



My Duke of Convenience (Scandalous Conveniences #1)

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Category: Historical

Description: "Do not tempt me, wife; I will make you obey me if you continue on this path."

Lady Octavia vowed never to surrender to any man. But when her beloved cousin vanishes a week before her wedding, she must save her family's reputation by marrying the coldest duke in the ton!

Duke Simon has sworn to remain unmarried and childless. However, after his brother's scandalous disappearance, he must protect the duchy's legacy—so, he makes Octavia his Duchess.

Their marriage comes with one condition: once his brother is found, they will lead separate lives. Yet his wife's defiance stirs a deep, unexpected desire within him. Now, Simon won't relent until she submits to him completely...

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

Total Pages (Source): 36

CHAPTER 1

“Where is she?” he called to a maid in passing as the startled woman nodded toward his grandmother’s chambers.

Not now; not this as well.

Simon raced up the stairs of his grandmother’s townhouse with the note crumpled in his fist. His tall and muscular frame rushed past servants as they scrambled to get out of his way.

He had barely had time to try and track down his brother before a footman arrived with the untimely news.

Not wasting any time, Simon threw open the doors and practically sprinted inside before halting halfway to the bed.

“Simon, I am so glad you came,” Bernice Wakefield, the Dowager Duchess of Sunderley, spoke feebly in a cracked voice from her position in the middle of her large four-poster bed.

What seemed like dozens of pillows had been placed behind her back in an attempt to make her comfortable.

“What has happened? You said in your note that the doctor was here to see you, and the news is rather bleak.” He approached the bed slowly and perched on the edge as he took his time to examine his grandmother.

Her pale complexion only seemed slightly gaunter than usual. Her silver hair had been pinned to the back of her head in a loose bun that would allow for comfort when lying down.

“I did not want to worry you too much with the details, dear. The doctor has been to see me after I experienced some mild chest pains. He said it is more than likely my heart has suffered after the shock of your brother’s disappearance.”

Her hazel eyes seemed tired as she smiled reassuringly at her grandson while her frail shoulders were slightly hunched as she watched him move.

Reaching for her hand, he gave her fingers a gentle squeeze that made him realize just how thin she had become with age.

“I am doing all that I can to find Augustus. I am confident that I will track him down before his wedding.”

He swallowed hard and wished with all his might that even he could believe his own words.

Bernice shook her head with a heavy sigh. “There is something else that you should know. It is not only Augustus that has disappeared.”

“What do you mean?”

A feeling of dread and confusion came over his mind as he examined the bags under his grandmother’s eyes.

What else could possibly have gone wrong?

“I see no need to beat around the bush. Both your brother and Isolde Townshend have

now gone missing. Her father sent me a note early this morning explaining that he thinks she ran away after getting wind of your brother's absence. I am afraid there cannot be a wedding even if you manage to locate your brother."

What is happening?

Simon felt his brow creasing into a deep frown. The disappearance of his younger brother along with his bride-to-be would create more than just a small scandal among the ton. Their marriage would have solidified a fortuitous bond between the two families, not to mention the fact that he would not have to marry.

"Perhaps they decided to elope. You hear of these young couples all the time that forgo the formalities of a wedding and run away."

He grasped at straws, hoping against hope that there was still time to intercede if that were the case. He could track them down and convince them both to return and do things the proper way.

Bernice shook her head once again. "I do not see why they would. Their marriage was an acceptable one that was wanted by everyone involved. I can only conclude that your brother, and possibly Isolde as well, did not want the marriage. Barring any sinister motives, I cannot think of another reason."

Simon swore under his breath as he let go of his grandmother's hand and stood, beginning to pace beside her bed. Everything was set in stone and arranged; why did it have to go wrong now?

"As per the doctor's instructions, I must stay in bed and allow my body to heal from the shock. I therefore must ask you to handle this matter before the scandal gets out of hand," his grandmother continued, sinking a little further into her stack of pillows.

“Of course, you must rest. I will set out at once to find Augustus. Hopefully, it is only a case of cold feet and nothing more.” He turned to leave but paused when his grandmother called to him.

“Simon, wait. That is not what I meant.” Bernice cleared her throat and waited for her grandson to turn.

A sudden feeling of unease swept over his body. “What did you mean?”

He turned back to his grandmother but kept his position at the door, untrusting what she was about to say. Although their relationship had always been close, his grandmother had often tried to meddle in her grandson’s affairs with her wild schemes.

“There will be gossip and a scandal; there is no hope of avoiding any of that at this point. The only thing that can be done at present is we must endeavor to minimize the scandal as much as possible.” She looked at her hands in her lap before lifting her gaze to meet Simon’s. “You must go and speak with Isolde’s father at once.”

The seriousness of his grandmother’s expression did not help the tension that was beginning to gnaw at the pit of his stomach.

What is she planning?

“The only way out of this mess is to have a wedding. If Augustus is unwilling to marry the youngest Townshend sister, then you must marry her cousin. Lady Octavia is seen as an adopted daughter to her uncle and will serve as a more than suitable match for you and this family.” She sat up a little straighter and held her grandson’s gaze.

“You must be joking, Grandmamma.” Simon felt like laughing as he listened to her

plan.

Nobody had ever brought such a ridiculous idea to him in all his years of being a duke.

“I am not joking; in fact, I am being deadly serious. Marrying Lady Octavia will muffle the scandal of your brother’s disappearance while still procuring the desired match between our families. You know as well as I do that the Earl of Winthorpe approached your father long before either of your parents passed. The arrangements were made among gentlemen, and those arrangements need to be honored. The Townshend family will be united with ours.” His grandmother spoke to him in the same tone she had always used to reprimand him as a child.

The air of definitiveness in her voice knocked the wind from his sails when he realized that she was serious.

“Grandmamma, you know that I have made a vow never to marry. I will not go back on my word now just because Augustus has decided to go back on his.” He matched his grandmother’s serious demeanor as he narrowed his eyes.

“And I would have been happy to honor your vow if we had not been thrust into this situation. If your brother had stayed and married Isolde, then the chances of an heir would have been secured and you would not have had to marry. However, I must add that I do not and have never agreed with your stance on marriage. Your parents painted a somewhat convoluted picture of the institution. As the situation stands, the responsibility of taking a wife now falls back to you as it always should have.” Her tone softened slightly.

Simon ran his hand over his mouth as he considered his grandmother’s words.

Marriage?

Was breaking his vow truly the only way of rectifying the situation? He could see her point about siring an heir—it certainly was not something that his rakish brother seemed to be taking seriously.

“Say now I agree to this ludicrous suggestion. You do know that Lady Octavia and I have not met. I refuse to be thrust into an arranged marriage with someone who I know by reputation alone!” His irritation with the situation began to gnaw at him, making him irritable.

Rumors of her beauty had certainly reached his ears in the past. Yet he couldn’t help but think that any woman who was held in such high regard because of her looks would certainly think a lot of herself.

He never wanted a wife, even less one like Lady Octavia.

Bernice rolled her eyes for the first time since Simon had entered her chambers and lifted the back of her hand to her forehead.

“Do not make me argue while I am in my weakened state. Lady Octavia is a bright and beautiful young woman with a quick wit. If you have any preconceived negative perceptions about her, it is only because of your insistence upon pushing others away.”

He narrowed his eyes at his grandmother.

“Did you not just finish saying that you understood why I believe the things that I do? Vulnerability is a sign of weakness. The second that you show any kind of vulnerability in the eyes of the ton, you are pounced upon by marriage-minded mamas seeking fortunes for their misguided daughters. I do not see the need to be charming to any of them when I do not intend to marry any of them.” He spoke bluntly and placed his hands behind his back with his chin thrust defiantly in the air.

“Thus, confirming what I have just said. Octavia will be a suitable match for you, even if you do not believe in love. If she seems less than pleasant, it is because of the coolness that you present to the rest of the world.” She matched her grandson’s glare.

A moment of loaded disagreement passed between the two as Simon clenched his jaw.

It was Bernice that broke the silence between them. “As the Dowager Duchess of this family, it is my responsibility to see that my grandsons produce at least one heir to carry the family’s name. I do not wish to burden you with anything else, but it is also my wish to see at least one great-grandchild before I die. I know that in my current condition, it may not be possible, but at least I will know that there is a small glimmer of hope if you marry.” Her eyes softened as she sank back into the pillows, seemingly winded by their long conversation.

“You are not dying, Grandmamma. I am certain that Augustus will provide you with plenty of great-grandchildren when the time comes.”

He felt a twinge of guilt when Bernice coughed into her hand and shook her head in desperation. Perhaps her condition was more serious than he’d anticipated.

“If only we knew if that were the truth. I can see you have made up your mind, I won’t hassle you any further. If it is up to me to mend the broken bonds between the families, then I shall do so.”

She flung the blankets from her legs and lifted her knees before pausing and lying back on the pillows with her eyes shut.

Simon took a moment to observe his grandmother and the labored breathing that moved her chest before making a decision.

His eyes fell on the many bottles on her bedside table. The doctor had undoubtedly left instructions with her lady's maid. He'd seen his grandmother sick before, but this seemed worse.

I do not have another choice.

The realization of his predicament came crashing down on him as the blood in his veins turned to ice, leaving him with a nasty taste of anger in his mouth.

"I will speak to the Earl of Winthorpe as soon as I can."

A faint smile spread over her lips as the Dowager Duchess of Sunderley shimmied down her pillows and shut her eyes.

I cannot believe I am doing this.

Simon turned from the bed and left the room, furious at having to deal with the consequences of his brother's actions. Why did he need to marry just because Augustus had changed his mind?

Clenching his fists at his sides, he stormed down the hall, irate from the idea of having to marry.

There will be hell to pay for Augustus when I find him.

CHAPTER 2

“Is the matter of your impending marriage weighing heavily on your mind?” The Dowager Countess of Langhall drew Octavia’s attention back to the soiree with her gentle voice.

The older woman of fifty was wearing an off-white dress with as little adornment as possible. The color complemented her light complexion and rosy cheeks.

Octavia let out a heavy sigh before sipping her punch and surveying the rest of the guests.

How did I allow myself to get caught up in all of this?

She secretly berated her cousin for not trusting her enough and telling her of her plans to run away. If Isolde had told her before acting so rashly, Octavia would have at least been able to go with her, or even help.

Turning her uncommonly deep blue eyes on her godmother, Octavia repeated her sigh and flipped the loose lengths of her raven hair over her shoulder. She had chosen her signature style of having her hair half pinned to the back of her head with bottom sections cascading down her back.

“I just wish that Isolde would have trusted me enough to tell me of her plans. At least then I would have been able to prepare myself for what followed. I feel like a child who got lost in the woods after being abandoned.”

She smoothed the folds of her dark blue dress down her sides and shook her head. Her slender figure and ample bosom complimented the sheer fabric of her dress.

“I know that you and Isolde have always been close, and I also know that you regard her as a younger sister more than a cousin, but I am sure she had her reasons,” Matilda tried to reason with Octavia as she too sipped on her glass of punch.

The women had chosen a semi-quiet corner beside the refreshment table to discuss the matters at hand. None of the other guests seemed to pay them much mind besides the occasional glances and greetings.

“The point is that we are family, and family sticks together instead of running off in the dead of night.” She feigned annoyance while worrying about her cousin at the back of her mind.

What was Isolde so afraid of telling her that she felt the need to keep her in the dark? It was entirely out of character for someone as sensitive and caring as her cousin to leave on a whim and not let any of them know where she was headed. A small part of her wondered what else had happened to drive her cousin into hiding.

“That may be so, but I am more interested in the fact that you even agreed to a match with the duke. I know that you never fancied marrying.”

Matilda’s light brown eyes sparkled mischievously over the rim of her glass as she eyed her goddaughter. Being only slightly shorter than Octavia, who was a tall young woman, she tilted her head up with a knowing smile.

“If you are implying that I am in any way attracted to that cold man, you are mistaken. He may be attractive as the rumors say, but that does not make up for the fact that everyone also says he is a pompous beast. You know very well that I have wanted to put off any kind of marriage prospects for as long as I possibly can. It was

a blessing that Uncle Jack even allowed Isolde to accept a proposal before I did.”

She turned back to the rest of the guests in an attempt to distract her mind.

A string quartet played a soft tune in the background while the rest of the guests filled in through the ballroom doors. Although the soirees at the Nordshire manor were something of an exclusive event, it never stopped Lady Nordshire from inviting half of the ton .

I should have asked to live abroad years ago, so I would not have to marry the Duke now.

“Lady Langhall, it’s such a pleasure to see you here this evening. I see you have brought the stunning Lady Octavia with you,” the Countess of Nordshire approached the two women in her lavish dress and curtsied.

Matilda and Octavia curtsied in unison to their hostess.

“The pleasure is all ours, Lady Nordshire; we would not dream of missing one of your soirees. They are legendary after all.” Matilda smiled warmly at the older woman.

Lady Nordshire was dressed from head to toe in bright green with peacock feathers sticking out the top of her elaborate hairdo. Her aristocratic features gave her an almost abnormally long nose.

“Thank you, that is ever so kind of you. And I hear that congratulations are in order, Lady Octavia. I know that your parents would have been so pleased with a man as handsome as the Duke of Sunderley. Many a young lady has tried to catch his attention and failed. You must tell me what won him over in the end?”

Perhaps those young ladies need to have their heads examined.

Octavia bit back the reply that lingered on the tip of her tongue.

“It was love at first sight—from both sides,” Matilda chimed in before Octavia could respond.

Chocking, Octavia coughed and placed her hand over her mouth before glaring at her godmother.

“Is that so? Where was that first romantic meeting?” Lady Nordshire asked, curiosity sparkling in her eyes.

Octavia glanced at her godmother, who soon intervened, “Oh, my goddaughter tells me that there was a private dinner. There, she laid eyes upon His Grace, and the rest is history.”

“Ah, I see. Of course, we all know that you are the belle of every ball that you attend, Lady Octavia. It is only natural that the Duke would have fallen in love with you. Your beauty is never exaggerated when spoken of among the ton . You make quite the fetching couple; I only wonder why it took him so long?” Lady Nordshire smiled with a far-off look in her eyes.

Octavia was about to correct their hostess when Matilda once again took over the conversation. “Well, naturally they had to wait until the marriage between Isolde and the Duke’s younger brother was settled. It would not have been right for them to steal all of the attention away.”

“Of course not, how silly of me. I am only glad that something good has come to light despite all of the scandals that must be surrounding you all at the moment. I will be waiting for my invitation to your wedding, Lady Octavia. Now if you would both

excuse me, I see there are more of my guests who are waiting,” Lady Nordshire winked at Matilda before sauntering off.

“Would you care to explain?” Octavia rounded on her godmother almost as soon as the woman was out of earshot.

Hooking her arm into Octavia’s, Matilda began to lead her away from the rest of the guests until they reached a quiet corner at the back of the room. “I know that I cannot trust you to respond without sarcasm in situations such as this, but I also had another reason.”

“Was that reason that you have suddenly come down with a mysterious illness that affected your understanding of the truth?” Octavia cocked her head to the side and glared at the woman who had been a motherly figure to her since she was eight.

Matilda smiled at her in the way that she always did when she was enjoying Octavia’s over-the-top reactions. “I do not have to speak to your uncle or even to the Duke and his family to know that there is a very good reason behind the sudden marriage. I was only trying to lay the groundwork for you.”

Shutting her eyes, Octavia shook her head and let out a deep sigh, wondering for the hundredth time how things had changed so quickly.

“I apologize if I sound curt, godmother. You have done nothing but helped thus far. Thank you,” Octavia said as she opened her eyes; despite everything that was happening, Matilda deserved her gratitude.

“Think nothing of it, my child,” Matilda responded warmly.

Octavia glanced around the room wistfully. She had been dreaming of traveling—possibly being a spinster until her uncle Jack came and ripped the rug

from under her feet. She had put up a fight before agreeing, but in the end, she knew it was all for Isolde's sake after all. So, she had to agree.

Deep in her heart, she knew that she still held out hope that Isolde would return and marry Augustus.

“Lady Nordshire is correct in assuming that there is a myriad of scandals and gossip now surrounding both families. While it would not be possible to stop the gossip entirely, it would cunning to distract from the stories with an even better one.” Matilda's face lit up as realization dawned on Octavia.

“I know that I must to play the part of the doting fiancé and wife. To clear the good names of our families, at least.”

Octavia felt her rebellious nature kicking against the concept of being a demure lady of the ton . The last thing she wanted in life was to be submissive and raise a bunch of children in a loveless marriage.

“Even you must admit that it is quite a clever idea. You have always said that you know you must marry eventually. If you are not looking for love, then why not marry the Duke now and play the part of a besotted lover? You love a good adventure, and I keep telling you that there are plenty of ways to gain your freedom in the confines of marriage,” Matilda lowered her voice and smiled at a few of the guests who were passing.

“Confines and freedom are not words that complement each other,” Octavia suddenly felt her chest tightening as she listened to her godmother speak.

As her mother's oldest friend, Matilda had always been in Octavia's life as something of a mentor and even a friend. Her schemes and ability to bend the rules of the ton had often amused Octavia. Yet she could not help but feel constricted and uneasy

when the plans and rule-bending involved her directly.

Softening toward Octavia, Matilda raised her hand and stroked the girl's cheek. "I know things may seem quite scary at present, but I promise that I will be there to guide you every step of the way."

Octavia felt her heart softening a little despite her fear and reservations. "Thank you, I think I just need a bit of fresh air. Everything is happening so quickly; it's all a little overwhelming."

"I understand, as long you do not allow the fear to overwhelm you. You have always been a strong young woman. Remember who you are, and I know that you will be able to face anything that comes your way." Matilda offered her a warm smile and patted her cheek before stepping aside and allowing her to pass.

Marriage offers a different kind of freedom.

She tried to reassure herself as she picked her way through the throng of guests and headed toward an open balcony.

For all her bravery and lust for adventure, Octavia had never pictured herself giving up on her dreams of traveling so soon.

Perhaps the Duke will allow me to travel with my maid or even a companion of his choosing.

The crisp evening air kissed her skin as attempts to reassure herself failed.

It is for Isolde's sake , she reminded herself, once when she returns, or if she ever does, she would wish to marry someone of her choosing.

By marrying the Duke of Sunderley, the ton would soon forget about her cousin's disappearance.

And soon enough, Isolde would come home.

As Octavia looked up at the moon, she held on to the hope that it was not all in vain.

CHAPTER 3

“ T here you are. I was wondering when you would be making an appearance. Looking for your new intended, are we?” Arthur Eagleton came striding towards Simon with a glass of whisky in hand.

The glint in his friend’s eyes let Simon know that he had already imbibed in more than was good for him.

Folding his arms across his chest, Simon allowed the corner of his mouth to tilt into something that very closely resembled a smile. “I know we have been close since Eton, Arthur, but I cannot say that I fancy you in that manner. Thank you very much for your proposal though, I am truly flattered.”

“Are you not sweet, saying you are looking for me when both of us know that it is Lady Octavia’s appearance that you are dreading?” Arthur rolled his eyes and stopped in front of his friend, taking a large sip from his glass.

“Are not you starting a bit early with the whisky this evening?” Simon shot back and eyed the half-empty glass of amber liquid.

At the age of twenty-seven, Arthur had garnered quite a reputation for himself as a rake. His sandy-blond hair, light brown eyes, and friendly face made him somewhat of a favorite with the ladies of the ton.

“Come now, Simon, you know it is never too early for a glass of whisky; besides, I can hold my drink better than any man here.” He downed the last few drops and

placed the glass on the tray of a passing footman before gesturing to the room at large.

It was Simon's turn to roll his eyes as he pushed himself off of the pillar. "That is what you always say then I inevitably end up scraping you off of the floor and dragging you to your chambers.

"That is quite judgmental coming from a man who suddenly finds himself betrothed," Arthur said scathingly. "Tell me, were you going to let me in on your little secret? Or were you waiting for the papers to announce the birth of your first child?"

"There was not any time to tell you about the development. It has only been three days; I have barely had time to process matters myself," Simon grumbled and shook his head.

It had been three days of nonstop planning and relatives congratulating him on what the rest of the ton perceived as the most romantic match of the century.

If only they knew the truth.

His shoulders tensed as he looked over the heads of the rest of the guests. "I have to marry her. You will have heard by now that Augustus has decided to disappear at the most inopportune moment. I have no other choice but to marry the girl and lessen the scandal he has created." He lowered his voice so that only his friend could hear him.

"By God, that is quite a predicament. I can understand now why you were not announcing it from the rooftops." Arthur let out a low whistle. "Augustus certainly owes you his fair share of inheritance when he returns. Or at least a drink." He chuckled at his own joke.

Simon grumbled under his breath and ignored his friend's teasing.

“Cheer up old chap; things are not all that bleak. You are engaged to one of the most beautiful women of the ton. I will be honest with you; I have tried to flirt with her on occasion but to no avail. She is quite the stiff upper lip when it comes to morals and things like that. Perhaps she will be able to break through those iron barriers of yours.” He shot a charming smile at a passing group of young women who giggled and hid behind their fans.

She is not willing to flirt with just any man.

Simon grew slightly impressed despite his resolve not to find her attractive. Any woman who refused to flirt for the sake of flirting was rare enough among the ladies of the ton.

Winking at one of the girls who had caught his attention, Arthur drew Simon’s attention back to their conversation.

“Do you ever think of anything other than women and drinking?” Simon asked him in a scathing tone, wanting to divert the conversation away from himself.

Arthur stood up a little straighter and fixed his cuffs. “I would never dream of thinking of anything else. What would the ladies and the distillers say?” he remarked with a smirk.

“You know, Arthur, you mock me, but one of these days, someone is going to see past all of your jesting,” Simon shot back triumphantly.

His friend did not seem to be paying any attention to what he was saying as Arthur suddenly perked up and smiled at a lady from across the room.

Simon cast his gaze in the direction of Arthur’s attention and noted Lady Trowbridge throwing suggestive glances at his friend.

The widow had often been a favorite flirtation of Arthur's since her husband's passing. Her bright blond hair was piled atop her head in an elaborate updo. The black dress clung to her body like a glove as she skillfully leaned over a table and allowed her bosom to bulge over the low-cut neckline.

"If you would excuse me, there is someone that I have been dying to pay my respects to." Arthur's smile only broadened as he set off toward the woman without waiting for a response.

"Insufferable rake," Simon muttered under his breath, despite his amusement with the situation.

Deep down, he knew that his friend possessed a heart of gold despite his flitting from flirtation to flirtation. Arthur used his rakish ways to keep others at bay as much as Simon treated others with cool indifference.

"There you are, Your Grace, I was wondering if I would find you here this evening." Lady Nordshire approached Simon with a bright smile, echoing Arthur's sentiments from earlier.

"Forgive me, My Lady, I did not wish to disturb you while you were busy entertaining your other, far more esteemed guests." Simon quickly slipped back into his aloof demeanor and forced a smile as he bowed to his hostess.

Lady Nordshire seemed flattered once again despite the lack of compliments in Simon's greeting. "Do not be silly, Your Grace. There is nobody more esteemed than you this evening. You must allow me to square you about. There are so many people who wish to offer you their congratulations." She held out her arm for Simon before he could even protest.

Looking over his shoulder at his friend who was busy guiding Lady Trowbridge out

of the room, he begrudgingly accepted the hostess' offer. Eager masses of ill-informed socialites beamed at him from across the room, bringing a nauseating ache to his stomach.

Three hours had passed before Simon found himself once again leaning against the same pillar he had started at. The sheer number of people he had had to meet and feign conversation with had left him with a tiresome feeling of irritation. His facial muscles were practically stiff from faking a smile.

He scanned the room once more and frowned when he could not catch a glimpse of his intended bride or even his friend.

Did she not attend the soiree this evening?

His annoyance grew at her absence. They were two days away from getting married, and she did not seem to be upholding her end of the bargain. There were social expectations that needed to be met if they were to present a convincing front.

"Your Grace, where have you gotten to?" Lady Nordshire's voice carried over the heads of the rest of the guests.

He quickly looked up to see the hostess craning her head over the other guests. The wilting peacock feathers gave the distinct appearance of a tall, wobbly bird.

Oh, Lord, I cannot take it anymore.

Simon's eyes darted around the room before spotting a clear path between the throng of guests. Ducking under a tray that was being carried by a footman, he made his escape and entered the same hall he had seen Arthur disappearing into a few hours earlier. At least if anyone came searching for him, he would be able to use the excuse that he was looking for his friend.

Picking a direction that seemed most likely, he headed toward a door where a sliver of light was pouring into the empty hallway. He assumed that Arthur would be finished with any kind of compromising position if the door had been left ajar.

“I thought I might find you in here...” Simon paused with his hand against the wood when sounds of retching met his ears. “What in God’s name is going on in here?”

He pushed open the door to find his friend bent over a potted plant.

The large fern in question seemed to be on the receiving end of unwanted fertilizer.

“I only gave him a little brandy; I did not know he had had so much at the beginning of the evening. He had barely had a few sips when he started to look rather green,” Lady Trowbridge explained apologetically with a sheepish look before biting her lower lip anxiously.

Simon noted her untidy appearance and the smudged edges of her lipstick and wondered how far they had gotten before Arthur became ill.

Arthur retched uncontrollably again with an ungodly sound that seemed to emanate from the pit of his stomach. “Someone is trying to poison me.” He lifted his face ever so slightly to reveal his flushed cheeks before heaving again.

Rolling his eyes, Simon came forward and patted him on the back. “Nobody is trying to poison you; I tried to warn you earlier in the evening that you needed to slow down.”

Coming up straight, Arthur wiped his mouth with a handkerchief. “I was only trying to lighten the mood. You were being such a downer with your talk about forced marriage and obligation. You should all be grateful that I did not throw myself off the nearest balcony.” He stumbled toward an armchair and slumped into the cushions

with his face buried in his hands.

Lady Trowbridge instantly came to his aid with a fresh handkerchief and began to mop his brow as his head lulled back. “Forgive me, Your Grace. I have not yet offered my congratulations on your impending nuptials.” She gave Simon a polite smile while wiping the sweat from Arthur’s brow.

“Thank you, but no congratulations are needed. The marriage is one of convenience. I would not be going ahead with it if it were not for my grandmother’s illness and the fact that my younger brother has shirked his responsibilities.” The long evening finally wore on him as he grew tired of keeping up the charade.

The woman seemed taken aback as she paused for a second before wiping the rest of Arthur’s face. “I am sorry to hear of your grandmother’s ill health. Surely the match is not entirely unagreeable, Your Grace? Lady Octavia is a smart young lady, not to mention beautiful and well-bred.”

Clenching his jaw, Simon stood and looked around the room for a pitcher of water. “While I do not know her very well, Lady Octavia is more than likely an innocent debutant and a saccharine virgin. Our marriage is nothing more than a formality to save the family’s honor.”

Hurried footsteps from outside the door drew their attention away from their conversation as both Lady Trowbridge and Simon looked up.

Shrugging it off as a passing footman, Simon watched as Lady Trowbridge turned back to Arthur.

“That is quite harsh, Your Grace; I am sure that the young lady is much more than that.” She barely hid her resentment at his cool remarks.

Simon let out a sigh of irritation. “Be that as it may, the marriage is a formality and a duty. If you will excuse me, I need some fresh air. I will send up a footman discreetly to deal with the aftermath.” He bowed politely and exited the room in search of a little quiet.

Why did everyone feel the need to romanticize the marriage that he did not want in the first place?

He grumbled to himself before spotting an open terrace, and he headed straight for it. His relief at having a moment to himself was short-lived as he spotted a figure on the corner of the quiet balcony.

“I beg your pardon; I did not mean to intrude.” He cleared his throat apologetically and took a step back.

The pit of his stomach knotted with a strange sensation when a beautiful woman stepped into view.

Her beautiful blue eyes, which reminded him of a cat, flashed with anger as a light breeze blew strands of her raven hair across her face. “There is no need to apologize, Your Grace; I will leave.” She lifted her dress and attempted to step past him when he blocked her path.

“Please do not let me drive you away; I can leave if you wish me to.” He examined the veiled expression on her face, wondering if she was angry at him because of their impending marriage.

“That is quite considerate of you.” She cocked her head to the side in defiance and lifted her chin, narrowing her eyes in what seemed like a challenge.

An unexpected wave of desire rushed through his body as his eyes moved over her

body in the dim light of the moon. Her almost olive skin shone against the fabric of her dark blue dress. Just for a moment, he felt as if he would have been utterly amenable to her beauty if the circumstances had been any different.

Her full, kissable lips parted ever so slightly as she cocked an eyebrow in his direction.

Realizing that he had been staring at her, Simon cleared his throat again. “Is something the matter?”

“Nothing at all, Your Grace. I am merely contemplating my future as a saccharine virgin. That was what you called me, was it not?”

“Who are you?” Simon felt a wave of shock run through his body when he suddenly realized who she must be.

Her eyes flashed with anger as she proudly lifted her chin in the air. “Do you not recognize your saccharine virgin, Your Grace? I am Octavia Townshend.”

CHAPTER 4

“One would think that you already knew who I was. You seemed to have formed quite a grand opinion of me for someone who has never met me,” Octavia said.

The pit of her stomach fluttered uncontrollably as she glared at him. His dark hair, piercing green eyes, and rugged handsomeness had often made women of the ton swoon in droves. Yet she could not bring herself to look past his cool indifference. Why was he always so stoic?

Her heart raced with anger and a mixture of confusion as Octavia glared at her future husband. How could her uncle not see how cold he truly was? Her chest rose and fell with every breath as she stood her ground. The man was so infuriating with his attitude of superiority. Yet she could not help but feel drawn in by his eyes.

She attempted to ignore the fluttering sensations in the pit of her stomach. There was no time to be distracted by lust when the man had all but insulted her without even knowing who she really was as a person. They had had not even spoken in the past, yet he had summed her up as a saccharine virgin.

“Were you listening to my private conversations at the door?” Simon’s light green eyes darkened to an almost emerald hue.

The contrasting layers of green reminded her of a stormy sea when the waves raged against one another.

“I hardly think you are in a position to be accusing me of eavesdropping when you

were the one dishing out insults as if they were canapés. I was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time!”

Heat flooded her cheeks when his eyes swept over her body and rested for a moment on her chest. Biting her lip, she shifted slightly to the side in an attempt to slip his gaze.

“That is no excuse; you were listening to a private conversation, and you should have moved on the second you realized that. And as for your accusation, I was merely speaking in the heat of the moment. I did not...” His words trailed off when Octavia snapped at him, her eyes wild with anger and frustration.

“Spare me your cheap explanations, Your Grace. You owe me no apologies as I will not apologize for simply walking past an open door. This house does not belong to you, nor do you have the right to control my actions.”

She sliced decisively through the air with her hand, unwilling to back down despite the strange feelings that she experienced in his presence.

He has no control over me until we are married.

She felt her pulse racing again when he held her gaze for a little too long. “And I will add that you do not need to worry about my saccharinity, Your Grace. I did not wish to marry such a cold and aloof duke. In fact, I would never have even considered the proposal if it had not been for my cousin and the predicament she now finds herself in. Your brother has made matters difficult for all of us!” She felt her anger flaring again when his eyes darkened.

“My brother? It is not just my brother who is at fault here. Tell me, has your cousin sent word as to her whereabouts yet? If not, I will implore you to keep any accusations to a minimum. As far as I know, there are two parties that have

contributed to the downfall of that arrangement. Who is to say that my brother did not find your cousin wanting?" He raised his voice and took a step forward, his tall stature towering over her in the moment.

"I hardly think that my cousin should be found wanting. She more than likely detested the arrangement as much as I detest this one." She noted the flash of anger in his eyes at her words.

"Do you think that I want to marry you?" The coolness in his voice washed over her like an icy wind.

Feeling her breath catch in her throat, Octavia allowed her eyes to pierce his. "Then perhaps you should use this great control that you seem to have over everything and everyone to find another solution, Your Grace. Perhaps there is a far less saccharine young virgin that you can use as a sacrifice for your brother's folly."

Her words seemed to have struck a chord with him as the Duke clenched his jaw, showing the strong line of his jaw in the light of the moon.

There is no use in arguing with him.

Octavia felt her heart fluttering uncontrollably in his presence. Wanting to avoid any further confrontation that Octavia feared would end her snapping, she took a deep breath and pushed past him.

There were many times in her life when she had stood her ground and fought while remaining calm, yet the Duke seemed to bring the worst out in her with little to no effort at all.

"You will be my wife; the arrangements have been made. Neither of us can back out now even if we wanted to. You are mine whether you like it or not..." he growled at

her in passing.

The sudden heat in his voice caught her off guard as she failed to notice the step leading back into the house.

Her eyes widened in shock when she felt her foot hooking on the hem of her dress. Panic set in when her arms flailed in the air in search of something to hold onto as she shut her eyes.

Moments seemed to pass when strong hands gripped her waist and kept her suspended above the floor.

“You need to be more careful,” Simon growled under his breath, his hands tightening on her slender waist.

Octavia opened her eyes and lowered her arms to find the brilliant depths of his irises staring into hers.

She was not even sure when and how her body had turned, but she was staring into his eyes as if he were dipping her amidst a waltz.

His face and lips were mere inches from hers as her chest rose and fell in rapid succession. Her cheeks flooded with heat when she realized that she was clutching his arms a little too tightly.

His eyes swept down her face, taking in the slender curve of her neck before lingering on her cleavage that had almost escaped the confines of her corset and undergarments.

“I would not have fallen if you hadn’t unnerved me so,” her voice was breathy and barely audible above a whisper as she felt unable to move beneath his gaze.

The feel of his arms holding her firmly in place sent a shiver of unwanted pleasure down her spine. The visceral response that she seemed to experience in his presence was unlike anything she had ever experienced before.

The warmth of his hands moving up her back seeped through the fabric of her dress as he pulled her up straight.

Her lips parted with a gentle gasp when he kept her in place, the tips of his fingers brushing the flesh of her back where the fabric ended. His strong arms seemed to create something of a cage around her waist that warded off the chill from the breeze.

“I hardly think that you can blame me for your clumsiness.” His voice seemed deeper as he leaned in closer with his eyes fixed on her lips.

An almost arcane hunger lingered in his eyes as he tightened his grip. His strong jawline moved a fraction of an inch when his lips parted with a breath.

She suddenly snapped out of her daze and began to panic.

What am I doing?

She gripped his upper arms and pushed him away just as his lips brushed hers. Her sudden gesture seemed to snap him from his daze, and he took a step back and cleared his throat.

“Please excuse me; my godmother will be looking for me soon.” Octavia lifted her dress and rushed past him without waiting for a reply.

Her heart raced almost as fast as her feet carried her away from the Duke of Sunderley, and her thoughts raced just as quickly as she hurried down the hall back to the party.

Never in her life had she been so tempted to allow a man to kiss her. The worst part of the entire experience was that she had wanted to kiss him too. Their lips had come dangerously close to touching before her good sense had kicked in.

I will need to watch myself around him.

What was I thinking?

Simon felt his breathing deepen as he watched Octavia disappear down the hall. Her raven hair and dark dress fluttered behind her as she hurried to close the distance between them.

Everything had happened so fast that he was not quite sure what had happened. One minute he had been reaching for her, and then his lips were almost pressed against his.

I wanted to kiss her.

His body froze in place when he realized that he had not been the only one who seemed to have wanted the kiss. Octavia had not pulled away until the very end, and there was the fluttering of her lashes before she pushed him away.

Was she preparing for the kiss in anticipation?

The sudden thought shocked him almost as much as the realization of his still-present arousal. Shifting his legs, Simon attempted to calm his thoughts and tame the bulge that was pressing against his breeches.

He had been with his fair share of women in the past, albeit far more discreetly than his brother and Arthur. Yet there was something utterly alluring about Octavia that sparked his desires and muddled his mind. He had never had a problem controlling

himself when it came to any other woman.

Octavia.

Saying her name had seemed so natural to him that he had not even realized what he was doing. The warmth of her skin still lingered on the tips of his fingers as he balled his hands into fists and unclenched them again. The faint scent of her perfume lingered on his coat as he tried to pinpoint the smell. It was far sweeter than lavender, yet he could not place his finger on it. There were notes of romance and intrigue that reminded him of the night.

“Your Grace?” Lady Trowbridge called to him from somewhere down the hall.

Turning to the side, Simon noticed his friend with his arm draped over his lover’s shoulder. He briefly wondered how much they had seen before Arthur opened his mouth in a drunken slur.

“Was that Lady Octavia that I saw running away just now?” He hiccupped halfway through her name and laughed.

Shaking his head, Simon closed the distance between them and shifted his friend’s weight onto his own shoulders.

His companion gave the Duke a grateful smile as she passed him over as if he were a parcel.

“Do not avoid my question just because I am inebriated. Was that Lady Octavia that we saw rushing past you?” Arthur narrowed his eyes in suspicion while trying to focus on his friend.

The blurriness in his eyes let Simon know that there was still a chance that he could

convince him otherwise.

“I think you have had far too many glasses of drink to assume anything right now. How many other hallucinations have you seen this evening?” Simon shifted slightly as he allowed his friend to lean on him.

Arthur’s brow wrinkled into a frown. “That is a good point; I did wonder if Lady Octavia had a twin sister that I was not aware of. I think I had better get some rest. Seeing two women running away from you at the same time did seem like quite a stretch for you. You are not even that handsome.” He looked up at Simon with a sheepish grin.

Lady Trowbridge suppressed a giggle before biting on her lip.

She cannot possibly find this alluring.

Simon resisted the urge to roll his eyes, yet he could not help but notice the warm affection in the widow’s gaze. She seemed to not only flirt with Arthur but to tolerate all of his quirks. Then again, Arthur did possess the innate ability to win anyone over.

“I think we had better exit through the back door. Would you ask one of the footmen to bring the carriage around? I will take him back to my lodgings where he can sleep it off.” Simon asked her respectfully, half dragging his friend past her when Arthur decided to fall asleep.

“I think that is a good idea.” She nodded in agreement with a final glance at Arthur.

The Duke noted her hesitation as she lingered for a moment.

“Is something the matter?” He raised an eyebrow in question.

“I wanted to reassure you that nothing I saw or heard this evening will be remembered. If anything, Arthur has taught me the value of discretion. His present state obviously does not help my point.” She suppressed another giggle when Arthur grumbled in his sleep.

Simon looked at her differently as he realized that she was more than just a silly flirt. She was a woman of good heart who was simply mourning the death of her husband.

“I do think you were wrong, though, judging by what I overheard. Lady Octavia is far more than a saccharine virgin. She will surprise you if you give her half the chance.”

Lady Trowbridge curtsied politely and left as the Duke made his way down the hallway under the weight of Arthur.

Confusion set in once again as Simon watched her leave. Octavia’s response had certainly caught him off guard. He had not realized how strong-willed and fiery she was.

Shifting Arthur’s weight once again, he carried his friend down the hall in the opposite direction.

None of the servants seemed to bother with them as they made their way through passages and out the back door where a carriage was waiting. Simon had barely placed his friend in his seat when Arthur began to sing at the top of his lungs.

“Oh, what I would give for a love like yours! The world would look upon us both with such envy if they knew the sweetness of your skin!” His voice reached an octave that would have made any nearby dogs howl in pain.

“It astounds me how you manage to charm so many women,” Simon grumbled under his breath and shut the carriage door before looking at the driver and signaling for

him to move on. "I will get another carriage; take him to my lodgings and instruct the butler to put him to bed."

The man atop the carriage in dark blue livery nodded his acknowledgment and flicked the reins.

The horses began to move, pulling the carriage behind them as Arthur continued to sing of the sorrows of his heart.

Simon took one last look at the carriage before turning back to the house. He was just about to go back inside when his breath caught in his chest. There in the distance was Lady Octavia entering the carriage with an older woman.

She is leaving already.

His mouth suddenly felt dry as he wondered if she was trying to run away from him. He quickly shook his head and headed back toward the house. Out of everything that had happened between them during the evening, the most surprising of all was the fact that he had felt a pang of disappointment.

Did I want to speak to her again?

He questioned the odd sensations she had awoken in him as he chose a path that would lead him away from the mansion. He needed a moment to compose his thoughts before he could face anyone else.

Roses.

He realized why Lady Octavia had smelled so sweet in his arms almost as soon as he entered the garden.

She smelled like the hundreds of roses glistening with evening dew beneath the light of the moon.

Simon had smelled roses before in his life. But why did her scent stand out so much to him?

And for that reason, he had to stay as far away from her as possible.

CHAPTER 5

“Octavia, will you please tell me what happened?” her godmother asked, her eyes searching Octavia’s face as she settled into the seat opposite her goddaughter’s.

“You come rushing back to the party after hours of keeping to yourself, and now, you will not even stop to tell me what has happened. I had to make our excuses to Lady Nordshire when you suddenly disappeared again,” Matilda added.

“Nothing happened, I simply wish to get home,” Octavia lied and tried to catch her breath. The last thing she wanted at present was to discuss the situation with anyone else.

“Dearest, I have known you since you were born. I can tell when something has caused you distress,” Matilda lowered her voice and gently probed.

How is it that she can always see through me?

She felt grateful toward her mother’s oldest friend despite wanting to keep the experience to herself. Her mother would have wanted her to speak to Matilda if anything was wrong. “I met the Duke while I was catching my breath on the terrace.”

Matilda bit her lips as she wrinkled her nose, a habit she possessed whenever she was anxious. “I take it that the meeting did not go as smoothly as one would hope?” She placed her hands in her lap and sighed as the carriage rattled forward, jostling them both in their seats.

“Smoothly? That would imply that there had been even the slightest bit of civility in the exchange. The man is far more brutish and insufferable than I had previously imagined. Never in all my years had I ever thought that anyone could be so pig-headed and... and...” Her words faltered as images of their almost kiss flooded her mind.

The nearness of his lips to hers. The feel of his fingers on her skin that had sent a rush of bumps over her skin. Everything about the interaction had made her feel helpless in his presence. Yet she had stood there, rooted to the spot as if he were capable of commanding her body.

“Would dashing be the word that you are looking for?” Matilda teased her gently when Octavia seemed to still be at a loss for words.

“Dashing is not quite the word that I was looking for.” She felt her cheeks filling with heat despite the anger she felt toward him. How had he gotten her into such a state?

Matilda shook her head and barely suppressed a laugh. “You hardly know the man, Octavia. Some people hide their feelings behind masks. It is safer that way. Showing others how you truly feel can pose quite a challenge when you do not wish to get hurt.”

She turned her face toward the window and looked into the darkness.

Octavia was not sure if she was mistaken, but there was something in the older woman’s eyes that made her sad. “Is there someone that you fancy?” she asked gently.

Her question seemed to catch her godmother off guard as she spluttered and blushed. “Why on earth would you ask such a silly question? I have already had a husband. I can assure you that those matters are the furthest thing from my mind. We were

talking about you and the Duke. Do you not find him as handsome as the rest of the young ladies of the ton?"

Octavia examined her face for a moment before answering. There was something in Matilda's gaze that made her curious about her reactions. "The Duke is handsome, there is no denying that, but I was hoping for more than just looks."

"Wealth, a title? What more could there be than all of that?" Matilda tilted her head to the side in confusion. "Have you not said that romance and flattery were things that belonged in books? You have made it known for many years that you do not wish to marry for love. Have you had a sudden change of heart?"

"I have not; you know very well that I have never thought that a husband and a marriage would make me happy. There is so much more out there in the world than anything that being bound to one man forever can bring." Octavia felt her heart clenching in longing for the dreams that would no longer be recognized.

What kind of 'freedom' could possibly come from having to obey a husband for the rest of your life? If he did not want her to travel, then that would be the end of her dreams.

Reaching over, Matilda reached for Octavia's hand. "Dearest, things are not as bad as they seem. You might even end up liking the Duke—perhaps even fall in love with him. These things take time; very few couples fall in love with one another before the wedding. Promise me that you will give the match time before throwing in the towel. You are doing such a brave and noble thing for your cousin and family. You deserve happiness for your sacrifice alone."

Her godmother's words did little to ease her concerns as Octavia offered her a gentle smile that did not reach her eyes.

I do not think I can fall in love with him.

Her heart skipped a beat despite her reservations when images of his lips inches away from hers flitted into her mind.

No, she could not fall in love with him.

Simon's finger drew a path down her lips, traveling over her neck before dipping between her breasts. The heat from his touch traveled over her breasts and reached her nipples, making them press against her corset.

"Octavia..." His voice was low and deep, reminding her of a rushing river during a storm.

Bolts of exhilaration shot through her body when he pulled her up straight and stared into her eyes. The feel of his fingers gently running down her arm made her lips part with a silent gasp. The differing shades of green in his eyes were almost hauntingly spellbinding to her.

"I want you, Octavia..." His words trailed off once again as he drew her closer, his lips brushing hers before his hands worked their way up her sides.

"Say my name again." The words came from her lips without her even needing to think. There was something utterly captivating about the way that Simon said her name. She could listen to him speak for hours if only he would allow her to be his wife.

"Octavia... Octavia for goodness's sake, you must wake up!"

Opening her eyes with reluctance, it took a moment or two to realize that she was in her room and not on the balcony at the ball.

Matilda shot her a sympathetic look with her lips pursed before moving away from the bed and allowing the maids to come in. Several young maids carried bolts of fine fabric against the far wall beside the mahogany dresses.

“What were you dreaming about, dear? You seemed quite content with whatever it was. I was beginning to think that I would not be able to rouse you before noon,” Matilda remarked distractedly, examining the bolts of fabric with a great deal of attention.

The Duke. I was dreaming of the Duke.

Octavia felt her cheeks flooding with heat as she sat up straight in bed. Her mind had obviously been playing through the previous night’s events, but there had been one key factor that had changed. She had wanted Simon to marry her. His hands gliding over her body had awoken a carnal need within her that longed to be touched. Reaching for a pillow, she placed it on her lap and buried her face, hiding from the entanglement of confusion.

What does all of this mean?

She tried to reassure herself that dreaming of Simon in such an intimate manner did not mean that she was falling in love with him. How could she be? He had been just as insufferable as ever during their meeting. He was an attractive man, and that was all it was; many women had swooned for him in the past. Her mind seemed to think that she needed to as well.

Her godmother broke into her thoughts once more, “Hurry and put on your dressing gown, dearest. We do not have much time. The dressmaker has agreed to place your dress at the front of the queue, but we must hurry and choose a fabric. These are all the colors of which she already has dresses in your size. She would only need to make a few minor alterations if we choose one of these.”

Bringing her head up groggily and tangling her fingers in her messy hair, Octavia blinked at the bolts of fabric in her room.

“Why are we doing this in my chambers instead of at the dressmaker’s shop?” Her voice was still heavy with sleep.

“I twisted your uncle’s arm and had the dressmaker send over her choices of fabric for your dress. I thought you might like a bit of privacy considering the fact that half the ton is speaking of the sudden engagement. You looked so flustered last night when Lady Nordshire approached us.” Matilda ran her hand over a pearl-colored fabric with her back to the bed.

Swinging her slender legs over the side of the bed, Octavia reached for the silk robe that hung over a chair. “That was quite considerate of you, thank you. You must tell me how you get it right with my uncle; he only ever seems to listen to you,” she remarked groggily and headed toward the other end of the room.

Matilda laughed. “Your uncle is just like any other man; you need to know how to speak to them.”

“Then you must possess a special talent. Uncle Jack is a bear with a sore foot at the best of times.” Octavia spotted a pot of tea that had been left on a tray beside the window and headed directly toward it.

“He is not that bad; he cares deeply about rules and propriety, to be sure, but he possesses a heart of gold.” Her godmother’s voice seemed softer whenever she spoke of Octavia’s paternal uncle. “You know he did not even hesitate to take you in the second your parents passed in that tragic accident. I take my hat off to any man who devoted his life to raising his daughter as well as his niece, not to mention the fact that he did it all with love.”

Octavia felt a little sheepish about grumbling when her uncle had been nothing but kind to her for all of her life. There were times when he could be a stickler for the rules, yet he had been kind to her for as far back as she could recall. Isolde had grown up without a mother when Uncle Jack's wife passed while giving birth.

Isolde.

Her heart clenched when Octavia realized that Isolde still had not sent word about her whereabouts. She wondered what had happened to make her push even her closest cousin away. They had always treated each other as sisters, yet Octavia was beginning to wonder if perhaps Isolde had not felt that way.

"I think that pearl would suit you best." Matilda came forward carrying a swatch of pearl lace and held it up to Octavia's face as she sipped on her cup of tea. "What do you think, dearest?"

"Whatever you think best. I have never had an eye for fashion, and I personally do not care about the wedding. Simon will not care what I am wearing; I can assure you of that." She swallowed her tea and placed the cup back on the table.

"Simon? Since when do you refer to the Duke by his name?" The note of surprise and teasing in her godmother's voice did not go unnoticed.

Turning around with a cheeky grin that she hoped would hide her embarrassment, Octavia faced her godmother. "Since I am to be his wife. Was it not you in the carriage last night who asked me to give the match a fighting chance?"

Matilda held her gaze for a moment before allowing the corner of her mouth to hook into a knowing smile. Closing the distance between them, she held up another swatch of fabric to her face. "On second thought, I think that champagne might be a better choice. The rich tones will go nicely with your skin tone, and the fabric is just as

vibrant as you.”

Staring into the other women’s eyes, Octavia wondered if Matilda could see that she was trying to conceal something. “Aunt Matilda, have you ever been in love?” she asked her in a quiet voice, wondering what it would feel like to harbor feelings for a man.

She was more than certain that she and Simon would never fall in love, yet she still wondered what the sensation would feel like.

Her godmother swallowed hard before pursing her lips and turning her back on Octavia to sort through the fabrics. “Of course, I have; I was married for quite a few years before my husband’s passing.”

“And what was it like? I do not mean to pry; I just want to know.” Octavia felt a strange sensation in the pit of her stomach as if hundreds of butterflies were spreading their wings.

Matilda came up straight after reaching for a swatch of fabric on the floor. “It’s strange at times. Sometimes the person can frustrate you so much that you never wish to see them ever again. Yet you never seem to be able to get enough of that person. They occupy most of your thoughts and even manage to enter your dreams.” Her eyes softened so much that color almost changed.

Lifting her hand to her abdomen, Octavia attempted to stifle the fluttering. She had never wondered what love and attraction meant, but her mind was filled with questions that almost drove her to the point of exhaustion.

“It’s just nerves dear; you will feel better once the ceremony is over. You and the Duke will settle into a routine and get to know one another soon enough. Do not worry yourself with questions of love. You will have security and stability enough

with the Duke. If love develops from that, then you will be twice as lucky.”

She offered Octavia an encouraging smile and turned her attention back to the fabrics.

What if it doesn’t?

Octavia’s mind swam with questions as she folded her arms around her middle and chewed the inside of her cheek.

What if the Duke expected her to fall in love with him? They had not even spoken to each other long enough to ascertain what the other’s expectations were. She hoped and prayed that some semblance of an understanding could be reached between them.

One thing was for certain, she, Octavia Townshend, would not be falling in love with the Duke.

You are mine.

His words on the balcony made her heart flutter uncontrollably.

The woman both turned toward the door when a knock drew their attention.

“Is everyone decent?” Her uncle’s voice was partially muffled by the door.

Ensuring that her robe was securely fastened around her waist, Octavia called back.

“You may enter, Uncle Jack.”

Matilda suddenly cleared her throat and fixed her hair before continuing to fidget with the bolts of fabric.

“I was hoping you would be up already.” The Earl of Winthorpe stuck his head

around the door and smiled before entering the room. His black hair that had been slicked back was peppered with grey.

“Of course, she is up; she is a lady after all.” Matilda turned to him and raised an eyebrow.

Octavia noted the twinkle in her godmother’s eyes despite the seriousness on her face.

Jack narrowed his eyes at the bolts of fabric behind Matilda. “I can see that the money I gave for a dress is being put to good use. Do try and leave me with a penny when you are done,” he remarked seriously, yet Octavia couldn’t help but notice the lack of force behind his words. Her mother’s eldest friend had always been in their lives, yet it was only recently that Octavia had started noticing a change between the two.

Shaking her head, Matilda turned back to the bolts of fabric while muttering under her breath.

Her uncle shook his head and addressed Octavia, “Have you heard from your cousin at all?”

“No, I am afraid that I haven’t,” she admitted with a heavy heart.

The pain in his eyes was clearly evident when Matilda turned to him with a worried look. “I was hoping that she would have at least reached out to you. I have doubled my efforts in trying to find her. In the meantime, I must reiterate how thankful, and proud I am of you. Your cousin has left us in quite a situation. You are the shining star that will pull us out of all of this.” He lifted his head proudly despite the sadness in his eyes regarding his daughter.

Octavia swallowed hard and forced a smile.

There was no possible way she could back out now. Not when her uncle had painted her as the family's only hope.

For Isolde's sake , she reminded herself, I must do it for her .

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CHAPTER 6

Simon cleared his throat and took up his stance at the front of the altar, patiently awaiting the arrival of Lady Octavia.

I am going to be a husband.

The thought alone made him clench his jaw as images of his father on that fateful night flashed before his eyes. Marriage was nothing more than a farce created by society. He could not believe that he had allowed himself to be backed into a corner.

Coming forward, the Dowager Duchess sniffed back her tears. “You look ever so handsome in your tails. It does my heart good to see you standing here in front of the altar.” She reached up to fix his shirt and slapped his hands away when he began to fuss.

“I hesitate to remind you, Grandmamma, that I am doing this out of obligation and nothing more,” he grumbled under his breath and rolled his eyes when she ignored his protests, dusting off his shoulders.

“Then hesitate some more, dear. Do not ruin this day for me now that it is here.” Bernice shook her head, despite the broad smile that curved her lips.

Simon eyed his grandmother suspiciously, from her rosy cheeks to the straightness of her posture. She had chosen a lemon-yellow dress for the day and had pinned her hair in an elaborate braid. Her eyes practically shone with flecks of gold as she barely stopped herself from crying.

“You seem to have made a miraculous recovery in the past few days. Are you sure that you were ill to begin with?” His jaw clenched as his suspicion grew.

“Hush now. I am not sure what you are accusing me of, but I plead innocence. Good news can cure a person’s heart just as quickly as bad news can damage it.”

She gave him a final swat of love on his upper arm before returning to her seat in the front pew.

“If only all the doctors in London knew of your epiphany,” Simon grumbled, shaking his head in annoyance when he realized that there was every chance his grandmother had been faking her illness. It was just like her to meddle and come up with a scheme.

“How are you holding up?” Arthur chuckled as he came to his side. He wore a fresh, brown suit, and his hair had been combed to the side. Yet none of these factors hid the fact that he was once again nursing a headache.

Simon decided to ignore his friend’s obvious late night. “Much better than you. There is no need for everyone to keep checking up on me when I am doing this out of obligation. I am neither nervous nor scared.”

Arthur gave him a look of exasperation before patting him on the back. “One protests a little too much for someone who does not care.”

The Duke was about to retort when the large oak doors at the entrance to the chapel suddenly opened. “I do not...”

And he quieted as his eyes fell on Lady Octavia.

She looked like a vision in champagne satin. Her raven hair hung down her back in an intricate braid that had been adorned with hundreds of little white flowers. He

could not believe how brilliantly her bright blue eyes shone in the light. Their distinctive shape was visible down the aisle even from beneath her lace veil.

Simon tore his gaze away from her when Arthur leaned in to whisper before returning to his seat.

“You might want to close your mouth, Simon; people might just think you are marrying her for something other than obligation.” Arthur chuckled.

Shooting him a lethal look, Simon lifted his gaze to Octavia just as she reached the top of the aisle.

“I am sorry if I kept you waiting,” she apologized before placing her hands in his.

“Not... not at all.” His mouth suddenly felt dry as he looked into her beautiful eyes.

Why cannot I think straight?

He felt like kicking himself for stuttering like a fool in her presence. There was something about the light in the large chapel that made her naturally tanned skin glow with a halo-like effect.

“Now that we are all here, we can start the ceremony,” the Vicar spoke from the pulpit, making Simon flinch. He had been so distracted that he had not even noticed the Vicar’s arrival.

“We are here today to join two souls on holy matrimony, so without further ado, and if there are no objections...” He lowered his gaze and scrutinized the small group that gathered.

The Dowager Duchess beamed up at them while Arthur shifted in his seat. The Earl

of Winthorpe sat proudly with a woman, whom Simon presumed was his bride's godmother, at his side.

“Very well then, we shall begin with the exchange of vows. Do you, Simon Wakefield, Duke of Sunderley, take this young woman to be my wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness or in health, to love and to cherish, 'til death do you part, according to God's holy ordinance; thereto plight your troth?”

The Vicar stopped and waited expectantly, looking down his nose with a serious expression.

His heart raced as Simon looked back at Octavia, who had parted her lips ever so slightly.

“I do.” His heart raced even faster when he realized that he'd be kissing her perfect lips in a matter of moments.

The Vicar's voice echoed through the church as he continued with the ceremony. “And do you, Octavia Townshend, take this man to be thy wedded husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness or in health, to love and to cherish, 'til death do you part, according to God's holy ordinance; thereto plight your troth?”

Her chest rose and fell in a steady rhythm as she took a deep breath. “I do,” she answered after a brief pause.

Why am I relieved?

Simon realized he had been holding his breath when a sharp pain made him exhale. There had been such a brief pause before her answer, yet it had felt like an eternity to

him.

“Then, dearly beloved, I now pronounce the Duke of Sunderley and his beautiful bride, the Duchess of Sunderley, husband and wife.” He took a step back and bowed his head respectfully. “You may now seal your marital agreement with a kiss.”

Simon could hear his heart pounding in his chest as he took a step forward and tilted his head to the side.

Octavia’s eyes were closed, her naturally long lashes brushing her cheeks as she waited for the kiss.

His breathing deepened when he closed his eyes and pressed his lips against hers. The kiss was soft and chaste at first but quickly turned into something more when he felt her respond. Her lips pressed into his before parting ever so slightly.

Simon’s hand moved up her arm and drew her closer until loud applause drew them apart.

The look of surprise that he saw in her eyes mirrored the shock that he felt. Her expression made it evident to him that the kiss had caught her off guard as much as it had for him. There was no denying the fact that the moment they had shared was more than just good.

“I cannot believe we are finally here.” His grandmother interrupted the moment between them with her almost uncontrollable sobs.

Octavia gave the older woman a gentle smile as she came forward to embrace her. “There is no need to cry, Your Grace,” she spoke to the Dowager Duchess in such a gentle tone that Simon felt as if he was suddenly seeing her in a different light.

Has she always been this sweet and gentle?

He swallowed hard and licked over his lips when he suddenly realized that he may have been wrong in the way he thought of her.

“Please, you may call me either Bernice or Grandmamma now. I want you to feel at home in our family. Will you allow me to call you Octavia? You have such a beautiful name.” His grandmother seemed to regain her composure as she smiled at them both.

“If you wish, Grandmamma Bernice.” Octavia gracefully accepted the gesture that had been offered to her.

The Earl and his companion stepped forward and offered their congratulations when it seemed as if Bernice was about to burst into tears once again.

“It is wonderful to make your acquaintance, Your Grace. I am only sorry that it has taken so long. I am the Dowager Countess of Langhall, Matilda Huntington, and Octavia’s godmother.” There was something in her eyes that made the introduction almost sound as if the woman were threatening him. She looked to the side and smiled when the Earl embraced his niece. “She is a lovely bride, do you not think?”

Simon struggled to read the woman’s facial expression as he swallowed.

“She is; I promise you that she will be looked after. You have my word.” He spoke truthfully, realizing that Octavia’s godmother was acting protectively toward someone she loved.

Turning back to him, she smiled. “I know because if she is not loved and cherished, I am the only person who is able to convince her uncle of anything. I will not be pleading your case with him if she ever so much as gives us a hint of her

displeasure.”

Her lips were smiling while her eyes glinted with something that could have easily been mistaken for amusement and teasing.

Arthur let out a low whistle and came forward when Matilda moved on to embrace Octavia. “That lady is both fascinatingly scary and wonderful all at the same time. Should you think she would fancy a flirtation with me?”

He nudged Simon in the side when he stood rooted to the spot.

“No, I do not think so. Matilda Huntington is an honest woman. I may have only just met her, but I can assure you that a woman of her caliber is not to be trifled with.” He felt a deep liking for the woman and her need to protect her goddaughter.

“Well, that’s a pity.” Arthur shook his head and walked off behind the others, clapping his hands together as he announced his enthusiasm for the wedding breakfast.

“I see you met my godmother.” Octavia came to his side, averting her eyes when he met her gaze.

Simon’s eyes wandered over her flushed cheeks and down her chest where her neckline dipped.

“She is quite the woman,” he answered gruffly, wanting to keep his thoughts away from the swelling of Octavia’s breasts.

His response elicited a nervous smile from his bride. “She is. What did she say to you?”

Simon cleared his throat and offered Octavia his arm as they began to walk down the aisle. “She all but threatened to behead me if you ever complain to her. I, in turn, promised her that you shall never want for any earthly possessions. And I meant what I said, you need only ask, and anything your heart desires shall be yours.”

Octavia glanced at him out of the corner of her eyes before lifting her head. “Thank you, I shall keep that in mind.”

A veiled expression fell over her face that made it difficult for him to read her thoughts.

Was she happy with that arrangement? Or was she secretly hoping for more? Simon made a mental note to broach the subject with her as soon as they were alone.

He would give anything she desired as his wife.

Yet there was one thing that he would not allow himself to be talked into, and that was siring an heir.

CHAPTER 7

Octavia inhaled sharply as she stepped from the carriage and took in the sight of the mansion that lay before her.

The Sunderley estate was vast with sprawling gardens that boasted myriads of flowers and plants. Yet the mansion itself was something more akin to a castle than a house.

High buttresses and countless windows spoke of the affluence of the family while small details such as a pair of stone swans hinted at just a touch of elegance.

Her mouth practically fell open when she noted the large fountain to the side of the house. The base of the structure was almost big enough to warrant being called a pond rather than a fountain.

“Welcome to Sunderley Mansion; this will be your home for the foreseeable future.” Simon came to her side and offered her his arm when the rest of the carriages came into view.

Octavia looked up at him with a frown, already annoyed with the silence that had ensued in the carriage. She had been so shocked by their lingering kiss in the church that she had almost been expecting him to make more of an effort where the conversation was concerned. Instead, he had chosen to grunt replies at her whenever she asked him a question.

She shook her head and made a mental note to ask him what he had meant as the

butler came forward to greet them both.

His black livery was impeccably ironed without so much as a button out of place.

“Good morning, Your Grace. May I be the first one to welcome you to your new home?” His straight, stick-like figure bowed so low that Octavia was afraid that a gust of wind would snap him in two.

“Has the breakfast banquet been taken care of?” Simon replied, not allowing her a chance to greet the man.

“It has, Your Grace. Everything has been laid out exactly as you asked,” the butler replied with a dignified tilt of his head as he came up straight.

Simon nodded his approval and practically dragged her forward without warning.

“Is there a particular reason for your haste, Your Grace?” Octavia complained, feeling her irritation growing with every passing moment. He had seemed so kind and even gentle in the church when he had kissed her; what had happened to that man?

“I would like us to be waiting at the door for our guests as soon as they arrive. We can greet them all before welcoming them to our home. There will be plenty of time to relax after the wedding breakfast has commenced,” he answered her curtly, giving off the same coolness that she had detested from the start.

Obedying him rather begrudgingly, Octavia allowed herself to be led up the stone steps and took up her position at his side once her uncle and godmother exited the carriage.

“Tell me, Your Grace, will I be allowed to find my way in my new lodgings, or will you be dragging me from room to room?” she snapped at him out of the corner of her mouth and forced a smile.

Simon seemed as if he were about to reply but flashed his eyes at her instead and welcomed their guests.

“You have a lovely home, Your Grace. I can see our Octavia being very happy here.” It was Matilda who came forward and kissed her goddaughter on both cheeks before addressing the Duke.

“Thank you, Lady Langhall; I hope you will feel welcome here during the course of your visit,” Simon responded smoothly with a glint in his eyes before shaking hands with the Earl.

Octavia instantly noted the mirth in Matilda’s eyes and tried her best to hide her smirk. If the Duke thought that he would be able to treat any of them with cool indifference, then he was sorely mistaken where Matilda was concerned. The older woman harbored the habit of teasing anyone who took themselves or their station too seriously in life.

“Thank you, Your Grace, the Earl and I will graciously accept your invitation to visit whenever we please.” Matilda hooked her arm into the Earl’s and led him away with a secret wink in Octavia’s direction.

It took all of her self-control to keep herself from laughing when Simon frowned. The kinder thing would have been explaining to him that Matilda had been joking, yet she enjoyed his discomfort immensely. It almost felt to her as if she had gotten him back for the silence in the carriage.

“You look as if you belong here already.” His grandmother came up the stairs next, followed by Arthur.

The way he rolled his eyes did not go unnoticed by Octavia as she hugged the Dowager Duchess.

“You may go inside with Octavia and take your seat at the table, Grandmamma. You must be quite tired after this morning, given your poor health.” Simon narrowed his eyes at her, making Octavia bristle.

She was not sure what had occurred between him and his grandmother, yet she was not about to allow him to speak to her in such a manner.

“I would be delighted to escort you inside.” She held her arm out to Bernice before turning back to Simon with a serious expression. “Oh, I forgot to mention, I have arranged for my uncle’s footmen to bring the pets this afternoon.”

“Pets?” Simon grumbled with a look of confusion and annoyance on his face.

“Of course, one of my charitable outreaches involves providing a safe dwelling for animals in need of a home. There are not that many: there are only fourteen dogs and several dozen cats. I hope that will not be a problem. You did promise my godmother that I could have anything my heart desired,” she explained sweetly.

Simon’s face turned the brightest shade of red as he began to splutter. “What?”

“I am only teasing, of course, Your Grace,” she added before he could explode in anger. The look of utter defeat that came over his face brought her an immense amount of pleasure.

The Dowager Duchess threw back her head and laughed in such an unladylike manner that Octavia began to love her even more.

“You better watch out, Simon; Octavia here may just break down all of those walls you worked so hard on building.” His grandmother continued to laugh and shook her head.

Holding his gaze, Octavia allowed the corner of her mouth to hook into a smile before turning and leading his grandmother into the house.

If he was not even willing to be civil with her during the course of their marriage, then she was not about to make things easy for him.

Bernice patted her arm as they walked into the foyer of the grand mansion with marble flooring. “You give him hell, dear. Simon may come across as grumpy as a cat in a bathtub, but his bark is worse than his bite. He will come around in time; you will see.”

Octavia glanced over her shoulder and noted the expression on her husband’s face. He was not amused with her, nor was he angry.

What are you thinking, Simon Wakefield?

Simon watched from the doorway as his grandmother and wife disappeared around a corner. He had not been expecting her to tease him like that. He wondered if she was always that playful, or if his gruffness had brought it out in her. Their kiss in the chapel had not been what he had expected either.

Her lips had stirred something within him that made him want to keep her at arm’s length.

Arthur let out another low whistle before chuckling. “You certainly have quite a wife there, Simon. She is stunningly beautiful, well-bred, and funny to boot. If you allowed it, I think you could have quite a successful marriage. It certainly will not ever be boring.”

Coming back to his senses, Simon pushed the unwanted thoughts aside and clenched his jaw. “Nothing in her behavior has changed my mind. Our marriage is purely one

of duty. I will provide a good home for her, nothing more.”

Arthur lowered his head and shook it in exasperation. “You know the old saying that you can lead a horse to water, but you cannot force it to drink?”

“What of it?” Simon grumbled, already annoyed by his friend and grandmother’s insistence upon thrusting him at his wife.

“Apparently, you can lead a duke to a chapel, but you cannot force him to be happy.” Arthur raised his eyebrows with a knowing look before pushing past his friend and entering the house.

Why cannot everyone let things be?

Simon clenched his jaw and let out a deep breath before following his friend into the house.

Inside the dining room, things had been put in place exactly as he had instructed the servants. Trays of roast beef, chicken, and several delicacies had been laid on the serving table with the footmen waiting to serve them all.

Striding into the room with the long table and solid chairs, Simon took up his seat beside his bride and gestured for the food to be served.

Octavia seemed to be engaging in spirited conversations with his grandmother before turning to him. “You have a lovely home, Your Grace.” Her smile seemed sincere as if she were trying to placate him.

“It is yours now if you wish it to be.” He returned her smile with a great deal of effort, eliciting a frown from her.

The Dowager Duchess narrowed her eyes at him before turning to Lady Langhall and continuing the conversation.

Simon knew that she would not like it all if she heard of his plans to allow Octavia her choice of dwelling, but that was a bridge that he would cross when the time arose.

“Octavia, you must remind me to show you the rose gardens. They are simply splendid this time of year. After your honeymoon, I may want to come up from the dower house and spend my afternoons with you in the gardens.” His grandmother steered the conversation back to the house almost as soon as the footmen began to serve the food.

Sipping on his wine, Simon noted the mischievous glint in her eyes. She was certainly still up to something, even though they were already married. “Are you sure that you are well enough to be having tea in the gardens, Grandmamma?”

Octavia frowned and looked from one to the other. “Have you been ill?”

Simon thoroughly enjoyed the panic that filled his grandmother’s eyes before she composed herself again.

“You know it was the most curious thing, I had a bit of chest pains when I heard the news of August’s disappearance, but I am feeling much better now.” She threw Simon a subtle glare before smiling reassuringly at Octavia. “In fact, I am feeling much better now that I know Simon has you for a wife.”

“If you are feeling unwell, then perhaps you should not be traveling back to London. I am sure that Simon would not mind if you stayed the evening with us?” Octavia turned to him with a piercing gaze, her brilliantly blue eyes catching him off guard for a second.

It was Bernice who answered for him after taking a sip of her wine. “Oh, I do not think so, dear. It is kind of you to think of me like that, but I would not dream of imposing myself upon a young couple. Not when they have only just been married.”

Lady Langhall chimed in from across the table with a mischievous smile that had Arthur stifling a chuckle. “Not to worry, His Grace has kindly offered his home to us at any time after the honeymoon, have you not, Your Grace?”

Bernice chuckled gleefully to herself before reaching for her napkin, making Simon realize that she had been teasing him outside.

“Of course, everyone is always welcome to pay us a visit, after an extended honeymoon.” Simon rose to the challenge and raised his glass, locking eyes with Matilda.

A look of utter triumph came over the woman’s face as she turned back to her plate.

Was she attempting to draw me out of my shell?

Simon felt as if he had met his match when his leg suddenly brushed against Octavia’s beneath the table.

Her cheeks flushed, and her lips parted with a silent gasp as Octavia pretended not to have felt anything at all. He suddenly felt as if she were far too near to him for comfort. He shifted his leg away from her and focused on his plate. Images of her lips pressed against his as he removed her clothes filled his mind.

The attraction he felt toward her threatened the vow he had made to never sire an heir. He would need to be careful with her, that he was certain of. She was far too charming and beautiful for him to control himself if ever they were placed in a situation alone.

He knew deep down that he would have to speak with her alone after breakfast; there were things that he needed to explain to her, but after that, he would try and stay out of her way.

“Do you think that you will be doing much redecorating?” his grandmother asked Octavia after swallowing a mouthful of chicken.

Octavia’s lips curled into a smile that quickly faded when Simon jumped in.

“I hardly think that will be necessary. The house has been the same since you lived here, Grandmamma. Why would anyone go and change anything?”

Octavia turned to him with renewed fire in her eyes. “Of course, I would never do anything without consulting you first, Your Grace, but I am given to understand that is a lady’s right to redecorate a house as she sees fit, is it not?” She openly challenged him now as she cocked her head to the side.

“Of course it is, and I do not think any lady should have to ask her husband permission,” his grandmother interjected.

A wave of heat rushed through his body as Octavia continued to stare him down.

What is she thinking?

He fought the urge to take her into his arms and kiss her lips into submission. Every fiber of his being wanted them to be alone so that he could consummate the marriage. Her sheer determination to defy him at every turn lit a fire in his loins that needed to be extinguished.

“Octavia will have her pick of décor once we are settled in. She would do well to rest before barreling straight into having the walls ripped down, however.” He reached for

his glass of wine and met her gaze over the rim, feeling the need to shift in his seat.

The sheer look of determination that flashed in her eyes made him want her even more.

“You are right, Your Grace. I will certainly need some time to settle into my new life. And who knows, perhaps I will take to rescuing animals if redecorating does not keep me fulfilled.” She turned to the rest of the table with a warm smile as the other ladies agreed with her.

Arthur raised his eyebrows and smirked as Simon sat back in his chair and surveyed the rest of the breakfast. Running his tongue over his lips, Simon finished his wine, wondering how he was going to make things work with a woman who was as utterly defiant as Octavia.

Defiant and beautiful.

His thoughts wandered back into uncomfortable territory as he noted her profile.

The woman would prove to be the death of him if he did not lay down the rules as soon as he could.

CHAPTER 8

Octavia's feet ached by the end of the day as she carried herself up the stairs to her new chambers. Her first impression of the Sunderley mansion had been one of grandeur and intrigue, yet all she cared about now was a hot bath and her bed.

There is still the wedding night.

Her heart fluttered in her chest as her pulse began to race. What would it feel like to lay with Simon as husband and wife? There was certainly a hint of attraction between them. Yet if their wedding breakfast was anything to go by, they could not stand to be in each other's presence for more than a few moments at a time.

"Duchess, would you mind sparing a few moments before you go up?" Simon called to her from the foot of the stairs.

Feeling her angst turn into annoyance, Octavia paused and turned to glare at him. "Was there something you needed, Your Grace?"

Simon clenched his jaw and looked up at her. "I would like a word with you in my study if you do not mind."

"I am listening to you now, Your Grace." She deliberately addressed him in a formal manner after feeling as if he had avoided her all day.

"I hardly think that it is appropriate for me to shout to my wife from the bottom of the stairs. The conversation will be brief." He narrowed his eyes at her and lifted a brow

expectantly.

Swallowing her pride when she realized that he wanted a private conversation, Octavia took a deep breath and descended the staircase.

This man will be the death of me if I do not end up murdering him first.

She followed him into the downstairs study and entered when he stood aside and ushered her in.

The room itself was cozy and inviting with a warm fire blazing in the furnace despite the lack of cold weather. She noted the few shelves of leather-bound ledges along the wall before taking a seat in one of the large brown chairs in front of his desk.

“I will not take up too much of your time as I can imagine that you must be tired.”

Simon shut the door and made his way to the desk, taking a seat with his hands folded on the rich mahogany surface.

Wanting to be rid of the ache her tight plait was causing her head, Octavia began to loosen her pins before shaking her hair loose. The silky lengths cascaded down her back as tiny white flowers fell to the carpet.

It was not inappropriate for her to appear in such a state of undress now that they were married, and she was not about to stand on propriety when she was tired.

Simon stared at her hair with a veiled expression in his eyes before clearing his throat. “I wanted a word with you in private so that we may discuss the boundaries of our marriage without any of the servants overhearing. I do not think that such matters should be discussed beyond the two of us, and I will thank you for doing the same.”

Octavia finished running her fingers through her hair and looked up in confusion. “Boundaries?” She tilted her head to the side in confusion.

“Yes, boundaries. You and I both know that this marriage is one of duty and convenience, nothing more. Therefore, you need not worry that I will be visiting your chambers this evening or any evening after that.” His tone was cool, causing Octavia’s irritation to rise once again.

“Do you not wish to sire an heir, Your Grace?”

She wondered if the attraction she had felt toward him was one-sided. Perhaps the kiss they had shared at the wedding was not as surprising to him as it was to her. Her heart fluttered again when she recalled the shiver of pleasure that had run down her spine when his lips had met hers.

“No, I have never intended to sire an heir. I probably should have mentioned this to you before we got married, but time was not something that was afforded to either of us. My plan is to find my brother as soon as possible and force him to make good on his promise of marrying. If Augustus can produce an heir, there will be little to no reason for us to do so. Furthermore, you may choose your dwelling as you see fit. The Sunderley family owns many houses across London and in the country.”

His voice retained the same coolness as if he were speaking to an acquaintance rather than his wife.

How can he be so cold?

She suddenly realized why he had made the remark about the house being her dwelling for the time being.

Octavia took a deep breath and smiled, realizing that the situation could work to her

advantage.

“Very well, if that is how you wish to conduct your business, then I only have one thing to ask.”

Simon sat back in his chair and raised both his eyebrows in question. “Go on.”

“I wish to travel. Whether it is with you on business, the occasional holiday, or even with a chaperone that has been approved by you. I have always harbored an affinity for travel, and I do not wish to give up on that.” She stated her case defiantly and waited for his response.

Simon seemed impressed as his tongue flicked over his lips. “Very well, I wish to keep our arrangement within our marriage, so you will more than likely be accompanying me on business, but I am not opposed to your wants. I will, however, expect you to obey me any time I tell you to return home or even to my side. Society must see us as one even if we do not live as such.”

“So, I am to be your captive under the illusion of freedom?” She felt her anger rising in her chest as she narrowed her eyes at him.

“You may view the situation as such if you wish. I will not have people gossiping about my wife.” His words bit into her chest like a knife.

“I can assure you that if anyone ever gossips about our marriage, it will not be because of me, Your Grace!” She stood so abruptly that she almost stumbled.

This man is insufferable!

Her blood boiled at the thought of having so much ‘freedom’ that came at the price of her own free will.

Simon stood along with her and came out from behind his desk. “There is just one other matter that I wish to discuss with you before you storm off.”

It was Octavia’s turn to raise an eyebrow as she glared at him, detesting his portrayal of her reactions. “Go on?”

Did he think of her as an unreasonable and spoiled woman just because she wished to have an iota of freedom?

The Duke cleared his throat before crossing his arms over his chest and leaning against the edge of the desk. “I do not require you to live the rest of your life in solitude. You may do as you please in private as long as you are discreet about the matter.”

Confusion filled her mind as a frown creased her brow. “I do not understand...”

The meaning of his words dawned on her as she looked up in shock, making her blood boil at his insinuation.

He stared back at her, unblinking as his expression remained fixed in place. “This is how things are in the real world. I’m not sure if you have been fed a story of how love is all roses and sunshine, but it is not. Married couples take lovers and avoid each other as much as possible.”

“Of course, Your Grace, I would not want to remain a saccharine virgin for the rest of my life.” She cocked her head to the side in a challenge and stood her ground, shocked by his view of how a marriage worked.

Just who does he think he is?

Her pulse began to race when he closed the distance between them and glared down

at her, his jaw set in anger.

“You will have to start addressing me as something other than Your Grace if we are to have a believable marriage.” His chest rose and fell with every breath as he narrowed his eyes, hiding his dark expression.

“I would address you as Simon if you were not so cold and aloof all the time, Your Grace,” she fired back at him and took a step forward, refusing to back down until their noses were just about touching.

Simon’s breath tickled her lips as his eyes dipped to her mouth with a hungry glare that made the pit of her stomach coil deliciously with desire.

“Why should my coldness have any kind of effect on the manner in which you address me, wife?”

Octavia twitched when she felt his hand brush up against hers, her lips parting in ragged breaths as the heavy scent of his cologne filled her senses.

There was not any time to respond as Simon’s lips hungry sought hers, parting her mouth with his tongue before searching the warmth depths.

She could not help but moan with pleasure when her body responded to his in kind. Her breasts pressed into his chest as her arms snaked around his neck, drawing him closer into their passionate embrace.

Simon growled hungrily against her lips when she drew his bottom lip through her teeth. His hands moved down her waist, cupping her bottom firmly before lifting her in the air and placing her on the desk in one smooth motion.

An audible gasp escaped her throat when his hand moved up her side and firmly

cupped her breast. The waves of pleasure that washed over her chest made her kiss him even deeper as her tongue jousting with his, fighting for dominance.

Parting her thighs with his knees, Simon leaned into her, the bulge in his breeches pressing into her core as they kissed. Her hands moved up the back of his neck and tangled in the thick locks of his hair before his mouth moved from her mouth to her neck.

Whimpers of pleasure came from her throat when he kissed a path down her neck, using the tip of his tongue to subtly draw patterns.

The fabric of her dress had only just slipped from her shoulder when a loud knock drew them apart.

Jumping back as if he had been caught red-handed, Simon held her gaze as his chest rose and fell with labored breaths. His hair was tousled where her fingers had gripped the roots. "Who is it?" he barked at the door, seemingly annoyed by the interruption.

There was a moment of hesitation before a man called back, "I have your glass of whisky, Your Grace. I noted that you had not gone up to bed yet and wondered if you would still be finishing the evening off as you have always done."

The muffled voice seemed dignified yet uncertain.

The moment seemed to linger on for quite a while as Octavia regained control of her breathing and fixed her dress before hopping off the desk.

Simon's eyes watched her every move with a veiled expression before he spoke again. "Thank you, Jeeves; you may bring in the whisky."

The door opened to reveal an elderly man dressed in a butler's livery. The light of the

fire cast shadows over his balding head as the man held his head high and brought the tray into the room. He placed the single glass of whisky on the desk before bowing to Octavia and addressing Simon.

“Forgive me, Your Grace, I did not know that Her Grace would be joining you this evening. I will fetch another glass at once.”

Octavia’s heart pounded furiously when Simon ordered him to stop. “I think that Her Grace would like to turn in for the evening. Would you kindly show her to her chambers? I know that Farley is waiting to welcome her.” He tore his eyes away from her and nodded a dismissal to the butler.

Confusion made her chest clench as she suddenly felt ill at ease in his presence. Was he casting her off after having kissed her so passionately? Heat flooded her cheeks when she realized that she had been just as guilty as him in initiating the intimate moment.

“Good evening, Your Grace.” She defied him openly and curtsied before leaving the room with the butler in tow. If he was about to deny the attraction that was clearly so evident between them, then she would not be playing his games.

Marching back up the stairs, she made her way across the gallery with the butler hurrying to keep up with her. It was not until they reached the end of the corridor of rooms that she stopped and allowed the man to open a door for her.

“I will bid you a good evening, Your Grace; Mrs. Farley will assist with anything else that you may need.” Jeeves bowed courteously and shut the door behind her back.

It took Octavia a moment to calm down before looking around her room and noting the older woman dressed in a black uniform.

“Good evening, Your Grace, I hope you do not mind the intrusion. I wanted everything to be perfect for you this evening. My name is Mrs. Farley, and I am your housekeeper.” The woman curtsied kindly and smiled at Octavia.

Remembering her position as the lady of the house, Octavia nodded, wanting to be alone. “Thank you, Mrs. Farley. I appreciate all of your efforts, but there will be no need for any kind of preparation this evening. I will have a hot bath and go straight to bed.”

Mrs. Farley seemed hesitant and confused as she frowned, clasping her wrinkled hands in front of her. “Of course, Your Grace, I had anticipated the bath. The water has already been brought up and is waiting for you in the adjacent room. Shall I send for your maid to assist, I am also more than happy to step in if Your Grace does not wish to wait.”

“No.” Octavia snapped a little too quickly before reminding herself that the housekeeper was not at fault. “That is to say, no thank you, Mrs. Farley, I wish to be alone for a while. I will bathe myself this evening, and we may commence with the rest of the introductions in the morning.”

Mrs. Farley bowed and curtsied politely before making her way from the room and shutting the door.

Walking across her room with all the fine furnishing and floral décor, Octavia lifted a pillow from the bed and flung it across the room. The only thing that would have made her feel better was if the Duke had been standing in its path.

He is such an insufferable man!

She wanted to open the window and yell her frustrations at the rest of the world. He was hot one moment and cold the next. His behavior was beginning to make her

wonder if she had married a man or a beverage.

If he wanted to play games with her, then she was left with no other choice than to play the dutiful wife—no matter what situation she was thrust into.

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CHAPTER 9

Octavia blinked a few times as she attempted to adjust her thoughts to her new reality.

I am married.

The realization of the situation she found herself in accompanied by the speech that Simon had given her sent her mind into a spiral.

Thoughts of her heated kiss with the Duke in his study filled her mind and made her blush. How on earth could he be so cold as to banish himself from their marital bed, and then kiss her with such passion? Was he repressing his attraction for her?

Her thoughts quickly turned into confusion when she realized that she had enjoyed the kiss.

His lips guiding hers had caused a visceral reaction in her body that culminated in a roaring fire. She had wanted him, more than just the kiss that had burned her lips.

“My Lady, are you awake yet?” A gentle knock sounded at the door, drawing Octavia’s thoughts away from her confusion.

Sitting up in bed and stretching, she cleared her throat.

“Come in,” she replied groggily. There was no use in agonizing over her situation when the Duke had made it perfectly clear that her time would be her own. There was

plenty of time to ponder her situation.

The door gently creaked open, revealing a young woman with light blonde hair and a friendly face. “Good morning, Your Grace. I was worried to wake you. You had quite a busy day yesterday. I am your lady’s maid; my name is Ethel.” She curtsied politely and brought a tray into the room.

“That is quite all right.” Octavia frowned when Ethel came forward and placed the tray on the foot of the bed before fixing the pillows behind Octavia’s back.

“We weren’t sure what you would like for breakfast this morning, Your Grace. The cook has made you a few of her favorites, but you may tell me what you do not like, and we will adjust for tomorrow morning.” Ethel continued to chatter away as she placed the tray on Octavia’s lap. She seemed competent in her duties, making Octavia feel at ease.

Eyeing the tray of toast, eggs, and even a dish of kippers, Octavia felt her curiosity getting the better of her. “Will His Grace be having his breakfast in his chambers this morning as well?”

Her stomach fluttered at the thought of Simon in his bed with nothing more than his breeches and shirt.

Ethel seemed hesitant at first, shifting from one foot to the other as she bit at her lip. “His Grace has his breakfast early in the dining room, Your Grace. We did set a place for you, but His Grace instructed us not to wake you and to bring your breakfast up when you were ready.”

“Is that so?” Octavia swallowed the anger that filled her chest.

Did he think of her as a fragile woman who couldn’t manage to get up for breakfast?

He certainly treated her as if she were nothing more than a showpiece to present to the rest of the world. Their marriage may very well be a farce, but she would be damned if she would just sit back and neglect her duties as the lady of the house. Simon wanting to avoid her was no excuse for her to stay in her chambers.

“Your Grace?” Ethel seemed taken aback when Octavia pushed the tray aside and stood.

“I will have my breakfast in the dining room this morning. You may set a place for me tomorrow morning as well. If His Grace asks why, you may tell him that you are not a messenger. He may ask me himself why I do not wish to eat in bed, and I shall inform him that I am not ill, and I should stay in my chambers.”

She took a deep breath and made her way to her dresser where she flung open the doors.

If the Duke thought that she would just be quiet and amiable for the rest of her life, then he’d have another thing coming.

Ethel seemed hesitant as she stood rooted to the spot, not moving a muscle as Octavia pulled one of her dresses from the cupboard.

Turning with a gentle smile, Octavia realized that she may have been a little harsh with the girl. “You need not say anything to His Grace, Ethel. I will deal with him. You may help me get dressed now and carry my tray down the dining hall. I’m sure there are plenty of things that need my attention as the lady of the house. If His Grace reprimands you, I shall step in.”

The girl’s face relaxed as she smiled again and came forward to help Octavia dress. “Certainly, Your Grace. Mrs. Farley will assist you with everything that needs your attention.”

Octavia nodded and turned to the side, lifting her arms so that Ethel could remove her night dress. The reflection she saw in the mirror was fierce and determined.

Good. I won't back down.

The dining room was empty when Octavia entered in her light green day dress. The place at the head of the table hadn't been cleared, and she wondered how quickly Simon had finished his breakfast. The plate was filled with crumbs, accompanied by an empty cup of tea on the side.

"Good morning, Your Grace." Mrs. Farley came into the room and curtsied almost as soon as Octavia was seated.

"Good morning, Mrs. Farley. I was just about to send for you." Octavia gave her a welcoming smile before sipping her tea. She tore her attention away from Simon's place and fixed her eyes on the housekeeper.

Mrs. Farley seemed concerned as her brow wrinkled into a frown. "Is everything to your liking, Your Grace? I hope Ethel has been performing her duties satisfactorily. I hired her because of her excellent recommendations." She seemed concerned at being summoned so early in the morning.

Octavia reached for a piece of toast before answering. "I can assure you that Ethel is quite lovely. She knows her duties and performs them without hesitation. Even the food is quite satisfactory. I wanted to see you as I wish to get started with my duties as lady of the house as soon as possible."

She placed a piece of kipper on her toast and took a bite.

"Are you sure you wouldn't like to rest a while, Your Grace? His Grace informed the servants this morning that you are not to be disturbed while you are settling in." Mrs.

Farley clasped her hands in front of her abdomen, causing the keys on her belt to jingle when she straightened her posture.

And what else has His Grace decided for me?

She bit back the sarcastic remark and recalled how uncomfortable Ethel had been. It wasn't fair to involve the servants in her arguments with Simon.

"That is quite considerate of His Grace, I am sure, but I will decide when I need rest. Please walk me through all of my duties and anything that needs my attention. Idle hands are the devil's playthings after all." She took another bite of her toast and savored the salty flavor of the fish.

And Simon might just find them around his neck if I don't find something useful to do with them.

His insistence on treating her like a stranger in his house instead of his wife was wearing thin on her nerves. Just because he didn't care to lie with her didn't mean she wasn't capable of anything else.

Mrs. Farley's dark eyes sparkled with appreciation as she looked at Octavia. "Of course, Your Grace. My mother always said the exact same thing. I will make a list at once, and if it pleases Your Grace, we can have a proper tour of the house and everything that needs your attention."

"I think you and I will get along quite nicely, Mrs. Farley." Octavia bit into her slice of toast and chewed determinedly as she watched the housekeeper hurry from the room.

She wasn't sure what Simon was playing at, but if it was a war he wanted, she would be the fiercest opponent he ever faced.

“Breakfast in bed like an old maid just because he wishes to avoid me,” she muttered under her breath and took another bite of her toast.

Hours had passed when Octavia and Mrs. Farley were walking side by side in the gardens. They had dealt with the orders for the kitchen, organized the maids’ schedules, and even looked over all the staff references so that Octavia could learn all of their names.

She sighed contentedly with a smile and enjoyed the sun on her face. There certainly was something satisfying in proving that she could perform her duties despite Simon’s need for control. A slight frown creased her brow when she noticed that the only flowers in the garden were white roses.

“Mrs. Farley, is His Grace allergic to color, or is there a more reasonable explanation for the rows of white roses?” Octavia ran her fingers over the white roses as they passed, taking care to avoid the thorns.

The housekeeper bit back a smile as if she were trying to suppress a laugh. “His Grace has the gardeners graft the same white roses every year to save on expenses. Cuttings of these bushes are stored in a warm shed and replanted come spring.”

“And what of investing in a few new sprigs to add some color?” An idea began to form in the back of her mind as she pictured the garden full of color and life. The garden parties she could host on occasion would be so much more vibrant if there were splashes of color along the rows.

Mrs. Farley shook her head. “His Grace has ordered the gardener to keep the gardens clean while not spending any of the allocated funds on unnecessary expenses,” she explained kindly.

Octavia pursed her lips and mulled the thought over in the back of her mind. There

were other ways to fill a garden with new plants; it wasn't necessarily expensive if one used a bit of creativity.

Stopping in her tracks beside a white rosebush, Octavia frowned when her eyes fell on a fiddle that had been placed against the thin stem of the plant. The wood was worn and faded from what looked like years of being played.

"Whom does this belong to?" She bent down and ran her fingers over the strings.

A soft plunking sound floated up to her and caressed her ears.

"I beg your pardon, Your Grace. The fiddle belongs to Willy, one of the boys who assists the gardener. He has a terrible habit of leaving his things lying about. I will give him a stern talking to when I see him again." Mrs. Farley was apologetic when she attempted to reach for the fiddle.

"No, don't reprimand him. I wish to hear him play; can you send for him?" Octavia came up straight and looked around the rest of the garden.

Mrs. Farley stood rooted to the spot for a moment before nodding and gesturing to a small group of boys who were tilling some soil near the start of the vineyards.

The eldest man, who had been leaning against a post, straightened and said something inaudible to the group of workers before nodding to Mrs. Farley.

One of the boys, who looked to be about seventeen or eighteen, dusted his hands on his breeches and came hurrying forward. His sandy-blond hair and bright blue eyes reminded Octavia of the young men in Italy who would work the lands on her father's estate.

"Good morning, Your Grace." He bowed sheepishly to Octavia before turning to the

housekeeper.

Mrs. Farley placed her hands on her hips and pursed her lips as she eyed the young man. “Good morning, Willy. Her Grace has found your fiddle nestled between the roses. I think I have mentioned to you before that the gardens are not a suitable place for musical instruments. The fact that it was you who came straight here lets me know that you are aware of this.” She narrowed her eyes at the boy who recoiled before reaching for his fiddle.

“I am sorry, Mrs. Farley. I will try and be more mindful.” His cheeks filled with heat when he came up straight and bowed again.

The innocence in his voice struck Octavia as he began to back away with his eyes downcast.

“Please, don’t go just yet,” Octavia stopped him, giving him what she hoped was an encouraging smile. “I would very much like to hear you play. I am quite fond of the fiddle. It reminds me of my years abroad.” She turned to Mrs. Farley with a nod, signaling for her to leave the boy be.

Nodding to Willy, Mrs. Farley gave him the go-ahead. “Go on, then; play that lively tune that the servants like so much. I will allow it this once in Her Grace’s presence.”

Willy swallowed hard and licked over his lips before bringing the fiddle up to his chin and shutting his eyes with the fiddlestick to the strings. He hesitated just for a moment as if he were trying to align his breathing with the fiddle.

In an instant, Octavia felt as if she had been transported back to Italy with her parents as they toured the countryside. Gone was the hesitant young lad who seemed as if he had been about to burst into tears. The confident young man she now saw before her played his instrument with skill and passion, creating a soaring melody of joy.

Octavia laughed gleefully and clapped her hands together as maids and footmen left their work, coming forward to watch the delightful performance.

Willy's body swayed along with the music as if he were no longer aware of anything else other than the fiddle.

She suddenly felt overcome with the urge to dance as happy memories filled her mind. Her mother smiling on the porch of their house in Italy. Her father giving orders to the men working his lands before scooping her up on his arms.

Grabbing Mrs. Farley by the hand, Octavia led her into the circle of servants and began to dance a jig, lifting her dress to reveal her boots. "Dance with me, Mrs. Farley." Her laughter filled the air like the soft tinkling of a bell.

Looking around the circle at all the expectant faces, Mrs. Farley shrugged and joined Octavia as the servants began to cheer and clap. Mimicking Octavia's feet, they danced and kicked to their hearts' content.

Her heart felt lighter than it had in years when maids and footmen alike began to dance to Willy's fiddle. The joyful melody brought tears to her eyes as she recalled her life with her parents.

Their lives had always been joyful and pure, even in London. She missed them with all of her heart and soul as she pictured the moors of Scotland and even the comfort of their house in London.

"Your Grace?" Mrs. Farley gasped and raised her hand to her chest.

Feeling her heart jolt, Octavia looked up and into the angry face of her husband.

CHAPTER 10

“What is going on here?” Simon yelled over the servants’ heads, bringing the music to a screeching halt.

Gasps of shock filled the air as servants turned and looked at him with flushed faces. The boy who had been playing the fiddle shrunk into the crowd as he placed the offending instrument behind his back.

“Do I pay you all to have a good time while the day’s duties fall behind?” His anger rose as he folded his arms over his chest.

“It was my fault, Your Grace. The servants are not to be held accountable for any of this.” A tired feminine voice called to him over the heads of the servants as the crowd suddenly parted.

Simon felt his heart skip a beat when he caught sight of his wife and housekeeper in the middle of the circle. Her dark hair was loose and wild as a single strand stuck to her lips. Her cheeks were just as flushed as the servants, yet her eyes were filled with sheer determination.

“I instructed Willy to play the fiddle. I thought the servants might enjoy a moment of levity during their very busy day.” She lifted a hand and removed the strand of hair that had clung to her face, drawing Simon’s attention to her full lips.

Swallowing hard, he pushed back the urges of desire he felt toward her. “Levity? Do you not understand the gravity of the situation? Work has fallen behind; schedules

have been disrupted—all because of this frivolity.” He waved his hand over the crowd of servants in disgust.

Locking her eyes on his, Octavia took a few steps forward and closed the distance between them. “This was my fault, Your Grace. The servants are not to be blamed or punished. I thought they may enjoy a moment of respite. I didn’t realize that you would disagree.”

“Leave us,” Simon barked at the servants over her head, keeping his eyes locked on hers.

A low susurrant filled the air as everyone scurried away as fast as they could, leaving Octavia and Simon alone at the bottom of the garden.

“Do you understand how irresponsible and inappropriate your behavior has been?” He glared at her after making sure that everyone was out of earshot before beginning his reprimand.

Octavia stood tall and thrust her chin in the air. “I am well aware of my responsibilities as a duchess, Your Grace. Even if you seemed hell-bent on keeping me in bed this morning. What I am not blind to is the fact that even servants deserve a moment of frivolity .”

The fierceness in her eyes struck him when he noted the steady rise and fall of her chest.

“I thought it best for you to learn the ropes before falling headfirst into your new duties. Judging by what I have seen here, I think I was right!” He raised his voice and narrowed his eyes, vexed by the way she had addressed him in front of his servants.

“Not accustomed to? Have you forgotten that I am a lady, Your Grace? I am not

some gentle flower that you picked from the marriage market. I am well aware of the duties that befall a duchess.” She stood her ground and snapped back at him, balling her fists at her sides.

“Well, then I expect you to start behaving like one! There are plenty of responsibilities that go into running an estate of this size. So next time, do not to involve the servants in your whimsical flights of fancy!”

He leaned closer and felt the heaviness of his breathing when the tension grew thicker between them.

Octavia’s mouth fell open as her eyes flashed with anger. “How cold does one have to be to be so angered by music and dancing? All of this because I wanted to hear a song from my childhood.” She raised her voice to match his, bringing her face inches away from his.

Realizing that she had been indulging in a form of comfort, Simon searched her eyes for a moment before taking a step back.

“Be that as it may, there is no place for such... sentimentality where work is concerned. We cannot fix our troubles with idle distractions, Duchess. Our duties should not be swayed by nostalgia.”

He felt a momentary pang of guilt at having forgotten the death of her parents, but he reminded himself that work needed to be done.

He had asked the servants to leave her be, thinking that she would find other ways of occupying her time.

Octavia took a step back as if he had slapped her. “Sentimentality and nostalgia? You equate my grief to a simple sentimentality?”

Pushing back the urge to apologize, Simon lifted his head. “As sad as your past may be, we cannot allow our lives to be ruled by emotions. Duty must always come first.”

She continued to stare at him, seemingly dumbfounded by his reply. “You know the ton was right about you, Your Grace. You are truly a cold man.” The hurt in her voice was evident when she lifted her skirts and attempted to push past him.

Moving quicker than a flash, Simon reached out and gripped her wrist, pulling her back to him until she was once again looking into his eyes.

“Be careful what you say to me, Duchess; you might get burned if I choose to stop being cold, as you so eloquently stated.” His chest rose and fell with anger when the sweet scent of her perfume wafted over his face.

Her breasts rose and fell beneath the confines of her corset, adding to the heat rushing through his veins. He wanted nothing more than to press his lips against her until she yielded to him.

“I am not afraid of getting burned, Your Grace.” She brought her face closer to his until their lips were nearly touching, making his stomach coil with desire.

Simon’s eyes flitted to her lips, lingering on their fullness for a moment before dipping to her chest and back up to her eyes.

The confusion of attraction and anger that he saw mirrored in her gaze drove him to action as he let go of her wrist and took a step back.

I cannot allow myself to lose control again.

Octavia stood rooted to the spot for a moment before looking him in the eyes as her chest continued to rise and fall in steady rhythms.

“I shall be in my chambers, Your Grace, not that you would care about that.” She turned on her heels and stormed away from him, making her way toward the house.

Simon swallowed hard, watching her leave as he felt the sting of guilt in his chest. It wasn't her fault that she had wanted a moment of happiness, yet he couldn't bring himself to go after her. The attraction he felt toward her was far too strong for him to resist.

He wouldn't risk going back on his vow, not even for his wife.

Octavia fought back her tears as she slammed the door to her chambers behind her.

How can he be so cruel?

The coldness she had seen in his eyes sent a shiver down her spine. She hadn't meant to open up to him, but the admission of remembering her parents had come out in the heat of the moment. What had she been expecting? That he would say all is forgiven and take her in his arms?

Heat filled her cheeks when she realized that she had been expecting an ounce of humanity from him. There had been a moment when they were arguing when she had wanted the kiss from the previous night.

Feeling a sense of shame and confusion, she crossed her arms over her chest and walked to her bed, perching on the edge as she faced the door.

Why do I feel so different in his presence?

Her heart skittered at the thought of kissing him again as she raised her hand and placed it over her chest. His actions had angered her as much as they had hurt her.

“Your Grace, could I have a word in private?” Mrs. Farley drew her attention away from her sorrows.

Sniffing back her tears, Octavia took a moment to compose herself before answering. “You may come in, Mrs. Farley.”

She quickly wiped her cheeks with the back of her hands and blinked back the rest of her tears. She had been crying out of frustration more than anything else, yet she still didn’t want the housekeeper to know.

The door creaked open as a worried Mrs. Farley stepped inside and shut the door behind her.

“I hope you don’t mind the intrusion, Your Grace. I wanted to check on you after the whole ordeal in the garden.” Her face was kind, yet there was a hint of sadness in her eyes.

Octavia shot her a reassuring smile and sat up straight.

“If you don’t mind me speaking frankly, Your Grace, the servants are both grateful for the brief moment of joy and the fact that you came to their defense. You have their appreciation.” Mrs. Farley shot her an encouraging smile.

Sighing heavily, Octavia forced another smile and shook her head. “Thank you for trying to cheer me up, Mrs. Farley, but I don’t think that the Duke would agree with your assessment of the situation.”

Mrs. Farley’s face softened as she came closer to the bed and folded her hands in front of her lap. “I know that His Grace may come across as harsh and cold, but it isn’t all his fault.”

Octavia frowned and cocked her head to the side. “I don’t understand, Mrs. Farley; how on earth is it not his fault? Forgive me for sounding cruel, but I believe that we are all responsible for our own actions. One can choose not to react in a way that is utterly unfeeling.”

She used her hand to slice through the air with conviction. The older woman may have felt the need to stand up for the man who paid her wages, but Octavia wasn’t willing to accept excuses for such poor behavior.

Beginning with a sigh, Mrs. Farley pursed her lips. “I hope I am not out of place in speaking as I see fit, Your Grace, but the Duke is a product of his upbringing as much as any of us are. I have served the Sunderley state for many years. The Duke was raised in a house where his young eyes were exposed to matters that should never have been as they were in the first place.”

“I still don’t understand, Mrs. Farley; what are you trying to say?” Octavia felt her head aching as she fought back the emotions of the day. Horrible things happened to people all the time, and none of that excused bad behavior.

“If I may make an observation, Your Grace, you seem to have come from a very loving family,” the housekeeper stated gently.

Octavia swallowed hard and nodded, still feeling a bit sad after her encounter with the Duke. “Yes. My parents were very loving. They always put me first in all that they did. I miss them dearly.”

Mrs. Farley nodded in understanding. “The Duke’s parents did not put him first. They were selfish to the core, even if it pains me to admit it. Only the Dowager Duchess showed him true affection. His view of the world and even marriage has been skewed.”

“What happened during his childhood?” Octavia frowned and looked down, curious as to what could have made the Duke so cold.

“I am afraid that it would be far too impertinent of me to answer that question, Your Grace. All I can say is that while His Grace’s behavior may seem cold, we have all learned to live with the consequences of his parents’ actions.” The housekeeper looked at her sadly.

“Are you asking me to be more patient with him and try to understand because if you are...” Octavia felt utterly exasperated by the request.

His cold dismissal of her in the gardens had hurt her too deeply.

“It is not my place to ask anything of you, Your Grace. I was only offering the wisdom of an old woman who has served the Duke’s parents since he was born. The child that I helped raise in this house wasn’t always as cold as the man you see before you now.”

She sighed one last time with a heavy look in her eyes before leaving Octavia to her own devices. Octavia felt her heart sinking again as she looked out over the gardens.

She would need a lot of understanding to ever see reason in the Duke’s cold behavior.

Yet she couldn’t see how that would ever be possible when all he did was push her away.

CHAPTER 11

Simon clenched his jaw in frustration as he sat at breakfast the next morning. He had hoped that Octavia would take her breakfast in her chambers, yet she had shown up on time and now sat beside him at the table.

The fact that he had dreamed of her in his bed didn't help matters at all. He'd woken up with a burning desire to visit her chambers but decided that staying away from her was a better course of action.

"I trust your chambers are to your liking," he grumbled under his breath and accepted a fresh cup of tea from one of the footmen.

Octavia held her head high and ate a few bites of her toast before replying.

"They are, thank you. Mrs. Farley and I will be going through the house today. There are a few things that I may want to change. You need not worry. None of the changes will involve any of the servants playing their instruments."

The sarcasm in her voice still cut through the air, despite her politeness. She raised her head and gave him a genuine smile, making his heart skip a beat.

"What kind of things?" Simon speared a piece of kipper with his fork and shoveled it into his mouth out of frustration. He recognized the fact that he had been unfair to her the day before, yet he couldn't bring himself to apologize to her.

Why does she feel the need to be so polite about things?

She held his gaze with her piercing blue eyes. “I’m not sure, Your Grace. Perhaps I would like to change the curtains or even some of the furniture. You did state I would be able to choose where I reside. What if I choose to take up residence here? Surely, I should have a say in what my house looks like.”

“Then I should start having breakfast in my study,” he shot back and glared at her, despising his brother again for getting him into such a difficult situation.

Wherever Augustus was in the world, he hoped that things were just as difficult for him as they were for Simon.

“Perhaps I would like to turn your study into a parlor; maybe then we could spend more time together.”

She speared a piece of fruit onto her fork and popped it into her mouth without so much as blinking, guiding his eyes towards her mouth and luscious lips.

He gulped.

Is she teasing me?

“We had an understanding about how this marriage would work.”

He wanted to be left alone, could she not see that?

“I just thought that it may be nice if we spent a little more time together. We are married after all, even if it is in name alone.”

There was something in her eyes that made him wonder if she didn’t want more from him than just their initial arrangement.

Simon strummed his fingers on the table beside his plate, losing his appetite. A strange feeling of uncertainty rose in his chest.

The legs of his chair scraped across the wooden floor as he pushed his chair back and stood.

“Try and stay away from affairs that do not concern you. Change things in the house and help Mrs. Farley until your heart is content, but the gardens and the running of the estate are not to be meddled with. I like things to be run in a very particular manner. The gardens are an extravagance that I cannot justify. Whatever changes you do decide to make, I expect them to be minimal.”

Octavia stared at him without blinking in such an unnerving manner that he wasn't sure how to respond.

What game is she trying to play with me?

“The estate is well-off, but I do not spend a lot of money on frivolous things. I warn you that any kind of changes you make will have to adhere to the household budget. I will not give you anything extra to buy items of furniture and vases that will only serve to gather dust.”

He continued to glare at her from across the table, feeling his anger rise when she stood with her hands on either side of her plate.

“Very well, Your Grace; I may have been born into a wealthy family, but I am no stranger to frugal. I accept your challenge and will work within the confines that you have so graciously presented me with.” Her tone was even and reasonable as she stared back at him.

Is this her form of revenge?

Simon sighed heavily and shook his head before pinching the bridge of his nose between his thumb and finger. “It wasn’t a challenge.”

He fought with the idea of apologizing to her about the incident in the garden if only to get her off the path she had chosen.

His pride won the battle when she retorted again in a snarky tone, “Let us not quibble over wording, Your Grace. I understood your meaning.” She turned away from him with a curtsy and left the room.

Simon felt his irritation rising again as he stormed after her. He wanted to give her a piece of his mind and let her know on no uncertain terms that he was the one who would be making all of the decisions. How had she even managed to talk him into allowing changes?

He was about to stop her when his attention was drawn to the open front doors.

“Forgive me, Your Grace. I was waiting for Mrs. Farley when I heard your voice.”

A kind old man with white hair and sun-kissed skin stood in the doorway with his hat in his hands. The fabric of his tweed hat was worn and frayed on the edges from many years of working in the sun.

Octavia stopped halfway up the stairs and smiled down at the old man.

“There is no need to apologize, Mr. Brown. Is something the matter?” The Duke recognized one of his oldest tenants who ran the largest farm on his estate.

Mr. Brown cleared his throat and bowed respectfully to both Simon and Octavia, who had begun to descend the stairs.

“It is not terribly urgent, Your Grace. I only wanted to address the matter of my old farmhouse where the roof has begun to sag. The problem has gotten worse to the point where a cat fell through the ceiling last night. Gave me and Mrs. Brown quite a fright. There was turnip soup as far as the eye could see.” He chuckled under his breath despite the seriousness of the matter.

Simon could see that Octavia had taken an instant liking to the old man as she came to his side.

“That sounds like quite an urgent matter to me. We must do all that we can to remedy the matter. I wouldn’t want any animals falling in my soup while I ate, would you, Your Grace?” She turned to Simon expectantly.

“Certainly not. I will send some of the men this afternoon with poles. We will secure the ceiling so that the matter does not worsen. Pushing the rafters up from the inside will ensure no more animals fall through.”

He made a few calculations in his mind and realized how much it would cost to have the roof of the cottage repaired

“Wouldn’t it be better to do a more permanent fix? I do not claim to know too much about running an estate or farming, but a sagging roof seems to me like a problem that should be dealt with as soon as possible.” Octavia looked from the farmer to Simon.

. “I am aware that the solution is only temporary. There are quite a few costs that need to be dealt with before a permanent solution can be reached. The farm cottage is far older than either of us.”

Farmer brown nodded in agreement. “I was born in that cottage.” His lips hooked into a smile around his wrinkled mouth as if he was seeing his past flash before his eyes.

“We can’t just leave the problem as is, Your Grace; we must see to it at once. Mr. Brown seems to have rather fond recollections of the cottage. I shall oversee all of the work if it is time away from your other duties that burdens you.” She placed her hand on the old man’s arm and pleaded with Simon.

Realizing that she cared deeply for the well-being of others, Simon relented. There was something intriguing to him in the way she cared so deeply, even if they weren’t seeing eye to eye.

“Very well, I will have the men assess the damage and report back to me by this evening. We will secure the problem and come up with a more permanent solution as soon as we can.”

Octavia perked up considerably as she turned to the old man. “There now, Mr. Brown, I knew we could come up with a better solution. I’m sure that you and Mrs. Brown will be eating in peace before you know it. The turnip soup will be cat-free from here on out.”

Mr. Brown chuckled. “Thank you, Your Grace. It’s an honor to be the first of the tenants to meet you. I can see that His Grace has chosen a fine wife, and we will all be lucky to have you with us.”

He bowed politely to them both and excused himself.

Simon waited for the man to be out of earshot before rounding on Octavia. “The running of the estate which, I will remind you, involves the tenants and their affairs, is my affair. I am not professing to be an expert when it comes to housing, but I do not need to be one when cats are falling into people’s food.”

He felt the need to maintain control over the situation despite how caring she had been.

“You cannot interfere in matters that do not concern you,” Simon called up the stairs.

There was something almost playful between them now as he watched how defensive she was whenever he reprimanded her.

The woman was more vexing than any problem he had ever faced in his life. He was beginning to think that not wanting to get married had been one of his smarter decisions. Augustus would certainly pay for what he was putting Simon through.

Stopping at the top of the landing, Octavia looked over her shoulder and allowed the corner of her mouth to lift into an alluring smile.

Is she flirting with me?

His heart skipped a beat when she raised her eyebrows suggestively and laughed before turning away from him and walking off.

What exactly was she trying to prove? That she could gain the upper hand with him by using her womanly wiles?

He suddenly felt a wave of irritation toward her behavior.

“And I will thank you to stop being so naïve when it comes to matters of money!” he called up the stairs one last time as she rounded a corner.

Octavia suddenly reappeared around the corner with a fiery look in her eyes.

“And I will thank you if you stop being such a heartless ice beast!” Her cheeks turned red from yelling before she withdrew once again.

This woman is going to be the death of me.

Simon shook his head and grumbled under his breath as he set out to find some of his workers on the estate.

CHAPTER 12

A few days passed with Octavia and Simon glaring at one another every time they passed in the halls. Nobody had said anything to her, including Mrs. Farley, yet Octavia knew that all the servants were on edge whenever she and the Duke were in the same room.

Sighing contentedly, Octavia came up straight and dusted her hands together, looking around the gardens. She had enlisted the help of Willy and the rest of the young men who assisted the gardener.

“Where would you like this bush of yellow roses, Your Grace?” Willy asked with a giant smile as he carried an uprooted rosebush.

The servants had grown fond of her ever since the incident with the fiddle, helping her where and whenever she needed.

“Goodness, I asked for a few cuttings for grafting; I didn’t realize that people would be sending entire bushes!” Octavia laughed and placed her hand against her cheek.

Willy chuckled again and nodded toward the rest of the young men who were carefully carrying rose bushes of all colors. “You might want to brace yourself, Your Grace. There are two more carriages waiting at the back of the estate. Not to worry, though; I’m sure we will be able to salvage the bushes—whoever uprooted them had enough good sense to keep the soil around the roots.”

Octavia shook her head in amusement as Willy walked past her, carrying the bush to

a bed of soil that had been tilled. Several different colors had already been placed among the rows of white, giving the garden or more vibrant feel.

“What the devil is going on now?” Simon swore under his breath, making Octavia turn to see him storming toward her like a bear with a sore foot.

Rolling her eyes, she took a deep breath and braced herself for yet another argument. “I am gardening, Your Grace; you may not recognize it because the plants aren’t bound in leather like your ledgers.”

Simon stopped in front of her and narrowed his eyes.

“I know what gardening looks like; what I do not know is why you are doing it. And what in God’s name is going on in the garden.” He clenched his jaw in frustration and eyed all of the rose bushes suspiciously as young men carried them past. “How much is all of this costing?”

Cocking her head to the side in triumph, Octavia smiled at him.

“Nothing, Your Grace; not a single penny was spent on any of these bushes. And to answer your question, I am attempting to add some color to the garden. As lovely as the white roses may be, I thought a bit of color would really spruce things up.”

“Spruce things up? Where did these roses come from if you didn’t spend any money? Have you been out all night pilfering the gardens of London?”

Giving him a look of exasperation, she placed her hand on her hip and glared at him. “Yes, Your Grace, I wore a dark cape and went under the cover of night, uprooting rose bushes and dipping my hands into the ton’s jewelry cases.”

Simon looked her up and down, settling on the spot on her cheek where her dirty

hand had been resting. “You shouldn’t jest like that; you look the part of a criminal,” he said reproachfully.

She was about to open her mouth with another snarky quip when the rest of the men came into earshot.

“Not here,” Simon looked over his shoulder. “I will not have any more bickering in front of the servants.

“Then where would you like to bicker, Your Grace? Should we set up a schedule with a time and place? I would gladly plan my remarks ahead of time if that would suit you.” She smiled at him.

Looking over her shoulder, Simon narrowed his eyes before reaching for her hand.

“What are you doing?” Octavia’s heart skipped a beat when he began to pull her along behind him.

The heat from his hand seeped into her skin when he tightened his grip, bringing her to silence.

“Away from the rest of the servants, we can discuss this matter in the orchards. The apples aren’t ripe yet, and nobody will be there,” Simon muttered to her so that nobody else could hear.

Lifting her dress in an attempt to stop herself from stumbling, Octavia allowed herself to be led out of the garden and over a small bridge that led to the orchards.

“Will you slow down now? Nobody can hear us!” she practically yelled at him when they had reached what looked like the middle of the thicket.

Rows and rows of large apple trees filled the earth as far as the eye could see. Nothing but a light breeze rustled the leaves when Simon finally stopped and faced her.

“I told you that I do not like arguing in front of the servants. Our marital problems are to remain private at all times. Now, if you would kindly stop with the remarks and explain yourself,” he hissed at her through his teeth.

Taking a moment to glare at him, Octavia cocked her head to the side and frowned. “Why is it that you have such a problem with arguing in front of others?”

She recalled what Mrs. Farley had said about his childhood and wondered if whatever had happened to him had shaped his behavior.

Simon held back for a moment, passing his tongue over his lips before speaking again. The look of pain that flashed in his eyes almost made her regret asking the question. “There is nothing wrong with wanting to keep marital affairs between a husband and his wife.”

Octavia shook her head and rolled her eyes again out of frustration.

Her reaction seemed to anger Simon again as he raised his voice. “Now, will you please explain where you got the money to purchase all of the roses you now have littering my gardens?”

“Your gardens, Your Grace? Did you not just finish stating that we are a married couple? Not that you have warmed my bed, yet in name alone, I am your wife and therefore entitled to the use of the gardens.”

Octavia stood her ground and glared at him when he came closer and narrowed his eyes.

“I will not ask you again, Octavia, where did the roses come from?” His lips were dangerously close to her as he growled.

Feeling her breath catch in her throat, Octavia took a step back and found herself blocked by the trunk of a tree. The sound of her name on his lips had caught her off guard, causing the sarcasm at the back of her mind to wither like a flower.

“I did not purchase any of the roses, Your Grace; I asked my godmother if she could give me a few cuttings for the gardener to graft. I woke up this morning to carriages full of rose bushes and a note stating that my godmother had asked a few friends to gift me some roses.”

Simon advanced on her once again, placing his arm above her head on the tree before glaring down at her.

“Am I to believe that all the women in London saw it within their hearts to uproot their precious roses and send them to you in carriages?” His voice was dangerously low when his breath teased her lips.

“Yes, that or if you find it easier to believe that I am leading a double life as a thief, I will not dictate your thoughts, Your Grace.” Her voice was soft and breathy as her eyes dropped to his lips, forcing her to recall their sudden kiss in the study.

The corner of Simon’s mouth hooked into a smile, exposing a wolfish grin that tugged at her heart. His hand suddenly moved up the side of her body, caressing her skin through the fabric of her dress before moving up her arm. Placing his finger under her chin, he tilted her head toward him, forcing her to look into his eyes.

“Do not tempt me, Octavia; I will make you obey me if you continue on this path.” His lips parted slightly when his breathing deepened.

Octavia almost gasped when he pressed his thighs against hers, revealing the bulge in his breeches. A shiver of desire ran down her spine when he continued to look into her eyes, fully aware of the feelings he was eliciting in her body.

The pit of her stomach knotted deliciously with desire when he shifted his body further into hers. He used his knee to gently part her thighs, pinning her in place against the tree.

“How do you intend to make me obey you, Your Grace?” she whispered, feeling her lips graze his with every word.

Her body melted into him, yielding to his touch when his fingers grazed the curve of her hips through her dress.

Simon’s breathing seemed to deepen, and a dark look of hunger fell over his eyes.

“I think you know, Duchess...” He slipped back into the formal address, caressing her ear with his hot breath when he shifted his head.

Octavia gasped audibly when he used the back of his knuckles to caress her cheek, dripping his head to her neck. A light layer of bumps spread over her skin when his lips brushed her skin, softer than the wings of a butterfly yet more urgent and demanding.

The tips of his fingers brushed her skin beside his face, tracing a path to her chest and stopping right before the swelling of her breasts.

Her chest rose and fell in rapid succession when she leaned the back of her head against the tree and exposed the tender flesh of her throat.

Dipping his head a little further, Simon pressed his lips against her neck, taking his

time to savor the delicate flesh before using the tip of his tongue. The hot sensations of pleasure that shot through her body and forced Octavia to respond in kind as she lifted her hands and pulled his head closer to her body.

Simon growled from deep within his throat and began to ravage her neck, kissing and nibbling her flesh until her breaths turned into soft moans.

Something dormant awoke in her soul as her body pressed into his, her nipples hardening against the fabric of her corset.

“Simon...” she whispered his name for the very first time, making him double his efforts as he kissed over the tops of her breasts.

Bringing his hand down to her chest, he cupped her breast and squeezed, eliciting a loud moan of pleasure from her lips. He flicked a path over each breast before he hooked his fingers into her neckline and tugged on the fabric.

Opening her eyes, she looked down at his mop of thick hair when he buried his face between her breasts and kissed her cleavage.

I want you.

Her body began to respond in a way that she hadn't anticipated when she tangled her fingers in his hair and gently pushed him down. Her core fluttered with a strange sensation, building the heat that was growing between her thighs.

She wanted to give him everything as she reached behind her back and undid the ribbons that held her dress in place. The sweet release that her body yearned to field could only be met with Simon's hands on her flesh.

Simon suddenly looked up and shook his head before reaching behind her back and

stopping her hand with his own. His fingers applied the slightest amount of pressure to hers until she yielded.

Confusion and hurt filled her mind when he took a step back and motioned for her to do the same. Her lips parted in shock when he spun her around and tied the ribbons of her dress. She was about to ask him why he had stopped when a voice suddenly made her look up.

“Your Grace, are you out here?” Mrs. Farley called out through the orchards, causing a flock of birds to take flight in the distance.

Turning her back around, Simon quickly fixed her hair and removed a few slivers of bark before whispering to her.

“I will go the long way around. Nobody else knows these orchards as well as I do. Follow Mrs. Farley back to the house to avoid getting lost.” He looked past her as if he couldn’t stand looking into her eyes before turning away and disappearing behind a tree.

Octavia stood stunned for a moment, rooted to the spot as she watched him disappear.

Is he ashamed of being seen with me?

Her heart suddenly ached as she wondered if his refusal to lie with her had anything to do with siring an heir, or if he simply didn’t want her. They were married after all; being found together in an orchard by their housekeeper wasn’t exactly cause for a scandal.

Her chest ached with every breath as she chewed the inside of her cheek.

“Your Grace, are you out here?” Mrs. Farley called out again, her voice echoing in

the depths of the orchard.

Sighing heavily against the sudden and confusing feelings of betrayal, Octavia bit her lips before answering, “I am here Mrs. Farley.”

It didn’t take the housekeeper very long at all to find her, appearing from behind a tree. “Goodness, Your Grace, you shouldn’t be out here alone. These orchards are vast, and many a new hand has gotten lost out here. It’s better to ask me or one of the maids to accompany you if you wish to walk.”

The housekeeper was friendly as she came forward and breathed a sigh of relief.

At least one person is happy to see me.

She let out a shaky breath as she fought against her feelings. Why did she suddenly feel so rejected when he’d made it perfectly clear to her that their marriage was nothing more than duty? He’d never once professed to want anything more or even hinted at enjoying her company.

I don’t dislike his company...

Octavia thought back to every time they had bickered in the past week since their wedding. She had never once despised their arguments. Realizing with a start that she enjoyed their sparring matches, she lifted her fist and pressed it into the pit of her stomach.

“Is anything the matter, Your Grace?” Mrs. Farley came forward with a concerned look in her eyes.

Regaining her composure, Octavia forced a smile. “I am well, thank you. I’m afraid that I may have overdone the gardening a little. I am quite parched.” She came up

with a lie to hide the confusion in her chest.

The housekeeper tutted like a mother hen. “You mustn’t overdo things, Your Grace; it is fine to oversee the work, but you should leave all of the labor to the gardener and his helpers.” She fussed about Octavia and dusted off her dress.

Allowing the older woman to tidy her appearance, Octavia stared into the line of trees where Simon had disappeared.

Who is he really?

She wondered about the Duke and the way he’d touched her. It was almost as if he wanted her, yet he didn’t want anyone to see them together. Was he attracted to her or not? She pushed the feelings aside and shut her eyes. A marriage built on an agreement alone was never supposed to be this difficult.

“There now, you look more presentable although I think we had better get you inside for a bath and change of clothes.” Mrs. Farley patted her hand gently as if she were a small child.

“A bath sounds wonderful, Mrs. Farley; I wouldn’t mind a nice cup of tea either.” Octavia appreciated that the older woman’s care reminded her of her own mother and the way she used to fuss over her.

“That can certainly be arranged, Your Grace.” The housekeeper’s eyes softened as she began to lead them from the Orchards.

Giving herself over to the situation, Octavia once again allowed herself to be led by the hand. She looked over her shoulder at the tree where Simon had held her captive.

He was holding me captive, yet I was willing.

She suddenly recalled his words with a start.

Do not tempt me, Octavia; I will make you obey me...

She had willingly obeyed him without so much as a moment's hesitation, but what did that mean?

Her breathing deepened when she suddenly realized that she didn't know how she felt about her husband.

CHAPTER 13

“Well, I must say that I thoroughly enjoy the color in the gardens; I know it wasn’t you, so my compliments to Octavia.” The Dowager Duchess leaned on her cane and smiled as she stood beside Simon in front of the drawing-room window.

Simon sighed heavily and shook his head as he looked over the garden with the different colored roses scattered throughout the white. He hadn’t been keeping the white bushes exclusively for any reason other than it saved him money. The gardens did look livelier, but he would never admit it to Octavia. It had only been a few days, yet the bushes were already taking to the soil as the leaves perked up.

Turning away from the window, he gestured for his grandmother to take a seat, ignoring her comment.

“To what do I owe the pleasure of your presence this morning, Grandmamma?”

He knew very well that she would latch on and tease him relentlessly if she knew how Octavia had taken things into her own hands.

The corner of Bernice’s mouth hooked into a smile as she took a seat and placed her cane beside her on the settee. “May a grandmother not pay her grandson and his new wife a visit?” She looked around the room as if she were waiting for Octavia to appear.

“Octavia is currently out, so I am afraid that you will have to be content with my company and nothing more.” He bristled a little before taking a seat opposite his

grandmother and gesturing to a maid for tea.

Knowing his grandmother, she was more than likely there to see how things were progressing between Simon and Octavia.

“More the pity, but I wouldn’t mind a visit with my grandson. Tell me, how is married life treating you?” Bernice smiled sweetly at him and made herself comfortable, unperturbed by the fact that Octavia was absent.

Narrowing his eyes, Simon looked her over. “You seem quite healthy and chipper. How is your heart faring after the wedding? My marriage seems to have benefited you far more than it has me.”

He noted the pinkness of her cheeks and the sparkle in her eyes.

It still vexed him greatly that she’d convinced him of her illness, only to make a miraculous recovery once he’d agreed to her schemes.

Bernice couldn’t help but smile as she reached over and touched her cane, running her fingers over the wood as if it were alive. “I am not without ailments, Simon. The doctor recommended a cane to help me rest. Keeps the weight off of my old legs you know. The whole ordeal left me with a bit of a funny knee.”

“Is that so; I thought it would have been your heart.” Simon continued to eye her suspiciously, growing annoyed at the amusement in her eyes.

“Ah, that would be the tea. I am quite parched from the bumpy carriage ride.” His grandmother smiled at the maid as she brought their tea on a tray and proceeded to pour them each a cup before leaving. Her expertise in avoiding his remarks was even more impressive than her recovery.

A neat little tray of sandwiches and pink iced cake had been brought along with the tea, giving them something to nibble on as they continued with their visit.

“Now, you didn’t answer my question. How is married life treating you? I see it is doing wonders for the gardens.” Bernice sipped her tea quite contentedly and raised an eyebrow at Simon, smirking at him over the rim of her cup.

Giving himself over to the situation at hand, Simon grumbled. “It’s not all sunshine and roses if you will excuse the turn of phrase. The color that you see in the gardens does not by any means reflect how we react to one another. In fact, what you see is the direct result of Octavia deliberately disobeying me.”

Bernice chuckled deeply. “Octavia is quite the spirited young woman; I can’t see her taking a back seat while you run the estate. She was bound to change things around here sooner rather than later.”

His grandmother’s words only worsened his anger as he shook his head. “Spirited isn’t quite the word that I would use to describe her. She is stubborn, pig-headed, and outright defiant. I can’t tell you how many times she interfered with the running of the estate in the past week. Every time I lay down the law and tell her not to interfere, she goes right ahead and interferes.”

“Have you tried working with her and not laying down the law?” The Dowager’s eyes twinkled mischievously as she placed her cup back on the tray. She folded her hands on her lap and waited patiently for her grandson to answer her question.

Simon frowned at her, clenching his jaw. “And what do you mean by that? Are you suggesting that I allow her to run the estate?”

She chuckled again before continuing. “No marriage is without its quirks, Simon. You will have to work with Octavia if your relationship is to flourish. Marriage is

never neat and tidy. I'm not suggesting you hand over the reins; I'm simply asking you to be a little more giving."

He ignored her request completely and continued his tirade. "Things were neat and tidy before she came along. Do you know that she stopped the servants from working the other day? I went outside to find one of the gardener's helpers playing the fiddle while my wife danced around with the housekeeper! I was surprised I didn't find any of the liquor missing from the cabinet!"

His grandmother laughed.

"I think I would have loved to see that. These old bones haven't seen such joy in years." Her voice sounded dreamy.

Looking up sharply, Simon glared at her.

Bernice endeavored to correct her statement. "Not that I am able to join in, not with my current state of health." She sniffed loudly and pretended to cough into her hand.

Simon sighed heavily and shook his head, begrudging his brother his freedom for the hundredth time. If Augustus had only stayed and gone through with the wedding, then none of this would be his problem. He'd be running the estate as normal while waiting for the news of his brother's heir.

Breaking the silence again, Bernice reached for one of the small, iced cakes that had been placed on the tray along with the tea.

"Tell me, Simon, you seem quite tense for a man who has recently been married."

"That is not a question, Grandmamma." He strummed his fingers impatiently on the armrest of the chair. "That is a statement."

She took a deep breath and seemed to consider her words carefully before speaking again. “Has your bed been sufficiently warm at night?” She sipped her tea before lowering the cup and saucer onto her lap.

Simon frowned at her, wondering if her illness hadn’t in fact affected her mind.

Clearing her throat, Bernice tried again. “Has your wife been warming your bed? These things can often help reduce the amount of quarreling that a couple will inevitably experience...” Her voice trailed off almost sheepishly as her cheeks filled with color.

The Duke’s mouth fell open in shock as he suddenly stopped strumming his fingers. “Grandmamma, that has nothing to do with you. You know very well that I will not speak of such things. My parents’ marital affairs were the business of the ton, I would like to keep mine private.”

Shrugging her shoulders, Bernice pursed her lips. “I was only asking out of concern. It’s not just your marriage that will suffer if you and the newly crowned duchess do not warm each other’s bed, so to speak.” She coughed again, a little more convincingly than the last time.

“What do you mean?” Simon was beginning to regret welcoming his grandmother instead of saying he was busy.

He could have been pouring over the ledgers in his study rather than undergoing such an unpleasant interrogation.

“If you and Octavia do not produce an heir, and reasonably soon, within the next few months of your marriage, then the recent scandal will not be forgotten. Do not forget that we are attempting to sell a story of true love that blossomed in the face of adversity. If the ton believes that you and Octavia are truly in love, then the scandal

surrounding your brother will be forgotten. If not, people will begin to question the sudden pairing and by extension, your brother's sudden departure."

"I will not repeat myself. I will not be siring an heir for you, the ton, or even the sake of my farce of a marriage. I will be successful in finding Augustus, and when I do, he shall keep his word and marry Octavia's cousin. Once they have secured the line, Octavia shall more than likely choose to live abroad, and I shall carry on with life as it was."

He stated his plan clearly despite the reprimanding looks his grandmother was giving him.

"Do not act like a child, Simon. You know very well that your brother will come back with his tail between his legs. He's always been that way. It is up to you to sire an heir. You have always been the more responsible one. And as the eldest, it is your duty!" She raised her voice in annoyance.

Simon was about to snap back at her when their conversation was interrupted by one of the gardener's helpers.

The young man's cheeks were flushed as he bent over double to catch his breath, his eyes wild with panic.

"What is the meaning of this?" Simon demanded irritably.

He recognized the young man as the one who had been playing the fiddle in the garden. His demeanor quickly changed when he realized that something was seriously wrong.

Willy came up straight and sucked in a sharp breath. "I apologize for the intrusion, Your Grace, but you must come at once."

The blood in his veins suddenly turned to ice when Simon realized that he hadn't seen Octavia in hours. He had been so annoyed with her about the gardens that he hadn't asked where and how she would be spending her day.

"What has happened?" Simon jumped to his feet, fear gripping his heart.

Bernice stood and rested on her cane, encouraging the boy to come up straight.

"It's the head gardener, Your Grace; he climbed the old oak tree out by the stables and can't get down." Willy seemed to have caught his breath as he hurriedly explained.

Relief flooded his body for a moment before Simon nodded. There was a crisis, but at least, Octavia wasn't in the way of harm. "I'll come in a moment; has anyone gone up to help him?"

The blood drained from Willy's face as he seemed to shrink. "That's just the thing, Your Grace; it was the Duchess who climbed up after him, and now both of them can't come back down."

Heat flooded his veins once again as all the relief left in the space of a sentence.

"Go and see to it that nothing else has happened; I will come at once." Simon dismissed the young man with a nod and turned to his grandmother.

Bernice raised a hand to silence him. "Go, do not wait on me. I will ask one thing of you—next time you are angry and doubting your feelings, think of how you felt when you heard that she was in danger."

Her eyes searched his face seriously as if she could read something there that he wasn't aware of.

Simon frowned, not understanding what she was trying to say. Shaking his head, he set off at a run, hoping and praying that he wasn't too late.

He knew in his heart that nobody could have stopped Octavia even if they had tried. She was more stubborn than a mule and far more determined than any of the young men on his estate.

Hang in there.

His heart raced uncontrollably as he ran toward the group of people that had gathered beside the barn in the distance.

CHAPTER 14

“Why the devil hasn’t anyone gone up there?” Simon barked at the group of servants who didn’t seem to be helping at all.

Fear coursed through his veins as the Duke neared the old oak. The leaves were full and lush enough to hide the people who had apparently climbed up.

Even though the tree was brimming with life, Simon knew that the age of the tree would count against anyone who dared climb its branches. The wood was dry and old, a certain danger.

The group at the foot of the tree was all gasping with hands over their mouths as the branches of the tree creaked in protest. They seemed to be rooted to the spot as they all gawked on in shock.

As he approached, their faces were pale with fear as they shifted uncomfortably on their feet.

It was one of the other gardeners who gave him an answer. “Your Grace, the branches are too old and dry to take any more weight. Willy tried climbing up after them, but the first branch snapped almost as soon as he touched it. Most of the lower branches were badly damaged in the last storm that hit.”

The man pointed to the base of the tree where an old branch lay beside the ladder.

“Willy barely got away without a scratch, Your Grace,” one of the maids informed

him and pointed to the young lad who was bent over double from running.

Simon swore under his breath and looked up when Octavia's voice called down to him amidst the branches. "I told them not to come up; there isn't any room up here for anyone else." Her voice quivered slightly.

A mixture of relief and annoyance filled his body as Simon strained his eyes to look into the branches. "Where are you? I can't even see you." He spotted the old gardener clinging to the trunk for dear life but couldn't seem to see Octavia among the leaves.

"It doesn't matter where I am; we are perfectly capable of handling this matter." She suddenly gasped from somewhere between the branches when the tree gave a loud creak.

The wind began to pick up as if from nowhere, adding to the eminent danger at hand.

Ignoring her protests, Simon swung into action and removed his coat, handing it to the nearest maid before climbing the ladder. The metal creaked under his weight as he carefully ascended the rungs, taking his time to calculate each and every step.

"Your Grace, I can see you climbing the ladder; it is not wise to add any more weight to the branches," Octavia called down to him once again as soon as he reached the top.

Looking down, Simon realized that the ground was farther away from the top of the ladder than he would have liked. It was no wonder they were stuck; he hadn't even reached the branches yet, and the ground seemed like a million miles below. How anyone had climbed up in the first place was beyond him.

Catching sight of Octavia's boot standing on one of the branches above his head, Simon called to her, "Are you insane? Climbing up here in those boots like some kind

of primate?”

He gawked at the heel of her boot and shook his head.

How did she manage this?

He couldn't help but feel a little impressed despite the situation at hand.

His words seemed to vex her. “I will have you know that the situation was in hand; I would have been able to save Charlie on my own. It isn't my fault that you have the need to play the hero!” She suddenly gasped again and moved her boots closer to the trunk when the branch beneath her creaked.

Fearing the worst, Simon called to the servants below. “Gather as much rope from the barn as you can find.”

The servants all scattered like ants, disappearing into the large barn that stood a few feet away from the tree.

It only took Simon a few moments to realize that he'd need to save the old man first if he had any hope of retrieving Octavia safely. The branch that Octavia was perched against was directly connected to the one that held the gardener in place.

“Charlie, do you think you can reach me?” Simon called out to the old man, extending his hand toward him as he leaned forward.

“I don't think any of us should move; the weight is evenly dispersed on the branches right now!” Octavia chimed in again, her voice drifting off when the wind rustled the leaves.

“I think you should allow me to handle this matter. I hesitate to remind you, but I am

not the one who is stuck!” Simon growled back in annoyance and swore under his breath before returning his attention back to the old man. Why was she so insistent upon interfering even when he was trying to save her life?

Charlie shut his eyes and breathed heavily when a gust of wind shook the branches of the tree. His frail hands gripped the trunk as he clung on for dear life.

Seeing that the man was too afraid, Simon made a calculated decision and shifted his weight from the ladder to a nearby branch. The wood creaked beneath his weight, threatening to give way as he reached for a stronger branch above his head and held himself steady. The extra support made it easier to move as he moved along, almost dragging his legs with the support from above.

“Please be careful,” Octavia called to him more gently.

Turning his head to the side, Simon caught sight of Octavia with her body hugging the trunk. Her eyes were filled with fear despite the bravado in her voice. The ribbon from her hair and blown loose, causing the strands of her raven hair to partially cover her face.

Nodding to her, the Duke turned back to the old man and took a deep breath before reaching out again. “Charlie, I am going to need you to slowly make your way toward me. We have to work together with this. Can you do that?”

The old man nodded hesitantly, his hands visibly shaking as he looked at Simon. It seemed like an eternity had passed before Charlie was able to work up the courage and edge his way toward Simon.

The old branches creaked in protest when the Duke gripped his hand and pulled the man to his side. Indicating for the old man to follow suit and grip the branch for support, he nodded up.

Charlie breathed a sigh of relief that was short-lived when Octavia screamed in horror.

Whipping around, Simon realized that the weight shift had placed even more strain on the branch beneath her feet. Her body was as close to the trunk as humanly possible, yet the branch was threatening to give way. Every slight nudge from the wind caused the branch to move closer and closer to the point of breaking.

Acting quickly, he guided Charlie past his body and down the ladder to where Willy was waiting to take him the rest of the way. Looking back up, Simon said a silent prayer and lifted himself to the branches above where Octavia was holding on for dear life.

He perched on a strong section with his legs dangling down before coming up straight. “Octavia, you have to open your eyes and look at me,” he commanded her gently.

Breathing heavily, she did as he said, shutting her eyes quickly again when she caught sight of the ground below.

“Don’t look down; keep your eyes on me,” Simon commanded her a little more firmly. His tone seemed to do the trick as Octavia opened her eyes and glared at him, eliciting a response other than fear.

“There is no need to shout, Your Grace. I am perfectly capable of following instructions.” She cocked her head to the side in a challenge despite the imminent danger.

A thousand retorts filled his mind as Simon blinked back his anger. “I think that now would be the time when you show me how good you are at following instructions.”

Reaching out to him with a shaky hand, she swallowed hard before placing her hand in his.

The Duke could feel how scared she was when her fingers gripped his hand like a vice. “Very good, now I am going to move closer to you, and when I give the word, I want you to hop as quickly as you can into my arms.”

Octavia’s eyes widened in shock when she realized what Simon was suggesting.

“I can’t leap into your arms! This isn’t some romantic novel! What if I fall?” Her voice was higher than ever before.

“Hence my plan of catching you!” he called back angrily, his heart racing when the branch beneath her creaked in protest again. “There isn’t enough time for bickering! Are you going to let me help you or not?” He eyed the branch wearily, praying for extra time before it gave in.

Her screams turned into soft whimpers of fear as tears streamed down her cheeks. The tree itself was swaying despite the girth of the thick trunk.

Taking a deep breath, Simon attempted to speak to her in a more soothing tone. “Octavia, I need you to trust me just this once. I know you don’t trust me as your husband, and we haven’t exactly warmed to one another. If there ever comes a time when you choose to trust me, let it be now.”

He gripped her hand a little tighter with what he hoped was an encouraging squeeze.

She whimpered a few more times before nodding to him and inching forward.

“Right, now I am going to count to three, and then I want you to use all of your strength to jump into my arms. Do you think you can do that?”

Octavia nodded with her eyes shut before looking him in the eyes.

Simon held her gaze and nodded. "One..."

The branch creaked loudly, threatening to snap at any moment.

"Two... Three!" Simon yanked on her arm as hard as he could, pulling her closer with the force of her jump.

Her breath came in sharp bursts as Simon used his body to shield her against the trunk. The loud snap behind him shook the tree, letting them know that the branch had indeed snapped beneath the shift in weight. A series of crashing sounds continued all the way down the tree until a loud thud sounded below them.

Burying his face in her hair, Simon swore silently as he breathed in the scent of her shampoo. "What were you thinking, coming up here?" His arms closed in around her tightly as he held her trembling form close to his chest.

Crying softly, she hid her face in his shoulder and sobbed, the fear of the moment taking over her body.

His lips moved closer to her ear as he soothed her softly. "You're safe now; there's no need to cry." He ran his hands up and down her back while holding her close.

Swallowing hard once again, Octavia looked up and into his eyes. "I was just trying to help." The intense vulnerability that he saw reflected in her eyes tugged at his heart as he moved a few strands of her hair from her face.

"I know. I've got you now." He breathed heavily, forgetting for a second that they were still both suspended in a tree. He was about to lean in closer when one of the men called to them from below.

“We have enough rope, Your Grace! The fallen branch has knocked out all of the lower branches. We will have to use the ropes to get you both safely to the ground!”

Snapping out of his daze, Simon looked down and noticed the ladder lying on the ground. True to what the man had said, most of the lower branches that he’d used to climb the tree now lay beside the ladder on the ground. It was a miracle that any of them had made it this far without falling.

Octavia began to panic again as her breathing deepened, turning into pants; tears of fear filled her eyes as she searched his face for reassurance.

Placing his hand under her chin, he held her steady. “Did I not catch you like I said I would?” His voice was low and breathy as he eased her body back against the trunk.

Nodding slowly, Octavia licked over her lips and attempted to ease her breathing, her chest rising and falling with every labored breath.

“Now I need you to trust me again. I promise that I won’t let anything happen to you, but in order for this to work, you will need to trust me with your life.”

Octavia gulped, but then nodded.

“Just like that, I am going to need you to keep your eyes focused on me when they lower us to the ground.” His heart slowed and beat more steadily when she placed her arms around his neck and kept her eyes fixed on his.

A long rope attached to a hook flew past their heads, looping over a branch to the left. Reaching out, Simon gripped the rope and pulled it down, placing it around them both. Her body moved with his as if they were one when he secured them both with a tight knot. The branch that held the rope seemed steady enough as the men on the ground pulled and lifted their feet a few inches off of the branch.

Octavia sucked in a sharp breath but kept her eyes fixed on Simon when he held her a little tighter.

“We can do this together,” he reassured her almost breathlessly.

The rope lifted them both a few inches in the air before the men began to lower them slowly to the ground.

His heart raced uncontrollably with the feeling of their bodies suspended in the air.

A sudden jolt made Octavia shudder and shut her eyes before burying her face in his arm.

“Steady men!” Willy called to the others as they dug their boots into the earth before continuing the slow descent.

Simon was grateful for the fact that the estate employed quite a few young men who seemed to be more than capable of the physical work.

“It’s okay, I’ve got you,” Simon whispered against her hair, cradling her head in his hand.

The moment seemed to drag on forever before his boots made contact with the solid earth. He noticed that Octavia’s eyes were still shut when he undid the rope and threw it aside.

“Octavia, you can open your eyes now,” he spoke to her softly, gently prying her head away from his shoulder.

Blinking a few times, she looked around them as if she couldn’t believe that she was safely on the ground. Simon was caught off guard when she flung her arms around

his neck and began to sob into his chest.

Pulling her closer, he hugged her tightly, supporting her weight when it seemed as if her legs stopped working.

His heart raced again when rational thinking gave way to the fear that should have been there from the start. So many things could have gone wrong from branches snapping to one of them losing their footing and plummeting to the earth.

“That was quite the rescue,” Bernice spoke softly at his side.

Looking up, Simon noticed his grandmother for the first time since he’d reached the ground.

Her smile was radiant and proud as he recalled the final words she had spoken to him before the ordeal.

...think of how you felt when you heard that she was in danger...

What had she meant with those words? Confusion suddenly gripped his heart when he realized just how scared he had been when he’d heard the news.

He held her tighter against his body before burying his face in her hair. The light scent of lavender filled his senses as he scooped her up and lifted her in his arms.

Bernice held his gaze for a second before instructing the servants to prepare sweet tea for the shock. Walking past him, she stopped for a moment to whisper under her breath, “It is quite remarkable what can be achieved when people learn how to work together.”

It took him a moment to consider his grandmother’s words before Simon brushed it

off and continued on.

Heading toward the house, Simon carried Octavia in his arms as if she weighed nothing more than a feather. Her weight against his chest brought even more confusion to his mind as he fought the urge to carry her to his chambers.

Why do I feel as if I need to protect her?

He swallowed hard against a new kind of fear that had never crossed his mind before.

What would he do if he fell in love with her?

CHAPTER 15

Octavia breathed in the fresh air as her horse neared the line of trees at the end of the estate. It had been a few days since the incident in the tree, and neither she nor Simon seemed to know how to behave around one another.

Breakfasts were spent with polite conversations while bickering was kept to an absolute minimum.

Her horse came to a stop when she sucked in a sharp breath and pulled on the reins.

In the distance, just beyond the path that she had chosen, was Simon. His white cotton shirt was drenched in sweat, creating a sheerness to the fabric that displayed the chiseled muscles of his shirt.

His horse stood a few feet behind him, tethered to a tree.

Octavia swallowed hard when he stopped jogging and lifted his arms in the air, stretching his muscles. She couldn't help but feel a deep sense of attraction that culminated in the pit of her stomach. She wondered what it would have felt like if he hadn't stopped their kisses in the study as well as the orchard.

A jolt of panic shot through her body when Simon suddenly looked in her direction.

Acting on a whim, she turned her horse in the direction of the forest and started galloping.

Running towards her with his arms flailing in the air, Simon seemed as if he were attempting to stop her, yet Octavia carried on, unswayed by his efforts.

I can't face him now.

The horse continued to gallop through the trees, whipping branches against her face when she attempted to look back.

It didn't seem as if Simon was following her. How could he when he had been on foot? She briefly wondered why he had been so adamantly trying to flag her down when the trees suddenly gave way to what seemed to be a cliff in the distance.

Cold dread filled her body when the horse continued to gallop in full panic now and unmoved by Octavia's efforts to pull on the reins. The charcoal mare that she'd chosen seemed to have a mind of her own when it came to galloping.

With startling clarity, she suddenly realized that Simon's shouting must have spooked the horse far more than she realized.

I am going to die.

Her life suddenly began to flash before her eyes when the edge of the cliff seemed to draw closer in the blink of an eye.

"Are you out of your mind?" Simon called to her as he suddenly appeared at her side on the back of a white stallion.

Her throat felt dry when she tried to yell that the horse was out of control.

Taking control of the situation, Simon maintained his speed and reached for the reins, missing by inches when the mare gained a burst of speed.

In a last-ditch effort to stop the horse, Octavia yanked the left rein as hard as she could. The horse's neck turned forcing the mare to finally slow. Octavia's heart raced with fear as the beast came to a screeching halt in front of the cliff. The horse's nostrils flared, and the mare snorted with fear.

The sound of rocks falling to the bottom of the ravine made Octavia shudder.

Simon was swearing under his breath when he came to her side. "Are you trying to get killed, or are just hell-bent on making my life as difficult as possible?"

Regaining her breath, she swallowed hard and looked at him. "I don't see why you are complaining. It's not as if you needed to save me again. I did get the situation under control, did I not?"

She raised an eyebrow in question and held the reins steady when the mare became restless.

Shutting his eyes, Simon shook his head and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"I swear you will be the death of me, one of these days; mark my words. What were you doing gawking at me in the first place?" He opened his eyes again and gave her an accusing glare.

"I wasn't gawking at you; I was simply riding when you decided to cross my path. It's not my fault that you decided to suddenly appear in a state of undress." She felt her cheeks filling with heat when he smirked at her.

"So, you were looking then?" He almost seemed pleased at having caught her.

"I think I saw a stream beyond the trees, and my mare is restless." She held her head high as she steered her horse in the direction she had come.

“How on earth did you even see a stream at the speed you were going?” Simon pulled his horse up beside her with ease.

Her irritation suddenly flared when it seemed as if he would follow her all the way to the stream instead of letting her be.

“By the way, I don’t think you should be ashamed of looking at me. I saw quite a bit of you during your little stunt back there.” Simon’s eyes moved down her body, settling on her exposed thigh.

Gasping in surprise, Octavia quickly fixed her dress, pulling the fabric back over her thigh. She had been so panicked during the whole ordeal that she hadn’t even realized that her dress had come up.

Simon chuckled deeply for the very first time since she had met him. The sound sent a strange shiver of pleasure down her spine.

She suddenly felt as if she wanted to know him more, to understand why he acted the way that he did. There was another part of him lurking beneath the cool exterior that he showed to the rest of the world.

Biting her lower lip, she decided to take a chance. “Your Grace, you haven’t spoken much about your parents. What were they like?” She went off of the only bit of information that Mrs. Farley had given her.

The Duke was exposed to things that he never should have been when he was a child.

She regretted her decision when Simon’s body suddenly stiffened.

“The stream is just up ahead.” Simon cleared his throat and urged his horse forward, leaving Octavia to follow him down a narrow path that led to the sound of rushing

water.

Octavia's eyes were fixed on the muscles of his back as he rode on ahead.

The thicket of trees suddenly gave way to a spectacular view that caught Octavia off guard.

The sounds of rushing water were coming from a spectacular waterfall that gushed from an outcropping of rocks. The water at the base of it was crystal clear, giving them both a clear view of the bottom. The pool continued to flow past the trees, narrowing into a stream that disappeared somewhere in the forest.

It was Simon who dismounted first and led his horse to the edge of the water.

Following suit, Octavia did the same and patted the horse's strong neck before stealing a glance at the Duke. His face was stiff and serious when he turned his back on the horse and walked to an outcropping of rocks where he took a seat. Following his lead, she looped the reins over the front of the saddle and allowed her horse to graze near the water.

Wondering if he would open up to her in time, she left the horses beside the stream and chose a position beside the Duke. Silence seemed to fill the serene atmosphere before Simon spoke.

"My parents were never faithful to each other." His voice was almost as cool and distant as the day she had met him.

"Oh. I was not aware. I'm sorry." Octavia frowned, wondering where he was going with the conversation.

"I stumbled upon their dirty little secrets one night when I was a child. My eyes were

opened to a world of infidelity and scandal that I never knew existed. After that night, I began paying closer attention to both of my parents and realized that neither of them had ever been faithful.” He continued staring ahead as the horses wandered off to the side and began to nibble on some greenery.

Octavia felt a wave of pity for the man she had married. His view of love had certainly been strange to her, but it suddenly made sense why he never wanted any of the servants to see them bickering. His parents had never been discreet.

“I watched them flirt with other people at balls and take men and women alike to their chambers late at night. I never knew if they had ever loved each other, but the rest of society certainly knew what they were doing behind closed doors.” His Adam’s apple bobbed up and down as he swallowed, mesmerizing Octavia.

Simon certainly was an incredibly handsome man, yet there was so much more to him now that she knew a little of his past.

“Things went on for years until I overheard some of the guests at a ball talking about my parents and how their marriage was a joke. I had assumed up until that point that all marriages were based on affairs. You said I do in the church and found yourself a mistress as soon the day was over.” The bitterness in his voice was almost palpable as he spoke. “It wasn’t until that night that I realized that my parents were the laughingstock of the ton.”

Feeling a great amount of sympathy toward him, Octavia reached out and touched his arm. It made sense to her now why he had suggested she take a lover, and she briefly wondered if he had lain with any woman since their marriage. She wasn’t certain how she would feel if he had been unfaithful, but she was fairly certain that she wouldn’t like the feeling at all.

“Simon, I can’t say that I have much experience with marriage, but I did grow up

with a mother and father who loved one another dearly. I can safely say that the way your parents conducted themselves wasn't how things were supposed to be between a husband and wife. I know a lot of people take lovers, but those marriages are seldom happy from what I have seen. My parents never strayed from each other's beds as far as I am aware, and they were blissfully happy with each other."

Simon looked at her out of the corner of his eye and smirked, causing Octavia to wonder what he was thinking. "I have not been with another woman since we've been married if that was what you were wondering."

Her cheeks quickly filled with heat again as she withdrew her hand from his arm and cleared her throat. "I wasn't wondering that at all; you made it perfectly clear that our business is our own as long as we are both discreet."

She tore her eyes away from him and watched the ripples of water at the base of the waterfall.

Why did he have to go and say that?

She tried to cover the relief and embarrassment that she felt by pushing herself up and walking to the edge of the water. To her great surprise, Simon followed suit and removed his shirt, wading into the water before diving straight into the depths of the pool.

Octavia held her breath when he resurfaced on the other end of the pool, water dripping from his face.

"What are you waiting for? Aren't you hot after your ride? You can swim, can you not?"

She looked around herself in confusion for a moment before rubbing the back of her

neck.

“Of course I know how to swim. I just don’t think it would be appropriate to swim in my dress.” She looked at the heavy fabric that would surely weigh her down if she entered the pool.

“Then take it off.” Simon’s lips spread into a cheeky smile as he raised his eyebrows at her suggestively.

“I... I most certainly cannot do that!” she began to stutter before refusing most emphatically.

Simon threw back his head and laughed, causing heat to rise to her cheeks once again as she blushed. “There isn’t anyone here to see you. I promise I won’t look until you are in the water.” He turned his back on her and allowed the water to keep him up as he floated in place.

Octavia hesitated at first, wondering if she should risk it and have a little fun. Biting on her lip, she decided to join in the fun and began to remove her dress.

“You promise that you won’t look?” she called over her shoulder and slipped the fabric down her body.

“I swear; now get in the water before I come to fetch you...”

The way he teased her made the pit of her stomach coil with desire as she slipped her chemise up over her head. Tiptoeing to the water, she braced herself and dove into the icy depths, feeling the water bringing her body to life as she resurfaced on the other side of the pond.

Simon smirked at her when she ran her hands through her hair and allowed the water

to cascade down her back.

“What?” She suddenly felt self-conscious and covered her chest when he continued to stare at her.

His eyes hungrily moved over her shoulders before moving back up to her eyes. “I’ve never seen you like this before. Swimming becomes you.”

Heat crept up the back of her neck when his smile softened into a genuine compliment that reached his eyes. Wanting to break the tension that suddenly formed between them, Octavia splashed some water on his face.

“Are you sure that you want to do that?” His smile broadened into a cheeky grin that tugged at the pit of her stomach.

Her eyes widened in shock when she realized that she’d given him an open invitation to start a war. Watching him disappear under the water, she suddenly panicked and tried to swim in the opposite direction. Screaming in surprise, she felt her body being lifted from the water, Simon’s hands holding her above his head as he laughed.

“Did you really think that you could get away from me that easily?” His eyes mocked her as he held her in place before lowering her back into the water.

Octavia giggled freely as she splashed and tried to swim away from him thoroughly enjoying herself for the first time since she had gotten married.

Simon gave chase and quickly caught up with her again before pulling her into his arms.

“I think I had better teach you a lesson in proper swimming etiquette.” His eyes suddenly softened when he gripped her waist and pulled her closer.

CHAPTER 16

Octavia sucked in a sharp breath and gasped when Simon drew her into his arms and kissed her neck. Then warm feel of his hot tongue against her skin sent shivers of pleasure down her spine.

“Simon,” she gasped his name so passionately that he growled with pleasure and drew her body closer to his.

The heat from his chiseled muscles seeped into her skin despite the coolness of the water.

Acting on instinct, Octavia wrapped her legs around his waist and allowed him to explore her body as she leaned back in the water. His hands moved up her sides, stopping short of her breasts as she nuzzled her neck.

Moments passed where they kissed, savoring the depths of each other’s mouths before Simon changed the flow.

His hands were on her breasts, hungrily kneading them with his palms while her nipples hardened against the sodden fabric of her chemise.

“Octavia, you don’t know how long I have wanted to do this,” he practically growled against her throat before pushing her back in the water until her body connected with an outcropping of rocks.

The rock in question formed the perfect shape to cradle her body as Simon lifted her

up and laid her back down. The water lapped at her legs, creating a gentle sensation of caresses.

I've wanted you for the longest time.

She felt the words catching in her throat when the tips of his fingers brushed the curves of her hips.

Taking a moment to stare down at her with a hungry look in his eyes, he reached up and cupped her breasts once again.

Octavia gasped loudly when her fully erect nipples made contact with his hand. She was ready at that moment to give herself to him fully.

Propping herself up on her elbows, she pressed her lips into his, savoring the sweet feel of his tongue parting her lips. Her tongue fought for dominance in the warm depths of his mouth until he growled with pleasure and positioned himself on top of her.

The feel of his hard body pressing into hers made her core quiver with pleasure when he left her lips and kissed a path down her neck. His tongue flicked over her skin, lapping at the droplets of water.

She couldn't help but squirm with pleasure when Simon slipped the straps of her chemise over her shoulders and pulled them down her body. The cool breeze kissed her nipples, hardening them even further before Simon dipped his head and took the first rosy bud into his mouth. The loud squeal of delight made him look up as he flicked his tongue over her nipple. The cheeky grin of satisfaction curled his lips before returning to her nipple drove Octavia wild with pleasure.

How was it even possible they had gone from bickering to exploring each other's

bodies in the space of one afternoon? Her thoughts quickly banished like mist in the sun when he doubled his efforts on her breast and gently dragged her nipple between his teeth.

He wasn't just teasing her body; he was making sure to take his time and please her in all the ways that she didn't even know were possible. Switching nipples, he used his finger and thumb to gently pinch the one he had been sucking while licking the other.

"Simon?" Octavia lifted her head and looked down when his free hand moved up her thigh and gently parted her knees.

She wasn't sure what to expect beyond the pleasurable sensations on her breasts, yet something about the look in his eyes made her want to find out.

He stopped for the briefest of moments and looked her in the eyes.

"Do you trust me?" He held her gaze and slid his fingers further up her thighs, patiently waiting for her response.

Realizing that she liked what he was doing, she leaned back on the rock and closed her eyes, focusing on the soothing sensations of the water lapping at her body. A sudden sensation of white-hot pleasure rippled through her body when his fingers parted the delicate flesh between her thighs and entered the folds.

He moved slowly at first, giving her time to adjust to the pleasure.

"Oh!" She moaned loudly and bit her lips when he moved his fingers strategically over the small nub at the apex of her core.

"Tell me how that feels," Simon left her breast and watched her face as he moved his

fingers in circles, staring out slow at first but picking up the pace when she moaned.

She gasped for breath with disbelief budding in her chest at how amazing her body was feeling.

She managed to answer. “It... It feels amazing...”

She sought the right words, overcome by the waves of pleasure that were shooting throughout her body.

Does it feel this good for all women?

Her mind suddenly whirled with thoughts of pleasure when Simon returned to her nipples and took turns sucking them into his mouth. Her eyes shot open again when he kissed a path down her chest and abdomen, stopping to remove her chemise and discard it in the water.

Her breathing was heavy and labored when he placed his hands on her knees and parted her thighs, shifting his weight down her body until his head was over her core.

“I think you will like this a whole lot more than my fingers.” He gave her another cheeky grin before kissing the insides of her thighs and lowering his head.

Octavia gasped and reached for his hair, wanting more the second his tongue flicked over her folds. The lapping water helped with motions of pleasure as he moved her body in rhythm with his tongue, savoring every lick as her legs began to tremble. She felt as if she would burst with pleasure when Simon paused and looked into her eyes.

“Nobody can hear us, Octavia; there is no need to hold back...” He sunk his teeth into her inner thigh before returning his attention to her folds.

“Oh, Simon!” She let out a moan of pleasure when he sucked the nub of pleasure into his mouth and swirled his tongue, almost sending her over the edge.

Her screams spurred him on as he doubled his efforts, moving his head from side to side licking up and down in quick succession.

Her moans turned into urgent whimpers when he reached up and gripped each breast in his hands, playing with her nipples while she threw her legs over his shoulders. The new elevated position of his head buried between her thighs created new sensations that had Octavia gasping for air. It wasn't long until her legs began to tremble, wave after wave of pleasure coursing through her body.

Her legs spasmed out of control when the climax of his licking pushed her over the edge.

“Simon!” she screamed his name so loudly that a nearby flock of birds took flight.

The Duke held her hips in place when her back arched from the orgasm, licking her slowly until she came back down to earth.

She lay there panting with her back on the rock until Simon pulled her into his arms and sank her into the water.

“Was that the first time that that has ever happened to you?” He kissed her neck softly before running his hands up her thighs.

It took her a moment to gather her thoughts before she shook her head.

“I didn't know that anything like that was possible. I knew that men and women came together once they were married... I just didn't realize that it was like that...”

She felt the heat rising to her cheeks when she realized that Simon had just touched her body in a very intimate manner.

His smile was soft and understanding when he pulled her closer and kissed her forehead. The water lapped over their shoulders, pulling them back to the middle of the pool.

“I’m glad that I could make you feel new things.”

He dipped his hand under the water and touched her again, making her gasp when gently rubbed over her folds. The flesh between her thighs was still tender enough to make her shiver with pleasure.

“Is it like that for men as well?” She acted instinctively and kissed his neck, dragging her teeth over his skin until he moaned.

“Well, we also like to be touched, and we can be just as loud if things are done the right way.” He shot her a wolfish grin before pulling her into his arms and kissing her lips.

“Will you show me?” She managed to pull back for a moment before thrusting her tongue back into his mouth.

Simon growled so hungrily that Octavia felt as if she would reach her climax all over again.

“I didn’t think that you were such a little minx.” Simon reached for her hand and guided her beneath the water until the tips of her fingers brushed that bulge that had once been concealed by his breaches.

Simon pulled her back toward the rock and leaned against the hard surface.

“Do what feels natural.” His voice was low and commanding, sending shivers of pleasure down her spine.

Taking a deep breath, she flexed her fingers and wrapped them around his erection, feeling the pulsating muscle in her palm.

Simon groaned so loudly that she almost thought that she’d done something wrong. Yet the look of utter bliss on his face as his features contorted let her know that she was on the right track.

Flexing her fingers a few more times, she began to move back and forth, mimicking the rhythm he had used on her with his tongue.

“Octavia...” he whispered her name passionately, leaning against the rock until his face was pointed toward the sky.

Feeling as if she understood what pleased him, she shifted to his side and whispered in his ear as her hand worked back and forth beneath the water.

“I want you to feel just as good as I did.” She flicked her tongue over his lobe before doubling her pace.

It didn’t take long for Simon moans to turn into panting. The motion of his hips as he thrust into her hand was almost animalistic as Octavia watched his face tighten and contort with pleasure. It was over almost as quickly as it started when the Duke cried out and moved her hand to the side.

“Did I do it right?” She bit her lip, wondering if she had pleased him.

Simon took a moment to open his eyes before sinking back into the water and kissing her lips.

“That was more than fine; it felt just as good as your screams.” His tongue entered her mouth as he took her into his arms and kissed her passionately.

She sighed contently when he drew back and led her over to the edge of the water.

“As fun as this was, we had better get back.” He gripped her hand and helped her out of the water before leading her over to her clothes.

It took them both a few moments to locate all of their garments before dressing in the damp and somewhat sodden items.

“Oh dear.” Octavia suddenly looked up and gasped when she realized something very important.

“What is it?” Simon came forward and pulled her shirt over his head.

“It’s the horses, they aren’t here anymore.” She pointed out the obvious when he turned to look at the trees.

The peals of laughter that filled the air caught her off guard as Octavia finished fastening the ribbons of her dress. Had their moment in the water made him lose his mind? She looked around again to see if she had missed anything at all.

“I don’t understand, Your Grace?” She cocked her head to the side when he finally finished laughing.

Shaking his head, Simon smirked. “I think it may have been your screams that drove them away. The scene must have been a bit too much for them to handle.”

He winked at her and allowed his lips to curl back into a satisfied grin. He seemed more open with her now, less private, and more willing to be himself.

Feeling herself blush, she made a face at him and pursed her lips, unsure of how to interpret his laughter. The atmosphere between them had shifted so quickly from one moment to the next that she wasn't even sure of how to address him.

"I'm just teasing. Horses have wandered off on the estate before, and it isn't unusual for them to make their way back to the stables. We had better start moving if we want to make it back to the house before nightfall." He looked over his shoulder at the sun that was hanging low in the sky.

"I guess we had better get back before Mrs. Farley sends a search party after us." She attempted to make polite conversation despite all of the questions that were swimming at the back of her mind.

Simon didn't say anything else before making his way back up the path and entering the thicket of trees. The silence that greeted them was almost deafening as she was left with her own thoughts.

Was he looking at her differently now? Or was this simply a dalliance for him that met a need?

They walked on in silence for a time while Octavia wondered how things would be between them now.

It couldn't go back to how it had been, not now that they had been together in such an intimate manner.

I wonder if we will do that again.

She continued to blush when her thoughts wandered to images of the Duke in her chambers.

The experience was certainly one that she wanted and even needed to happen again. Yet she couldn't help but feel a strange pang of fear in her chest. What did this mean for their marriage? And what did it mean if she fell in love with him? Would they still be able to coexist in the same house without bickering?

The future seemed quite uncertain to her as they made their way back through the trees.

Simon looked a few times, making sure that she was following close behind. He didn't say anything to her, yet his behavior and even the way he carried himself seemed to have changed. He seemed more content with her presence rather than irritable. She also no longer saw him as the cold and unfeeling monster that had referred to her as a saccharine virgin.

She kept her eyes fixed on his back as wave after wave of tangled emotions pulsed through her mind.

Everything has changed.

The thought scared her more than she wanted to admit.

CHAPTER 17

I can do this.

Octavia felt the pit of her stomach fluttering with nerves as she took a deep breath and composed herself before entering the dining room. It was the following day, and she wasn't sure how she and Simon would respond to one another after their intimate romp in the pool. They had come straight back to the mansion and gone their separate ways.

“Good morning.” Simon stood awkwardly, bumping the table in his haste.

Heat filled her cheeks and she tried her best not to laugh at his sheepish expression. “Good morning, Your Grace.”

He's just as nervous as I am.

A wave of relief engulfed her body as she made her way to the other end of the room and took her seat beside him. She began to wonder if all new couples experienced the same kind of tension as they did. She certainly felt closer to him after their romp.

Clearing his throat, Simon returned to his seat and began sorting through a stack of letters beside his plate.

The atmosphere in the room was filled with a tense feeling of longing and awkwardness that made it almost impossible to ignore.

Octavia wanted to reach out and touch his hand before asking him why he hadn't come to her room once they had returned. She had been expecting him to at least check in on her during the night. The thought almost startled her as much as her longing for his touch.

Questions swam in her mind until she couldn't stand the silence any longer.

"I hope you don't have too many matters that need your attention?" she blurted out awkwardly before she could stop herself.

Heat crept up the back of her neck when he looked up with a frown.

"I beg your pardon?" Simon asked at her, his eyes moving over her flushed cheeks.

Taking a moment, Octavia reminded herself that she was a noblewoman of good breeding who could hold a proper conversation.

"I mean, you seem to be quite busy this morning, Your Grace. I hope the matters aren't too pressing?" She released a deep breath and smiled, pronouncing her words with all the elocution she could muster.

Simon kept his eyes fixed on her face before shaking his head and returning to the stack of letters with a sigh.

"It's just letters from the men I've sent to find Augustus."

He threw the letter in his hand on top of the pile and slumped back in his chair, exposing the taut muscles of his chest through his white, cotton shirt.

Octavia sucked in a sharp breath and practically tore her eyes away from his chest. "I'm guessing that they haven't been able to find him?"

She felt a momentary pang of guilt for getting so wrapped up in her own affairs that she hadn't spared a moment for her cousin. It had been more than a week since her cousin had gone missing. Neither her godmother nor her uncle had sent any word since the wedding.

"I'm afraid not; I've searched every place that he's been known to frequent. He seems to have disappeared into thin air." Simon ran his hand over the light layer of stubble that cast a shadow over his chin.

"I haven't heard anything from Isolde either." Octavia sighed and reached for a jar of preserves to spread over her toast.

The situation with her cousin and Simon's brother was certainly cause for concern. If they had both run away in an attempt to avoid marriage, shouldn't they have sent word by now that they were safe? It wasn't like her cousin to keep others in the dark.

The thought suddenly plagued her mind, pushing the awkwardness aside as she placed the jar beside her plate.

Simon broke through her train of thought. "All we can do is keep looking for them."

The concern in his voice made her look up.

Her breath almost caught in her chest again when she noted the deep look of concern in his light green eyes.

Images of the day before flashed into her mind as she recalled the feel of his lips moving down her skin.

"Simon I..." Her lips moved as if they possessed a life of their own.

Reaching instinctively, she held her hand out to him. She wanted to tell him that she longed for his touch and the feel of his head between her thighs.

“Careful!” Simon snatched the jar of preserves with lightning speed as it toppled over the edge.

Octavia gasped and jumped back in her chair as a large blob of deep purple jam hit her lap, splattering onto her arm and wrist.

“I’m so sorry! I can’t believe how clumsy I am.” Her cheeks filled with heat as Simon placed the jar back on the table.

Her fumbled apologies set her cheeks aflame.

“There is no need to apologize.” Simon seemed as if he were trying his best not to laugh. His eyes twinkled mischievously as he bit back his laughter.

Great, all I need now is for Simon to think that I’m incapable of the simplest of tasks.

Looking around, she realized that none of the servants were around.

“I’ll fetch a cloth.” She began to stand at the same time as Simon, fumbling with the patch of preserves on her dress.

Simon reached out and stopped her, freezing when she looked up with her face mere inches away from his.

“I was going to call for one of the servants.” His voice was low as his eyes dipped to her lips.

“It... it’s my fault, I should be more careful.” The skittering of her heart caught her

off guard when he reached for her hand and lifted her wrist to his lips.

“It’s just a little splattering of berries, that’s all.”

He lowered his face to her wrist and carefully licked at the berries before covering the spot with his mouth.

The sheer force of exhilaration that ran through her veins almost had her moaning as she bit her lip. Her chest suddenly rose and fell in rapid succession with every labored breath.

The tingling sensation of his lips on her skin sent a wave of bumps up her arm. Pressure, softer than the fluttering of a butterfly’s wings, made her pulse race.

He continued to kiss a path up her arm, taking his time to flick his tongue over her flesh while using his thumb to caress her wrist.

“Simon...” She finally gasped, shutting her eyes as she laid her head back and moaned.

“See, there is no need for a cloth,” Simon whispered against the inside of her elbow before kissing his way back to her wrist and pulling away.

The look of passion in his eyes when she finally came to her senses set her heart beating at an unstoppable pace. She wanted him more than she had at the pond, more than the desire for freedom and traveling the world.

“Octavia, I want...”

He placed his hand on her hip and drew her closer, keeping his eyes locked on her lips while lifting his other hand. Using the back of his knuckles, he stroked her cheek,

taking his time to draw a line over her bottom lip with his thumb.

Every ounce of her resolve suddenly faded away as she allowed herself to be pulled against his chest. Her heart was screaming for him to kiss her while her body yearned for his touch.

“So do I...” She found herself whispering breathlessly against his lips as she worked up the courage and ran the tips of her fingers up his chest.

The chiseled muscles beneath her touch quivered for a moment when she kissed the corner of his mouth. Words weren’t needed when the tension between them spoke volumes.

It was Octavia who tilted her head to the side and angled her lips against his. Shifting her body into his, she allowed her knee to slip between his thighs.

Simon growled against her lips while lifting his eyes to hers. “Do not tempt me, wife. Not unless you are ready to feel what your defiance does to me.”

Her lips parted into a seductive smile at his words.

“Who says I am trying to tempt you, Your Grace?”

She lifted her hands to his hips and pushed her breasts into his chest. The feeling of being able to evoke a response from him urged her forward as she bit her lip before dragging them across his.

Rising to the challenge, Simon gripped her hip tighter and moved his hand down her neck, pausing just before the swelling of her breasts.

Giving in to the desire that her own flirting had created between her thighs, Octavia

leaned in all the way and kissed him.

He responded in kind, drawing her lips between his teeth before searching the depths of her mouth with his tongue. His hands moved to her bottom, cupping her firmly as if he wanted to move her onto the table.

“Your Grace, there is a letter here from...” Mrs. Farley gasped in shock.

Octavia’s eyes shot open as she suddenly jumped back, noting the look of surprise in the housekeeper’s eyes.

The older woman began to panic as she spluttered over her words and quickly placed the silver tray on the end of the table.

“I beg your pardon, Your Grace.” Her face turned bright red before Mrs. Farley hurried from the room.

Simon cleared his throat and averted his gaze from her chest before returning to his seat.

Taking a moment to compose herself, she smoothed the folds of her dress and took a deep breath before crossing the room.

They had gotten so caught up in the heat of the moment that neither of them had realized where they were. Servants were bound to enter the dining room at breakfast.

Her chest still rose and fell from the encounter as she rebuked herself for being so careless.

Keeping her eyes fixed on the cream letter, Octavia suddenly felt excited when she recognized her godmother’s writing.

“It looks like an invitation.” Her eyes drifted over the slanted writing before her fingers began to work the wax seal at the back of the letter.

Simon grunted an acknowledgment and returned to pouring over his letters as if nothing had happened at all. He seemed resigned to the fact that nothing more could be said about the sudden intrusion.

“It’s an invitation to a ball. My godmother, Matilda always hosts the most elegant parties.” She read the invitation as she walked back to her seat and elegantly slid back into her chair.

The ball was to be held as a mere social gathering of the ton , yet Octavia knew that her godmother missed her. They had been an inseparable duo before the wedding.

“I don’t think that it’s a good idea for you to be attending a ball so soon after the wedding.” Simon dismissed the invitation without looking up.

“And may I ask why not?” She suddenly felt annoyed at his dismissal.

He’d changed from hot to cold again in the space of a few minutes, and she wasn’t having any of it.

“The ton is still questioning the reasoning behind our marriage. If you show up to a ball on your own, people will begin to wonder if everything between us is as it should be.” He looked up with his eyebrows raised.

“Well then there is no need for concern, Your Grace, the invitation is for both of us. If we attend the ball together, then nobody would have any reason to believe that things aren’t as they should be.” Her chest suddenly constricted with confusion.

Aren’t they as they should be?

She searched his eyes for an answer but came up empty-handed when the same veiled expression fell over his face. Why was he pushing her away again when they had come so close just moments before?

“That is beside the point; I do not wish to attend a ball so soon after the wedding. We should stay well away from the rest of the ton until the dust has settled.” He looked back down at the letter in his hand.

“I can’t stay cooped up in this mansion for the next year, Your Grace. Do you expect me to run and hide every time someone mentions my cousin’s folly? I haven’t even written to my uncle or godmother since the wedding.”

Her chest suddenly constricted again with longing for the freedom she had felt as a debutant. She had been bound by the expectations of society, yet now, she felt like a prized bird locked in a cage.

Simon sat back in his chair again and ran his hand over his chin. “I did not say that you were not allowed to write to your family. On the contrary, I think it would be good for you if you wrote letters to your cousin and sent them to any places that you think she could be hiding.”

His mention of her cousin suddenly brought an idea to the front of her mind. “Do you not think that going to London will make finding your brother easier?”

Simon frowned at her, a look of confusion in his eyes.

“I mean you’re sitting here corresponding with your men when you could be visiting some of his friends yourself. What if the men you sent missed a few minor details that could give Augustus away? I’m assuming that you know your brother better than anyone who could go in your place. You can’t deny the fact that your presence is better than anyone else’s. What is one ball compared to finding your brother and

possibly even Isolde?”

He seemed to consider her words as he ran his tongue over his bottom lip.

Octavia held her breath in the hopes of swaying him to change his mind. She longed to see her godmother again and even her uncle, but she wasn't about to tell him that; it was better for him to focus on matters close to his heart.

“Very well then. I guess one public appearance will only help sway convince the rest of the ton ,” he finally conceded with a nod.

Jumping from her chair, Octavia rushed to his side and threw her arms around his neck before placing a chaste kiss on his cheek.

“Thank you, Simon, thank you so much! You have no idea what this means to me!” She gave his neck another tight squeeze with her cheek placed against his before awkwardly realizing what she was doing.

Taking a step back, she cleared her throat and examined the look of surprise on his face. He wasn't angry with her or even annoyed, he just didn't seem as if he knew how to respond.

“It is just one ball. I'm doing it to find Augustus and Isolde.” He cleared his throat and nodded before Octavia curtsied and hurried from the room.

Stopping just outside the dining room, Octavia raised her hand to her chest and attempted to still her beating heart.

CHAPTER 18

“Where is Her Grace, Mrs. Farley? We were supposed to leave for the ball an hour ago. The sun has set, and our carriage is waiting,” Simon complained to the housekeeper from the bottom of the stairs.

Placing a hand over the fluttering in her stomach, Octavia took a deep breath and composed herself.

She had spent a lot of time with Mrs. Farley and the dressmaker preparing for the ball. Part of her wanted the rest of the ton to see that everything was as it should have been. Yet she knew deep down that she had chosen the dress for Simon. She wanted him to look at her as he had done in the pool.

“I can assure you that Her Grace will be down soon, Your Grace. It takes time for a lady to make herself ready.” Mrs. Farley held the fort while Octavia worked up the courage to come down.

“Married life will be the death of me...” Simon grumbled loud enough for Octavia to hear, irritation dripping from his words.

Taking her cue from the tone of his voice, Octavia stepped out of the hallway and placed her hand on the top of the banister.

Letting out a breath through her pursed lips, she blinked a few times before looking at Simon.

“How hard can it be to...” The Duke suddenly stopped, his words tapering off as he unfolded his arms and turned to Octavia with his mouth slightly agape.

He’s looking at me.

Her heart tumbled uncontrollably in her chest, causing the pit of her stomach to flutter furiously.

“Well, Your Grace, do you approve?” Octavia angled her head to the side with a cheeky smile.

She teased him with a curtsy that exposed her cleavage ever so slightly. Her godmother had always told her that the art of seduction was in the minor details for a man.

The gown of white silk and silver trimmings had been chosen for the elegant way that the fabric clung to her figure. Her tight corset pushed up her chest, highlighting the swelling of her breasts. Her thick black hair had been braided and pinned to the back of her head with dozens of tiny white pearls. The fine diamonds in her ears and around her neck sparkled in the light of the candles in their sconces.

“You... you look... beautiful,” Simon stammered, swallowing hard when she began to descend the stairs.

His eyes drank in her appearance, never leaving her for a moment.

The bright red shawl she had chosen, hung over her arms in a scarlet river of silk, finishing off her look with a pop of brilliant color.

“Thank you, Your Grace. Mrs. Farley and I knew that you wouldn’t mind waiting. Do you like my shawl? I felt that it adds much-needed brightness to the plain dress.”

She took her time descending the stairs, allowing Simon the time to take everything in. She knew she had placated his frustration when he closed his mouth and took a deep breath. His chest rose and fell beneath the neat black dinner jacket.

“It will certainly help if you feel a chill,” he responded coolly and stood up straight, yet Octavia could tell that she had caught him off guard.

His eyes moved over her figure, lingering over her waist and breasts for a little too long.

Mrs. Farley smiled knowingly, pursing her lips in an attempt to hide her approval. “Well, I think that my work here is done, I bid you both a wonderful evening, Your Graces.”

She curtsied politely and hurried away, leaving Simon and Octavia alone.

Stifling a giggle, Octavia reached the bottom of the stairs and met his gaze.

“Well, Your Grace? Shall we go? I know we should have left for the ball an hour ago. All these pearls and frills take time to perfect,” she teased him gently, letting him know that she had heard his complaints.

Simon coughed into his hand before allowing the corner of his mouth to tilt into a smile.

“Yes, yes. Let’s.” He held his arm out to her with a veiled look in his eyes.

Her heart skittered again when she looped her arm into his, feeling the warmth of his skin seep through her glove.

“I hope you don’t find the ball this evening too tiresome, Your Grace.” She spoke

softly to him, not wanting to break the spell that had suddenly formed between them.

Things seemed lighter somehow, more tangible and real.

Their relationship was beginning to change in ways that she hadn't expected. She felt closer to him as a tiny spark of hope took flame in her chest.

"It shouldn't be too tiresome. I'm not saying that I will want to stay to the end, but one or two dances wouldn't hurt." He spoke stiffly, smiling at her from the corner of his mouth.

Octavia looked up in surprise as they neared the front doors where a footman was waiting to whisk them into the carriage. Was he secretly confessing to enjoying her company? Her heart leaped into her throat as they stepped into the cool summer air.

What am I hoping will happen between us?

The evening ahead suddenly felt more daunting as she realized that her feelings toward her husband were beginning to change over time.

As slow and steady as the flowing of a river, she was beginning to enjoy his company.

The ball teemed with guests chattering away when Octavia and Simon entered the room. Ladies stopped to stare, whispering behind their fans with excited chatter as the Duke led her into the throng.

"Did you see? It's them; they've apparently been in love for years. They held back on getting married because the Duke's brother wanted to marry her cousin." A blonde lady wearing a lemon-yellow gown whispered to her friends excitedly.

“Can you think of anything more romantic?” One of her friends almost swooned as she began to fan herself faster.

Octavia smiled to herself and glanced at Simon out of the corner of her eye. He didn’t seem to be paying the women any mind, yet he seemed to be scanning the room. For what or whom, she wasn’t sure. Her heart fluttered a little when sudden thoughts of jealousy entered her mind. Did he have a lover before she came along?

No.

That wasn’t a likely scenario, given his history with his parents. He was more than likely scanning the room in an attempt to see how people were reacting to their presence.

“Octavia! I’m so happy you could come.” Matilda locked eyes on the couple and rushed forward, flinging her arms around her goddaughter.

“We wouldn’t have missed it for the world.” Octavia giggled in delight, embracing Matilda.

Taking a step back, Matilda looked her over. “Let’s have a look at you then. I heard a rumor that the dressmaker was seen heading to your estate with the finest silk,” she gushed with a contented sigh as if she were admiring a great work of art.

Octavia gave a small spin and fanned her shawl about her.

Matilda nodded in approval and clapped her hands together gleefully. “Marvelous, you look simply marvelous. Married life is treating you well I can see.” She winked at Simon who seemed to stiffen under the attention.

“I see you have arrived, good. It wouldn’t have been wise to stay away.” Uncle Jack

joined Matilda at her side and greeted Octavia and Simon.

“You are looking well, Uncle Jack. Has Matilda been feeding you again?” Octavia teased him gently with a wink at her godmother, hoping to defuse the tension she felt from her husband.

Matilda gave her a knowing smile before looping her arm into Jack’s. The gesture seemed to divert him a little as he smiled down at her, making Octavia wonder again if there wasn’t anything going on between them.

Remembering her cousin, Octavia changed the subject. “Uncle Jack, have you heard anything from Isolde? I was hoping she would have written by now.”

The Earl shook his head sadly before clenching his jaw. “I am afraid not. We need to focus on keeping up appearances with the two of you instead. I am doing all that I can to find them both, but things will only get better once you and the Duke have sired an heir. The ton is beginning to believe that the two of you have indeed been in love. I would like to keep it that way.”

Simon shifted uncomfortably before clearing his throat.

Noticing the change in atmosphere, Matilda bumped his arm. “Let’s not interrogate them, Jack; allow them to settle in first. Don’t spoil the evening when you’ve chosen such a dashing coat.”

To Octavia’s great surprise, her uncle blushed a little and seemed sheepish. She wanted to observe them more when the Dowager Duchess suddenly appeared from among the crowd.

“I see that the armies have gathered; it does warm my heart to see you all getting along.” Bernice stopped in front of the group and leaned on her cane.

“It’s an honor to have you join us this evening, Your Grace.” Matilda curtsied politely along with Octavia.

Having made her introductions, Bernice turned to her grandson and Octavia. “And I am still waiting on an invitation for tea. The gardens looked quite lovely the last time I visited the mansion. I trust that our new duchess has refrained from climbing any more trees?”

Octavia blushed as her godmother shot her a confused frown.

Smirking with a satisfied grin, Bernice turned to Simon. “And you are looking quite dapper this evening, Your Grace. I can see that married life has been treating you well. It’s quite unusual to see you looking so content at a social gathering.” She raised her eyebrow in a question.

Simon narrowed his eyes at his grandmother. “And it is quite astonishing to see you looking so well, especially considering your recent scare with your health, Grandmamma.”

Bernice chuckled and shook her head. “Perhaps it is the glow emanating from you and the new duchess. It does seem to be quite catching.” She winked at Octavia, adding to Simon’s annoyance as he grumbled under his breath.

“They do make quite the fetching pair,” Matilda chimed in, seemingly enjoying the light banter.

Noticing how irritable Simon was getting, Octavia chimed in, “Do you mind if I take a turn about the room with my godmother? There are a few people that I would like to greet.”

She gave her husband an endearing smile, hoping that the mood would lighten if his

grandmother stopped her teasing. There was something very endearing about the older woman and the way she teased her grandson, yet Simon seemed to take the bait at every turn.

“I think that would be a good idea, I’ve spotted my good friend, Arthur.” He nodded to Octavia and left the group, making his way across the room.

Matilda exchanged an amused glance with Octavia and hooked their arms, dragging her away when the Dowager Duchess began to tease her uncle.

“It seems as if things are going well between you and the Duke?” she asked Octavia in hushed tones as they made their way through the crowd.

Glancing over her shoulder, Octavia caught a glimpse of her husband’s broad shoulders before he disappeared into the throng.

“We are still getting to know each other.” She turned back to her godmother with a forced smile.

It was still perplexing to her how he was hot one minute and cold the next. Things were good between them when he opened up. She felt as if she knew him a little better after their talk beside the pool.

“That’s all right; it takes time for a couple to truly know one another. The most important thing is that you take time to spend together. Only then, will you truly know one another.” Matilda gave her a reassuring smile.

“We have been spending quite a bit of time together, actually.” Her heart fluttered when she recalled their intimate moments.

“I knew you and the Duke were a good match.” Matilda smiled broadly and gave her

arm a gentle squeeze. “It won’t be long now until the first heir is on the way. A baby will truly bring the two of you together.”

Octavia offered her a smile in exchange for the advice, swallowing hard when she glanced back at Simon.

I hope we can truly get to know one another. Even with the absence of a child.

CHAPTER 19

“Where the devil have you been all evening?” Simon strode toward Arthur, smirking at him.

Turning to Simon with a look of surprise, Arthur laughed. “Hiding from you, of course. I am looking to find eligible young ladies seeking company. I didn’t think your sour countenance would help.” He smirked triumphantly before downing the rest of his drink.

“Will you ever learn your lesson when it comes to strong drink?” Simon shook his head in disapproval, relaxing in the company of his eldest friend.

Arthur was a good man at heart, despite his rakish ways, and Simon was glad to count him as a friend.

Rolling his eyes, Arthur placed his drink on the tray of a passing footman. “Tell me, Simon; are you my friend or my father? I would say that marriage has changed you, but you’ve been a stick in the mud since Eton.”

Enjoying their usual biting banter, Simon folded his arms across his chest and leaned against a pillar. “If that were the case, women would be flocking to your side at all times. I think you need to look a little closer to home to find the true cause of your dry spell.” His remark caused Arthur to laugh uproariously.

“I’m glad to see that Octavia hasn’t broken your sense of humor. How is married life treating you?” Arthur changed the conversation, reaching for a glass of champagne

just as a footman passed.

Allowing his eyes to wander over the guests, the Duke spotted his wife from across the room as she made polite conversation with others.

“It is as I expected. Octavia does surprise me from time to time, but she is discreet about our marriage.”

“Gosh, that does sound awfully boring. You reinforce my desire never to marry.” He sighed heavily and shook his head, scanning the rest of the crowd for eligible partners.

Running his tongue over his lips, Simon glanced back at his wife.

It isn't boring.

He thought of the incident in the tree, her fierce stubbornness, and the afternoon at the pool. His life was anything but boring since she had come along. He wasn't about to admit it to his best friend, but Octavia was beginning to change more than just his garden and home.

His heart jolted wildly when she locked eyes with him from across the room. Her lips curved into a gentle smile of acknowledgment before she turned back to her conversation.

Why does she affect me like this?

He ran his tongue over his lips again before shaking off the unwanted thoughts.

“You know what? I think I can use you to my advantage this evening. Or at least your marriage.” Arthur suddenly drew his attention back to their conversation with a

mischievous smirk.

“What do you mean?” Simon pushed himself off of the pillar and frowned, not liking the look in his friend’s eyes.

“I did happen to overhear a few ladies speaking of your marriage this evening. Your sudden and unexpected love story with the new duchess has caused quite a few ladies to swoon this evening.” Arthur chuckled deeply before placing his empty glass on a passing tray and angling himself toward a group of women.

Before Simon could even protest, Arthur had gripped him by the elbow and pushed him toward the group.

“Good evening, ladies, may my friend and I keep you company while his wife makes the rounds?” The corners of his mouth hooked into a charming smile as he placed his hands behind his back.

The women all sucked in a sharp breath when they turned to see Simon at Arthur’s side.

I’ll get you for this.

Simon glared at his friend before forcing a smile. It wasn’t the first time that Arthur had used him as bait for attracting women. Yet Simon hadn’t thought that he’d use his marriage, or at least the mystery surrounding it. “Good evening.” He bowed low and clenched his jaw.

“It’s such a pleasure to see you and the Duchess here this evening, Your Grace.” A blonde woman with brown eyes and a light pink dress suddenly began to blush as she fanned her face vigorously.

“I thought it was about time that they made an appearance,” Arthur chimed in immediately, making sure to hold the woman’s gaze, making himself the center of attention despite Simon’s presence. “I had to practically drag them away from their country estate. You know how those honeymoon years can be. I almost began to fear that I’d never see my friend ever again.”

Relenting to the situation, Simon allowed Arthur to spin a web of lies based on his marriage.

“I was there when everything was still a secret you know. I helped them sneak around, arranging distractions at balls and intimate family gatherings. Of course, we had to be discreet; we couldn’t allow the love that was so innocent and pure to overshadow the love between her cousin and His Grace’s brother.” Arthur held his head high, sniffing importantly with a faked look of humility.

As if anyone would buy that story.

Simon smirked, trying his best not to laugh yet enjoying his friend’s wild tales. If anything, the stories that Arthur was spinning would help the rest of the ton to believe their lie.

“I can’t believe that men like you exist,” The blonde fanned herself so vigorously that Simon was afraid she would faint. Her cheeks filled with color as her eyes sparkled. “To think, perhaps they wouldn’t have gotten together if it hadn’t been for your bravery and selflessness.”

It wasn’t exactly a war...

The urge to give his friend away in the game was almost too strong to resist, yet Simon held back and attempted not to laugh.

Arthur sighed heavily and attempted to look as humble as possible. “There were days when things were really tough; I gave up such a large portion of my own life to ensure their happiness. Yet I couldn’t leave my oldest friend in the lurch when he was in love. I was always there to act as a chaperone, of course; the Duke is nothing but a stickler for propriety.”

“You poor dear, I can’t think of anything braver than offering oneself up in the name of love. It must have been dreadful knowing that their families could catch you at any time.” The blonde shut her fan, placing her hand on Arthur’s arm. I hope that the Duke and Duchess know what a gem of a friend they have in you.” She all but ignored Simon as if he weren’t even there.

“That they do,” he patted her hand gently before giving her gloved fingers a firm squeeze. “They often remind me how none of this would have been possible if it hadn’t been for me.”

Simon was practically bursting with laughter. He wasn’t sure how Arthur had managed it, yet the young woman had fallen, hook, line, and sinker for his story.

“I think you deserve a bit of respite; would you care to join me for a drink?” Her thin lips curled into a seductive smile as she curled her fingers around his arm.

Arthur perked up considerably. “I would be delighted to accompany a young woman as elegant as you are, my dear.” Nodding at Simon when the blonde looked in the opposite direction, Arthur wriggled his eyebrows triumphantly.

“You’re such a cad,” Simon whispered to his friend and shook his head, chuckling under his breath as he watched them leave.

“It’s quite a change to see you laughing at a social event.” Bernice suddenly appeared at Simon’s side, following his gaze to where Arthur had escorted his date to the table

of refreshments.

Simon kept his eyes fixed on Arthur for a while before addressing his grandmother. “Is it a crime to enjoy the company of my oldest friend?”

“No, but I recall a young man who wouldn’t have been caught dead at one of these events. Yet here you are smiling and laughing, thoroughly enjoying yourself. Although young Arthur Eagleton is quite the amusing young man, I find myself wondering if there isn’t perhaps another reason for your change in demeanor.” Bernice smiled knowingly at him.

Considering his grandmother’s words, Simon lifted his gaze and scanned the room for Octavia. His heart jolted in his chest when he spotted her from across the room. She seemed to be enthralled in deep conversation with a pale young man of average height and medium build.

Octavia’s laughter filled the air like the soft tolling of bells on a summer’s breeze as she listened intently to something that the man was saying.

She’s never laughed like that with me.

He suddenly felt the urge to march to her side and lay claim to what was his.

Placing her cane on his arm, Bernice held him back as if she could read his thoughts. “It will not do you any good to barge in on her conversations. Interrupt if you must, but do not cause a scene.”

“I couldn’t care less what the rest of the ton thinks,” he grumbled under his breath and clenched his jaw as he removed the tip of his grandmother’s cane from his arm.

“It is not the ton that concerns me. I do not think that the newly crowned duchess

would look kindly on any displays of barbarism. Octavia is not one of the simple-minded young ladies who would fall for stories of faked heroism. Octavia is more level-headed than that,” Bernice finished and leaned on her cane.

Simon came up straight and took a deep breath, heeding his grandmother’s advice as he watched Octavia laugh.

Why does it make me so angry?

Octavia laughed heartily at Timothy’s joke.

It had been ages since she’d seen him. He’d often regaled her with stories as a child that would have her bent over double with fits of laughter.

“You haven’t changed a bit.” She paused for a breath and composed herself.

“And I am glad that your godmother decided to greet some of her guests, I never would have been able to tell that story in front of her. You know Matilda has always frightened me. She once scolded me for spilling some punch on your dress when we were six, and I almost swooned like a debutant from fright.” He raised his eyebrows and straightened his collar as if it were tight.

She couldn’t help but laugh again as she shook her head at her childhood friend. “Honestly, Timothy, Matilda isn’t all that bad; she’s been my dearest friend for so many years.”

His light brown eyes softened as he ran his fingers through his mop of sandy-brown hair. “I know. You were lucky to have someone who raised you like a mother and supports you like a friend.”

“That she has.” Octavia found herself sobering up with the fond memories of her

childhood.

Despite the tragedy of losing her parents at such a young age, Matilda and her uncle had ensured a proper upbringing for her. The Reed family had been old friends of Matilda's, and Timothy and his parents had often accompanied them on holidays.

"It's good to see you looking so well; I just can't believe that you're married now. You were always such a free spirit. What of your ambitions to travel?" Timothy smiled at her again, cocking his head to the side in a question.

"Believe it or not, the Duke has promised to take me traveling. We haven't planned our first trip as of yet, but I do know that Scotland will be first on my list. I miss the grassy highlands and the cloudy skies. I want to accompany another hunting party through the peat and moss."

Her heart soured a little as she thought of the days she'd visited Scotland with her aunt.

Timothy pursed his lips and made a face that didn't sit quite right with Octavia. "I'm surprised to hear that the Duke is allowing such freedom. He's always come off as quite a stick in the mud."

Octavia cleared her throat at his remark, feeling the pit of her stomach churn with unease. Timothy had never been one to say anything untoward about anyone at all, yet he seemed to speak so nastily of a man that he'd never even met to her knowledge.

"I must tell you that I do not believe a word of any of this nonsense about you and the Duke being in love." Timothy waved the idea away and made a face of disgust.

"And why is that?" Octavia kept calm, reminding herself that Timothy was an old

friend.

“Just look at the man; he prowls around London like a bear with a sore foot who thinks he owns the place. What right has he to be so superior?” His words came off as bitter as the man scowled.

“He is a duke, after all, and I think that Simon is very much misunderstood when it comes to his countenance. He’s a good man.” She forced a smile when a group of guests passed them.

Timothy rolled his eyes as if he didn’t believe her.

“You do not have to defend the man in front of me, Octavia. Anyone with two eyes in their head can see that the marriage was arranged to hide the fact that his younger brother and your cousin ran away. I almost choked on my drink early when I heard the whispers of true love earlier this evening.”

I wish you had choked.

She discreetly clenched her fist at her, growing annoyed with Timothy’s unkind words. Had he always been this judgmental and nasty? Or had his character developed poorly over the years?

“Then there are the rumors regarding his parents, I know that I would never walk around with such an air of superiority knowing that my parents had entertained half of London in their beds...”

Octavia had finally had enough when her resolve snapped. “That is if any woman would warm your bed.” She forced a polite smile that barely hid the deep breath she used to compose herself.

“I beg your pardon?” Timothy seemed taken aback as if she’d slapped him.

“I was only joking of course. What you do in your spare time is entirely your own business; just like the rumors of his parents, it is a private matter. Besides, I do not know why his parents’ behavior would reflect badly on the Duke. He is his own man, is he not? After asking every other person at this ball, I think you would find that nobody wishes to be held accountable for the sins of their parents. Would you like to be held responsible for the generation before you?”

He began to fall over his words, muttering under his breath as his face turned a deep shade of red. “I... I...”

Octavia barely gave him an opportunity to finish his sentence before carrying on. “I know that I certainly would like to be known for my behavior and not that of my parents or guardians. My husband is an honorable man; he has been good to me and my family even before our marriage. I will thank you not to speak of him in such a manner.”

Timothy seemed as if he were about to burst as he frowned in anger.

“Here you are. I have been looking for you everywhere.” Simon came up from behind and placed his hand on Octavia’s elbow.

Looking up in surprise, she felt her breath catching in her chest.

How much of that did he hear?

Simon held her gaze, making her pulse race. “The first dance is about to start; will you join me?” He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed her gloved fingers.

“I would be delighted,” Octavia responded softly, almost forgetting that Timothy was

even there.

Why does he look so angry?

She suddenly realized that his eyes were dark with anger.

Without a word, Simon led her away without so much as a glance in Timothy's direction as he led her onto the dance floor.

CHAPTER 20

O ctavia's heart fluttered furiously when Simon placed his hand on her hip and drew her closer. The waltz began with a swirl of couples moving around them in whirls of color.

What was he thinking?

Confusion filled her mind from the anger in his eyes to the gentle way he held her waist.

Was he jealous or simply annoyed that she'd strayed away from her godmother?

"What do you think you were doing?" he finally hissed at her when the rest of the couples were distracted by their dance.

He seemed to be angry, yet his eyes held a hint of hurt that she couldn't understand.

She wasn't sure how to respond when a frown creased her brow.

"I was talking to an old friend, that is all." She allowed herself to be spun under his arm before being drawn back into his arms.

The couples around them didn't seem to pay them much mind as they all focused on the dance at hand.

"The man didn't seem like an old friend. Or at least a good one at that. You seemed

rather vexed, and the expressions on his face didn't seem to convey any kind of polite conversation. You shouldn't be speaking to a man on your own; it isn't becoming for a duke's wife."

A muscle on his jawline bulged as he clenched his jaw.

Did he think that Timothy was a lover?

Their conversation from the night of their wedding came to mind as she recalled his words.

You may do as you please, as long as you are discreet.

Not only did she not agree with the statement, but she found the idea of taking a lover to be utterly offensive after everything they had been through since their marriage.

Irritation flared from the pit of her stomach as she grew angry.

"My godmother was present for most of the conversation; she only left us to greet some of her guests. And for your information, Timothy Reed is an old friend whether you choose to believe me or not."

"You should have gone with her," Simon growled under his breath, leading her in a circle behind his back before pulling her back in and ignoring her angry remarks.

He was jealous.

The pit of her stomach fluttered for an entirely different reason as Octavia was pulled back into his arms. Her face came closer to his as the rest of the ball suddenly faded into the background. The visceral response throughout her body when his thumb moved over her wrist evoked a fine layer of bumps on her skin.

Their dance began to seem more like a subtle seduction rather than a waltz. Every step and turn seemed to determine who would win as they battled for dominance.

“As far as I could tell, Your Grace, you were just as submerged in conversation with others as I was.” She felt her breath moving effortlessly through her body as they danced, adding to the confusion of their argument.

Why wasn’t she angrier with him? Did she like the fact that he was jealous of her company? The attraction in her core only grew stronger as the song played on.

A look of surprise flashed across his face as he looked down at her.

Did he think I had forgotten about him all evening?

She recalled the smile on his face as a man he had referred to as his friend had laughed with the group of women. She had wanted to join him and meet his friend, but it had seemed rude at the time to interrupt their conversations.

“What were you speaking to him about?” Simon seemed to breathe even deeper as he looked into her eyes, guiding her expertly across the floor without missing a step.

The chandelier overhead lit up his eyes, highlighting the flecks of brown in the seas of green. She marveled at how handsome he was with his light green eyes and muscular build, making it almost impossible to concentrate.

“We were reminiscing. Our families have known each other for many years. Timothy Reed is the son of a viscount who is a good friend of Matilda’s.” She explained the situation to him, not wanting to bring up the fact that Timothy had been less than a gentleman towards the end.

The rumors of his family’s past had chased him enough without anyone bringing it

up. She almost felt guilty after realizing that her interaction had bothered him.

“Was the memory a particularly vexing one? Or was I mistaken in thinking that the two of you were quarreling toward the end of your conversation?” His hand tightened on her waist, sending a shiver of unexpected pleasure down her spine.

How long had he been watching her? She was almost certain that he hadn’t been looking at her throughout the evening. Yet the thought of him watching her caught her off guard.

“It wasn’t vexing per se; Timothy had recalled something that I didn’t quite agree with, and I was only setting him straight. We didn’t see eye to eye on the subject, and we decided to leave the matter be in the end.”

She suddenly became painfully aware of the fact that her hip was pressed against his, leaving little to no space between them as they danced.

Her core fluttered with more than just irritation when he spun her under his arm and pulled her close enough to whisper in her ear. The feeling of his hot breath against her skin was quite exhilarating even if they weren’t alone. She almost forgot herself and moaned when his lips brushed her ear for the briefest of seconds.

“I don’t think that you’re telling me the truth, Octavia.” His voice was low and demanding, creating an intense feeling of desire within her.

Pulling back, she looked into her eyes and realized just how jealous and angry he had been by her interaction with another man. She had been attempting to spare him the pain of gossip, yet she had failed and angered him instead.

“I was defending you; he had mentioned the rumors regarding your parents, along with several other unkind remarks. I let him know that you are a good man who

doesn't deserve his scorn." She let out a breath almost as soon as the music stopped and held his gaze.

The silence surrounding them both in their own little world was deafening despite the chattering of happy couples leaving the floor.

"Thank you," Simon whispered beneath his breath, letting go of her hands.

"You're welcome." She felt her breath flowing through her lungs as if every inch of her body had suddenly felt the sweet kiss of relief.

He believes me.

The Duke glanced over her shoulder for a second before looking back. "Your godmother is attempting to gain your attention. You had better acknowledge her before she knocks someone over."

Looking over her shoulder, Octavia spotted her godmother from across the room. She stood beside a group of women, animatedly waving her arm in the air to gain Octavia's attention.

Nodding her acknowledgment, Octavia turned to make her excuses to Simon, but he had already left her side, heading toward his friend.

Simon joined Arthur who seemed to have been watching the exchange with a great deal of interest.

"I take it that your little dalliance with the young lady did not go as planned. It doesn't bode well that you are standing here by yourself." Simon's eyebrow hooked into a question as he stopped at his friend's side and turned back to the rest of the ball.

Octavia had made her way to her godmother and was currently talking to a group of men and women. His heart still raced from the honest look in her eyes when she'd told him the truth.

She defended me.

There had only ever been two other people in his life that had come to his defense, Arthur and his grandmother, and even they hadn't looked as fierce as Octavia.

Arthur drew his attention back to their conversation by clearing his throat.

“Unfortunate incident that, the young lady in question had forgotten to mention that she is engaged to be married to a young lord—a fact that very quickly became a problem when the man in question demanded to know why I was entertaining his betrothed alone on a balcony. The whole debacle caused quite a scene, actually; you would have noticed if you hadn't been so enthralled by your wife.”

Simon tore his eyes away from Octavia who seemed to be demanding the attention of all who listened to her.

“Much like you are now,” Arthur smirked. “She seems to have cast a spell on you; the attraction between the two of you was palpable even from across the room.”

“I was merely playing the part that everyone expects; there was nothing more to the interaction than that,” he dismissed his friend's claims and swallowed hard when Octavia seemed to be speaking to an older man who had pushed his way into the intimate group.

He wanted to march across the floor and take her away with him, yet that would do more harm than good.

“You’re clearly besotted with the woman; I’ve never seen you act so jealous in all the years that I’ve known you. Why do you feel the need to keep up the charade?” Arthur remarked more seriously.

Clenching his jaw, Simon turned to his friend. “I am not jealous, nor do I desire my wife; she may speak to whomever she desires. Her affairs are her own. And even if I desired her, I would not act upon those desires. Intimacy in a marriage can bring far more problems than what it’s worth.”

“What do you mean by that?” Arthur asked with a deep frown etched into his brow.

“I married Octavia out of duty and nothing more. I plan on finding my brother as soon as possible. When I have tracked him down and brought him back home, I shall insist upon his marriage and siring an heir.”

He left out the part about traveling abroad and possibly taking up separate residences from his wife. The more time he spent with her, the more he realized that keeping his hands off of her would prove to be difficult.

There had been a deep sense of attraction between him and Octavia, yet those moments only led to trouble. He thought of the moment at the pond when he’d been tempted to do more than just pleasure her with his tongue. His blood still ran hot at the thought of his head between her thighs and her hand pleasuring him beneath the water.

A second waltz began as he spotted Matilda being led onto the dance floor by Octavia’s uncle. Octavia stood back, smiling gently with a far-off look in her eyes as she watched.

What is she thinking?

Simon fought the urge to take her home when another man approached her and started a conversation.

Shaking his head, Arthur sighed and placed his hand on the Duke's shoulder.

"You know, Simon, ever since I have known you, you have been hell-bent on upholding honor and doing what is right in the eyes of the ton and your family. Don't allow honor to keep you from seeing what is right in front of your eyes." He turned his head to Octavia before looking back to Simon and pursing his lips.

Octavia had seemingly slipped the man's attention as she stood on the edge of the dance floor, contently watching her uncle dancing with her godmother.

His heart raced uncontrollably as Simon realized that he had been relieved to see his wife on her own.

Was I acting out of jealousy?

His throat suddenly felt dry when Octavia met his gaze from across the room and smiled.

I have to be more careful.

She moved her gaze back to the dancing, making his pulse race with desire when her red shawl slipped down her arm, exposing the milky flesh of her shoulder.

"She is quite beautiful," Bernice spoke softly, coming to her grandson's side as she watched Octavia from across the room.

Blinking back the daze he had been in, Simon looked at his grandmother.

“I’ve been watching her all evening. She commands the attention of all those around her without even a hint of arrogance or superiority. I often thought that a beautiful woman was needed to help you see the error of your ways, yet Octavia has far exceeded my expectations. My only fear is that you will not allow yourself to love.” Her face was serious as she adjusted her fingers over the top of her cane and looked at Simon.

The hurt and her eyes made Simon realize that his grandmother had spent more hours worrying about him than he’d realized.

“Grandmamma, I still will not sire an heir,” he lowered his voice so that nobody would hear. “I will be good to Octavia and allow her all the freedom that her heart desires, but I will not go against my vow, no matter how many times you ask it of me.”

Bernice’s eyes filled with tears that threatened to spill over her cheeks. “Then I am afraid that you may very well miss one of the greatest lessons in life. I have tried my best to help you see the error in your thinking, but if you wish to keep your heart closed off to the possibility of love, then it shall be your burden to bear.” The hurt in her eyes tugged at his heart.

“There is more to life than siring an heir; having a child is not the greatest of achievement of one’s life.” His voice was almost shaky as he swallowed hard.

“Does Octavia know that you do not wish to sire an heir?” Bernice ran her tongue over her lips and drew her bottom lip into her mouth, concern marring her aristocratic features.

Simon clenched his jaw, glancing across the room at his wife who seemed to be lost in a world of her own. “We have briefly touched on the matter, I didn’t go into detail, but I did mention that I do not wish to sire an heir.”

She drew his attention back to her with a heavy sigh. “I want you to listen to me very carefully, now, Simon; there may come a day when you have to choose between your vow and your heart. I pray that you will choose correctly.”

She lifted her hand with tears in her eyes and cupped his cheek before pursing her lips and ambling back into the crowd.

What does she mean?

He turned to Octavia with a frown and watched her closely.

What if she didn’t fully understand that he never wanted to have any children? Would she still insist upon sharing a home with him if she knew? His heart suddenly jolted with a strange kind of fear as he rubbed his fingers against his palm.

What if Octavia didn’t even realize that she may want children in the future?

CHAPTER 21

Octavia watched as the dance came to an end; Matilda's cheeks were flooded with heat by the time she came to her side.

"That was quite a fast dance," her godmother remarked breathlessly and glanced over her shoulder at Octavia's uncle who had gone in the opposite direction.

"You seemed to have enjoyed yourself." Octavia observed her closely, noting the glint in her eyes as well as the color of her skin.

"You know that I've always enjoyed a good waltz." Matilda took a deep breath and placed a hand on her chest.

"Not as much as you seem to enjoy a good waltz with Uncle Jack," Octavia teased her, recalling the way her uncle had gripped her godmother's hand. The pair didn't seem to have been aware of anyone else around throughout the entirety of the dance.

Matilda suddenly seemed coy as she cleared her throat and changed the subject. "Your uncle has always been a good dancer, but I cannot give him all of the credit. One too many glasses of champagne played their part in my current state. Let us stop talking nonsense and get some air; I think one of the balconies is empty." She shooed Octavia in the opposite direction before she could protest.

Taking in the coolness of the evening air, Octavia allowed herself a moment of respite before Matilda began to question her.

“I have been dying to speak to you alone all evening. Tell me, dear, how is married life treating you really? You and the Duke seemed quite enthralled with one another when you danced.” Her godmother seemed to catch her breath as she leaned against the cool stone of the terrace banister.

Having dreaded the question all evening, Octavia sighed heavily.

“Is it that bad? I rather hoped that the two of you would have grown closer by now,” Matilda remarked cautiously with a worried look.

Turning around and facing the open doors that led to the ball, Octavia allowed the distant chatter and music to wash over her for a moment.

“It’s been quite difficult to understand at the best of times. He can be so cold and distant, not to mention blunt with his responses. I often feel vexed and respond in ways that I shouldn’t. We bicker more than anything else, yet I find myself attracted to him in such a way that I’m hardly able to think of anything else.”

Matilda smiled knowingly while pursing her lips before allowing Octavia to continue with her rant.

“And even after he’s frustrated me to the point of wanting to throw something at his head, there are these subtle glimpses of a gentle soul. He’s strong and commanding with everyone that works for him, yet his heart seems bigger than anyone else that I’ve ever met.”

Her lips curled into a gentle smile as she thought of all the ways that he was good to his tenants and even the people he employed.

Despite their argument regarding the tenant’s roof, it had only taken Simon a day to come up with a plan that more than suited the farmer and his wife. She couldn’t

understand why he tried so hard to push her away. Even if it was because of his parents, that didn't mean that his own marriage would fail.

"You know, the way that you describe the Duke is not unlike the relationship that I had with my late husband." Matilda smiled, sighing contentedly as if she were recalling a fond memory.

Her reaction made Octavia look up and forget her troubles for a moment. In all the years that her godmother had been a part of her life, she had never known Matilda to speak so openly about her past.

"The late Earl and I would bicker more often than not. I would find myself responding in ways that vexed him. When I look back on everything now, I realize that I was only trying to get his attention. I was so smitten with him that I didn't know how to communicate it other than starting an argument. It may sound silly, but passion has a way of getting through when one argues."

Her godmother looked almost sheepish as she looked at her feet with a knowing smile.

"I don't know if I am in love with the Duke," Octavia blurted out before she could stop herself.

Matilda looked up with a strange expression in her eyes. "I am afraid that that is a question that only you can answer. I can tell you how I felt and how many novels on love have described the feeling. The frustrating part is that only you can determine the answer. It may come to you when you least expect it to, but when you know, there won't even be a shred of doubt in your mind."

Octavia's heart pounded furiously as she caught a glimpse of Simon in the throng of guests.

How will I know?

Her eyes followed his every move as he seemed to be looking for among the multitude of guests.

Coming up from behind, Matilda embraced her with her arms around Octavia's shoulders.

"Be patient with the Duke. I cannot say that I understand the man, but I do know that he hasn't been able to keep his eyes off of you all evening. Try and show him how much you want to be in his company, even if he pushes you away." The smile on Matilda's face offered little comfort as Octavia suppressed a sigh.

"And just how am I supposed to achieve the desired effect if the Duke does not wish to spend more time with me?"

The corner of her lips hooked into a sarcastic question. "Am I to bind his hands behind his back and tie him to a chair?"

Letting go of her goddaughter, Matilda shook her head with a smile. "If that is what it takes, dear. I am not opposed to alternative methods when it comes to the hearts of men."

She winked at Octavia before turning toward the open doors.

Laughing at her godmother's joke, Octavia shook her head and crossed her arms over her waist before looking up at the stars.

"Hopefully things will not have to come to that," she whispered to herself, adding to the joke.

Her heart skipped a beat when she suddenly realized that she was willing to do anything at all when it came to the affections of the Duke.

The carriage ride back to the London townhouse was awkward as Simon sat across from Octavia. They hadn't said so much as a word to one another since they had left the ball.

The silence was almost deafening as Simon felt the need to hear her thoughts.

"I hope you had a good evening?" He swallowed hard, attempting to alleviate the dryness in his throat.

"I did, thank you, Your Grace; my godmother was thrilled that we were able to attend." She looked at him awkwardly for a moment before averting her gaze and looking back out the window.

I should apologize to her.

Simon knew that he had been in the wrong by acting as he had done out of jealousy, yet he couldn't find the words to justify his behavior.

"Will you be seeing more of your 'friend' Timothy Reed?" He uttered the question without thinking and berated himself almost as soon as it was out.

Whipping her head back in his direction, Octavia glared at him, her eyes flashing with anger. "I shan't. Would you like to provide me with a list of names of the people you would like me to steer clear of, Your Grace? I think it will make any future interactions at social gatherings more bearable if I know ahead of time."

Feeling his irritation growing, Simon clenched his jaw.

“I don’t know, Your Grace, are there more men that will warrant your anger in my defense? How many ‘friends’ from your past are there?” he shot back, wielding the formal address of her title as a weapon.

“I’m not certain. How many women warmed your bed before you were forced to marry me, Your Grace?” She raised her voice a little just as the carriage came to a stop in front of their home.

Glaring at him now, she thrust open the door before the footmen could hurry forward.

“Why must you be so obstinate all the time?” he hissed at her through his teeth.

“I don’t know, You Grace, why must you be so adamant about starting an argument all of the time?” she shot back at him and exited the carriage, hurrying to the front door as she picked up her dress.

Simon swore under his breath before following suit and stomping up the steps after her. He had wanted to end their evening on a more positive note, but it didn’t seem as if that were at all possible now.

The front door practically slammed behind him as he watched her stalk angrily toward the stairs.

“Your Graces, I was just about to come and get the door.” Mrs. Farley suddenly appeared at the start of a passage.

Her face was flushed with embarrassment as she hurried forward to get their coats. “I wasn’t sure what time the ball would end, so I have sent the butler along with all of the maids to their beds,” she hurriedly explained.

Octavia stopped at the foot of the stairs and turned to their housekeeper. “There is no

need to apologize, Mrs. Farley. It is quite late, but I'm sure that His Grace and I can undress ourselves and get to bed. You had better turn in yourself; thank you for waiting for us."

Mrs. Farley glanced from one to the other before placing their coats on the rack in the hall beside the door. "If you are both certain?"

"We are," Simon and Octavia chanted in unison before glaring at one another.

A heated moment of silence ensued before Mrs. Farley excused herself and hurried back down the hall.

"I too shall bid you a good evening, Your Grace. I am quite tired and do not wish to hinder you with my presence any longer." She turned away from him and began to climb the stairs before Simon rushed forward and reached for her wrist.

"Wait! I refuse to leave things between us like this!" He spun her around and steadied her with his hands on her upper arms when it seemed as if she were about to fall.

It took her a moment to regain her composure before she glared down at him.

"What more could you possibly have to say to me?" Her voice dripped with anger despite the look of confusion in her eyes.

"I don't know!" he growled at her before calming himself. "I don't know what to say to you. I've tried my best to start a conversation that doesn't lead to an argument, but every time that I'm near you... My thoughts come out wrong. I don't know how else to explain it to you."

Her eyes filled with even more confusion as she listened to him speak.

“I... I want you, Octavia. I find it hard to be in your presence without touching you. I’ve fought against the desire for you that courses through my veins since that night you confronted me on the balcony.”

His desire for her suddenly grew and intensified as he let go of her arms and ran his fingers down her skin.

“I want you, Octavia...” he whispered, feeling his heart race at an unstoppable pace.

“Then why do you...” Her words trailed off when Simon suddenly took her in his arms, pulling her down until her lips met his.

His tongue parted her lips, searching the depths of her mouth with an urgent hunger as his hands explored her body. His fingers worked up her thighs, kneading her flesh through the fabric of her dress.

Responding in kind, Octavia sighed contentedly when he lowered her body to the stairs and positioned himself above her. Her legs parted without resistance when he lifted her skirts above her knees and placed his body between her thighs.

“I want you, Octavia.” He breathed her name against her lips before pulling back and looking into her eyes. “My demands from the start of the marriage have not changed, yet I want you with every fiber of my being.”

He reached down and squeezed her breasts with both hands until she moaned with pleasure.

“What does that mean?” She had barely uttered the question when Simon moved down her body, hurriedly tugging at her garments before disappearing under the layers of her dress.

The fabric engulfed his head in a warm cloud that smelled of her floral-scented perfume which made him want her even more.

The warmth of her thighs around his head spurred him on as he positioned his head and gripped her thighs.

Soft sighs of pleasure floated through the layers of dress and caressed his ears when he began to lick her folds from every angle. Tilting his head to the side, he expertly played with her core, using his mouth to set the pace of his licking.

It wasn't long before Octavia was moaning for more, placing her hands behind his head and guiding him deeper into her core in the sweet anticipation of release.

He slowed his pace, teasing her lightly with the tip of his tongue until her legs began to tremble.

He wanted to savor the moment, reveling in the trembling of her body as he pleased her.

“Simon, please...” Her voice was laced with urgency when she began to pant for breath.

She squirmed beneath him on the steps until he gripped her hips and held her in place.

Smiling at the sound of his name on her lips, the Duke pressed kisses into her folds, savoring the taste of her on his tongue before doubling his efforts. His tongue flicked over the nub at the apex of her core with such rapid motions that Octavia almost screamed in pleasure.

Reaching up, he placed his hand over her mouth, feeling her hot breath on his skin in

an attempt to silence her screams. The last thing he wanted was to wake the servants who would undoubtedly find them in the position.

Her breathing turned to a silent scream as her body tensed and writhed on the stairs. Her teeth gently dug into his flesh as she reached the apex of her pleasure, panting against his hand.

Waiting for her body to relax, he continued to lick at her folds until her shuddering came to an end. Her thighs still trembled as he kissed her flesh, making sure to heighten every ounce of her pleasure while she came back down to earth.

Her hands suddenly left his head as her body relaxed beneath his, signaling the end of her climax.

Smiling to himself, he reappeared above her skirts, feeling the cool sting of the air on his face. She looked utterly serene in the dim light of the entrance candles as she lay on the stairs, her chest rising and falling with every breath.

Octavia's eyes were shut as she lay with her face angled toward the ceiling. The tender flesh of her neck excited him as his gaze fell to her hands that were cupping both of her breasts.

"Do you understand how much I want you?" He placed the tip of his index finger on her chin and drew a path down her neck, stopping in the cleft of her cleavage.

It took her a moment to open her eyes and look at him, but when she did, he knew instinctively that the evening wasn't over. Her lips parted with a ragged breath when she reached up and stroked his cheek.

"Simon, I want you to take me to bed..." Her voice was soft from the pleasure she'd received, demanding, and just a little bit hesitant.

Scooping her up in his arms, he placed her legs around his waist and drew her close before kissing her deeply.

“I will make you mine this evening,” he growled against her lips before burying his face between her breasts.

Gasping for breath, Octavia gripped the back of his head and pulled him closer to her chest.

He kissed the tops of her breasts again before carrying her up the stairs and into his chambers.

CHAPTER 22

O ctavia's heart raced as Simon placed her on the edge of his bed and gently kissed her lips before pulling back.

A low fire crackled in the hearth, filling the air with a welcoming warmth that diminished the evening chill.

She allowed him to reach behind her back and untie the ribbons that held her dress in place. The fabric slipped from her shoulders, exposing her milky flesh in the dying light of the fire.

Placing his hands on her upper arms, Simon guided her up, kissing her deeply when she came to her feet.

"I want to hear how much you want me..." he whispered against her lips before kissing a path down her neck.

The fabric of her dress pooled at her feet, exposing her corset and chemise as she shivered with pleasure.

"I want you more than anything else... I need you to touch me." Her voice was barely audible as he undid the loops of her corset, causing her breasts to spring free.

Gripping her chemise with both hands, she lifted the garment above her head and tossed it aside, allowing the Duke to drink in her naked form.

“God, you are beautiful...” Simon reached for her breast, gently kneading the flesh before taking her nipple into his mouth.

Soft moans of pleasure filled the air as his tongue worked the rosy bud, flicking back and forth at the same pace he’d used on her core. Placing her hands behind his head, she gently caressed his hair, tilting her head back as she sighed with pleasure.

Drawing back, the Duke smirked seductively at her before removing his shirt and breeches. The garments were tossed to the side, landing in a heap beside the bed.

Her pulse raced with desire when she saw his arousal in the flickering light of the fading fire.

She reached instinctively, but Simon stopped her, placing his hands over hers and guiding them back to her sides.

“Not yet, there is something else that I want to do with you first.” He ran the back of his fingers over her cheek, using his thumb to caress her bottom lip.

Her breathing deepened when he came closer and drew her into his arms, placing his hands firmly on her buttocks before lifting her onto the bed.

The softness of the sheets kissed her bare skin as he smiled down at her, drawing his fingers between her breasts.

“This will only hurt for a moment, but I promise to go slow.” He held her gaze, whispering before dipping his head and kissing her neck.

Waves of exhilaration engulfed her body as she shut her eyes and allowed him to explore her body. Tangling her fingers with his, she allowed him to place her hands beside her head on the sheets as he sucked on her nipples.

Taking his time, he teased her breast with his tongue, gently dragging her hard nipples between his teeth. Coming up straight, he placed his hands on her knees and parted her thighs, positioning himself with her legs on either side of his body.

Octavia gasped with surprise when he lifted her foot beside her head and kissed her ankle before working his way down and stopping at the back of her knee.

“I want you to close your eyes and take a breath. The pain will soon be replaced with pleasure...”

He lowered her leg back to the bed and touched her hips, holding her firmly in place as he lowered himself onto her body.

A sharp pain shot through her loins, creating a searing fire in the pit of her stomach when Simon began to move. The movements were painful at first, but the sensation was quickly replaced by one of pleasure.

Placing her hands on the back of his neck, she opened her eyes and looked into his, seeing the pleasure she felt in her loins mirrored on his face.

“Octavia...” Simon gasped through labored breaths, thrusting harder when she lifted her hips to meet his pace.

Her lips parted with pleasure, releasing the moans that filtered up from the pit of her stomach.

Reaching for hands once again, Simon laced his fingers between hers and picked up the pace, grunting with pleasure as they moved together as one.

Pleasure began to build between her thighs the faster he moved, spurring her on as she panted for more, whispering his name against his lips. “Simon...”

Feeling as if she were about to explode, Octavia watched as his face contorted with pleasure.

Crying out loud, Simon suddenly went rigid, his muscles contorting against hers as she also reached her climax. Moving swiftly, he withdrew from her and placed his hand between her thighs before placing one of his fingers in her core.

Darkness suddenly burst with light as she shut her eyes and rode the waves of pleasure, crying into the night when he fell against her body, moving his finger back and forth with his body angled to the side.

“Oh, Simon!”

Her breath stopped for a second as her face turned red, contorting with pleasure from the height of her orgasm.

Simon lay panting on her chest as she struggled to regain control of her breathing. In all the ways she had pictured the moment, nothing had ever come close to the pleasure she had experienced from his touch. She felt lighter than a feather with her body molded against his.

Turning his head to kiss the side of her breast, Simon spoke softly. “Does it still hurt?”

She shook her head and smiled before whispering a response. “No.”

The corner of his mouth hooked into a smile as he made his way up her body and propped himself up on an elbow.

“Good.”

Turning on her side, she continued to smile and looked into his eyes. The pearls and pins that had been holding her hair in place lay scattered across the sheet, and her hair fell in her face.

Tucking it behind her ear, Simon continued to smile at her with a contented look in his eyes that mirrored the feeling in her chest.

“As for your question from earlier... there aren’t any other men that I grew up with. Timothy Reed is the only man who was my friend, but I don’t think we will be socializing again after his behavior.” She smiled reassuringly at him as he moved the tips of his fingers over her face.

“Good,” he answered gruffly, moving his finger down to her chest and drawing circles on top of her breast.

“And you?” She questioned, hoping he wouldn’t be angry with her for being curious about his past.

The embers in the fire were just about dying when he ran his fingers over her hip, following the path with his eyes. “I do not have any female friends that I talk to at balls.”

Octavia smiled and pressed a kiss against his cheek, lingering for a moment as she breathed in the scent of his skin.

“No, I don’t mean friends. How many lovers have you had in the past?” Her heart fluttered in her chest despite the closeness of the moment.

Simon seemed to consider her words before placing his hand under her chin and angling her face toward his.

“I will not lie to you, Octavia, there were a few. But I will never shame you publicly as my parents did to each other. They flaunted their affairs about the ton as if they wanted to hurt each other...”

“And in doing so, they hurt you,” she finished his sentence for him and reached up to stroke his cheek.

“Yes.” Simon placed his hand over hers, shifting closer as he held her hand against his chest.

The subtle and rhythmic beating of his heart flowed through the tips of her fingers, reaching her chest. She hadn’t imagined herself ever being this close to Simon, not even in her wildest dreams. Now that she was lying in his bed, she realized just how much she had thought of him since their wedding. She didn’t care if he had lovers in the past. She wanted to be his last.

“Simon, what if I want this to last?” she asked him hesitantly, keeping her eyes fixed on their hands.

“What do you mean?” He sounded more than a little sleepy as he gripped her hands tighter.

“What you said to me on the night of our wedding. What if I don’t wish to take a lover? What if I want things to be like this forever, just you and me?” Her voice quivered slightly as she spoke, revealing the trembling that she felt in the pit of her stomach.

What if he rejected her and stated his intent to take a lover? She suddenly regretted her question as her mind raced with all of the possibilities. He prized discretion, but that didn’t mean that he never wanted to take a lover.

Tilting her face toward his, Cassin searched her eyes. “You do not have to take a lover if you do not wish. Things can continue between us, but this still does not mean that I wish to sire an heir. If you can accept things as they are now, then I promise to never stray from our marital bed.”

Her heart fluttered uncontrollably.

Children?

She hadn’t given the subject any thought. Did she even want them? Something in the depths of her soul prickled at the back of her mind. A motherly instinct that she hadn’t ever been aware of prickled at her thoughts.

He can change. He’s already beginning to change.

She drew her bottom lip between her teeth and let out a breath.

“Octavia, is that something you can agree to?” He lifted her chin once again and forced her to look into his eyes. “I can give you what you want, just not that.”

Swallowing hard, she thought of her life without him by her side. “I want you; I can’t say anything else right now, but I do know that I want you. I want us to continue learning about each other. Perhaps we could even travel after the honeymoon. I would like to see Scotland as your wife.”

Simon drew his thumb over her lips with a veiled expression in his eyes. “That can be arranged.”

She forced a smile before snuggling against his chest and allowing him to reposition her body when he turned on his back. Placing her ear against his chest, she listened to him drifting off to sleep with every rhythmic breath.

Would all of this be enough to keep her content at his side? The notion of him changing his mind still seemed like a possibility to her. He had changed so much since the day of their wedding, perhaps in time, he would change his mind about this.

She hadn't even considered the concept since the night of their wedding, yet deep in her heart, she knew that she wanted his child.

Sleep crept in like a thief in the night as she drifted off into a cloud of endless possibilities.

CHAPTER 23

Simon opened his eyes and stretched out his arm, feeling the emptiness beside him in bed. His mind filled with confusion as he lifted his head off of the pillow and squinted in the dim light that was filtering through the curtains.

She must have gone back to her own chambers during the night.

He swung the sheets off of his legs before climbing out of bed and dressing. He vaguely recalled the conversation he'd had with Octavia before falling asleep. He'd promised to never stray from their marital bed, yet he had reminded her of his vow never to sire an heir. She had taken his words remarkably well, yet there had been a look of hesitation in her eyes.

Shaking off the unpleasant thoughts, he finished dressing and made his way downstairs, following his nose as the appetizing scent of breakfast led the way.

"You're up early." He offered Octavia a smile as he spotted her seated at their much smaller table in the London home's dining room.

Octavia looked up from her plate, her eyes bright and slightly unsure. "Good morning, Your Grace. You were sleeping so soundly this morning; I didn't wish to wake you," she explained about her absence.

The sheepish expression on her face made his heart flutter quite unexpectedly. "That's quite all right. I did wonder where you had gotten to this morning, but I assumed you'd gone back to your chambers." He offered her another smile just as

one of the footmen entered the room with another tray of food.

Octavia offered him another shy smile and bit her lips before looking back at her plate.

“I was going to ask you if you wished to join me this afternoon when I pay my friend a visit, but I will understand if you wish to stay in and rest.” He searched her face thoroughly enjoying the light blush that was creeping over her cheeks.

“No, I would very much like to accompany you.” She placed her fork beside her plate and offered him a bright smile. It almost seemed as if she wasn’t sure how to act around him now that their marriage had been consummated.

“Is this friend the one you were talking to last night?” She reached for the jar of preserves and spread the purple jelly over her toast.

Recalling the moment back home when she spilled a jar on her dress, Simon responded with a smile. “Yes, Arthur is my oldest and only friend; we attended Eton together and frequented each other’s homes during the holidays.”

“I would very much like to meet him,” she responded with a pleasant smile, making Simon relive the evening before.

Every move she made caused him to realize just how much of a sensual woman she truly was.

The tension he experienced in his body from wanting her was almost too much for him to bear as an idea suddenly occurred to him.

Pushing back his chair, he stood with a subtle smile, pushing back the chair with his knees.

“Did you need something?” Octavia asked him with a frown when he came to her side and reached for the jar of preserves.

“Just some of the preserves.” He held the jar behind his back, discreetly dipping the tip of his finger in as he smiled down at her. “You have something on your face.”

Octavia frowned before reaching for her napkin and dabbing the corners of her mouth.

“Did I get it?” She looked at him with a wide-eyed expression of confusion.

The look of confusion in her eyes made him enjoy the moment all the more when he reached over and touched the tip of her nose.

“You missed a spot right there.” He quickly withdrew his hand and smiled triumphantly at her. The trick with preserves had been one that his late governess had used on him whenever he would fuss over the vegetables on his plate.

The sheer look of confusion on her face as her mouth opened and closed caused Simon to chuckle from deep within his chest. “That’s better.”

Suddenly realizing what he was doing, Octavia narrowed her eyes at him and stood, reaching for the jar of preserves before dipping in three of her fingers right up to her knuckles.

“What are you doing?” He suddenly stopped laughing and eyed her with suspicion.

“Nothing at all, Your Grace. It’s just that you have something on your face.” She placed the jar back on the table and began to advance on him, holding her fingers out like a weapon.

Frantically searching for an escape, Simon began to move around the table, keeping his eyes fixed on hers as he sidled away. “Octavia, listen to me. The joke only works one way. You aren’t supposed to seek revenge. It doesn’t work like that.”

Cocking her head to the side with a cheeky smile, Octavia frowned. “What joke?” Her eyes suddenly filled with mischief as she lunged at him.

Ducking behind the chair, Simon dodged her fingers, causing the jam to splatter onto the carpet. “You will have to move faster than that to catch me.” He laughed at her and sprinted to the other end of the table, looking over his shoulder as he ran.

Laughing heartily now, Octavia gave chase, wielding her fingers in front of her as they led the way.

Simon regretted his decision to run almost as soon as his foot hooked onto the edge of the rug, sending him toppling to the floor as trays and food went flying through the air.

Octavia had been following too close behind, and her eyes suddenly widened with shock. Toppling over Simon, she yelped in surprise before falling head-first onto his chest.

“Are you hurt?” Simon asked her, reaching up and moving her hair out of her face.

“I don’t think so.” She groaned a little and moved her neck. “My wrist just hurts a little.”

“Where?” Simon reached for her hand, bringing it closer to his face before he realized his mistake.

“Right over there!” She smeared her fingers across his face, laughing almost

hysterically as she did.

Wincing from the feel of the cold food on his skin, Simon shut his eyes and smiled. It had been many years since he genuinely laughed from the pit of his stomach; the feeling was almost as shocking as the jam on his face. He opened his eyes to see the light in her eyes as she gazed down at him.

Their faces inched closer, covering the distance as their lips locked together. His hands moved over her back, cupping her buttocks firmly in each hand.

“My goodness! I am so sorry, Your Graces!” Mrs. Farley gasped for breath and placed her hand over her chest before rushing from the room.

Octavia and Simon both turned back to each other with the same bewildered look in their eyes, bursting into laughter almost as soon as the housekeeper had left.

“You know, I think we will have to start paying Mrs. Farley more in case she decides to leave us.” Octavia shook her head and pushed herself off of Simon.

“I think you may just be right.” He sat up straight and came to his feet.

Octavia smiled at him before reaching for her napkin and wiping his face. “There, now you look presentable again.” She drew her bottom lip through her teeth and almost leaned in again when she glanced at his lips.

“Thank you; we had better finish our breakfast if we want to meet Arthur later.” Simon smiled at her, his heart warming at the unexpected gesture. Pulling her into his arms, he kissed her deeply, feeling the passion from the night before pulse through his veins.

Octavia stepped from the carriage, accepting her husband’s hand as he helped her to

the ground. The grand houses all looked alike as she glanced down the row of buildings.

“Arthur has a home in the country, but he prefers to stay in London where he can have regular access to young debutants.” Simon seemed to regret his words when Octavia frowned at him. “Not that he misleads any of them; he always tells them up front that he isn’t looking for marriage.”

“Somehow, that doesn’t make me feel any better.” Octavia raised an eyebrow and tilted her head to the side.

Simon opened his mouth to reply, but his sentence was cut short by the sudden appearance of Arthur. “Welcome to my humble abode.” His arms were splayed wide as he hurried down the steps that led to his front door.

Octavia suddenly recalled him from the day of their wedding although she had had little to no interaction with the man. She recognized his light brown eyes and sandy-blond hair along with his lean build.

“Thank you for inviting us to your home.” She curtsied politely, offering their host a warm and friendly smile.

Arthur bowed politely before aiming a punch at Simon’s shoulder. “We should have had a formal introduction by now, but the Duke here likes to make things far more complicated than they need be.”

Simon dodged the blow with ease, smirking at his friend. “It was self-preservation; I knew that Octavia would never agree to the marriage if she met you before the wedding.”

“You flatter me, Simon. I know I have a way with the ladies, but I didn’t think that

your confidence in me was so high.” Arthur gripped his lapels and sniffed importantly, winking at Octavia.

Rolling his eyes, Simon shook his head. “Not even close; I was too afraid that she would think less of me if she saw the company that I keep.”

Narrowing his eyes at Simon, Arthur frowned trying to hide the mirth that sparkled in his eyes.

She was beginning to enjoy the light-hearted banter between the men when Arthur aimed another ill-fated blow at Simon’s shoulder and missed. This playful side of her husband hadn’t been one that she had expected. Even his attempts at cheering up at breakfast had caught her off guard. The Duke’s display of tender-hearted fun was beginning to make her think that she could live a life without any children as long as they remained together.

“Let us not stand here on the street; people are already beginning to gawk at us.” Arthur laughed before turning on his heel and gesturing for them to follow.

Simon turned to Octavia for a moment and gave her hand a gentle squeeze.

The couple followed Arthur up the stairs and into the main entrance of the house which was sparsely decorated with vases here and there and a couple of paintings hanging on the walls.

“I hope you don’t mind the humble appearance of my lodgings, Your Grace. I prefer to live a simpler life here in London. Since I am the only person in residence here, I find that keeping too lavish of a lifestyle feels like a waste,” Arthur explained to Octavia as she looked around the entrance hall which seemed to need a feminine touch.

It was Simon who jumped in and answered for her. “The Duchess isn’t here to inspect your house, Arthur. Ring for tea before you bore us both to death.” He pushed past his friend and made his way into an adjoining room.

Looking at Octavia with a smile, Arthur winked at her. “I know things may seem tough at times with Simon, but I’ve already begun to see changes in him. He’s much happier than I’ve seen him before. Keep up whatever it is that you’re doing; it’s working.” His lips hooked into a cheeky smile before he turned and left her standing alone in the hall.

Perhaps he will change his mind.

Her heart fluttered as she struggled with the hope that rose in her chest. Out of everything that she struggled with in her life, accepting the fact she wouldn’t ever be a mother was proving to be harder than she had initially anticipated.

I want to stay with him.

She reminded herself of her decision to accept him as he was with all of his conditions.

“Octavia, is everything all right?” Simon appeared around the corner again and searched her face.

“Of course, I was merely admiring your friend’s superior decorating skills.” She shot him a beaming smile.

Simon shot her a smile of approval before nodding into the next room.

Taking a deep breath, she pushed past Simon and entered a room that was just as sparsely decorated as the one she had left.

The room seemed to be a drawing room of sorts with brown leather chairs and a matching chaise lounge. The earthy brown tones of the carpet matched the paper on the walls that were decorated with various heads of animals. The poor creatures had undoubtedly been killed by Arthur himself.

“As you can see, my superior decorating skills extend to the rest of the house.” Arthur pursed his lips into a knowing smile and winked at Octavia, deriving a laugh from Simon.

“Will you be ringing for tea anytime soon, or will we have to die of thirst before you offer us any kind of refreshments?” the Duke chided his friend again before choosing a seat on the chaise lounge and gesturing for Octavia to join him.

The friendly banter among the men commenced while Arthur ran for tea. Their persistent back and forth gave Octavia a moment to breathe as she gathered her thoughts. Things certainly would be easy for her if she never had any children, and living a life away from Simon didn’t seem very appealing either.

In a perfect world, she would have been able to keep her marriage intact as well as have a child. Her mind suddenly wandered to her cousin and Simon’s brother. What had happened to Isolde and why hadn’t she sent any word? The more time that passed without any kind of news, the more Octavia began to fear that something bad had happened to her cousin.

“Your Grace, are you well?” Arthur suddenly stopped talking and addressed Octavia with a frown.

Simon turned to her and reached for her hand.

She decided to tell them the truth when Simon gave her hand a gentle squeeze. “I was only thinking of my cousin, Isolde. We haven’t heard from her yet, and I’m afraid

that my uncle isn't any closer to finding her. I thought that she would at least have made an appearance by now if she heard of my wedding."

Angling his body toward her, Simon turned in his seat. "Fear not, I have written several letters to ascertain her whereabouts as well as those of my brother. I'm sure that my solicitor will be sending word any day now."

Arthur chimed in as the tea arrived on a fancy silver tray that was overladen with cakes and sandwiches. "I'm sure there isn't anything to concern ourselves with; Augustus was never one for playing by the rules. I'm sure that he's flitting somewhere across Europe by now and will return with his tail between his legs."

Octavia felt a little more at ease with the men reassuring her.

Rubbing his hands together, Arthur eyed the tray of eats before gesturing for the maid to pour them each a cup. "Let us move on to happier things now. My cook is well known for her iced cakes. Tuck in and have as many as you like."

"Good God, Arthur, how many people were you expecting for tea?" Simon glanced at the piles of cakes and sandwiches with a disapproving scowl. "There is enough food on this tray to feed half of London."

Rubbing the back of his neck, Arthur suddenly seemed sheepish. "Well, I never know how much to ask the cook to prepare. Hosting isn't one of my finer qualities. Besides, I often get hungry this late in the afternoon. Whatever you do not eat will do nicely with my evening tea."

Octavia pursed her lips and exchanged a glance with her husband before bursting into a fit of laughter. The weight of the world seemed to lift from her shoulders for a moment as Arthur took a seat and stuffed a cucumber sandwich into his mouth.

“Nobody will ever understand me.” Crumbs fell onto his shirt as he reached for one of the delicately iced cakes.

Realizing that Arthur wasn't the rake she had pinned him as from the start, she warmed to his company. There was something utterly endearing about his character, and she found herself wondering if he'd ever settle down with a wife.

If she and Simon had managed to find their way to one another, then surely there was somebody out there for Arthur.

CHAPTER 24

Two or three days had passed since the night of the ball, and Simon found himself enjoying Octavia's company more and more as time went by.

They spent their mornings together, talking, and their afternoons at tea with friends. There was something in Octavia's eyes that he couldn't quite put his finger on, yet she seemed content most of the time.

"And how are things progressing in the great plan to restore the family's honor? Are you and the new duchess living as grand a life as the ton suspects?" Bernice placed her cup on the table beside her chair and waited patiently for her grandson to answer. "I know that I have asked about your marriage before, but I shall ask until I am blue in the face or at least until I get an answer that satisfies an old woman's curious mind."

Turning away from the window that overlooked the busy London street, Simon walked to his chair and took a seat.

"Am I to relive this conversation in these exact circumstances until the day that I die?" He recalled the tree incident and the eerie similarities that occurred.

Octavia was out with her maid, shopping for dresses when Bernice had decided to pay them a visit.

Considering his words, Bernice conceded. "Or at least until the day that I die."

Simon looked his grandmother over. “You still don’t seem sick, Grandmamma; let us not flog a dead horse now that the matter has been settled. I am already married.”

His heart felt lighter now than it had on the previous occasion when they’d discussed the matter.

Bernice’s eyes twinkled mischievously as she gazed at Simon.

“You look well—more than well, actually, you look happy. It does my heart good to see you like this. I am glad that Octavia is out. I wanted to come over and patch things up with you. I know that we didn’t exactly leave things on a favorable note the last time that we spoke, but I am happy for you.”

“Thank you, Grandmamma, and while I can understand your need for a great-grandchild, it will be Augustus who provides you with one. My solicitor has let me know that he’s getting close to tracking him down.” Simon reached for his cup of tea and took a sip, making himself comfortable in his chair.

A strange look crossed her face as Bernice continued to stare at him. “Have you discussed these matters with Octavia? Is she content to live a childless life?”

Simon considered her words for a moment, deciding how much of the truth he wanted to tell her. “We have; she is content as long as she gets to travel.”

“And she has told you this?” She continued to purse her lips as she raised an eyebrow in question.

“Not in those exact words, but yes, she has. We’ve come to an agreement between the two of us.”

Bernice turned her attention back to her cup of tea. “I see; well, I shall not meddle

any further if the two of you have indeed grown content in your marriage. It is still early days, and I cannot say that my hope has all but gone, but I am glad.”

Narrowing his eyes, Simon glared at her, yet his heart was no longer resentful toward her for forcing the marriage. “You should never have meddled in the first place.”

“Do you regret getting married?” Bernice caught him off guard with her question.

“No, I cannot say that I do. Despite my reservations, Octavia has made me happy in ways that I never expected,” he answered truthfully.

Allowing her smile to broaden, Bernice sipped her tea and eyed him over the rim of her cup. “Well then, miracles can happen. I guess the big question, in that case, is if you love her?”

The question punched him in the gut as he wondered what to say.

He’d never been in love in his life. His parents had never supplied him with an adequate or even a reliable example. How was he to know what love felt like? Or if it even existed.

“I see,” Bernice spoke up when he took too long to respond. “I cannot say that I am an expert on the matter, but does the atmosphere suddenly change when she walks into a room? Does the sound of her name instantly make you look up? And do you find yourself thinking of her even when she’s not around? All of these things can be an indication of affection.”

“But is affection an indication of love?” Simon frowned at her strange turn of phrase; they had been discussing love, not the merits of affection.

“You are wiser than I give you credit for. Affection is indeed the first feeling that

leads to love. Love will come when you are willing to sacrifice anything and everything for her. Love cannot exist without the sacrifice of self.” Her eyes darkened as she sipped her tea and held his gaze, making him think about her words.

Was she implying that he did not love Octavia unless he was willing to sacrifice everything he held dear for her? He would certainly travel to the ends of the earth if she ever needed anything from him, but was that what his grandmother meant?

What about your vow?

The words echoed in the back of his mind almost as if his grandmother was saying them out loud. The thought made him uncomfortable as he shifted in his seat.

Giving up on his vow would mean risking the promise he’d made to himself to never raise a child in a world as cruel as the one that he inhabited.

“Ah, Octavia, I’m so glad that you’re in time to join us.”

Simon looked up instantaneously, responding to the mention of Octavia’s name.

“I hope I’m not too late.” She came into the room and chose a seat beside Bernice.

“Not at all, in fact, we are off to quite a good start.” His grandmother gave him a knowing smile before turning to Octavia and enquiring about all the stores that she had visited.

Something in his chest clenched furiously as Simon realized that he’d responded to Octavia’s name.

Am I beginning to fall in love with her?

The thought scared him more than he wanted to admit. What would happen if he fell in love with his wife?

“Simon and I were just talking about you. How are you settling in here in London? It’s quite a change from the country estate.” Bernice gave him a knowing smile, adding to the fear that he felt in his chest.

“Quite well, thank you. Simon has been most gracious in helping me settle in.” Octavia shot him a charming smile that caught him off guard and worsened the confusion in his chest.

“Is that so? That is interesting indeed.” Bernice barely suppressed a chuckle before sipping her tea.

The light atmosphere of their banter became too much for him to bear, and Simon suddenly stood. “I forgot that there are a few things that I need to see to before this evening. If you would both excuse me.”

He hurried from the room despite the protests that followed in his wake.

The look of confusion in Octavia’s eyes only spurred him on as he hurried from the room and shut the door behind his back.

Stopping outside the door, he shut his eyes and leaned against the wooden frame.

What should I do?

The question swam in his mind with unrelenting force. His plan had seemed so simple at first, but now, everything was beginning to unravel as time moved on. Octavia was growing increasingly fonder of him as he was of her.

“Don’t mind him dear, he’s always quite busy when it comes to matters in London. Things will settle down soon. He already seems far more content than I’ve seen him in years. These things just need a bit of time.” His grandmother’s muffled voice carried through the door as he pushed himself up and began to make his way to his study.

Things were getting far too overwhelming for him as everyone around him continued to point out the truth.

Octavia was beginning to change him, but at what cost?

Simon lost track of time as he stared into the dying embers of the fire in his study. The conversation with his grandmother had scared him enough to withdraw for the rest of the evening as the ladies finished their tea.

Perhaps it would have been better if they took up separate lodgings once Isolde and Augustus had been found. Living with Octavia certainly presented him with problems even if they had agreed.

The door to his study creaked open as Octavia poked her head around the corner.

“I thought you might be in here.”

She shut the door behind her back and tiptoed into the room as if she was trying not to wake the rest of the house.

“We missed you at tea this afternoon; your grandmother said to give you her regards when she left.

Smiling at her, Simon watched as she perched on the armrest of his chair and ran her fingers through his hair as if the gesture was the most natural thing in the world.

“There was some business that I needed to take care of.” He swallowed hard when she placed her hand on his chest and slipped her fingers beneath the fabric of his shirt.

“I hope you aren’t too busy to spend the evening with your wife?” she leaned down and whispered seductively in his ear.

Shutting his eyes, Simon felt his worries floating away with every stroke of her fingers. There was a lot that he needed to figure out, yet her presence in the room made him push it aside. Whatever his decision would be, he would make it in the morning.

Taking her hand from his shirt, he guided her to the front of his chair and pulled her by the hips until she straddled his lap.

“I didn’t lock the door,” she whispered above his head, shifting closer to his body with her fingers tangled in his hair.

“It doesn’t matter; everyone else is asleep,” he growled against her chest and buried his face between her breasts.

“Would you like to go upstairs?” She held him close, playing with the hair that hung in his collar at the back of his neck.

Moving her dress up her thighs, he allowed his fingers to caress her core over the sheer fabric of her chemise.

“No, I want to stay here. Will you stay with me for a while?” His fingers slipped past the fabric and entered her folds, making her writhe with pleasure.

“I guess I could stay here for a little while.” Her lips parted in ecstasy as he continued

to tease her before lifting her in his arms and carrying her over to the desk.

With one wave of his arm, he shoved the clutter to the ground and laid her on his desk positioning himself above her before moving her dress up her thighs.

Octavia moaned with pleasure as he entered her, gripping the edge of his desk as he began to move.

The feeling of being inside of her drove all of his fears away as he made love to the woman he'd married. Nothing else seemed to matter as he moaned with pleasure and gripped her side.

Shifting closer, Octavia came up straight, placing her hands on the back of his neck as her hips moved in time with his thrusts.

"Simon..." she moaned for him, driving him wild with lust as her legs began to shake with pleasure.

His body suddenly stiffened as the pace increased signaling the start of his orgasm.

Not now.

He shut his eyes and held off as long as he could before withdrawing and stopping his seed. Pulling up his breaches, he drew closer to her again and kissed her neck.

"I want you close to me..." Octavia breathed above him, pulling the laces of her corset free behind her back until her breasts sprang free beneath the confines of her dress.

Using both of her hands, she pulled on the fabric of her dress until her breasts came into view.

Placing his other hand between her thighs, Simon began to pleasure herself, working his fingers into her core as he gently pushed her back on the desk and began to lick her nipples.

Her body squirmed with pleasure as he picked up the pace, working his fingers in and out with his thumb duplicating his efforts.

It wasn't long until she cried out in pleasure, her legs quivering as her face turned red.

Pulling her into his body, Simon held her close, stroking her hair as she whimpered from the power of her climax. Fear filled his body the tighter he held her as he realized that there had been a moment when he'd considered staying inside of her.

Things can't go on like this.

His chest clenched when she snuggled against his neck and kissed a path up to his cheek. Too much was at stake if he kept on living with his wife. He needed to find his brother as soon as possible and end the charade.

"Shall we go up to bed?" she breathed against his neck, trying to regain control of her breathing.

"Yes, let's go to bed," he whispered in her ear before pressing a kiss against her head.

Hopping from the desk, Octavia straightened her clothes before cupping his face in her hands.

"I hate it when you pull away from me like that. I want to feel your skin against mine until the very end." She shut her eyes and kissed his lips.

And that is why things should end.

His heart felt as if it were breaking as he led her out of the room and up the stairs to her chambers. He wasn't sure how he would go about the separation. Breaking her heart seemed too cruel of a deed after all of the intimacy they had shared.

Octavia slipped out of her dress and climbed beneath the covers, before patting the bed beside her.

Feeling an overwhelming sensation of dread for the things to come, Simon climbed into bed beside her and drew her closer to his chest.

CHAPTER 25

“ A h, Your Grace, I was hoping that I would be seeing you soon.” Mr. Derbyshire greeted Simon with a warm smile from behind his desk.

“The chances of me paying you a visit were greatly increased when you sent a note summoning me,” Simon shot back with a smirk.

The old man’s bright blue eyes twinkled mischievously as he gestured for the Duke to have a seat in his cluttered office. His snow-white hair was neatly slicked back, and his tweed suit had been pressed.

Chuckling heartily, Mr. Derbyshire shook his head and took a seat behind his mahogany desk almost as soon as Simon had settled in.

“You have me there; it would have been far more impressive if you had shown up without a summons. I only meant that I foresaw a delay given the fact you are newlywed. These kinds of delays are expected when one is adjusting to married life.”

Clearing his throat, Simon made himself comfortable in the leather-bound chair and glanced around the room at the many stacks of books and papers. The account’s messy tendencies had put him off at first, yet the man’s impeccable capabilities had won him over in the end.

“Before we get to the matter at hand, may I offer my most heartfelt congratulations on your wedding. I cannot say that I am personally acquainted with the young lady, but I did know her father, and he was a fine man.” Mr. Derbyshire reached for a stack

of papers and pushed his spectacles further up his nose as his eyes wandered over a letter.

“Thank you, Mr. Derbyshire; the Duchess is indeed a lady of fine breeding,” Simon answered distractedly, wondering what it was that couldn’t have been relayed in a letter.

It couldn’t have had anything to do with the family finances as Simon himself always kept an eye on the accounts.

“Now where exactly did I see it?” Mr. Derbyshire riffled through the stack of papers, clicking his tongue against the roof of his mouth.

Flexing his fingers repeatedly, Simon tried to remain as patient as he could. He was about to ask the man to get on with it and explain his news when Mr. Derbyshire finally withdrew a piece of parchment from the messy stack.

“Ah, here we are. I knew I put it in here somewhere. I would lose my head if it wasn’t attached to my body.” The old man smiled at his own idiosyncrasies and chuckled. “It would seem that a week before your wedding, a rather large sum of money was withdrawn from your family fortunes. It didn’t strike me as odd at first, given the wedding that was about to take place, but I now find it quite suspicious.”

Simon felt his jaw clenching as he sat back and ran his hand over his chin. “The money was not withdrawn by myself, and dare I say it, my grandmother has no need of withdrawing such a large sum.”

Nodding, Mr. Derbyshire slid the piece of parchment across the desk. “I didn’t think it would have been either of you. I have since done some calculations and deduced that the sum was large enough to live sensibly for six months without the need for more.”

“Augustus has never been known for being sensible.” Simon flexed his fingers more irritably now in an attempt to keep himself from storming from the office.

Just what did Augustus think he was doing? Knowing his brother and all his proclivities for living a lavish life, the money would be gone sooner rather than later.

“Now, we could simply wait and see when your brother decides to come back home in search of more money...”

“I do not wish to wait,” Simon cut him off before he could finish his sentence. “Something needs to be done to bring him back.”

Mr. Derbyshire nodded. “I thought you might feel that way. With your permission, Your Grace, I will reach out to a few fellow accounts abroad. I know that your brother was fond of certain places across Europe. Now that we know nothing sinister has occurred, we can be a little more blatant with our inquiries.”

Simon nodded. “Do as you must, Mr. Derbyshire. It is about time that my brother returns home and faces the consequences of his actions.”

“Indeed, I have already drafted several inquiries, and now that I have your approval, I will send them at once. We should have answers within a week or two.”

A week or two.

His stomach suddenly clenched with nerves as he realized that his brother’s return would mean that things couldn’t stay the same between him and Octavia.

“I know that you must be eager to get back to your country home. I suspect that the Duchess is still settling in as well.” Mr. Derbyshire stood, placing his hands flat on the desk to support his weight.

“Yes, thank you, it is about time that things get put into perspective; they cannot carry on as they are.” Simon swallowed hard before standing and looking down at the sum of money that had been withdrawn from the family funds.

“Indeed, you and the Duchess may return to your country home as soon as you wish. I will personally send word of your brother’s whereabouts if anything turns up.” Mr. Derbyshire bowed respectfully.

Simon reached down and lifted the letter, folding it three times before placing it in his breast pocket. “Thank you, I shall be awaiting your news. Hopefully, the search will come to an end soon enough.”

“Of course, Your Grace, may God smile favorably upon you and the Duchess and bless you both with an heir that is both healthy and happy.”

The accountant’s words floated to his ears just as he placed his hand on the door.

There is every possibility of that happening if things continue as they are.

“I had tea with your grandmother this afternoon while you were out. I tried to put her off, but she insisted on coming over as soon as we got back home. She has visions of redecorating the drawing room with floral prints.” Octavia tried to make conversation yet found her words being met with grunts.

Simon barely lifted his eyes from his plate as he speared a piece of roast chicken on his fork before lifting it to his mouth.

Octavia watched his face, hoping for even the slightest notion of acknowledgment.

“I thought I might warn you in advance, lest you blame me for changing things again. I don’t want to have to beat you over the head with a roll of wallpaper when the time

comes.”

Reaching for his glass, Simon sipped his wine and returned to eating without so much as a grunt.

“Is something the matter?” She finally reached the end of her wits as she placed her knife and fork beside her plate.

The Duke had barely spoken a word to her ever since he returned from seeing his accountant. Part of her wished that she had gone with him. Whatever was playing on his mind seemed to be distracting him enough not to pay attention.

Heaving a sigh, he looked up at her and finished chewing his mouthful of chicken.

“The accountant must have had some frightful news?” She forced a smile and raised an eyebrow, hoping to draw him into a lighter mood.

“Mr. Derbyshire informed me of a rather large sum of money that was withdrawn from the family funds. It would seem that Augustus had planned to skip out on the wedding all along. It shouldn’t be long now before we track him down and bring him back home.” Simon’s voice was cold as he averted his gaze.

Frowning, Octavia felt her chest clenching. She had been aware of the fact that Simon was still looking for his brother. What she wasn’t aware of was why it had altered his behavior toward her.

“Is... is that not good news?” She swallowed the sudden surge of dread that crept up her throat.

Why do things need to change if Augustus comes home?

“It is indeed good news for us both. We can finally go ahead with the agreement we made on the night of our wedding.”

He tore his eyes away from his plate and looked at her with such finality that Octavia almost gasped.

“Is that truly what you wish, Your Grace?”

Her stomach began to spin as she suddenly felt dizzy. Where had it all gone wrong? They had made love more than once and finally seemed to be warming to one another.

Simon nodded with his jaw clenched. “All good things must come to an end.”

His words felt like a punch to her gut as she sucked in a sharp breath.

“Things cannot continue as they are at present. What if you fall pregnant?” He seemed irritable as he ran a section of the tablecloth through his fingers and crumpled the fine embroidery in his fist.

Words failed her as the intensity of her confusion choked back her words.

I don’t understand...

Everything seemed to slow down as she took a deep breath. How could he be so cruel and distant after everything that had happened between them?

“We have been sailing perilously close to the wind; it’s time to act more sensible.” He let go of the linen and tapped his fingers on the table instead.

“Why are you so insistent on never having a child? I am struggling to see things from

your point of view.” She finally found the words and placed her hands on her lap, feeling like an outsider in her own marriage.

There was so much that didn’t make sense to her anymore. So much seemed to be changing, yet she couldn’t help but feel as if she had been a fool all along.

Simon held her gaze, clenching his jaw until it seemed as if his teeth would shatter. “You know very well that I cannot sire an heir; I refuse to bring a child into this world and repeat the mistakes of my parents.”

Her chest rose and fell with labored breaths as she mulled over his words.

“I was willing to make my peace with not siring your heir. I was even willing to fill my days with other frivolous activities to play the part of your wife. Except I wasn’t playing a part. I truly wanted to be by your side, Simon. Are you telling me now that everything leading up to this point has been a lie?”

She searched his face, desperate for an answer that would contradict her fear.

Remaining silent for a moment, Simon ran his hand over her jaw as if he were considering her words.

I have been delusional.

Her heart shattered into a million pieces when she realized that he wasn’t willing to answer her. His silence spoke volumes more than his words ever could.

“And what of you brother, Your Grace? Will he not repeat the mistakes of your parents if he sires an heir? What makes him so different than the man that you have become?”

Anger and hurt clutched at her chest, making it almost impossible to breathe without crying.

“Augustus is different. He seems to have learned from our parents’ mistake; if he hadn’t, he would have married your cousin.” The coolness of his words bit into her skin as if he slapped her.

“So, this marriage was a mistake to you?” Her voice was soft, barely audible above a whisper.

Simon’s face remained expressionless as he looked at his plate with the half-eaten food.

“I see,” Octavia said to herself and stood, refusing to look at him as she made her way out of the room.

She had given him so much of herself since their wedding. He had seen parts of her and even experienced things that nobody else ever had.

She wasn’t about to show him her tears, not when he was treating her like a stranger.

CHAPTER 26

The sight of the maids packing her belongings was almost too much for Octavia to bear as she turned from her open door. All of the dresses and items of clothing reminded her of Simon.

How did things end up like this?

She thought of the moment in the library when they'd made love. He'd been so passionate and caring with her in the chambers. Had he already been thinking of their separate lodgings when he'd held her to his chest?

The thought was almost too painful for her to bear as she entered the study where Simon was gathering his papers.

Looking up in surprise, he quickly cleared his throat. "Have the maids begun to pack your belongings? I did instruct Mrs. Farley to have everything packed for our departure this afternoon."

"They are, thank you, Your Grace." She almost felt as if she were addressing a stranger as he went back to sorting through the papers he had laid on the desk.

"Very good." He nodded curtly.

Octavia wanted to scream at him and sweep the papers to the floor. How could he be so cruel to her after all this time?

It hasn't been that long...

She thought back to the day of their wedding and just how quickly they had been thrust into the situation. Everything they had experienced together as a married couple had made it feel as if she'd known him all of her life. Yet it had only been a few weeks.

"There was something else that I wanted to ask you." She swallowed her tears and crossed her arms across her waist.

"Go on." Simon looked up again with a frown.

"My parents owned a villa in Rome. My mother always said that it would be mine if I ever wanted it. It was in my uncle's trust when we got married."

She found it hard to maintain eye contact with him while she spoke yet tried her best to keep her head held high.

She had begun to trust in him so much since they had gotten married that his change in behavior felt like a monumental betrayal to her.

"Yes, I do recall that it was part of your dowry. The house is being kept by one of my solicitors. As far as I understand, the house is still being run by the housekeeper and butler in the family's absence," Simon paused for a moment to explain before carrying on with his task.

The family.

The use of the word struck Octavia and broke her heart. He could have said that the house was waiting for them, or even their family, yet he had used the phrase as a singular meaning apart from himself.

Taking a deep breath as she composed herself against the tears that threatened to spill over her cheeks. “I would like to take up permanent residence in that villa once Augustus and Isolde have been found. I will go back to my uncle’s house and stay there while the search continues.”

Pausing again from a frown, the Duke looked up with a veiled expression. “I hardly think that is necessary. What will the rest of the ton say if we divide our house mere weeks after the wedding? I think you should wait until after Augustus and Isolde are married.”

“No,” she said the word with such finality that Simon placed the papers back on his desk and looked at her as if he were seeing her for the first time.

“Do you not think that your absence would cause more scandal?” He cocked an eyebrow up in question.

“I’m surprised that you should be concerned about what the rest of the ton thinks, Your Grace.” She spoke more surely now as the anger she felt in her chest drove her forward.

It may have been possible for him to discard everything they had been through with such ease, but she wasn’t about to betray her feelings.

Simon seemed taken aback as he spoke quite irately. “What kind of question is that when I have cared for nothing but the honor of this family? I married you when I never wanted to get married, all for the sake of avoiding a scandal.” He placed his palms flat on the desk in front of him.

“You do not have to remind me of the reason for our marriage, Simon. I know very well why you married me. I am under no delusion that anything you and I experienced had anything to do with love or affection. If I ever harbored any such

delusions, you made sure to cure me of them last night..." Her voice was soft yet certain as a single tear spilled over her cheek.

Lifting her hand, she quickly wiped her cheek and took a deep breath as Simon looked at her in confusion.

Good, let him see that I was willing to give him everything.

She lifted her head and clenched her fists at her sides.

"Why I am shocked, is that you seem to place the ton above the possibility of siring an heir. Nothing else seems to be more important, yet the opinions of strangers trump even the sacrifices that I was willing to make for you."

Simon's mouth fell open as he removed his hands from the desk and took a step back.

"I was willing to give you everything, to remain a childless woman by your side, yet you couldn't even give me that." More tears fell now as the dam of emotions finally broke. "The ton seems to have garnered a place in your heart where I have failed."

"Don't you dare use my unwillingness to sire an heir against me. I may not have been honest with you before the wedding, but by God, I was on the first night of our marriage. I never asked you to remain by my side; that was a decision that you made all on your own!" he raised his voice in anger he thrust his thumb into his chest.

Octavia nodded as her tears fell freely, creating little rivulets down her cheeks. "So, you were just humoring me that night in your chambers when I warmed your bed?"

"I was acting upon desires, and if I recall, you were fully apprised of the fact that I never wanted an heir when you willingly came to my bed." Simon placed his hands on the back of the chair and almost thrust it aside in his anger.

That is what he thinks of me.

Shutting her eyes, Octavia realized that she had been holding off on hope that he'd see her in a different light.

"Octavia... I never..." Simon lowered his voice, letting go of the back of the chair with a burdened sigh.

Snapping her head in his direction, she opened her eyes and finished his sentence for him.

"You never wanted to get married. I understand that now, Your Grace. I was foolish to think that this marriage of convenience could ever be anything more than a clever ruse. You may rest assured that I shall never darken your doorstep ever again." She blinked back the rest of her tears and held her head high as she turned away from her husband and left the study.

Her legs weren't able to carry her fast enough as she raced up the stairs toward her chambers.

"Leave everything as it is; I want a moment alone," she instructed the maids while trying to hide her tears.

The maids seemed startled as they paused above her cases with garments in their hands. One of them held the dress she had worn to her godmother's ball. The very dress she had worn the first time they had made love.

"Take that dress away and place it in one of His Grace's trunks. I do not wish to ever see it again!" she snapped, allowing her emotions to get the better of her.

"We were instructed..." one of the maids began but quickly stopped when the other

young woman shook her head and gestured for them to leave.

Hearing the door shut, Octavia allowed her tears to fall as she collapsed on her bed. She had been such a spirited and free-willed young woman before Simon had come along. What had happened to all of her dreams of traveling?

I wanted to travel with him...

She realized with a start that all of her hopes and plans had changed to include Simon. She no longer wanted to travel the globe if he wasn't at her side.

"Your Grace?"

Octavia quickly sat up straight on her bed and wiped her eyes with the back of her hands.

"Mrs. Farley, I'm sorry, I didn't hear you come in." She tried her best to compose herself, but she couldn't seem to stop the tears.

Mrs. Farley offered her a sympathetic smile before shutting the door behind her.

"The maids have informed me that you no longer wish for them to pack your things. Will you be staying on with his Grace?" Her words were soft and kind as she gave Octavia a moment to breathe.

"No, we will still both be leaving. His Grace will return to the country manor while I spend some time with my uncle here in London." She attempted to force a smile yet only succeeded in making her crying worse.

"Is something the matter, Your Grace? I do not wish to intrude... But I am sensing they may be something wrong. What is the matter?"

“Oh, Mrs. Farley! I don’t understand, what did I do wrong as a wife? I honestly thought that things had changed!” She began to sob as if she were a child. Her heart broke all over again as her words tumbled over each other in torrents. Having someone ask her what was wrong seemed to send her over the edge as all the stress and heartache took hold.

“Oh, my dear.” Mrs. Farley rushed to her side and sat on the bed beside her, placing her arms around Octavia’s shoulders and drawing her closer. “I hope you will forgive me for sitting and acting so impertinently in your presence, Your Grace.” She began to rock Octavia back and forth in her arms.

The steady soothing motion reminded Octavia of her mother and the times when she’d cried as a child. She felt equally as hopeless and lost as she had in her youth. The heavy scent of peppermint filled Octavia’s senses as she regained some control over her emotions.

“You didn’t do anything wrong, Your Grace, and I hope you will forgive me the love of a mother’s heart. I was never blessed with a child, but I watched His Grace grow up right in front of my eyes. And just as I would have accepted a son’s wife as my own, I have grown rather fond of you in your time with us.”

Her words acted as a balm on Octavia’s heart as she allowed herself a moment away from all of the grief that had driven her to tears.

“While I do not understand what it is that has gone so horribly wrong between the two of you, I have seen a change in His Grace since your arrival.” Mrs. Farley placed her cheek against Octavia’s head and continued to rock her back and forth.

“I thought he had changed as well, but I was wrong.” Octavia came to her senses having calmed down.

“Then it cannot be all that bad?” The housekeeper removed her arms from Octavia’s shoulders but remained where she was on the bed.

Reaching for a handkerchief in one of the open trunks, Octavia dried her eyes and blew her nose.

“It isn’t; I know I get to live the life of my dreams without any of the obligations that other wives of the ton have to face.”

Her loyalty to Simon’s need for privacy kept her from telling the woman who ran his house the truth. Even after he’d broken her heart, she still felt the need to keep his confidence.

Why do I still want to protect him?

The question seemed far too overwhelming for her at present. She reminded herself that she would be getting the life she had always envisioned. She would live in Rome with a chaperone; if her uncle denied her request, then she would take her godmother. There was no need to fret when everything was working out just as she had envisioned it.

“There now, these little tiffs always seem so important when they occur, but one often finds a solution.” Mrs. Farley smiled brightly and pushed herself up from her knees. “Now, I will send the maids back up as soon as you are ready, Your Grace.”

“The maids may come up at once, Mrs. Farley; I am ready to take my leave. You may have all of my belongings sent to my uncle’s house. I will spare His Grace the extra trouble and go there at once.” She took a deep breath and stood, giving the housekeeper her instructions with a forced smile.

Mrs. Farley seemed taken aback and stuttered just for a moment, “Forgive me...

Your Grace, but I..."

"Never fear, Mrs. Farley. The marriage between His Grace and I will remain as it was and should have been from the start. I simply wish to visit with my family before we proceed. I know His Grace has very important matters to attend to back home." She held her head high and pushed back the questions that still plagued her mind.

It no longer mattered to her why she felt the need to be at his side or keep his confidence. She would be getting the life of her dreams. The little change that she had experienced in feelings toward Simon would seem like nothing more than a fluke when she was traveling the world.

"Very well, Your Grace. I will send the maids up at once." Mrs. Farley bowed her head respectfully and left the room, leaving Octavia to her thoughts.

Walking over to the window, Octavia wrapped her arms around her waist and looked at the passing carriages in the street.

That will be me soon enough on my way to Rome.

Her heart clenched in pain when she spotted Simon leaving the house in his top hat and coat. He never so much as glanced behind him as he crossed the street.

Feeling her emotions welling again, she placed her hand on her throat and swallowed.

"I won't look back either, no matter how painful it is," she whispered to herself and turned away from the window just as the maids came into the room.

"You may continue packing; Mrs. Farley will know what to do with the trunks." Octavia lowered her hand from her throat and smiled reassuringly at the maids.

“And, the dress, Your Grace?” The maid who had been holding the dress from the ball swallowed hard, her voice quivering with uncertainty.

Glancing at the garment in question, Octavia allowed herself a moment of tender recollection.

“Have it sent back to the house and placed in storage. Perhaps I will wear it again in my old age.”

She began to envision a time in her life when all of her journeys had come to an end without Simon at her side.

“Of course, Your Grace.” The maids curtsied politely and began to pack the remnants of Octavia’s brief time in London.

CHAPTER 27

“Octavia? Did I forget something?” Uncle Jack looked around in confusion, halting at the bottom of the stairs with his hand on the rail.

Taking a deep breath, Octavia composed herself and began to remove her gloves, pulling on the tips of her fingers until the fabric relented.

“You did not; I am afraid that there wasn’t any time to send a note as I only made the decision this morning.” She tried to smile reassuringly at him but found her face betraying her.

Everything that had happened still weighed heavily on her heart, despite her decision to move on with her life.

Uncle Jack frowned and looked over her shoulder. “Have you come alone? Where is the Duke?”

Straight to the point.

Her heart felt grieved that her uncle would question her visit without showing any signs of wanting her presence.

“Simon has gone back home without me. There has been news of his brother, and he needs to be there in case anyone sends word.” She finished removing her gloves and placed them on the entrance table along with her traveling bonnet and cloak.

“Why have you not gone with him?” Her uncle removed his hand from the banister and frowned, persisting on the topic.

“May a lady not visit her family alone, even after she is married? I would have thought that you’d welcome some company in this quiet house,” she tried again but knew that her uncle would not let the subject go when his frown deepened.

“A lady may visit her family alone, but it is not proper given the circumstances. You haven’t been married long enough to justify an agreeable separation with your husband for any length of time. Are you and the Duke having marital difficulties?” Uncle Jack ran his tongue over his bottom lip before pursing his lips in disapproval.

The marriage is the difficulty.

She bit back the words on the edge of her tongue and continued toward the stairs.

“You may rest assured, Uncle, that the marriage is just as intact as it was from the start. The Duke and I will be continuing the ruse in the eyes of the ton.”

“What do you mean by ruse? You should return to your home at once and settle whatever the misunderstanding is between you and your husband.” Uncle Jack shook his head and stood between Octavia and the stairs.

Octavia finally snapped and brought her hand up to her forehead.

“Can you not see that there is no marriage to salvage? Not in the sense that you mean. The Duke married me out of obligation, just as you and his grandmother asked. Will I not be allowed even a moment’s respite from that situation?”

“The situation that you refer to is your marriage! The more time that you and the Duke spend apart, the more the ton will gossip!” He raised his voice a little,

grumbling under his breath about her insolence.

“The ton , the ton , the ton ! Do not worry Uncle, I know far more about the ton , gossip, and even duty than you give me credit for. In fact, it is all that I have learned about even in the short time that I have been married.” She thrust her arm out dramatically and gestured to the room at large.

“Then you should understand why it is of the utmost importance that you return to your husband at once!” He shook his head angrily and came forward as if he were about to turn her around.

Stepping back quickly, Octavia felt her anger growing again. “It is you who does not understand the situation, Uncle, not I. It was you that forced me to marry a man that will never love me! I have been forced to tie myself down when all I ever wanted was to be free!”

Uncle Jack paused and lowered his hands, backing off a bit as Octavia yelled at him. “You speak of love as if you were a child. These things take time...”

“Time! Just like you allowed Isolde time to come to terms with her marriage before you forced the matter? I could tell that she never wanted to marry the Duke’s younger brother, yet you pushed the matter until she fled! Now I’m not even sure if any of us will ever hear from her ever again!” The words tumbled from her lips before she could stop them.

All the blood seemed to drain from his face as Uncle Jack took another step back and ran his hand over the bottom half of his face. “I only ever wanted what was right for this family.”

“And in doing so, you placed propriety and honor above your own daughter’s feelings and even mine. My father would never have forced me to marry Simon under

these circumstances.” She shook her head angrily and wished the fight could end.

It was bad enough that she’d had to come to terms with Simon’s feelings for her, but she wasn’t in the mood for a fight with her uncle.

“And do you think your father would be proud of how you are acting now? This childish behavior of yours makes me wonder if I shouldn’t have been stricter with you. Your naïve view of the world and how these things work is astonishing!”

“Perhaps I should have died instead of my parents!”

Lifting the hem of her skirt, Octavia rushed up the stairs and passed her uncle, wishing she could just disappear.

Her chambers had never seemed so far away as she raced down the corridor. All she had wanted was to travel the world and lead a simple life unbound by anyone or anything. Yet now, she felt like a prisoner in her own mind.

Throwing open the doors to her chambers, she flung herself on the bed and sobbed, feeling the weight of the world pushing her down.

Simon shot up in bed, his head aching. Reaching over, he felt the emptiness beside him and sighed.

It’s for the best.

He reminded himself why he had pushed Octavia away. It was better for both of them if they only saw each other once a year. He wasn’t able to keep his hands off of her, and she in turn seemed to have grown fonder of him.

The loving look in her eyes when she’d spent the night in his bed haunted him more

than the pain in her eyes when they'd fought.

...I was willing to give you everything...

Her words came flooding back to him as he rolled back over and swung his legs from the bed. He'd never asked her to do that for him. He refused to feel guilty when she'd made that decision on her own. He'd been honest with her; it wasn't as if he'd ever misled her.

Placing his face in his hands, he shook his head and sighed, wishing he could turn back time. He never would have allowed his grandmother to talk him into the marriage in the first place.

"Your Grace, breakfast is ready." The muffled sound of the butler's voice drew his attention to the door as the sound of knocking made his head ache.

Blinking back the pain, he winced and looked at the sliver of light that was visible through the drapes in his chambers. "I'll be right there," he called back when he realized that it was the next day.

How did I lose track of time?

He quickly spotted the empty bottle of whisky beside his bed and groaned.

That is how.

For all the grief he had given his friend for drinking to excess, he'd gone and drowned his sorrows.

Pushing himself up from the bed, he pulled his shirt over his head and dressed for breakfast before heading out the door and down the stairs.

The house seemed emptier than usual. None of the furniture had been moved, and all of the maids and footmen were still milling about, yet something was missing.

“Good morning, Your Grace.” Mrs. Farley appeared in the doorway to the dining room, drawing Simon away from the unwanted thoughts.

Clearing his throat, he tried to hide the fact that he had been startled. “Mrs. Farley, good morning. I hope that everything is well with the house?”

“Oh yes, the staff behaved quite exemplary in our absence, Your Grace. The house is just as spotless as we left it.” She smiled in satisfaction and clasped her hands proudly in front of her apron.

Simon was about to push past her when he noted her hesitation. “Was there something else that you wished to discuss, Mrs. Farley?”

The older woman seemed sheepish as she too cleared her throat. “There was, Your Grace. I did not wish to hassle you this early in the morning, but I must ask when the Duchess will be returning?”

The question caught him off guard as he fought against the pounding ache in his head. “I am not entirely sure; we did not discuss it. Is there something that needs her attention?”

“Uh, well, there are a few matters. The Dowager Duchess is scheduled to arrive tomorrow. I understand that a number of wallpaper samples are being delivered this afternoon.”

“Ah, yes, I do recall that the Duchess mentioned something of the sort.” He frowned and pinched the bridge of his nose between his finger and thumb. “I will send a note to my grandmother explaining that the Duchess has chosen to stay with her family for

a while.

Mrs. Farley nodded and pursed her lips. “Very well, Your Grace. There is also the matter of the soiree that Her Grace was planning.”

“What soiree?” Simon racked his mind but came up empty-handed.

“Well, it was less of a soiree and more of a dance for the servants. Her Grace said that she would address the matter with you once you had returned from London.”

Of course, she would have planned something like that.

Simon heaved a sigh and wished he’d stayed in bed. How was he to move on with his life when his wife had gained the special attention of his staff?

“That will have to be put aside for now; instruct the servants to carry on with their duties as they had before the Duchess came along. All changes that have been made to the household should revert to normal until the Duchess returns.”

The sadness in the older woman’s eyes was more than noticeable as she struggled to hide a sigh. “As you wish, Your Grace.”

Walking past her, Simon paused despite his better judgment. “I do not think that you have to cancel the plans altogether, Mrs. Farley. I’m sure that Her Grace will want to offer the servants some form of respite when she does return.”

His words brought a spark back to the woman’s face that didn’t ignite his own.

What am I doing?

He would never have considered allowing a dance for the servants when they already

had their days off along with considerable wages. Octavia had changed him in such a way that he'd even consider her plans in his absence.

"Thank you, Your Grace." Mrs. Farley cheered up considerably and hurried away before he could change his mind.

Muttering to himself under his breath, Simon made his way into the empty dining room and eyed the plate that had been set beside his at the table. Anger flared up in the pit of his stomach when he realized that the staff had accommodated his wife to such a degree that nothing seemed to function properly without her.

It wasn't their fault; they were all doing what was expected of them.

"Shall I remove the extra plate in Her Grace's absence, Your Grace?" A footman entered the dining room and followed Simon's gaze.

"Yes, there is no need to set an extra place until Her Grace returns," he grunted his response at the servant and waved his hand in the air as if he could make the memory of his wife disappear.

The man hurried forward and quickly gathered the plate along with the glass, knife, and fork before hurrying from the room.

The gesture only served to make Simon feel worse as he sat in his chair and instantly spotted the fresh jar of preserves. Everything in his house had grown around Octavia. The staff had done her bidding and accommodated her as far as possible.

Not only the staff.

Simon recalled the times she'd followed him out of the dining room and started an argument. She had such a fiery personality that he'd almost lost his temper with her

on more than one occasion. The smile that tugged at his lips caught him off guard as it instantly turned to a scowl.

Her actions had infuriated him; why were the memories suddenly making him smile? He recalled her stint in the tree and even the time she had attempted to replant his garden. The memory caused him to look out the window and take note of the myriads of colors that now brighten the garden.

Losing his temper out of frustration, he picked up the jar of preserves and threw it across the room, instantly regretting his decision when the glass shattered against the wall.

“Your Grace?” Mrs. Farley came rushing back into the room and frowned when she spotted the broken jar at her feet beside the doorway.

“I am sorry, Mrs. Farley; I don’t seem to be myself this morning. Have one of the maids clean up the mess and take the food back to the kitchen; I am not hungry.” The legs of his chair scraped across the floor as he pushed it back and stood.

“Certainly, Your Grace.” Mrs. Farley bent down and began to pick up the pieces of the broken jar as Simon walked past.

“I’m not sure if I will be back in time for supper. Have the cook prepare something small that will keep for tomorrow.” He clenched his jaw in anger and averted his gaze from the broken shards.

Mrs. Farley scrambled to her feet and curtsied politely as he passed.

“I do not know when I shall return.” He hurried from the room and practically sprinted down the hall toward the front doors. He needed to put as much space between himself and the house as possible.

Octavia may have decided to stay behind in London, yet she had left behind such a distinct and palpable presence in his life that it was hard to escape. Even the air in the house somehow felt different with the lack of her presence.

Heading toward the stables, he decided to seek out parts of his estate where his wife had never ventured. Yet no matter how hard he tried, her presence and even the smell of her perfume seemed to chase him. The very essence of his home and lands whispered her name on the wind.

Octavia.

CHAPTER 28

Octavia was picking at the eggs on her plate when her godmother came barreling into the little parlor that had been used by her uncle's late wife.

"Are you hurt? What in heaven's name has happened?" Matilda fell to her knees beside Octavia and proceeded to examine her from head to toe before taking her face in her hands.

"Nothing has happened; why are you so panicked?" Octavia felt her pulse racing at the wild look of panic in her godmother's eyes.

Coming to her feet and gasping for breath, Matilda proceeded to brandish a note in the air before placing her hand on her abdomen and heaving.

"Your uncle...he sent a note...said come at once, something is wrong." Her cheeks were flushed and red from running and her hair had mostly come loose from the bun at the back of her head.

Realizing what had happened, Octavia stood and took the note from her godmother, helping her into the chair opposite her own.

"I am sorry that you have gotten such a fright, but I am not ill, nor am I hurt." She made Matilda take a deep breath before ringing for an extra cup.

It took Matilda a moment to regain her composure. "Why the devil did your uncle send me such a note then? I practically fainted when I read it. I thought you had

gotten hurt or worse.” She seemed almost furious as she shook her head.

A part of Octavia was glad that her uncle hadn’t elaborated more on the matter. It saved her yet another awkward conversation having to explain matters between her and Simon.

“We had a bit of a falling out over Isolde. I’m afraid that both of us ended up saying things that we shouldn’t have.”

A maid entered the room and left again when Octavia gestured for a second cup.

Shaking her head out of frustration, Matilda failed to hide the look of relief on her face.

“That man will be the death of me, carrying on as if someone had died when it was nothing more than a spat.” Her face softened a little as she looked at Octavia. “I know your uncle may come across as a very harsh man at times, but he ultimately means well.”

The look in her godmother’s eyes made her heart ache as Octavia realized again how much they cared for one another. Her godmother seemed to understand her uncle in ways that nobody else could.

The maid hurried in with a clean cup and saucer, placing it in front of Matilda with a polite curtsy before leaving again.

“Well, now that all of that has been settled, tell me, is the Duke here as well?” Matilda poured herself a cup of tea and proceeded to sip it slowly.

“No, there are important matters that needed his attention. It would seem that there is every possibility of finding his brother sooner rather than later. He knew that I missed

spending time with my family and granted me a little respite,” Octavia answered quickly, hoping that her godmother would buy her story and not ask any further questions.

Matilda seemed satisfied with her answer and nodded. “That is good news. I hope they will be able to find Isolde as well; your uncle does worry ever so much about her. Even I have attempted to track her down, but the girl seems to have vanished without a trace.”

Octavia felt a pang of guilt at having accused her uncle of chasing her cousin away. Even if he had been pressuring her, it didn’t excuse the fact that Isolde had disappeared without a trace.

“It weighs heavily on me as well; I wish she would have left some kind of clue to her whereabouts.” Octavia shook her head.

“Are you certain that Isolde didn’t say anything to you? I wouldn’t be angry with you if you were keeping her secret. The two of you were more like sisters than cousins.” Matilda placed her cup back on the table and smiled reassuringly at Octavia.

“If I had known, I would have gone and dragged her back by now. Her presence would have saved us all a lot of worry and heartache.”

Simon drifted back into her mind as she chewed the inside of her cheek. Their argument the previous day had left tossing and turning during the night. A lack of sleep wasn’t helping her mood either as she’d endeavored to avoid her uncle as much as possible.

“I know that things can’t be easy on you either; her absence must seem like a betrayal to you. Nevertheless, I hope that the poor dear is safe, wherever she may be.” Matilda looked up when Uncle Jack entered the room and cleared his throat.

Feeling a shift in the atmosphere once again, Octavia quickly devised a plan to excuse herself.

“If you would excuse me, there is something in the library that I needed. Perhaps you and Uncle Jack can catch up while I have a moment to myself.” She stood and smiled courteously at her uncle before Matilda could protest.

Weaving her way to the library, Octavia quickly shut the door behind her back and sighed in relief. Her uncle would undoubtedly tell her godmother the truth about her visit, and Matilda in return would press her for more. She felt as if she needed more time to process her situation before anyone else intervened.

Pushing herself off of the door, she walked to the row of shelves on the opposite wall and ran her finger over the spines.

“Where are you?” she whispered to the room in general, recalling all of the times that she and Isolde had spent swapping books and dreaming of bigger things in life.

They had discussed traveling the world together and even opening a shop that sold hats and books. The spines only served to grieve her even further as she recalled the good times in her life before everything had gone south.

Stopping on a book that she and Isolde had both loved, Octavia withdrew the novel from the shelf and proceeded to open the cover. Something felt off to her as a frown creased her brow. The pages seemed bulkier as if something had been wedged in between.

Jumping back from fright, she raised her hand to her throat and gasped. Something long and silver had fallen from the pages.

Bending down with a frown, she ran her fingers over the silver chain before noting

the shining pendant at the end.

“Oh, my word, I think I know where you are.”

She jumped to her feet and ran to the door, yanking it open before racing back down the hall.

Matilda and Jack both jumped apart, their faces flushed as if they’d been whispering.

“Heavens, dearest, you practically gave me a heart attack. What has happened?” She placed her hand over her chest before glancing at Jack.

“Nothing, I merely wanted to come and say that I will be returning to Sunderley at once, this afternoon in fact.” She smiled at her uncle as he frowned at her.

“Has something happened with the Duke?” Uncle Jack frowned and searched her face as if he were reading a newspaper.

Octavia shook her head. “Nothing at all; I simply saw the error of my ways and wish to rectify the situation as soon as possible.”

She held the necklace behind her back, closing the chain in her fist.

Matilda looked at her with a frown but smiled, nonetheless. “I’m glad to hear it, dearest. Your uncle and I shall instruct the housekeeper at once.”

She lifted the hem of her dress and readied herself to leave when Octavia suddenly stepped in front of her.

“Please stay for just a moment; I would like a word in private.” She quickly looked at her uncle with an apologetic smile. “I need some advice on... womanly problems.”

Uncle Jack's lips formed a perfect 'O' before he cleared his throat.

"Very well then, I shall leave the two of you alone for a moment." He fidgeted with his mustache before exiting the room as quickly as possible.

Shaking her head with a smile, Octavia rolled her eyes. If there was anything that would ensure the absence of a man, it was the mention of womanly problems.

"What is the matter, dearest? You can't think yourself pregnant already. I don't think it has been long enough." Matilda seemed thoughtful as she chewed the inside of her cheek.

Waving the idea away with her hand, Octavia hurriedly shook her head. "Not at all, I merely wanted a word alone. I have no intentions of heading back to Sunderley; I just didn't want to give Uncle Jack false hope."

She reached for her godmother's hand and pulled her across the room before settling on a settee in front of the window.

"But your uncle told me of the problems between you and the Duke; what do you mean you will not be returning to Sunderley?" Her godmother seemed even more concerned as she examined Octavia.

"I will not be returning to Sunderley because I will be going somewhere else. Do you recognize this?" She held the necklace out to Matilda and placed it on her lap.

Picking up the piece of jewelry, Matilda examined it with a great deal of concentration.

"It does look familiar, but I don't recall?" She looked up with a frown.

“It belonged to Isolde. She never left a note, but she did leave me this,” she stated triumphantly.

Matilda lifted her hand to her forehead and frowned. “Octavia, you aren’t making any sense. You will have to explain.”

Retrieving the item of jewelry from her godmother’s knee, Octavia clasped it in her fist.

“This necklace was placed in one of the novels that Isolde and I used to love as young debutants. The only reason that she would have left this behind was to give me a clue as to where she would have gone. There is only one person that I can think of who would take Isolde in without saying a word and notifying Uncle Jack. I’m not sure why I didn’t think of her before now, but I am more than certain that Isolde has gone to her Jessamine in the country.”

Matilda’s brows knit together in a deep frown.

“How on earth could you have deduced all of this from a necklace? Honestly, Octavia, you aren’t making any sense, and I am beginning to grow concerned. Your uncle was concerned that you may not be thinking straight right now, and I am afraid that he may be right.”

Shifting closer to her godmother, Octavia took the older woman’s hands in her own.

“This necklace belonged to Isolde’s mother; it meant more to her than any other possession in the world. You need to trust me on this. Isolde would never have left this behind unless she had done it with an intention. The only person that Isolde would trust with her secret, if not me, is her mother’s oldest friend, Jessamine.”

“Who is Jessamine?” Matilda continued to search Octavia’s face, seeming as if she

wanted to ring for help.

“Jessamine was her mother’s oldest friend. Much like the bond that you and I share, she is the closest thing that Isolde had to a mother.” She gave Matilda’s fingers a gentle squeeze.

“Oh.” Matilda let out a shaky breath as if she were taking everything in.

“I hope you understand now why I feel the need to go after her. Someone has to make sure that she isn’t in need of help.” Octavia let go of her godmother’s hand and fastened the clasp of the necklace behind her neck.

“I know that I may very well regret this in the very near future, but I agree that you should go. If you feel very strongly that is where your cousin is, then I will not stand in your way.” Matilda let out yet another sigh and smiled.

Throwing her arms around her godmother’s neck, Octavia drew her into a warm embrace.

Her godmother responded in kind and hugged her back. “Please do not make me regret my decision; if your plan is to run away, your uncle would never forgive me. Despite the words that the two of you may have exchanged, your uncle does care for you very deeply.” Matilda drew back and cupped Octavia’s cheek in the palm of her hand.

“I know,” Octavia said with a smile, feeling more alive than she had in a long time.

The prospect of an adventure and finding her cousin had pushed the problems with the Duke to the back of her mind for a little while at least. She was about to stand and leave when Matilda reached for her hand and drew her back down.

“One last thing, your uncle did apprise me in full of the conversation that inspired his note. I do not proclaim to know what happened between you and the Duke, but I do not think that the two of you were perpetuating a ruse. It may have started that way, but not all of it was a lie. I am certain of that.”

Feeling the pit of her stomach knot with anxiety, Octavia let out a shaky breath.

“I do not wish to speak beyond the bounds of my marital life but suffice it to say that you were sorely mistaken by the Duke’s actions and behavior. He was not taken with me at the ball, nor was he smitten. Our marriage has never been anything more than an inconvenience to him.”

“I do not think that is true, Octavia; the way the Duke looked at you was far beyond the lust-filled looks of lesser men. I am certain that the man is in love with you, and deep down, I know that you feel the same way about him.” Matilda let go of her hand and sat back, giving Octavia a moment to mull over her words.

Time seemed to stand still as Octavia stopped breathing for a moment.

Do I love him?

All of the confused feelings she’d experienced over the past few days came flooding back to her as she considered her godmother’s words.

None of that matters now.

She took a deep breath and swallowed hard as she stood.

“None of that matters now. I have to find Isolde and ensure that she is safe. If my hunch is correct, I will send word. The matter of my marriage has been settled; perhaps Isolde can do better with hers.” The breath in her lungs felt shaky as her legs

began to tremble.

If she had been in love with the Duke, how long had she been lying to herself? Had she fallen in love with him at the pool, the first time they had made love, or was it that day in the tree when he'd come to her rescue?

Matilda merely pursed her lips and nodded as Octavia turned to leave with the necklace securely fastened around her neck.

For some inexplicable reason, Octavia felt as if all would be well if she returned the necklace to Isolde.

Perhaps everything would work out for the best, even if she did indeed love a husband who refused to love her back.

CHAPTER 29

Wiping the sweat from his brow with the inside of his arm, Simon stopped brushing his horse and took a step back.

He'd ridden most of the night, returning to the mansion after dark. Sleep had evaded him for the rest of the night until he'd climbed out of bed at the crack of dawn.

He'd spent the day caring for the horses, wanting to remain in the stables to keep his mind off of Octavia. The stables had been the only place on the estate where she hadn't left her mark, yet her presence seemed to linger between the stalls of horses.

It had only been two days since his argument with Octavia, yet he couldn't help but feel as if something significant was missing. The earthy scent of hay did little to keep his mind off of his problems.

"Is your plan to scrub and brush every single horse in the county?" Bernice lifted up her nose as she hobbled into the stables on her cane.

Looking over his shoulder, Cassin swore under his breath when he realized that he'd forgotten to cancel his grandmother's visit.

"Will I need to pull the information out of you or are you willing to tell me where your wife is and why your house feels like a mausoleum? I've never seen such a bunch of downcast servants in my life. Have you threatened to cut their wages?"

She stopped in front of Simon and leaned on her cane, pulling her nose up at the beast

in front of her. She had never been one for riding and seldom ventured into a stable, even in her youth.

Scratching his head out of frustration, Simon moved his sleeves further up his arms and continued to brush the horse, avoiding his grandmother's gaze.

"Octavia is gone." He placed his hand on the horse's flanks when the stallion neighed.

"Gone? What do you mean she is gone? Make sense of the matter before I lose my temper. Your housekeeper practically burst into tears when I asked her what had happened."

Bernice slammed the tip of her cane against the floor, causing the horses to jump as a cloud of dust swirled at her feet. The tip of her cane left an impression in the fresh hay beneath her feet.

Feeling his arm ache from his efforts, Simon ceased brushing the chestnut stallion and tossed the hard bristled brush into a bucket.

"Octavia agreed from the start that she would take up more permanent residence elsewhere once the matter with her cousin and Augustus was settled. I have a firm lead on Augustus; thus, Octavia has made plans to move on with her life. She will be staying with her uncle in London before moving on to Rome after her cousin has been found."

He let out a heavy sigh and turned his back, reaching for the pitchfork that stood against the stall door.

"Simon Wakefield! You stop this at once and look at me!" Bernice lost her temper, knocking her cane against the floor repeatedly until all of the horses began to neigh

and stomp.

Turning around with his jaw clenched, Simon looked at his grandmother, trying to keep hold of the stallion's reins.

"Now you listen to me young man, and you listen well! I have had it up to my neck with you and your nonsense!" She whirled the cane above her head as if she were about to wallop him. "I may have deceived you with my illness, but that young woman is the best thing that has ever happened to you! I will stake my health on that!"

Her cheeks filled with color as she glared at him.

"You have never been happier than you've been with her. When in your life have you ever willingly gone to a ball and danced? You practically bit the head of that poor young man who was seen talking to her. When will you realize that you aren't punishing anyone other than yourself by refusing to sire an heir? Your parents aren't even here to see what they have done to you, yet you insist upon getting your revenge."

"It's not about getting revenge; I refuse to bring a child into this world!" he finally lost his temper and snapped at her.

Narrowing her eyes at him, Bernice straightened her spine.

"And what world would that be? One where its mother and father refused to see that they love one another? If that is what you are referring to, then I must say that I agree. What you have failed to realize is that in trying not to be like your parents, you have both succeeded in being exactly like them."

"I have never once stepped outside of my marital bonds, and neither has Octavia! She

may work on my nerves at the best of times, but she is as loyal as they come. Don't you dare compare her to my mother, nor am I like my father!" His chest rose and fell with anger when he jabbed a thumb at the house and back at himself.

Bernice's lips curved into a triumphant smile. "Oh, so you agree that you aren't like your parents, and neither is your wife. I wonder then why it is that you are so adamant about not siring an heir. Would it be so awful for a child to grow up in a house where their mother and father are in love and never stray from each other's beds?"

Simon frowned at his grandmother's words. In all his anger and confusion with Octavia, he had failed to notice one very important aspect. Neither of them had ever strayed from their marriage; in the short space of time that they'd known one another, he'd never so much as looked at another woman.

"I can see that you may finally have come to the conclusion that you have been wrong. I will say this before I leave the matter alone, Octavia loves you. You may not have realized it until now, nor do I think she has realized it, but the two of you love each other more deeply than anyone I have ever observed in the past. You told me once that she had accepted her lot in life and agreed to stay by your side as a childless wife. Forgive me if I sound impertinent, but that seems to me to be the very definition of love."

Swallowing hard, Simon took another shaky breath, recalling her tears in the study when she had yelled those very words at him.

...I was willing to stay by your side even if it meant I'd never bear a child...

"Love must and always does demand some form of sacrifice, Simon. Octavia has already shown you that she is willing to make that sacrifice. The question is, are you willing to make that sacrifice for her?" Bernice looked at him, holding his gaze as she

placed both of her hands on the head of her cane.

Realizing what a fool he had been, Simon acted without thinking, swinging his legs onto the back of the chestnut stallion.

“Before you trot off into the sunset, consider this question. Do you love her?” Her eyes twinkled mischievously when Simon pulled on the reins of his horse.

“She will want an answer, trust me on that; your ride to London will provide you with more than enough time to contemplate my question.”

Nodding his acknowledgment, Simon turned his horse toward the stable doors. “And just so you know, you were never fooling anyone with that cane of yours.”

He dug the heels of his boots into the horse’s flanks and set off at a trot before leaving the stables at a gallop.

“And you were never fooling anyone with your little marriage of convenience line!” she called after him with a chuckle, waving her cane in the air.

The wind whipped through his messy hair as the horse’s hooves kicked gravel into the air.

It would take him a few hours to reach London, on horseback, but the ride was worth it to see Octavia again. He wasn’t certain if he loved her, but he knew that he needed to see her again. If that meant that he loved her, then he was willing to face whatever consequences came his way.

Wait for me.

His heart felt lighter than it had in days as he rode toward London.

Things didn't seem so bad now that Octavia's face drew him forward.

Taking the steps two at a time, Simon burst through the doors of the Earl's London mansion.

Nobody seemed to be anywhere in sight as he moved from room to room, calling for Octavia as he glanced around every corner.

Fear gripped at his chest as he began to wonder if Octavia hadn't convinced the Earl and her godmother to leave for Rome sooner than expected. He was just beginning to lose hope when he ambled back down the stairs and almost bumped into someone at the bottom.

"Your Grace?" A startled butler almost dropped the tray of silver he was carrying.

"Where is the Duchess of Sunderley? I must speak with her at once!" He grew almost frantic, his cheeks flushed, and his hair disheveled from the ride.

The older man, with a stick-thin build, cleared his throat and placed the tray on the table beside the coat rack. His long nose and small eyes almost gave him the appearance of a scarecrow.

"The Earl and the rest of the family went to Hyde Park for a promenade, Your Grace. I am afraid that they will not return for another hour at least. May I offer some refreshments in the drawing room while you wait, Your Grace?"

"There is no time; I will go and meet them in the park." Simon turned on his heel just as the butler called to him.

"It would be wise to wait, Your Grace. There seems to be a storm brewing on the horizon. I could send for a carriage; one could get frightfully drenched in weather like

this.” The man’s voice faded into the background as dark clouds pooled on the horizon, threatening to spill over at a moment’s notice.

Climbing onto the saddle and swinging his leg over the horse, Simon proceeded to race off into the distance.

Women gasped, and men swore as he rode with reckless abundance, not caring about anything other than finding Octavia.

Sweat beaded his brow as Simon pulled his horse into Hyde Park. The sun was about to set, and people glared at him, but he didn’t care.

He’d ridden for hours, only to hear from the butler that neither Octavia nor her uncle were home. Frustration marred his features as he struggled to see if Octavia and her family were anywhere around.

Spotting the couple in the distance, Simon trotted toward them and dismounted as soon as they became aware of his presence.

“Your Grace, we weren’t expecting to see you here.” Jack looked at Simon with a frown while Matilda seemed to clutch his arm even tighter.

“I am looking for Octavia; where is she?” he asked almost out of breath.

His eyes widened in shock when he realized that she could have left for Rome on her own. It wasn’t likely that her uncle would have allowed it, but that didn’t mean that her godmother hadn’t persuaded him.

“She has gone back to your home.” The Earl’s brow creased into a frown as he cocked his head to the side. “Has she not arrived? She did leave shortly before luncheon.”

The pit of Simon's stomach began to churn as the day of Augustus' disappearance played through his mind. It was entirely possible that Octavia had decided to run away. He wouldn't have blamed her for that after everything he'd put her through.

"Surely you would have passed her carriage on the road; perhaps you missed her." The Earl seemed convinced that she had gone back to Sunderley.

Simon was about to protest that he would have noticed her carriage along the way when Matilda suddenly intervened. "Isn't that one of your connections? I think that man is trying to get your attention."

She gestured to the trees in the distance.

Squinting his eyes in the direction of her finger, the Earl wrinkled his nose. "I don't see any man over there." The Earl raised his hand and shielded his eyes from the late afternoon sun.

"No really, I saw him gesturing to you quite frantically; I think it was one of your business associates." She let go of his arm and gently nudged him in the direction of the trees across the park.

Jack frowned at her but turned away and headed toward the line of trees without further questions.

Matilda rounded on Simon at once. "Why are you looking for her?" She narrowed her eyes at him as if she were angry.

"I do not have time to explain, but I need to find her at once." He refused to back down as Matilda thrust her finger in his face.

"You will make time if you know what is good for you. I trusted you with my

goddaughter, only to find her back home with a tearful expression. I do not wish to know what has occurred between the two of you, but if you do not tell me why you are looking for her, I may very well refuse to tell you where she has gone.”

Gripping her hand, Simon moved it aside. “You have my word that I do not wish to hurt her again. I need to see her; only then will I be able to tell you why.”

Matilda seemed uncertain at first but seemed to give him the benefit of the doubt. “She hasn’t gone to Sunderley; her uncle doesn’t know, but she thinks that her cousin is in Surrey. An old family acquaintance lives there.”

“Do you know where in Surrey?”

Hope sparked in his chest despite the burning of his lungs. The pulsing of his veins from exhaustion didn’t matter at all as he pictured Octavia’s face.

Glaring at him again, Octavia’s godmother reached into her purse and withdrew a scrap of parchment.

“You are ever so lucky that I found it necessary to track down the address. I wasn’t about to let my only goddaughter gallop off into wide blue yonder without knowing exactly where she was headed.”

She pulled the piece of parchment away from him sharply and narrowed her eyes when he tried to reach for it.

Simon pursed his lips and humored the woman who had raised his wife like a mother.

“Now, I’m warning you, any more funny business where Octavia feels the need to run away, and you will have me to deal with. I am far less subtle than your grandmother. Decoy canes aren’t exactly my style if you catch my meaning.” She

lowered her hand once again and allowed Simon to take the piece of paper.

Glimpsing the address, Simon nodded his thanks and turned back to his horse just as Octavia's uncle came back.

"I think we had better take you to see an occultist. There is nobody either behind or in front of the line of trees. There is, however, a very irate swan that proceeded to chase me away from her children," the Earl complained, dusting the patches of dirt off of his clothes.

Turning toward him, Matilda stifled a laugh. "Heavens, did you fight the swan? You look as if you've been through the war!"

The Earl narrowed his eyes at her and turned back to Simon. "You had better get back home; I suspect that Octavia will be looking for you by now."

"Thank you for your time, I will send word once I have arrived and sorted everything out." Simon nodded at Matilda and Jack before turning his horse in the direction he'd come.

Thunder rumbled in the distance as he crumbled the note with the address and placed it in the horse's saddle bag as he began to ride.

A fine sheet of rain began to fall from the sky by the time he made it out of the park. His clothes were already soaked when he reached the outskirts of London.

"Nothing will stop me from getting to you." He spurred the horse on and began to gallop in the direction of Surrey, unsure of anything other than the fact that he needed to hold his wife in his arms once again.

He could have kicked himself for hurting her. He'd never felt more stupid in his life.

If riding across the country for hours didn't prove to her that he wanted her in his life, then he wasn't sure what would.

CHAPTER 30

The sun peaked in the sky as Octavia reached Redbeck House in Surrey.

The carriage pulled up outside the grand country estate as Octavia hoped and prayed that Lady Haxford would welcome her with open arms.

Taking a deep breath, she stepped from the carriage and made her way to the front door where she waited for a footman to see her inside.

The grand entrance struck her as elegant when she glimpsed the vases of fresh country flowers. It was clear to her that Lady Haxford cared deeply for the appearance of her house.

“May I help you, Lady...” A tall distinguished-looking man in black livery stepped forward. His sandy brown hair was only just beginning to turn grey.

“I am Lady Octavia Wakefield, the Duchess of Sunderley. I am here to see my cousin, Isolde, as well as Lady Haxford.” She held her head high and began to remove her gloves.

The man’s brown eyes widened in shock as if he knew exactly who she was.

“Of course, Your Grace, if you wouldn’t mind waiting for just one moment? I am not sure if this Lady Isolde you mentioned is currently in.” He bowed respectfully as his cheeks flushed with color.

“I do not mind waiting; there is nowhere else that I need to be at present.” Her pulse raced with anticipation when the man hurried down the passage and disappeared behind a door.

Her nerves got the better of her when the sound of muffled voices floated down the hall. It almost sounded as if people were arguing before the man reappeared. Clearing her throat, Octavia quickly made as if she were examining a vase of roses.

“Lady Haxford will see you now if you would care to come with me, Your Grace.” His cheeks seemed even more flushed as he bowed once again and led her down the hall.

It felt like an eternity to Octavia as they made their way down the hall and stopped in front of the mahogany door.

This is it.

She held her breath and almost shut her eyes as the butler placed his hand on the door and pushed.

“Octavia, I...” Isolde suddenly stood, her thin frame shaking slightly as her doe-like eyes widened in shock.

Feeling as if she were about to faint, Octavia matched across the tiny parlor and threw her arms around her cousin’s shoulders.

“Don’t you ever dare do that again.” She felt the tears falling down her cheeks before she could stop them.

Isolde seemed to hesitate for a moment before wrapping her arms around Octavia and crying.

“There now, I think you can bring us another cup for tea, Henderson. It would seem that the cousins have a lot to catch up on.” The older woman’s voice broke through Octavia’s daze.

She had been so focused on seeing her cousin that she hadn’t even greeted the lady at her side.

Sniffing back her tears, Octavia turned and curtsied to Lady Haxford. “I am so sorry for barging in like this, My Lady.”

“Stuff and nonsense.” The woman waved her apology away with her hand as if she were chasing a fly and smiled. “Any family of Isolde’s is welcome in my home. Please have a seat, you must be exhausted after such a long journey.”

The woman’s thin lips curled into a welcoming smile that set Octavia at ease. Her greying blonde hair had been pinned to the back of her head in a very tight bun.

Isolde forced a smile and returned to her seat before starting to apologize. “Octavia, I am so sorry for everything that I’ve put you through. My only intention was to stay out of sight for a while until everyone forgot about the engagement. I didn’t for a second think that Papa would force you to marry that cold duke. By the time that I heard about your wedding, it was already too late. A week had passed, and there was nothing to be done...”

She opened and closed her mouth like a fish out of water as she sought words.

Reaching over, Octavia placed her hand over Isolde’s to silence her.

“I am not angry at you, dear cousin.” She considered her own words for a second. “Well, I was at first, but I’m not angry anymore. I’m only upset that you left for so long without sending words. Your father and everyone else have been worried sick

about you.”

Isolde sniffed back her tears and offered Octavia a thankful smile. “I promise that I’ll never be that selfish ever again. I acted out of fear more than anything else.”

Feeling as if she understood where her cousin was coming from, Octavia turned to Lady Haxford. “I want to thank you for taking such good care of my cousin. She looks better and healthier than she did when she left London.”

“It was only my pleasure; my dear departed friend’s daughter is always welcome in my home as are you. I presume you will be staying the night instead of riding back home in this frightful weather.” Lady Haxford gestured to the clouds building on the horizon. “I would seem that you have brought the rainy London weather with you to Surrey.”

“Thank you, Lady Haxford, I would be forever in your debt,” Octavia thanked her profusely, having dreaded the long ride back to London.

Using her walking stick to push herself up, Lady Haxford stood with great difficulty. “I presume that the two of you have plenty of things to catch up on. I will instruct the maids to prepare a room for you.”

Isolde stood and helped her mother’s oldest friend to her feet. “Lady Haxford, would you mind if Octavia and I took a turn about the gardens?”

“Do as you please; just don’t wander too far from the house. The Duchess must be tired, and it looks like rain on the horizon.” The older woman touched Isolde’s cheek with such loving affection that Octavia realized why her cousin had run to her for help.

“Thank you, I owe you more than I will ever be able to repay you.” Isolde leaned in

and gave the older woman a kiss on her cheek.

Walking arm-in-arm, Octavia and Isolde breathed in the fresh country air that carried a hint of rain.

“I wanted to apologize again for all the trouble that I’ve put you through, Octavia. I can’t imagine what you have been through. If I had known that Papa was going to marry you off so soon, I wouldn’t have left the clue in the library.” She seemed sad as she looked at her feet.

Giving her cousin’s arm a gentle squeeze, Octavia tried to reassure her. “I understand why you did what you did. I only wish you had come to me sooner, and I’m sorry that I didn’t think of looking in our favorite place. I could kick myself for not looking in the library. Which reminds me...” She paused and let go of her cousin’s arm.

Isolde watched as Octavia reached inside her dress and unclasped the necklace.

“You brought it with you.” She clapped her hands together gleefully, reminding Octavia of all the good times they had shared.

“Of course, I know how painful it must have been for you to leave behind your precious mama’s keepsake.” Octavia placed the chain around her cousin’s neck and fastened the clasp. “Thank you for leaving it for me.”

Isolde’s large brown eyes filled with tears that clung to the ends of her naturally long lashes. She was the polar opposite of Octavia in every way possible, yet there was a natural beauty about her that shone through her eyes.

“Let’s not cry anymore, not when there is still so much to discuss.” Octavia took her arm once again and continued their stroll down the long garden path.

The neat rows of flowers and floral scents reminded her of home and the roses she had planted.

Home.

It suddenly occurred to her that she thought of the Duke's country manor as home. She hoped he'd let her spend more time there even if it was only when he went to London. The villa in Rome seemed like a lonely prospect now as she thought of all the servants and Mrs. Farley. Each one of them had unique quirks that she treasured deep within her heart.

"Of course, you must tell me what it's like being married to the Duke. He always struck me as such a cold man. A handsome one, but cool and distant." Isolde broke through her train of thought.

"It... it was certainly eye-opening. That I can say for sure." Octavia forced a smile, feeling as if she'd spent the past week forcing a facade for the sake of everyone around her.

"I can only imagine. Did the Duke not mind you coming this far without him?" Isolde chattered away, seeming chattier than Octavia recalled, but then again, she herself had changed a great deal in the past few weeks.

Swallowing hard, she hid her sigh. "No, the Duke does not mind. In fact, he wanted the marriage even less than I did, if you can believe that. We came to an agreement that suits us both. We will remain married in name alone while the Duke runs his estate and affairs. I on the other hand will travel the world at leisure and only make appearances as his wife when necessary." She tried her best to muster the strength to pretend but felt the weariness in her bones.

The long ride from London had given her plenty of time to think, but the only

conclusion she had come to was that she was better off on her own.

“That is perfect, isn’t it? You’ve always wanted to travel the world without being tied down by marriage. I feel more at ease now knowing that you’re getting what you’ve always wanted.” Isolde sighed thankfully as if the weight of the world had been lifted from her shoulders. “I can’t imagine a more perfect ending.”

“Neither can I.”

Octavia sensed the deceit in her own voice, even if Isolde did not. She was finding it increasingly harder to breathe as she thought of Simon and everything she’d left behind at the mansion. She’d never pictured herself as the homely type who wanted nothing more than to build a family, yet her heart felt emptier without the prospect.

Isolde suddenly brightened again. “I just had the most marvelous idea. Now that I know you are able to travel, you should come with us to Scotland. Lady Haxford has been longing to travel for quite some time, and I do not relish the thought of returning home just yet.”

The more sensible side of Octavia's brain took over as she stopped her cousin in her tracks and turned to face her.

“Isolde, your father has been worried sick about you; before we go anywhere at all, you and I need to return home. A proper end to all of this is long overdue. Now, before you say anything at all, I will go with you. It’s better to get it over and done with; you can’t run away from the consequences forever.”

Her cousin’s eyes suddenly widened again with shock, giving her the doe-like appearance of innocence that had always won Octavia over in the past.

“I guess you are right. I must face my father.” She cocked her head to the side and

stared quite intensely at Octavia. “You know, something about you has changed. I can’t quite put my finger on it, but you seem more responsible now.”

Looping her arm through Isolde’s, Octavia changed the direction and began to lead them back up the path.

“Marriage will do that to a person. Would you like to hear about the time that I climbed a giant oak in pursuit of an ancient gardener and had to wait for the Duke to come to my rescue?”

Isolde’s mouth opened slightly in shock. “You did not.”

“Oh, I did, that and more.” Octavia took a deep breath and began to regale her cousin with tales of married life as a duchess.

She told her everything from the rose bushes to the dance and the tree, yet she couldn’t bring herself to speak of the feelings she harbored in her heart.

CHAPTER 31

Simon brought his horse to a stop in front of Redbeck house in the pouring rain. His body had never felt as exhausted as it had when he trudged up to the house and banged on the front doors.

It only took a moment before the wood swung open to reveal a distinguished butler.

“I didn’t think we’d be expecting another visitor today, not in this dreadful weather,” he muttered under his breath as Simon pushed past.

Ignoring the man’s words, Simon leaned against the hallway table, grateful for a moment of rest in a dry room.

“Would you be as kind as to tell me if the Duchess of Sunderley is here? If she is, I would like an audience at her earliest convenience.” He fought against the exhaustion flowing through his body.

“May I ask who is calling, Lord...” The butler lifted an eyebrow and looked and eyed the puddles at Simon’s feet.

Using the last remnants of his strength, Simon dragged himself up and locked his gaze on the man. “You may tell her that her husband, the Duke of Sunderley, is here to call on her.”

The man’s eyes widened in shock as he instantly sprang into action. “Of course, Your Grace! I will fetch a towel and dry clothes at once!”

He sprinted down the hall before Simon could stop him.

Swearing under his breath, Simon shook his eyes. All he needed was for someone to show him where his wife was. A frown creased his brow as he strained his ears to listen. The faint sound of chattering with regular intervals of music could be heard from somewhere in the house.

Not wanting to wait for the over-enthusiastic and apologetic butler to return, the Duke trudged through the house with his muddy boots.

The sound of a piano filtered through a shut door, letting him know that there was life on the other side.

The music instantly came to a stop amidst shocked gasps when Simon opened the door.

Trudging across the carpet, Simon locked eyes on Octavia and pointed at her.

“I need to talk to you, and before you deny me your company, I have travelled through rain and sleet to get here; I am not taking no for an answer.”

Octavia opened and shut her mouth as she gaped at Simon.

“Octavia Wakefield, I have come all this way to let you know that I have come to a very important decision in my life. It’s about time that I stopped living in the past and got rid of the foolish notion that I can somehow get vengeance on my parents by not living my life. I want to live my life with you by my side.”

Lifting her hand to her throat as she gasped, Octavia suddenly began to cry as tears streamed down her face.

“Now I know that I have done nothing at all to win your love, nor have I done anything to gain your trust. What I am asking of you is truly unfair and downright arrogant of me in the face of my recent behavior, but if you will have me, I will spend the rest of my life trying to make you see that I love you.”

The room fell deathly silently as somebody else gasped. He’d been so hell-bent on finding her that Simon hadn’t even noticed who she was with. Moments seemed to pass as Octavia stared down at him with tears in her eyes.

“Will you put me out of my misery and answer a weary traveller?” His chest rose and fell with every breath as the legs in his muscles threatened to give in.

“Well, that certainly was quite a speech; I’m just not sure how to answer a man who is drenched in mud from head to toe. It kind of makes a woman wonder if she should spend the rest of her life with him.” The playful smile that curved her lips set his heart on fire as he almost collapsed from relief.

Falling to his hands, he shook his head with laughter. The exhaustion of the day was beginning to wear on him when Octavia lifted his face in her hands.

“Yes, Simon, I will stay by your side. And in case you were wondering, I love you too. Not that you said it in so many words, but I assume that is what you meant with your little stunt.” Her smile brightened as tears fell down her cheeks.

Feeling overcome by an urgent desire for her love, Simon leaned in and kissed her with all of the pent-up emotions he’d felt for weeks.

Octavia responded in kind as her lips parted with a gentle sigh of satisfaction.

He couldn’t believe how lucky he felt to hear those words coming from her lips.

“Well, it would seem we have been privy to a great love story this evening.” An older woman’s voice drew Simon away from the kiss as he opened his eyes.

Blushing deeply, Octavia turned to their audience. “Lady Haxford, Isolde, may I present my husband, the Duke of Sunderley.” She leaned away from him and lowered her voice to a whisper. “He isn’t usually this wet.”

Simon burst into a fit of laughter before regaining his composure.

“I am sorry for the intrusion this evening, My Lady, but as you could see, there were a few pressing matters that simply couldn’t wait until morning.” His heart swelled with pride as he looked at Octavia and reached for her hand.

“Indeed, I’m only sorry that my poor carpet had to take the brunt of your most admirable declaration.” She looked past Simon and raised her eyebrows at the puddle of muddy water on her tan carpet.

“I will have a new one sent from London as soon as I can.” Simon offered apologetically.

Shaking her head as she chuckled, Lady Haxford waved the offer away. “I was only teasing. To tell you the truth, I’ve never really liked the carpet. It was given to me by my late mother-in-law, and I have been looking for an excuse to get rid of it for years. You have made more than one woman’s dreams come true this evening, Your Grace.”

She winked teasingly at Simon.

Heads turned to the door as it burst open, revealing an out-of-breath butler who clung to the wall for dear life.

“I have found a towel and a clean change of clothes, Your Grace; I am sorry that it took me so long.” Glancing at the puddle on the carpet, the poor man nearly fainted as his face paled. “Oh dear, I will fetch another towel.”

Pushing herself up by her cane, Lady Haxford stood and addressed her butler.

“Never mind that now; I think you had better draw a bath for the Duke and prepare his chambers. We have a full house this evening, and here I thought that nothing else exciting could happen to an old woman like me.”

“Yes, yes of course.” The butler stood with great difficulty and ambled from the room.

Turning back to the rest of the room, Lady Haxford addressed Octavia and Simon before nodding to Isolde to follow her. “You do not have to tell me when I am not wanted. I think we had better leave these two alone.” She winked at them both before leaving the room.

Swallowing hard, Isolde came forward and bowed her head. “I think I owe you an apology, Your Grace. I understand that I have caused you a great deal of difficulties.”

She kept her eyes on his boots and wrung her hands in front of her like a child being scolded.

Reaching out, Octavia took her cousin’s hand and made her look up. “There will be plenty of time to discuss all of that in the morning.” She nodded toward the door, echoing their host’s sentiment for privacy.

Curtsying awkwardly, Isolde left and shut the door behind her.

“Where were we?” Simon felt his heart melting when he looked into her eyes.

“Oh, shut up and kiss me like you meant what you said.” Octavia pressed her lips against his before he could respond.

Bringing his hands up her back, he drew her closer and parted her lips with his tongue.

Pulling her comb through her hair, Octavia examined her reflection in the dresser mirror. Her eyes were bright, and her smile even broader.

I love him.

Her heart soared from the realization as happy tears filled her eyes. They hadn't even covered the topic of children, but Octavia just knew that everything would work itself out in the end.

She still couldn't believe that Simon of all people had made such a romantic declaration in front of others. Perhaps it was true what people said, love could change a man and make him act in unexpected ways.

Simon loves me.

The thought still seemed surreal to her as she lifted her hand to her lips and felt the lingering effects of his kiss.

Her attention was suddenly drawn to the door when someone knocked.

“Who is it?” she asked in a low voice as her pulse raced.

She had hoped that Simon would come to her, yet she understood how exhausted he must have been from the journey. She still couldn't believe how far he had travelled through rain and sleet, just to tell her that he loved her.

“A lonely traveler seeking your company,” Simon called back in a hushed voice.

Feeling as if her heart would burst from joy, Octavia tiptoed across the floor and opened the door.

Simon smiled at her, his hair slicked back against his head and wearing a fresh pair of breeches and a white cotton shirt.

“What are you doing up this late? You should be resting.” Her heart raced when his eyes ran down her body, taking in her curves through the small robe that her cousin had given to her.

His eyes travelled up her body and caressed her skin before locking on her gaze.

“How could I sleep without having a taste of my beautiful wife?” He placed his hand on the door and backed her up before closing them both in her chambers.

“Simon, you must be so tired.” She gasped in pleasure as he dipped his head and kissed her neck while reaching for her hands.

“I will never be too tired to make love to my wife,” he growled against her skin, dragging his teeth over her neck and pausing beneath her ear.

A light layer of bumps spread over her skin as he moved his hands up her sides, feeling the shape of her body through her garment.

All thoughts of sleep left her body when he cupped her breasts through the thin fabric of her robe and played with her nipples.

“It would seem as if you have forgotten your undergarments this evening, Your Grace,” he whispered playfully in her ear before reaching around her waist and

untying the sash of her robe.

Feeling her breath quicken, Octavia smiled and shut her eyes when he continued to kiss a path over her jawline.

“How could I think of dressing in undergarments when my husband was in the very next room?” Her voice was soft and breathy when he ran his hands over her shoulders and dropped the fabric to the ground.

The heat from the crackling fire kissed her skin when Simon lowered his head and took one of her nipples into his mouth. Hot sensations of pleasure travelled up her body, making her shiver with desire.

Using his free hand to play with her other breast, he continued to tease her with his tongue until she moaned for more. He took his time to drag his tongue over her nipple, kissing a path between her breasts as he switched sides.

“Simon, I need you...” She tangled her fingers in his hair and pulled him closer before pushing him back.

Looking up at her with a wolfish grin, he flicked his tongue over her hard nipple.

“Your wish is my command, Your Grace.”

Coming up straight, he took her hand and led her over to the bed, guiding her onto his body as he lay back.

Unsure of what he wanted, she allowed him to take the lead, positioning her knees on either side of his hips. Gasping in pleasure, she leaned back and felt him entering her, experiencing the new sensations.

“Like this,” Simon gasped almost breathlessly, gripping her hips and guiding her movements in gentle rolling motions.

It didn’t take her long to get the hang of things as the feeling of his erection moving inside of her drove her wild. The moment that passed between them as their eyes locked in a loaded embrace caused her heart to race beyond the feeling she was already creating in her core.

Thunder struck in the distance as the rain beat down on the roof, muffling the sounds of their moans as Octavia gave into the desires of her flesh. Her panting grew louder as Simon began to thrust with his hips, guiding her forward as she rolled her hips in circular motions.

“Oh, Octavia...” Simon’s eyes rolled back on his head as he fell against the pillows and allowed her to take control.

Shutting her eyes, Octavia leaned back with her hands on his knees, doing what felt natural as her own pleasure coursed through her body, making her moan.

The passionate sounds of their lovemaking filled the air as Simon reached up and played with her nipples. The sensations alone were enough to push her over the edge as her breasts bounced in his palms, creating a rubbing effect against her nipples.

Panting with pleasure, Octavia began to move faster, letting her hips move in time with Simon’s thrusts. The visceral response she felt throughout her body caused her to moan even louder as the tension built in her core.

She was about to move aside as she felt her climax nearing when Simon suddenly gripped her thighs and held her in place.

Confusion filled her mind for the briefest of seconds as Simon’s face contorted with

pleasure, his legs stiffening as he called out her name. “Octavia!”

Nature took its course as her pleasure reached its apex, making her body tremble with pleasure before collapsing on top of her husband.

Their breathing seemed to synchronize as they both came down from the clouds.

“That was different.” She turned her head to the side and listened to the steady beating of his heart.

Placing his hands on her upper arms, Simon pulled her to the side and positioned his body against hers as he turned to face her.

“Did you like it?” He pushed a few strands of her hair behind her ear.

Nodding as she bit her lips, Octavia smiled. “It was different, but it felt better; it was more complete in a way. Why didn’t you pull away like you usually do when we finish?”

Avoiding her gaze for a moment, Simon allowed his lips to curve into a smile that melted her heart.

“Let me put it this way. If what I was doing before prevented the possibility of children to a certain degree, what we did now will almost certainly ensure it.”

Octavia’s eyes widened in shock when she realized what he was saying.

Touching the tip of her nose, Simon grew more serious as he looked into her eyes.

“I know that you were willing to sacrifice a very big part of your future to be by my side. This little gesture was my way of showing you that I am willing to sacrifice

everything and more in return.”

Feeling a sudden rush of affection for the man she had married, Octavia pressed her lips against his. The kiss was tender at first and soft at first as their lips brushed against one another. Things quickly grew heated when Simon used his tongue to part her lips, searching the depths of her mouth with the heat of this tongue.

It wasn't until she gasped for breath that he drew back and let her breathe.

“I hope you will accept me now, even after my deplorable behavior in the past.” He placed his index finger under her chin and lifted her face to his.

Snuggling against his body, Octavia made herself comfortable, listening to the sounds of pouring rain outside their window. A deep feeling of contentment washed over her, and her heart beat in time with his.

“I never needed you to go back on your vow, an ‘I love you’ would have sufficed. But I am overjoyed by the fact that you are willing to sire an heir with me.” She turned her face toward his and smiled when he placed a kiss on her forehead.

Placing his cheek against her head, he held her close to his body and breathed in the scent of her hair.

“You know, I think you'll make an amazing father. Our children will be lucky to have you.”

She frowned and looked up when a single tear fell on her head.

“Did I say something wrong?” She noticed the tears in his eyes and felt her heart melted all over again.

“No.” Simon shook his head and attempted to hide his tears. “On the contrary, you have made me the happiest man in the world with your words. For the longest time, I have feared that siring an heir would ruin that child’s life. Yet, you have shown me that life can mean so much more if we open ourselves to the possibilities of living without fear.”

Feeling her breath move effortlessly through her body, she smiled down at him. “You are a good man, Simon Wakefield; never forget that.”

Catching her off guard, Simon flipped her onto her back and pinned her wrists beside her head. “And you, Octavia Wakefield, love of my life, must never forget that there are still many lessons on life that I can teach you.”

Stifling a giggle, she bit her lips and looked up at him. “And what might those lessons be, Your Grace?” The love she saw in his eyes reflected the steady beating of her heart. She finally felt at peace in the world, even if she wasn’t at home.

Glancing down her body, he allowed his gaze to linger on her breasts.

“Well, now that I have shown you how one can sire an heir, I think I should make it perfectly clear how one does not.” His smile turned to a cheeky grin as he kissed a path down her body, stopping at her breasts as he took his time to kiss her nipples.

“I think I could get used to these lessons of yours as long as you promise to always tell me how much you love me after.” She sank back on the pillows and shut her eyes, reveling in the sensations his tongue was creating.

“Always, I can never stop loving you,” he whispered against her breast before kissing a path down her body.

EPILOGUE

THE FOLLOWING DAY

Drawing his wife closer to his chest, Simon kissed her deeply. “Well, Your Grace, are you ready to return to our home?” His heart felt as if it would burst as he smiled down at her.

“I am; we just need to ensure that our little ward is ready as well.” She placed her hands on his chest and gently pushed him away.

Groaning deeply, Simon rolled his eyes and allowed her to escape.

“Can’t we send her home in a separate carriage, or even better, we could come back for her? I was looking forward to riding alone with you in our carriage. The drive back to London could prove to be a fruitful one, if you know what I mean.” He reached for her hand and kissed a path up her arm, stopping when he reached her neck.

Octavia laughed and shook her head. “I am afraid not, Your Grace. Isolde is our responsibility until we have delivered her to my uncle.” She gave him a cheeky grin before slipping out of his grasp and heading toward the door. “Besides, the anticipation of waiting will make our trips abroad all the sweeter.”

Relenting to the situation at hand, Simon rolled his eyes and followed her down the hall. For all of his complaints, he was happy that everything had turned out as it should have in the end.

Augustus still hadn't been found, but Simon was certain that they'd be hearing from him any day.

"Good morning, I hope you both slept well." Isolde met them in the hallway just outside her chamber door. The bags under her eyes indicated a lack of sleep as she forced a smile.

"We did, thank you," Octavia answered for them both, glancing over her cousin's shoulder. "I don't see any trunks; have you had them sent down already?"

Isolde pursed her thin lips into a line and shook her head almost sadly. "I am not ready to return to my father's house. I know that I will have to face the music sooner or later, but that time isn't now. I have asked Lady Haxford, and she is more than willing to accommodate me until I am ready."

Simon watched as Octavia's shoulders slumped in understanding. Closing the distance between them, Octavia placed her arm around Isolde's shoulders and pulled her in for a hug.

"We understand; I shall return to London and let Uncle Jack and my godmother know that you are safe. I shall tell them where you are, but that you are not ready to face them just yet."

Isolde seemed to relax as the tension left her face. "Thank you."

"And when you do decide that you are ready to return, you are more than welcome to stay with me and Simon for as long as you like. We will provide a safe harbor for you until we can ensure that your homecoming will be one filled with joy." Octavia shot Simon a pointed look when he practically groaned his disapproval.

He hadn't even had time to enjoy his reunion with his wife yet, and Octavia was

already offering their home to her cousin.

Sensing a pivotal moment in their relationship, Simon relented and faked a smile. “Of course, you will always be welcome to stay with us.”

Octavia mouthed the words ‘thank you’ to him and gave her cousin’s shoulders a final squeeze.

“Well, I guess there is nothing left to do but see the two of you off then. Will you be traveling abroad once you’ve finished your plans in London?” Isolde seemed to cheer up once the worst was out of the way.

Simon looked at his wife with a smile. “Oh, I think that can be arranged. I think it’s high time that we make good on our agreement to travel.”

His wife’s face filled with so much love and adoration that Simon couldn’t help but feel as if he’d made the right decision. “I think Rome should be first on our list. We can see the Colosseum and stay in our family villa.”

“That sounds like the best idea that I’ve ever heard.” They held each other’s gaze forgetting for a moment that Isolde was even there.

Clearing her throat, Octavia’s cousin stepped past them. “I think I’ll go and see how far they are with the carriage.” Her cheeks filled with color as she made her way down the hall.

Drawing Octavia in his arms before she could escape, Simon pushed her hair aside and whispered in her ear. “Do you think we have enough time to try again for an heir? I think our chances are greatly improved the more we try.”

Shaking her head with laughter, Octavia turned back to Simon and kissed his cheek.

“You are being quite naughty, Your Grace. We should make our way downstairs before anyone comes looking for us. Besides, we are going to have the carriage to ourselves now that Isolde is no longer coming with us.”

“That’s true.” Simon suddenly lifted his head and let go of her, rushing back into their chambers.

“Simon, where are you going?” she called after him in confusion.

Poking his head around the corner, he met her gaze with one of her cases placed under his arm. “I’m taking the luggage down to the carriage; the sooner we load the cases, the sooner we can enjoy the carriage.”

Laughter rang through the corridor as she tilted her head back and laughed.

“Just who do you think you are laughing at?” Simon rushed forward and slung her over his shoulder.

“I’m laughing at you, Your Grace. Your behavior is most improper!” She continued to giggle as he carried her down the passage.

“I’ll show you improper as soon as the wheels of the carriage start to turn!” He called at the top of his lungs, not caring who heard him.

Too many years had been spent fearing the opinions of others, and Simon Wakefield was about to start living his life.

Octavia took a deep breath as the carriage pulled up outside her childhood home. The building seemed smaller somehow, yet she was more than certain that nothing physical had changed. Lady Haxford had been kind enough to loan them a carriage and horses while Simon’s stallion rested enough to be sent back to the estate.

“Are you ready?” Simon asked her with a gentle smile of encouragement.

“Readier than I will ever be.” She leaned in closer and kissed his cheek.

Stepping from the carriage, Octavia stepped right into the waiting arms of her godmother.

“And where is my note? I’ve been waiting for news since yesterday, young lady! I was about to send a search party after you!” Matilda drew her into her arms and hugged her tight enough to cut off her breathing.

“Help,” Octavia whispered to her uncle, indicating for him to intervene when she spotted him over her godmother’s shoulder.

Coming forward, the Earl placed his hand on Matilda’s shoulder and gently prized her off of Octavia. “Come now, Matilda, let the girl breathe.”

Doing as he said, Matilda reluctantly let go of Octavia and took a step back. “Well, I see you are all in one piece. Have you news of your cousin?” She glanced from Octavia to Simon as if she could see that something had changed.

The Duke stepped forward and offered them both a greeting as he came to his wife’s side.

“We did find Isolde,” Octavia informed them before glancing at Simon. They had used the long carriage ride to devise a plan between themselves that would benefit Isolde.

“And where is she?” The Earl stepped forward and demanded angrily despite the relief that flooded his face. “Why did you not bring her back with you?”

It was Matilda who placed her hand on his arm and held him back. “Jack, let them speak.”

Taking a deep breath, Octavia began to explain. “She is alive, well, and safe, but she will only return when she is ready to face you. Let this be a lesson to you, Uncle Jack, that despite our positions in society, Isolde and I both have feelings that demand to be heard.”

Looking down in shame, her uncle seemed to be considering her words.

“Jack, isn’t there something that you wanted to say to your niece?” Matilda gently nudged him in the side and spoke through the corner of her mouth.

Sighing heavily, Uncle Jack looked up. “Octavia, as difficult as it is for me to say, I think that an apology is long overdue. I never should have pressured either your cousin or yourself into marrying. The arrangement had been made long before either of you were even of marriageable age. Out of all the terrible things that I have said and done, there is however one that haunts me the most...” His voice trailed off as emotions took hold.

Matilda moved a bit closer and placed her hand on his arm for support, nodding her approval.

The Earl seemed to be in a great deal of discomfort as he looked Octavia in the eyes. “I should never have said that your father wouldn’t have been proud of you. It brings me a great deal of shame to think that I made you doubt your position and even your worth in this family. Never for a moment have I ever regretted bringing you into my home. It may not seem like it at times, but you are a daughter to me, and your parents would have been utterly proud of the young woman you have become.”

Tears welled in her eyes as Octavia swallowed the lump in her throat. “Thank you,

Uncle Jack. It means the world to hear you say that. I have never been ungrateful for the way you stepped into my life.”

She looked up at Simon with a loving smile and looped her arm through his. “Besides, it isn’t entirely necessary to apologize for everything that happened.”

Matilda caught on first and gasped in delight, raising her hands to her cheeks. “You made up; this is such wonderful news. You see, Jack, I told you things would work themselves out in the end.”

Lifting his head with pride, the Earl cracked a rare smile that would have shocked passers-by if anyone had seen it.

It did Octavia’s heart good to know that her uncle was finally proud of her marriage.

“Since you are already in London, will the two of you be joining us for dinner?” Uncle Jack looked from Octavia to Cassin.

Exchanging a knowing look that made her Godmother swoon with delight, Octavia and Simon turned back to her uncle.

“I think I would like to take my wife home as soon as possible if you don’t mind. I think a few days of rest at our country estate will be in order before we set off on our honeymoon. If I understood correctly, there is something of a charming villa in Rome that is just waiting to be put to good use. There is also a ball for the servants that needs to be planned. I don’t think any of them would forgive us if it didn’t take place.” Simon gazed down at her with such love that Octavia wished they were alone.

“That sounds like a fine plan to me.” Matilda caught Octavia’s gaze, sending her a message that only the woman could understand.

I am so happy for you.

Octavia started crying from joy at the same time as her godmother.

“What has happened?” The Earl glanced between them with a confused look before looking to Simon for help.

Lifting his shoulders in a shrug, Simon shook his head.

The awkward exchange caused a fit of giggles between the woman that had them gasping for breath.

Uncle Jack’s frown deepened as Simon smirked in discomfort.

“Men!” Matilda laughed with a heavy sigh and ushered the group into the house for a final cup of tea before Simon and Octavia set off on what was to be the first of many adventures together.

Two months later...

Octavia sighed contentedly as she repositioned her body against Simon’s. The silk robe he had purchased for her as a belated wedding gift opened slightly to reveal her shapely legs.

The warm afternoon air that wafted through the open villa shutters caressed their semi-clothed bodies.

Simon was practically falling asleep again when Octavia ran her fingers over his chest.

“Did your meeting with your brother go well this morning?” She flattened her palm

against his chest and enjoyed the heat that radiated through her fingers.

Dozing off, Simon quickly came to his senses and cleared his throat. “It went well; I’m sorry you didn’t feel well enough to come with me. He apologized for not getting in contact earlier. He plans to travel the continent now that I’m happily married.”

Laughing softly, Octavia kissed his chest. “I’m glad things worked out for everyone in the end. It wouldn’t have been right to force them to get married.”

“Hmmm,” Simon grunted a response, running his fingers through her hair. “Did the doctor say what he thinks is ailing you? I don’t think we should have eaten at that strange little inn yesterday. I know you said it was charming, but I wasn’t entirely sure what kind of meat we were eating.”

“He said I will survive.” She bit on her lip and placed her chin on his chest, so she could get a better look at him.

“You had better; if you don’t feel well again in a few days, I think we had better go back home. I don’t trust doctors abroad. London boasts some of the finest doctors in the world, in my opinion.” The corners of his mouth tugged into a smile as he shut his eyes.

Feeling the pit of her stomach churning, Octavia sat up and placed her hand against her abdomen. “Can we not talk about doctors and traveling right now? Just the thought of it makes me want to...”

Simon shot up in bed, his eyes filled with concern as her face paled. “Are you ill? Must I send for the doctor?”

It was almost too late when Octavia shot out of bed and ran to the window.

“Octavia? What must I do? Oh God, things can’t go wrong right now. Not after everything we’ve been through.” He shot out of bed and began to pace back and forth in front of the bed, running his fingers through his hair.

Coming up straight, Octavia felt the nausea subsiding as she walked to the simple jug of water that had been placed in their chambers. The cool water she splashed against her face helped bring some of the color back to her cheeks.

“You know, this is all my fault. I wasted so much time in our marriage, and God is punishing me. Rightly so. I’ll fetch the doctor at once before I find a chapel. I will spend the rest of the week on my knees asking for forgiveness. I should never have swept you away like this.” His voice became increasingly frantic when Octavia decided to end his misery.

She wiped her face with a clean towel and made her way toward him.

“Calm yourself, my love. There is nothing wrong with me that will not be cured in another seven months.” She placed her hands on his chest and stopped him from pacing back and forth.

“I knew I should have... What did you say?” He paused mid-sentence and looked at her.

Octavia sighed heavily and shook her head with a smile. “God is not punishing you, my love. On the contrary, I think we are being blessed.” She gave him a moment to process the news.

Realization dawned in his eyes as he lifted his hands and placed them both behind his head.

“You don’t mean to tell me?” His eyes filled with grateful tears.

Nodding with tears in her eyes, Octavia felt the relief flooding her body. “I am ill because I am carrying your child. I wanted to tell you when I was a little further along, but your penchant for self-deprecation made it impossible.”

Lifting her in his arms, Simon swung her around the room in a circle. “I can’t believe that I’m going to be a father. This is the happiest day of my life.” His laughter echoed through the villa and filled Octavia’s heart with joy.

“You aren’t going to be very pleased with me if you don’t stop spinning me around like this.” Octavia felt her stomach churning again before he placed her back on her feet.

“Oh, of course.” He took her hand and led her over to the bed, making her sit on the edge. “You must get lots of rest and make sure you don’t overdo it.”

His words made her roll her eyes. “I am pregnant, Simon, not an invalid. I still wish to walk among the vineyards on this estate and enjoy the rest of our honeymoon.

Relaxing a little, Simon lifted his hand and stroked her cheek with the back of his knuckles. “You know I love you. I would never forgive myself if anything happened to you. I am the luckiest man alive for having you as my wife. You came into my life and showed me what it truly meant to live my life to the fullest. I wouldn’t be where I am today if it wasn’t for you.”

Reaching for his hand, Octavia took it in hers and kissed his fingers. “Nothing will happen to me, Simon. You’re stuck with me for the rest of your life. I knew I loved you from the very start; I was just stubborn to admit it to myself.”

Leaning in, Simon kissed her cheek before pulling her against his chest as they both lay down on the bed.

The warm summer breeze kissed their bodies as Simon placed his hand over her abdomen. “I did want to ask if you had been enjoying the cuisine here in Rome, but I didn’t want to offend you.”

Allowing her head to fall back on the pillows, Octavia laughed from the pit of her stomach.

The End?

Five years later...

“Matilda Wakefield, what did I tell you about running away from your brother like that?” Octavia scolded her daughter, biting back her laughter when her perfect little lips turned to a pout.

The young girl’s messy, long black curls flowed down her back, complimenting her porcelain skin and bright green eyes.

Simon laughed and shook his head, sighing contentedly at his wife from his position opposite her on the blanket. “Let them be, my love. Running will only make him stronger.”

“Yes, but I don’t like it when he falls. It breaks my heart when their laughter suddenly turns to tears.” Octavia shook her head in disapproval when Alexander ran after his sister and toppled onto the grass, his chubby fists smashing into the dirt.

The sun shone brightly on them as the family enjoyed a picnic in the garden beside the roses that had continued to bloom for years in the manor gardens.

“I know what might help take your mind off of all your cares.” Simon gave her a cheeky smile as he stood and helped her to her feet.

Making a face, Octavia thrust her nose in the air. “Oh, are you finally going to take my side and stop your children from running like hooligans through the gardens.”

“Not likely.” Simon glanced over his shoulder at his son and daughter who had

entered into yet another spirited game of chase.

At three years old, young Alexander giggled contentedly and tried his best to keep up with his sister. His blonde hair shone in the sun like strands of gold.

Shaking her head, Octavia relented to the situation and watched as Simon took a step back and clapped his hands. “What are you doing?”

“You will see.” Simon wiggled his eyebrows conspiratorially and gave her a boyish grin that tugged at her heart.

“What...” Her words trailed off as the corners of her mouth hooked into a smile.

The joyful sounds of a violin filled the air as Willy suddenly appeared around the side of the house.

Simon came to her side and took her hands in his. “You may have forgotten, but I have not. Today, five years ago, you made me the luckiest man alive. I know this song reminds you of your parents and the happy memories you shared as a child.”

“Oh, Simon.” A lump suddenly formed in her throat as tears welled in her eyes.”

“Now, now, Your Grace, there is no time for tears when a fiddle is playing.” He shot her a dashing smile before twirling her under his arm and spinning her into a dance.

The sound of their laughter beckoned the children as they squealed in delight and came running.

Scooping his daughter up in his arms while Alexander clung to his mother’s legs, Simon danced with his family.

“Thank you,” Octavia mouthed the words to him as Willy began to play a softer song. “Thank you for this and everything you have brought to my life since the day we were married.”

Placing his Matilda back on the grass while their son toddled off on a mission, Simon drew his wife closer and whispered in her ear, “Don’t thank me just yet; there is still one more thing that I wish to do today.”

Octavia smiled and raised her eyebrows in question. “And what about the children.”

“Don’t you worry about them; I have already called for reinforcements.” He nodded toward Mrs. Farley who was ambling toward them over the grass.”

The older woman was beginning to show her age, yet neither Simon nor Octavia could find it in their hearts to tell her that it was time to retire. She had meant so much to their family over the years that she was practically essential to their home.

“Come with me.” Simon nodded toward the stables and winked when the children went running to Mrs. Farley.

“Don’t you think it’s a little irresponsible of us to be fleeing the country when we haven’t said goodbye to our children?” Octavia laughed contentedly and allowed herself to be dragged along.

“It’s not quite another country, but I’m certain that you will enjoy this surprise.” His laughter mingled with hers as they picked up the pace and headed toward the stables, playfully spanking her on the bottom as they went.

Octavia licked her lips in anticipation as she stared at the pool beneath the waterfall

where Simon had first shown her the joys of intimacy.

“Was this what you had in mind?” He came up from behind and placed his arms around her waist, hugging her tightly.

She leaned her head back on his shoulder and allowed him to kiss her neck before pulling away.

“Great minds think alike.” She turned to him with a cheeky grin and began to unlace the back of her dress.

“Are you challenging me?” His grin broadened.

“I don’t know, Your Grace. Do you want me to challenge you?” She allowed her dress to fall at her feet as she began to work the laces of her corset.

Reaching down with a bright smile, Simon began to remove his boots. “You know the sun will be setting soon?” He glanced up at the patch of sky that was visible beyond the canopy of trees.

Octavia however gained the upper hand as she removed her corset and quickly lifted her chemise over her head. “Well then, we had better get on with it!”

“That’s cheating!” Simon yelled after her as she dove head-first into the clear water.

Coming up on the other side of the pool, Octavia looked around in confusion. “Simon?” she called his name and turned around to check the water behind her.

Strong arms gripped her waist, lifting her into the air as she squealed in surprise.

“You may have gotten the best of me, but I still have a few tricks up my sleeves.”

Simon laughed and lowered her into his arms, pulling across the pool to the rock where he had first sampled the delights between her thighs.

Octavia's pulse raced when he turned her around and drew her naked body against his. The feeling of his erection pressing against her thigh drove her wild with lust as he kissed her neck, licking a path down to her chest.

"In the spirit of reliving things that happened after our wedding..." he took her hard nipple into his mouth and licked the rosy bud before lifting her onto the rocks.

Her knees fell open, parting her thighs as she lay back and shut her eyes.

Kissing the insides of her thighs, Simon made his way up her body before burying his head in her core.

Her breathing turned to moans when his tongue flicked over her folds, drawing a path to the most sensitive place of all.

"Simon..." her delighted gasp drove him on as he turned his head to the side and changed the angle of his tongue. Placing his hands on her thighs he guided her legs over his shoulders and reached up to cup her breasts.

Octavia propped herself up on her elbows and panted for more as Simon licked and teased at varying paces, pulling back whenever he sensed her muscles tensing. "You're going to be the death of me, My Love." She reached down and ran her fingers through the wet strands of his hair when he pulled her closer and teased her nipples.

Growling from between her thighs, Simon lifted his head just for a moment. "I won't be the death of you, but this just might be..." He lowered his head again and doubled his efforts, lapping at her folds with increased vigor.

“Simon!” Octavia gasped loudly, feeling her breath turn to panting as her climax began to build. Her muscles shook and contorted as Simon licked her with unrelenting speed, forcing a scream from her throat as she wriggled and writhed on the rock.

Slowing his pace, Simon licked her down from the high as she caught her breath, allowing her a few moments of respite before pulling her into the water. “I hope you aren’t too tired; there is something else that I’d like to do to you now. I wanted to do it on that day five years ago, but now seems like a good time to make it come true.”

He lifted her in his arms and placed her legs around his waist, eliciting another gasp from her lips when he began to move inside of her.

Feeling the rush of sensations, Octavia leaned back and rode the waves of pleasure that created more than just a visceral response in her core.

Moans filled the air when Simon picked up the pace, using the rock at her back as leverage as he made love to his wife.

Their movements created ripples across the pool as the water lapped at the edges, adding to the motion of the water that moved their bodies in perfect synchronicity.

The motions lasted for quite a while before Octavia felt her muscles tensing again.

Simon’s face contorted with pleasure as he cried out into the night, releasing himself in her core.

Her moans filled the air as yet another orgasm ripped through her body, making her see white as she lost control over her limbs.

Holding her against his body, Simon waited for their breathing to subside before

kissing her lips and nuzzling himself into her neck.

“That was quite something, Your Grace.” He held her in place, allowing the water to wash over their bodies. His hands moved up and down her sides, feeling the light layer of bumps that had formed across her skin.

Octavia finally regained control of her breathing and opened her eyes.

“Is it just me, or have we only gotten better at that as time goes on?”

She couldn’t help but smile at him as she placed her arms around his neck and allowed him to pull her into the middle of the pool.

“Well, you know what they say, practice makes perfect.” Simon held her gaze as the bright light of the moon reflected in her eyes.

“If that is the case, then I think that making love to you might just be the death of me. I almost blacked out during that second round.” She kissed his lips and drew closer to his body, feeling the warmth of his skin warding off the evening chill.

“Almost?” Simon asked with a frown. “I had better up try harder next time.” He shot her one of his cheeky grins that never failed to tug at her heart. Out of all of the adventures she’d experienced in her life, marrying Simon and siring his heirs had been the greatest.

Laughing under her breath, Octavia drew him in for a kiss, allowing his tongue to part her lips. Their breaths mingled together, reminding them of how good it felt to be one.

The moment seemed to linger on forever until Simon came up for breath. “I love you so much, Octavia; I only wish that I hadn’t been so stubborn at the start.”

Leaning in for another kiss, Octavia silenced his words before drawing back. “None of that matters now. All we need is each other; I wouldn’t change a single part of our story. The wait for your love only made me realize how much I truly wanted to be your wife. I love you too, Simon Wakefield. And if it takes the rest of my life to prove that to you, then that is what I shall do.”

“Do you think we should try for another heir? We don’t have nearly enough children for you to fuss over.” He smiled contentedly.

“Well, you know what they say, Your Grace, practice makes perfect.”

The moon shone down on the happy couple as they sank into the depths of the pool, fully enjoying each other’s company until it was time to return to their home.

The End.

CHAPTER 1

“ Y -Your Grace? ...” the valet spoke louder each time, but it still didn’t work. “Your Grace, I apologize, but you really ought to wake up...”

“What? ... Where...” Jonathan Whitlock, the Duke of Silverbrook, opened just one eye, and even that was more effort than he could muster. A tidal wave of pain washed over him, his head violently rebelling against the idea of moving.

“Lady Kirdale is waiting for you downstairs in the parlor, Your Grace,” the valet added even more apologetically.

“Parlor?” Jonathan echoed as if he had no idea what a parlor was. Perhaps something to eat or drink?

Drink. That was when his memory flooded him with images of the previous night. The other eye finally opened, viscous and reluctant to accept the visions of the morning. At first glance, he realized where he was. He was in his townhouse in London.

Oh, good, he thought to himself. At least, I managed to get home.

He moved slowly with much effort, and when he looked down at himself, he reached yet another realization. He had slept in the same clothes he was wearing the previous night. He looked down more closely. His shirt was unbuttoned. His trousers as well. To say that he was a mess would have been a gross understatement. And that headache rose with each passing moment, claiming more of his focus.

“You said Lady Kirdale?” Jonathan echoed when the idea finally settled, an idea he didn’t like. “She is here?”

“Yes, Your Grace,” his valet nodded patiently, for this was not the first time he had to explain something twice, or even thrice, before Jonathan realized what was happening. Fortunately, the man was handsomely paid for his efforts, and in Jonathan’s opinion, that made it more than fair.

Jonathan nodded, placing his feet onto the floor with a heavy frown. He felt as if he had magically been transformed into a rag doll, and his limbs were sewn onto him, dangling without any control on his part. They were there, but he could not do anything conscious with them. He doubted he could hold a teacup at that moment.

“I shall be downstairs momentarily,” Jonathan managed to muster, wondering why his cousin Rebecca had come so early and unannounced. Did something happen?

“Yes, Your Grace,” the valet nodded again then disappeared behind closed doors, giving Jonathan a moment to gather the strength to get up.

He ran a hand through his thick black hair, disheveled and tangled from sleep. The movement sent a wave of pain through his head, causing him to wince and mutter a curse under his breath. Slowly, he rose to his full height, despite the obvious discomfort.

Staggering to the washbasin, he splashed cold water on his face, the shock helping to clear some of the fog from his mind. His clothes from the previous night were crumpled and smelled faintly of tobacco and brandy. The dark blue waistcoat and black trousers, while stylish, were a stark contrast to his disheveled state. He tugged at the edges of his shirt and waistcoat, trying to make himself look somewhat presentable, but that was impossible. He reached into his pocket, feeling something sticking out.

A moment later, his hand extracted a white garter and stocking. He lifted an eyebrow, faintly remembering the face of the lady it belonged to. He grinned to himself, stuffing it back into his pocket. Deciding that he needed to look at least somewhat presentable, he got dressed although without his valet, and with the aftereffects of the previous night still emanating off of him, he didn't manage to do a very good job of it. With a final glance in the mirror, he attempted to smooth his hair and straighten his posture. It did little to achieve any improvement in his outward appearance, so he gave up.

A minute later, he found himself in the parlor with his cousin standing by the window with a cup of tea in her hand. The look of utter shock upon seeing him was impossible to miss.

“Jonathan... what happened to you? Did you just wake up?” she asked aghast. Her blue eyes, sharp and observant, traversed the distance between his head and his toes, taking in his crumpled attire and disheveled hair.

“Yes,” he replied with a nonchalant shrug. “What’s wrong with that?”

Rebecca arched an eyebrow. “It’s well past lunchtime, Cousin. Even for you, that is rather late.”

She stood, shaking her head at him, her hand pressed to her hip in the manner of a disapproving governess. She was tall and slender, even after two children, her figure accentuated by the elegantly simple gowns she favored, often in shades of deep green or royal blue that complemented her fair complexion.

He offered a casual smile to his cousin, unbothered by her scrutiny. “I had a late night, and I just lost track of time. You know how it is.”

“I do not know how it is,” she reminded him. “You know that well enough.”

“Ah, yes, you must have forgotten what it is like to actually have fun,” he teased, much to her amused chagrin.

“I do believe you have a tendency to have fun for the both of us, so I don’t have to,” she reciprocated in the same playful manner that always characterized their conversations.

“Do you see, Becky my dear, how much I love you? I am even willing to sacrifice myself like that for you,” he said with a chuckle, and she could not help but join in.

Rebecca set her teacup down and crossed her arms, her expression one of amused exasperation. “You know, Jonathan, one of these days, you will have to relinquish your bachelor ways.”

“One of which days?” he asked, mockingly gasping. “These?”

“I am serious,” she said with a hint of a smile lingering in the corner of her lips. That was a conversation they had had many times before, but it never ended the way she wanted it to. He was simply too good at avoiding his obligations.

“So am I,” he replied, grinning.

“It’s high time you considered settling down, Jonathan.” She started listing the things he already knew, “Starting a family, continuing the bloodline...”

Jonathan chuckled, moving over to the small table and proceeding to pour himself a cup of tea. “You sound like an old matron, Rebecca.”

“You talk as if there is plenty of time for that,” she frowned.

“There is,” he shrugged without a single care in the world.

“Time waits for no one, Jonathan,” she replied, her voice softening with love. “You like to think that isn’t so, but you do bear some responsibility to your family, you know.”

He sipped his warm tea, feeling a bit more awake by that point. However, he was in no condition for such grave conversations. “There is no need to rush things, Rebecca. I am still young.”

“That depends on what you consider young,” she replied, teasing him. “Seven and twenty sounds about the right age for marriage, if you ask me.”

“Too soon I say,” he shook his head. “Besides, the last thing the world needs is another Whitlock.”

“I beg—” she started, but he raised his finger at her, interrupting her.

“Before you get offended about your own children, they do not count. You have diluted them with Kirdale’s blood. And you were never really like our fathers in any case.”

Rebecca sighed, obviously feeling exasperated about having the same conversation over and over again without a different outcome.

“So, is that why you have come so early in the... noon?” he asked playfully. “I could have been resting, you know.”

“You could be resting in the carriage while you accompany me,” she suggested, placing her cup down onto the silver tray, signaling that she was done with it.

He raised a displeased eyebrow. “Accompany you? Where?”

“I have been invited to the Earl of Langley’s garden party,” she explained importantly, “and I would like you to accompany me.”

“Me?” he frowned again. “Why can’t your husband go? Isn’t that his duty and not mine?”

“He cannot,” she clarified. “He has gone off on a business trip to Wales.”

“Why didn’t you accompany him then?” he asked.

“Me, go to Wales?” she asked incredulously as if that were the most preposterous thing she had ever heard. “What on earth for?”

They exchanged a meaningful glance, and then they both burst into a chuckle. She was one of the few rare people in his life who had the ability to make him laugh like that.

“No, Rebecca,” he shook his head once the onslaught of laughter had subsided. “I am in no mood to withstand lordlings and their incessant jabber about themselves. I have no patience for it; my mind and body have not taken their rest.”

That was only partly true. Indeed, he was in no mood for that, but also, he knew that while there, Rebecca would not resist trying to get him to speak to some ladies of her choosing in an effort to make a match. She had been caught doing that numerous times, and still, she persisted, despite his urging against it.

“But it’s not a ball,” she reminded him. “You will not have to dance with anyone or exert yourself in any way. Just?—”

“Talk,” he ended her sentence. “Yes, that is the worst part about it, talking. No, thank you.”

“If you appear looking like that, I doubt anyone will want to talk to you anyway, so you will be safe,” she teased.

He almost burst into a chuckle again, but instead, he only smiled. “It is rude to come into someone’s home, wake him up, and then point out he is not dressed for company.”

“If you were in your night robe, I would understand, but considering how disheveled you look now, I’m assuming you barely got changed from last night’s... ahem, adventures,” she continued with an amused smirk.

“Is this your way of trying to convince me to come with you?” he asked mischievously. “Because I have to tell you it is not working.”

She laughed melodiously at his words. “No,” she shook her head. “I actually didn’t want to resort to this, but you made me.”

His eyes widened. “No... please, no. Not now.”

“Yes,” she said, her eyes narrowing at him, like a hunter eyeing his prey. “I am calling that favor. Now.”

“Not now,” he whined again, rolling his eyes.

“Yes, now,” she repeated amusedly. “You said I could use it whenever I wanted. I want it now.”

“Oh, for fu?—”

“No cursing,” she interrupted him, walking over to him and pretending to clean his shoulders. “You owe me, remember? I saved you from the unbearable affections of

Lady Helena Whitley and her mother when they cornered you during that ball at Lord Cunningham's." She chuckled to herself. "I still remember the look on your face. Weren't they showering you with questions which dangerously neared the subject of courtship and marriage?"

He frowned. "You know well that Lady Helena's mother was an old friend of my late mother's. I could not just excuse myself without a proper reason, and one always lacks the ability to lie when the circumstances require it the most."

"And then, I saved you... for a price. Now, do slip into something more... appropriate, my dear. I shall wait for you in the carriage."

She leaned to kiss him on the cheek and then waltzed out of the parlor victoriously.

Jonathan raked his fingers through his hair. He sighed heavily, shaking his head at himself. He headed upstairs, wondering what the day would bring. Whatever it was, he was absolutely certain he wouldn't like it.

CHAPTER 2

“ I think everyone is looking at me,” Ciara whispered to her friend, Adeline Middleton, who stood next to her in the middle of the garden party.

Although the sprawling gardens, meticulously manicured with vibrant blooms, offered a respite from the hustle and bustle of busy London streets, Ciara could not rest easy. She could feel the weight of countless eyes upon her. She took a deep breath in an effort to steady her nerves.

“How could they not?” Adeline replied reassuringly as she always did. “You look lovelier than a rose in full bloom.”

Ciara chuckled. Her gown truly was the color of a red rose, a daring choice she would not have chosen if Adeline had not persuaded her into it, and now, she felt awkward and out of place. “Did you read that in a book?”

“Actually, yes,” Adeline replied, and both girls laughed melodiously.

Adeline’s presence had always been a balm to Ciara’s frayed nerves, a constant source of comfort and stability. Social events such as this one always felt overwhelming, especially the constant whispers and furtive glances which unsettled her more than she was willing to admit. She felt as if everyone could see right through her into her very soul and pick apart everything she had been so desperately trying to keep together ever since she had been rescued from the nunnery by Penelope, Adeline’s sister, and her husband, James.

“I feel like everyone seems eager to catch a glimpse of the infamous Miss Everton,” Ciara said mockingly. “I feel as if I am under severe scrutiny.”

Adeline nodded sympathetically. “I can imagine. But remember, most of these people are just curious. Their lives are infinitely dull, and when someone has had... as many adventures as you have, it is natural for them to want to know all about it.”

“Adventures?” Ciara laughed, appreciating the word her friend used. “That is the last thing I would call my life, but I suppose that is one way to look at it.”

“It is all about perspective, my dear Ciara,” Adeline chirped, looking about. “And curiosity is an omnipresent human condition.”

Ciara glanced around, noticing the subtle stares and whispers among the guests. She could feel their scrutiny like a physical presence, making her skin prickle with discomfort. “Curiosity or gossip, it’s all the same to me. I just want to get through this without making a spectacle of myself.

Adeline reached out and squeezed her hand. “You are doing wonderfully, Ciara. And if anyone dares to say otherwise, they will have to answer to me.”

Ciara could not help but laugh softly at that. “Thank you, Addie. I don’t know what I would do without you.”

“Thankfully, you will never have to find out,” Adeline said with a wink. “Now, how about we go find something to drink? A glass of lemonade should help take the edge off. Or maybe something a bit stronger?”

“No, lemonade will be fine,” Ciara shook her head, wondering how that might look, served on top of the tales that had already been spinning about her in the ton.

As they walked towards the refreshment table, Ciara felt a bit of her tension ease. With Adeline by her side, she could face the whispers and the stares. For the first time that afternoon, she allowed herself to enjoy the beauty of the garden, the warmth of the sun on her skin, and the simple pleasure of a friend's company. However, that moment of serenity didn't last long.

Ciara immediately noticed her coming. Miss Sarah Danforth, the daughter of the Viscount of Hartford, was in the company of two of her friends, whom Ciara did not know by name. Sarah was known for her unforgiving tongue and penchant for gossip, and Ciara could immediately notice the flicker of malice in the young woman's eyes as she approached them, leading her two friends with her.

"Oh, Miss Everton!" Sarah began, her voice laden with false sweetness, the likes of which Ciara could immediately recognize. "Fancy meeting you here!"

"Miss Danforth," Ciara nodded curtly at her then nodded one more time in the direction of her friends, who seemed equally amused by what was happening as Sarah herself was.

"Hello, Miss Danforth," Adeline shot her own cold greeting, but Sarah gave her a dismissive smile, focusing once again on Ciara.

"I didn't know whether to believe the rumors or not when I heard you were back home," Sarah launched her barrage of prying questions. "There is just so much we don't know!"

"Isn't that an omnipresent human condition?" Ciara threw an amused glance in Adeline's direction, but it flew over Sarah's head.

"Is it really true that you lived in a nunnery? My goodness! I can only imagine what that must have felt like. Did you ever consider taking vows? It must have been so

different over there. Do you find all this,” she gestured at the bustling garden, “overwhelming? I mean, even a... rebel such as yourself might not find it so easy to readjust to life in the ton, especially after everything you have done. People do make terrible mistakes, but I suppose some are not that easily forgotten, are they?”

“I—”

“No,” Adeline interfered immediately, taking a step in front of Ciara. “What she does find overwhelming are foolish questions asked by people who have no business asking them.”

Ciara almost gasped loudly at her best friend’s comment, which even took her off guard. Sarah and her friends looked shocked, their eyes wide with disbelief. But Adeline stood there, unapologetically staring back at Sarah, who quickly regained composure.

“Oh, come now, Miss Middleton,” Sarah said with mock innocence, as her friends giggled behind her. “We are just curious. It is not every day we stumble upon someone with such an... interesting background. A nunnery, of all places! I must say, it does make one wonder what sort of life led to such an exile. Whispers say it takes quite the scandal to be sent away like that. Secrets always have a way of coming out, don’t they? Especially the sordid ones. Perhaps, Miss Everton, you could enlighten us all with the tawdry details? After all, if one lived through something, one should be bold enough to tell about it.”

Ciara knew what that meant. They probably knew what landed her in the nunnery in the first place. She had a feeling that all of London knew it. Her life was an open book for everyone to see, for everyone to make fun of. It was an unbearable feeling.

She tugged at Adeline’s sleeve, wanting to escape the conversation. “Please, Adeline, let’s just go.”

Adeline hesitated, glaring at Sarah. “You should be ashamed of yourself, Miss Danforth.”

Sarah’s eyes widened in mock innocence. “I didn’t mean to offend her. I was merely asking questions, trying to be friendly. After all, not everyone finds themselves hidden away after such... indiscretions. One must wonder, with such a tainted past, what future can one possibly hope for? A gentleman of good standing would think twice, wouldn’t he?”

“If that is you being friendly, I dread to think how you behave otherwise,” Adeline said with chosen words, but Ciara could hear the rage boiling just underneath the surface.

Ciara could not take it any longer. “Excuse us,” she addressed Sarah and her friends as she tugged Adeline away.

The laughter of the ladies they left behind rang in her ears for a long time afterward. Adeline herself looked frustrated, but she allowed Ciara to lead her away, casting one last scathing look over her shoulder.

Once they were out of earshot, Adeline turned to Ciara, her expression softening. “That was really mean of her, Ciara. I am sorry. I should have thrown a glass of red wine on her gown.”

Ciara’s eyes widened in amusement as she imagined the commotion, but even that was not enough to make her feel better. “It’s not your fault, Adeline. You cannot repair what was once broken or pretend that it never broke in the first place...” She sighed heavily. She felt as if she were a burden to her friend, who instead of having fun had to be her line of defense. A part of her wished she had not come at all. “I... I just need a moment to myself. Do you mind?”

Adeline's prior frustration now completely melted into concern for her friend. "Of course, Ciara. You take a few moments to yourself; I will be by the refreshments table."

"All right," Ciara nodded. "Thank you."

"Of course," Adeline smiled, taking her friend by the hand. "I am here for you for whatever you need."

Ciara gave her a grateful nod and hurried off, weaving through the crowd until she found a secluded spot in the garden. She leaned against a tree, taking deep breaths to calm herself. The interaction with Sarah had rattled her more than she wanted to admit. She closed her eyes, trying to push away the feeling of being scrutinized and judged.

"Trying to hide from everyone, I see?" she suddenly heard a familiar voice.

She opened her eyes, and the sight of her uncle, Brendan Snowley, the Earl of Hopwich, greeted her.

"Is it that obvious?" she asked with a shy smile, feeling a tidal wave of relief upon seeing him.

"I saw what happened," he admitted, standing by her side.

"It's just... people being their worst selves," she said with a dismissive half-shrug.

"Why does it bother you then?" he asked.

"I wish everyone would just leave me alone," she confessed her deepest desire, one she knew would never come true.

He laughed as if she had said the funniest thing in the world. “Yes, we all wish that sometimes.”

She sighed. “I thought I was ready for this,” she mused. “But... it’s harder than I expected.”

He turned to her, placing a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “You are doing wonderfully, Ciara. Don’t allow a few thoughtless people to make you doubt yourself.”

She looked up at him, gratitude shining in her eyes. “Thank you, Uncle Brendan. I needed to hear that.”

“Shall we go back?” he suggested.

“If you don’t mind, I would like to stay here for a few moments longer,” she said apologetically. “I will return to the party soon.”

He nodded again, his expression gentle. “Of course, take all the time you need.”

As he walked away, Ciara took a deep breath, feeling a bit more grounded. She was grateful for her uncle’s understanding and patience. Although he was also no stranger to letting her know when he didn’t agree with her actions, he was still on her side, no matter what. Knowing she had his support gave her the strength she needed to face the gathering once more.

But not just yet.

“Ah, there you are,” Jonathan approached his cousin, who was gracefully mingling with the other guests at the garden party. His tall, well-built frame stood out among the crowd, and despite his unkempt appearance from that morning, he still managed

to exude a certain rugged charm. “You owe me for this favor, you know.”

She turned to him, laughing. “Need I remind you that I used my own favor to drag you here?”

“Yes, and now you owe me a favor back,” he said much to the amusement of them both. “Everyone around here is so dreadfully dull, Becky. And what’s worse, there is hardly any real alcohol to make it bearable.”

“Thank goodness for that,” she rolled her eyes playfully. “Who knows what alcohol would make you do?”

He smirked, his dark blue eyes twinkling with mischief. “And here I am, so very well-behaved.”

She could not suppress a smile. “Just try not to cause any scandals this time, for my sake?”

Jonathan sighed dramatically but acquiesced, “I will do my best, but don’t expect any miracles.”

Rebecca laughed softly, shaking her head. “I wouldn’t dream of it. Just try not to corrupt anyone too much.”

Jonathan gave a mock salute, his grin widening. “I will be on my best behavior, then. No promises, though.”

Just as he was about to suggest they take a walk away from the crowd, a young lady approached them.

“Lady Kirdale!” the lady gushed upon reaching them. “How lovely to see you!”

“Miss Danforth,” Rebecca smiled back. She turned to her cousin. “You do remember my cousin, Jonathan Whitlock, the Duke of Silverbrook?”

“Of course, how do you do, Your Grace?” Sarah smiled, curtsying. There was nothing outstanding about the girl or her persona. She blended so easily into the sea of other equally charming and lovely young ladies who had nothing spectacular about them.

Jonathan smiled back, suppressing a yawn. “Lovely to see you again, Miss Danforth.”

“Such a lovely gathering, isn’t it?” she asked cheerfully, her eyes sparkling with obvious interest.

Rebecca nodded politely. “Indeed, Miss Danforth. How are you enjoying the party?”

“Oh, it’s splendid,” Sarah replied, her gaze shifting immediately to Jonathan. “Your Grace, I heard you recently returned from a trip to Italy. How was it?”

Jonathan stifled a sigh, forcing a polite smile. “It was just business-related. Nothing too exciting, I am afraid.”

But her curiosity was far from satiated. “Business trips can be quite interesting, though. Did you meet any fascinating people? Learn any new customs? Surely there must be so many intriguing stories to share.”

Jonathan usually had very little patience for questions and people who did not hold his interest, especially after the sort of night he had had. However, he maintained his composure. “Nothing intriguing, Miss Danforth. Just... business.”

Rebecca could obviously sense Jonathan’s lack of interest and tried to steer the conversation in a different direction. “Miss Danforth, have you had a chance to

explore the gardens yet?”

“Oh, yes!” Miss Danforth said enthusiastically but quickly returned to Jonathan. “Your Grace, you must tell me more about your trip to Italy. I have always been fascinated by that place. Did you encounter any unexpected adventures?”

“I am afraid not. It was just... routine,” he said with a shrug, looking about and trying to come up with an excuse to leave.

Miss Danforth seemed undeterred. “Well, perhaps you can share your thoughts on the latest book you’ve read? I, personally, have read a ton and simply cannot find anything new to titillate me.”

Jonathan’s interest was barely masked by his polite facade, despite the word she had used. “I’m afraid I have very little time to read. If you need a recommendation, Miss Danforth, I am not the source you need.”

“Have you seen Lady Miranda?” Rebecca asked, seizing the chance to try and change the topic once again.

At that point, Jonathan was not listening any longer. He had spotted a familiar face in the crowd, Lady Elizabeth Finnegan, a striking beauty with whom he had shared more than just flirtation in the past. She locked eyes with him, giving him a subtle yet unmistakable signal to follow her.

His blood boiled at the thought of making this garden party a little more interesting. He didn’t need to be asked twice. He watched her disappear through a small, garden path, her fiery red dress trailing behind her, like a passionate invitation. A mischievous smile crept across his lips as he turned to his cousin, already crafting an excuse in his mind.

“My Ladies, I have just remembered that I need to discuss something with Lord Fitzwilliam. Urgent business, you know.”

His cousin raised an eyebrow, clearly skeptical at this sudden realization. “Really? Right now?”

He nodded, trying to appear honest. “Yes, right now. I will be back shortly. I promise.”

Before she could protest, he slipped away, weaving through the guests with practiced ease. He knew that she was probably watching him go, shaking her head in exasperation. But he didn’t care about that right now. He navigated the throng of guests with a sense of anticipation as he followed Lady Elizabeth’s trail, expecting something illicit.

Now where could she have gone?

CHAPTER 3

The sight of the small pond soothed Ciara. She could not hear the chatter of the guests any longer. The quiet, serene setting was a welcome escape from the judgmental whispers and curious stares. Bending over the pond, she cupped her hands and splashed the cool water onto her neck, letting the chill calm her racing heart.

As she stood up, she inhaled, gazing at the surface of the pond, mirroring the sun high up above. She began to sing softly, her voice barely louder than the gentle rustling of the leaves.

Close your eyes, my darling dear,

Let the stars above be near,

Dream of fields of emerald green,

Where troubles fade and hearts are seen.

It was an old Irish lullaby, one her grandmother used to sing to her every night before Ciara would drift off to sleep. After a moment, she leaned against a sturdy tree, closing her eyes. The cool breeze against her back was grounding, reminding her of the strength she had within. She focused on her breathing, in and out, letting the song's gentle rhythm guide her thoughts away from the party.

“I didn’t know you had such a beautiful voice.”

Before she could even open her eyes to see who the deep baritone belonged to, she felt two strong hands lock around her waist, pulling her into a kiss.

It was a kiss of claiming someone, of awakening deep, slumbering desire that thundered through her body with the strength of an avalanche. His lips crashed against hers as if they had kissed a million times before. Without thinking, her body melted into his own, without a single thought regarding the danger they were in.

His hands were on her waist, keeping her close to him as her hands flew around his neck. She had no idea what was happening. All she knew was that she didn't want to be anywhere else. He angled his head and completely took control of her body, of her mind. When he gently sucked at her lower lip, her mind was obliterated. Her insides were on fire as she moaned softly against his lips, not even realizing that she was doing it.

For a moment, she let herself get lost in the kiss, in the way his mouth moved against hers, the way his body pressed close to hers. It was intoxicating, exhilarating, and terrifying all at once. Her hands found their way to his chest, feeling the solid muscle beneath his clothes, anchoring herself as the intensity of the kiss grew.

Then, as quickly as it had happened, he pulled back, leaving her breathing heavily and with her heart still racing, trying to make sense of what had just happened. However, his hand still lingered on the small of her back.

Her eyes now wide open; she could immediately see that he was a stranger. A devilishly handsome stranger but a stranger, nonetheless. Her lips still tingled from the passionate kiss he had just given her, and she knew that her cheeks were flaring from his proximity. Dark curls fell over his forehead, and he stared at her with his chiseled chin and jaw, giving him the appearance of a Greek god.

“Well, you are not Elizabeth,” he grinned in obvious pleasure, “but I can't say I am complaining.”

Fully regaining her composure, she pushed him away, creating what appeared to be only a semblance of safe distance between them. She could only hope that he couldn't hear the thundering of her heart and what their kiss had done to her.

The man stood tall and well-built, exuding a commanding presence. His black hair, neatly styled, contrasted strikingly with his dark blue eyes that gleamed with intensity and intelligence. High cheekbones and a strong jawline gave his face a chiseled, aristocratic look while his impeccable attire and confident bearing completed the picture of a refined and powerful gentleman.

“What on earth were you thinking?” she managed to gasp, refusing to acknowledge how handsome he was, still inflamed from the kiss, a passion that only seemed to make her fury even more potent.

“Come on, darling. Do not act as though you were raised in a nunnery,” the man purred, his eyes dark and mysterious.

“How did you know?” she gasped, feeling as if someone had punched her in the stomach.

“Know what?” he asked in confusion, and Ciara realized he was not speaking literally.

“Um, never mind,” she mumbled with a hasty shake of her head, stepping further away.

He reached for her and gently grazed her shoulder with the tips of his fingers, gesturing at her gown. “This is all a misunderstanding, you see. A very silly one.”

“A misunderstanding?” she gasped. “A misunderstanding is bumping into someone or stepping on someone's foot. Not kissing someone, you vulgar man!”

“Do you always do this?” he asked, tilting his head as if to take a closer look at her which only infuriated her even more.

“Do what?” she snarled.

“Prevent people from explaining themselves,” he clarified. There was something about the way he seemed so unapologetic as if he had done absolutely nothing wrong. That only seemed to infuriate her even more, her cheeks revealing her state of mind.

“There is nothing you can say to explain yourself.” She shook her head incredulously.

“May I try?” he asked with a sly grin. He didn’t wait for her to finish. Instead, he merely continued, boldly confident of his charm. “I was following a lady with a gown the same color as yours. I assumed it was her standing by the tree, waiting for me as we had agreed.”

Her nostrils flared up at the thought of him having mistaken her for a lady who would so easily call upon a man to follow her away from the party.

“That only shows how much attention you were paying to the lady in question,” she told him furiously.

She had no idea where all that boldness was coming from. She wondered where it was when she had been talking to Sarah and her friends. But she was not enraged then. Now, she was.

For a moment, she thought he would be offended by her words, but he was only further amused. “I do apologize for having mistaken you for her, but if you don’t mind me saying, it would seem that you enjoyed that kiss as much as I did.”

Her cheeks flared up even more at those words. “How dare you insinuate such a thing?” she demanded, taking a shocked step back.

She thought he was rude before, but now, she thought he was a downright scoundrel. His apology was not even a proper apology, and he dared to point out... the truth. That very thought exploded inside her mind, reminding her that it would be best to simply leave both this place and this man and go home. Yet, she felt frozen in place.

“Careful,” he grinned, watching her move back. “You might fall into the pond, and then I will have to rescue you. Imagine having to explain that to everyone.”

She glanced back, realizing that he was right. She was dangerously close to the edge, so she stepped in the opposite direction, nearing him once again. She immediately knew that this proximity was a dangerous thing. His cologne overpowered her completely. Her mind was a haze from his smile and the kiss that they’d just shared.

“But perhaps you would like me to touch you again,” he teased. “Your body reacted to me so easily, giving itself away; it was as if you were expecting me to come, beckoning me with your song.”

“My body reacted in surprise,” she replied furiously. “It did nothing. You did everything.”

“That isn’t how I remember it.”

“You... are not a respectable gentleman,” she said through clenched teeth, feeling a desire to slap him, but she resisted the temptation to do so for the simple fact that he was right.

Her own comment made him laugh, and much to her chagrin, she realized that he was even more handsome when graced with that unrestrained laughter. Now, she wanted to slap him even more.

“Respectable men do not kiss like that,” he teased, nearing her even more. His hand lingered close to her shoulder, the proximity making her tremble, but he made sure

not to touch her. “And neither do respectable ladies.”

Respectable ladies. That was what Mother Superior used to tell them. That was what was expected of them. Every deviation from being good was a deviation from God. And right now, she felt that deviation more than ever before. Her body was insanely drawn to him. She could not deny that, at least not to herself. She felt sinful and dirty, and she knew that she could not remain there with him any longer.

“You are a rake,” she said the only word she could think of. “And I shall not be in the company of one.”

She turned on her heel to leave immediately, but before she could do so, she felt his hand gently gripping her elbow, preventing her from leaving.

“At least, tell me your name, siren.”

His own voice was the beckoning of a siren. She immediately remembered Odysseus and his sailors, who only survived because they could not hear the siren song. She had to resist the pull, the temptation, no matter how hard it was. At the same time, she could not force herself to leave without giving him a name.

But not hers.

“Sarah,” she said suddenly, blurting out the name. “Sarah Danforth.”

He chuckled at her words. She wondered why. She was already walking when she heard him call out after her.

“Very well, siren,” he said, and she knew then that it would be a name she would never forget. “Let our little game begin.”