



Midnight Rendezvous (Sins & Sensibilities #4)

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Category: Historical

Description: Lady Penelope has always harbored a tendre for Alexander, the enigmatic Earl of Bainbridge, but circumstances have forbidden their union. Bound by duty to marry a lord she does not desire, Penelope dares to defy convention. She ventures into Aphrodite's infamous pleasure palace under an assumed identity, determined to indulge in forbidden passion with the earl—if only for a few fleeting nights. In the embrace of her most wicked fantasies, Penelope risks everything for the man she cannot have, knowing their time together must come to an end.

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CHAPTER 1

Penny had made a dreadful mistake.

Tonight was one of her first proper balls of the season—one hosted by a high-society hostess and not the tedious confines of Almack's. Her brother, Thomas, Viscount Caldwell, often said these soirées were far more enjoyable. Penny believed he told the truth... and also lied.

The gowns were indeed more decadent, the colors bolder than the insipid pastels imposed upon Almack's debutantes. And yes, the waltz had been played. But Penny had not had a partner. She had lingered hopefully, gloved hands fidgeting at her sides, while all the young bucks sought partners with more flirtatious smiles and daring décolletage. She'd even spotted her brother across the room and brightened, certain he would ask her to dance out of duty or perhaps affection.

But instead of making his way to her, Thomas had slipped out to the terrace. Curious—and perhaps a bit cross—Penny had followed him. Now, she stood frozen just beyond the hedges, her dancing slippers sinking into the damp grass, heat blooming across her face. Her brother was decidedly not admiring the garden. He was standing beneath the arbor, holding a lady against his chest in an embrace that could only be described as scandalous.

The lady moaned his name.

Penny's cheeks flamed. Oh heavens . She should not be seeing this. She began to back away slowly, praying the shadows would conceal her retreat. But

then—footsteps.

No .

Someone was coming. Possibly another couple eager for privacy, or worse, someone who knew them. Mortified, she glanced around, searching for somewhere to hide. A large tree loomed a few yards away, its branches thick and heavy with foliage.

Clutching her skirts, Penny dashed toward the tree and attempted to climb. The trunk was wider than it looked, and her slippers made the task impossible. She toed them off, feeling the cold earth beneath her stockinged feet, and tried again.

This time, she made it halfway up.

Just as she began to slide back down, a hand appeared from above, startling her.

"Here," a voice drawled, deep and low, the kind of voice that suggested amusement at her expense. "Allow me."

Penny barely smothered a shriek as she was hauled up into the leaves. Her heart thudded wildly as she found herself tucked into the crook of a sturdy branch, her breath mingling with the scent of bark and male cologne.

She twisted around. It was too dark to see clearly, but she could make out the vague shape of a man sitting lazily in the tree beside her, one leg braced against the trunk, the other swinging idly.

"Goodness," she whispered breathlessly. "Why are you hiding in a tree?"

"Hiding?" he repeated, sounding almost offended. "It was the perfect vantage point to observe something rather... decadent."

Her brow furrowed, and she followed the angle of his gaze. Through a gap in the leaves, a parlor window glowed with golden candlelight. Inside, another couple was locked in a passionate embrace—more exposed than her brother and far more determined.

Penny gasped, pressing a hand to her chest. "You are all rogues."

"Possibly." His voice was maddeningly nonchalant. "But tell me, what does that make you?"

She turned to him sharply. "Excuse me?"

"You climbed up here quite eagerly," he murmured, his voice a lazy drawl that curled along her skin like smoke. "Stockings and all. Never say you thought it was a gentleman waiting for you?"

Visions of ruination, rakes, and libertines—the kind her mother warned about with dramatic flair—flashed through her mind like a Shakespearean warning. Penny scowled. "I was escaping," she hissed. "From something very awkward and potentially scarring. And you hauled me up before I could collect my scattered wits."

"Your brother and Lady Finchley?"

He sounded amused.

Penny groaned, burying her face in her hands. "You saw?"

"He's doing quite well for himself," he said blandly, as if her brother's imminent downfall into scandal was a matter of idle amusement. "Ah...a friend is joining."

Her hands slipped from her face as she glared at him. "This is mortifying . How can

you so casually watch someone's... someone's intimate moment?"

"Ah," he said with that same maddening nonchalance. "There is a wicked thrill in watching. Remove your fingers and see."

She gasped, scandalized. "You're vile."

"And you're delightfully dramatic."

"I ought to quote something Shakespearean about libertines, but I fear even the Bard could not describe your level of depravity."

"I daresay he'd admire my form."

Her mouth parted in disbelief. "Are you always this provoking?"

"Only when I'm hiding in trees with ladies who smell like sun-ripe peaches and poor decisions."

She blushed furiously. "You are insufferable."

He leaned in just enough for her to feel the faint whisper of his breath. "And yet, you're still here."

Her pulse stuttered, not from the climb, but from his nearness—the intimacy of the moment that shouldn't feel as breathless as it did. "I'm Penelope. Thomas's sister."

"I know," he replied easily. "Thomas has spoken about you with all the sufferation of a brother hounded by his younger sister. I'm quite sure he never imagined you would follow him straight into debauchery."

"Hardly. I climbed into a tree to avoid it."

"And landed in the lap of it instead."

His grin curved, slow and wicked. "Alexander Sutton. The Earl of Bainbridge, at your service."

Her breath caught. So this was her brother's elusive friend from university—the one who never accepted an invitation to the countryside. She stared at him, trying to make out the lines of his face hidden in the shadows.

"Hmm. He might win the bet," he mused.

She blinked. "What bet?"

"I believe there is a wager concerning who shall prove the more inventive lover," he said with unbearable calm. "I am to be the examiner and offer my worldly critique."

Shocked, she twisted toward him, her skirts tangling around her legs. "My brother would never be so wicked!"

"Ah, but the ladies are part of the wager," he murmured, gaze slipping back to the window.

Penny followed his line of sight—just in time to see the gentleman's head disappear beneath the lady's skirts.

"Oh my—!"

In her shock, she slipped. A gasp tore from her throat, but before she could fall, a strong arm snagged her waist and pulled her tight against a solid chest.

She froze. His scent wrapped around her—clean, spiced with something dark and expensive—and his breath ghosted warm against her temple. No gloves. No distance. His hand pressed to her side, anchoring her, his thigh braced against hers to steady them both. She became acutely aware of everything: the strength in his arms, the hard press of his body, and the alarming sense that she fit against him with shocking ease.

A peculiar shiver ran through her.

"How interesting," he said softly. "You are not swooning."

She gasped and tried to shift away. "You are impossible."

"Be careful," he murmured, his voice low and dangerous. "I won't be able to explain your broken body to Thomas if you tumble from this branch."

"Let me go," she hissed.

"You might fall from the shock of seeing what your brother is doing now."

She tilted her chin, defiant. "You are enjoying this far too much, my lord."

"Immensely," he drawled. "There's nothing quite as thrilling as corrupting sweet innocence."

"How fortunate for me, then," she said sweetly, "that my brother taught me how to handle corruptors."

And with a deft twist, she slid closer, her knee lifting to hover a breath from his manhood.

His low laugh rippled over her skin. "I am terrified. Truly."

What alarmed Penny most was that she felt... invigorated, not frightened. The heat of his body, the scent of clean linen and dark cologne, the dangerous proximity—it awakened something she didn't recognize but couldn't resist.

A light flared on from the upper level of the house, and for the first time, she saw his face fully. The glow caught the storm of his eyes—gray rimmed with that startling blue at the center, like glacial water just before it cracked. High, sharp cheekbones. Arrogant nose. Unforgivably long lashes.

"You're pretty," she said accusingly. "How unfair for those poor innocents who must swoon in your wretched arms."

His mouth quirked. "Alas, I do not seduce innocents. Not unless they understand I promise nothing but..."

He stopped, something flickering behind his gaze—less wicked, more restrained.

"Nothing but...?" she prompted, suddenly wanting to know the end of that sentence more than anything.

The light above extinguished, plunging them back into the hush and shadow beneath the branches.

"Ah, but you're Thomas's sister, so that means you are also my sister. I cannot say."

She sputtered. "I am not your sister. And a gentleman would not hold his sister so—so indecently!"

"Even to save her life?" he said mildly, then released the arm still banded around her waist.

His knuckles brushed the tip of her nose. "You're my good friend's sister, which makes you mine, in a way. Hence, I'll behave. A model of gentlemanly restraint. Be sure to tell Thomas I was the very picture of brotherly virtue, hmm?"

Penny blinked at him. "Strange. There's no lightning scything through the tree."

He laughed, a warm, low sound that made her lips curve before she could stop them.

"Now that they've taken their pleasures elsewhere," he murmured, "allow me to help you down."

She flushed and did not protest when he helped her descend—gracefully, without dismounting himself. She wondered why he remained hidden in the tree but didn't ask. Instead, she adjusted her skirts, retrieved her slippers, and turned to leave.

She didn't bid him farewell. But she stumbled slightly when his murmur floated down through the leaves, quiet as the wind:

"It's you who's pretty."

Penny fled into the night barefoot, heart pounding.

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CHAPTER 2

Dearest Diary,

Another dance, another whisper of impropriety that has been carefully concealed from Mama's and the eyes of society, and another sleepless night of disappointment, wishing I knew what it was like to feel his mouth against mine. The earl did not kiss me, and I wonder if the attention he flatters me with holds more significance for me than himself.

I do not know what has come over me, and I do not know how to defeat these feelings. I should not long for Lord B as I do, yet every time we dance, I feel like I am stepping into a dream I do not wish to wake from. When he looks at me with those storm-gray eyes, I feel he truly sees me in a way no one else ever has. And yet, there is an unspoken distance between us, a line he refuses to cross, though I sometimes think he wishes to.

Is he not a rakehell, as the rumors whisper? Where is that devilish gentleman I met in that tree? I do not know if it is honor that keeps him from pressing his suit, or if I have built castles in the sky of my own desires. What if the earl only sees me as his good friend's sister and nothing more? What if all his attention is mere politeness?

A scandalous part of me aches to be reckless, to tiptoe closer to temptation and see if his lips are as warm as I have imagined. Just once. Just one kiss.

Penny sighed and let the quill slip from her fingers, rolling onto her back as she stared at the canopy above her bed. The soft glow from the candle on her nightstand

flickered, casting golden shadows over the light blue walls of her chamber.

She felt like a fool. Since the start of the season, she had danced with The Earl of Bainbridge several times, stolen moments in Hyde Park, lingered too long beneath his heated gaze, and let herself fall under his wicked charm.

He often called upon her brother, and though he never directly approached her during those visits, she always felt the weight of his gaze—intense, searing, an inexplicable invitation to wickedness.

Did he truly harbor the same forbidden yearning that threatened to unravel her whenever he was near? Penny swallowed as she recalled his invitation to use his first name only last night.

Alexander ...

A loud thud shattered the quiet, followed by the unmistakable creak of her chamber door swinging open.

"Penny!"

Henrietta's voice rang with distress as she bounded into the room, the heavy skirts of her pale blue muslin dress swishing around her ankles. Without preamble, she launched herself onto the bed, her golden curls tumbling over her shoulders as she landed beside Penny.

With a startled gasp, Penny snapped her diary shut and shoved it beneath the pillow, her heart hammering. "Good heavens, Henrietta! Must you always enter a room as if highwaymen are pursuing you?"

Her younger sister, always lively and effervescent, did not return her teasing with a

laugh. Instead, Henrietta bit her lower lip, worry shadowing her normally bright hazel eyes.

"Why do you appear so out of sorts?"

"I had to speak with you at once," she whispered. "I overheard Mama talking with Aunt Margaret. Mama means to see us both wed before the season is over."

Penny froze, the weight of those words pressing against her chest. "Both of us?"

Henrietta nodded. "Yes!"

"That is nonsensical. You are not out, and you are only seventeen."

"I heard her say it. I was in the corridor just outside the drawing room. She said that with our family's current situation, we must both marry well and soon."

Penny sat up, her body tense. "Our current situation? What does that mean?"

She noted the fright in her sister's gaze and took her hand. "You must have misheard, Henrietta. Surely, Mama does not expect you to make a match this season. Papa would never agree to such foolhardy."

A miserable look crossed Henrietta's delicate features. "I promise I did not mishear. I was so shocked I behaved most improperly and pressed my ear to the door. I...I do not think Mama would consider Sir Anthony, even if he were to seek my hand, and my heart is breaking, Penny."

Tears shimmered in Henrietta's eyes, and she rapidly blinked them away, her vulnerability stark against the usual brightness of her expression. Penny's heart clenched. Her sister was already half in love with their Berkshire neighbor, Sir

Anthony Walters—a gentleman only four years her senior. He was charming and kind, his regard evident in how he looked at Henrietta. But Penny knew their mother would never deem him an acceptable match. Not when he lacked the wealth and consequence society demanded of a suitor for a marquess's daughter.

"There is more ."

The knot in Penny's stomach tightened. "Tell me."

Henrietta swallowed, squeezing Penny's fingers. "Mama told our aunt that the Duke of Merrick is prepared to wait an appropriate time before making an offer for you. That the alliance between our families is guaranteed."

Penny jerked as if slapped, her breath catching painfully in her throat. " No ," she murmured, her heart squeezing. "You must be mistaken."

"I wish I were," Henrietta whispered. "But I heard it plainly."

Disbelief and shock warred inside Penny. The Duke of Merrick ? A man old enough to be her father? A man she had shared nothing with—not a smile, whispered conversation, or moment of connection? If not for his frequent political dinner meetings with her father over the years, the duke would be unknown to Penny. Her gaze darted to her pillow, to the diary hidden beneath it. In its pages, she had confessed all her hopes, her heart's longing for the Earl of Bainbridge. And yet, her mother would choose for Penny and decide the man she would marry.

No .

She would not—could not—let this be her fate without a fight. Penny swung her legs over the edge of the bed, ignoring the way her nightgown tangled around her ankles. "I must speak with Mama."

Henrietta's eyes widened. " Now ?"

"Yes. Before she sets this plan into motion."

Penny strode to her dressing robe, slipping it over her shoulders with trembling hands as she moved toward the door. Her nightgown whispered against her legs, and her breath came fast and shallow.

Her sister scrambled after her, grabbing her hand. "Be careful, Penny. You know how Mama is when she's made up her mind."

Penny paused. The candlelight caught Henrietta's anxious expression, her brow furrowed, her lower lip caught between her teeth. "I will," she said quietly, though her pulse thundered.

With that, she stepped into the dimly lit hallway, her bare feet soundless on the carpet runner. The mournful strains of the pianoforte drifted from below, echoing down the corridor like a ghost of sorrow, haunting and persistent. Penny gripped the banister as she descended. She knew that melody. Her mother always played it when her heart was heavy.

Penny hastened toward the sound, hesitated at the doorway, opened it gently and slipped inside, leaning against the panel. The room was awash with golden lamplight, and the scent of beeswax and rosewater floated on the air. Lady Clarissa, the Marchioness of Belmont—still uncommonly beautiful at three-and-forty—sat at the gleaming pianoforte in the music room, her posture perfect, her auburn hair pinned with ruthless elegance. Her gown was a silvery gray silk, severe in its lines and without adornment, save for the narrow pearls at her throat and ears. She looked like a portrait brought to life, untouched by time but carved in quiet discontent.

Her mother's hands danced over the keys; each note a lament, each chord a warning.

Penny stood silently for what felt like an eternity, her heart aching, until her mother's fingers stilled. Her mother didn't turn.

"Henrietta told you what she rudely eavesdropped," she said, her voice composed, emotionless.

Penny managed a small smile. "She always did inherit your talent for hearing what was never meant to be heard, Mama."

Her mother turned then, regarding her with a cool, assessing gaze. "There was no need for you to come downstairs, my dear. I have already spoken to your papa, and it has been decided."

Dread coiled in her belly. "What has been decided, Mama?"

"The Duke of Merrick will make an offer for your hand after a respectable mourning period. And your father will accept it."

For a moment, Penny couldn't speak, her breath caught painfully in her lungs. Then, pushing away from the door, she stepped forward.

"Mama... did you raise me for nineteen years only to give me to a man older than Papa? A man with three young children whose duchess died barely a month ago. Where is his regard for her memory to be thinking of marriage again so soon?"

"The duke is practical. He understands what his family needs."

Seeing the implacable glint in her mother's eyes, Penny's voice cracked. "Then why did you teach me to dream? To fence, to swim in rivers, to climb trees and imagine the world was vast and full of wonder? Why talk to me about love and the joy of marrying a man who holds your heart? Why let me believe I could ever choose—"

"I also taught you about duty and sacrifice!" her mother snapped.

"Mama—"

"Be silent!" Her mother's tone was cold, her poise unshaken. "I was far too indulgent with you. I missed the adventures of my own childhood, and I wanted you to have what I never could. In that regard, I failed you."

The confession struck like a blow. Penny's heart twisted with pain. "Mama, please —"

"Our family is in dire straits, and we need you." Her mother rose then, smoothing her gown with slow, deliberate precision. She walked to the small walnut desk, plucked a sheaf of parchment from the top drawer, and returned to hand it to Penny.

She looked down. Three names were written in her father's bold script:

The Duke of Merrick

The Marquess of Ambrose

The Earl of Raine

Her mother's voice was calm, almost detached. "Your future husband will be one of these gentlemen. However, the Duke of Merrick advanced your father fifty thousand pounds to save the Berkshire estate. That generosity was given with the understanding that you would eventually become his duchess."

Penny flinched as if struck. "He gave Papa fifty thousand—?"

Her mother inclined her head. "The duke is a man of prestige, wealth, and influence. I

could not wish for a more advantageous match."

"You sold me?" The words escaped in a strangled whisper, filled with anguish.

"Do not be melodramatic," her mother snapped. "Marriages have always been transactions between the best families. This is nothing new."

Penny lifted a shaking hand as if to hold off the weight of her mother's words. "Mama, Lord Bainbridge—"

"Is broke ," Lady Clarissa cut in with ruthless precision. "And it is beneath our dignity to speak of money so crassly, but you leave me no choice. I am at fault for not stopping the attention he paid you. I confess, before I learned the truth of our financial standing—and his—I believed Lord Bainbridge might make you a suitable husband. But he has nothing to offer you or this family. And your father would never accept his suit. We will only consider offers from one of the men on that list."

Penny's lips trembled, her throat thick with unshed tears. "Lord Bainbridge has always been so considerate—"

"Do you wish to see your sister ruined?" her mother demanded, her voice dropping to a low, cutting whisper that carried far more weight than a shout. "Or your brother sent away to live on a pittance in the country, scraping by on pride and memory? Is that what your heart desires, Penelope?"

She flinched.

Her mother took a step closer, her posture regal, though her voice trembled with strain. "Henrietta has formed an attachment to Sir Anthony Walters and, in her girlish na?veté, believes I remain blissfully ignorant. That child's only hope of marrying where her heart lies rests entirely on you. If you make a worthy alliance, your father

will allow her a measure of choice."

Penny's breath caught painfully in her throat. Her mother's gaze, so often aloof and composed, was now ablaze with a fierce, almost desperate intensity.

"You hold the future of this family in your hands," she continued, her tone softer now but no less unyielding. "Do not be so selfish as to throw it away for a man who can give you nothing but his affection."

Penny felt as if a knife had pierced her chest. She opened her mouth, then closed it, unable to speak through the knot of emotions in her chest. Her mother's gaze, cool and composed, did not waver.

"I care deeply, Mama," Penny whispered, barely able to speak past the ache in her chest.

"You will not speak Lord Bainbridge's name again. Especially not before the duke. Do not disappoint our expectations, young lady."

Penny said nothing. She turned away, her spine rigid, her steps clipped and uneven as she walked from the room, her limbs trembling with the effort to maintain her composure.

She did not stop. She ran down the hallway and up the winding staircase, her slippers silent against the carpeted steps. Her brother rounded the corner from his chamber, dressed in the first state of fashion, a careless rake prepared for an evening of carousing. That the preservation of his inheritance rested upon her shoulders while he moved through life unburdened and untroubled filled her with a bitter, breathless fury.

"Penny, what is wrong?" he asked, frowning.

She did not answer. She swept past him as if she hadn't heard, reached her chamber, and flung open the door. It slammed behind her, muffling the world. With a low, broken sound, she threw herself onto the bed, burying her face into the pillow. Her chest heaved, but no sob escaped—only the silent shaking of her frame and the fierce grip of grief she did not wish to voice.

She clutched the pillow to her chest, breathing in the comforting scent of lavender water on the linen, the faint trace of her own perfume. Her dark hair spilled in tangled waves around her, falling like a curtain as she curled into herself.

To be given to a man she did not want. A life not of her choosing. A duchess to a stranger—widowed, older than Papa, with children who would possibly resent her existence.

But not yet.

Not yet.

If this were to be her fate, then she would steal what moments she could. She would carve her own small corner of joy from the days left to her—no matter how fleeting.

One kiss.

One stolen dance.

One breathless hour in the arms of the man who made her feel alive.

One forever, pressed into the folds of memory.

Even if she could not have a lifetime, she would have something that was only hers.

Just once, before everything changed.

CHAPTER 3

Alexander Sutton, the Earl of Bainbridge, sat broodingly in a velvet-backed chair, his whisky glass resting untouched in his hand. The amber liquid caught the low flicker of candlelight, casting golden ripples against the rim as if trying to entice him to drink. He ignored it.

The chamber—one of Aphrodite's private voyeur rooms—was designed for indulgence. Decadent, gilded paneling lined the walls, while thick damask drapes shielded the corners in shadows, allowing its patrons to observe without being seen. Mirrors adorned the ceiling, and the central dais was swathed in red silk, currently occupied by a tangle of writhing bodies—ton gentlemen and courtesans alike, all engaged in debauchery too carnal to name.

He ought to have been interested. This was his usual haunt, a haven of pleasure where the rules of the outside world did not apply. But tonight, he was bored. Deeply, restlessly bored.

"You wear the expression of a man contemplating something dangerous," came the lazy drawl of Sebastian, the Earl of Raine, from the chaise beside him.

"Or perhaps..." Raine leaned forward, smirking, his dark blue eyes gleaming. "Thinking about a particular young lady with exquisite hazel eyes... more flecks of green than gold, if memory serves."

Alexander's head snapped up. That unknown sensation curled through his chest again—warm, unsettling, maddening. Lady Penelope. He masked the reaction with a

sip of his whisky, but the warmth lingered, settling low in his belly. Damn it .

"She is in your thoughts again," Raine said, sounding far too satisfied with himself. "That proper little miss. Penelope Dodge."

His other friend, Radbourne, let out a low chuckle, one arm slung lazily over the back of his chair, his scar catching the light in a jagged gleam. "Good God, man. Never say you're courting her for marriage ."

Alexander's mouth quirked at the disbelief in their voices. "Why not?" he said mildly. "I'm six and twenty. It is time I considered my duty to preserve the earldom. Why not marry a lady I find both likable and admirable?"

Raine snorted. "Because the chit is fresh-faced, sweet, and everything that doesn't align with your... proclivities. You forget we know you too well. We know you like your lovers bent over, their arses blushing pink from your hand, their wrists bound with silk as they beg for mercy."

"And your mercy," Radbourne murmured, "is rarely given."

Alexander's jaw tightened. He swirled his glass, watching the whisky spiral before he murmured, "With her, I would be different."

That earned silence. Not from doubt—but from surprise.

"I would not offend the sensibilities of my wife," he added, quieter this time.

The door creaked open and in strolled Oliver, the Marquess of Ambrose, impeccably dressed and just as rakish as the rest of them. He shut the door behind him, leaned against it with casual elegance, and arched a brow. "Such a marriage would not be sustainable, and we all know it."

Alexander lifted his gaze to meet Oliver's. "My possible marriage—or not—is not a cause for concern. And certainly not a topic of public discussion."

Radbourne let out a mournful sigh. "We're not mocking you, Bainbridge. We're trying to save you from making a bloody mistake."

"You're young," Raine added. "Wait another decade. Have a few more lovers. Take your pleasures while you can. Then marry someone who doesn't make you want to throttle yourself, trying to pretend you're something you're not."

The sound of moans grew louder from the dais, the tempo of the bodies tangled in pleasure intensifying. The scent of sex, perfume, and sweat thickened in the air.

Alexander stood abruptly. He could not do this. He had not been able to take a lover since he met her. His cock stirred for no one but her now. Lady Penelope Dodge—so shy, so elegant, so maddeningly unaware of how he hungered for her—haunted his thoughts, even in a place like Aphrodite. Perhaps especially here.

"Leaving so soon?" Oliver asked with a lift of his glass.

"I find myself suddenly uninterested in the entertainment," Alexander said curtly.

"Which entertainment?" Radbourne drawled. "The women or our well-meant advice?"

Alexander gave them a faint smile. "Both."

He strode to the door, ignoring the flutter of a courtesan's fingers at his sleeve, the purring invitation of a blonde sprawled artfully on a velvet chaise, and the admiring glances from a pair of masked patrons. Outside, the night was cold. The scent of the city—soot, smoke, and wet cobblestones—felt bracing after the heat inside.

"Bring my horse," he snapped to the footman near the steps.

His stallion was brought around from the mews within moments, and Alexander mounted without a word, letting the familiar rhythm of hooves soothe him. He needed to be away from temptation. Away from the endless swirl of lust that did not touch him the way it used to. Not anymore.

Not since her.

He rode toward his empty townhouse in Berkeley Square, the wind biting against his face; the image of Lady Penelope burned into his mind—her flushed cheeks when she laughed, how the dimple in her left cheek deepened, her intelligent green-golden eyes, her quiet fire, the artful chignons she wore with those dark curls kissing her cheeks. And even though he knew his desires were too rough, too dominating for a young lady like her... it was still her he wanted.

Even if she deserved far better. Still, it was her. "I am a damn fool," he muttered.

He led his stallion to the mews himself, ensuring the beast was properly stabled and fed. Only then did he stride to the side entrance and slip into the quiet stillness of his townhouse. The hallway was dark save for a single wall sconce flickering low in the corridor. Its meager glow cast elongated shadows across the paneled walls, and Alexander walked with the weariness of a man too familiar with self-denial.

The butler had long since retired. Alexander preferred it that way—less staff, fewer expenses. Even in matters of heat and light, prudence was his guiding hand. Every flame, every coin, had to be accounted for. His boots echoed faintly against the marble floor as he moved through the hall to his sanctuary—the library.

A low fire burned in the hearth, casting soft, amber light across the well-worn leather of his favorite chair and the polished surface of his massive oak desk. He loosened his

cravat and shrugged out of his coat before sitting, tugging the ledgers closer.

Each night, this was his vigil. There were no invitations to idle pleasures here, only the grinding weight of numbers and obligation. Investment reports, grain tallies, shipping manifests. The steward's update from the Dorset estate revealed modest gains in tenant crop yields thanks to new rotational planting methods. That would stay. The dairy farms near the Scottish border, however, remained a bleeding wound.

He marked a note in the margins—cut staff and offer a handsome severance, lease the grazing lands—and turned to the next report. It detailed a parcel of mining land in Cornwall, leased for a paltry sum over seven years prior. Now, the lease was up for renewal, and the Viscount had the audacity to request the same terms. A cold snort escaped Alexander. He scrawled a firm instruction: have the steward calculate the cost of labor and equipment required to mine the land independently.

His father had been a gentle soul, wholly unsuited to the mantle of nobility. A second son thrust into responsibility when his elder brother died without issue. A man who had dreamed of the clergy, not of counting harvest bushels or appeasing creditors. In the five years since Alexander had inherited, he had come to know the depth of the chaos his father left behind—negligence masked by charm, debts tucked away with polite smiles and vague promises.

Alexander had spent the last five years righting the ship, yet the specter of ruination still dragged at their heels, threatening to pull them under. He reached for his quill, only to notice the two envelopes sitting on the corner of the desk. The top one was from his mother, the handwriting elegant, the wax seal already cracked.

He unfolded the page.

My lord,

Forgive me for pressing upon your time, which I know is already burdened with the care of our estates. As your mother and as the Countess of Bainbridge, I must speak plainly on this matter. We are no longer able to afford the illusion of stability. The estate is run with half the required staff, and our tenants whisper of change. If society were to learn of our circumstances, our dignity and your sisters' futures would be cruelly bartered at the altar of gossip. I fear for what may come if we do not act—if you do not act.

In two years, Charlotte and Eleanor must be presented, and they deserve gowns of fine silk, not cleverly mended hand-me-downs. They deserve music, dance, and a chance to marry with grace and without pity. You, my son, are the head of this family now. You carry the name and with it, the duty.

I know your pride, and I know your heart has always been your own. But I beg you, look carefully at the future before you and consider what might be saved by a prudent alliance.

I have taken the liberty of listing a few ladies whose fortunes are considerable and whose connections would do us no harm. Lady Alicia Hanover has a dowry of twenty thousand and comes from an impeccable line. Miss Judith Templeton of New York is the daughter of a powerful shipping magnate whose ambitions lean toward England's nobility. Miss Margaret Lyle of Boston is bold, intelligent, and said to possess a dowry of no less than fifty thousand. And lastly, there is Miss Constance Draper, the daughter of Viscount Redmere. Her fortune may not rival the others, but her station and reputation are beyond reproach.

Please, Alexander. Consider them. Speak to them. Court them if you can bear it. You may find one worthy of your respect, even admiration. I am not asking you to surrender your happiness, only to secure the future of our family before it is beyond rescue.

Take care of your health, my dearest. You looked far too thin the last time I saw you, and I worry you do not sleep as you ought. You bear so much, but you are not made of iron. Let me help in the only way I know how.

With all my love and unflagging hope,

Your Mother,

Countess of Bainbridge

Alexander stared at the names for a long moment, then crumpled the page in his fist and let it fall into the hearth. The flames devoured the letter eagerly, curling the edges into ash. He understood his mother's urgency and respected it, even. And he knew himself well enough to admit the weight of his own pride. The idea of marrying a woman solely for her fortune and connections was not merely unpalatable—it was abhorrent.

He reached for the second envelope, smaller, cream-colored, unmarked, save for a single letter: B. Curious, he broke it open.

Meet me at Lady Neville's Midnight Ball.

P.

A strange pressure expanded in his chest—some wild thing beating against its cage. He stared again at the letter, flipping it over, studying the slope of the hand. It was delicate. Feminine. A single initial. His mind conjured her before he could stop it. Eyes, flecked with green and gold. A mouth made for scandal and sweetness. Lady Penelope .

He glanced at the mantle clock: twelve minutes past midnight.

It was madness. She was as proper as they came. Gentle-voiced, wide-eyed, the sort of girl raised to become a countess or a duchess and sit prettily beside her husband at dinners and balls. Not the kind to send cryptic notes and invite a man to a midnight ball.

And yet...

He surged to his feet, the chair scraping over the thick rug. Within moments, he had donned his coat again and reached for the walking cane that housed a hidden rapier.

Caution warred with reckless anticipation as he stalked into the night, his long strides swift and purposeful.

If it was her—God help them both.

CHAPTER 4

Penny hovered on the periphery of the terrace, knowing that tonight, she was prepared to take an irrevocable step that could lead to ruin and disgrace. Yet, as she stood in the shadows of the glittering ballroom of Lady Neville's townhome, her heart stuttered with reckless anticipation. She had never attended a masquerade before and never imagined it could be so scandalous. Couples danced far closer than she had expected, and behind her, in the garden, a pair was caught in an unmistakably illicit embrace. Her cheeks burned. Nervousness coiled in her belly, but she brushed it aside.

It had been nearly two hours since she had daringly snuck from home. By chance, she had overheard her brother mentioning Lady Neville's masquerade, and the temptation had been too great to resist. The sinking sensation in her belly was awful, and she gripped the edges of her gown, scanning the crowded ballroom, which was sultrily decorated in an Arabian theme. Many of the ladies wore delicate filigree masks, as she did, while the gentlemen ranged from boldly unmasked to those in simple black or white.

Will you come, Alexander?

Those silent words whispered through her heart, and Penny briefly closed her eyes as bittersweet longing swept through her. They had known each other for only seven weeks, yet it felt like a lifetime. She knew his smile intimately, the quiet strength of his character, and his rare laughter—offered so freely to her and almost no one else.

A ripple of awareness coasted over her skin, her body softening in instinctive

welcome.

He is here.

Her fingers tightened around the stem of her champagne flute as she discreetly searched the crowd. When her gaze found him, a wild flutter ignited in her chest. Alexander moved through the throng with effortless grace. Clad in a midnight-black tailcoat, his cravat tied with immaculate precision, he embodied control. But beneath it all, she sensed the wild energy simmering below the surface.

She tucked a stray wisp of hair behind her ear, thinking of the heated argument with her mother only days before. She should not entertain the selfish thought that their family's salvation ought not to rest solely on her shoulders—but she did. Penny was expected to be obedient.

Tonight, she did not want to be the dutiful daughter her family expected. Tonight, she wanted to be a woman who chose for herself. She longed to live, bloom, and breathe, even for a short while. Penny desperately wanted to feel the warmth of his hand at her waist, to see the intensity in his eyes when he looked at her as if she were something interesting and precious. Perhaps, if daring enough, she would finally steal a kiss.

Because after tonight, she belonged to another man.

Unless I do everything to sabotage the courtship, whispered the rebellious voice in her heart. A shiver raced over her skin as he stopped before her. "Lady Penelope," he said, his voice low and smooth. "How lovely to see you again."

Her pulse leaped. Such pleasantries masked so much. They did not speak of how, only a week ago, she had laughingly danced with him beneath the stars. Nor did they reference the moment three nights ago, when she had risen onto her toes, silently begging for a kiss—only for him to brush his lips across her cheek before stepping

back and leaving her breathless.

His gaze swept the length of her gown, lingering at the soft swell of her bosom before returning to her face. She had chosen it with him in mind—ivory satin clinging with scandalous precision, the square neckline baring her shoulders dusted in pearl powder. Silver embroidery curled along the hem like vines, and a cluster of ivory roses cinched the waist, drawing attention to her figure. With each step, her whisper-thin stockings and satin slippers flashed into view.

How Alexander looked at her now made her curl her toes in her shoes. She tamped down the reckless urge to close the space between them, to breathe in his scent and anchor it in memory.

"Never say I have robbed you of speech," he drawled.

Penny blushed. "How did you know... this is me?"

His gaze held hers, steady and unblinking. "I would know you anywhere."

It was not said flirtatiously. Not like a rake with a clever line. It was said with a terrible, beautiful truth that made her breath catch. She should have said something—should have stepped back. Instead, she simply looked at him, waiting.

"Come here," he murmured.

Slowly, she stepped closer. To her utter shock, his hands came to her waist—strong, warm, claiming. He drew her flush against him. She gasped, tilting her head up, their breaths mingling.

"Why are you here?" he asked quietly.

She could feel the press of his body—his broad chest, the strength in his arms, and lower still, the hard ridge against her stomach that made her blood heat and her limbs tremble.

"I wanted to dance," she whispered.

One dark brow arched. "That's a lie."

"I wanted..." She faltered, not daring to say what she truly yearned for. "One memory."

His gaze darkened. "You intend to dance with me, then vanish forever?"

"Yes," she said almost teasingly, lest he realize the truth buried in her voice.

A muscle ticked in his jaw. Without a word, he took her glass, set it aside, and led her to the dance floor. The orchestra had begun a waltz—lush and slow. He swept her into the dance with fluid, powerful steps, one hand clasping hers, the other pressed to the small of her back. He held her scandalously close, tighter than any gentleman should, his gloved hand splayed wide across her spine.

"Are we to dance like this ?" she asked, breathless.

"Afraid?"

The taunt unfurled through her like smoke. Her heart thudded wildly as he moved, drawing her into the rhythm of the waltz. His hold did not loosen. He kept her close enough to feel the heat of his chest, the press of his thigh against hers as they turned.

She ought to be frightened. And she was—just enough to feel thrillingly alive.

Every movement of his body seemed calculated to test her, to see if she would flinch or pull away. She didn't. Every glide, every turn, he molded her against him, guiding her as if she belonged there. Penny's breath came in shallow bursts, her heart racing from the closeness and the intensity in his gaze.

Alexander watched her as if he could see behind the golden mask she wore. His stare wasn't filled with polite interest or admiration but with something far more dangerous—curious, consuming. He still looked every inch the gentleman, yet she sensed the quiet peril of a man who could ruin a lady with a single touch... or worship her with one.

She slid her hand to his shoulder and whispered, "You're testing me."

His mouth curved slightly. "Yes."

"Why?"

"I wanted to see how wicked I could be before you swoon."

Penny's knees weakened, but he danced as though she were weightless, his strength supporting her every step.

"Is that to say you wish to be wicked with me? Never say I am meeting the rake ladies whisper about," she murmured provocatively.

A low sound of amusement rumbled from his chest.

She smirked. "I am not the swooning sort, my lord."

"You are not the naughty kind either... are you?" he said regretfully.

The words struck her with terrifying pleasure. She should be afraid. Especially now, with temptation tugging at her senses, Penny should remember duty. But her pulse beat wildly in her ears, her body shivering beneath his hand, caught in a dance that felt like the edge of sin.

A slow heat curled low in her belly, spreading outward in waves of decadent pleasure. His touch was warm and sure, even through the layers of her gown. Her pulse fluttered, her body alive with awareness. The music blurred, and the ballroom vanished. There was only him.

"I would like to call upon your father tomorrow."

Her breath stilled. No .

A crack formed inside her chest, splintering outward like the first fissures in fragile glass. "Please... do not."

His steps faltered for the briefest moment before he tightened his hold and spun her in a graceful arc. The motion pressed her closer.

His breath warmed her temple. "Why not?"

Alexander's voice was softer now, intimate. "Have you no awareness of my feelings for you?"

Awareness ? His regard was all she had thought of for weeks. It had consumed her, burned through her, and made her ache.

"I..." Her throat closed.

His fingers flexed at her waist, his touch steady. "Have I been mistaken in your

regard?"

Her heart twisted. "You have not."

He exhaled as if her words unraveled some restraint within him. For a single, stolen moment, Penny allowed herself to pretend that she belonged to him.

"I... I cannot accept an offer of courtship," she forced out.

He studied her, eyes sharp with perception. She had the feeling he already knew—suspected the truth. But she would not let him shoulder this burden. She would protect him from the humiliation.

So she lied.

"My feelings are not deep enough to speak of marriage," she whispered, though each word splintered something inside her. "And I dare not think yours are when we've only known each other for a few weeks."

Alexander's jaw clenched. His steps slowed. She felt the tight coil of emotion in his frame, the way his hand nearly tightened before he forced himself to release her. He swallowed hard, the muscle in his throat ticking, his features carefully schooled into composure.

But his eyes betrayed him.

The waltz ended. The final chords hovered in the air.

Penny wanted to explain, to say everything. But she didn't. Instead, she turned and walked away, slipping from the crowded ballroom and toward the library.

Hoping. Praying.

That he would follow.

That, despite everything, he would grant her this one night of madness—one she would treasure forever.

CHAPTER 5

Penelope walked down the corridor to the library, her heart hammering so hard she could barely hear over the rush of her breath. She badly wanted to look behind her to see if he followed but was afraid.

Oh, please, Alexander, do come .

The seconds crawled by, stretching her anticipation into agony. Her hands trembled as she opened the door to the library. A soft rustling made her pause. The heavy drapes near the window shifted, but it was only the wind. Her nerves had never felt this frayed.

Then she felt his heat behind her.

"Go inside, Penny."

"You came," she breathed, her voice barely above a whisper, taking a few steps forward, still afraid to look at him.

He closed the door behind him with a soft click . Swallowing, she faced Alexander. His shoulders were rigid, his gaze unreadable. Candlelight flickered over his sharp cheekbones, casting shadows that made him look dangerous.

"I almost did not," he said, his voice low and rough. "Why are we here?"

Her throat burned. "Because I wanted this moment with you."

Silence stretched between them. He stared at her as if searching for a reason to turn away. "Penelope..."

She closed the distance between them, pressing a trembling hand to his chest. Through the fine weave of his jacket, she felt the steady, strong beat of his heart. Her fingers curled slightly as if anchoring herself to him.

"I know what I am doing," she whispered.

His entire body tensed. "Do you?"

"Yes."

"That you are alone with a man like me reveals you do not."

She tilted her chin, meeting his gaze in the dim candlelight. "A man like you?"

His lips quirked in something too dark to be called a smile. "That is to say, there are depths to me you have not yet begun to understand."

A warning coasted over her skin at the veiled promise in his words.

"I was watching you from the upper bowers earlier," he murmured.

Her eyes widened. He had been watching her before she even saw him? "I..."

"You stood by the sidelines, and your mouth did not smile, and your eyes..." His voice roughened. "There was no joy in them. Until you saw me walking toward you."

A painful, aching knot formed in her chest. "Alexander..."

"You are right. We have only known each other for a few weeks, but tell me, do you like being with me? Do you think of the future and hope I am in it with you, Penny?"

Tears burned the back of her throat. But she would not lie. "Yes."

A slow, devastating smile curved his mouth. His eyes darkened, and he lifted a hand, his thumb brushing tenderly across her cheek.

"I want to protect your smile," he said. "This sadness and uncertainty I see in your eyes... I would replace it with pleasure and with happiness."

Penny could not bear to repeat what her mother had told her. Instead, she reached for him, wrapped her arms around his nape, and pulled herself onto her toes to press her mouth to his.

A soft, desperate kiss.

For a moment, he did not move. Then he shattered. His hands framed her face, angling her head as he took control, his mouth consuming hers with a hunger so raw it made her knees weaken. His tongue swept between her lips, teasing, coaxing, until she moaned into him. He pulled her flush against him, and she felt the hard, undeniable evidence of his desire pressing against her belly.

"For weeks, I fought the temptation to taste you," he rasped against her mouth. "By God, I was a fool. Tell me to stop, Penelope."

"No."

"Penny—"

She kissed the words from his mouth, gliding her tongue against the seam of his

mouth as he had just done to hers. He groaned, and their mouths tangled in breathless passion.

So this is a kiss...

It felt wonderful . He broke their embrace, threading his fingers through her hair to lift her face to his. Alexander brushed a thumb over her lips, a grimace of lust darkening his gaze.

"I will escort you home now. How did you arrive—"

"No. I want this ...I want your kisses...."

"We will have many nights to—"

She whispered against his lips, "I have to marry the Duke of Merrick."

Alexander went still.

A terrible silence filled the room.

"What did you say?"

"My father... he will not accept your courtship. The duke... he..." Her fingers curled into his jacket, and she trembled in the cage of his arms.

Oh, what am I doing ?

Penny did not wish to speak about her parents' demands or of her duty to her family.

"I...kiss me until I feel nothing but you . I do not want to think about marrying

someone else to save my family. Tonight, I want to be selfish because I am never allowed to be."

A soft curse escaped him. Then his lips were on hers again, softer this time, almost reverent, as if memorizing her. He kissed her over and over until thought unraveled until there was nothing but the deep, slow burn of desire. His fingers trembled as he slid down the bodice of her gown, loosening the ties.

"I am not the lover for you," he rasped. "Not for your first time."

"Yes, you are."

"Do you know the things I want to do to you?" he ground out. "Do you know how filthy my thoughts were when I saw your swollen lips just now?"

Penny fell over the edge of recklessness she had been poised on the entire night. "Tell me," she breathed.

His low chuckle was almost mocking, and Penny sensed that he was angry—at himself. The awareness slammed into her. Acting on wild instinct, she lifted a finger to caress along his jawline.

"You are angry because you cannot resist me."

She felt it—his sexuality was controlled and barely leashed, giving the sense that only Penny could ever unmoor him. She felt awe and shocked and tumbled hopelessly deeper.

Something dark flashed in his eyes. Alexander stepped back, his storm-dark gaze raking over her. "On your knees!"

The low command lashed through her, and before Penny could even process the riotous feeling of alarm and arousal that surged through her body, she fell to the lush carpet on her knees, staring up at him almost helplessly. Why...why had she responded so instantly and instinctively to that rough order? She blushed, and a tremor worked through her body.

A thrill coursed through her as he shed his coat and waistcoat, pulling the cravat free with a swift motion. Then he unbuttoned his shirt, shrugging it from his broad shoulders, baring the hard planes of his chest. Penny's breath hitched. She had imagined him like this, but nothing had prepared her for his raw power. The low candlelight cast golden shadows over his skin, highlighting the taut ridges of muscle and the lean, sculpted lines of his stomach.

Then he removed his trousers, and Penny's breath strangled in her throat. A tremor moved through her as her gaze dropped to his thick, rigid length. She felt uncertain and intimidated, but she was also drawn to him with an aching hunger that weakened her knees.

"Unpin your hair."

She obeyed, loosing the chignon so her dark raven hair tumbled over her shoulder and down to her back.

"For weeks, I have imagined those lips around my cock...your eyes watering as I coax your throat to take my cock."

Her breath stuttered, and she felt breathless confusion. Penny arched a brow and lowered her gaze to the length jutting out so proudly. "Ah...I presume this is your...cock?"

His dark chuckle rasped over her.

"The innocence in your eyes makes me feel like a depraved libertine," he hissed. "Go, stand—"

" No !"

He narrowed his gaze to a dangerous slit as if her defiance had stoked something inside of him. Penny only knew that should she leave, she might never touch or kiss him or be like this with him ever again.

She flicked her gaze to his and murmured, "I thought rakes should want to despoil... innocence. Afraid ?"

His mouth quirked into a half smile. Alexander shifted closer and threaded his fingers through her hair. Alexander's jaw flexed, the muscle ticking beneath his cheek as he stared at her. The storm in his eyes had changed—it was no longer simply desire but conflict and restraint battling behind that pale, glacial blue.

"I should not be like this with you," he said, voice low and raw. "You don't know what it means to give yourself this way."

But she did know. At least, some part of her did. She felt it deep inside—this reckless hunger to see him undone, to have his need laid bare for her and no one else.

"Then show me," she whispered.

He shuddered as if the words gutted him. She watched as he guided her hand to his arousal, and her breath caught at the heat and weight of him. Her fingers trembled around him, barely managing the breadth of his shaft. Her skin tingled with nerves, yet there was a wild, delicious thrill in knowing she had caused this. Her. Not a courtesan or a mistress. Not some experienced woman who knew how to wield her power with practiced ease.

"Wet your lips," he murmured.

She obeyed, nervously drawing her tongue across them. His eyes darkened, and he looked almost pained. With a tender and reverent hand, he cradled her cheek, his thumb sweeping the edge of her mouth.

"Open for me."

Her lips parted, and she felt the hot, velvet weight of him brush her tongue. She took him in slowly, uncertainly, aware of every new sensation—the silky skin, the way his breath hissed sharply through his teeth as her lips closed around him.

She looked up at him through her lashes. The expression he wore stole her breath—eyes nearly closed, brows furrowed, mouth parted in a silent groan.

He liked this. I am making him feel this.

A powerful rush of want surged through her.

He moved gently, guiding her—no roughness, only care. His fingers threaded through her hair, urging her to take more of him. Her jaw stretched wider as he slid deeper, and a dull ache bloomed. Still, she pushed forward, greedy for the look on his face. Then she felt his hand at her throat—his thumb caressing lightly as if soothing her.

"You're doing so well," he rasped. "Relax. Breathe through your nose."

She tried. Her throat resisted. Her eyes stung. But still, she let him guide her. He pushed deeper, and she made a choking sound, a tear slipping down her cheek. Gasping, she drew back with a wet sound, blinking up at him, breathless and dazed. The taste of him lingered on her lips. She had never felt so... powerful. And yet, so vulnerable. She wanted more. She wanted everything .

His gaze was steady, locked on hers. "You should run from me. You should demand I take you home. That's what a good, proper young lady would do."

She smiled, just faintly. "I don't want to be good or proper tonight. Can't you tell?"

A look of wicked carnality settled across his features as his fingers tightened in her hair. With a slow, deliberate thrust, he guided his cock deeper into her mouth. Penny moaned around the strain in her jaw, feeling the thick length push farther than she thought possible.

His hips moved again—rougher this time—and her eyes burned as the stretch became almost unbearable. Her muffled moan vibrated against him, desperate and needy, even as her throat protested.

She clutched at his thighs, grounding herself, and stared up at him through damp lashes. There was something darkly sensual in his gaze, almost cruel in its intensity, and for a wild, shivering moment, she thought he might push even deeper past the limits of her breath.

A hiss escaped him, sharp and low before he pulled free with a wet sound that left her gasping—jaw aching, lips tingling, and a wet heat pulsing between her thighs.

That wetness startled her and confused her.

She had never imagined such pleasure could stem from something so raw. And yet, her body trembled for more. The regret that flashed across his face shocked her.

"Christ," he muttered, kneeling and gathering her into his arms. "Penny—I'm sorry. I lost control. I should never lose that kind of control with you."

Somehow, that word—control—unnerved her. It implied there was a part of him she

would never see. That with her, he could not be entirely himself. That the man she was permitted to know was only a tempered version, carefully curated.

A flare of panic twisted through her, sharp and unexpected. She swallowed it down with calm pragmatism.

What does it matter if he's holding something back? After tonight... we are strangers again.

He kissed the crown of her head, then held her close. When he drew back, it was only to tilt her chin up with gentle fingers. His mouth found hers again—not with the consuming heat of before, but with reverence. Tender. Restrained.

And it was that restraint that made her ache. A strange sense of loss unfurled inside her. As if the man who had kissed her with wild hunger only moments ago had vanished, replaced by someone cooler, more deliberate. A controlled seducer, composed and distant.

And God help her... she wanted the other version. The one who had trembled when she touched him. The one who couldn't resist her. His lips were warm and slow, worshipful, brushing over hers again and again until her racing heart calmed, until the moment turned from heated to heartbreakingly intimate.

Cool air whispered over her skin, but it was nothing compared to the fire of his mouth closing over her bare shoulder. She shuddered as he kissed his way down, dragging the silk from her arms, exposing inch by inch of flushed, trembling skin.

She gasped when her gown pooled at her feet.

"You are exquisite," he rasped. "If you do not want this...tell me before we cross the point of no return."

She rushed into his arms, cupping his jaw. "I want you...I want this with every breath inside my body."

He groaned, dragging her against his body and crashing his mouth against hers with violent tenderness. He lowered her onto the carpet, his weight pressing into her. His lips dragged down her throat, over the swells of her breasts, before capturing one aching peak between his teeth. A cry spilled from her as he laved his tongue over the sensitized tip, the pleasure shocking, sharp, and unbearably sweet.

His mouth moved lower, pressing kisses along her belly, her navel. Then he settled between her parted thighs.

" Oh —"

She gasped as his mouth pressed against her sex, his tongue sweeping over her most intimate flesh with devastating slowness. The sensation was foreign, shocking, and impossibly good . She sobbed his name, her body trembling, her hips arching helplessly into the caress of his tongue. Over and over, he loved her with his tongue and lips.

Pleasure curled through her, tightening, pulsing, winding her higher and higher until she shattered with a cry, shuddering beneath him. Then he was above her again, his breathing ragged, his gaze burning into hers. He guided himself to her entrance, the thick, swollen head of his cock pressing against her slick but trembling flesh.

"Look at me," he said, voice husky, low. "You're tight, untried—and I'm not a small man. It will hurt."

Penny's breath caught. "Hurt?" she whispered, her voice thread-thin.

"Only for a short while," he promised, brushing a kiss to the corner of her mouth. "I

swear—the pleasure will come back."

She held his gaze, her arms locked around his neck as he began to press into her. The intrusion was immediate and shocking. Pain bloomed sharp and deep, stealing the air from her lungs. A cry tore from her throat as her nails bit into his shoulders, her entire body going taut with resistance.

It was too much. Too thick. Too deep.

Tears stung her eyes, and for one breathless moment, she almost begged him to stop. But then his hand slid between their bodies, and his fingers found her. A gasp broke from her lips as he stroked her clitoris in slow, skilled circles—soft, coaxing, knowing.

The ache remained sharp and stretching, but now it mingled with a flicker of something else. A rush of heat licked through her belly, tightening the muscles of her belly. She moaned shakily, the pain dulling, blurred by the unexpected ripple of pleasure his fingers summoned.

She grew wetter, her body relaxing by increments, and he slid deeper. Penny whimpered as he filled her inch by relentless inch, the pain still there—but softened. Confused by the way her body ached for more, even as it trembled from the shock of taking him.

"That's it," Alexander murmured, his mouth brushing her cheek. "You're doing so well... Let me in, Penny."

And she did. Her thighs parted wider, her nails curling tighter into his skin as he rocked deeper, stretching her fully, the pain and pleasure blending until she no longer knew where one ended and the other began.

His movements were slow at first, careful. But when her body softened around him, when her nails dug into his back, pulling him closer, he lost control. He drove into her deeper, his breath rough against her ear as he filled her completely.

It was bliss.

It was devastation.

It was everything she would never have again. Tears slipped down her cheeks as she clung to him, her body trembling as the pleasure crested. His hips rolled with deep, purposeful thrusts, and with a soft, broken cry, Penny shattered around him—her inner muscles pulsing as ecstasy tore through her in waves. Alexander groaned her name like a curse and a prayer, his thrusts turning erratic before he buried himself deep and found his own release with a shudder.

For a long, breathless moment, they remained tangled together, limbs entwined. Their breathing came in harsh, uneven pants, and he was still joined with her, their bodies locked in perfect, aching stillness.

She held on tightly, memorizing everything—his weight pressing her into the carpet, the musk and spice of his scent, the way his mouth sought hers even in the aftermath, soft and reverent, as if he hadn't just taken her body but something more.

Something Penny wasn't ready to name, not when it was so fleeting.

CHAPTER 6

The innocence peering up at him was achingly sweet, a contrast so carnal it made Alexander's chest clench. Penny's lips stretched around his cock, her tongue curling against the sensitive underside, teasing him with the very devil's temptation. Alexander stroked his fingers along her throat, his thumb caressing the spot where her pulse fluttered wildly. He felt each moan she swallowed, the vibrations traveling straight through him, turning his hunger into something near unbearable.

"Christ," he groaned, tipping his head back as pleasure licked through his spine, his balls tightening, hardening him further.

He thrust just a fraction deeper, edging toward the back of her throat, and Penny didn't retreat. Instead, her hazel eyes, darkened with desire, flickered up to his, filled with wicked delight.

Earlier, when she said she wanted to take him into her mouth again, Alexander hesitated. Then, a wicked challenge had entered his gaze, and he sensed the minx wanted to wrest the careful way he had been loving her. She wanted to pleasure him, to feel him lose control.

By God, she was stunning—a creature of sin and innocence, surrender and demand. They had been locked in the library for almost two hours, the revelry outside muted. He had already taken her twice—once on the thick carpeted floor and once on the chaise flushed against the wall.

He had never been this desperate with a lover before...or this careful as he minded her

sensibilities. The dual needs were wrecking him. He wanted to rip down the wall and be free to drown himself in her softness, her taste, and the wild, desperate way she responded to him.

Penny released his cock with a wet sound, her breath coming in shallow pants. He tangled his fingers in her tousled black locks, tugging her up to him, slamming his mouth over hers in a kiss that was far rougher than before, his control fraying just a little bit more. She melted into him, her arms winding around his neck, pressing her soft body against his.

With a growl, he lifted her, hauling her into his arms, and stumbled toward the large oak desk by the window. Penny gasped as he sat her atop it, then dragged her onto his lap, impaling her halfway on his cock in one smooth thrust.

A sharp cry tore from her lips, swallowed by his kiss. She was wet, her inner folds swollen from her earlier orgasms and so damn tight that he almost climaxed instantly. He groaned into her mouth, gripping her hips, bracing his feet against the floor as he worked through her tightness until he was buried to the hilt.

"Alexander," she whimpered, her nails digging into his shoulders.

"I know, sweetheart," he rasped, brushing his lips against the curve of her jaw, down to her throat. "I know your sweet little pussy is sore, but it also feels good."

God, he should have restrained the filthy way he spoke, but it was as if the control he wanted to exercise melted once he touched her.

" Yes ," she moaned.

It was as if he could not get enough, as if some primal force inside him needed to claim her again and again. But he forced himself to slow, to temper his greed,

because she was his now, and they would have a lifetime for him to slowly introduce her to every wicked, delightful pleasure he had ever imagined. And if he ever thought it was too much, he would deny himself the desire.

Because he would marry this woman.

His hands gripped her hips, guiding her to rock onto his cock, and she did, moving with that sensual, instinctive grace that had driven him mad since the first moment he'd laid eyes on her. She wrenched her mouth from his, her breath ragged as she buried her face in his neck. Her teeth scraped lightly over his skin, and he nearly lost himself right then.

Over and over, he drove into her, and Penny met him, her body arching, taking him deeper, her moans turning softer, more broken, more desperate. Alexander reached between them, found the tight knot of nerves between her thighs, and pressed his fingers against her clitoris, pinching lightly.

Penny shattered. She cried out, her entire body going taut, her inner muscles clenching around him as she came undone in his arms. Heat flooded his cock, bathing him in her pleasure. He groaned, tightening his grip on her hip, bracing his other hand on the desk as he thrust deeper, riding her through the aftershocks of her climax.

Her head fell back, her breath coming in gasping little sobs, her glorious black hair cascading over her shoulders. She was so fucking beautiful it stole his breath.

"You are..." He groaned, leaning forward, dragging his tongue over the delicate, sweat-dampened hollow of her throat. "So damn beautiful."

His gaze lifted—and collided with another.

The Marquess of Ambrose sat in the shadows of the library, watching.

Possessiveness, dark and primal, curled through Alexander's gut. The thought of anyone seeing Penny like this—naked, panting, still trembling from her climax—filled him with a fury so sharp he stilled. He lifted her into his arms, still sheathed inside her, and carried her away from the desk. He found the chaise longue in the darker corner of the room and laid her down on the cushions.

"I should stop," he muttered against her lips.

But he didn't. Instead, he braced himself over her and thrust deep, chasing his own release. Penny clutched at his back, her nails raking his skin, her body arching to take him deeper.

"Alexander," she gasped, her voice breaking, her cries muffled against his shoulder.

The raw, clenching heat of her was too much. His entire body tightened, pleasure rolling through him in hot, violent waves as he buried himself inside her one last time, spilling his seed deep into her trembling body.

For a long moment, he held her, pressing his forehead against hers as he caught his breath. Her arms were still locked around his neck, her body soft and warm beneath him.

"Are you well?" he murmured.

She gave a weak, breathless laugh. "I cannot feel my legs."

Smirking, Alexander pressed a lingering kiss to her temple before reluctantly pulling from her body. Penny let out a small, protesting sound at the loss, and something inside him clenched at how much he wanted to keep her, to hold her like this every night.

Instead, he reached for his handkerchief and gently cleaned her, his touch careful. She watched him through dark-lashed eyes, and her lips parted, her expression still hazy from pleasure.

Then he helped her sit up and began gathering her discarded gown.

She blinked at him, still dazed. "You're rather skilled at dressing a woman."

He arched a brow, tugging the bodice up over her breasts. "I was once a libertine, sweetheart."

She laughed, soft and teasing, her cheeks pink. "Once?"

He met her gaze, something fierce and unguarded flashing in his storm-colored eyes. "Since you, I want no other."

Penny snorted but blushed, unable to hide the soft pleasure in her gaze.

Alexander smiled, slow and devastating, before cupping her cheek and pressing a lingering kiss to her lips.

"I will escort you home," Alexander murmured against her mouth.

"No." She reached up, touching her cheek, ensuring her mask was still in place. "I... I bribed the young coachman with my entire monthly allowance to bring me here. It would be too scandalous for you even to accompany me to the carriage door. Allow us to part here... please, Alexander."

"Go. I will see you tomorrow."

A peculiar look flickered in her eyes—wistful, almost resigned—and he frowned. She

hesitated, her fingers curling into the lapel of his coat. Then she nodded, stepping back. Gathering her skirts, she moved toward the door, her slippered feet nearly silent against the carpet. At the threshold, she paused and turned, looking back at him for a heartbeat longer.

Then she vanished into the shadows.

Alexander exhaled harshly, running a hand through his tousled hair, dragging his palm over his jaw. He turned slowly, already sensing the presence in the room behind him.

Oliver, the Marquess of Ambrose, rose from the shadows with a half-full glass of whisky in hand, a smirk tugging at his lips.

"Well," he drawled lazily. "That was quite the performance. Very stirring. I admit, I almost applauded."

Alexander said nothing. He crossed the room with unhurried grace and began dressing, his back turned as he pulled on his shirt and shrugged into his coat. Modesty was a wasted effort between them; they had once shared a lover in Vienna and laughed about it afterward. Their friendship was forged in fire, scandal, and the kind of trust only born through reckless camaraderie.

Oliver sipped his drink. "You do realize her family intends to marry her to the Duke of Merrick?"

Alexander went still.

"They'll have to step over my dead body first," he said tightly, fastening his waistcoat with clipped efficiency.

"She's nineteen, Alex," Oliver reminded him quietly. "You know the law. A young lady cannot marry without her parents' permission until she is one and twenty."

Alexander's jaw clenched. He reached for his cravat, wound it around his throat with methodical precision, and then faced his friend.

"I will speak to her father. There must be a misunderstanding. It's been clear—even to the bloody gossip rags—that I've been courting her."

Oliver raised a brow, his expression somewhere between admiration and regret. "And yet they're willing to trade her to Merrick for security. He's older, wealthier, and titled. He has honor, a powerful voice in parliament and is respected among his peers. You're all those things... except wealthy."

Alexander accepted the glass his friend poured and knocked it back in one swallow. "Wealth can be made. But no amount of it would convince me to give her up."

"You're in deeper than I thought."

Alexander said nothing.

Oliver sighed. "She's soft and sweet. Gentle. I don't see how that kind of girl could endure being yours. Not entirely."

Alexander set the empty glass aside. "Then you do not know her as I do."

There was no anger in his voice, just quiet certainty. Oliver nodded slowly, reading between the lines. "And what if she refuses you? What if her family forbids it?"

"I believe in the emotions I see in her gaze when she looks at me."

He stepped away from the hearth, his expression deliberately veiled and unreadable.

"Where are you going?" Oliver asked behind him.

"To think."

The door shut behind him with a decisive click . Outside, the wind swept low through the streets of Mayfair, but Alexander felt nothing of it. He strode into the night like a man with a single aim, his cane tapping with a deliberate rhythm against the cobblestones.

He would speak with her father and make his offer. Alexander would not walk away from Penny when she might be carrying his child.

The library of Belmont House was a stately chamber of dark wood and fine leather, masculine in both design and mood. Alexander sat in one of the worn armchairs before the large mahogany desk, coolly composed, his gloved hands resting on his knee. The fire crackled behind the grate, its warmth not easing the tension coiling in his gut.

"I've come," he said evenly, "to formally request permission to court your daughter. My intentions are honorable. I wish to make Lady Penelope my countess."

The Marquess of Belmont exhaled, rising with deliberate care. "Have a drink, Lord Bainbridge."

He turned to a nearby cabinet, poured two fingers of fine Scotch into crystal tumblers, and returned to hand Alexander one. He accepted it with a slight head incline, though his focus never left the older man's face. The marquess settled into the chair behind his desk with the measured calm of a man about to deliver a killing blow. He opened a drawer and withdrew a parchment sealed with wax. With unhurried grace, he broke

the seal and laid the sheet flat on the desk, turning it so that Alexander could read it.

Alexander's fingers tightened around the glass.

A betrothal agreement.

His eyes scanned the names at the top—Lady Penelope Eleanor Belmont and His Grace, the Duke of Merrick.

The breath locked in his chest.

"Does your daughter agree to this?" he asked quietly, the fury in his voice barely contained.

The marquess didn't blink. "I have decided for her. She is still two years from her majority. Still childish, willful, and impulsive."

"Lady Penny is a young woman with a heart and an inquisitive and brilliant mind."

"She is my daughter," the marquess snapped. "And the duke is a far better match. Do not presume to lecture me about my daughter."

Alexander rose slowly, the paper left untouched. "He is old enough to be her father. He will never know her. He will never cherish her. Not like I do."

The marquess said nothing at first, merely studied him. Then, with a dispassionate motion, he slid another sheet of paper across the desk.

Alexander didn't need to look—but he did. His stomach twisted into knots.

It was a financial report. A brutal one.

His debts. His assets. His unstable investments. The state of the Bainbridge holdings was laid bare.

"You see, Lord Bainbridge," the marquess said coolly, "you are not good enough for my daughter."

"I may not be rich," Alexander said, "but I will keep her clothed and sheltered as a countess should be. I'll damn well work the land myself if I must."

The marquess's smile was cold. "To marry my daughter, you will need to offer a sum of fifty thousand pounds. And you must show connections to secure loans, open credit, build investment. Without that... you are unworthy."

Alexander's hand curled into a fist, the whiskey in his other glass forgotten. "And if she carries my child?"

The marquess stilled.

His chair scraped loudly as he surged to his feet. "Then that child will belong to the Duke."

Something primal flared in Alexander's chest. He held the man's gaze a moment longer, his expression unreadable. Then, with quiet, lethal grace, he downed the rest of his whiskey and set the glass back on the desk. "Good day, my lord."

He turned, walked to the door and wrenched it open. Penny spilled forward.

She gasped softly, caught, her cheeks flushed with the unmistakable hue of shame.

"Penelope," her father said sharply. "Have you been eavesdropping?"

She didn't answer.

The marquess's eyes narrowed to slits. "Is there a possibility you might be with child for this bounder?"

Alexander's breath caught.

Penny flinched, and her eyes widened. And then, as if a mask dropped into place, her spine straightened, her chin lifted, and she looked at him with a chilling calm.

"My lord," she said coolly, "I have already informed you that I will not marry you. My regard lies with the Duke of Merrick."

Alexander stared at her. The words pierced deeper than any blade. "Penny—" he began.

She cut him off, her voice crystalline and cutting. "It is Lady Penelope, my lord. Kindly do not presume a familiarity or attachment that does not exist."

He froze. She turned to her father, curtsied with elegant grace, then glided from the room without a single tremor betraying her composure.

Only Alexander knew. Only he knew how she had clung to him with tears on her cheeks... how she had wept his name as she shattered around him. He thought of Penny's breathy moans, the way she clung to him, the trembling of her voice as she whispered his name, the feel of her heat closing around him as he took her virginity just hours ago.

Now she left him like a stranger.

And it gutted him.

He did not speak.

Did not look at the marquess.

Alexander followed Penny's path and left Belmont House behind, the fury in his chest like a storm threatening to break.

CHAPTER 7

One year and three months later ...

Penelope stood at the edge of the ballroom, a glass of lemonade clutched in one gloved hand, her mother at her right, and her brother—dutiful for once—at her left. She wore one of her finer gowns tonight, a soft silvery-blue silk that shimmered faintly beneath the chandeliers. The color suited her, or so her modiste had declared. Penny didn't much care. She hadn't cared in a long time.

"Do lift the corners of your mouth, Penelope," her mother murmured, the delicate fan in her hand fluttering with the precision of a general signaling troops. "The Duke of Merrick is expected tonight. He wrote to confirm his attendance."

Penny made a soft sound in her throat. Not quite in agreement. Not quite protest. It was the sort of sound that could mean anything, which was exactly how she intended it.

She had recently celebrated her twentieth birthday and felt older than the years permitted. Not just older—hollow. Tired. Her smiles were practiced now—easy to summon, easier still to tuck away when no one was looking. Her family never noticed her unhappiness because she refused to let them see it. Her father even praised her newfound reserve, declaring she was finally behaving as a proper young lady ought to.

But proper young ladies didn't burn with forbidden memories.

Visions of that wicked night with Alexander drifted through her thoughts like smoke, and she slammed her eyes shut, willing them away. The longing they stirred was too dangerous, too unbearable. She could not allow herself to remember how it had felt to be caged in his embrace—helpless, aching, and alive.

A ripple stirred the crowd like a wave. It preceded him wherever he went, and tonight was no different. The Duke of Merrick had arrived. He was tall, immaculately dressed in a deep forest green coat trimmed in black satin, and wore his silver-touched hair with elegant confidence. The gray at his temples only seemed to heighten his appeal—dignity, wealth, and refinement in a single devastating package.

He made his way toward her, parting the crowd with the same quiet command he always carried. Penny forced her spine straight and lifted her chin.

"Lady Penelope," the duke said smoothly, bowing low over her gloved hand. "May I have the honor of this waltz?"

She inclined her head. "Of course, Your Grace."

He led her onto the floor, his movements polished and sure. The orchestra struck up the waltz, and Penny let herself be swept into the dance. She turned, lifted, glided, every movement perfect.

"Your gown is very becoming," he said, his tone perfectly courteous.

"Thank you," she replied softly.

"It has been some time since I've had the pleasure of your company." A pause. Then he said, "I confess I had not expected to enjoy this season as much as I have. But then, I did not expect to see you again so soon."

"I had heard you were still in mourning," she said carefully, her gaze lingering just above his shoulder. "You have been...very devoted. It's been more than a year."

"Fourteen months," he confirmed. "I took her loss seriously."

Penny softened. "Most men do not. Society only expects six months, if that."

"I have never been a man to follow society's dictates blindly."

She looked up at him. His gaze was sincere. Admirable, really. But her heart... her heart gave no answering flutter. Her skin did not warm. There was no reckless longing, no unbearable need to press closer.

He was everything she should want.

But he was not him. A chill raced over her skin, a ripple like the wind stirring a field of poppies. Her breath caught.

He is here .

Penny didn't need to turn. She didn't need to search. She felt Alexander in the room the way she might feel a storm gathering—electric, inevitable, dark and unrelenting. Her flush deepened, and she fought the urge to look.

Had he seen her?

Would he care?

They had not spoken since that dreadful day when she had broken his heart with words wrapped in ice, even as her own heart bled inside her chest. Since then, not a letter, glance, or whisper.

And yet she could feel him still.

The Duke of Merrick's voice broke through her thoughts. "You've gone quiet."

"My apologies," Penny said swiftly, curving her lips into the smile she had perfected over the past year. "My mother often rebukes me for woolgathering."

The duke studied her with the patient air of a man unused to being disregarded. "You're flushed."

"The ballroom is warm," she said lightly, though her pulse throbbed far too fast for that to be true.

One of his dark brows lifted, and Penny feared he saw through her. She forced her shoulders to remain relaxed, her expression placid.

"Allow me to take you onto the terrace for a bit of fresh air," he said, offering his arm.

Her eyes widened. "Your Grace, that would not be proper—"

He smiled, faintly amused. "The days of a gentleman whisking a young lady outdoors for a stolen moment are not yet behind me, Lady Penelope."

A surprised laugh escaped her before she could stop it. "I..."

"Your mother will chaperone us," he said smoothly, already steering her toward the open terrace doors.

True to his word, her mother followed at a discreet and yet ever-watchful distance, a pleased gleam in her eye. Penny exhaled slowly as the cool night breeze washed over

her, soothing her heated skin. The air carried the scent of roses and distant laughter, and for a fleeting moment, she closed her eyes, willing herself to feel something other than dread.

The duke released her arm briefly and returned with a glass of champagne. She murmured a thank you and accepted it, grateful for the distraction.

A sudden burst of feminine laughter drifted from the garden below. Drawn by the sound, Penny stepped closer to the railing and looked down.

A lady stood far too close to a tall, broad-shouldered gentleman partially obscured by the shadows. But Penny would know that posture anywhere. That proud tilt of the chin. The lazy grace that masked restless energy. Even before he glanced up, her heart had already clenched.

Alexander.

As if summoned by her stare, he lifted his head. The flickering garden lights caught in the silver storm of his eyes—still piercing, still unreadable.

But there was no warmth in them.

His gaze swept over her without the faintest trace of recognition. Then slid to the Duke of Merrick beside her. A mocking smile curved his mouth before he turned away, saying something to the lady that made her laugh again.

Penny's breath caught. She gripped the stem of her glass tighter, feeling the edges of her composure splinter.

The indifference in his gaze cut deeper than any wound. He had looked at her as if she were nothing. As if she had never whispered his name. As if he had not once held

her as if she belonged to him.

She turned away quickly—and found the duke watching her.

"You know Lord Bainbridge?" he asked, his voice cool and even.

Penny summoned the calmness that had become second nature. "Somewhat," she said, her voice steady. "He is a university friend of my brother's."

The duke's stare sharpened, and something in his expression chilled. She could feel the weight of it, even as he said nothing. His silence was polite, but the undercurrent was unmistakable.

Penny lifted her chin. "If you'll excuse me, Your Grace. I believe I should visit the retiring room."

"Of course." He bowed his head, and she offered a shallow curtsy before stepping away.

Her steps were calm and measured, but inside, she was in disarray. She did not stop until she reached the marble hallway beyond the ballroom. There, out of sight, Penny pressed her hand to her chest.

Dread coiled in her belly.

What have I done ?

And why, after all this time, did a single look from him still unravel everything?

An hour later, Penny dropped her exhausted body onto her bed, the silken coverlet cool against her overheated skin. She groaned softly, burying her face in the

embroidered pillow.

Her muscles ached. Her mind spun. Her heart—well, it no longer felt like hers at all.

The latch clicked.

Penny didn't lift her head.

"Don't," she mumbled into the pillow. "Not now."

But it was already too late.

The door opened fully, and the soft sound of slippered feet padding across the carpet followed.

"Penny!" her sister whispered excitedly. "How was it? You met him, didn't you? The Duke? In society?"

Penny turned her face just enough to glare with one eye. "Henrietta," she groaned. "Must we do this tonight?"

Henrietta stood at the foot of the bed, clasping her hands in front of her with a mixture of hope, nerves, and that quiet fear she never dared voice aloud. She was still in her ballgown, her cheeks flushed with youth and innocence and expectation.

Penny stared at her for a long moment—and her heart softened, even as it twisted.

Their mother had told Henrietta more than once over the last year: once Penny was securely married to the Duke of Merrick, Henrietta would be free to follow her heart.

That promise had made her younger sister glow with happiness.

And Penny had wept silently, knowing even her dearest sister, her closest companion, had unknowingly tied her own future to Penny's sacrifice. That truth had pierced deeper than anything else.

But she had lifted her chin and borne it, like everything else.

She managed a soft smile. "It was...a fine meeting."

Henrietta's eyes widened. "Truly?"

"The ball was grand," Penny added gently, pushing herself up to rest against the pillows. "And our dance was thrilling."

Henrietta squealed, spinning in a circle as if Penny had announced a betrothal. "Oh! I knew it would be! He looked so handsome when he came to claim you. And you looked like a duchess already, Penny."

Penny smiled through the ache. She reached for her sister's hand, gave it a squeeze, and said nothing more.

Henrietta sighed dreamily and rushed from the room, no doubt off to scribble in her journal and imagine the wedding flowers.

Left alone, Penny sagged back into the bedding, hugging the pillow to her chest. Her throat tightened.

She would not cry. Not tonight. Not again.

She had chosen this path.

She had made her bargain with pride and silence and a shattered heart.

The candle beside her bed flickered low. She closed her eyes.

But long after sleep claimed her limbs, storm-gray eyes haunted the edges of her dreams—glinting with cold mockery, burning with forgotten heat.

And somewhere, deep inside her soul, something silently fractured all over again.

CHAPTER 8

The scent of sweat, cigar smoke, and blood clung to the air like a lover too bold to be banished. The crowd pressed in around the makeshift ring in the heart of the Soho Square club, their eager voices rising in a crescendo of anticipation. Somewhere overhead, a candle-lit chandelier cast fractured light over the faces of masked women draped over gentlemen's laps, their feathered fans fluttering as if to cool flushed cheeks. Fine crystal glasses clinked as the men drank and laughed with their friends.

Alexander stood at the center of it all.

Not as a lord.

But as the damned entertainment. His chest rose and fell slowly, the roll of his shoulders loose, relaxed, his expression deliberately cold and composed. He adjusted the thin vinegar-soaked wraps around his wrists and cracked his neck to the left, then right. The old bruises across his ribs ached dully, a welcome reminder that pain was real. Grounding.

If he won tonight's fight, the purse was ten thousand pounds.

And every bloody coin of it would go to restoring the rotted east wing of his principal estate and paying his staff wages for the next two years. The servants' quarters leaked. The farmlands needed new ploughs. The estate's future was being rebuilt with his fists.

Across from him, the next contender stepped into the ring.

A bull of a man. Thick-necked, heavily muscled, and with a crooked smile that promised broken bones. He was a full head taller than Alexander and nearly twice his breadth.

The crowd gasped.

Alexander didn't blink.

He turned his head toward Milton, the club's thin, twitchy organizer, who stood just beyond the edge of the ring. The man gave an apologetic shrug and gestured toward the gathered spectators.

Of course. Alexander's mouth curved into a grim, amused smile. The elite of the ton had turned out in numbers tonight—scented, masked, and ravenous for something raw and unspeakably forbidden. That was part of the allure, wasn't it? That one of their own—an earl, a gentleman born and bred—was willing to bleed for their amusement.

The polished brute they gawked at in ballrooms was the same man now bracing to be pummeled into the dirt.

The knowledge didn't bother him.

It suited him.

He had no pride left to protect. His gaze swept the crowd again—bored viscounts, giggling courtesans, and veiled ladies in silk who pretended they didn't know his name.

But they all knew. That was the point.

His jaw flexed.

And then he saw her.

Not Penny. Not his Penny. No. This woman in the third row, partially hidden behind a lace fan, wasn't her—but something about the curve of her neck, the tilt of her head, slammed into him like a punch to the gut.

A ghost of her.

Sweet Christ . He had thought he'd buried that ache. Had promised himself he'd broken it beneath bruised knuckles and the sharp sting of old, coppery blood. But the memory of her—standing on the terrace earlier, the moonlight dusting her shoulders, the sheen of longing gone from her gaze—refused to be exorcised. She had smiled for the Duke of Merrick. Had lifted her hand to him and allowed herself to be led into a waltz.

Alexander had watched it all. Every practiced curtsy. Every false smile. He had buried that longing beneath cold indifference, for both pride and heart refused to yearn for a woman who would not fight for him. And when she'd looked his way, when their gazes had clashed across the garden, his heart had kicked painfully in his chest, only for her to look away. Dismiss him as if he were nothing.

"Stop thinking about her," he hissed under his breath. "She is not worthy of it." He would never be so foolish again—to let Penny, or any woman, sink so deep that her absence could haunt him for months.

"Time," Milton called.

The crowd hushed.

Alexander refocused, turned back to the ring, to the man waiting to break his bones. And he welcomed it. With a slow exhale, he curled his fingers into fists. His skin hummed. His breath steadied.

Let the brute come. Let him swing. Let him take and take until there was nothing left.

The man surged forward, and Alexander moved. The crowd roared, bloodlust and thrill erupting from masked ladies and their rakish escorts. The brute before him was nearly a head taller and wide as a coach door, his body gleaming with sweat under the gaslight chandeliers. He swung first, a low arc meant to send Alexander to the floor. But Alexander ducked and countered with a hard jab to the ribs, relishing the satisfying grunt that escaped the other man.

They danced. Circling. Striking.

Fists collided with flesh in thunderous cracks; each blow met with either cheers or gasps from the crowd. The man's fist grazed Alexander's jaw, then came back harder, landing a brutal hit to his ribs. Pain exploded in his side, sharp and searing, and his vision swam. He staggered but did not fall.

Not tonight .

He surged forward, feinted left, and slammed his fist into the man's stomach. Another to the jaw. And another. Blood splattered. The brute reeled.

One more .

Alexander's knuckles split open as he drove his fist home, catching the man across the face with a sickening crunch. The larger fighter toppled backward like a felled oak, crashing to the floorboards. For one breathless moment, silence hung in the air. Then the crowd erupted.

Cheers and shrieks, champagne sloshing from glasses, the ladies clapping with gloved hands, their jewels glittering behind feathered masks. He didn't hear any of it. He stood in the center of the ring, chest heaving, his body throbbing with pain.

He stumbled to the edge of the ring, every muscle screaming. Milton was there, reaching for his hand, clasping it in a firm shake. There was something like respect in the man's eyes.

"Bloody hell, Bainbridge. You earned every coin of it."

Alexander nodded once. "Send the draft to my townhouse. First thing in the morning."

Milton grinned. "As agreed. When will I see you again? They'll be clamoring for more soon enough."

"A week," Alexander said tersely. "Give me a week."

"You're a beast," the man muttered, striding off with a pleased jaunt.

Alexander turned to leave, sweat cooling on his skin and blood trickling from a split brow. The lights blurred, and the floor tilted.

Damn it.

He gritted his teeth and kept walking, determined to get out of that room on his own. Then, a hand caught his elbow.

Alexander blinked and looked up.

Thomas. His friend's expression was tight with alarm. "Bloody hell, Alexander, you

look like a man on the verge of collapse. What you did in that ring was spectacular... but is it worth it?"

A cold snort escaped Alexander. "Spoken like a man who's never had to work for a damn thing in his life."

Thomas sighed. "Let me help you to your carriage."

Before Alexander could answer, the pain finally crashed through the adrenaline.

Darkness surged, and then the world vanished.

It was well past midnight, yet sleep continued to elude her. Penny sat curled on the worn velvet sofa beside the hearth in the library, a blanket draped around her shoulders and *Persuasion* open in her lap. The fire crackled softly, casting flickers of gold and shadow across the walls. Her finger traced the edge of the page she'd been rereading for nearly ten minutes, though the words blurred before her eyes.

She quite understood Anne Elliot. She understood her longing, her quiet ache, and the way her heart had remained tethered to someone long after sense and time had tried to cut it free.

Captain Wentworth had left, and Anne had waited even though she rejected his suit, bearing her pain in silence. How unbearably familiar it all felt. The door creaked open. She looked up, frowning as her brother stepped inside. His stride was stiff, and the moment he came into the glow of the firelight, her stomach clenched.

"Thomas!" she cried, lurching upright. Her book fell with a dull thud to the rug. She hurried to him, eyes fixed on the dark stain marring the front of his waistcoat. "You're bleeding—are you hurt?"

He held up a hand and rubbed the back of his neck with the other. "No, no. It's not mine."

Her breath caught. "Then... whose is it?"

Thomas hesitated.

She stilled. "Were you in an accident? Oh God . Who was hurt?"

"You're far too delicate for this sort of conversation, Pen," he muttered, looking away guiltily.

"Too delicate?" she gasped. "Blood is on your clothes in several places, and you are telling me I'm too delicate? Do not worry about my sensibilities that I assure you do not exist!"

When he didn't answer, she narrowed her eyes—and pinched his arm.

He cursed softly and grimaced. "It's Bainbridge's blood."

Penny went still. A strange, cold hollowness opened inside her chest, but she forced her features into impassivity.

"Lord Bainbridge?" Her voice was level, but her fingers clenched in the folds of her dressing gown. "What happened to him?"

"I'm not telling you," Thomas said quickly, edging toward the decanter on the mantel. "It's not fit for a lady's ears."

"I am not asking to inspect the wound, Thomas," she said tartly, crossing her arms. "But I think I've a right to know what happened to your friend if you walked into our

house at this hour covered in his blood."

He looked away and poured himself a drink, his jaw tight.

"Is he alive?"

"Yes, though I suspect not by much."

Her breath left her in a slow rush. Penny's chest squeezed so tightly it physically hurt.

"Has a physician seen him?"

Thomas downed the drink in one long swallow, then set the glass down with a soft clink .

"The damn fool refused one. And then had the audacity to boot me from his house. Said he wanted to be alone."

Penny stared at her brother in disbelief. "He refused help?"

Thomas shrugged. "Said he'd had worse."

"Had worse?" she echoed, her voice rising. "That's not reassuring, Thomas! Worse of what?"

"No," he muttered, rubbing the back of his neck again. "It's not."

Without another word, he turned and left, his shoulders heavy with fatigue.

Penny stood there a moment longer, watching the fire dance. Then she slowly returned to the sofa, sank into its cushions, and retrieved her book from the floor.

But she did not open it. She couldn't stop imagining Alexander lying somewhere alone, bleeding and too proud to accept help. Her hand tightened around the edge of the blanket, her throat thick with worry she could not voice. She wanted to go to him—wanted to see with her own eyes that he was well, that he still had breath in his body.

Do not be foolish , she silently reminded herself.

She had chosen this distance. She had let him go.

Penny curled on her side and hugged the pillow to her chest, blinking up at the ceiling. She would not cry or worry. Yet even as her eyes drifted closed, the image of storm-gray eyes haunted her—sharp and unreadable.

CHAPTER 9

Penelope lay atop her bed, curled slightly on her side, the pale moonlight casting a silvery sheen across her coverlet. The night was quiet but for the distant creak of the house settling and the soft rustle of wind against the windowpane. She had been peeking out at the full moon for what must have been an hour, her eyes burning with unshed tears and exhaustion.

It had been a full day since Thomas had come home with Alexander's blood on his clothes, and still, she knew nothing more. She had pressed him again in the morning, her voice measured, her questions careful.

"How was Lord Bainbridge hurt?" she'd asked.

Thomas had scowled. "Why are you asking me this again?"

"Because you refused to say the first time," she had replied, trying to keep the sharpness from her tone.

"He's not your concern, Penelope."

The words had cut deeper than she'd expected. She had wanted to yell at him.

Not her concern? The man who had once kissed her as if she were made of starlight and fire? The man who had looked at her with a kind of longing that had made her feel brave?

Not her concern?

She had clenched her hands in her lap and asked if Thomas had seen him again. His lips had twisted in frustration before he'd muttered, "No. His butler turned me away. Said the earl's not receiving visitors."

Not receiving visitors. Not even Thomas .

Penny closed her eyes and exhaled shakily. Today, she'd been forced to smile through a picnic in Hyde Park with the Duke of Merrick, with her mother fluttering alongside them in carefully polite intervals. Penny had learned several facts: the duke was eight and forty; his eldest daughter was seventeen and soon to make her debut; his youngest son was nine and adored horses.

When Penny had, without thinking, remarked that she was only three years older than his daughter, her mother had given her a discreet but vicious pinch on the inside of her arm. The bruise bloomed there now, a dark purple mark on her fair skin. Penny traced the edges of it absently, wondering how something so small could ache so much.

The duke had only chuckled and gone on to discuss the weather.

Charming, yes.

Respectable, certainly.

But her heart remained numb, and the entire day had felt like she was walking through someone else's life—a life chosen for her, built by duty and held together by silence.

The soft patter of rain began to fall, whispering against the windows and tiles like a

lullaby meant for someone else. Penny turned her face to the glass and whispered, "Are you well, Alexander?"

She didn't expect an answer. Only the steady rhythm of her heart thudding painfully in her chest. She touched the cold pane, her fingers ghosting over it like a caress.

Did he know that she still thought of him?

Did he dream of her the way she sometimes dreamed of him—his mouth at her ear, his hands on her skin, his voice low and wicked and tender?

Did he still hate her?

She let the tears fall then, silently, one by one, swallowed by the shadows of the night. She would cry only here, only now. And then she would rise tomorrow and smile prettily and nod when her mother spoke of wedding colors and marriage settlements.

But in the quiet between rain and moonlight, she clutched her pillow tighter and whispered his name again, softer this time.

"Alexander, please be well."

Penny only lasted a few hours.

The clock in the hallway had just struck midnight. It had taken her almost two hours to craft her plan, and she peered at her reflection in the mirror, thinking she looked like a perfectly respectable maid. She had tried to steal a maid's uniform and had been caught—then bribed the young girl with her entire week's allowance.

The dress was a dark, serviceable gown, plain and rather unflattering. Her hair was

pinned in a neat chignon, and she wore a maid's cap and sturdy boots. Taking a deep breath, she walked silently through the house, her parasol gripped in her hand like a sword and slipped out the servant's entrance.

Almost thirty minutes later, she was in the side gardens of Alexander's townhouse, heart pounding as she searched for an open window. Relief swelled in her chest when one yielded beneath her touch. It appeared to be the music room. She eased herself inside, the soft thud of her boots on the carpet the only sound.

Her daring still felt inconceivable—but she pressed onward.

The house was silent, cloaked in darkness and slumber. She crept up the stairs, hazarding a guess about the location of the master bedroom based on the layout of her own home.

At last, she opened a door, her breath catching as she saw him. Alexander lay on the bed, still as death but breathing. The rhythmic rise and fall of his chest undid something inside her. She had not realized how tightly she'd been holding herself together until that moment. Her knees almost buckled.

What would she say to him?

Even now, she could not explain the reckless desire that had pushed her to steal away from her home and come to see him.

"I can smell you," came his unexpectedly hoarse drawl. "Sun-ripe peach and a hint of lavender. So sharp and wonderful. I cannot tell if you are here or my fevered imagination."

"You are fevered," she cried, rushing forward, the low firelight flickering over his skin. He was naked beneath the sheets, the covers drawn only to his hips. Her cheeks

burned, but she did not turn away.

"Ah, you are real," he murmured, his voice husky and gentle—but beneath that warmth, something cold lurked. Indifferent. Detached. "Why are you here, Penny?"

She opened her mouth, but no words came. Her gaze locked on the bruises shadowing his chest and arms, the raw cut above his brow, and the swelling along his cheekbone. "Who did this?" she whispered fiercely.

He didn't answer. His gaze dropped to her clenched fists, then lifted to her face—flat, unreadable. "Leave."

She flinched as if he'd struck her. "No."

His jaw tightened. "You have one minute to remove yourself from this room," he said, his voice clipped and deadly. "Or I will toss you on your arse outside."

Tears stung the backs of her eyes, but she refused to let them fall. She spun on her heel and stormed from the room, anger and fear warring inside her. But she did not leave the townhouse. Penny marched down the stairs, navigating the unfamiliar halls until she found the servants' quarters. Light spilled from the doorway of the kitchen, voices murmuring low and tired. She stepped in, and chairs scraped against the stone floor as the butler and a few footmen surged to their feet, stunned.

"Who are you?" the butler asked, eyes wide.

"I am a friend of Lord Bainbridge. Has a physician seen your lord?" she asked crisply, her voice cutting through the stunned silence.

The butler hesitated. "No, my lady."

She saw it then—the curl of worry around his mouth, the tension in his shoulders.

"Send for Dr. Grant at once," she commanded. "Tell him it is urgent. I expect him here within the hour." Penny quickly gave him her family's physician's address.

"Yes, my lady." He gave a swift bow and turned to dispatch the footman.

"I need clean linen and a basin of water."

"Yes, my lady," a maid said, still looking uncertain.

Penny turned and climbed the stairs again, fury propelling her forward. She paused at the threshold of Alexander's chamber. He sat on the edge of the bed now, his head bowed slightly, one hand pressed to his temple. Sweat glistened along the line of his shoulders.

Her breath caught again—this time not in shock but in heartbreak.

Scars. Dozens of them, some faint, others cruel and jagged, crisscrossed his back like a brutal map of pain. Old wounds. Not the kind earned in a fight—but something more personal. More savage.

He glanced over his shoulder and scowled. "Why are you still here?"

She closed the door behind her with a soft click. "The physician will be here soon."

"I told you to leave."

"And I refused," she said, lifting her chin. "You don't get to order me about like a servant."

His mouth curled in a small self-ridiculing smile. "I am half-naked, feverish, and in pain," he bit out. "And you are standing there in a damned maid's uniform, staring at me like you've forgotten how much you hate me."

She faltered. "I never hated you."

"You made your choice. You let me believe I meant nothing. That means you do not get to barge into my home and pretend to be someone important to me." His tone was sharp, but his voice was quieter now, rough with something unspoken.

"I did what I had to," she whispered. "For my family."

"You did what you chose," he said flatly. "Don't mistake it."

She crossed the room, each step deliberate, ignoring how her heart slammed against her ribs.

"You've been beaten," she said, her voice trembling despite her effort to remain steady. "You're burning with fever. You've locked your doors and turned away everyone who cares. And yet you think I'm the one acting irrationally?"

His expression didn't change. He simply watched her, cold, exhausted and distant. But there was something—some flicker deep in those storm-gray eyes—that told her he wasn't as unaffected as he pretended.

"Why?" she asked softly. "Why are you doing this to yourself?"

He didn't answer. Not with words. He simply looked away, the set of his jaw a silent, stubborn, prideful wall. A maid brought up the linen and basin, setting them down on a small table before hurrying away.

Penny moved to the washbasin, filled a cloth with cool water, and returned to his side. He didn't stop her as she knelt and pressed the cloth gently to his brow.

She said nothing more, and neither did he. And though his eyes closed, and his lips pressed into a firm line, Alexander did not tell her to leave again.

Penny dipped the cloth again and again, wringing out the cool water before trailing it gently along the heated skin of his chest, his arms, and his brow. Her fingers trembled as she smoothed it along the slope of his shoulder, over his collarbone, down the ridges of muscle that should not have borne so many bruises. Her breath caught when she encountered another gash—raw, newly formed.

She pressed the cloth to it, her throat tightening.

And then, the tears came. Quietly. Unwillingly. They slipped down her cheeks like traitors, warm and shaming.

"Why do you cry?" he demanded, his voice low and gruff, a tremor beneath the harshness.

"I'm not crying," she refuted softly, though tears continued to fall.

His lips curled in a mirthless smile. "You are." He inhaled sharply, the effort pained. "And for what? This was something I chose."

Penny froze, the cloth in her hand growing warm from his skin. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," he said tightly, eyes narrowing, "that I've been fighting in the boxing underworld of London for the last year. Bare-knuckle, brutal, illegal fights. The bruises, the cuts, the bloody mouths and cracked ribs—they come with the territory."

She stared at him in disbelief, her heart giving a painful twist.

"The choice was mine," he said coldly. "So stop your foolish sobbing. It's wasted on me."

Her hand trembled as she pressed the cloth to his side, then slowly drew it back. Her eyes drifted to his back again. To those jagged, old scars, faded but unmistakably cruel.

"And those?" she whispered. "Are they from fighting, too?"

His body stilled. The air in the room changed.

"No," he said after a long moment, his voice flat and clipped. His gaze turned to ice. "They are not."

Before she could speak again, a firm knock sounded at the door.

"Dr. Grant, my lord," came the butler's voice.

Penny stood abruptly, her pulse thrumming beneath her skin. "I'll wait outside," she said, her voice barely more than a breath.

She didn't wait for his answer. She stepped out into the hallway, closing the door quietly behind her, and leaned against the wall. One hand went to her chest as if she could somehow still the furious aching of her heart.

Her body felt cold, her borrowed maid's dress suddenly suffocating. Tears pricked anew, but she blinked them back, tilting her head to rest against the wood paneling behind her. The faint murmur of the physician's voice reached her ears, too low to decipher, but she was grateful for the sound. Grateful that he was being tended.

And still, all she could think of was the look in his eyes when he spoke of pain—and the sharpness of his voice when he told her to stop crying.

She swallowed hard.

Why was it that wanting someone could feel so much like bleeding?

CHAPTER 10

After half an hour, the physician left, the door clicking shut softly. Penny stood in the corridor, fingers curled around the edge of her borrowed gown.

The hallway clock struck a solemn hour—nearly two in the morning. She should have left. Penny knew it with every breath she took. Each minute she remained threatened ruin and scandal. Her reputation would be shredded if anyone found her here—if anyone even suspected. Her family's ambitions, her sister's happiness, everything could be lost.

And yet... she opened the door and stepped inside.

Alexander lay sprawled on the bed, the sheets tangled around his hips, his hands clenched in the linen as if to anchor himself. His broad chest shuddered beneath a sheen of sweat, and a violent tremor racked his body.

Penny's heart lurched. She hurried to him, kneeling by the bed, brushing his damp hair from his forehead. "Should I recall the physician?" she asked anxiously.

His jaw was clenched tight, teeth grinding together as he forced out, "No. I'm cold. That's all. He's done his duty."

Still, she turned and rang the bell, summoning a maid. When the servant arrived, sleepy-eyed, Penny pointed to the hearth. "More logs. Quickly, please."

Once the fire had been stirred and new wood crackled into bright life, the warmth

spread slowly through the chamber. But Alexander was still trembling. Penny returned to the edge of the bed, hesitant, unsure what more she could do. She reached out, brushing another lock of hair from his brow.

His eyes snapped open, narrowed to slits, gleaming with both fever and something sharper—something mocking.

"You should leave," he rasped. "Go home, Penny. Or," his lips curled faintly, "you could climb in beside me and keep me warm."

Her heart stuttered. She met his gaze squarely, searching it. Beneath the glint of mockery, there was a vulnerability so raw she felt it like a touch on her skin.

She stood, wordless. Toed off her boots. And climbed onto the bed. Without hesitation, she slipped beneath the sheets and wrapped her arms around his shoulders, pressing her body gently to his. Her cheek came to rest against the warm plane of his chest, just above his racing heart.

He froze beneath her as if stunned by the intimacy. But she felt the furious pounding of his heartbeat— thump, thump, thump —and she knew... he was not unaffected.

"You're not afraid?" he asked, voice low and dark. "That I'll toss up your skirts and bury my cock inside your sweet little pussy?"

Heat surged into her cheeks at his deliberate crudity. But she did not pull away. She knew exactly what he was doing—trying to provoke her, to make her leave.

"No," she said softly. "You would not force me to do something I do not want."

A sharp scoff escaped him, but he said nothing more. Slowly, inch by inch, his body relaxed into hers. The trembling stopped. Penny exhaled and held him tighter, her

palm splayed across his bare chest. Her fingers brushed over the rough ridges of old scars, the memories they must carry. She could not name the ache in her chest—only that it bloomed deeper, heavier, with each breath he took against her.

Time passed. The fire snapped gently. Shadows danced across the walls. And then, in a voice just above a whisper, she said, "Perhaps... we could be friends."

He made no reply. But his arm slid around her waist, firm and sure, drawing her closer. She felt the deliberate press of his palm against her back, the way he tucked her beneath his chin. As if he needed her there. As if he could not—would not—let her go.

Her eyes stung. She closed them and whispered, "Who hurt you, Alexander?"

For a moment, she thought he would not answer. She felt the tension gather in his body, the sharp pull of breath held in his lungs. Then, quietly, he said, "My father."

Pain speared her. "I'm sorry."

His reply was a low growl. "Why? It wasn't your doing."

"No," she murmured. "But it still breaks my heart. Fathers should protect their children, not hurt them."

Alexander exhaled. "Mine was meant for the clergy. He was, in fact, a gentleman—but he could be pious. He didn't think it was hurting me. Only correcting me. Spare the rod and spoil the child, and all that."

"You excuse away the pain he caused," she said softly.

"No. I only understand it. Whatever resentment I held... it's long faded."

"How old were you?"

"Seventeen."

"And what was he saving you from?"

A corner of his mouth quirked. "Depravity."

Something within her tensed. A warning. But she ignored it. "What depravity?"

His fingers briefly tightened on her shoulder.

"He found me with my lover. She was older by a few years, but I had her bound—hands and feet. I was... spanking her cunt."

Penny flinched, shock jolting through her. Her mouth opened, then closed. He was unapologetic about his desires, possessing an unsettling ability to cut through pretense and speak directly to her heart. And though it unsettled her, a part of Penny—the part that cherished honesty—appreciated that he never treated her as if she were meant to be coddled. "Was she willing?" she finally whispered.

"Yes," he said. "Very much. But that didn't matter to him. He believed I was corrupting the very nature of love."

She swallowed, her heart fluttering wildly. "Do you... still...?"

"Still tie my lovers up?" he finished for her.

She gave a small nod.

"I do."

"You didn't tie me."

His eyes sharpened. "You were meant to be my wife."

Penny's breath caught. "And your wife isn't meant for those desires?"

He said nothing for a long moment. Then, tersely, "A wife is meant to be cherished. Protected. That side of me isn't meant for her."

A dull ache bloomed in her chest. "So you would take a mistress?"

"You think me so dishonorable?"

"No," she said quietly. "I don't."

His mouth tightened. "I would deny myself."

She stared at him, aghast. "Why must your wife be unworthy of all that you are?"

That made him still. His gaze flared, but his voice, when it came, was tight. "Because sometimes... a man's desires can offend a lady's sensibilities. Distress her dignity."

To Penny's surprise, a laugh escaped her. "Oh, how silly," she said, breathless with amusement. "How men flatter themselves, thinking wives and mistresses have different appetites, different hearts. We are women, and I daresay we are fashioned in the same regard."

Alexander's gaze softened. He reached out and stroked a finger down her cheek. "Your laugh is so damn lovely."

The air between them shifted—thickened. His eyes darkened with that unmistakable

hunger he had warned her about earlier. She felt the weight of it pulse through her, curling low in her belly. Her breath hitched. Alexander meant what he said about burying his cock inside her pussy. She blushed, recalling the words. He could have her now. He wanted to.

And she—

No. No.

Penny flushed and abruptly pulled from his arms, scrambling to her feet. "I must go."

He didn't stop her. But the gleam in his eyes said he knew how close she'd come to staying. The ache in her palm grounded her—the sharp sting from where she'd dug in her fingernails to resist herself. Penny would not fall again, not when she knew what was coming. The duke would announce their engagement this season.

Alexander watched her with growing coldness as if he saw the walls slamming back into place between them. He threw the sheet aside, rose from the bed, and began to dress.

"What are you doing?"

"I will escort you home."

"Home?" she said. "I walked here. I can walk back."

He gave her a look that made it clear she was being ridiculous and didn't dignify it with an answer. Instead, he pulled on his coat and rang for the carriage.

Fifteen minutes later, they sat in silence, the soft clatter of wheels and the rhythmic thud of hooves the only sounds between them. Penny sat stiffly, hands folded in her

lap, her parasol beside her. The street gaslamps passed in gentle flickers through the window as the carriage rolled through the darkened city.

When it stopped at a discreet distance from her home, she reached for the door.

"Penny."

She froze at the sound of her name on his lips and glanced over her shoulder.

He watched her in the dim light, his face unreadable. "Thank you."

She met his gaze and gave him a soft smile.

Then, after a moment, he added, "Friends... We can be friends. A novel idea, a man and woman being friends, but I already know... a friendship with you would be something I'd treasure."

Her heart squeezed painfully.

She smiled again and stepped down from the carriage. With quiet urgency, she slipped down the narrow path that led to the servant's entrance and disappeared inside. Behind her, the carriage lingered in the dark just a moment longer before it rolled into the night.

CHAPTER 11

I am a damn fool.

Alexander snarled the thought, glaring up at the dark ceiling of his bedchamber. Dawn crept over the horizon, silver light slipping between the edges of the curtains. Still, he could not sleep. Not with Penny's scent lingering on his skin, not with the feel of her arms around him like some longed-for fever dream.

Friends.

Christ. Why the bloody hell had he said such a thing? He knew why. Her smile always defeated him. One curve of her lips and his resolve fractured, exposing all the jagged edges he kept hidden. With a sharp exhale, Alexander threw back the sheets and swung his legs over the edge of the bed. He dressed himself without calling his valet, shrugging into breeches and a loose shirt, then tugging on his waistcoat and boots with practiced efficiency. His body protested with every movement—bruised ribs and knuckles and the deep ache of overuse, but he welcomed the pain. It grounded him.

Descending the stairs, he moved through the silent townhouse to his study. The hearth had burned low in the grate, casting a dim amber glow across the wide oak desk.

He sat and reached for the ledgers. A quick scan of the bank papers confirmed that the ten-thousand-pound draft from last night's fight had been deposited. He rubbed the back of his neck, easing the stiffness, and opened his account books.

In the last four months alone, he had earned over thirty thousand pounds from underground bare-knuckle bouts. A fortune sum for any man—unless that man had inherited the ruin his father had left behind. A letter from Milton lay to the side, unopened. He broke the seal, scanned the contents, and huffed a bitter laugh. Another invitation. This one promised a match against a renowned fighter from Leeds. The purse was fifteen thousand pounds.

Alexander leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. Tempting. But his body was still healing. The wound above his brow had barely stopped bleeding. His knuckles cracked and popped every time he flexed them. The ache in his ribs still stole his breath if he moved too quickly.

And yet...

He looked down at the books. There were numbers that needed resolving, creditors to be paid, and tenants to be reassured. With methodical precision, he set to work. Several hours passed in silence, broken only by the scratch of his quill. He drafted letters to estate stewards outlining improvements and investments. He allocated funds to purchase new tools and livestock, repair aging tenant cottages and refurbish crop storage sheds.

He placed one thousand pounds each into his sisters' dowries—something he had vowed to do since the first match he fought. Then, he tallied the servants' back wages and set aside two full years of their salaries, ensuring their loyalty and peace of mind.

When he leaned back in his chair again, the sun was high, casting golden rays through the tall windows. The room was warm and heavy with the scent of ink and wax.

He exhaled slowly, and his belly rumbled.

The butler entered with his usual soft efficiency and bowed. "My lord, the Earl of Radbourne has come to call."

Alexander did not lift his head. "Show him in."

Let the scolding begin, he thought dryly as he closed the ledger, wiping a smudge of ink from his thumb.

He needed the reminder—needed someone to call him a fool aloud since his thoughts had already done so a thousand times over. And still... even now... he couldn't banish the memory of Penny's arms around him, the softness of her body pressed to his, and the aching temptation to kiss her.

Hell . He truly was a damn fool.

The Earl of Radbourne entered the study without ceremony, his green eyes gleaming with their usual blend of mischief and calculation. Alexander rose from behind his desk and wordlessly crossed to the sideboard. He poured two generous fingers of brandy into crystal tumblers, then handed one to his friend.

Radbourne took it with a murmured thanks and sank into a wingback chair near the sunlit window, crossing one booted ankle over his knee with the ease of a man used to comfort and confidence.

"I haven't seen you at Aphrodite in months," Radbourne drawled, swirling the amber liquid in his glass. "Then I hear about this fight of yours—hell, the whole of London's talking about it. You flattened Barnabas the Beast."

Alexander's brow ticked upward as he leaned against the edge of his desk. "Was that his name?"

Radbourne gave him a long look over the rim of his glass. "You fought a man without knowing his name?"

Alexander smirked and shrugged. "He was large and angry. That was all the information I required."

A low laugh rumbled from Radbourne's throat. "We miss your scowling presence at the pleasure palace. It's not the same without you glaring at everyone like you're three seconds from tossing them out the nearest window."

Alexander took a measured sip of his drink, savoring the burn. "As a man who recently wed, and who seems to worship the ground his countess walks upon, why the hell are you still at Aphrodite?"

Radbourne's mouth curved into a slow, lazy smile. "Because my darling wife is... unconventional. She forged friendships there before she married me. We return from time to time. Chat with Madam Rebecca and share a glass of wine with the ladies. We watch. We do not partake."

Alexander lifted a brow, skeptical. "You? Not partaking?"

"My wife," Radbourne said solemnly, "would cut off my cock and make me eat it."

Alexander coughed on his brandy.

Radbourne grinned. "But I wouldn't risk it even if she were the most forgiving woman alive. I want no one else. Not after her. Agatha is my heartbeat."

There was something deeply satisfied in his tone—a note of lust and reverence that couldn't be faked. A quiet, unexpected envy pierced Alexander's chest.

He'd been there that infamous night. In the shadows of the pleasure palace, watching as Radbourne's future countess stepped onto the stage in radiant defiance, offering her virginity to the highest bidder. She'd stood tall and unashamed. Beautiful. Unbreakable. Then she danced. Radbourne had outbid every lord, rake, and degenerate without blinking—and then married her weeks later.

Alexander had not returned to Aphrodite since. "Do Basil and Ambrose still visit?"

"Rarely—and when they do, they never partake. Their wives come along, veiled in masks."

Alexander smiled faintly, a wry curve of his mouth. He knew how deeply his friends adored their wives. Basil, Ambrose—men once renowned for their libertine ways—now utterly besotted. And not once had they tried to cage their women, not in the way society demanded. They allowed them freedom, laughter, and passion. A quiet flicker of admiration stirred in him...perhaps even envy.

He knocked back the rest of his brandy as if that might drown the memory of a woman who laughed like spring and had arms that felt like home. "I'll visit tonight," he murmured.

Radbourne arched a brow but didn't comment. Instead, he leaned back with a self-satisfied sigh. "Good. I came by, actually, to discuss a few investment opportunities. There's a new venture with the East India docks that promises stable yields for the next five to ten years. It's not flashy, but it's dependable. You'll need dependable to keep your creditors quiet and your tenants satisfied. Though I'm damn proud you've become a beast in the fighting pits... we all worry about your stubborn, prideful hide."

"Don't even think of offering me money again," Alexander said coolly.

His friend exhaled heavily. "I won't."

Alexander knocked back the remainder of his brandy and moved back behind his desk. The weight of responsibility settled over him like a familiar cloak.

"Show me the papers," he said coolly, reaching for his inkwell and sealing the door on all thoughts of Penny.

An hour later, Alexander was fully dressed, his supper was hearty, and his mood passable. He adjusted the cuffs of his coat as he walked down the dim corridor toward the front of the house to his waiting carriage. A faint scratching sound halted his steps. He paused, head tilting, then moved silently toward the music room. The door was ajar. Pushing it open, he caught a flicker of movement. A lithe figure was slipping in through the open window, booted feet landing with a soft thump on the parquet floor.

"What the hell do you think you are doing?" he snapped.

A shriek tore from the intruder—feminine and far too familiar—followed by a muffled gasp and the sight of a gloved hand slapping over her mouth.

"You scared me!" Penny accused in a fierce whisper, her eyes wide. "Why are you skulking about in the dark?"

"Skulking?" he repeated, his voice a low drawl. "Woman, this is my home. You, however, are trespassing. I ought to summon the city magistrate."

Her lips twitched. "Friends do not call the authorities on each other."

Only then did he look at her properly—and stilled. Penny stood in the shaft of moonlight in a gentleman's ensemble tailored to shocking perfection. She wore a dark emerald waistcoat over a crisp white shirt, the collar starched high, and her cravat neatly tied beneath a black velvet frock coat. Her trousers hugged her slender thighs,

tucked into gleaming black boots. A short-cropped wig covered her hair beneath a gentleman's cap, and she clutched a polished cane in her gloved hand with a confidence that might have fooled anyone at a glance.

Almost.

Despite the disguise, the tilt of her chin, the grace in her bearing, and the softness of her features betrayed her. He suspected she had even bound her breasts beneath the shirt.

Alexander blinked, then gave her a long, deliberate once-over. "Why are you dressed as a man?"

She shifted under his scrutiny, clearing her throat delicately. "I thought to keep you company again. Perhaps we could play chess. I am, alarmingly, quite good."

His brow arched. "Shouldn't you be at some dazzling ball, clinging to the arm of your intended and dazzling him with your wit and charm?"

Her cheeks flushed. "I pled a headache. Only my mother went to Lady Chambers's midnight ball."

"That still doesn't explain why you're here. Dressed as a lad."

She mumbled something under her breath.

"I'm sorry," he said with cold amusement. "I didn't catch that."

"I was bored," she snapped. "And I thought to check on the health of a friend. Why are you giving me grief about it?"

Alexander exhaled heavily and dragged a hand over his face. "I'm better," he said tersely. "But I'm on my way out."

He flicked a glance at the clock above the mantle. Midnight. Something in his gut twisted. There was more to her visit than concern. And though her disguise was clever—impressively so—he was too attuned to her not to see through it.

"I'll escort you home."

Her gaze darted away. "No!"

"Penny—"

"I overheard Thomas speaking with Viscount Wimbley," she said quickly, "and he mentioned you might be at...Aphrodite tonight. I—I do not know where that is, but I thought I might convince you to take me with you."

Alexander reared back as if slapped. "You want me to take you to a pleasure palace?" His voice was low and dangerous. "Have you gone completely mad?"

Her gaze faltered. "Oh . I was not aware...."

A beat of silence. Then her voice, softer: "Why are you going there?"

He didn't spare her feelings. "For a woman," he said flatly. "To have her underneath me for the night."

A soft sound left her lips—painful, breathless. She looked away, lashes lowering.

"Enjoy yourself, my lord," she said with brittle dignity. "I shall return home and go to that ball after all."

She stepped toward the window. And he let her. Even as every fiber of him wanted to call her back—demand she stay, demand she explain what was pushing her to act with this recklessness. Alexander stayed silent, his jaw clenched so tightly it ached.

Moments later, he strode from the room, descending the steps with practiced ease. He climbed into his waiting carriage, gave the order, and let the night swallow him whole. He had not touched another woman in over a year. Not since Penny. Not even the flirtations and invitations at Aphrodite had tempted him.

But by God... that would change tonight.

It had to.

Or she would ruin him all over again.

CHAPTER 12

It was a dreadful, reckless idea.

It was also too late to stop now.

The wind tugged at her borrowed coat as she followed Alexander's carriage through the dusky, quiet streets, her mare trotting lightly behind at a safe distance. The clock had struck past midnight, and any sensible young lady would be tucked in bed, dreaming of bonnets or buttered toast. Not galloping through Mayfair in gentlemen's attire with the sole purpose of tailing a rake to a pleasure palace.

"I am only following him," she muttered through clenched teeth, "because he had a fever last night. And bruises. And a nasty gash on his brow. If he exerts himself, he might collapse. It's purely concern. Friendly concern."

Her horse snorted beneath her as if scoffing at the lie. Penny pressed her lips together and tried very hard to ignore the deep ache twisting in her chest since Alexander had told her—in that perfectly cold, devastating tone—that he was going to have a woman tonight. A lover.

Of course he would have lovers. He was a man, and men were allowed such... indulgences. She, however, had spent the last year pining in silence, growing older and duller while society waited breathlessly for the Duke of Merrick to claim her hand.

And now Alexander would claim someone else's body.

Penny's fingers tightened on the reins. Worse still, some traitorous part of her knew the truth. When he had taken her virginity, he had not shown her who he truly was. He had held back. Restrained himself. Treated her like spun glass wrapped in silk and modesty.

Because she was a lady.

Because in his mind, a wife was not meant for wicked pleasures.

Penny snorted aloud. She was beginning to detest that word— lady . All it seemed to mean was that she would forever be denied anything delicious or dangerous. She would always be expected to be dutiful and obedient, forever mindful of propriety and obligation. Always the one to sacrifice—because it seemed only women ever were.

Alexander's carriage rolled to a slow halt at the very end of the street. The townhouse before her was large, looming, with lit sconces casting golden light across the paving stones. Laughter and music leaked through the thick oak doors. Carriages queued up one after the other—sleek and expensive. Silk-shrouded ladies in elaborate masks and powdered gentlemen strolled in without hesitation.

Penny's breath hitched.

So this was it. Aphrodite.

Penny pressed into the shadows, dismounting quickly and passing the reins to the stable lad who worked there. She straightened the shoulders of her dark coat and marched forward with all the noble dignity she could muster while her heart beat like a terrified rabbit's.

Inside... she promptly forgot how to breathe. Decadence dripped from every inch of

the place. The air smelled of sandalwood, candle smoke, and sin. Crimson and gold silk hung in sensuous drapes along the walls. A grand staircase curved upward, its railings entwined with ivy and lanterns. Scantly clad ladies in jewel-toned dresses with plunging décolletage glided past with silver trays holding champagne and chocolate-dipped strawberries.

An Arabian theme dominated the décor—plush velvet divans, golden urns spilling rose petals, tapestries of sultans and dancers in erotic poses. Everywhere Penny turned, there was something more shocking.

A masked woman in a translucent chemise reclined in a corner, sipping wine as a gentleman slowly unlaced her corset. Another couple kissed with scandalous abandon on a nearby sofa, their limbs tangled. Penny blushed fiercely and looked away—only to see two men sharing a passionate embrace in an alcove.

Dear God .

Her heart beat faster, not from disgust but fascination. A soft sigh escaped her. Her gaze swept the room, searching for him—for Alexander. Part of her prayed she would not find him. The rest—the reckless, traitorous part—was desperate to catch just one glimpse, to know .

To see who he was when he wasn't holding back. She moved deeper into the main room, passing beneath hanging lanterns and brushing past a pair of giggling ladies holding feathered fans. Champagne was offered. She declined, her mouth dry, her pulse skittering wildly.

Then she saw him.

And forgot how to breathe. He stood at the far end of the room near the stairs, clad in black—perfectly tailored evening clothes, no cravat. His collar was open at the throat,

and his hair was mussed in that devilish, rakish way that was distressingly appealing. Three ladies surrounded him, laughing and fawning. One even touched his arm. He barely reacted. His mouth curled in that slow, wicked smile she remembered all too well. The one that made her knees weak and her thoughts shameful.

Penny froze, unable to move, her body thrumming with unbearable sensation. She stood amid a haze of candlelight and decadence, her pulse thudding unevenly as she watched the Marquess of Raine approach Alexander. A masked blonde clung to the marquess's arm, laughing throatily at something he murmured. Whatever was said made Alexander chuckle, his low, rich laugh curling through the perfumed air and tightening something deep in Penny's chest.

Without another glance behind him, Alexander followed them up the stairs, his long strides fluid and confident. The blonde said something else, and he leaned in slightly, the angle of his head suggesting interest—perhaps even amusement.

A hot wave of jealousy pierced through Penny, sharp and unrelenting.

She should turn around. Flee this place of hedonism and spectacle. She didn't belong here. But it was as if her feet moved of their own accord, drawn by some reckless ache in her heart. She slipped among the gathering of masked guests and followed them up the stairs, her stomach knotting with dread and want and something far more dangerous.

At the top of the landing, the Marquess of Raine and his lady entered a gilded chamber, the heavy door closing behind them with a soft snick.

But Alexander... he did not follow. Instead, he moved to the wall just beyond the last scone, his hand gliding over the ornate wallpaper. To Penny's astonishment, a panel slid open, blending so perfectly with the wall it might have been invisible without close inspection. No one else around seemed to notice. Then he vanished behind it,

swallowed by the shadows.

Her breath caught as she approached the wall, lifting trembling fingers to trace the faint groove in the silk-covered panel. Her heart was a wild, fluttering thing in her chest.

She didn't know what lay beyond. What would she find? Him—with another woman? In the arms of someone more worldly, more daring? Her hand hesitated, the heat of humiliation licking at her skin.

And still—she stepped forward.

With a soft click , the panel opened, and she slipped inside into a long, narrow hallway dimly lit by a single flickering lamp. Alexander leaned against the far wall, his head tilted back, exposing the long column of his throat. His eyes were closed. A frown creased his brow as though caught in some internal war. But he was alone.

Relief burst through her so abruptly that her knees went weak.

He hadn't chosen anyone. Not yet. As if he felt her presence, his eyes snapped open and locked on her. For a long, breathless moment, neither of them moved. Then, slowly, he pushed away from the wall, his expression unreadable.

"You've come this far," he said, his voice low and rough, tinged with something dangerous and dark. "Might as well come all the way... friend ."

The way he said that word—mocking and sensual—slid over her skin like a physical touch. Penny swallowed hard, her pulse drumming. She had followed him into the shadows.

Penny stopped beside him, her heart a fluttering chaos in her chest. Before she could

speaking, Alexander's hands settled at her waist, strong and unyielding. With a sharp tug, he hauled her to stand directly before him, their bodies a breath apart. The intimacy of it made her gasp softly, but she didn't move. Couldn't.

A tremor slipped down her spine, and she hurried to cover it with words. "I followed to ensure that...well, that you were well."

"Oh?" His voice was silken amusement, dangerously amused. "Is that why, little spy?"

Her cheeks burned, but she didn't answer. She could feel the heat of him at her back, his body radiating the kind of masculine energy that made her breath catch. She opened her mouth, but before she could frame a single excuse, he leaned in, his lips brushing the shell of her ear.

"Look," he murmured. "Since you were daring enough to come...look."

And then she did. The wall before them wasn't a wall at all—it was a wide pane of polished glass, hidden between the wallpapered panels. Her eyes widened as she took in the scene beyond. Lord Raine was very much unclothed, his powerful form bared to the low flickering candlelight. The blonde lady with him was also naked, her limbs draped over him in sensual abandon. The sounds filtering through the passageway were unmistakable—soft moans, whispered laughter, the shifting of bodies seeking pleasure.

Penny's breath caught. "Why are you watching them?" she whispered, her voice laced with disbelief.

"They invited me," he said smoothly. "Raine's lover likes it when others watch her."

She blinked. "Why?" she asked, too stunned to shape a more coherent thought.

Alexander chuckled softly, the sound a dark velvet scrape along her skin. "You sound aghast."

"I cannot imagine..." she murmured, eyes still wide. "Someone watching something so—so beautiful and intimate."

His hands flexed on her hips, a barely-there motion that sent a jolt of awareness through her. And then his next words struck like a thunderclap.

"The night I took you," he said lowly, "there was someone in the library. Watching."

The shock of those words made her knees nearly give out. She tried to whirl around, tried to look at him, but his grip held her firm.

Her breath came in shallow bursts. "No! Someone...was there?"

"Yes."

She shuddered. And then—she remembered. The sound. A muffled scrape of movement she had dismissed as the wind. " Oh ," she whispered, her lips numb. "Someone was indeed there."

"Yes," he repeated, quiet and calm. Too calm.

"Who?" Her voice was tight, stunned.

"A friend of mine," he said. "It wasn't intentional. He thought we'd leave. Then, when we didn't..." Alexander leaned closer, his breath warm against her temple. "He thought it rude to interrupt."

Her face flamed. Heat licked along her cheeks and down her throat. "That was an

accident," she muttered, half-mortified, half-dazed. "So I will forgive it."

Alexander's low laugh ghosted over her ear, and her skin prickled.

Penny bit her lip hard, but even that didn't stop the way her body reacted. She was trembling—yes—but not from shame. Something deeper curled inside her, something she dared not name. Alexander hadn't let go. His hands remained on her hips, possessive, hot, the silence between them growing thick with awareness.

She knew she should pull away. But instead... she stayed.

A soft, breathy moan dragged Penny's attention back to the glass. The blonde woman had shifted on the velvet chaise, now languidly splayed beneath the Marquess of Raine. Candlelight bathed the room in golden hues, catching on the glint of jewelry still clinging to her wrists and throat, now incongruous against the pale expanse of bare skin.

The woman turned her face toward the mirror—toward Penny—and in that instant, their eyes almost met, separated only by glass and shadows. A tremor shivered through Penny's limbs as she realized the woman knew . She was being watched, and she liked it .

The marquess's hand slid between the woman's thighs with lazy intent, coaxing her body with skilled strokes. Penny caught the flush of pleasure on the woman's face, the way her toes curled against the edge of the cushion. The woman's hands, now gently bound in silk, rested above her head, her legs parted and tethered with languid grace. There was nothing frantic or frantically scandalous about the display—it was strangely elegant, shockingly intimate.

Penny's lips parted, her throat dry. "This...this woman enjoys being bound?"

The low hum of amusement in his chest vibrated through her back. "From your tone, I suspect you think it indecent."

Penny sniffed. "I simply don't see the appeal. It's ridiculous . Why would anyone want to be bound?"

She winced the moment the words left her mouth, remembering all too well that this was his desire. Shame crept in slowly—hot and quiet—for she realized it was reactions like hers that might drive men like Alexander to seek women like the blonde as their mistresses instead of their wives. That thought hollowed her. She swallowed tightly against the sudden swell of understanding.

"It is interesting that you are aroused." He said it softly, without judgment, but with infuriating certainty.

"I am not ." Her voice trembled.

"No?" he murmured, and in one fluid motion, he reached into his coat pocket, drew out a length of dark silk—his cravat—and, with deft hands, brought her wrists behind her.

Penny froze. The silk whispered around her skin, smooth and warm from his body. Before she could speak, the cravat cinched around her wrists, not tight, but enough to make her breath catch in her throat.

"What are you—" she gasped and found that his body caged her, controlling her motions so she could not move.

"As your friend ," he said with mock solemnity, "it's my duty to educate you on things you're curious about."

She struggled, just slightly. And found she couldn't move an inch. Not with his body behind hers, his hands steady, his voice curling like smoke into her ears.

"I am curious," she whispered, appalled by her own honesty. "But not like this—"

"Yes. Like this." His voice brushed her neck. "You don't want lies or pleasantries. You came here for the truth. So feel it. Don't move. Don't speak. Watch. "

Penny went still. Her heartbeat pounded beneath her skin, pulsing against the silk binding her wrists. The heat of Alexander's body surrounded her. She could feel the disciplined tension in his muscles, the restrained force in his breathing. He was so close, and yet...he wasn't touching her at all.

Before them, the scene beyond the glass unfolded in decadent, unhurried pleasure. The marquess was moving again, reverent in the way he kissed the woman's ankle, her knee, her thigh. Her sighs were delicate, a litany of surrender and desire. The candlelight flickered, casting molten shadows across their bodies.

Penny's breath hitched. I should not be watching this. I should not want to.

But her body betrayed her. That knot low in her belly coiled tighter with each languid movement, with each subtle shift of Alexander behind her. The silk was not cold now. It was hot. Her wrists felt sensitized. And the ache, heaven help her, the ache between her thighs was real.

She closed her eyes, but it didn't help. She still felt the press of Alexander's presence behind her. Still heard the faint sounds from the hidden room. Still felt seen, as if this moment—this reckless choice—had forever shifted something inside her.

And then, she heard his voice again, quiet and edged with something darker.

"Some women like their pleasure to be guided. To surrender. Not because they are weak... but because they trust."

Penny's lashes fluttered open. "And do you want that?" she whispered.

There was a long silence. He didn't answer.

"Watch," he murmured by her ear, the command sliding through her like velvet and heat. Penny went soft and pliant against him, her breath catching as her gaze locked onto the scene beyond the glass.

The Marquess of Raine knelt between the blonde's thighs, pleasuring her with slow, reverent strokes of his mouth and fingers. They were perfectly positioned—intentionally so—allowing Penny a full view of the woman's pink, wet pussy as his fingers slid in and out. One... then two... then three.

Penny gasped, her voice a tremble. " Three ?"

Alexander's voice curled against her skin like a sin. "Look at her face. Even though half-hidden by the mask, you can see the grimace of pleasure." His hand tightened on her hip. "Look at her cunt again... the marquess is inserting a fourth finger. Look at how her body trembles... and now, look at her face again."

Penny's eyes flicked back to the masked woman whose back arched, mouth parted in a cry of pleasure.

"She's feeling pain and pleasure," he whispered, his voice thick with dark heat, "and loving every minute of it."

A shiver ran through Penny—of shock, of arousal, of something she didn't yet have the words to name. She moaned low in her throat, hating the tight ball of need that

settled low in her belly—hot, pulsing, undeniable. And still... she watched.
Helplessly. Hungrily.

CHAPTER 13

Penny squirmed where she stood, pressing her thighs together as a slow, pulsing ache built between them. Her breath hitched, heat rushing through her limbs, through the very core of her, as Alexander's hands moved—slow, deliberate, confident.

Then her breath caught entirely. His fingers were at the fastenings of her borrowed trousers, slipping open the flaps, his touch a provocative whisper against the fabric and her skin.

"Friend," he said, his voice low and filled with a dark promise that rippled over her spine, "if we are to be friends... there will be boundaries."

Her heart pounded.

"No more sneaking into my home unannounced. No more tending to me when I'm fevered or bleeding. No more following me. No more asking after my health." His fingers paused just at her hips, heat radiating from his hands. "No more looking at me like I am yours. You are not mine."

She stared up at him, stunned, breathless and burning.

"We'll see each other at balls," he continued, his voice smoother than velvet, "at polite gatherings. You'll curtsy, I'll bow, and we'll speak of weather and waltzes. That will be all."

Penny felt something crackle inside her—pain, pride, desire. "And if I do not agree?"

she tossed back, lifting her chin. Oh, what am I saying , she silently wailed.

For a moment, he said nothing.

Then his hand moved with shocking boldness, sliding down over the fine linen between her thighs. Penny gasped, jolting when the backs of his fingers brushed intimately over the wet heat of her center.

Her mouth parted in stunned silence—too shocked to speak, too aroused to move.

"You're already drenched," he said roughly. "And yet you look at me like I'm the dangerous one."

She tried to step back, but he caught her hips, holding her in place. "This," he murmured, "is what we cannot have. Not again. Not unless I own you."

The words rocked through her, dark and possessive and wildly intoxicating.

"You do not," she whispered.

"No," he agreed, his lips close to her ear, breath scorching her skin. "But you want me to."

Her knees threatened to buckle. His fingers slid along her sex, slow and intimate, not yet inside, just stroking, teasing. She bit her bottom lip so hard she tasted blood.

"Say the word," he rasped, "friends with boundaries, Penny."

Penny's lips parted. She said nothing.

And his fingers slid deeper between her folds, claiming her with a slow, devastating

touch. She arched, crying out softly, her head falling back as the heat built and crested, her body shuddering with pleasure that was both unbearable and exquisite.

He stroked two fingers deep inside her pussy, shoving her up onto the tips of her toes. Penny wailed, the sound torn from her throat like a plea. She tried to twist but was completely caged by his strength. Alexander kissed her throat and moved his fingers in and out of her sex, slow at first, then faster, and she quaked beneath the rhythm of his touch. Pleasure burned low in her belly, hot and twisting, and her clitoris ached—each pulse a torment, each stroke dragging her closer to the edge.

Over and over, he worked her until she was a trembling mess of moans and broken breath.

"Look at them," he said roughly, raking his teeth against her arched throat.

Her gaze snapped to the glass. The Marquess now had four fingers fully buried inside the countess's pussy. The woman was writhing, riding his hand with a kind of reckless abandon Penny had never imagined. Heat flamed through her, stealing her breath as she trembled in Alexander's arms.

"Do you want to feel a similar stretch, hmm?" he whispered, the evocative words sliding into her like another caress, scorching her with fresh, helpless lust.

She gasped when he nudged her legs wider, and then a third finger joined the others, stroking deep. Penny shattered. Pleasure tore through her in devastating waves, her entire body shaking with release. And still, he did not stop. His fingers continued their slow, relentless rhythm until she peaked again...and then again, crying out as if the pleasure itself might unmake her.

And then...Alexander stopped. Just as suddenly as he had touched her, he stepped away. She staggered, catching the edge of the wall for balance, her breath ragged, her

heart pounding.

"Go home, Penny," he said softly, dangerously. "Before I forget every line I've drawn and take what we both want."

His hands were warm and steady as he unwound the cravat, slowly releasing her.

And just like that, she felt the loss. "I..."

He turned her to face him, his expression unreadable in the low light. "You've had enough for tonight."

She didn't know if he meant the sights...or him .

"Yes," she said faintly, though every part of her disagreed.

He stepped back. "Go home, Penny."

She nodded, unable to meet his gaze. Her breath was still ragged, and her heart hammered against a fragile cage of confusion and longing. Then she turned and fled as if the devil had chased her.

Alexander hadn't meant to touch her. He hadn't meant to want her.

And yet, here he was, his fingers still damp with her release, his breath still ragged from the way she had moaned—those sweet, broken sounds that would echo in his head long after this moment.

Alexander leaned back against the shadowed corridor wall, dragging a hand over his face as the hidden door clicked shut behind her. She had fled just as he'd intended, skirts rustling in haste, her slippered feet tapping a frantic retreat over marble. No

doubt she was halfway down the corridor by now.

Good .

That's what he needed.

Christ . He shoved off the wall with a growl low in his throat, his body still tight with the aftershocks of restraint. His cock throbbed painfully against the front of his trousers, and he cursed the part of him that had wanted her to stay—to beg for more, to fall apart in his arms again and again. But Penny wasn't a mistress. She wasn't a faceless indulgence, and she certainly wasn't someone he could fuck and forget.

She was everything he had tried to resist. Every soft smile. Every sharp retort. Every haunting memory of moonlight and shadowed library and her calling his name as if it meant something.

"Damn it," he muttered, pushing through the crowd with a tight jaw and narrowed gaze.

He didn't even glance at the masked women who reached for him, nor the men who hailed him with nods of admiration. His boots clipped against the marble as he cut through the pleasure palace, ignoring the decadent moans and scandalous tableaux tucked into alcoves and behind silken veils.

Penny would have exited through the main floor. She had more courage than sense, which meant she likely didn't come with a chaperone. That fact alone made something primal coil inside him. He exited just in time to see her shape disappear around the corner.

Of course, she hadn't brought a carriage. Alexander didn't hesitate. He followed. The night was cool, the street lamps casting golden halos onto the cobbles. She walked

briskly, the edges of her masculine jacket fluttering with each step. She didn't look back. But he kept his distance, boots silent against the darkened street, his eyes locked on her.

Penny was rattled, and he felt a curl of regret. Had he pushed her too hard? He had to. Because if she had stayed...if she had looked up at him with those wide, innocent eyes, trembling and flushed and vulnerable...he would have broken.

He could not be the kind of friend someone with her sweet nature possibly foolishly thought possible. Could not smile across crowded ballrooms and pretend she was not the only thing he wanted.

"Did you walk here?"

She faltered, then turned, her eyes wide with surprise. The moonlight glinted off the damp tracks of tears on her cheeks, and something inside him twisted painfully.

"No," she said hoarsely. "I... I took Thomas's horse. I... forgot."

"I'll have it returned discreetly to the mews."

Penny swallowed hard. "Why are you following me?"

"To ensure you made it home safely."

Her lips parted, and for a moment, it looked as if she might say something more, but then she pressed them together, turned away, and kept walking. He trailed her from a distance for another thirty minutes, each step through the quiet streets stretching something taut inside him. Only when he saw her slip through the servants' entrance of her home without pause did he allow himself to stop.

Alexander stood, shadows cloaking him in silence. His hands curled into fists inside his coat pockets. The boundaries had been drawn. And he would damn well keep them. He turned and walked away.

CHAPTER 14

A week had passed since that fateful night at Aphrodite. The memory lingered like a bruise beneath her skin, flushed and tender. But now, Penny stood in a grand ballroom awash in golden candlelight, her gloved hand resting lightly on the crook of the Duke of Merrick's arm as he led her through a waltz. Her mother beamed from across the room, her fan fluttering with pleased excitement.

This morning's scandal sheet had printed a rather flattering sketch of her and the duke from a recent outing in Hyde Park. The accompanying lines hinted with unmistakable certainty that a proposal was imminent. Lady Penelope Dodge, soon to be the Duchess of Merrick.

The thought made Penny's stomach twist.

She tilted her head to meet the duke's gaze as they swept through the turn.

"Are you woolgathering again, Lady Penelope?"

She flushed and met his gaze. "I greatly enjoyed our visit to the Royal Museum, Your Grace."

"It was my pleasure," he said smoothly, his voice cultured, mild. "You have a keen eye for beauty and history."

"I was quite captivated by the Egyptian exhibit," she said. "I've always wanted to see the pyramids. I intend to one day."

To her surprise, he didn't scoff or politely redirect. Instead, he considered her with thoughtful interest. "Then I suppose we must add Egypt to our future travels."

Her breath caught. The idea of a future with him—a real one—felt oddly solidified in that moment. And perhaps she could be content. She could learn to treasure gentle affection, measured kisses, and a man who would not ask for the parts of her soul that still belonged to someone else. They moved gracefully through the final steps of the waltz, and as the music faded, the duke lifted her hand and bowed. "I look forward to claiming the last waltz of the night. You dance beautifully, Lady Penelope."

She offered a polite smile, even as her heart pounded. He had never danced with her twice in one evening before—this was the duke making another public declaration of intent. A part of her had come to understand his nature: measured, thoughtful, bound by propriety. He was waiting, she suspected, to let more respectable time pass since the death of his wife before formally making an offer. And from their quiet conversations, Penny sensed this delay was also for the sake of his children.

She was grateful for it.

Because even as she spent more time in his company—sharing laughter and quiet walks—she wasn't yet ready to walk into his arms and step into the role of duchess. Not when her heart still looked elsewhere. "Thank you, Your Grace."

As they stepped aside, Penny moved toward the open terrace, craving a breath of cool night air. But as she passed a marble column, her steps slowed. The murmur of male voices drifted from beyond the railing.

"Bainbridge is mad, I tell you. Taking on Kellerman? The man's never lost a match. Comes from Leeds. Built like a beast."

"They say he's only fighting for the purse. Fifteen thousand pounds if he wins. I am

betting on Kellerman. Heard the match is tomorrow night."

Penny froze, her fan slipping from her gloved fingers.

Alexander .

Her heart clenched in fear. She took a step back, retreating into the shadows. The conversation blurred in her ears, but the name Kellerman and the words never lost echoed.

She found her mother holding court among a cluster of matrons, all glittering with jewels and scented with expectation. After a few polite exchanges, Penny opened her fan and leaned closer.

"We must return home," she said softly, urgency threading through her voice.

Her mother blinked, caught off guard. "What are you talking about, Penny?"

"I have a terrible headache."

"You must bear it for a couple more hours."

"Mama—"

"You've yet to dance the supper waltz with the duke," her mother hissed, her smile still affixed for the benefit of the ladies nearby.

Penny's jaw tightened. "No. I am unwell, and I need to leave."

Her mother's eyes narrowed, displeasure flashing like a blade. "Do not make a scene."

Penny didn't wait for more. She turned swiftly, skirts whispering in protest as she cut across the ballroom with practiced grace. She felt her mother's burning stare on her back, but she didn't slow until she spilled outside. A few minutes later, her mother joined her, lips pressed into a thin line. The carriage was summoned, and soon, they were seated within, the gentle sway of the ride carrying them through the quiet streets. Neither spoke. The silence between them stretched, brittle and tense, broken only by the soft clatter of hooves on cobblestones.

Penny barely noticed the jostle of the wheels or her mother's stony silence. Alexander consumed her thoughts and the knowledge that he willingly bruised and bloodied himself for the survival of his name. For his family. For his pride. She hated the risks he took, even as she understood the unrelenting force that drove him. Her parents disdained him for being impoverished, as would many others in society who shut doors the moment a fortune ran dry.

Later, alone in her chamber, Penny sat at the edge of her bed. Her gown slipped from her shoulders, pooling in lavender silk at her feet. Her maid had already gone. The moon spilled across the carpet, illuminating her pale arms and the bare slope of her collarbone.

She should sleep. Tomorrow would bring expectations, a visit from the duke, perhaps more public affection. A future . But instead, she lay back on her bed, hair unbound, eyes fixed on the ceiling. One hand gripped the edge of her coverlet as the other lay on her belly, over the place that still ached at the memory of Alexander's touch.

He would fight again. Another brutal match.

I should not go to him.

But her heart thudded traitorously in her chest, pulsing with one truth she could not silence.

He could die.

And she could not bear it.

The scent of sweat, blood, and cigar smoke filled the underground den, pungent and thick in Alexander's lungs as he entered the ring. The crowd roared, that low, hungry sound of anticipation that reminded him he was both gladiator and spectacle.

Across from him stood the fighter from Leeds, the one whispered about in every betting circle as undefeated—a bull of a man with arms like tree trunks and eyes that gleamed with the promise of violence. Alexander flexed his hands, curling them into fists. His knuckles were already aching, not fully healed from last week's fight.

He wasn't confident. Not even close. All the years of training at Gentleman Jackson's and the past eight months of fighting in the underground hadn't prepared him for this man's sheer brute strength. But he had never let fear guide him before, and he wouldn't tonight.

He raised his chin, scanning the audience. Basil and Raine nodded soberly at him. Radbourne, the devil, was in the corner with his scandalous masked countess sprawled across his lap, a flute of champagne balanced in her hand. No one was cheering among his friends. Their expressions were grim. They feared for him.

He inhaled deeply, the air stale and electric. Even if he lost, the purse for lasting fifteen minutes was two thousand pounds, enough to ease more burdens at his estate. And if he won... fifteen thousand pounds, enough to repair roofs, pay staff, restore some of the lands, and strengthen investments.

Milton had made it clear: survival was the goal. Victory would be a miracle.

He bounced on his toes, trying to focus. But then, a familiar shape at the edge of the

crowd caught his attention. Slim. Straight-backed. Lush derriere. A crop of dark hair peeking beneath a gentleman's hat. He stilled.

Bloody hell .

Penny. Dressed again as a man, her face partially shadowed, but he knew her. Knew every inch, every breath, every pulse of her presence. His chest thudded, a sharp ache slicing through his focus.

Why the hell was she here?

There was no time to demand answers. The bell rang. The fight began. The brute came at him fast—a wide arc of a swing meant to break a bone. Alexander ducked, slammed a fist into the man's ribs, and twisted away. The crowd erupted. For the next ten minutes, it was a brutal blur. Blow for blow, grit for grit. Blood slicked his lip, and the sting in his side told him at least one rib was cracked. The crowd's howls blended into a single roar. He fought with desperation. With fury.

And with every glance to the side, he saw Penny. Watching him with a gloved hand pressed against her chest. Not with curiosity. But with fear. With tears in her eyes. And God help him, it gave him strength. He ducked another punch and slammed his fist into the side of the brute's neck, then into his stomach. The man stumbled. Alexander didn't stop darting forward with agility and landing well-placed punches despite his aching muscles. He was faster than Kellerman, and that worked in Alexander's favor. A final left hook landed with a crunch, and the giant dropped like a felled oak.

Silence. Then pandemonium.

Alexander stood swaying, blood dripping from his brow. Then Milton grabbed his arm and lifted it. He was the winner. His knees buckled. He stumbled from the ring.

Strong arms caught him. He blinked in disbelief to see her face so close. Penny. Tears slipped silently down her cheeks.

"You fool," she whispered fiercely. "You damn fool."

He opened his mouth, but only a groan came out. He sagged into her, her strength the only thing holding him up as the crowd swirled in wild cheer around them. Several people shook his hands, and somehow, in the crush, Penny slipped from under his arms.

Raine helped him to the carriage, Alexander gritting his teeth with every step. He said little, only glanced once over his shoulder when he heard her—a soft, broken sound. Penny followed, her eyes wet, her expression stricken. She climbed into the carriage without hesitation, settling beside him, ignoring the blood on his shirt and the bruises already darkening his jaw. Raine said nothing, only giving Penny a curious look before shutting the door behind them.

The ride home was quiet but pulsing with unspoken emotion. Alexander did not ask her why or how she came. He just knew that he was glad she had come. When they reached his townhouse, Raine, who had ridden behind his carriage, helped Alexander inside but left quickly, murmuring something about brandy and a warm bed. Alexander didn't reply. Penny followed silently, her eyes wide and teary.

Inside the drawing room, she rounded on him. "You reckless fool," she cried. "He could have killed you!"

"I'm alive," he said hoarsely, slumping into a chair. "And wealthier for it."

"It's not worth it," she snapped, kneeling beside him to inspect the fresh bruises along his ribs.

"Do not tell me what is worth it," he growled. "You weren't there when the debts came due. You didn't see how creditors and dependents looked at me! You do not see the desperation and hope on my mother and sisters' faces."

She flinched, tears slipping down her cheeks. "I didn't come here to argue," she said brokenly. "Tell me what I can do."

He meant to push her away. Meant to tell her to leave him be. But she looked so fragile, so heartbreakingly determined, that instead, he let something reckless slip past his lips. "A bit of pleasure might dull the pain."

Her eyes narrowed. "If you're well enough to think about pleasure, you're not dying."

Despite himself, his lips curved. "You say that, but the only thing keeping me upright is the thought of your mouth on my cock."

It was meant to tease away her fear and anxiety, nothing more. But his heart nearly stopped when she moved—graceful and silent—dropping to her knees before him.

"What the hell are you doing?" he rasped, heat licking through his body.

She looked up at him, eyes fierce and filled with something dangerously close to devotion. "Giving you what you asked for."

"The boundary," he said tightly. "I did not mean it. I only teased."

Penny glanced up, startled—and then smirked knowingly. "Really?"

"Yes."

Her voice didn't waver. "There will be no boundary tonight. The line that you want

between us will break every night you step into that ring. On other days, I will pretend. I will smile and curtsy and hold every rule you draw. But not on nights like these. If I ever hear you've been hurt, Alexander... I will come."

His cock hardened instantly, painfully. The truth of her vow shattered something inside him. "Even when you're a duchess?"

Shock flared in her eyes and then she said, "Even then."

His breath stilled. "I won't be with a married woman," he ground out. "My hunger for you won't let me play at honor while I unravel everything you are. I would never compromise my honor so." Even if temptation ate at him every day.

She didn't argue. Didn't need to. Instead, her hands moved to the fastenings of his trousers, and he watched, helpless, as she took him in her hands, her mouth brushing over the head of his cock with the reverence of a woman offering solace and surrender in one breath.

And Alexander—bruised, bloodied, and drowning—let her.

Her mouth was warm, so warm, and when she lowered her head over his cock, a ragged sound tore from his throat. Alexander gripped the edge of the carriage seat, his body shuddering with the restraint it took not to thrust deeper.

Then she looked up at him. Penny's eyes were shimmering, wide with purpose and something more tender, something that cracked straight through his carefully built walls. The sight undid him. She looked utterly wrecked, soft and determined, lips stretched around his cock with devotion in every movement. His heart stuttered. His cock pulsed.

"Christ," he ground out, voice hoarse. "This is madness."

He reached down, tearing the hat and cropped wig from her head, freeing the tumble of dark hair he adored. His fingers tunneled through the strands, cradling her head as if she were something sacred.

And God help him, she was.

He guided her slowly, watching in astonishment and awe as she accepted him again and again, her mouth molding to him, her fingers tightening around the base as if she couldn't bear to let him go.

Then he slid deeper. She made a soft choking sound, and her eyes watered. A curse slipped from his lips. He should have pulled back, stopped—but the sight of her like this, holding on to him, letting him inside her throat... he trembled. "Penny..."

Her hands gripped his thighs, her mouth working him with slow, devastating precision, her tongue gliding under the flared head of his cock as if she were learning him by heart. Every flick of her tongue, every pull of her mouth, was a pleasure and ruin tangled into one. A shiver racked through his frame as he caressed her cheek, her jaw, then down to the curve of her neck, where her pulse fluttered like wild wings. Alexander fucked her mouth a bit deeper, and her eyes watered more, but she took him.

He growled, thrusting deeper into her mouth, his fingers flexing in her hair. "You have no idea what you're doing to me."

Her eyes widened, dark with desire, and a soft moan escaped her lips.

"Swallow every drop when I come in this hot little mouth," he said, voice rough with need.

She didn't stop. If anything, she became bolder—stroking, sucking, licking until he

was panting her name like a desperate man. Pleasure seared through him, powerful and blinding. A surge that wasn't just physical but something deeper, soul-deep. He climaxed with a ragged shout, his cock jerking in her mouth, his release torn from him in waves as she swallowed him down.

When he finally sagged back against the velvet seat, chest heaving, she rested her cheek against his thigh, one hand still curved gently around his now-softening cock, as if to hold him there, grounded.

His heart beat like a war drum in his chest.

He looked down at her, rumpled, wild-haired, eyes luminous and mouth kiss-bruised and felt something dangerous stir in him.

Not lust. A deeper, more complex longing. He brushed her hair back from her temple with shaking hands. "You undo me even when I damn well know I should have more control when it comes to you."

Then, heart still thundering, he pulled her up into his arms and held her because words no longer seemed enough. Alexander held her for long minutes, ignoring the pain inside his body. Her body was soft against his, her breath still uneven where her cheek pressed to his chest. His hands moved slowly along her spine, memorizing the fragile curve of it, the weight of her in his lap. A war raged inside him—desire, tenderness, the need to keep her, and the brutal demand to let her go.

Eventually, she stirred.

Without speaking, he slid his arms beneath her knees and shoulders and carried her to his bedchamber, the quiet hush of the night folding around them. Penny didn't protest, only burrowed closer, her head tucked against his neck. In his bedchamber, he set her on the edge of the mattress. The bruises from the fight still throbbed along his ribs

and shoulder, but he barely noticed them when she reached for his coat and helped ease it down his arms.

He let her. Her fingers were so gentle—slow and reverent as she undid the buttons of his waistcoat and slid it off. She touched him as if he might break, and he didn't know how to tell her that it was only under her hands that he ever felt whole.

When she reached for the damp cloth, he grunted. "You don't have to—"

"I know," she whispered. "But I want to."

She bathed him silently, her hands moving carefully over his bruised torso, dabbing at the small cuts. He watched her in the candlelight, his throat tight. She didn't speak. Neither did he. Then she reached for the liniment the physician left on the last visit and tenderly rubbed it into each wound, blowing air on the wound whenever he winced. Good humor washed through him, but he did not stop her. Once finished, Penny pulled the covers back and helped ease him beneath them. For a moment, she stood by his bed, uncertain. Then she bent, pressed a light, almost chaste kiss to his cheek, and turned away.

He let her get to the door before exhaling a low, rough laugh. "Bloody hell," he muttered, dragging himself upright. "Wait."

She paused, hand on the knob.

"You'll have to wait while I dress. I'm taking you home."

She glanced back, her eyes wide and shimmering. "You don't have to. You are hurt."

Penny said it as if that would quell the relentless urge he felt always to ensure her safety. "You shouldn't be out alone at this hour. And you certainly shouldn't have to

walk."

She opened her mouth to argue. He silenced her with a look. Ten minutes later, dressed in a clean shirt and trousers, he carried her to his waiting carriage, settling her gently inside. They didn't speak on the short ride, the quiet between them comfortable.

When they reached her street, he stopped the carriage at the shadowed edge of the mews. She opened the door but hesitated, halfway turned toward him. He reached out, cupped her cheek, and kissed her forehead, tender and aching careful.

Then his voice, low and hoarse, brushed against her skin. "Remember the boundaries, Penny."

She nodded slowly, but her gaze clung to him, and for a moment, he thought she might kiss him again. She didn't. Penny slipped down from the carriage and disappeared into the shadows. He watched the door close behind her until the flicker of candlelight from within vanished... and still he remained, staring after her, aching.

CHAPTER 15

Penny sat on the edge of her bed, her fingers tightly clasped in her lap as she listened to the muted hum of voices downstairs. Her mother's light laughter mingled with the heavier timbre of her father's, and soon after, the sound of the front door closing and the rumble of the carriage wheels told her the coast was finally clear.

They had gone to the Ellertons' ball, and her brother had gone to White's. She had claimed fatigue. And now she waited only for the last of the household to settle before she dared to slip away into the night. Penny could have passed for a young man dressed in a dark gentleman's coat, breeches that hugged her legs, and a crisp shirt buttoned up to her throat. Her hair was tightly coiled and hidden beneath a curled crop wig, and a cravat sat stiffly at her throat. A cane rested against the side of her dresser, part of the illusion.

It had only been three days since the fight, since she had ridden home with him, weeping and furious...and then dropped to her knees and given him her mouth in a moment of desperate tenderness and maddening need. Penny's fingers lifted to her lips. Even now, she could still feel the weight of him on her tongue, the taste of him, the way his hand had buried itself in her hair, and the torn sound of her name from his lips.

She had seen the pain in his eyes, the brokenness he thought no one could witness. And in that moment, all she had wanted was to give him something—anything—that would remind him he was wanted and that he was not alone.

"Silly," she whispered.

And now...now she was sneaking out again, dressed like this, ready to go to him because the wretched man had not sent a single note. No word. No hint that he was even alive.

He had told her clearly— no attachment . They would not be lovers. Not even friends. A bow, a curtsy, polite smiles from across a ballroom floor. She understood but could not adhere to it. Not yet. Not while her heart still beat to the rhythm of his voice.

"I'll only check on him," she muttered fiercely. "See that he is healing properly. Then I will be sensible. Respectful of his wishes."

She stood, reached for her cloak, and turned toward the door. Her foot had barely touched the landing when a shadow rose up the stairs.

They both gasped.

" Penny ?"

Henrietta's voice was a sharp whisper of disbelief. She clutched a book to her chest, blinking at her sister as if she were an apparition. "Why are you dressed like...like a highwayman?"

Penny groaned.

Grabbing Henrietta by the wrist, she yanked her down the stairs, steering them into the music room and quietly shutting the doors.

"Do not swoon," she warned, just as Henrietta's hand flung dramatically to her forehead, and she sank into the nearest chaise like a dying heroine from a gothic novel.

"I am not swooning," Henrietta said, though her tone was outrageously theatrical. "I'm merely stunned, speechless."

"You're speaking," Penny replied drily. "So clearly, you'll survive."

Henrietta sat up straight, eyes wide. "Are you sneaking out? At night ?"

"I am."

"Where are you going? No, wait, don't tell me. You're going to a gaming hell. Or God above, you've joined a troupe of traveling actors—"

"I'm going to see a friend," Penny cut in, firm and quiet.

Henrietta stared at her. "Is it him ?"

Penny didn't answer.

"Oh, my word , it is , " Henrietta whispered. "You're in love with him, aren't you?"

"I'm not having this conversation with you," Penny said, buttoning her cloak. "You'll wake the whole household."

"But what if something happens to you? What if you're seen? What if—"

"Nothing will happen," Penny said. She felt a strange mix of aching vulnerability and fierce resolve. "I'll be back before the sun rises. No one will know I've gone."

Henrietta opened her mouth again, but something in Penny's expression silenced her.

"Will you tell?" Penny asked softly now. "If I asked you not to?"

Henrietta looked at her for a long moment, then shook her head.

"I won't," Henrietta whispered. "But please come back before Mama and Papa return!"

"I swear."

Penny smiled, pressed her hand briefly to her sister's cheek, then hurried into the night, heart pounding with anticipation and a trace of guilt. Once again, she borrowed Thomas's horse from the mews, swinging easily into the saddle. The chill in the air kissed her cheeks as she rode through the quiet streets of Mayfair. Her pulse beat a little faster with each hoofbeat that brought her closer to him.

When she reached Alexander's townhouse, she noted at once the unsettling stillness. The windows glowed faintly with light, but no shadows moved within. It was early yet, too early for him to be abed. Dismounting, she tethered the horse to the gate and approached the door, lifting the brass knocker with far more confidence than she felt. She was dressed as a lad—no one would question a young man seeking entry.

The door opened. The butler, tall and composed as ever, lifted one brow. "Lady Penelope?"

She blinked. "I... I..."

The faintest hint of amusement curved his lips. "His lordship informed me I might expect you, my lady."

She stared, stunned. "He did?"

There was no judgment in the man's expression, no alarm or curiosity, merely patient observation as though noblewomen in disguise visited at odd hours regularly. Penny

cleared her throat and tried for composure. "Is Lord Bainbridge at home?"

"I'm afraid not, my lady."

Her heart sank. "He is out ? After that brutal fight? That wretched, reckless—" She gasped and pressed a hand to her chest. "Must he worry my heart so? Does he think himself immortal?"

The butler now looked mildly bemused. "I believe he mentioned going to his club."

"To White's ?" she asked, already turning toward the gate.

He hesitated, then said delicately, "I cannot say for certain, my lady."

She mounted swiftly. As she rode away, Penny chewed on her lower lip. Surely he hadn't gone back to fighting. Not so soon. His ribs had been bruised, his knuckles raw. Perhaps he truly was at White's, sipping brandy and reading the Times .

Or Aphrodite , whispered a treacherous voice in her mind. She stiffened in the saddle. It was foolish to follow that thread. Foolish to chase after him, to keep pushing against the boundaries he had so clearly drawn. And yet...she turned her horse in the direction of the pleasure palace, ignoring the small, sensible voice that shouted for her to go home.

Several minutes later, Penny slipped through the grand double doors of Aphrodite. At once, the scent of incense, amber, and something darker—desire itself—curled around her like an invisible caress. The low murmur of voices and the sultry pulse of string music teased at her senses. The very air shimmered with sin, thick with laughter, gasps, and the heady perfume of pleasure.

Silken draperies in hues of midnight and wine hung from vaulted ceilings, casting

shadows on the polished floors. Velvet lounges cradled lovers in scandalous poses. A bare-chested man reclined on a divan, his head thrown back in ecstasy as a masked woman knelt between his thighs, her mouth working with aching devotion. Another couple danced slowly, their bodies pressed flush, the woman's gown in a suggestive heap around her hips.

Penny tore her gaze away and moved forward, lifting her chin with as much composure as she could muster. She was not here for this world. She was here for him .

A hush fell as she stepped through the arched entrance of a card room, where the ton's gentlemen and daring ladies wagered coin and reputation over roulette and whist. Penny hovered by the edge, watching their fluid movements, how desire and danger seemed to flavor even innocent bets. She turned to go and collided with a broad chest. "Oh!" she gasped, stumbling back.

A gloved hand steadied her, and she looked up into the too-knowing green eyes of the Marquess of Raine.

His gaze showed a spark of recognition as he took in her disguised form. His lips curved faintly.

"Your lord," he said teasingly, "is out on the terrace. Fourth door."

Penny flushed scarlet. "Thank you," she murmured, her voice low.

"Of course." He gave her a gallant bow, his smirk deepening. "If you're going to sneak into dens of vice for love, you might consider less revealing trousers next time."

She huffed and marched away, her boots soundless against the thick Aubusson rugs.

Weaving through the crowd, she passed a dais where a masked man thrust languidly into a flushed woman while a ring of onlookers applauded softly, wineglasses gleaming in hand. Penny's stomach twisted—not in judgment, but in astonishment. She had never imagined there were people in the world who sought such public decadence.

She reached the fourth terrace door and slipped outside. The night air cooled her flushed cheeks. Alexander sat in a wrought iron chair, legs stretched before him, a half-empty glass cradled loosely in his hand. His face was tipped toward the starless sky, eyes distant, the set of his jaw bleak.

Penny's heart twisted painfully. She took a step forward.

His gaze flicked to her, and a slow, unsurprised smile touched his lips. "I am not surprised to see you, Penny."

She said nothing, only crossed to the chair opposite his and sat. The scent of brandy clung to the air between them. She reached for his glass, ignoring his amused brow, took a tentative sip—and immediately spluttered.

Alexander chuckled, low and warm. "Careful."

Coughing, she wiped her lips and gave him a glower before draining the rest in one determined swallow. His gaze lingered on her mouth, but he said nothing.

For a long moment, they sat in silence. Then she asked, barely above a whisper, "Are you healed?"

He stared at the sky again. "Not your concern."

Her scowl returned full force, but when she glanced sideways, he was watching her, a

smile ghosting across his lips. She hated how much she loved that look.

A shadow passed across the threshold.

"My lord," a man said, bowing, "your decision?"

Alexander didn't move. "I'm still thinking."

The man bowed again and retreated into the dark. Penny blinked, heart thudding. She had seen that face before—at the bare-knuckle fights. Her breath caught. "He was at the ring."

"Yes."

"What does he want?"

"Another match," he said flatly. "Next week."

Penny reeled. "But you're not healed!"

He took another drink. "Apparently, I'm now being whispered about in very enthusiastic circles. They're calling me the Bare-Knuckle King."

He said it without pride—only a faint trace of irony.

Her chest ached. "Will you do it?"

Alexander didn't answer.

She closed her eyes for a heartbeat. "Is it the purse?"

His silence was answer enough. Her throat tightened when she recalled a conversation from a year ago with the Marquess of Ambrose.

He fears you will wed another before he succeeds.

A lump rose behind her tongue. "Are you close?" she whispered. "To pulling your estates out of debt?"

He stared at her, long and steady. "I will be solvent by next year."

Too long. The words echoed in her bones, a mournful truth. Penny pressed her fingers to her mouth, her lips still tingling from the drink. She didn't know how long she sat there, but the night deepened, and all around them, laughter and moans rose like incense from the bowels of Aphrodite.

Penny shifted closer. "Have you tried gambling?"

Alexander turned to her, brow arching in wry amusement. "Gambling?"

"Yes," she murmured, eyes fixed on the flickering shadows cast by the lanterns. "I heard my brother speaking with Papa a fortnight ago...apparently Lord Jensen lost an estate in Scotland and five thousand pounds in a single night of cards."

Alexander gave a low laugh. "That sounds about right. But no, Penny...gambling is far more dangerous than fighting."

She blinked. "Truly? You think risking coin is more dangerous than breaking your ribs?"

"I'm a terrible gambler," he said dryly. "Always have been. And I'd never wager something my family depends on. I could lose everything in a single hand."

Her voice broke slightly as she whispered, "But you would risk yourself?"

Their eyes met, the air between them growing taut.

"You'd risk your life for the same cause?" she pressed, voice thick with emotion. "If you die, Alexander, what then? Your family would lose far more than a roof or coin. They would lose you. And that pain would destroy them."

His breath caught, and for a long moment, he said nothing. Their gazes remained locked—hers pleading, his unreadable. Then he looked away, and so did she, her throat closing up.

"I..." She hesitated, then lifted her chin. "I'm an excellent gambler, you know."

That drew another surprised smile from him. "Is that so?"

"Yes. Thomas taught me. Father used to scold him soundly for letting me play, but I was far too quick with numbers and strategies."

"Have you ever actually gambled in society?"

"No," she admitted, her lips quirking. "But I'd love to try. Shall we?"

"You are hell-bent on foolhardy. Where is your damn sense of fear?"

Penny frowned. "Why should I be afraid? I'm with you."

Alexander went utterly still for a moment, then a slow, disbelieving smile curved his lips. He rose from his chair, extending a hand. "Very well. Let me escort this reckless lad to the gambling rooms."

She grinned and slipped her arm through his, warmth spiraling from the contact. "Aren't you worried someone will see you holding hands with a man?"

Alexander smirked. "There are plenty of men here who hold hands...and much more."

Penny faltered mid-step. "What?" she said, blinking rapidly.

His smile was almost gentle. "There are lovers of all kinds here, Penny. That's part of what makes Aphrodite so...liberated."

A small breath escaped her lips as she absorbed this, her gaze flitting around at the shadowed figures, the indulgent laughter, the loosened morals wrapped in silk and champagne. She had lived all her life in the drawing rooms and salons of proper society, never imagining that desire could look so varied...so raw...so beautiful and strange.

"I didn't know," she said quietly. "I didn't know people...of the same sex could be...in love."

Alexander glanced down at her, his expression unreadable. "There's a great deal the world hides from well-bred young ladies."

Penny swallowed, her thoughts tangled.

"Come," he said, gently drawing her forward. "Let's see if your luck holds at the tables."

As they stepped through the threshold and into the gilded chaos of the gambling salon, Penny felt everything about her was changing—one touch, one glance, one risk at a time.

CHAPTER 16

The gambling room at Aphrodite was unlike any drawing room Penny had ever entered. Dark-paneled walls gleamed under the soft golden wash of candlelight. Heavy curtains in jewel-toned velvet blocked the windows, making it feel like night had wrapped itself around the place twice. Polished tables glittered with gold coins and ivory chips, and the low murmur of conversation mixed with the rustle of cards and occasional ripple of laughter or groan of loss.

A haze of cigar smoke floated in the air, and a footman passed with a silver tray holding glasses of brandy and flutes of champagne. Penny clutched Alexander's arm tighter, nerves fluttering in her stomach.

"Which game?" he asked, leaning in, his voice low and amused.

Her eyes scanned the tables. She ignored the busy whirl of roulette, the steady hands at whist, and the boisterous cheer near hazard. Instead, her gaze landed on a quiet faro table, the banker a stately older man with a calm air and keen eyes.

"That one," she said, nodding toward it.

"Faro?" Alexander said with a brow arched. "A bold choice."

"I remember the rules and how often I beat Thomas," she said confidently, though her heart beat faster. "It's all chance and instinct, yes?"

"And card counting," he added with a glint of admiration. "Very well."

At her chair, he placed a firm hand on her shoulder before reaching into his coat and withdrawing his purse. From it, he counted ten pounds and set it beside her.

"My stake," he murmured.

Penny glanced up at him. "I'll do my best not to lose your money, my lord."

He leaned closer, his lips brushing her ear. "See that you don't."

Her cheeks flamed, but she turned to the game, eager to prove herself. The first few hands were nerve-wracking. Her back remained straight, her gloved hands steady as she placed her bets on the layout, watching the dealer draw card after card. She lost the first hand. Then, the second. But she didn't flinch.

However, luck turned. A winning streak began, and her instincts were sharp. Her gaze never left the cards. Penny felt the rhythm of the game, a dancer in perfect time with music only she could hear. Ten pounds became fifty. Fifty became two hundred.

Gasps started to rise from the small group that had begun to gather. Cards were dealt. Another win. Then another. And another. The cards kept falling in her favor with astonishing precision. The room was a haze of murmurs and low laughter, the occasional clink of glass and rustle of silks and brocade adding to the heady atmosphere.

Penny perched on the edge of her seat, her gloved fingers pressed lightly against her lips as the dealer dealt again. A queen of hearts. She'd bet high on the queen. A ripple of excitement shivered down her spine.

"Queen takes it," the dealer announced with practiced cool, sweeping the chips toward her.

A soft gasp escaped her, quickly swallowed in a breathless laugh. Her modest pile of chips was now a small fortune. She leaned forward again. A gentleman across the table gave her an admiring glance, his brow raised, while another muttered something about beginner's luck.

The next hand began. Faro was a game of swift rhythm, and she moved with it easily, following the flow of cards, listening to the flick and snap as they were revealed. The king turned. Not hers.

But the next—a jack of clubs. She had placed a side bet, almost as an afterthought. Another win. She barely managed to suppress her delighted squeal. The pile before her grew again. She felt Alexander beside her, quiet and still, but she could feel the hum of his energy, the press of his attention focused entirely on her. His presence grounded her even as her pulse raced with every card turned.

And then it came—the final card of the round, the deciding moment. The ace of spades.

The table went still. She held her breath. She had bet on the ace.

The dealer nodded and pushed her winnings forward. "Ace wins again."

The air exploded with murmurs. Someone let out a low whistle. Penny's breath caught, her heart tripping wildly in her chest. Her gaze darted to Alexander, her eyes wide with disbelief and a glint of exhilaration.

"I've won..." she breathed. "Good heavens, I've won a thousand pounds."

She turned to him, laughing in awe, and without thinking, flung her arms around him. Alexander caught her with a quiet grunt, steadying them both as she pressed her cheek to his chest. Penny's breathless laughter spilled between them. His arms folded

around her slowly, and when she looked up, something entirely different flickered in his gaze.

Alexander stared down at her, his beautiful mouth tilted in the faintest smile. But it was his eyes that stopped her breath. They were soft, tender, devastating, and lustful. Her laughter faded. Blushing, she stepped back, her gaze dropping. She straightened the jacket she wore, brushing her hands over it unnecessarily.

"These winnings," she said, voice a bit shaky but determined, "are my gift to you."

He stared at her.

She continued, "I shall return here several nights and gamble for you. I can win more . That way...you don't have to fight. You don't have to be hurt."

He didn't speak. Penny looked up and met his gaze. "I mean it," she whispered. "Please... don't let yourself be hurt again. I'll sneak away from home as often as I can. I'm good at other games—we can devise a plan and find ways to earn. I receive a monthly allowance. I'll send it to you."

She drew a steadying breath, her voice softening. "I've painted several watercolors over the years. My mother said they were very good, though I confess I haven't painted in months. Still, I've heard of ladies managing to sell their work. Quietly. I could discreetly shop around and see if anyone might want to buy some of mine."

Realizing she was rambling, she pressed her lips together. The silence that followed stretched between them, heavy with all the words left unspoken. She longed to tell him how frightened she was—how deeply she feared that one day he might take a blow he wouldn't recover from. That she might lose him forever.

Alexander's gaze lingered on her, unreadable. Then, slowly, so gently, it made her

breath catch, he reached out and brushed his thumb along her cheek, tracing the soft skin just below her eye.

"You don't need to risk your reputation to rescue me," he said, his voice low and rough-edged. "Not for coin. Not for me."

Penny's heart clenched. "But I want to," she said, lifting her chin. "You are always pushing yourself to the brink, fighting with your fists, hurting your body... and I—"

He touched her lips with two fingers, silencing her.

"No more tonight." His tone was final but not cold. Almost reverent. "Come. Let me take you home."

She opened her mouth to protest, to insist she was not ready to go, not when there was so much more she wanted to say. But the look in his eyes held a plea beneath the command. And the brush of his hand as he took hers—warm, protective, a little desperate—stripped her will to argue. He guided her from the card room with a protective arm around her waist. The raucous atmosphere of Aphrodite fell behind them, muffled by velvet curtains and heavy doors, replaced by the cool hush of night.

Outside, the crisp air kissed her flushed cheeks. A carriage had already been summoned, and his driver waited at the ready. Alexander helped her inside, his hand steady at her back, and climbed in after her without a word. He hauled her gently against his side, and she smiled as she rested her head on his shoulder.

For a moment, she closed her eyes and simply breathed him in—the faint scent of sandalwood and leather, the steady rise and fall of his chest. She let herself lean into his quiet strength, letting it wrap around her like a balm. Here, like this, she felt safe and protected, as if nothing in the world could touch her as long as he held her.

"Once lost, your reputation will almost be impossible to regain," he said after a beat, lacing their gloved hands together and gently squeezing her fingers. "You are taking too many risks to come see me. It is already a miracle that your family has not discovered the maids you've bribed."

"I do bribe them very generously," she drawled, trying for levity, though a small knot tightened in her chest at the reminder of just how reckless she had been. One whispered word could destroy everything. Her father would be apoplectic. Her mother... disappointed beyond repair.

"You must stop," he said, his tone clipped and biting.

The command lashed through her, and she scowled. "No."

"Penny—"

"I know what you're thinking," she said softly, tilting her face to look up at him. "That I'm taking these risks only for you. That it's foolish. That you're not worth it because we are nothing more than friends and something... peculiar."

He stilled beside her. But he did not argue.

"I'm doing this for me," she whispered, voice barely a thread. "Because when I am with you, I feel as if the rest of the world falls away. The expectations. The rules. The weight." Her throat worked, and she blinked quickly. "I feel so damn caged by my family's hopes, by society's script for my life. Mama speaks as though ruin is knocking at our door and that only my marriage can hold it at bay. That I must save everyone."

Her voice cracked. "But why must I be the one? Why not Thomas, who will inherit everything? Why does my worth only extend to how well I can attract a duke or an

earl?"

She turned away slightly, but he kept their fingers threaded together, and it gave her the courage to continue.

"And the duke... he is kind, proper, intelligent. A good man. But I feel hollow when I imagine my life with him—gowns and dinners, children and duty. As if I am stepping into a role someone else wrote for me. I've spent my life doing what was expected, and then I met you. And suddenly..."

She let out a shaky breath. "Suddenly, I realized there is so much I haven't lived. Haven't seen. Haven't felt . You make me curious. About the world. About myself. There are parts of life I want to explore before I become someone's wife and mother."

Penny's voice turned quiet, vulnerable. "And when I'm with you... I remember I'm allowed to want more. I understand the risks I take, Alexander. I do not need you to caution me away."

"I understand," he said quietly.

"Good," she replied just as softly.

The carriage rolled to a stop a few feet from her home, nestled in the shadows just beyond the glow of the nearest gas lamp. Alexander stepped down first, then offered his hand to help her alight. When she did, he didn't let go right away. His gaze had a complicated look, as if he wanted to say something but knew he shouldn't.

"Thank you," she said.

"For what?"

"For... everything."

Alexander studied her for a long moment, then reached up to cup her cheek, his thumb brushing along her skin in a tender, aching stroke. The touch seared straight to her soul.

"I would keep you from every shadow if I could," he murmured. "If you were mine, I would take you on every adventure I could dream. I'd sail you through the English Channel, take you to bathe naked in the Aegean Sea, to Venice, to Rome. I'd take you to Egypt and show you the Nile under a violet sky."

Her mouth trembled, and she swallowed the surge of emotion that rose like a tide. "I know," she whispered. "I know what I'm sacrificing. I know what I've lost."

His hand dropped from her cheek like it pained him to let her go. Without another word, she turned and hurried up the steps and into the house, leaving him behind in the night. But God help her—it was impossible to stop loving him, even knowing the heartbreak that loomed like a storm just beyond the horizon.

CHAPTER 17

A week had passed since he'd last seen Penny at Aphrodite. Alexander rolled his shoulder, noting with detached satisfaction how well his body was mending. His ribs still ached if he turned too sharply, but the bruising had faded, and his strength had returned. Months of underground fighting had toughened him, hardened his muscles, honed his endurance. His body now recovered faster—resilience forged by sheer will and desperation.

Still, when Milton returned with his offer—double the purse this time—Alexander had turned him down without hesitation. He hadn't done so out of principle. He'd done it because he remembered how Penny looked at him that night. Eyes shimmering with fear. Her hands were trembling as she touched him as if checking he was still whole. That had undone something deep inside him.

Alexander had spent the days since then poring over ledgers and investments, tracking the slow and steady crawl of progress. And for the first time in years, he'd allowed a single, foolish tendril of hope to bloom in his chest. If projections held...if tenants paid on time...if harvests remained strong, and if interest in his shipping investment continued...

He could be solvent in less than a year. The realization had slammed into his gut and left him shaken. But it still wasn't enough. Not enough to satisfy her father. Not enough to offer her a life of opulence and security. He could not rescue her family from ruin, not when he was only beginning to rescue his own.

Alexander gritted his teeth and straightened from the marble column he'd been

leaning against at Lady Glenvale's midnight ball. Penny . She entered the ballroom with all the elegance of a reigning queen, and his chest went tight. This was why he'd come tonight, though he'd told himself otherwise. Though he had cursed himself for being a damn fool. Though he knew he would only suffer. Alexander ran a hand down his face and muttered a vicious oath under his breath. Penny had not come to him after Aphrodite. Not the following night or the next. Not even a letter. And that was what had pushed him to seek her out. Standing in this gilded ballroom, awaiting the moment she would arrive. Like a man chasing the scent of smoke, even knowing the fire would burn him.

He had seen her three days past in Hyde Park, riding with her duke.

They had exchanged only a bow and a curtsy as he'd outlined. It had felt fucking awful. As if they were nothing. As if he had never buried his face between her thighs, never taken her mouth with his cock, never made her tremble with need.

A few young bucks approached her, and his mouth curled. It was expected. His Penny was damn exquisite. Her gown tonight was a masterpiece of seduction—deep emerald silk with Chantilly lace that kissed her décolletage and hinted at sin. The gold filigree embroidery shimmered under the chandelier light, cinching her waist like a lover's possessive hand. Her skirts floated as she moved, brushing softly around her slippers. Her dark hair was swept up, with curls pinned artfully to expose the nape of her neck—the same neck he had kissed, nipped, and marked.

She was radiant. Devastating. And her mouth wasn't smiling. Penny was unhappy. Alexander wanted to cross the room. He wanted to seize her hand and pull her close, to whisper that she belonged with him, not with a man who'd court her with Egyptian art and polite conversation.

But instead, Alexander remained exactly where he was, content to watch her discreetly, unable to escape the knowledge that despite his efforts he was still

hopelessly, damnably, achingly in love. He closed his eyes briefly, inhaling through his nose, shoving down the desperate urge in his chest.

Penny danced with empty grace, her smile a pale imitation of its usual brilliance. Her mouth remained too flat, her eyes too dim. She was in her third dance, and he could tell every step she took was a masquerade. She wasn't well. And he needed to know. Alexander cut through the crowd, ignoring greetings, brushing past embroidered coats and trailing silks.

Penny stood near the refreshment table, nodding politely to something the Viscount of Darrington was saying, her gloved fingers curled too tightly around her fan.

She shifted slightly and saw him. For the briefest moment, Alexander faltered. Because she came alive. Penny's lips parted, and her eyes widened. A bloom of color flushed across her cheeks, and something unnameable flickered in the air between them. It was as if the very breath in her lungs had changed, shifted. Her entire being lit from within.

The sight of her silent joy and warmth filled him. His chest tightened. He felt struck, awed, and humbled. No woman had ever looked at him this way—not with this depth of desire, recognition, or the aching honesty of a heart already given.

It made him feel as though he could destroy anything that hurt her smile and lay the world at her feet. Alexander reached her. Bowed low over her hand, brushing his lips lightly to her glove.

"Lady Penelope, may I have the honor of your next dance?" he asked, his voice low and even.

Her lips parted. He saw the yes on her tongue—

And then her mother was there. A hawk in violet satin, her eyes sharp as razors. "The next dance is already promised," she clipped.

Penny blinked, her lashes falling like the descent of a curtain. When she looked up again, her expression was composed and cool.

"I'm afraid I'm not available to dance, my lord," she said, her voice a monotone.

He bowed again, polite, distant. "Of course. Enjoy the rest of your evening, Lady Penelope."

And he turned and walked away. But not to the ballroom. Not to the card tables or the garden or the supper room. Alexander walked down the shadowed hallway, past murmured voices and flickering candles, until he found the door to the host's library.

He stepped inside, closed the door behind him, and sank into an armchair by the low-lit hearth. Darkness pooled in the corners, thick and quiet. The heavy scent of leather-bound books and aged whisky filled the air.

And he waited. His gut twisted with every passing second. Every footfall in the hall. Every creak of the wooden floorboards. And then, at last, the door opened. It was barely more than a whisper, a hush of hinges and fabric.

Penny stepped inside. She looked around the dim space, a delicate frown touching her brows. When she sighed soft, disappointed, it pierced straight through him. She turned to leave.

"I'm here," he said quietly.

Penny gasped, one hand flying to her throat. Her back met the door, and she leaned against it, her breath catching.

"I wanted to dance with you," she whispered, her voice shaky. "I..."

"Close the door."

The soft click echoed in the room. Alexander didn't speak again. He rose slowly from the chair and crossed the space between them. She came toward him as if to meet him, and Alexander reached for her, cupping her jaw in his hands, and lowered his mouth to hers. The kiss was not ravenous, not yet. It was reverent. Aching. It was a question and an answer, a plea and a surrender.

And when she kissed him back softly and urgently, it was everything he didn't know he was starving for. He moved her backward. Alexander had no plan. Only need. The moment her back hit the door and her lips parted beneath his, he lost all pretense of control. She was warm and trembling, her fingers curling into his lapels as if she couldn't breathe without him.

Alexander knew the feeling. He was drowning in it. Her scent—sun-ripe peaches and lavender—wrapped around him like silk, tightening with every heartbeat. He kissed her as if he'd been starved. Tongue stroking deep, claiming. She moaned softly into his mouth, and his control frayed like an unraveling thread.

"I should stop," he whispered roughly, his forehead resting against hers. "I should stop right now."

"Don't," she breathed. "Please, don't. We can go back to being friends tomorrow...tonight...now...I want you, Alexander."

His hands skated down her back, catching the curve of her hips. He gripped her as if anchoring himself. She fit him too perfectly. Her mouth, her body, the soft, desperate noises she made. With a curse torn from his chest, he lifted her. She gasped, arms winding around his neck as he carried her across the room. Her gown rustled, her

slippers tapping against his legs. He lowered her onto the chaise longue by the fire and just looked at her.

Firelight gilded her skin. Her lips were kiss-bitten. Her eyes were wide and dark with longing. She was exquisite. "You destroy me and all my resolves, even knowing better I am lost whenever it comes to you," he said hoarsely.

A tremor ran through her. But Penny didn't stop him when he reached for the back of her gown and slid the buttons open. One by one. Slowly. Reverently. Until the emerald silk fell away and revealed skin, he'd dreamed about for far too many nights. "Lift your hips."

She obeyed, breath coming fast. He stripped her down to her stockings, garters, and slippers—nothing else. Just the woman who owned his soul spread like a gift before him.

"Turn around," he said thickly. "On your belly."

She blinked and flushed but obeyed again, rising to her knees and turning toward the back of the chaise, her body unfolding like a forbidden offering. From behind, the sight of her was devastating—her thighs parted just enough to reveal the glistening heat between them. Her pussy was lush, swollen with arousal, the delicate folds flushed pink. The soft thatch of curls above only accentuated the slick sheen of her arousal, the intimate scent of her musk thick in the air. Every shift of her hips, every nervous tremble, made her glisten anew, the wetness clinging to her pussy in a way that made his mouth water.

She was open like this, vulnerable, the prettiest little temptation he'd ever seen—and all for him. He let out a ragged sound and loosened his cravat.

"I want your hands," he murmured, threading the length of silk between his palms.

"Let me have them."

She looked over her shoulder, eyes full of emotion—uncertainty, desire, something more, and slowly offered him her wrists. He wrapped the silk around them, knotting it with firm care behind her back.

"Tell me if this is too much," he said, brushing her hair aside and kissing the nape of her neck.

"I'll tell you," she whispered.

He spread her with deliberate slowness, fingers tracing the delicate crease where thigh met hip before pushing her thighs wider. His lips brushed the plush curve of her ass—a teasing, open-mouthed kiss. Then another, lower this time, his breath hot against her damp flesh. When his tongue finally dragged through the slick folds of her pussy, Penny jolted, a sharp cry tearing from her throat. The sound was raw and desperate.

He groaned against her, the vibration wringing another whimper from her lips as he licked her again, deeper this time, savoring the salt-sweet taste of her. His grip on her hips tightened, fingers digging into the soft flesh as he held her open relentlessly. Every flick of his tongue was a promise; every suck at her clitoris was a slow-burning torture. She writhed, her bound hands twisting against the chaise, but he didn't relent.

"Please—"

Her voice broke as he circled her clitoris with the flat of his tongue, then sucked it hard between his lips. She climaxed with a sob, her body clamping down around nothing, thighs trembling as pleasure ripped through her. But he didn't stop. Couldn't stop. Not when she was this responsive, this his. He licked into her until she was gasping, oversensitive, her moans pitching higher as he worked her toward another

climax.

"Again," he said against her pussy, and she whimpered his name like a plea—like worship.

Only then did he rise, kiss the small of her back, and unfasten his trousers.

He fisted his cock once, struggling against the urgent need to sink into her heat. She was slick, ready, but not yet stretched enough for how thoroughly he intended to take her. He would not rush—she deserved more than that.

"You're so fucking beautiful," he whispered against her shoulder.

He teased her pussy with a single finger, gliding through her slick heat before sinking deep. A second joined, stretching her, working her open with slow, deliberate thrusts. Her sex clenched around his fingers. The way she was bound—wrists secured behind her back, shoulders pressed down—left her helpless, her hips arched high, her cunt exposed and glistening. Every shift of his fingers drew a whimper from her lips, every curl of them inside her made her thighs tremble.

Then he stroked a third finger inside her sex. Penny gasped as he filled her, her inner muscles fluttering in protest before yielding, softening under his relentless strokes. His free hand gripped her hip, holding her steady as he fucked her with his fingers, each movement deeper, harder, until her breath came in ragged pants.

"Look at you," he murmured, dragging his thumb over her swollen clitoris, "so wet. So fucking tight. And all for me."

Her moan was a broken thing, her body bowing as pleasure crested, sudden and sharp. He didn't stop, didn't let her catch her breath—just kept working her through it, his fingers soaked with her release. When he finally withdrew, he trailed his damp

touch down the curve of her ass, savoring the way she shivered.

"One day," he promised, his voice rough with hunger, "I'm going to spank this perfect arse until it's blushing red. Until every slap makes you drip for me."

She whimpered, her hips rocking back instinctively, seeking more.

"And then," he continued, leaning close, his breath hot against her ear, "I'll spread you wide and feast on this sweet cunt. Even when you sob, even when you beg, I won't stop."

"Yes—" Her voice cracked, her body taut with need. "God, yes—"

His cock throbbed, his balls drawn tight with the ache to claim her. But it was the way she arched into his touch, the way her breath hitched at his words, that sent a dark thrill through him. She was his. Every gasp, every tremble, every desperate plea was proof of it.

Alexander didn't take her all at once. Instead, he teased her, pressing just the head of his cock against her entrance before easing forward, stretching her slowly. She whimpered as he worked himself deeper, inch by torturous inch. Her breath hitched with every small advance, her body trembling as she struggled to adjust.

By the time he was fully sheathed inside her, her whimpers had turned into soft, broken gasps, her hips shifting to take him even deeper. Penny was tight, so fucking tight. Heat clamped around him, slick and pulsing, and it took every ounce of discipline not to come the moment he sank deep. His thrusts came deep and hard, each stroke a surrender to raw need.

"Alexander, more," she wailed.

And then —only then—did everything inside him shatter. Control gone, he lost himself in the rhythm, the slick heat of her, the way her body arched to take him, so perfect it bordered on agony. She gasped, every ragged breath and shuddering moan urging him deeper and harder. The world narrowed to this: the primal cadence of their bodies, the exquisite friction, the desperate, beautiful collision of pleasure and hunger. Penny cried out, half sob, half moan. He wrapped his arms around her and thrust deep and hard, again and again. Bound and bent over, she took every inch he gave, sobbing his name, and he knew this moment would ruin him.

She was silken heat, and he was buried to the hilt, moving in her with rough desperation. When she came again, clenching around him, he cursed, shoved deep, and followed her over the edge, his release torn from his soul. Alexander held her through the aftershocks, their bodies shaking together, and pressed his lips to the base of her neck.

And even then, even spent, even knowing he'd crossed a line they couldn't uncross, he whispered, "I love you."

Penny jolted and froze, a soft moan of denial slipping from her. Alexander knew she did not want to hear such words of devotion, for they made things harder. He untied her wrists and cradled her in his arms. In the quiet that followed, Alexander knew he would never love another woman in this life.

CHAPTER 18

Ten more days passed in reckless, delicious bliss. By daylight, Penny played the dutiful daughter. She took tea with her mother, attended recitals, and strolled the gardens with her sister. Her conscience teetered constantly between guilt and rebellion. Her heart was caught somewhere in the middle, trapped in a tangled web of duty, longing, and a love that only grew bolder with each night spent in Alexander's arms.

The Duke of Merrick had called on her twice more. Once for a respectable picnic in Kensington Gardens—her mother and sister present, and once again for a curated walk through the Royal Museum. He remembered she had enjoyed it before, and while the gesture was thoughtful, she had not truly wanted to be there. A quiet part of her longed to ask why he chose to court someone so young.

Why her? There were no romantic gestures, stolen glances, or whispered words between them. He had never even tried to steal a kiss. Everything between them felt proper, distant as if affection were something to be scheduled, not felt. When she looked into the duke's pale, assessing eyes, Penny saw no flicker of longing, no heat. Only scrutiny. A measured man weighing the merits of a future duchess.

And yet... he was not cruel. Nor unkind. He could be charming in conversation; on rare occasions, he made her laugh with his carefully told stories. She could see how he might make an agreeable husband—dependable, respected, polite.

But in the nights...

Penny had managed to sneak from her home six more times, every escape more daring than the last. And every time, Alexander waited. Sometimes, with an unexpected adventure. Sometimes, with heated kisses that bruised her mouth and filled her lungs with want. He had taken her to an underground art auction in Seven Dials, where she'd been scandalized—and thrilled—by the beauty and immorality on open display. Another night, they slipped into the velvet-dark corners of a forbidden gambling den. But last night...

Last night had been madness.

A masquerade in Soho Square, tucked into a townhouse dripping with opulence and masked secrets. He had stolen her away to the moonlit garden, pulled her into his lap on a wrought iron bench, and with her silken gown around her hips and his mouth at her throat, she had ridden his cock until they were both hoarse from stifling moans.

As morning sunlight filtered across her bed, Penny sat with a hand pressed to her belly. Heat rushed up her neck as she recalled the way he'd gripped her hips, guiding her down on his cock harder, deeper. Even after a long soak in the bath, she was tender, every movement a reminder of how thoroughly he had claimed her.

Not gently like she was spun glass and made of fine sensibilities.

Not reverently. But like she was his. His equal and his craving. Penny's lips curved in a smile, and she exhaled. Then, she hastily pushed away the diary she had been writing in, half poems, half confessions of her wild, stolen nights, and sat up straighter when a knock sounded at her door.

It creaked open, and Henrietta bustled in, bright-eyed and breathless, curls bouncing. "You'll never believe it!" she said, practically skipping to the bed.

"What?" Penny asked, half-annoyed and half-amused.

Henrietta flung herself onto the mattress beside her. "The duke is here! He's in the drawing room with Papa. He asked for a private audience."

Penny's breath stuttered.

"What do you think it means?" Henrietta continued, already giddy. "Mama is faint with joy. She's having the cook fetch the special lemon cake and tea."

But Penny wasn't listening. Her ears rang. Her chest tightened. Slowly, she rose from the bed and walked toward the window, staring out at the gray sky and manicured gardens below.

It was happening. She had known this would come. Eventually, His Grace would make the offer everyone had been waiting for. Penny closed her eyes, and for a heartbeat, all she could feel was the ghost of Alexander's mouth at her throat, his voice in her ear, his hands on her bare hips.

"Penny?" her sister asked behind her.

"I need a moment," she said faintly, gripping the windowsill.

Because the man downstairs was about to offer her a crown, yet the man she loved had already given her the world.

Penny hurried from her room and down the winding stairs. She saw her mother walking toward her, a pleased smile on her face. Penny froze in the hallway. Her pulse thudded painfully in her throat, and her hands trembled as she gripped the edge of the console table, steadying herself. Just beyond the doorway, her future was being arranged with civility and good breeding—entirely devoid of passion, her opinions and wishes.

Tears slipped silently down her cheeks. She brushed them away quickly and looked around to be sure no one saw. Then she turned and fled softly down the hallway, the corridor blurring at the edges. She ducked into the music room, the familiar scent of rosewood and old sheet music pressing around her like a comforting shroud.

Sinking onto the sofa by the window, Penny clasped her hands in her lap and waited. It wasn't long before she heard footsteps approaching, calm and measured. The door opened, and the Duke of Merrick entered. He looked exactly as he always did—composed, refined, and quietly handsome in a way that offered comfort rather than fire. His graying temples lent him distinction, his movements precise and noble.

"Lady Penelope," he said, his voice warm and gentlemanly. "I have just spoken with your father. With his blessing, I come now to seek yours."

She rose on unsteady legs and folded her hands before her. Her smile felt frozen on her lips.

"It would be my great honor," he said formally, "if you would do me the distinction of becoming my duchess."

Her throat closed, but she smiled wider. The correct smile. The practiced one. The one that would reassure her mother and bring relief to her father. She sank into a deep curtsy. "Yes, Your Grace. I would be honored."

He bowed with a pleased smile. "Then I shall speak with your mother and we will see to announcing it appropriately."

And with that, he was gone. The door clicked softly shut behind him. Penny stood there for a moment, trembling, her limbs still locked in place. Then, something cracked inside her. She turned and rushed from the room, skirts whispering along the carpet as she climbed the stairs and burst into her bedchamber. The door barely

closed behind her before she flung herself onto the bed, pressing her face into the pillow.

The sobs tore from her chest in silent, violent waves.

Oh, Alexander .

She had said yes. She had done what was expected. And she had never felt so lost and empty in her life.

The paper crinkled in his hand as Alexander stared at the announcement, the script burned into his vision as if seared by flame.

The Duke of Merrick is pleased to announce his upcoming nuptials to Lady Penelope Dodge.

It was done. Official. Final. A low, savage sound curled in his throat as he folded the paper, then gripped it tightly, his knuckles whitened. Loss tore through him, sharp and visceral, hollowing his chest. He blinked hard, but damn it all, his eyes still smarted.

"Hell," he muttered, tossing the crumpled notice onto the low table before him.

From across the room, his good friend, the Duke of Basil, leaned back in his chair, arms crossed, his eyes narrowed with something suspiciously like pity. "Are you just going to let her go?"

Alexander didn't answer right away. His jaw clenched. He reached for his drink instead and tossed it back, the burn of brandy a poor distraction from the dull throb radiating from somewhere beneath his ribs. "This is what she wants," he said gruffly. "She's made her choice. I have no right to interfere."

Basil's voice lowered. "I know it was her that night. In the pit. Watching you fight. Don't insult me by pretending otherwise."

Alexander's spine went rigid. "What the hell does that matter?"

"She wasn't looking at you like a friend," Basil added. "That was the expression of a woman who loved you. Body and soul."

The words cracked through him like lightning, cleaving him in two. Alexander shoved away from the table, the scrape of his chair loud in the stillness. He didn't speak. Couldn't. His throat felt scraped raw. Instead, he stalked out of the library and down the corridor, ignoring the footman who moved to open a door. He threw open the door to his private exercise chamber and stepped inside, slamming it shut behind him. The room was cool and dim, lit only by the weak light seeping through the curtains. But the heavy boxing bag hung suspended from the ceiling—silent and waiting.

Alexander violently stripped off his coat and waistcoat and rolled his sleeves up past his elbows. His fists clenched as he took his stance, his muscles coiled tight, and his breathing was shallow.

And then he struck.

Again. And again.

The dull, rhythmic thud of his fists echoed through the chamber as he pounded the bag, his knuckles repeatedly slamming into the leather. His body shook with the force of his blows, pain radiating from his bruised ribs, but he welcomed it. He needed it. Alexander struck until sweat dripped down his brow, until his arms trembled with exertion, and his lungs burned.

But still, he kept hitting because it was the only way to drown the image of her—of Penny—in another man's arms. A man who would never see the wildness in her soul the way he had. A man who would never know how she looked with her hair down and eyes glassy from pleasure. A man who would never deserve her. A man who would never grant her the freedom to travel, to experience life beyond what was deemed suitable for proper young ladies—a freedom that felt wild and real.

He hit harder because she was gone. And if he allowed himself to feel all that roared inside him—he might never survive it.

CHAPTER 19

The carriage wheels rumbled steadily over the uneven roads, the scent of rain-soaked earth drifting through the slightly cracked window. Penny sat rigid, her gloved hands folded tightly in her lap, her gaze fixed on the mist-covered fields rolling past in a blur. Her mother and sister sat across from her—Henrietta softly humming, her excitement impossible to contain, while their mother regarded Penny with an increasingly irritated expression.

They were on their way to Derbyshire. To the Duke of Merrick's estate. To her wedding. A private ceremony, he'd said. Only family and a few close friends would be present as witnesses for their wedding ceremony held in the small, elegant chapel on his grounds. Penny had quietly agreed. She suspected he knew what lingered between her and Alexander, which was why everything was moving so quickly. The banns had not been read. Instead, the duke had procured a special license and the invitations were sent quietly, without fanfare.

Penny's chest ached. She had barely eaten for days. Her thoughts tangled, torn between grief and longing and a hollow dread that even now, she might still be making a mistake. She had chosen duty. Honor. But at what cost?

"Do try to smile," her mother snapped, breaking into her thoughts. "It is your wedding day, Penelope. Try not to look as though you are being carted to an execution."

Penny flinched and turned her face to the window, blinking fast. Shouting sounded from outside, and the carriage lurched. The horses screamed. Her sister shrieked.

Penny's breath caught as the carriage came to a sharp, jarring stop.

"Highwaymen!" the driver shouted.

Her mother gasped, "In Derbyshire ? Upon my word, are we to be robbed ?"

A moment later, the carriage door was yanked open. A masked man loomed before them, pistol drawn and voice rough.

"Out. Now."

Terror shot through her like a lightning bolt. Henrietta whimpered, clutching their mother. Penny's heart pounded. But she moved, her body obeying before her thoughts could catch up.

"I said now ."

"I'm coming," she whispered, her voice shaking.

She stepped down, and the man seized her arm. Before she could even scream, she was swept up—lifted effortlessly—and tossed onto the back of a massive black stallion. Penny gasped, clutching at the coarse mane, her entire body trembling. The masked man mounted behind her, wrapping an arm around her waist, and with a sharp whistle, the horse surged into motion.

She barely had time to scream, " No !"

Visions of ruin and scandal flushed through her thoughts. Oh, God ! "Take me back!"

Penny was ignored, and her eyes narrowed. "I am sure you've heard the name Bainbridge. He is known as the bare-knuckle king of London. His fists are vicious

and unrelenting. If you harm me in any way, he will kill you."

"I'm not going to hurt you," the man said against her ear, his voice lower, familiar and amused.

Penny stilled. It couldn't be. She twisted on the horse, reached up and dragged off the mask. It fell away with a tug, and her breath locked in her throat. "Alexander?"

His jaw was hard, his mouth grim. "Yes."

"What in God's name do you think you're doing?" she cried. "This is...this...you are kidnapping me?"

"Yes," he said so casually as if these were normal actions of a gentleman.

"You must take me back!"

"I'm never taking you back, and you are not marrying Merrick."

Her head whipped around. Oh, God, why was her heart thrilling with the disaster looming?

"It was announced," she said, stricken.

Alexander didn't look at her. He didn't waver. "You were never meant to marry him. And you are not meant to sacrifice your happiness for your father's poor management of his estates and inheritance. For the last four days, I hired a man of affairs to investigate the full extent of your father's debts. They are severe. But mine were worse."

He paused, his voice low and steady. "Correction—they were worse. I have bled and

fought and pushed. I invested whatever money I could. I did not buy new clothes or new paintings for my household. I did not sacrifice my two sisters by forcing them to marry for money, against their hearts, against their happiness, so I could continue living a life of ease. They are in the country with my mother, waiting for me to do my duty and ensure their happiness. Your father and Thomas will not sacrifice you. I will not allow it. And Penny?"

"Yes?" she whispered, her voice cracking, tears slipping down her cheeks.

"If you do marry Merrick, it will kill something in you. And in me."

Those soft words tore through her like a sharpened blade.

"You don't get to make that choice for me!" she shouted, inexplicably scared. "I understand everything you say. We are on the brink. Yet Father bought a new painting recently. Mama refurnished the drawing room. And Thomas walks about in the first stare of fashion. But I am still a part of the family. And you can't—"

"You've made your choices," he said tightly. "And I've made mine."

She wanted to scream. Hit him. Weep. But the wind lashed her cheeks, and his arm was a steel band around her waist, keeping her pressed to his body as the horse galloped across the countryside. Thirty minutes later, they reached a stone cabin tucked between trees—a secluded hunting lodge, its roof dusted with moss and its windows shuttered.

He dismounted, then lifted her down with maddening gentleness. "This cottage belonged to Raine. I bought it from him two days ago."

"You are mad," she whispered.

"Only for you."

And without waiting for permission, Alexander pushed open the cabin door and carried her inside. The door shut behind them with a dull thud , sealing them into shadow and silence.

Penny turned on him, trembling. "You had no right to take me from that carriage! Alexander, please—"

"I had every right," he snapped, voice low. "You would've married a man you do not love. You would've wasted your life out of duty."

"My life is not yours to dictate! Allow me to think and decide for myself because—"

"No," he said, stepping closer, his voice hoarse, "I cannot bear to stand by and watch you give yourself to someone else when I know the truth—when I've felt it in your every touch, every look, every stolen moment between us."

Alexander took another step, his eyes blazing with torment and love. "I love you, Penny. I fucking love you with every breath in my lungs, every emotion in my soul. It's not a passing desire, it's not infatuation—it's bone-deep and maddening. It's why I've fought until my knuckles bled, why I let my body take brutal punishment in those underground rings. I was driven by more than duty to my family. I was driven by you . By the dream of becoming enough."

His voice dropped, rough with longing. "I wanted to give your father the funds he needed, not just to prove myself worthy, but so I could offer you everything. Not because you ever asked for it. You never would. But because you deserve it. Luxury. Safety. Freedom. The world, if I could place it at your feet. I wanted you to be my countess."

Alexander exhaled, his voice softer but no less fierce. "And the cruelest part is knowing that you would still choose me even without the gowns, the diamonds, or the title. And yet, here we are. And I'm losing you."

Penny gasped, the heat of his nearness overwhelming. Her fists balled at her sides—and then she launched herself into his chest, crushing her mouth to his.

I love you , she silently screamed.

The kiss was wild. Frantic. All her aching love and longing poured into it as he groaned and clutched her to him. His hands cupped her face and her hips and roved over her body like he didn't know where to touch first. She kissed him harder, tangling her fingers in his hair, breathing him in like she'd been suffocating.

"I hate you for stripping me so bare that I cannot hide my feelings," she whispered against his mouth, sobbing. "For making me want this so much."

"I'll live with your hate," he said hoarsely, lifting her in his arms. "So long as I can have this."

He laid her down on the small bed, undressing her with trembling hands, unbuttoning, unlacing, reverently kissing every inch of skin he uncovered. Her gown slipped away, and then her stays, her chemise. She was bare before him, and he looked at her like she was made of starlight.

"You're beautiful," he said, brushing her cheek. "God help me."

Then he kissed her again—deep and slow this time—like he meant for her to remember him in every bone of her body. Alexander dipped his head and pressed a kiss just behind her ear. Penny shivered, tilting her neck to give him better access. The feel of his lips on her skin and the hush of his breath all left her trembling with

anticipation.

"I must confess," he murmured against her throat, "I fully intend to punish you for daring to consider another man. You were riding toward him...and by tonight, you would have been in his arms."

Penny let out a shaky breath, stunned by the dark hunger and agony in his tone. "Punish me?" she whispered.

"With such pleasure, you'll beg for mercy."

Her pulse raced. Fear didn't live in her chest, only a bone-deep awareness of him. He slid a hand along her waist and down to her sex, his possession firm and unrelenting.

"I want you ruined for anyone else," he murmured, his teeth scraping gently at her skin. "By morning, you'll only remember my touch. Only ache for me."

Penny clutched at his coat, breathless.

"I cannot stay," she whispered, pushing through the ache.

He shoved two fingers inside her sex. She cried out, the sensation startling, wicked, and unbearably good. Her knees nearly buckled as he pressed harder and deeper.

"I won't be gentle," he said roughly. "Not with what I feel. I'll keep you writhing beneath me until you forget you are still wanting and telling me to let you go."

A tremor of longing tore through her. She was burning—everywhere he touched sparked heat. Her fingers tangled in his hair and pulled his mouth to hers.

"Then don't be gentle," she whispered. "I want all of you."

His eyes darkened, and he captured her lips with such raw, searing hunger it left her boneless. His mouth was both promise and punishment—kissing her deeply, relentlessly, as if he needed her to breathe. His hands explored her body with reverence and heat. He groaned low and gathered her close, burying his face in her neck as if trying to memorize her scent. "You undo me," he rasped.

He kissed every inch of her skin, tasting her, worshipping her, branding her with every stroke of his hands and lips. When his mouth moved lower, she gasped and arched, every nerve alight as waves of sensation rolled through her. Penny felt utterly possessed by his skill, focus, and the deliberate way he coaxed her toward rapture.

And when he finally moved over her, bracing himself above, their eyes met.

"You're my lover, Penny," he said, voice hoarse. "No one else. No one."

She wrapped her arms around his neck, wanting to say yes but could not.

Despite his promise of roughness, Alexander entered her slowly, deeply, a breath stolen from his chest and hers as their bodies joined. The world spun away, leaving only skin sliding against skin, the desperate gasps, and the kisses between each thrust that unraveled her. He moved with a fierce and tender rhythm as if he'd waited years for this moment.

Penny clung to him, meeting him stroke for stroke, each movement carving her deeper into his soul.

"Alexander."

She moaned his name, the sound ragged and filled with feeling. Her climax hit hard, shattering her, and he held her through it, whispering her name like a vow. He plunged deeper, and Penny arched into his touch, wrapping her legs around his hips.

He moved inside her in long, sinuous thrusts, taking his time, his lips brushing her throat, her temple.

She touched him, learned from him, and offered everything without words. And when they fell together—when their bodies locked and broke and burned—Penny knew no other man could ever feel this way. A groan torn from the depths of him, his body trembling with release. Long moments passed before either of them moved. He kissed her brow, and she tucked her face into his neck, hearts still thundering in tandem.

Penny nestled into his chest, their bodies still joined, their breath slowly returning. "I love you," she whispered.

He stilled and then gently kissed the crown of her head. "I love you," he said.

She closed her eyes. But reality, cruel and relentless, returned too quickly. "I have to go back," she whispered. "I cannot stay here with you, Alexander. My family will be worried...and the duke..." Penny swallowed. "We have not gone long. There might be a way to avoid scandal and ruination."

His body stiffened. Alexander pulled away, cold now. Distant.

"I cannot," he said harshly. "I cannot take you back to him."

"Please," she said, tears slipping down her cheeks. His jaw clenched. But slowly, mechanically, he stood and began to dress. Not looking at her. Neither of them spoke as he helped her into her gown. He was stiff and formal, his hands careful but impersonal. The warmth was gone. Minutes later, she was in the saddle, riding in front of him again—but the ride was cold and wordless.

More than an hour had passed before they finally reached the outskirts of the duke's estate. Penny was clasped in his arms as his stallion pounded across the country road,

the wind pulling at his coat, her soft breath warming the crook of his neck. Her silence was a weight he could feel in every flex of his arms around her. She was thinking—he could feel her thinking—and it gutted him.

She had chosen not him. Again. And this time... he would let her go and ruthlessly squash his feelings. Because he could not survive loving her in half-measures, he could not watch her become a duchess or pretend at friendship when every glance and shared breath unraveled the barriers he'd fought to build between them. He would not dishonor himself—or her—with stolen moments and aching restraint. He would not live in torment, knowing he could never truly have her.

The imposing country mansion came into view, sprawling and proud atop a hill framed by old oaks and hedgerows, its grey stone facade catching the morning sun. A full party waited at the grand entrance. The Duke of Merrick stood at the top of the steps, calm and unreadable. Beside him, Penny's family: her father with thunder in his eyes, her sister clutching her shawl, and Thomas—grim, wary, but silent. Her mother looked as though she might collapse from scandal alone.

As the horse skidded to a halt, Penny slipped from the saddle with the grace of a woman breaking apart. She didn't look back. She ran straight into her sister's arms. Alexander gritted his teeth and turned his horse away, heart thundering with the pain he refused to show.

"Please, wait ! Alexander!"

Her voice hit him like a lash.

He stopped and wheeled his horse around. Penny stood just before her family now, her spine straight despite the disarray of her hair, the flush on her cheeks, the fear shimmering in her eyes.

"I presume you rescued my fiancée from the clutches of highwaymen," the Duke of Merrick said, his tone clipped and aristocratically cool. "How fortunate you were nearby to offer your assistance. We are in your debt, Lord Bainbridge."

His words were polite, but they had an unmistakable edge—calculated civility masking suspicion, pride, and something darker beneath.

Standing tall in his formal coat, Penny's father exhaled sharply, the relief written plainly across his face. Her mother pressed a trembling hand to her chest, eyes darting from Alexander to Penny, comprehension dawning like a slow, chilling tide.

This—this was their salvation. A way out of scandal. A way to appease a duke's bruised ego and avoid the stain that would have followed Penny forever.

Henrietta, wide-eyed beside them, blinked in confusion. Her gaze flitted between the adults, trying to make sense of the tension humming in the air. Though young, she sensed the undercurrent of disaster waiting to unfold.

Alexander's eyes found Penny's, and what he saw in her expression hollowed something in his chest. She looked stricken. Terrified. Her lips parted as if to speak, but no sound emerged.

"You are welcome," he said at last, his voice rough with emotion, though he schooled it to a casual drawl. His fingers tightened imperceptibly on the reins. "I bid you all farewell."

"I want to say something," Penny said, her voice steady but soft. "And I must say it only once, before my courage breaks. I would like Lord Bainbridge to hear it."

Everything inside Alexander stilled.

Penny turned, her eyes shining as she swept her gaze across her mother, father, brother, and duke.

Her chin lifted. "I am deeply in love with Lord Bainbridge."

Her mother swooned. Her father made a sound of outrage. The duke... remained still, unreadable. And Alexander nearly slid from his horse.

"I cannot marry you, Your Grace," she said, voice trembling now. "And I beg your forgiveness for not saying so sooner. But I love someone else. With such profound depth, I know I could never be faithful to our vows. While riding back to you, I searched myself and wondered if I was the kind of woman who would break her marriage vows. And the truth is—no. I would not. It is dishonorable and wicked and immoral to shatter vows made before God."

"But for Alexander... for the way I love him," she whispered, her voice cracking, "I could give up everything. Even my honor. I could never stay away from him. I would never know happiness without loving him. If he so much as looked at me, I would falter—I would break every vow, betray my honesty and my fidelity, because the truth is, he is the man I was meant to give them to. I already have."

A murmur rippled through the gathering. Alexander sat frozen, struck breathless by her honesty.

"But I will not be selfish," Penny went on. "I will not bring shame on my family, not if I can help it. So, I will leave now with the man I love and bear the burden of that scandal of breaking an engagement. Your Grace...you do not look at me with love, affection, or admiration...please find another duchess who would love you and one you love."

Then she turned to Alexander. Tears streamed down her cheeks, but her hand lifted

steady and sure as she reached for him. Alexander was off his horse before he realized he'd moved. In four long strides, he closed the distance, swept her into his arms, and crushed her against his chest.

"I love you," he said hoarsely. "So damn much."

"I love you too," she sobbed, burying her face in the folds of his coat. "The scandal will be awful."

"I'll shelter us from it," he vowed, his voice fierce as he pressed kisses to her brow, temple, and cheeks. "You. Your family. I swear it."

A trembling smile broke across her lips. "What now?"

"I'm whisking you to Gretna Green."

She let out a broken sound, half-sob, half-laugh, that cracked his heart wide open. "Truly?"

"Your father won't allow our match unless I scandalously compromise you with a marriage over the anvil."

Penny choked on a chortle, laughter and tears mingling.

Alexander smiled, cupping her face between his hands. "That laugh. That smile. I'll spend the rest of my life protecting them."

She nodded, more tears slipping free as he lifted her onto the horse. Mounting behind her, he wrapped his arms securely around her waist and turned away from the duke's grand estate.

They left behind titles, expectations, and duties. And rode toward love.

Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 1:30 am

Two weeks later ...

The cottage sat nestled in the Scottish Highlands, wrapped in early summer fog and framed by budding heather. It was small but warm, with stone walls, a wood-burning hearth, and ivy creeping along the windowpanes. Penny sat cross-legged on a quilted sofa, her toes tucked beneath her as the kettle whistled in the kitchen. She was Alexander's wife. They had married over the anvil several days ago and since had been locked in this cottage feasting on each other.

There was a potential scandal. There had been outrage. Her mother's tears, her father's cold silence. But there had also been peace—because she had finally chosen herself. Penny had written letters to each of her family members before leaving London. Not to plead or apologize. But to assure them of her intentions. As the Countess of Bainbridge, she vowed to use her position and whatever connection she formed to help restore their fortunes, to stand as both daughter and woman in her own right.

Now, she stared down at the brown paper package that had arrived earlier that morning. It bore no return address, only a flourish of her name in elegant handwriting. She peeled away the wrapping carefully, revealing a folded clipping of *The Tattler* tucked inside a pressed sprig of lavender.

My dearest readers,

With no small amount of pleasure, I present to you the most delicious tidbit of the Season. The ever-enigmatic and undeniably dashing Earl of Bainbridge has declared his love for none other than Lady P, a young lady who, until recently, was rumored to

be on the verge of an engagement to a certain somber and distinguished duke. One can only imagine the tremors that must have shaken polite society when whispers of a sudden parting began to circulate.

But take heart, gentle readers, for I am assured by the most unimpeachable sources that the engagement was dissolved with mutual respect and that said duke continues to hold Lady P and her family in the highest regard. And as for Lord Bainbridge... well. They say the reformed rake makes the very best husband, and if that is true, Lady P is indeed a most fortunate woman. Word has it their affections were too profound to be stifled by society's expectations—or a looming scandal. Love, it seems, has claimed yet another victory.

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

— THE DAILY GOSSIP

Her husband entered the room and quietly sat beside her, slipping an arm around her waist. Penny laughed softly and leaned back against his chest, savoring the comfort of his presence.

"Raine?" he asked, reading the satisfied gleam in her eyes.

"Possibly. Or you. Or one of your co-conspirators."

"I plead innocence," Alexander said, his mouth grazing her temple. "Though I am not above bribery where your happiness is concerned."

She turned to him, her smile full and unrepentant. "I have no regrets, Alexander. Not one."

"Nor I, countess. Although my mother sent a blistering letter insisting I bring you

home at once so she can properly meet you."

Penny curled into him, the scandal sheet slipping from her fingers, forgotten as the fire crackled and the fog rolled gently past their window. Outside, the world might whisper and wonder—but within these walls, there was only the quiet intimacy of two hearts at peace. Soon, they would return to London and whatever awaited them. But for now, for this week, she would lose herself in the warmth of her husband's love.