in your house.”

“No, you certainly should not,” he agreed emphatically. “Unmarried men cannot be seen hosting beautiful young ladies without a proper chaperone?—”

The Duke of Dawford stopped abruptly, and, in his handsome though ill-tempered face, Dorothy observed a peculiar rush of color that paralleled her own.

Had something made him even angrier? Maybe he was angry at himself for giving her that inadvertent compliment. Or perhaps she had committed some further impropriety unawares. Despite her brother’s warning, she found it hard to regret offending this man after his rudeness.

“I should call down Miss Hughes immediately, but that would be most inconvenient while she’s settling my mother for her afternoon rest,” he continued to chide her. “If you wished to see the painting, it would have been more proper to arrange to call at another time and for my mother and Miss Hughes to receive you.”

“I shall go,” Dorothy announced and turned towards the French windows. “Good day, Your Grace.”

She had made her apology and given her explanation. There was no sense in standing there and being further berated when there was nothing more she could do to remedy the situation. If the Duke of Dawford was determined to take offense, she could not stop him.

“Wait,” he called before she reached the windows, his frown now looking bemused as much as angry. “I did not mean to throw you out, Miss Hoskins, only to remind you of propriety. Please do not think that this reminder diminishes my gratitude for your service to my mother.”

“I quite understand,” Dorothy said stiffly, wishing she had wings to fly away from this awkward encounter as fast as possible.

How priggish and rule-bound this relatively young nobleman seemed! No wonder Patrick had taken such a shine to him. They were both prematurely middle-aged, she decided. If the two earls were cut from the same cloth, next week’s dinner party promised to be one of the duller and most unedifying experiences of her life.

It was a shame, however, that a man with such well-drawn features and a fine figure should have such a disappointing personality, especially if his father had been as amiable and loving as the portrait painter had made him out.

How very blue the younger Duke’s eyes were, regardless of their storminess! She made herself look away for fear of staring.

“I wish your mother well, Your Grace. Now I shall...” Dorothy took another step towards the doors, feeling an ever stronger and more complex urge to escape, but her ungracious host had evidently not finished his scolding.

“You are still young, I suppose, and with your family background, it is understandable that your manners might be somewhat remiss,” he added. “In the interests of preserving your reputation and furthering your future career, I trust you will take my advice and not repeat such an improper introduction with any of our other neighbors.”

“What?” Dorothy blurted out, wondering if she had really heard him correctly. “What

did you say?!”

“You’re only the daughter of a country baron, aren’t you, Miss Hoskins? You therefore likely have country manners and are not accustomed to moving in more sophisticated circles in London. I understand that. I only warn you that such thoughtless behavior could be misunderstood by others. I would not allow an innocent young woman to fall into such a trap.”

He actually spoke as though he thought he was doing her a favor with his words!

“Yes, I am the daughter of a country baron,” Dorothy retorted, her fury at this slight against her family background entirely eclipsing her previous self-consciousness and apologetic frame of mind. “Perhaps I do even have ‘country manners,’ whatever they might be, although I am also familiar with London. But, tell me, as a sophisticated gentleman of rank, what’s the excuse for your own rudeness today, Your Grace?”

Turning on her heel without waiting for an answer, Dorothy marched back to the French windows, but then halted and caught her breath sharply as a powerful hand landed on her shoulder and spun her back around.

CHAPTER 3

Up close, the Duke of Dawford was even more intimidating. His size gave Dorothy no doubt that he could pick her up with a single hand if he chose. Surely, he would not. But what could his intention be?

She automatically raised one of her own hands to free her shoulder, but his grip was too firm, and she realized her fingers were only pressing without effect on his warm skin. Neither of them had been wearing gloves, and this was a closer encounter with a man than any Dorothy had experienced on a dance floor or while embarking or disembarking during boat parties.

“Take your hand off me!” she ordered, without any idea of what she would do if he failed to obey.

Fortunately, she felt his fingers relax and lift at her words before realizing with a gasp of horror that she was still somehow holding onto his hand as it moved.

Rapidly withdrawing her hand, Dorothy wrapped her shawl even tighter around her shoulders. This encounter was becoming more awkward, confusing and potentially dangerous with every passing minute, and she knew that the Duke of Dawford must feel it too.

After the earlier anger and confusion, Dorothy could now see a third emotion creeping across his darkly handsome features, although she did not know the right words to describe it.

Now the Duke was looking at her with something akin to fascination and disbelief, his gaze seeking her own with an intensity that equally unnerved and excited her. When their eyes finally met, it felt like a kind of physical contact in itself. Did he feel it too?

“Does anyone even know that you are here?” he asked, his voice quieter but also slightly rougher than before. “God! They don’t, do they?”

Dorothy could not tear her eyes away from his strained features, seeing also the tightness of his jaw, and the vein throbbing in his throat. Even his breathing was visible, a little too fast and effortful for comfort but somehow in sync with her own. Was this man angry, confused, or... what?

Long seconds passed, the strange tension between them only growing.

While neither of them had deliberately moved forward, the Duke still seemed to have drawn closer. There was a faint sheen of perspiration on his forehead, as though he were making some great effort. The touch of warm air on her cheek might have been the breeze from the garden, but might also have been his breath.

It occurred to Dorothy then that he might be about to kiss her. Given their difference in size, she knew that she would not be able to protest or offer resistance to anything he might do next...

“You must be more careful, Miss Hoskins,” the Duke of Dawford said at last, with some consternation. “You cannot talk to me like this.”

From his words and his puzzling but undeniable reaction to her, Dorothy wondered whether any woman had ever stood up to him before, even in the simplest of situations. His manner suggested that perhaps they had not.

“I think you’ll find that I can,” she challenged him, and enjoyed the way his eyes

widened and he took a step back in surprise.

Quickly, while she had some slight advantage, Dorothy rushed back out into the garden and marched briskly along the path to the gate, glancing back only once to be sure that she had not been followed.

Dorothy did not tell her father or Patrick of any of the events that had transpired that afternoon. She'd had enough censure for one day.

Instead, she took a long bath and had one of the maids wash her hair, allowing her to remain closeted in her room for long hours without interruption.

While nothing truly untoward had happened during her short visit to their neighbor's house, Dorothy felt disturbed by the encounter. Once safely back under her father's roof, she had found that her dress was damp with sweat, her heart beating rapidly and her legs not entirely steady, as though she had fled from some great threat.

Was the Duke of Dawford a threat? Physically, Dorothy thought not. Despite his bad manners, he had unhanded her as soon as she had spoken. But she had still not come away from their meeting entirely untouched. His eyes, the leap of his pulse, and that faint stirring that might have been his breath on her skin, all stayed with her, almost as vividly as the moment she had lived them.

She took out the diary she had kept since she was a young girl, hidden carefully on the bookshelf behind the volumes of art and music books that attracted no great interest from others.

Sitting down at her small desk with a quill and inkpot, Dorothy thought to herself and then wrote today's date.

Today I met the strangest man. If his personality were as pleasing as his person, then he would be a happy man, indeed. Sadly for him, the two appear greatly at odds...

This was no exaggeration. Regardless of what impression the Duke of Dawford had made on her overall, Dorothy could not deny his handsome face or admirable physique.

Careful in her diary never to mention names or precise locations, Dorothy wrote nevertheless a short description of the painting that had precipitated her untoward introduction to the Duke. Then her mind turned to the future and the unwanted dinner that Patrick was organizing.

It is inevitable that we meet again. Given what I now know of his character and my own, I must prepare well for our next conversation. It will be by duty to ease the awkwardness of our first meeting as well as respect my family's wishes and think of my own future. This is not a man to cross without the utmost care for one's defenses.

Blotting the page, she closed the diary and replaced it on the shelf.

Patrick was pleased to find Dorothy in the library studying Debretts before dinner, the page open at the Duke of Dawford.

"I'm glad to see you taking our earlier conversation seriously, Dorothy." He smiled with satisfaction and patted the front of his waistcoat, which as usual was middle-aged in its cut and pattern. "I know that Father and I can rely on you to do the right thing."

Dorothy had actually picked up the book to learn the fate of the Duke of Dawford's parents, the loving couple in that painting. It saddened her to read of the former Duke's early death and his wife's "retirement from Society," by which the writer likely meant a mental breakdown. The present Duke's life sounded as though it had been hard and lonely—little wonder he was so ill-tempered...

After closing Debretts, Dorothy tried hard to put her encounter with the Duke out of her mind in front of her brother and father, still unsettled and fearing her thoughts

might show on her face.

Regardless of Patrick's enthusiasm for the man, Dorothy managed to steer him away from the subject of the Duke of Dawford over dinner by encouraging him to tell her at length about various other eligible bachelors.

"Lord Helmsley? Yes, I did mention him to you last year, didn't I? Then, it was too soon after Lady Helmsley's death to be worth seriously pursuing, but now it is certainly worth considering. A widower of five-and-thirty but no children, and a large estate on the coast in Norfolk. Through his wife's death, he inherited shares in a diamond mining concern..."

"How fascinating, Brother. Do tell me more about his diamond mines," Dorothy had urged.

The tactic worked well, and she diverted Patrick further after dinner with questions about his own future nuptial plans. While presently entirely theoretical, all of his ideas seemed focused on fortunes and titles rather than actual women.

"Once you are well-married, Dorothy, my own prospects and opportunities will likely change according to your new station and your husband's connections," he droned on, leaning on the mantelpiece in the drawing room while their father dozed in his chair and Dorothy poured coffee. "If you marry a duke, for example, then?—"

"Is it true that Lady Lilian Carnforth stands to inherit from both sides of her family now that her father's cousin has died without issue?" Dorothy interrupted innocently. "I overheard two ladies in the park yesterday talking about her and speculating about her prospects."

"Ah, a double heiress. Yes, a most desirable prospect for an eligible bachelor seeking a good match, or for a lowdown fortune hunter seeking to rise in the ranks. Fortunately for Lady Lilian, her parents are most careful in guarding her

acquaintance. If you marry an earl or a marquess, Dorothy, I may seek an introduction to Lady Lilian myself. But if you marry a duke...”

“If I marry a duke, then you may seek a woman of yet higher rank than Lady Lilian, regardless of her fortune,” Dorothy had quickly finished for him. “What about the Dowager Duchess of Monterbrooke? Widowed at only three-and-twenty, cousin to a past Prime Minister and well-connected in the Royal Court. I expect she will want to marry again before long.”

“A fine thought, Sister.” Patrick nodded, accepting a cup of coffee from her hands. “A lady like the Dowager Duchess of Monterbrooke does indeed hold all the qualities I should value in a wife. But I could not yet aspire to such heights. A dowager countess, perhaps, and there are several presently on the marriage market...”

Successfully steering the conversation away from the one subject she did not wish to touch on, Dorothy was mentally exhausted by the time the clock struck ten, and she felt able to say goodnight without drawing any remark.

It was only as she sat in front of her looking glass that night and brushed out her long, heavy locks of chestnut-brown hair that she allowed herself to recall certain events of the afternoon in full once more and weigh them properly in the balance.

The way the Duke had looked at her in his drawing room made her shiver even in recollection, as did the remembered sensation of his hand on her shoulder and her hand briefly on his, bare skin on bare skin. For a few seconds, she had believed that he wanted to kiss her, and she had feared that she would even return his kiss.

But surely all they had done was insult and confuse one other! Why should he wish to kiss her, or she him? It made no sense at all, and Dorothy wished she could shrug it off and begin the acquaintance all over again. Patrick would doubtless sit them near to one another at the dinner he had planned.

Whether she liked it or not, the Duke of Dawford would look at her again with those deep blue eyes...

How on earth would she be able to make polite conversation with the man while so disturbed by the memories of their tense exchange and her body's strange response to his proximity?