



Not His Duchess (The Gentlemen's Club #1)

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Category: Historical

Description: "Like it or not, for the next two months... you will obey me."

Isolde's debut is ruined. And it's all her brother's fault for leaving her under the supervision of his infuriating best friend...

Duke Edmund never goes back on his word. Even if that means taming this spitfire of a woman that seems to hate him with a passion...

But when Edmund starts sending all of her suitors running for the hills, he realizes that it's no longer his duty that he is fulfilling. It's his heart's deepest and darkest longing...

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CHAPTER ONE

It had been a matter of hours since Isolde Wilds had debuted into society, and already she was wondering if there was a single eligible, pleasant gentleman to be found.

“Heavens, Vincent, where have you been hiding this exceptional creature? Lady Isabel, is it not?” a gentleman named Lord Pomfrey cheered, the glassiness of his eyes behind a golden mask suggesting he had freely been partaking of the port and punch that was on offer at Kensington Palace.

Everyone, Isolde included, had been thrilled when the announcement had come that the debut ball of the Season, where she would make her entrance into society with the rest of the debutantes, was to be held in such an illustrious environment. Society had spoken of nothing else for weeks. Isolde had spoken of nothing else for weeks, eager for the day to come at last.

The fact that it was a masquerade too only made it more exciting, though Isolde had wondered if it was a rather foolish idea, considering the point of a debut ball was supposed to be that the debutantes were seen for the first time.

Isolde smiled politely at Lord Pomfrey, lowering her own gaze behind a mask of ornate silver and bronze vines and leaves, coiling over the bridge of her nose, the apples of her cheeks, and around her eyes as if they were part of her. Vincent had had it imported from Venice, and it was already drawing a great deal of attention.

Which, Isolde supposed, was what a young lady wanted on the night of her debut.

“Lady Isolde,” she corrected the loud man, praying he would not ask for a dance. “But I can understand the confusion, Lord Pomfrey. The names are so very similar. You would not be the first to muddle them, nor shall you be the last; I am sure.”

She chuckled just enough to be considered demure, rather than obnoxious or discourteous, remembering the lessons she had received over the past few years. After a somewhat memorable—for all the wrong reasons—house party at her family’s residence, Grayling House, she had been thrown into elocution and deportment and comportment lessons at once by her mother.

“You will never embarrass us like that again, you wretched girl! If your father were here, he would not stand for it! Why, I am almost glad he is dead so that he did not have to see such behavior!” Six years later, Isolde still remembered her mother’s furious words, though she liked to think she had done her best to make amends since then.

“What did I say?” Lord Pomfrey tilted his head to one side, clearly too inebriated to remember what he had called her.

Vincent clapped the man on the back. “It is of no consequence. Now, if you will excuse me, our mother is waving for us to come over, and we should not keep her waiting.”

“But I—” Lord Pomfrey slurred, then tailed off, no doubt forgetting what it was he had meant to say. An invitation to dance, most likely.

Venturing back into the security of the masked crowd, Isolde patted her brother’s hand and flashed him a smile. “Thank you, Brother.”

“For what?” Vincent replied, grinning. He wore an unusual golden mask that was apparently meant to be a fox but looked more like a ferret to Isolde’s amused eyes.

She had neglected to tell him as much, for politeness' sake.

“I know I should not be terribly particular on my debut evening, but I am glad to not have to dance with such a gentleman,” Isolde replied. “At best, my toes would be broken by the end. At the worst, he would forget what he was doing halfway through the dance and wander off, leaving me mortified. And one should never be mortified in the midst of a country dance. A quadrille—now, that is mortifying for everyone.”

Vincent chuckled. “You have only yourself to blame.”

“Whatever do you mean?”

Vincent paused, staring down at her for a moment with solemnity in his blue eyes. “It is no secret that I had my concerns over the years,” he explained haltingly. “There was a time when I worried you were as half-wild as Prudie, but... you have surprised me, Isolde. Which, in and of itself, should not be so surprising.”

“I still do not have the faintest idea what you are saying,” she teased, aware of many eyes on her.

Gentlemen had been staring ever since she made her entrance in her splendid gown of cream silk, the skirt and bodice painstakingly adorned with pearlescent beads that caught the light in the most remarkable way. She preferred to think that they were merely admiring the craftsmanship of the gown, rather than looking at her; it seemed less intimidating that way.

Vincent gave her hand a reassuring squeeze. “Nor do I know what it is I am trying to say.” He paused. “I know I have been stricter with you since that unfortunate business with Edmund at our residence, but I am not sorry for it. I am proud of you, Isolde. Proud of the charming, elegant, demure young lady you have become. Prouder still that you have not entirely given up your sharp sense of humor, though you are better

at hiding it now—it bewilders and adds to your charm where it once outright offended.”

“I took pains to study the world’s greatest humorists, and though I am not nearly as entertaining as they are or were, I do well enough. As long as I amuse those who are dearest to me instead of embarrassing them, I am quite content with my wit,” Isolde teased, feeling a little sorry that she had forced her brother to be stricter with her.

It had not been her intention. Six years ago, she had simply been trying to protect him and had gone about it all wrong.

“You could never embarrass me, Isolde,” Vincent assured, resuming their subtle promenade through the crowd once more.

“I wish Mama had the same faith,” Isolde remarked wryly. “Where is she, anyway? Did you not say she was waving us over?”

Vincent grinned from ear to ear, making his mask look more like a wolf than a fox or a ferret for a moment. “I have no notion of where our mother has wandered off to, but if there is one thing that is guaranteed to deter a gentleman from pursuing a lady, it is mentioning one’s mother. Then again, I think you probably could have dispensed with subterfuge and distracted Lord Pomfrey just by pointing to something shiny.”

“The trouble is,” Isolde countered, “I am rather shiny tonight.”

“‘Dazzling’ is the word I have heard several gentlemen use.” Vincent really did seem pleased, like a weight was slowly lifting off his shoulders. He now had one sister out in society, with two to go—that was reason enough to relax a little.

And when I am married, he will not have to worry about me at all anymore. It saddened her and gladdened Isolde in equal measure as she cast her brother a

sideways glance. It could not have been easy to take on the role of the Earl of Grayling at the age of four-and-ten, long before he was ready, but he had dedicated his life to his family, slowly filling the shoes of the father who had passed before his time.

Isolde knew she had not always made it easy for him to do his duty well. She had been half-wild after their father passed and might have walked a more gossip-worthy path if she had been left half-wild, but she had realized that it would only cause her brother and mother more heartache. That had been the true catalyst to her changing her behavior.

Deep down, there was still a sliver of rebellion in her, but now it was dressed up in a pretty gown and would never show its face around her family again.

“What of you?” Isolde swiped a glass of lemonade off a passing tray. “Should you not be seeking out marital prospects tonight?”

Vincent pulled a face. “All I intend to do, once you begin to toil through your crammed dance card, is to find the smoking room and enjoy cigars and brandy with Edmund.”

“Excuse me?” All the good cheer abandoned Isolde in a flash, halting right where she was walking, prompting a pair of young gentlemen to almost knock into her.

Even the likes of Lord Pomfrey were preferable to Edmund Connolly, the Duke of Davenport. Isolde prided herself on being amenable to most people, but she could not stand Edmund. She could not stand the way he behaved as if he were the most honorable, respectable, congenial gentleman to ever walk the earth, when it could not have been further from the truth.

Since the age of twelve, Isolde had decided to loathe him, for the crime of not being

there for her brother when he needed a friend the most. Yet, he had expected Vincent's loyalty and generosity and comfort when he had suffered the same grief and had never once thanked Vincent for it. Edmund had acted as if it were a reasonable expectation instead—something required, rather than something graciously offered by Vincent, who was the best of men. As such, he would not ask for an apology or a gesture of thanks himself; it had been up to Isolde.

Over the last six years, wherever possible, she had tried to force an apology out of Edmund for abandoning Vincent after the loss of their father, only to receive rudeness and haughtiness in return. At times, she might have deserved that, but still...

Eventually, her attempts had turned into a general distaste which she doubted would ever fade.

A grimace twitched upon Vincent's lips. "There is no need for that tone of voice, Isolde."

"Edmund is back? When? Were you planning to inform me, or were you waiting for me to bump into him?" Her eyes flared with irritation. Of all the people she hoped would attend her debut ball, Edmund Connolly, the Duke of Davenport, had his name firmly in the bottom spot. If she never saw the man again, it would be too soon.

Vincent sighed, leading her to the side of the main ballroom, where they might have more privacy from gossipmongers. "He is my oldest and dearest friend, Isolde. I know the two of you have not always been friendly, but I had hoped that three years of distance might be enough for you to be civil in one another's company." His grimace became more pronounced. "Besides, dear sister, it is mostly your fault that there is enmity between you."

"I was twelve," Isolde shot back. "And trying to get an apology out of him for you, that you deserved!"

Vincent nodded slowly, having heard this argument many times before. “And he was mourning the loss of his entire family, thus in no mood for a girl’s tricks and schemes. He has never been able to eat strawberry tarts again after what you did.”

Clenching her hands into fists, Isolde had to fight to regain her composure. Even from elsewhere in the palace, Edmund was unraveling all of the hard work that she had done to become a respectable, polite young lady: the kind that could make her mother content.

“He behaved worse than I ever did after that incident,” she reminded her brother. “I cannot recall a single encounter since where he has not been utterly vicious to me. Why, I should say it was a greater test for my ladylike manners than any lessons a tutor has taught me.”

Vincent hesitated. “He teased you a little, that is all. I do not think it was worse than what you did to him.”

“Of course not, because he is your dearest friend and, in your eyes, can do no wrong,” Isolde grumbled. “Honestly, I would like to see you withstand such teasing. Then, you could deign to tell me how I feel.”

They were interrupted by the shy clearing of a throat, and, for an awful moment, Isolde feared that Edmund himself had crept up on them. Instead, she looked upon the bird mask and kind brown eyes of Colin Ward, Marquess of Fenton.

“Apologies for the intrusion,” he said, adjusting his posture. “I believe we are to dance the next set together, if you are still willing? Of course, if you are in the midst of something, then I shall return when it is more convenient.”

Isolde brightened, shuffling off her irritation like a heavy cloak after a walk in the rain. “Now is perfectly convenient,” she said softly. “My brother and I were just

having a lighthearted quarrel about nothing much at all. It is assuredly a family's prerogative to squabble now and then, for I believe it shows you care."

Colin chuckled, gazing at her as if she were the most precious thing he had ever seen. She would have been lying if she said it did not feel good to be so admired, after all of the effort and determination she had put into being a refined lady of the Ton . Anyone would have been pleased by the reward after such hard work.

"My brother and I never cease our quarreling," Colin said, offering his arm. "If we ever did, I would think that something was wrong with him."

Isolde laughed daintily. "Quite so!"

"I shall restore Lady Isolde to you after the dance, Your Grace." Colin bowed his head to Vincent.

"There is no rush," Vincent said slyly, blue eyes glinting with mischief. "If the compulsion should arise, and my sister is amenable, dance two dances."

Not content with letting her brother off the hook, Isolde leaned in to Colin's ear. "He is eager to retreat to the smoking room before any lovely young ladies compel him to dance. The poor soul has two left feet."

Colin stifled a snort, turning his warm brown eyes on Isolde once more. "Meanwhile, I should hate to be in the smoking room—at least while you are still in the vicinity. Who would choose the company of gentlemen over the prospect of catching a glimpse—perhaps, even dancing—with the most beautiful lady in all of England."

Remembering to be modest, Isolde made a show of glancing this way and that. "Where is she, Lord Fenton? Might you point her out so that I might witness this rare creature?"

He beamed at her. “We would have to find a mirror for that, Lady Isolde.”

“Oh!” Isolde snapped out her fan, half hiding her face behind it. “What a charming gentleman you are, Lord Fenton, though you flatter me too much. I cannot accept such a compliment, but I will accept a dance.”

She was as eager to be on the dance floor as Vincent was to reach the fog of the smoking room, though she doubted he would actually sneak off. He had a sister to chaperone, and he would not neglect his duties for the sake of port and cigars, regardless of his claims to the contrary.

Looking as proud as a peacock, Colin led Isolde toward the dance floor, but not before she made another discreet view of the guests in the main ballroom. News of Edmund’s return had left her restless, her chest uneasy with the sort of nerves that struck before an important recital.

Her stomach dropped as she caught sight of a towering figure leaning against the entryway to the ballroom. Dark brown curls, with an undertone of auburn, framed a smirking, annoyingly handsome face, while eyes the color of sapphires twinkled smugly, unfettered by any mask despite the fact it was supposed to be a masquerade ball.

A few ladies were making eyes at him, no doubt ‘charmed’ by his rebellion against the nature of the ball. Isolde could imagine them whispering of how daring he was, to show up without a mask, nudging each other to walk past him or drop something in front of him—anything to capture his attention in return, though his attention was firmly fixed on Isolde.

She glared at him, wondering if he knew it was her or if his face had just stuck that way, forever etched with haughty self-importance.

Why come back tonight of all nights?

Of course, she already knew the answer: he wanted to ruin her debut. Revenge was a dish best served cold, after all, and it appeared he had waited six long years to exact it.

CHAPTER TWO

“A re you well, Lady Isolde?” Colin asked, as Isolde turned in a distracted circle around him, her head moving opposite to her body, her gaze unwillingly drawn to the cream and gold entrance of the ballroom.

Edmund had made himself scarce at the beginning of the dance, but she could not help feeling like he was still in the room somewhere; a prickle down the back of her neck, like she was being watched.

“Pardon? Yes... goodness, I am so very sorry,” she replied, concentrating on her dancing partner. “I thought I saw one of my friends looking rather distressed, but I think I was mistaken.”

I will not let you ruin this night, Edmund, as you have ruined so many others, she vowed, putting more enthusiasm into her steps and hops, flashing her most winning smile at Colin.

Unlike Edmund, the Marquess of Fenton seemed to be a true gentleman: shy, polite, intelligent, and bursting with compliments for her. Why should she waste another moment thinking about Edmund and how much she loathed him, when she was supposed to be having the night of her life? A society lady never had the chance to debut twice, so she needed to make the most of it, regardless of what unsavory characters might have been invited.

“Would you like to go to her?” Colin asked, his tone worried.

Isolde shook her head. “There is no need, Lord Fenton. I really was mistaken. That lady was wearing a silver mask, and my friend arrived with a golden one.” She paused to cast him another warm smile. “That is the trouble with masks, I suppose—one never quite knows who they are looking at.”

“That may be true for most,” Colin replied, pressing his palm to hers as they turned three slow circles around one another, their touching hands the center point. “But I know that I am looking at the rarest jewel of the Season. It cannot be denied. No gentleman here would argue.”

Isolde smiled at the praise—not too much, not too little. “You really are too kind, Lord Fenton. Truly, my cheeks shall never be cool again for all the blushing you are inspiring.”

“I wish that I could see that blush,” Colin said in earnest, a sigh in his voice. “Indeed, if I may be so bold—and please, strike me with your glove or reticule if I am being too bold—would you possibly consider wandering with me in the gardens after this dance? I hear they are exceptional.”

Isolde’s stomach fluttered with excitement; she was never one to refuse a wander in fine gardens, and she had been longing to explore those at the palace. Every time she wandered by the gates when she was in London, she thought the same thing, how nice it would be to stroll in such exquisite gardens. Having a handsome gentleman beside her would only make it more delightful.

“I should like that very much,” she said. “Once I find my mother, of course.”

“Of course,” Colin replied, gazing at her once again as if she were the most precious thing in the world.

The extraordinary sprawl of manicured gardens was precisely as Isolde had imagined,

transformed into a fairy realm by the flicker of torchlight and the silvery moon that shone above, as full and round and perfect as a freshly minted coin. Crushed-shell pathways gleamed white, guiding any guests who might find themselves wandering in the night air.

“I wish I could see it in the daylight too,” Isolde sighed, inhaling the fragrant aroma that drifted from the slumbering blooms and bushes.

“Say nothing to anyone,” Colin whispered, covering her hand with hers as she held onto the crook of his elbow, “but I happen to know the head gardener. A stroll in the afternoon would not be out of the question if that was your heart’s desire. This week, perhaps?”

Isolde nodded eagerly, caught up in the mystery and romance of promenading with a gentleman in such a dreamy place. It did not matter too much that Colin had yet to make her heart pound or her mind race with visions of a potential future, nor that he had barely made her stomach flutter. She was content to enjoy amenable company in a beautiful setting, and to take her time to see if there was any delayed spark between them. Perhaps, it would ignite later on. Perhaps, it would not. There was no rush to make any decisions; it was only her first outing into society, after all.

“That would be marvelous,” she told him, relishing the sound of her shoes crunching against the crushed shells, the sleepy coo of doves coming from a nearby apple tree, and the absolute serenity that enveloped her.

She glanced back over her shoulder, wanting to remark upon the beauty of the gardens to her mother.

A frown creased her brow, panic rising like a saucepan of milk left on the stove, boiling over. She was certain her mother had been right behind them. Indeed, Julianna Wilds, the Dowager Countess of Grayling, had been just as excited as her

daughter to venture out into the immaculate gardens.

Letting go of Colin's arm, she spoke her fears aloud. "Lord Fenton, I cannot see my mother anymore."

"I am sure she is somewhere nearby," Colin replied, weaving her arm through his once more. "She is not the sort of lady who would allow her daughter to wander unchaperoned. Fear not."

Frowning, but knowing that Colin was right, Isolde allowed herself to relax again. Soon enough, she settled back into the peace of the gardens, following Colin's lead as if they were back on the dance floor. Although, she did listen out more intently for the telltale crunch of her mother's shoes on the pathways, but as the time wore on, that comforting sound never materialized.

"She must be lost," Isolde said, pulling away from Colin, intending to make her way back through the gardens until she found her mother.

But Colin's hand closed around her wrist, tugging her into him rather vigorously. "Do not worry about your mother. She is up there somewhere, conversing with my mother."

"What do you mean? How can you possibly know that?" Isolde tried to shove him backward, but he would not budge.

"I asked her to intervene on my behalf," Colin replied, holding her so tightly that she could not breathe, as if he meant to crush her against his chest. "I thought it might be of benefit to the two of us if we were entirely alone for a short while. Indeed, I cannot very well kiss the most beautiful lady in society in front of everyone, now, can I? I should hate for us to cause a scandal."

Isolde released the rebellious girl who, for the most part, remained hidden inside her, buried deep. She glowered at Colin and slammed her palms into his chest, noting his wince with some satisfaction. He still wore his bird mask, but the mask beneath had slipped; he was not as nice nor as gentlemanly as he would have had her believe.

She told him as much. “I do not appreciate tricks and deceits, Lord Fenton,” she hissed. “Invite me into beautiful gardens under false pretenses at your peril. You do not know my true nature, and I doubt you would find her as gracious as I am being right now. So, with the greatest disrespect, please unhand me.”

“But I have not had my kiss,” Colin purred, eyes glinting. “I will not be going anywhere until I have savored what those other gentlemen in there can only dream about. So, with the greatest respect, hold still so I can kiss you, and truly stake my claim.”

Her hand flew up and smacked against his mouth as he tried to dip his head to kiss her. She pushed with all her might, his neck arcing back, but his arms around her waist held her firmly.

“Unhand me,” she seethed, furious with herself for trusting in the sweet words of such a man.

A crunch of heavy footfalls on the pathway preceded a gruff, gravelly voice that growled, “You heard the lady. Take your hands off her.” The footsteps drew nearer. “As for staking your claim, think again. And never again touch what is not yours. I do not tolerate anyone touching what is mine.”

Isolde did not know the voice, did not know what he meant by his words, and though she feared the insinuation, she feared Colin more in that moment.

“Yours?” Colin scoffed, thrashing his head to escape Isolde’s clawing hand.

A shadow emerged from a gap in the torchlit hedge, a short distance away. A tall figure in a greatcoat, apparently oblivious to the balmy warmth of the evening, the tails of the garment flapping in the light breeze. He wore a top hat and in a flare of amber light from the flickering flame, she caught the glint of an elegant mask beneath the rim: bronze roses and thorns coiling and weaving across the upper part of his face, his eyes dark and menacing through the almond-shaped holes.

A rough hand seized Colin's arm and flung it away with considerable strength, while another rough hand grabbed Isolde by the wrist and pulled her from danger's grip, hauling her toward the mysterious figure instead. He tugged her so fiercely that she hit his chest with a thump, but she made no attempt to run from him or to free herself from his grip.

His powerful arm snaked around her waist, strong and secure, and though he did not squeeze her or constrict her or hold her there with any distinct force, she felt quite breathless in his unexpected embrace. Her cheeks, too, were flushed with such heat, as though she had sprinted through the gardens back to the palace already.

It is the night air, that is all, she told herself, fully aware that it had more to do with the hard muscle underneath her palm, and the way her unknown champion had almost curved himself around her to keep her safe; his broad shoulders rounded.

"You spoke of your mother," the man said in that same rumbling growl. "If you do not want her to find out that she raised a scoundrel, I suggest you begin running."

Colin's mouth opened and closed like a beached fish, but he finally found his voice. "How long have you been following us? Are you some manner of degenerate?"

"I know a sly weasel when I see one," the rescuer replied. "I thought it best to keep an eye on you. And I will be keeping an eye on you, Lord Fenton, so remember to watch your back. You never know where I might be next, and I might feel less

generous on that day.”

Colin did not need to be told a third time. Whirling around, he took off up the shadowed pathway, sprinting as if Isolde’s masked savior were chasing him, leaving the scene of his crime without so much as an apology to the woman he had tried to kiss without permission.

But I shall have an apology, she vowed, glaring after the cretin.

“Thank you,” she said, turning toward the tall, unseasonably dressed gentleman who had likely saved her reputation, though there could be no denying that the night was truly ruined now. And, surprisingly, not at Edmund’s hand.

The man released her slowly, and she had to resist the urge to cling on a while longer, embarrassed that she would even have such a notion. But he did not respond to her thanks, simply bowing his head. Perhaps, he might have said something eventually, if the sound of ladies’ voices had not drifted on the breeze to their ears at that moment.

Passing by the torchlight, he turned and left her with one lingering, gleaming glance before he disappeared through the gap in the hedges, melting back into the shadows from whence he came.

Stung as she was by her rescuer’s silence, Isolde wasted no time breaking into a run of her own, eager to find her mother and return to her brother as quickly as possible. In truth, she had had quite enough of the palace gardens, and society in general, for one evening.

Her debut, it seemed, had no choice but to be cut short.

“And you never heard his name?” Prudence hugged the pillow she had snatched out from under Isolde’s head to wake her up, desperate to hear all of the events of the

night before. At three-and-ten, the youngest of the Wilds sisters had a greater thirst for gossip than even the most seasoned of society's scandalmongers.

Isolde shook her head, glancing at Teresa, who perched daintily on the end of the bed, pretending to read a book. But she had not turned the page in at least twenty minutes, not while Isolde had told the thrilling tale of a mysterious stranger who had emerged from the shadows to save her from the clutches of the dastardly Marquess of Fenton.

It was rare that Teresa's attention could be dragged away from her books, so Isolde had made the story somewhat more dramatic in order to hold Teresa's interest.

"Was he really so handsome?" Prudence urged.

"The most handsome gentleman I have ever seen," Isolde fibbed, for all she had seen of the man were his gleaming eyes and a fleeting glimpse of full, enticing lips.

Of course, she could have spoken at great length about the strength of his arms and the hard muscle of his chest and the broadness of his shoulders, but she did not think that was appropriate for such young ears. She was not even certain it was appropriate for her mind, though it had not stopped her from dreaming of the stranger ever since her hurried return to Mayfair the previous evening.

"Tell us everything again," Prudence said, leaning back against the post of the four-poster bed in Isolde's chambers.

Isolde chuckled. "Again? Surely, it would bore you now that you know everything."

"I would not mind hearing it again," Teresa said quietly, closing her book altogether. "Particularly the part where he spoke for the first time."

Isolde shrugged. "Very well."

Secretly pleased to have the full concentration of both of her sisters, she began the story again from the start, where she had danced with Colin, and how that had led to what might have been the most exciting moment of her eight-and-ten years.

“His touch lingered,” she concluded with a sigh, bending the truth a little, “as if he did not wish to let me go, but with the gaggle of ladies approaching, I fear he had no choice or we would have been?—”

“Scandalized!” a grim voice rumbled from the bedchamber doorway.

All three sisters whipped around, gasping at the sight of their brother. How long has he been standing there? Isolde flushed with embarrassment, wishing she had not been quite so creative with the truth.

“How could you be so careless?” Vincent snapped as he stalked further into the room, arms crossed. “Do you realize what could have happened if you had been seen? I should have known better than to think you were entirely reformed. You will always cause trouble, Isolde. Always. I do not know why I thought any differently.”

Isolde blinked, hurt and furious all at once. “Mama was with me in the gardens. I cannot be blamed if she forgot her duty as chaperone.”

“Yes, well, evidently she cannot be trusted either,” Vincent muttered. “This is poor timing, Isolde. I am supposed to be venturing to Bath soon. How am I to do that now?”

Isolde glared at him. “You get into your carriage and instruct the driver to take you to Bath. It is rather simple, I should think.”

“Do not test me, Isolde.” Vincent grimaced, sweeping a stressed hand through his hair. “As you have proven that you cannot be left to your own devices without risking

our entire family's reputation, more supervision will be required. Yes, a lot more supervision."

He walked back out of the room without further explanation, and as Isolde watched him go, a lump of dread hardened in her chest, reflected on the faces of her sisters. Whatever he meant by "supervision," he had left her in no doubt that it could not be good.

CHAPTER THREE

Tobacco smoke wisped and coiled like morning fog across the loud main parlor of Golding's Gentlemen's Club, the scent of spilled brandy clinging to the acrid air. In a quieter corner, nursing a glass of port, Edmund Connolly was not having quite the welcome home he had been looking forward to.

"Why so glum?" Vincent, sitting across from Edmund with a measure of brandy, asked.

Edmund raised his head, having been lost in thought, his mind adrift in an altogether different part of London. "Glum? Not at all. Tired would be a better word. I fear I am still adjusting to the atrocious English weather."

"But it has been fair all week."

"There is a stark difference between good weather in England and good weather on the Continent," Edmund pointed out, smiling at his oldest friend.

"Ah, well, I would know nothing of that. I always imagined I would have a grand tour, but, alas, it shall have to wait a few more years—perhaps many more years if my hopes of finally adventuring abroad rest on Prudence marrying." Vincent mustered a tight laugh and took a deep sip of his brandy as if he very much needed it.

Edmund cocked his head. "How old is she now?"

"Three-and-ten. Teresa is six-and-ten and will likely be as difficult to find a husband

for as Prudence when she is of age.” Vincent groaned. “How is it possible that all three could be so completely opposite to one another? Prudence is wild and untamable. Teresa is mute half the time. And Isolde is...”

“A law unto herself?” Edmund interjected, chuckling stiffly.

Vincent nodded slowly, sitting back in his chair as the babble of other men’s chatter rose and fell in waves around them. “I thought she was improving, I thought she had become a proper lady at last, but I was mistaken.” He sat up straight once more. “Now, I must go to Bath, and I have not the faintest notion of what I am going to do with them—my sisters and my mother.”

“Bath? Whatever for?” Edmund hoped that his friend could not see his disappointment. He had been hoping to reacquaint himself with London with Vincent at his side.

“We have inherited a considerable fortune,” Vincent explained. “I did not know the man well—a distant second cousin of some kind—but he has left all of his worldly wealth to me. I must go to Bath to collect the inheritance, and do not know how long that shall take.”

“Can you not take the ladies to Bath with you?”

Vincent hesitated, swirling his glass, transfixed by the movement of the amber liquid. “I could, but I fear it would jeopardize Isolde’s prospects. She has only just debuted, and though there is society aplenty in Bath, the true elite are here. I need her to be well-stationed in marriage, and she will insist on being wherever her sisters are, so I cannot take them and leave her behind. Moreover, I cannot trust her to stay behind, not even with our mother present.”

“There was no one of interest for her last night?” Edmund asked, his brow creasing as

he heard a somewhat familiar voice weaving through the smoke. A reedy, pathetic voice that reminded him of a certain wretch he had encountered the previous evening.

Vincent downed the contents of his glass, summoning the waiter for another measure. “I had hoped so, but it was not to be.”

“Is that why you left early?” Edmund searched the fog of the parlor, trying to find the owner of that voice.

“In part,” Vincent admitted. “What of you? Did you encounter any young ladies charming enough to make you relinquish your bachelorhood?”

Edmund glanced at his friend as the waiter came by to replenish their drinks. He had encountered someone last night; a rather fierce lady who had needed his help before an opportunistic coward could force a kiss upon her. A lady he had not ceased thinking about since, wondering if she was well after her unpleasant experience.

If he thought about her too intently, he could almost feel the firm press of her palms against his chest and see the grateful gleam of her eyes through her elegant mask. He opened his mouth to tell Vincent about the woman he rescued, but halted himself before a single word could slip out.

If Vincent knew the woman, Edmund might very well ruin her by accident, by speaking of the events in the gardens of Kensington Palace. And as much as he wanted to talk about it, he realized that only silence would keep her truly safe—indeed, what was the point in rescuing her last night, if a scandal destroyed her tomorrow?

“I doubt such a lady exists,” he said to Vincent instead.

Vincent nodded, tugging at his collar. “Then, you will not have any other prior

engagements to attend to this coming week?”

“Nothing too pressing,” Edmund replied, realizing a moment too late where his friend’s question was heading.

Vincent jumped right in, a sly glint in his eyes. “So, you would not be averse to taking care of my dear, feral sisters and my mother while I am away? I am certain they would not mind aiding you in your readjustment to the ways of polite English society.”

“No,” Edmund said abruptly, unsettled by the request.

“No, you are not averse to taking care of them?” Vincent grinned. “That is a relief. I shall be forever in your debt, Edmund. Truly, I cannot thank you enough for doing this favor for me.”

Edmund tried to protest, tried to get out any possible reason why he could not do such a thing for his friend, but the excuses would not come. He had never been a particularly good liar, preferring omission over outright untruths, and Vincent would see right through him either way.

And I owe him. I owe him a great deal. My life, probably. Perhaps, that was why he could not find a worthy excuse. In his younger years, cast adrift in a lonely world with no family and no idea what he was supposed to do in his new position as Duke, Vincent had been his anchor, holding him steady through every storm, guiding him safely back to calmer waters. The least Edmund could do in return was keep an eye on the Wilds girls for a short while.

“If you are gone for more than a week, I will withdraw and leave them to run amok,” Edmund grumbled, while a look of genuine relief passed across Vincent’s face and relaxed his posture.

“Thank you, Edmund,” Vincent said. “Truly, thank you.”

Raising his hand, Edmund summoned the waiter and asked him to bring over what was left of the bottle of port. He would need more than a meager measure of the stuff if he was to share a residence, and the lion’s share of his time, with Isolde Wilds—otherwise known as the bane of his existence. Even after three years of absence, she had not lost that title, and he doubted she ever would.

Isolde hummed her way down the stairs of the family’s Mayfair townhouse, daydreaming of tall, masked gentlemen in beautiful gardens, and contemplating what she might have for her breakfast.

As it was still rather early in the morning, the sun barely high enough to cast a glow through the townhouse windows, she had not bothered to dress for the day yet. Instead, she wore her nightgown and housecoat, determined to irritate Vincent if they happened to cross paths. If he truly believed that she had not changed in six years, then she figured she ought to remind him of who she used to be— then , he would take back his unkind words.

“I think I might have breakfast in the garden,” she mumbled aloud, ceasing her humming. “Yes, that would be a fine thing.”

Turning right and heading for the kitchens, resuming her jaunty tune, she did not hear the study door open nor see the lumbering figure lurch out until it was too late. A hefty weight knocked into her, and she stumbled backward, saved from a fall by bouncing off the opposite wall. Her shoulder collided with mahogany, a sharp pain shooting down her left arm.

“Have your eyes not yet opened? Are you half asleep?” she blurted out, shocked into rudeness by the impact and the smarting sting of her arm.

Indeed, considering where the figure had emerged from, she suspected it was her brother... until the morning glow illuminated the man's face. A horrified gasp slipped from Isolde's throat as she looked upon one of the most handsome, infuriating men in all of England, her irritation liquefying into molten anger.

"Had you not been humming that awful song like a common sailor, you might have had the wherewithal to step out of the way," Edmund's hoarse voice replied, eyes narrowing.

Isolde clenched her jaw, her hands balling into fists, wishing he was not so tall and imposing. Wishing he was as ugly outside as he was inside.

"Me get out of the way?" she retorted. "I see you learned no manners during your grand tour. Maybe, you ought to return to the Continent and stay there until you have learned some."

"I will not argue with someone who cannot admit they are in the wrong," he replied gruffly, attempting to move past her.

She blocked his path and though he could have easily knocked her sideways with the slightest nudge of his broad shoulder and muscular arm, he stalled with a dark look on his face. Even someone as unfeeling as him would not barge past a lady, or so it seemed.

"But you would know all about that, would you not?" she said.

"You can either stand aside or I can move you out of the way," he warned, with the strong hands and athletic physique to back up the threat. "It is your choice."

She squared her shoulders and straightened her posture, but she still barely came up to his neck, which rather made trying to look intimidating an impossibility. "What

were you doing in my brother's study? Not plundering his generosity as always, I hope?"

"I was asleep," Edmund growled. "Now, I mean to have breakfast. You are standing in my way. Move aside."

"Asleep in the study?" Isolde scoffed. "I suppose I do not need to guess where you were last night. But I should warn you, Your Grace, I do not appreciate those who would lead my brother astray."

Edmund sighed, staring down at her with his eyebrow arched, a pitying expression upon his face. "Vincent said you had not changed, despite his best hopes. I see that he was right."

She recoiled at that, the sting of her brother's reprimand throbbing afresh. "Perhaps, you ought to forgo breakfast and leave. I intended to have breakfast, and your presence is rather ruining my appetite."

"It is bewildering to me that, at eight-and-ten, you are still behaving like a child," he said coolly. "Always resorting to such juvenile remarks. If you ever hope to find your fairytale prince and live your happily ever after, I would suggest remedying that first. No man wants to deal with such pettiness."

She glared at him, cheeks flushing with furious heat. In all the years they had known one another, he had taken every opportunity to mock her for her belief in romance. And while that belief had set her on a dangerous path at her debut, she would not let him continue to tease her for it. If anything, her unpleasant encounter with Colin, and her rather marvelous encounter with the masked stranger, had made her all the more determined to find an exceptional love. The kind that made other ladies swoon, and made life feel like the most exquisite dream.

Unfortunately, Edmund had a habit of making other ladies swoon. Ladies who did not truly know him, as Isolde did.

“I might make remarks that you do not favor, but at least I am not utterly unlovable,” she muttered. “Indeed, it rather smarts of envy. Duke or not, you will never find a wife. If any lady had the choice between spending ten minutes in your company or listening to the most tedious sermon in a feverishly warm church on the hottest day of the year, they would, without fail, choose the latter every time.”

Edmund’s dark blue eyes flashed. “Envy? You flatter yourself, Lady Isolde. Then again, you always have.”

“Says the gentleman who did not bother to wear a mask to a masquerade,” she shot back. “Only someone wishing to draw attention to himself would do such a thing.”

He was about to respond, no doubt striking her with another cutting comment, when a different voice split the tense atmosphere in the eastern hallway.

“Stand down, soldiers!” Vincent’s laughter echoed as he hurried to join his sister and his friend. “I want no warfare in my residence. Like it or not, this is neutral territory.”

Edmund looked to his friend, his expression still pinched with annoyance. “I do feel like a canister has exploded in my skull. I was hoping the cook might prepare me something to ease the ache.”

“Certainly, she would be happy to,” Vincent assured, gaze darting between the two enemies. “And what of you, Sister? What brings you downstairs so early?”

Isolde cast her brother a withering look. “I am always awake at this hour. It is you who idles in bed, so I can understand why you are disoriented. Welcome, Brother—this is what true morning looks like.” She tilted her chin up in defiance. “As

for what I am doing, I was planning to have breakfast when some oaf nearly sent me flying. I shall have a bruise on my shoulder that will entirely ruin the gowns I planned to wear this week.”

“Ah, speaking of which,” Vincent hesitated, turning his gaze everywhere but at Isolde, “Edmund will be escorting you to the week’s events and gatherings, along with Mother, of course. I must leave for Bath by noon, and considering... um... recent troubles, I must have a replacement here. A replacement that I trust to watch over you until I return, so no harm can befall you.”

Isolde stared at her brother, mouth hanging open, as shocked as if he had struck her with his hand. “You cannot be serious! I refuse! If you mean to... to... inflict this beast upon this household, then I shall also be departing at noon. I shall go to Charlotte’s or Louisa’s—goodness, I would rather spend the Season at our country seat, in complete isolation, if him being my wretched shadow is the alternative.”

“Charming as ever,” Edmund muttered, sweeping a casual hand through his wavy, warm brown locks.

Tentatively, Vincent put his hand on Isolde’s shoulder. “It is only for a week, dear sister. Indeed, it is my hope that it will be good for the two of you. I cannot have my dearest friend and my sweet sister at one another’s throats forever.”

“That is not your choice to make,” Isolde retorted, shaking off Vincent’s hand. “And if you do not want warfare in this house, I suggest you rethink your strategy, because this will end in tears, and they shall not be mine.”

Certain that Edmund was going to jump in with a scathing rejoinder, Isolde took off before he could, marching away from that awful man as fast as she could. As she did, her brain raced, already conjuring up schemes for the days to come, for if Vincent would not change his mind—which she sensed he would not—then she would make

him wish he had never left her in the 'trustworthy' hands of Edmund Connolly.

And maybe, just maybe, her masked stranger might come to her rescue once again, saving her from an interminable week in Edmund's company. She sighed at the thought, but the thrill of it passed quickly. After all, getting her unknown champion to emerge from the shadows again might well be easier said than done; she had no name, she had no information, she did not even know what he looked like.

Still, there was no one more determined to succeed than a woman scorned... and a woman who believed in fate of the most romantic kind.

CHAPTER FOUR

Isolde perched delicately on the edge of the settee in the townhouse drawing room, conscious of her posture, her words, making sure she sipped her tea daintily and did not partake in more than one small cake. Being a refined lady, or so she had learned, was more exhausting than anyone had told her it would be.

“And do you enjoy Cornwall, Mr. Grimshaw?” she asked the fourth of the morning’s suitors—the eldest son of the Viscount of Chelmsley. A handsome fellow but lacking in conversational ease.

Mr. Grimshaw nodded. “There are very pleasant walks. I walk a great deal. Do you walk?”

Do I walk? Isolde resisted the urge to roll her eyes.

“I simply adore long walks,” she replied instead, searching his face for any sign of the masked stranger who had inhabited her daydreams since her debut. Could it be him? Was that why he was being so reticent? Did he fear she might recognize his voice?

Across the drawing room, by the window, where he had been keeping a stern vigil throughout the morning’s visitations, Edmund cleared his throat loudly. “And Lady Isolde is in need of her constitutional. Thank you for your visit, Mr. Grimshaw. You may leave now.”

The Viscount’s son blinked in surprise. “You wish me to leave?”

“I did not say that,” Isolde replied, mortified by Edmund’s interruption.

No gentleman in want of a wife wanted to hear that a young lady was about to take her morning constitutional, considering the implication. Among polite society, it did not merely mean a brisk stroll, and Edmund knew that all too well.

“You have not even finished your tea, Mr. Grimshaw,” she insisted, flashing her brightest smile. “Please, do tell me more about these splendid walks that you enjoy in Cornwall.”

She did not actually want to hear about them, nor was she particularly interested in Mr. Grimshaw, but she was not going to let Edmund decide when her gentlemen callers were to be dismissed.

“But His Grace has asked me to leave,” Mr. Grimshaw said, standing awkwardly.

Isolde rose to her feet, bursting with sudden desperation. “Were you at the ball the other night? At Kensington Palace?”

She certainly could not allow Mr. Grimshaw to depart before she had, without doubt, figured out if he was her mysterious savior or not.

“Me? Heavens, no.” Mr. Grimshaw glanced at Edmund, as if he did not know if he should continue to speak or scurry off without another word. “I do not favor public gatherings. I am only here because my mother insisted.”

Isolde’s own mother, Julianna, took that moment to chime in. “Oh, do give your mother my fondest wishes, will you not? I have not seen her in an age.” She smiled between the two gentlemen in the room. “And, please, do not be too dismayed. His Grace is simply ensuring that there is no awkwardness when my daughter’s next caller arrives.”

“Of course.” Mr. Grimshaw bowed far too low, clearly rattled by Edmund’s imposing, scowling presence. “Apologies for the intrusion, Your Grace.”

“You are forgiven,” Edmund replied, to Isolde’s abject infuriation.

How was she meant to behave in a ladylike fashion with Edmund standing there, chasing off all of her prospects, acting as if he had any say in who she spoke to at all? But, naturally, she could not berate him in front of Mr. Grimshaw, for though she did not want the man to pursue her anymore, he might spread news of her being discourteous or unrefined.

“Thank you for your visit, Mr. Grimshaw,” she called after the Viscount’s son as he hurried from the room. Had he had a tail, it would have been tucked firmly between his legs.

The instant she heard the front door open and close, she rounded on Edmund.

“I am sorry, Your Grace, I did not realize that you had woken up as me this morning,” she seethed. “Shall I lend you a gown so you can sit in my place and entertain any other callers who happen to come by? I could stand there in the window and glare at everyone. That would be fun, would it not?”

He had behaved the same way with every caller thus far, scaring them off or outright demanding their departure, giving her little opportunity to get to know a single one. And Isolde was tired of it, wishing he would shove off back to his own townhouse and leave them be, as he had done the previous day. After breakfast, to her lingering annoyance.

Jullianna reached over and grabbed Isolde’s hand. “Be genteel, darling. Edmund is just being cautious on your behalf. Why, who would know a gentleman’s intentions better than another gentleman? You ought to be thanking him for thinning out the

herd, so to speak.”

“Thanking him?” Isolde gaped at her mother. “That settles it—the world has gone mad, or I am stuck in a terrible nightmare. I would rather swim in the Thames than thank that... that... insufferable creature.”

Edmund fixed Isolde with a cold stare. “Are you quite finished?”

“Finished with your interjections, yes,” she shot back.

Sweeping a hand through his dark brown curls, Edmund approached the low table that sat between the two settees. Casually, he poured himself a cup of tea and took a raspberry madeleine from the array of cakes, taking his time, understanding full well how much it annoyed Isolde.

“Did you like Mr. Grimshaw?” he asked, taking a pointed sip of his tea.

Isolde narrowed her eyes at him. “What?”

“Is he the hero you have always dreamed of? Could you envision him as your husband?”

“Well... no, but?—”

“Then I spared you both the trouble of pretending otherwise,” Edmund interrupted. “And your dear mother is right—you ought to be thanking me for that.”

Incensed, and ready to hurl the entire tray of cakes and fancies at him, Isolde might have shed her façade of ladylike propriety altogether had there not been an abrupt knock on the drawing room door.

The butler, Mr. Richards, entered apprehensively. “There is a Lord Warrington at the door, to call upon Lady Isolde.”

“Then show him in,” Edmund commanded, before Isolde or her mother could.

But as they waited for the next suitor to appear, Edmund did not hesitate to land one last stinging remark. “Let us see if this one is the gentleman of your dreams, Lady Isolde, though I truly doubt that anyone could reach such lofty heights of expectation. There is a reason that all of those romantic novels are branded as fiction.”

It took every shred of willpower that Isolde possessed to force her anger into submission, figuring that if she ruined the next visit with her fury it would only give Edmund satisfaction. He would have to look elsewhere for that, no matter how hard he tried to taunt her.

I will not be prevented from finding the man of my dreams because of you. He is in London somewhere. And if the masked man was half the gentleman that she hoped he was, he would want to see her again, to ensure that she had not suffered any after-effects from Colin’s actions.

“Lady Isolde, what a rare pleasure this is,” Lord Warrington began well, his light blue eyes unwavering in their warm attention toward her. He bowed to Julianna and Edmund in turn, but his gaze immediately shot back to Isolde. “I do not know how it is possible, but you look more radiant now than you did at your debut. I confess, I mistook you for an angel, somehow lost in Kensington Palace.”

Isolde beamed at the compliment. “But how could you possibly know what I looked like beneath my mask?”

“Another confession—I have admired you, from afar, since you enchanted everyone at the theater last year,” Lord Warrington replied with a roguish, pleasing smile.

“Have you any intention of honoring us all with your presence this year? I have a particularly good view of the stage from my private box.”

Isolde sat up straighter, already enjoying the man’s charm more than she had done with her previous callers. He was undoubtedly tall enough to be her mysterious champion, his shoulders broad, his manner confident, and there was a roughness to his voice that sparked hope that she had found him .

“I intend to visit the theater often this Season,” she replied shyly, remembering those strong arms curving around her, and the faint memory of a scent: woodsmoke and something soapy, like rosemary or lavender. “The opera, too, though you must not ask me to decide which I prefer. It would be like asking me which sister I love more—an impossible question.”

“I am exactly the same,” Lord Warrington urged, moving closer to the settee opposite. “You have two sisters, do you not?”

Isolde nodded. “And a brother, who is presently in Bath.”

“I do not need to know such intimate details. What a gentleman does in the privacy of his own chambers to cleanse himself is his own business.” Lord Warrington flashed a debonair grin, conjuring a giddy laugh from Isolde’s throat.

He had been the first of five suitors to attempt a joke, which charmed her all the more. To her mind, humor was as important as station, fortune, appearance, and a keen desire to dance.

“Please, sit and make yourself comfortable,” Isolde insisted, casting a conspiratorial glance at her mother, who seemed equally captivated by Lord Warrington. “Would you care for some tea? A cake, perhaps?”

“Oh, I do not much like tea,” Lord Warrington replied. “I know, admitting such a thing ought to have me exiled from the country, but I would not begin our first proper encounter with a lie. Your company, your conversation, and perhaps a scone shall be enough refreshment for me.”

Shocked as she was that she had met a gentleman who did not like tea, she felt rather refreshed by his honesty. She was about to tell him as much, when Edmund’s voice pierced through the warm atmosphere like a shard of ice.

“Sitting will not be necessary,” he said abruptly. “Lady Isolde is tired. She has seen enough. You may leave with or without your scone.”

Lord Warrington faltered in a strange half-crouch, his backside hovering a short distance from the settee cushions, his expression confused as he looked from Isolde to Edmund and back again.

“Nonsense,” Isolde insisted with forced cheer. “Do sit, Lord Warrington.”

Lord Warrington sat down slowly, his eyebrows knitted together in consternation. “Is it a jape of some kind?”

“I have no notion of why he said that,” Isolde replied.

“It was no jape,” Edmund cut in. “And do not sit when I have instructed you not to. Lord Warrington, with respect, it is time for you to go.”

Isolde flashed Edmund a dark look. “With respect, Lord Warrington, I do not want you to leave just yet. I have barely made your acquaintance.”

“Well, that is what I thought,” Lord Warrington replied, “but if His Grace wishes me to depart, then?—”

“You ought to do as you are told,” Edmund said. “The first sign of a fine gentleman is how well he takes instruction. You are failing, Lord Warrington.”

Isolde looked to her mother in desperation, as Lord Warrington shuffled to the very edge of the settee, apparently still uncertain as to what he should do. But Isolde could see the desire to get out of there as quickly as possible forming upon the suitor’s perplexed face.

“Cream and jam?” Julianna said in a bright voice.

Lord Warrington tilted his head to one side, frowning. “Pardon?”

“For your scone,” Julianna replied.

“Then, I am to stay?” Lord Warrington asked.

“Of course you are,” Isolde said, flashing another warning look at Edmund.

Julianna continued to smile as if someone had winched her mouth into that tight, unnatural position. “If it is my daughter’s wish, I do not see why not.”

“And is that your wish, Lady Isolde?” Lord Warrington asked with hope in his voice.

Isolde schooled her expression back to ladylike shyness, fluttering her eyelashes at the most promising suitor of the morning. “It is?—”

“Not the wish of the household,” Edmund interrupted, igniting a sudden burst of fury in Isolde that threatened to crack her entire façade of politeness into smithereens. “I have been placed in charge of Lady Isolde in her brother’s absence. In truth, Lord Warrington, he would not like you.”

Lord Warrington blinked at that, rising suddenly to his feet. “Now listen here, Your Grace, I have known Vincent for a year or two and he has never expressed any such opinion of me. I rather get the feeling that you are jealous, Your Grace. Has she rejected your suit? Is that the trouble here?”

At that, Edmund laughed. A wild, raucous laugh that hardly had a drop of true amusement in it. A cold thing, mocking and deeply unkind, prompting Isolde’s face to heat with a strange combination of abject rage and writhing embarrassment. She should have laughed back at the insinuation that anything but enmity could exist between her and Edmund, but she only managed a dry chuckle.

“Outlandish notion,” Edmund said, his laughter ending sharply. “And for that accusation, I really must insist on you leaving at once.”

To Isolde’s surprise, it was her mother who got up. “Come, Lord Warrington. I think, perhaps, we should arrange for you to return another day. You will, will you not?”

Lord Warrington allowed himself to be escorted out by Isolde’s mother, muttering as he went, “I would be happy to return when Vincent comes back, but I shall not set foot in this house again if His Grace is present.”

“Of course, Lord Warrington,” Julianna said in a soothing voice, closing the drawing room door behind her, but not before casting a look at Isolde that said: Whatever this quarrel is, fix it at once. As if it was somehow Isolde’s fault that Edmund was behaving as he always did—like a rude boy that had never grown up.

CHAPTER FIVE

“My brother asked you to watch over the household,” Isolde snapped, jumping up from the settee. “He did not ask you to decimate my hopes of finding a husband. What is the matter with you? Have you yet to rid yourself of your brandy sickness? If you feel unwell, please do us all a favor and leave. Stay gone. I do not want you here.”

She marched around to the back of the settee where she began to pace, not trusting herself to be too close to the cakes and scones in case she gave into her wilder impulses and hurled the entire tray of them at Edmund. Nothing would have pleased her more, in that moment, than to see him covered in cream and jam, having to wipe it from his eyes to resume his usual glaring at her.

“A brandy-induced sickness is far better than the sickness that plagues you,” Edmund retorted coolly, perching on the window seat to sip from his cup of tea. After all that mocking laughter, he likely had a dry throat.

“And what sickness is that?” Isolde whirled around, scowling at him. “Is it this Duke-shaped splinter in my side that continues to fester despite my best attempts to be rid of it?”

He turned up his nose. “What a foul description. You ought to revisit your education on how to be civil.” He pushed away from the window seat, moving toward her. “The sickness I am talking about is your foolish love sickness. It has addled your brain.”

“Love sickness?” she scoffed. “Whatever are you talking about? And if you mention

a single word about fairytales or romantic novels, I shall pluck my favorite from this shelf right here and lob it at your head.”

She rested her hand threateningly on the small array of books that lined the shelf nearest to her. Her London collection, for when she was not at her family’s country seat, to keep her occupied in the quieter moments of city life.

Edmund paused at the opposite end of the wide avenue between the settee and the bookshelves, his blue eyes narrowing as if he were trying to memorize the entirety of *Paradise Lost*.

“You do not see it, do you?” he said with a slight shake of his head.

“See what?”

“That these gentlemen with their sweet words and compliments and charm do not care a jot about you,” he replied. “Either they are atrociously boring and have been forced into this by their mothers, so not worth your efforts, or they are fortune hunters that have spotted easy prey. That is all I have seen this morning—the dullards and the opportunists. And you are so desperate for a love match that you cannot see right through their fa?ades.”

Isolde’s forefingers hooked over the top of the spine of the thickest book on the shelf, as Edmund came ever closer. An intimidation tactic, no doubt.

“I am not desperate for a love match,” she gasped, her neck complaining as it arched back to look up at him.

“You are,” he said, stopping just a pace away. “It is not entirely your fault—your mother has put notions into your head since you were young. But you must grow up and grow out of such ideas, or you will end up filling your daughter’s heads with

foolish notions that will not serve them well either.”

Isolde’s heart began to race, her skin tingling strangely, like a cold sweat prickling down her neck that had somehow branched across the rest of her. A symptom of her anger, no doubt, rather than his close proximity—closer than he had ever been to her before. It had to be her anger. She would accept no other reason.

“I am capable of deciding for myself who is “worth my effort” and who is not,” she rasped, her throat suddenly tight. “So, Your Grace , stand down from the watch that my brother has tasked you with. I am not so blind as you think, nor am I lovesick or desperate. Indeed, perhaps you ought to concentrate on your own future instead of taking a mallet to mine. At the very least, find yourself a more productive pastime.”

He took another half step, and his hand came up to push the book she had slightly pulled out, back into its position on the shelf. His fingertips brushed hers for a second, no more, but the touch was like lightning had jumped between his skin and hers. She recoiled sharply, uncertain of what trickery was afoot while her heart raced faster.

“I am capable of putting my books back, too,” she muttered, her breath catching.

He frowned down at her, teeth grazing his lower lip in thought.

A moment later, he shrugged and breezed past her, his arm brushing hers in the same way that his fingertips had, as if he wanted to take up some of the space that she possessed. A habit of his arrogance, she reasoned, for she could think of no other reason why he would want to be so near to her, to touch her however accidentally.

“Then, consider me a silent sentinel from now on,” he said, reaching the door. “Make your own mistakes, stubborn girl. I will not try to help you again. I will not be intervening unless you are in danger.”

With that, he walked out, leaving the door open in a manner he knew would annoy her.

Leaning back against the bookshelf, her hand to her chest, Isolde listened for the sound of Edmund's footsteps on the stairs and struggled to make sense of what had just happened. Indeed, for someone who claimed to have been helping her see through the men who pretended to care, she wondered why he had not added himself to that list.

For Vincent, Edmund told himself sternly, once more positioned by the window while ingrates and sycophants and unworthy men filed in and out of the drawing room. I promised him I would, so I will. A week is not so long.

Although, the previous day and that current morning felt like an eternity, every hour seeming to tick by with tortuous slowness until it seemed like he had been there for a week already. Holding his tongue had been the hardest part, but if Isolde thought she was above his perception and assistance, so be it. He would let her do as she pleased, sifting through her suitors herself.

And doing a poor job of it... It was Isolde's second morning of accepting callers and, already, she had kept one gentleman, a Mr. Harris, in the drawing room for an hour when he ought to have been cast out after five minutes for saying he admired her necklace.

No gentleman of merit looked at the jewelry first when there was beauty to be appreciated and studied. Mr. Harris should have observed the color of Isolde's eyes long before the glint of diamonds caught his eye, at least in Edmund's opinion. Not that he had ever remarked upon the color and clarity and charm of a lady's eyes, nor would he.

The second caller had clearly been suffering a bout of 'brandy sickness,' as Isolde

called it, and the third had not had a single intelligent word to say.

“Do you like to read, Lady Isolde?” the latest caller, Lord Spofforth, asked as he politely sipped his tea.

Edmund’s gaze drifted to the bookshelves, picking out the book that he had pushed back into place the day before. He clenched and unclenched his hand at the memory, uneasy with the idea that he had touched Isolde in any way, shape, or form. Even more uneasy with the fleeting moment afterward where he had wanted to be softer toward her, just for a short while, to make her see sense in the chaos of the marriage mart.

It was all too easy to pick the wrong partner and be stuck with them for the rest of one’s life. As much as they could not abide each other, Edmund did not want that for her. Rather, he did not want to have to hear about it through Vincent, not when it could be avoided if she would just listen to him for once.

“There are few things I adore more,” Isolde replied to Lord Spofforth. “That being said, my sister is the great devourer of books in this household. I doubt I could match her, even if I were to spend every hour of every day with my nose in a book.”

Lord Spofforth smiled at that. “What books do you favor?”

“Oh... I could not say,” Isolde replied shyly. “My tastes are quite ordinary. I enjoy what is popular.”

A glint flashed in Lord Spofforth’s dark eyes as he leaned forward, his smile seeming somewhat menacing to Edmund—but what did he know?

“You “could not say” or you will not say?” Lord Spofforth prompted, rankling Edmund.

He knew exactly what Lord Spofforth was trying to coax out of her, and it astonished him and frustrated him that neither Isolde nor her mother could see it. Lord Spofforth was a walking alarm bell, clanging mercilessly, yet neither woman could hear it. Indeed, it irked Edmund all the more that Lord Spofforth would be so brazen with the Dowager sitting right there, however obliviously.

He wants you to say that you read things you should not—the ‘popular’ books that young ladies are secretly reading. He knew *The Monk* was causing consistent uproar, though he had not read it himself.

“It is more that I simply cannot choose,” Isolde replied with an affected laugh that made Edmund want to turn his nose up yet again.

That was not the way Isolde laughed; he had heard her often enough with her brother, and it was a full, rich, uninhibited sound that might have been contagious if he did not have the restraint he possessed. Truly, he could not understand why she would put on a laugh that sounded so hollow.

But he could understand why Lord Spofforth seemed so enamored by it. He, too, was likely seeing sapphires instead of the lighter blue of her eyes.

“Forgive me if I am being too bold, Lady Isolde,” Lord Spofforth said, his smile warm and rehearsed. “But might you consider taking a turn about the private park with me, while the weather is so nice?”

The park in question was an oval of lush green lawns, paved walkways, benches for sitting and conversing, and mature oak trees and horse chestnut trees that offered shade to any lady fearful of gaining a freckle. It lay behind a wrought iron fence, a short walk across the road from Isolde’s family townhouse.

Isolde cast a pleased, sideways glance at her mother, who flashed a discreet wink and

gave a slight dip of her head in assent. Not once did Isolde bother to look to Edmund for permission, likely because he would not have granted it, not for an obvious rogue like Lord Spofforth.

Edmund sighed quietly, glancing once again at the book on the shelf where his fingertips had touched hers for a moment. A romance novel, of course, putting more of the most foolish notions into her head.

“I should be delighted,” Isolde said, and Edmund did not stop her.

Instead, he looked back over his shoulder to the greenery of the private park. Perhaps she will only learn if she finds out the hard way...

CHAPTER SIX

The weather was glorious, the midday sun high and hazy in the sky, and Isolde's mood soared with it. She walked rather proudly on the arm of Lord Spofforth, enjoying the astonished glances and sudden bursts of whispered gossip that were cast in their direction by the gentry of Mayfair. All because she had taken matters of potential courtship into her own fair hands.

Of course, the pair were not permitted to be alone. Isolde's mother and Edmund walked behind at a polite distance, making it quite clear that they were performing their chaperone duties without being invasive.

"That is better, is it not?" Lord Spofforth asked Isolde, as they strolled along the well-kept pathways, underneath the full-leafed branches of the old oak trees. "You have a charming townhouse, of course, but I would much rather be in the fresh air than in a stuffy drawing room. Would you not agree?"

Isolde peered up at him, smiling. "On a day such as today, I entirely agree. If it was teeming down with rain, I might be less inclined to."

"I would never be that brazen," Lord Spofforth replied with a wink. "Although, without hesitation, I would offer my services to ensure you were warm and dry quickly enough, should you ever feel a desire to run in the summer rain with me."

Despite what Edmund had said about her romantic notions, Isolde could not help but sigh dreamily at such a thrilling possibility. She could picture it, like something from one of her most beloved novels, or a poem perhaps. The warm downpour soaking her

to the skin, and her not caring a jot as she turned around and around, relishing every rebellious moment.

Vincent would send me to a convent immediately. She chuckled, trying to imagine her brother's horrified face. As she did, it made her more keenly aware of his replacement, forever glowering at her. Even now, at a distance, she could feel Edmund's disdain for her, which made it all the stranger that he had insisted that he was just trying to help her.

"Goodness, be careful!" Lord Spofforth said suddenly, his hand briefly moving to the small of her back to steer her out of the way of an unknown danger.

She gasped at the unexpected touch, looking to Lord Spofforth in surprise. "What was it?"

His hand returned to where it had been, slightly extended with her gloved hand on top of it. "A rather large stone on the path," he explained. "I thought you might stumble on it and injure yourself. Apologies. I should have warned you sooner, then I would not have had to move you to safety."

Isolde's cheeks heated up as she noted his concerned expression and the undivided attention he showed to her— had been showing to her, ever since his arrival. When she spoke, he listened: A rarity, or so she had come to learn over the past two days of accepting callers to the townhouse. And he seemed to know what would make her smile, even before she knew it, for taking a walk had been the exact remedy she needed for the otherwise terrible morning.

Edmund would not have bothered to make her smile. He would have reprimanded her for stumbling and ignored her when she spoke about the things that pleased her. Either that, or he would have mocked her, thumbing through her favorite books just to tease her about the content. Indeed, the only thing about Edmund that was superior

to Lord Spofforth was his appearance. It could not be denied, to Isolde's dismay, that Edmund was exceptionally handsome.

"Thank you," she said softly to Lord Spofforth, as they resumed their promenade.

"It was my pleasure," he replied, leaning in a little closer than was perhaps appropriate, his arm flush against hers. Not that she minded too much. In truth, it made her feel... secure, much like another man had, not so long ago.

Mustering her courage, she cast him a shy glance. "I do not suppose you wandered like this in the gardens of Kensington Palace at my debut ball, did you?"

"When one has the opportunity to investigate royal gardens, one does not miss it," Lord Spofforth replied, raising up her hopes.

She held tighter to his hand. "Did you... happen to see anything of interest in those gardens?"

"That depends on what you consider to be interesting," he replied silkily. "I saw many interesting things."

"Did you, perchance, see me in those gardens?" Isolde held her breath, hardly daring to believe that her rescuer might be the very man walking at her side.

He was not quite what she had imagined beneath the mask of coiling bronze roses and thorns, with his russet-toned hair and exceedingly dark eyes, like two perfectly polished pieces of jet, but she doubted she would have had any complaints if he was her savior.

"I dreamed I did," Lord Spofforth replied, his vague reply more frustrating than enchanting.

“You imagined that you saw me?” she pressed.

Lord Spofforth turned to face her, sweeping away a wayward lock of hair that had sprung loose from her bonnet. A gesture that should have made her heart beat faster and make her skin tingle, but she was more interested in his words than his actions in that moment.

Are you my champion or not? It infuriated Isolde that she could not simply ask him, for that would expose her to scandal, and all interest that Lord Spofforth might have toward her would evaporate.

“I imagined it and then it came true,” he told her. “I saw Aphrodite herself in the Elysian Fields. Mask or not, I knew she was you.”

Isolde frowned and Lord Spofforth seemed to falter, as if his compliments were not quite having the effect that he had anticipated.

“So, you did see me?” she urged.

He nodded slowly. “I did. I had no choice but to seek you out again, in daylight, where I could look upon your beautiful face and admire it in all its glory.”

Isolde expelled a breath, jittering with an excitement she could barely contain. She was not yet entirely certain that the gentleman standing before her was the gentleman she sought, but it looked promising. And she supposed she did not have to rush her investigation, for Lord Spofforth was pleasant company and she did not want to scare him away... or dash her hopes earlier than necessary.

“Are you attending Lord and Lady Montrose’s garden party this week?” she asked brightly, beginning to walk with him again in the gorgeous afternoon sunlight.

He visibly relaxed, his easy smile returning to his lips. "I was not intending to, but if there was a tempting reason to be there, I would assuredly reconsider."

"I do not know that I can offer a "tempting" reason, but I shall be there, and I would very much like to speak with you again," Isolde replied, chuckling.

He is amusing too, with plenty of witty things to say. It would certainly make the garden party more exciting, for she had been dreading it since Vincent told her that he was going away, and Edmund would be watching over her. If Lord Spofforth was attending, she would have something to look forward to.

Lord Spofforth flashed a grin. "I should like that too, Lady Isolde. Indeed, I have just this moment decided that I will be going to the party. I cannot think of anything more stimulating." He turned to face her once more, and keeping his gaze upon her, he lifted her hand and kissed it. "Until then, my sweet Aphrodite."

"Until then," Isolde murmured, suddenly flustered.

Slowly, he released her hand. "I am afraid I must take my leave of you, but I have heard that absence only makes the heart grow fonder." He clasped his own hand to his chest and, with a wink, made his way out of the private park, leaving Isolde reeling and altogether more determined to find out if he was her mysterious champion.

"Shall we have some tea?" Isolde's mother asked as the small group of three returned to the townhouse across the road. "I cannot begin to dissect that lovely outing without a cup of tea in my hand. Perhaps a cake too, Edmund?"

He should get nothing but a wedge of lemon to match his sour face. Isolde smiled secretly at her jest, still thinking about Lord Spofforth and the bold manner in which he had kissed her hand. She did not doubt that most of the other walkers had seen the

moment, but she hoped it would not become fodder for the scandal sheets.

Edmund bowed his head politely. “That would be delightful, Lady Grayling.”

“Julianna, please,” Isolde’s mother urged. “We have known one another long enough that you are practically one of us.”

Edmund seemed to hesitate. “Nevertheless, I would prefer to be courteous to a lady of your esteem.”

“Such exemplary manners.” Isolde’s mother sighed, patting Edmund lightly on the shoulder.

Isolde leaned against the banister of the curving staircase in a rather unladylike fashion, exhausted by keeping up appearances. “Am I not permitted a cake too, Mama?”

“I think not,” her mother replied. “With so many callers, and likely more to come, you ought to be cautious of how many sweet treats you indulge in. A lady ought to maintain her figure, always.”

With that, Julianna wandered off up the black-and-white tiled hallway to the kitchens, to request the offered tea tray. Isolde had no doubt that her mother would indulge in a cake herself, while Isolde would be left with a growling stomach until luncheon.

I did not have a crumb of anything in Lord Spofforth’s company... Isolde did not know if that was a promising sign or not, though she tended to resort to nibbling the cakes and tarts when a caller was exceedingly dull or made her feel awkward. But with Lord Spofforth, she had been more interested in him than what was arranged on the tea tray. That had to be a good sign.

“And you claim not to need my assistance,” Edmund muttered, drawing Isolde out of her thoughts.

She shot him a look. “Evidently, I do not.”

“You thought that went well?” His eyebrow rose, his expression blank.

“I thought it went very well, actually,” she replied a note too quickly. “He is handsome, he is charming, he is witty, he is everything a young lady might hope to meet during her debut Season.”

Edmund laughed coldly. “He is the last gentleman a young lady should hope to meet during their debut Season, unless they wish to find themselves cast out of the marriage market altogether, their names strewn across the scandal sheets, their reputations in tatters.”

“Nonsense. He was a perfect gentleman,” Isolde insisted, folding her hand over the one that Lord Spofforth had kissed so daringly.

Edmund stepped closer to her, where she continued to lean against the banister. As he closed the gap between them, her breath caught in her chest, her throat tightening again as she tried to glare up at him. That feverish prickle swept across her skin once more, her back pressing harder into the banister as if she feared he might not stop until he was practically flush against her. If he were to be that close, she did not know what she would do.

Shove him, perhaps. Or kick him in the shin. That would be the only reasonable response.

So, why was her mind conjuring very un reasonable responses? Notions that made the feverish prickle run hotter, her heart thudding faster, her hands not instinctively rising

up to push him in the chest. If anything, they felt more inclined to fall onto his shoulders, to hold her steady, despite being the cause of her unsteadiness.

Edmund paused a step away and jabbed a finger toward the townhouse door. "Lord Spofforth is no perfect gentleman, Lady Isolde. He was trying to take advantage of you. He was trying to lure you, and you fell for it like a doe wandering obliviously toward a hunter's pit." His sudden anger seemed to propel him forward another half step. "I know what a lust-filled man looks like, and that man is a well-established rake who likely spends more of his meager fortune paying for other people's silence than on anything else."

"I am no dolt, Edmund," Isolde retorted, too annoyed to use sarcastic honorifics. "If he were an... improper man, I would know it in his words and his actions. He did nothing inappropriate, and I suspect that you are just trying to thwart my marriage prospects out of spite. So, with regret, I must inform you that your assistance and your presence are still not wanted."

Ordinarily, that would have been enough to send Edmund to another room at least, believing himself to be the better party for excusing himself from a quarrel. So, it came as something of a surprise when he did not stride away, but stayed exactly where he was, breathing hard.

His eyes were bright with anger as he gazed down at Isolde, his pointed finger slowly lowering to his side. "You might not believe me now," he said, his voice raspy and gruff, "but I made a promise to your brother, and I mean to fulfil it. As long as I am here, as long as this duty is mine, no man will lay a finger on you. And, most assuredly, no man will ever get close enough to kiss your hand again."

Isolde stared at him, bewildered by the peculiar heat that began to course through her veins, making her feel as if she had stepped into a humid greenhouse on a chilly day. Edmund had spoken with such intent, such furious determination, and she could not

understand why when he was supposed to hate her. Surely, he should have been cheering for her to make a mistake, not offering advice.

“Are you not standing a little too close?” she managed to whisper out, for his bold declaration of his duty had brought him even nearer.

He stepped back as if he had been shoved, shaking his head like an insect had landed on his mane of umber locks. “I just wanted to ensure that you listened for once,” he said in haste. “That you would not amble off, thinking you know better than I do what dangers lurk for a young lady in society.”

“Does that mean you are done?” she said, more discreetly shaking off the weird, tingly feeling that sparked through her. “I have no desire to hear any more of your unkind, evidently dishonest lectures about a fine gentleman who has captured my attention.”

His eyes narrowed, a muscle clenching in his jaw. “If it were not for your brother, I would stand back and let you see how far your stubbornness and naivety gets you.”

“Yes, please do stand back,” Isolde said, pushing away from the banister. “You are in my way.”

She rounded the newel post and headed up the staircase, praying with every step that Edmund would not see the blush in her cheeks, nor misunderstand why they had pinkened. Then again, even she could not understand why her face had warmed at his words and his closeness.

It was the latent heat of the sunshine, nothing more, she told herself and hurried the rest of the way to her bedchamber, silently insisting that she should be more concerned that she might have gained a freckle from her afternoon promenade.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“What do you think of this?” Isolde asked, turning this way and that in front of the mirror, anxious about her attire. It had been three days since she had last seen Lord Spofforth, and she wanted their next meeting to be perfect—as much to prove a point to Edmund as anything else.

In the reflection, she looked at her sisters, one sprawled across the bed as if it were her own, while the other sat up on the window seat with her head firmly in a book. Neither sister could have been less interested if they tried.

Isolde said as much, whirling around to face them with her hand on her hip. “Please give me your opinion. I am in such a fluster that I fear nothing in my wardrobe is good enough. Will one of you not reassure me at least?”

Prudence sat up on the bed, arching an eyebrow. At three-and-ten, she had the ferocity of a terrier, the wit of a humorist, and the same lack of patience as a harried mother parading their unwed daughter around during their sixth Season. Indeed, Isolde had often wondered why their mother had not demanded the same duty and extensive education in etiquette from them.

Perhaps I seemed like the most malleable...

“I could give you my opinion, but whether or not you actually want to hear it is another matter,” Prudence said, her lips curving in a mischievous smile.

Isolde rolled her eyes. “Be kind, Prudie.”

“Ah, so when you said you wanted my opinion, you did not mean my honest opinion.”

From the window seat, Teresa looked up. “Do not toy with her, Prudie,” she scolded in her mild-mannered way. “You look beautiful, Isolde. You would look beautiful regardless of what you wore, but that shade of blue is particularly fetching. It matches your eyes.”

“And we ought to start a wager as to how many gentlemen say precisely that at this garden party,” Prudence interjected, chuckling. “What a lark to see how unoriginal they can be, while they will think they are masters of the compliment.”

Isolde turned back to the mirror, somewhat reassured. “I shall inform you of how many say such a thing upon my return.”

“Or you could convince Mama to let us come with you,” Prudence said, shuffling to the edge of the bed. “I cannot bear the governess. I cannot bear to be cooped up in this townhouse while you have all the fun. I might chase the governess away out of spite if I cannot come with you.”

Teresa cleared her throat and closed her book. “In five years, you can attend all the garden parties your heart desires, Prudie. Until then, you must find other amusements to occupy yourself, as I do.”

“But I have found other amusements,” Prudence insisted with mischief in her light blue eyes. “Scaring off governesses is as much my favorite pastime as reading is yours.”

Isolde had to laugh, though their mother despaired of her youngest daughter. Prudence had become renowned among governesses for being something of a ‘challenge’ and, as such, it had gotten harder to find one who was willing to take her

on. Still, Prudence's creativity in chasing the governesses away was always a surprise worth hearing about.

"You will be nice to Miss Dexter," Isolde said, remembering herself. As the oldest sister, and with Vincent in Bath, she was supposed to be the voice of reason and discipline. "If she resigns while we are at the garden party, it would undoubtedly be the quickest you have managed to get a governess to do so, but please do think of Mama and behave. If you do not behave, I shall not divulge any of the gossip I hear at the party."

Prudence feigned a pout and flopped back onto Isolde's bed, staring up at the ceiling as she twiddled her thumbs.

"I need to hear you say that you will behave," Isolde insisted.

Prudence sat back up and pretended to salute. "I swear that I shall do my very best to behave for Miss Dexter. She is pleasant enough. I can give her at least a month to win me over before I endeavor to be rid of her."

"Thank you," Isolde said with a smile, smoothing her hands down the front of her skirts, thinking she quite liked the duck-egg blue day dress after all.

And not a moment too soon, as the girls' mother shouted up the stairs, "The carriage is waiting, Isolde! As is Edmund! Please do hurry yourself, dear!" There was a veiled threat in that last word that made Isolde chuckle to herself, indulging in a sliver of her bygone defiance.

"If I did not know any better, I would say you were deliberately keeping Edmund waiting," Prudence said slyly, propping herself up on her elbows as she raised another far too perceptive eyebrow. "Not stowing any strawberry tarts into your reticule, I hope. Actually... please do, and then tell me all about it!"

Teresa sighed wearily. “You should go, Isolde, before Prudie decides to stow her self into the back of the carriage.”

“Not a terrible idea,” Prudence said, putting a healthy dose of fear into Isolde’s footsteps as she grabbed her reticule and hurried from the room. The last thing the garden party needed was Prudence running amok, and she would stow away if she thought she could get away with it.

“Coming, Mama!” Isolde called, hoping Edmund was suitably vexed by the delay. It would serve him right for acting superior and judgmental since her walk in the park with Lord Spofforth, and with the callers she had welcomed since.

“It is a fine day for it, is it not?” Julianna sighed contentedly, turning her face up to the hazy sunshine and closing her eyes, like she was the debutante and not the mother of one. “Breathe in that fresh air, Isolde. What a delight it is to be out of the city for a short while.”

Edmund discreetly inhaled a breath of the countryside air, perfumed with the earthy-sweet scent of cut grass, balsam notes from the cedar trees that encircled Lord and Lady Montrose’s manor, and the heady aroma of roses, coming from the charming bushes that climbed across the house’s front porch. It smelled like home, a long time ago.

He glanced at Isolde, who appeared to be enjoying the same perfumed air, her eyes closing, an unbridled joy falling across her face as her chest rose and fell with her deep breaths. For reasons unknown, he could not stop watching her, alarmingly enchanted by that peace upon her face. Envious, even.

“You know, this would be a marvelous occasion to announce an engagement,” Julianna said suddenly, snapping Edmund out of his trance. “Now, I am not one to steal another’s thunder and, yes, this is Lord and Lady Montrose’s gathering, but I

doubt they would mind. Indeed, they might appreciate their fine residence being named in the papers along with the happy news.”

Edmund squinted at Julianna, wondering if he had missed something. “Who is set to be engaged?”

“No one,” Julianna replied with a wave of her hand, “but I just thought... Well, if I am to be honest, I think the two of you would make a rather lovely couple. You would not need to suffer the rigmarole of the marriage market, Isolde, and I know Vincent would be pleased, Edmund.”

Edmund recoiled as if she had waved a saber at him instead, uncertain of whether to grimace or laugh. Moreover, he had to wonder if Julianna had imbibed something more than tea with her breakfast, for the notion was utter madness. She knew, as well as he and Isolde, that such a match was akin to throwing two lions into a cage and praying they would not kill each other.

“Mama, I told you it was too hot in the carriage,” Isolde chimed in, her tone colored with an acerbic hue. “It has boiled your mind.”

Julianna threw up her hands in mock surrender. “It was only a suggestion. You see, I had forgotten how difficult this time can be in a young lady’s life. Watching you over the past few days, seeing how it is exhausted you, I merely thought you might forgo it altogether and wed someone you at least know well. There is merit in that.”

“And there is merit in a love match,” Isolde replied curtly. “For years you have drummed that into my head, insisting that I should be happy with a man I truly love, and who truly loves me in return. How can you give up after a few days? Fortunately, I have more mettle than you, Mama. I am not in the least bit exhausted—quite the opposite, in fact.”

Edmund's forehead began to furrow into a frown, but he caught it before it could become an expression of concern, disciplining it back into blankness. He had not forgotten that Isolde had invited Lord Spofforth to the garden party and realized with a strange unease in his chest that that was likely why she had dressed so prettily.

Her dark blonde hair, the color of fresh honey catching summer sunlight, had been braided and fashioned into a bun, studded with forget-me-nots. Her plump cheeks were rosy, complementing her fair complexion, and the shade of her lips was a little darker than usual, if he was not mistaken.

All of that for the benefit of a most unworthy man.

“It is an important moment in a society lady's life,” Edmund said drily. “Lady Isolde is capable of choosing well; I am sure.”

Isolde flashed him a look as if waiting for his next insult, but he said nothing, for he had nothing more to say. By the end of the garden party, she would see that he was right—that Lord Spofforth would never be worthy of her, and that her judgment was not as keen as she thought it was.

Of that , he was sure.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Lady Isolde is capable of choosing well; I am sure. Isolde turned Edmund's undoubtedly sarcastic words over and over in her mind. Her mouth moved bitterly to mutter out the sentiment as she walked around the side of Lord and Lady Montrose's manor. Toward the music that drifted across the serene estate, two hours' ride from London. Toward revelry and joy and distraction and discovering if Lord Spofforth was the man she had been dreaming of.

She was so busy simmering over Edmund's snide remark that she did not notice the small group who were loitering around the corner of the manor until she had all but knocked into them.

"Goodness, I am so very sorry!" she gasped, as a hand shot out to steady her, though she had already regained her balance. "I did not see you there."

Following the hand up to a familiar face, she gasped again, her irritation with Edmund draining away, replaced with a nervous delight.

"I should have known you were approaching by the sound of heavenly bells that were chiming in my head, heralding the appearance of an angel," Lord Spofforth said with a warm smile.

There were two other gentlemen and a lady, perhaps a couple of years older than Isolde, in the group. They, too, smiled at her with a friendly ease, though Isolde kept glancing at the young lady, wondering which of the two gentlemen she was married to. After all, if she was unwed, she should not have been alone with the opposite sex.

I should not be alone with them, either. Isolde glanced back over her shoulder, wondering where Edmund and her mother were. She had darted off after her mother had mentioned the awful notion of being a good match with Edmund, but she had expected them to be no more than a couple of minutes behind her.

“If anyone else were to say that,” one of the gentlemen remarked to Lord Spofforth, snorting, “it would sound hackneyed or disingenuous, but it slips so sweetly from those lips of yours, Robert.”

Robert? It was the first time she had heard Lord Spofforth’s name. She let it swirl around in her mind for a moment, like good brandy in a glass, trying to pair it with the man in the palace gardens.

“You must be Lady Isolde,” the woman of the group said, extending a hand. “We have heard so much about you.”

Isolde accepted the proffered hand, shaking it lightly. “All pleasant things, I trust?”

“Oh, undoubtedly pleasant,” one of the gentlemen said, flashing a wink at Robert. “It is rare that a lady is equal to the stories Robert tells about her, but you assuredly are.”

Isolde froze, squinting at the man who had spoken while an unsettled feeling ricocheted across her chest, tiny vibrations of doubt. Robert still had his hand on her arm, his fingers curled a little too tightly. She tried to remember what her masked shadow’s hands had felt like when he held her, but she could not tell if the grip had been the same. Perhaps. Perhaps not.

“Pay no mind to that fool,” Robert said softly, grimacing somewhat. “They have teased me since boyhood and show no signs of ceasing. This is my cousin, Norman, and the one with the unkind tongue is my oldest friend, Oliver. And the young lady is Rebecca—Oliver’s sister.”

Isolde allowed herself to relax, knowing all too well what sort of banter existed between childhood friends. When she was younger, she would eavesdrop on the conversations that Vincent and Edmund had when they thought no one was listening. Every time, she wondered if Edmund had somehow transformed into someone else entirely, for he laughed and jested and behaved quite ordinary when it was just the two friends together.

“It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance,” she said politely.

Robert peered at her for a moment, a different sort of smile playing upon his lips as his eyes shone with a feeling Isolde could not recognize. It almost looked like hunger, but that could not be right, for the garden party would have had a fine array of things to eat.

“Have you no chaperone, Lady Isolde?” Robert asked a few seconds later.

“I do,” she replied in a rush, “but I do not know where they have gone. They were right behind me.”

Robert offered his arm. “Then, let me help you find them. We can chaperone you until then.”

I do not think that is how it works, Isolde wanted to say, but surrounded by the eager insistence of Robert’s friends, she found herself taking his arm and letting him lead her toward the babble and music of the party proper.

They came around to a wide terrace of red-hued stone that stepped down into a beautiful sandstone piazza that had been turned into a dance floor. Low boxwood hedges bordered off exquisitely patterned flowerbeds, all in full bloom, in every vivid color imaginable. On the other side of the piazza, high walls and a quaint wooden gate marked the walled gardens, the exterior guarded by fruiting apple trees, whose

boughs bent under the weight of their delicious burden.

An orchestra played in the center of one of the hedged-off sections of garden, and though the hour was still rather early, there were already dancers on the floor. Isolde's heart leaped at the sight of them, for there was nothing she loved so much as dancing. It was one of the things she had looked forward to the most, as part of her debut—the freedom to dance as she pleased, with whomever she pleased.

Robert leaned in, his breath tickling her neck as he whispered, “Lady Isolde, my dear Aphrodite, would you do me the honor of dancing with me?”

She pulled away, the tingle of her skin more like a brush with a nettle leaf than the feverish flush of infatuation. “I really must find my mother and my... other chaperone first.”

“Nonsense,” Robert insisted, rather more forcefully than she had anticipated. “Taking to the dance floor is the swiftest way to be found. They will not be able to miss you, for all they will need to do is follow where everyone else is looking.”

Isolde chuckled stiffly, not certain if she really felt uncomfortable or if Edmund's warning about Robert had manipulated her view of him. There was every possibility that Robert meant well and had good intentions, and she was letting Edmund's attempt at thwarting her Season come to fruition.

He is extroverted, that is all, she told herself.

“I suppose we could dance,” she said shyly, turning to address the young lady in Robert's group. “Are you married, Rebecca?”

“Happily so,” Rebecca replied.

Isolde took a steadying breath and put on her brightest smile. “Well then, I have no further complaints, as long as Rebecca agrees to act as my chaperone until my own can be found.”

“Rebecca?” Robert said with a gleam in his eyes, as he covered Isolde’s hand with his.

The young woman shrugged. “I cannot profess to be a watchful chaperone, but I will play the part.”

With that, Robert led Isolde down the staggered steps to the piazza. But rather than rush, he seemed determined to walk slowly down those wide steps, like he was trying to parade the fact that Isolde was on his arm.

Whispers rippled through the gathered guests and fans fluttered in front of curious faces to hide gossiping mouths, the sudden and all-consuming attention making Isolde even more on edge. She kept her head down, chin almost to her chest, wishing she had not run on ahead of her mother and, to a lesser degree, Edmund.

I want love, Robert, but I would rather be a spinster than be someone’s trophy. As they reached the edge of the dance floor to wait for the last dance to finish, Isolde was beginning to wonder if Edmund was partially right—not that Robert was a rogue and a rake, but that he simply was not the man for her.

“Do you remember that I asked you if you were in the palace gardens on the night of the debut ball?” she asked, deciding that there was no greater time than the present to begin her interrogation.

Robert smiled down at her, his eyes still shining with that unusual feeling that she could not quite place. “Of course I do. You were my goddess wandering in an ethereal realm. You were Artemis and I was humble Actaeon, stumbling upon the

forbidden sight of your beauty.”

Isolde remembered Teresa telling her the tragic tale of Actaeon, transformed into a stag after unwittingly catching a glimpse of the goddess Artemis bathing with her nymphs. In her embarrassment and anger, the chaste goddess splashed Actaeon with water, turning him into that frightened stag. A punishment for seeing what he should not that ended with him being hunted and killed by his own hounds, who could not recognize their master.

But Robert did not seem like the Actaeon of that tale. He was looking deliberately, his eyes searching her and assessing her figure in a manner that left Isolde wanting to splash the coldest, most stag-cursed water she could find on him.

“I... got lost that night,” she continued regardless, needing to know. “Rather, my mother and I got lost.”

How do I ask this without inadvertently scandalizing myself?

She paused. “What mask were you wearing that night?”

She could not believe she had not thought of that simple question sooner, for her champion’s mask had been very distinct.

“As if you do not remember,” Robert purred, just as the music ended, and the partners of the last dance swapped places with the new ones.

Before she knew it, Isolde was dancing with Robert: a lively, energetic country dance that reminded her far too much of her dance with Colin. Every step and hop and leap and whirl jarred in her mind, the touch of Robert’s hand on hers like being transported back to that ruined night. It did not help that as they stepped close together and turned in a circle together, their hands joined above their heads, Robert’s

other hand decided to skim the curve of her waist. He immediately insisted it was an accidental touch and returned his other hand to her shoulder, but his smirk suggested otherwise.

“What mask were you wearing that night?” Isolde repeated, wishing the dance would end.

Robert’s hand became more daring, slowly slipping down from her shoulder toward her waist again. “A fox, my dear. And you, my sweet vixen.”

A fox? She was about to shove him away, not caring if it was rude to abandon a partner in the middle of a dance, when a gruff voice that was not her own spoke her angry thoughts aloud.

“Remove your hand if you wish to keep it,” the voice growled. “If you wish to make a lady into fodder for the scandal sheets, choose another. Lady Isolde will not be besmirched by the likes of you, not while I draw breath.”

Robert’s eyes flew wide in alarm, his wandering hand immediately tucked in behind his back, while his other hand released Isolde’s. Meanwhile, she could not breathe, her heart leaping into her dry throat, a flame of hope burning brightly in her mind—had her champion come to save her again?

The voice was not quite as gruff and throaty, but it was not entirely dissimilar either. However, the fear upon Robert’s face was identical to Colin’s on that fateful night.

Robert turned a nasty glare on Isolde as he stepped back. “You might have said you were spoken for and saved me the trouble of trying to woo you.” He sniffed at the man standing behind Isolde, though she had not yet turned to see his face. “Enjoy my dance, Your Grace.”

Your Grace? My champion is a duke? Isolde's heart thundered, her hands shaking slightly as she finally turned around to look at him.

Her flame of hope sputtered out, her excitement deflating as swiftly as it had puffed up. But before she could say a single word of protest to Edmund, standing there with his usual scowl upon his face, he took hold of her hand and pressed his palm to hers. With no enthusiasm whatsoever, he came closer to her, guiding them into a series of turns that left her surprisingly breathless.

"They are whispering about me now," Isolde mumbled, as Edmund spun her out and back to him again, their arms crossing over each other to begin the ending promenade.

"They would have said worse if I had not stepped in," Edmund replied tersely.

She peered up at him, her cheeks flaming. "Yes, perhaps they would." She cleared her clogged throat, struggling between her customary irritation toward him and the embarrassment of having the entire party's eyes upon her once more. "Thank you."

"What?" He almost missed a step.

"You heard me," she said quietly. "Lord Spofforth was not who I thought he was, and I am glad of it."

Edmund frowned. "You are?"

"I am meant to separate the good prospects from the bad," she reminded him. "I could have dealt with him myself, but at least you will have something to tell my brother, to reassure him that you did your duty."

His frown deepened. "You were not dealing with him by yourself. That is why I

intervened.”

“Had you had some patience, I would have shown you otherwise. Now, you have broken your promise.” She sighed, no longer in the mood to bicker. “But, no matter. What is done is done, and now I am free to find the man who has captured my ‘silly’ heart. Well, maybe not my heart, but certainly my attention.”

Edmund stared at her strangely as they parted to undertake the final bow and curtsy, while the beautiful music faded to a close and the warm wind rustled the apple trees, sounding rather like the whispers that surrounded the unlikely pair.

Did you think I would give up because Lord Spofforth was an idiot? She smiled back at him, knowing how it irked him. Of course, she was grateful for Edmund’s intervention, but she did not want him to think that her gratitude would continue.

She sketched a graceful curtsy, and as she rose up, the golden sunlight seemed to bathe Edmund in its summer glow. He emerged from his courteous bow, tall and proud and elegant, one arm across his waist, the other behind his back. And, for a moment, she thought him quite handsome.

But not at all the man of my dreams... Evidently, she had mistaken Edmund’s gruff voice for that of her mystery gentleman. An easy enough mistake to make with memories of her debut evening playing through her mind, blurring the past and the present. Robert had mimicked Colin, Edmund had mimicked her hero of roses and shadows. Indeed, it was a relief to her as much as it was a disappointment that her hero had not been her rescuer this time.

“You have a suitor who interests you?” Edmund asked, offering his arm to take her back to her mother.

“It is no business of yours, but there is someone who has... made a lasting

impression,” she replied with a secret smile.

Edmund pulled her forward, rougher with her than before, as he whispered through gritted teeth, “Well, just remember, he will have to go through me first.”

A gasp caught in Isolde’s throat, shocked as she bumped into his side. Even more shocked as he held her there, much too close to be deemed proper. But she did not wrench herself away; she could not, too drawn in by the closeness of him, the power of him, the strength and protection in his voice.

He paused, gazing down at her in a way that made her stomach feel strange. “I had word from your brother this morning—he does not return for at least another week, and rest assured, I will not be letting you out of my sight again.”

CHAPTER NINE

The rest of the garden party continued without further incident, Edmund sipping tea on the terrace by himself, ensuring he always had a clear view of Isolde. At present, she was chattering amiably with a group of young ladies, the barely avoided scandal of earlier apparently all but forgotten. And Lord Spofforth was nowhere to be seen, making himself scarce.

She does not realize what could have happened, and yet she claims to know exactly what she is doing. Edmund simmered as he partook in a lemon tart, blaming Julianna as much as Isolde. Clearly, the lady's mother had not raised her with enough warnings about the dangers of men. At that very moment, Julianna was enjoying the party with her own friends, not paying Isolde any attention whatsoever.

Edmund did not lay blame at Vincent's door, however. His dearest friend had been too occupied with the role of Duke, thrown into it at such a young age, that he had not had time to ensure that his sister was being raised with enough wariness of the opposite sex.

"But who is the gentleman?" Edmund mumbled to himself, letting his gaze wander across the other guests for a short while.

He liked to think of himself as a perceptive man, certain that he would be able to spot the individual that Isolde had alluded to, whether it be through a secret look or a prolonged gaze or through a shiftiness in someone's demeanor.

He observed the quartet of gentlemen by the walled garden, the gentlemen trying to

pick apples from the trees, the gentlemen indulging in conversation over glasses of lemonade, the gentlemen who were apart from the main festivities; the solitary gentlemen, the bored gentlemen, the inebriated gentlemen, the shy gentlemen, but there was one glaring problem—at one time or another, all of them cast discreet looks at Isolde.

“Why should I care?” he muttered into the crust of his lemon tart as he took a big bite.

I need patience, not whatever this unease is. He banged on his chest with the palm of his hand, hoping to dislodge the tight feeling that had settled there since Isolde had revealed she had a gentleman in mind.

“Do you need someone to smack you on the back? Did you swallow that pastry the wrong way?” A mild voice made him sit up straighter, the tart very nearly catching in his throat as he hurried to swallow it down.

“Goodness, where did you come from? I almost did choke!” Edmund peered up at the familiar face of his friend, Lionel Barnet, the Earl of Westyork.

A quiet, steely sort of fellow who tended to keep to his country estate, Lionel and Edmund had struck up an unlikely friendship several years ago, after a fight had broken out in a gentlemen’s club and they had both leaped in to separate the two brawlers. Thanks to his grand tour of the Continent, it had been at least two years since Edmund had last seen the man, and it was a welcome reunion.

Lionel sat down in the white garden chair beside Edmund, reaching to pour himself a cup of tea before one of the nearby members of staff could do so for him. “Apologies, Edmund. I have only just arrived and when I saw you, I approached without thought.” He pulled the cup and saucer to him. “It is good to have you back on English soil.”

“I would say that it is good to be back, but I daresay I am still finding my feet,” Edmund replied with uncharacteristic honesty.

When he was with Lionel, for reasons he could not explain, he always felt like he could say anything without risk of judgment. Of course, Vincent was Edmund’s dearest friend, but Vincent preferred not to be serious or to talk of vulnerabilities, tending to turn everything into a jest. Without that part of Vincent’s nature, Edmund doubted he would have made it through the grief of losing so much, but, sometimes, he liked to speak his mind freely.

“A return to duty is always a difficult thing,” Lionel agreed, “but duty is our greatest purpose. Within a month, you will be at ease with your position again, and I have no doubt that your adventures abroad will be of tremendous assistance—a balm of memory, if you like, for the truly hard days. I expect it shall make finding a Duchess much simpler too, for you have stories to tell—there is nothing better to begin a conversation with a suitable lady.”

Edmund tapped the edge of his cup as his gaze found Isolde again. She had not moved from her gaggle of ladies, their laughter ringing out across the beautiful gardens, drawing the collective attention of the gentlemen once more. And though the other ladies were pretty enough, Isolde did have a way of standing out. A certain... essence to her that could not be described.

“I have no desire to find a Duchess,” Edmund said. “You know this, Lionel.”

Lionel took a sip of his tea. “I was aware of your aversion, but I suppose I thought that your time away might have altered your opinion. We are men of high station and influence, Edmund—we must set a good example to our peers, and one of our primary duties is to find a wife and have children to continue our ancestral legacy.”

“A gentleman of high station cannot choose his own path?” Edmund arched an

eyebrow. "Is that not part of the benefit of being in positions such as ours?"

Lionel lifted his shoulders in a halfhearted shrug. "I would not dare to tell you what path you should walk, Edmund. I can only do what is expected of me; I cannot instruct anyone else." He hesitated. "But would it be such a terrible thing?"

"It would," Edmund confirmed, closing his eyes and concentrating on his breathing as his mind was overwhelmed with sounds and visions: the shriek of panicked horses, the crack of carriage wheels, the thump and violent rolling of bodies tossed in a tumbling landau, the sharp, solitary cry for help, and deathly silence afterward.

He became aware of Lionel's hand on his shoulder, pulling him out of that wretched mix of memories.

"You still struggle with the ghosts?" Lionel asked gently.

After one too many snifters of brandy in the gentlemen's club, Edmund had revealed the 'ghosts' to Lionel, explaining that was what he called the memories that struck him out of nowhere sometimes.

Edmund opened his eyes. "They have been less pervasive since I went away, but they remind me that they are still lingering in my mind now and then."

Lionel nodded in understanding. "How is Sinclair?"

Edmund mustered a smile, grateful to his friend for diverting the conversation slightly. "As miserable as ever, though I suspect he had a rare time in my absence. I almost gained a smile out of him when I asked to see the ledgers upon my return. He did such exemplary work as my steward that I am tempted to let him continue."

Noticing Lionel's momentarily horrified expression, Edmund laughed and added, "Of

course, I will not, but it was a comfort to know that my estate was in capable hands.”

“Does that mean you will not be in London for much of the Season? I expect you will be eager to return to Davenport Towers to begin afresh,” Lionel said, glancing around with a confused frown. “I had thought I might see Vincent here today. Did he decline the invitation?”

Edmund looked at Isolde again, his eyes widening just a little as he realized she was staring right back at him. Every impulse within him urged him to turn away or lower his gaze, but he did not want her to think he was bothered, so he continued to stare, waiting for her to look away first.

Her eyes pinched and she gave him a look that seemed to say, “What do you think you are staring at?” before one of the nearby ladies said something, and she turned back into the conversation, laughing so brightly that she practically glowed. Some sort of witchery, no doubt, for it could not be explained with common logic.

“Actually, he is in Bath,” Edmund told Lionel. “That is the reason that I have not yet resumed my duties at Davenport. I have been charged with a very important task, and until Vincent returns, I must remain at my post.”

For you will embarrass him, Isolde, if you are left to your own devices... He mused upon the unknown man who had ‘captured her heart,’ and his stomach began to churn, as if he had swallowed a rock and it was now tumbling around in his abdomen. A strange feeling, half-dread, half something he could not pinpoint.

“What manner of task?” Lionel leaned in, holding his cup and saucer, ready to listen before he took another sip.

Edmund pointed his chin in Isolde’s direction. “The eldest of his three sisters has just debuted. I am to ensure that she finds no trouble for herself while she is searching for

a husband.”

“Ah, I remember her,” Lionel said, following Edmund’s line of sight. He frowned, a look of confusion falling across his face. “But why would you be worried about such a thing? From what I can recall, and from what I have heard of her, she is a sensible, respectable, modest young woman. Many of the society mothers have been speaking very highly of her. I should think you would have no trouble at all.”

Edmund turned to observe his friend. “And when have you been spending time with society mothers?”

“I have not,” Lionel replied, withdrawing into his customary reticence. “I... um... happened to overhear at Lord Simpkin’s gathering the other night. They were speaking very loudly, and I was nearby, sampling a rather excellent salmon puff. I did not do it on purpose. Goodness, I would never eavesdrop on purpose.”

Edmund had refused to allow Isolde to attend Lord Simpkin’s ball, for those gatherings were known to be infamous occasions that frequently descended into degeneracy. He had informed her over dinner, and, for a fleeting moment, he had been certain that she was about to launch her fork at him.

But it surprised him that Lionel had gone to such an event.

“You went to Lord Simpkin’s ball?”

Lionel picked up a lemon tart, to give his hands something to do. “An accident. I misread the invitation.” He paused, frowning as if he was trying to solve a difficult puzzle. “I did not have my spectacles at the time, and you know how atrocious my eyesight is. I thought it was Lord Simson’s ball, and, to my shame, it was several hours before I realized the mistake. I left once the waltzing began. Now, what were we saying? You were speaking of this task of yours, to guard Lady Isolde?”

Edmund hid a smile, content to relieve his friend of his unease. “It is not as simple a task as you might think, for the girl is... more wayward than she appears, with silly notions that will assuredly see her reputation in tatters if she is not closely watched.”

He reclined in his chair, his gaze once again drawn to Isolde as she laughed delightedly, the apples of her cheeks dusted with the prettiest shade of pink, her happiness as contagious as that laugh. Of course, Edmund was impervious, forcing his mouth to flatten into a stern line, refusing to indulge in that woman’s frivolities.

“She already had a near-miss with Lord Spofforth,” he added, pulling a wry face at Lionel.

Lionel duly grimaced. “Heavens, did no one warn her? Should you not have warned her?”

“I tried. She would not listen. That is my primary predicament, and that is what I mean when I say she is more wayward than she seems.” Edmund dusted pastry crumbs from his fingers, diverting his gaze to check where Julianna was. To his dismay, she was asleep in a chair beneath the shade of an apple tree, utterly oblivious to her daughter’s potential antics.

Lionel jolted, sitting up straighter as he raised his index finger. “Wait a moment—is Lady Isolde not the one involved in the strawberry tart incident? The one who?”

“She is,” Edmund interrupted, flinching at the memory.

“Ah, so that must mean all is finally forgiven!” Lionel said more brightly. “I did think it rather peculiar that you held such a grudge for so long, when she was but a girl at the time. I find it is always to one’s benefit to forgive where possible. It must be a relief to finally be friendly with one another.”

Edmund downed what was left of his tea and dabbed his mouth a little too aggressively with a napkin, his eyes narrowing at Isolde. She was not looking at him this time, had not looked at him since she caught him staring, and he could not explain why that irked him so. Indeed, there was an unusual strain in his chest, as if he wanted her to look back at him.

“I would not say that,” he murmured, for even if he and Isolde were not constantly in conflict with one another, he knew it would be safer if they were never friendly.

He cared for the friends he already had, and that was all; he would not add any other name to that list, in case fate should decide to strike a line through it, hurling him back into a grief he had fought long and hard to overcome.

Just then, an almighty crash erupted across the peaceful garden party. A scream went up, piercing through Edmund’s skull like a javelin, igniting a wave of visceral visions that should have held him rigid in his seat. Instead, he was up and out of his chair in an instant, eyes scouring the scene, heart lurching with panic as he saw the glint of smashed glass and the gleam of something red.

Ahead of him, the group of young ladies who had been keeping Isolde company were crowded around something in the center of their tight circle. And where Isolde had been standing, the other women had closed ranks, all turning at once to glare at a figure who swayed a short distance away. A very familiar figure, for Edmund had wanted to punch that ‘gentleman’ in the face the moment he had seen Lord Spofforth touch Isolde’s waist.

Putting two and two together, the tense scene left Edmund with only one possible reason why he could not see Isolde there anymore, and who the group of ladies were protecting.

He ran without thought, closing the distance in seconds, terrified of what he might

see.

CHAPTER TEN

“ I do not know who you think you are, Lady Isolde,” Lord Spofforth shouted, slurring his words. “You have broken my heart! You made me believe that you were the lady I had been searching for, all these years. My Aphrodite, my Artemis, my angel. A good and honest woman, at last! But you have been... bewitched by another, and I shall die alone and destitute because you will not love me!”

Edmund skidded to a halt beside the group of ladies, nudging them aside without a care for propriety in his desperation to see if his awful assumption was correct.

Isolde sat in the center of that defensive circle, her crystalline blue eyes peering up at Edmund with such sorrow, such anguish, such... relief that it knocked the air out of his lungs for a moment. The front of her pretty day dress was stained with the most horrifying spray of scarlet, the color spreading as swiftly as Edmund’s panic rose.

Blood... It is blood... Lord Spofforth has injured her. Lord Spofforth has decided that if he cannot have her, no one can. Edmund could not think clearly as he dropped to his knees, grabbing for Isolde’s trembling hand.

“What happened?” he demanded to know, unable to soften his voice despite the situation. Indeed, all he wanted to do was march directly at Lord Spofforth and hit him with a punch so hard that he would be unconscious for at least a few hours.

To his surprise, Isolde gripped his hand tightly, as if she needed it to anchor herself. “It is nothing.”

“It is not nothing,” Edmund growled. “You are bleeding. I must get you to a physician at once.”

He tried to pull her up so he could carry her out of there, but she made her body a dead weight, resisting. “I am not bleeding, Edmund,” she told him, the sound of his name from her lips, spoken so gently, squeezing the last bit of breath out of his lungs. “Not much anyway—only where the little bits of glass caught me. The rest is port.”

“What?” Edmund blinked, staring at the spreading stain on her dress, still fearing the worst.

“He threw a carafe of port at me,” Isolde explained, wiping her eyes. “I believe he only meant to hurl the liquid, but the carafe slipped out of his hand and smashed. Is anyone else hurt?”

She raised her gaze to the ladies who surrounded her, their formerly furious expressions transformed into admiration as they fluttered their eyelashes and cast coy smiles down at Edmund.

A lady with flaming red hair wafted her fan in front of her face. “I think a few little pieces struck my ankle, but I dare not check for myself.”

The blonde woman beside her nudged her hard in the ribs. “Do not embarrass yourself. He is not going to tend to you; he is evidently here for Isolde and Isolde alone.”

“I can tend to any cuts!” a lady with strawberry-blonde hair declared, raising her hand. “If we all retreat to the drawing room, I can be an impromptu physician!”

Against all sense and reason, Edmund reached out and touched the spreading red stain that soaked the front of Isolde’s dress, pressing his fingertips gingerly to her

stomach. It was improper, it could have caused a scandal, but in that instant, he did not care; he needed to be sure that she was telling the truth, that she was not terribly injured.

He brought his fingertips to his nose first, scenting the rich, spicy notes of port. Then he tasted the thin coating of red liquid, his tongue confirming what Isolde had already told him.

She gazed at him, mouth open in astonishment, as if she meant to say something but could not muster a single word.

“Ladies, please take yourselves into the drawing room, as suggested. Any cuts or injuries must be tended to with haste,” Edmund said, snapping out of his panic, the visions whirling through the back of his mind sinking back into the dark.

She is not hurt badly. She is safe... which is more than can be said for Lord Spofforth. Edmund got to his feet and glowered at the drunkard who wobbled and staggered a short distance away, muttering unkind laments under his breath.

“Ladies—inside the manor, now ,” Edmund repeated. He did not want there to be any witnesses of the female persuasion for what he was about to do next.

Bizarrely giddy, the ladies swept Isolde up in their merry gaggle and ushered her across the sandstone piazza, up to the terrace, and into Lord and Lady Montrose’s pleasant country manor. Some of the older ladies followed, and Edmund was relieved to see that they took care of Julianna, waking her and leading her inside.

“Come now, Your Grace,” one man said as Edmund stalked toward Lord Spofforth, fury brimming within him. “Robert has imbibed too much and behaved like a fool. It has happened to the best of us.”

Edmund rounded on the man who had spoken. “And if he had deliberately thrown that carafe instead of merely dropping it, my ward could have been severely injured.” His stomach roiled, his mind ablaze with the past. “I will not tolerate poor excuses. Isolde— Lady Isolde—did not give that wretch any false hopes. Indeed, she thought him a fine gentleman until he proved otherwise.”

He did not offer any further details, for Isolde’s sake. But he hoped that Lord Spofforth’s behavior would ensure that nothing incendiary found its way into the scandal sheets. After all, the cretin was accustomed to silencing gossipmongers.

Edmund was suddenly aware of Lionel at his side. “Do not do anything that might see your name in the scandal sheets,” his friend whispered perceptively. “You are justifiably angry, but it is our duty to be calm in the face of conflict. It is our duty to set an example. Moreover, Lord Spofforth is unlikely to remember much of this tomorrow.”

As if to prove Lionel’s point, Lord Spofforth squinted at Edmund, his eyes glassy, his face ruddy with liquor.

Biting down his rage, Edmund closed the gap between himself and the inebriate and seized him roughly by the lapels. All the while, Lionel stayed at Edmund’s side, as if he did not trust what his friend might do.

“I will permit you to return home to sleep away your stupor,” Edmund hissed, close to Lord Spofforth’s ear. “But it is the only generosity you will receive from me. If I see Isolde’s name in the papers or the scandal sheets, if I hear a soul mention her in an unsavory fashion, I will reveal every secret you have crowed about at the gentlemen’s club. No lady of any kind will go near you again. Am I understood?”

Lord Spofforth pulled back, a sudden shine of clarity in his formerly glazed eyes. Fear could be very sobering. “She will... come to no harm of any sort,” he muttered,

clearing his throat. "I will see to it. Just... do not speak of my secrets; I beg of you. I have... been told that I must be married by the end of this Season... or I shall be disinherited."

"Then, I trust you really will be wise. But make no mistake, this threat is not empty; I will look for her name every morning," Edmund warned, gripping Lord Spofforth's lapels a little tighter. "A single unseemly mention, and the floodgates of your degeneracy will be opened. I do not like to repeat myself, but I want to be sure you have heard me."

Lord Spofforth nodded like a scolded schoolboy who was desperate for the punishment to end. "I have heard you, Your Grace. Her reputation will not receive a single smear." He gulped. "Please, be merciful."

Edmund let him go with a light shove, but the clarity in Lord Spofforth's mind had not reached his legs. The awful man crumpled to the ground, landing with a thud on his backside, peering up in bewilderment like he did not know how he had ended up on the floor.

But Edmund did not doubt that Lord Spofforth would do as he had been told, for Edmund had also heard the rumor that the renowned rake had finally been brought to heel. His father had had enough of his eldest son's antics, and as Lord Spofforth's title was only a courtesy title, he stood to lose an earldom to his younger brother if he did not obey at last.

"Whoever is responsible for this fool, take him home," Edmund snapped, before turning on his heel and striding toward the manor to see how the ladies were faring.

Crossing the terrace, he had just flung open the doors that led into the drawing room when a second, but no less jarring, scream cut through the air. But there was one stark difference; the scream was not one of terror but of panic, accompanied by the hurried

rush of footsteps across the parquet floor.

Edmund realized the cause a second too late, his eyes flying wide as he caught a glimpse of a bare, slender ankle, speckled with a few tiny cuts. His gaze shot up to find Isolde staring back at him, equally mortified.

“Forgive me,” Edmund mumbled, whirling around and heading straight back onto the terrace as embarrassed heat threatened to overwhelm his face.

Lionel, who had sagely been waiting outside, cracked an uncharacteristically mischievous smile. “I was about to warn you that the ladies might not be in any state to receive well-meaning visitors,” he said, “but you had already stepped inside.”

“You should have grabbed me and hauled me away,” Edmund groaned, knowing without a doubt that Isolde would not let him forget that mistake any time soon. His good deeds for the day would not matter a jot.

The relatively short journey back to London could not have felt longer, the air within the carriage thicker than the center of the city on the hottest, most humid day of the year. It was still daylight outside the windows, for the garden party had tried its best to resume, but everyone had lost their taste for revelries after Lord Spofforth’s bad behavior, choosing to return home early.

Edmund kept waiting for Isolde to make a sharp or witty remark at his expense, the anticipation as unbearable as the warmth inside the carriage. He had not looked at her since he had stepped into the drawing room and seen her exposed ankle, and she had not said a word.

Julianna, however, had no such trouble. “I feel simply awful for poor Lord and Lady Montrose. I know they were so looking forward to that garden party.”

“You have said that several times already,” Isolde mumbled, speaking at last.

The sound of her voice pulled at Edmund’s willpower, urging him to look at her, to ask if she was well, but he stared out of the window instead and watched the hedgerows and fields transforming into the stone and civilization of London.

“Yes, well, no one has responded to me,” Julianna replied sullenly. “I do not appreciate being made to feel invisible. You know that my favorite part of all gatherings is the discussion in the carriage afterward, Isolde.”

Isolde rolled her eyes. “I have had a lot to think about, Mama. I apologize for not responding to you—yes, it is a shame that Lord and Lady Montrose’s party had to end so abruptly. Perhaps, you ought to write a stern letter to Lord Spofforth to gain your justice.”

“Oh, there will be no need. He will be ashamed enough as it is,” Julianna said. “There are always gentlemen who cannot resist some mischief, but I am certain he is sorry. Perhaps, he might call upon you again one day soon to apologize, and maybe he will continue his suit.”

Edmund’s head whipped around, staring at Julianna as if she had taken leave of her senses. She could not in good conscience think that Lord Spofforth was still a good match for Isolde, could she? No one could be so oblivious.

He noticed that Isolde’s expression matched his own—a strange irony that they had finally agreed upon something, especially after that ‘something’ had previously been a point of contention.

“I would accept an apology,” Isolde said flatly, “but I will not accept any pursuit from that gentleman again. My search continues.”

Julianna shrugged. "As you prefer."

But who does she prefer? Edmund returned his gaze to the windowpane, watching the cramped terraced houses and alleyways and streetlamps that passed by on their return to Mayfair.

The moment the carriage came to a halt outside the townhouse, Isolde flung open the door and stepped out of her own accord, not bothering to wait for the footman. Edmund paused to help Julianna down before following his charge up the porch steps and into the entrance hall.

There, almost against his will, he grabbed Isolde by the arm before she could vanish upstairs. Her bare skin was warm against his fingertips, the heat and softness making his heart jolt. He should not have touched her, it was dangerous to touch her so boldly, but he could not let her leave without saying what needed to be said.

She turned in surprise, eyes widening. "If you intend to scold me for not listening to you sooner, then you need not. I am tired, I am in no temper for a lecture, and I should very much like to retire in peace."

"No lecture," Edmund replied, though he had been preparing a mild chiding. "I just wanted to say... I am sorry the garden party was not what you had hoped. And I am sorry your dress was ruined."

She eyed him warily. "And... what?"

"I have nothing further to add," he replied, trying very hard not to think of that glimpse of bare ankle. He knew he should apologize for bursting into the drawing room like that, and he knew he should offer a prayer for her little cuts to heal quickly, but he did not want her to mistake it for an invitation to tease him about what he had seen.

As such, he turned and headed for Vincent's study, certain that she would not follow him. The events of the party had shaken him, and the last thing he needed was for her to see that, in case she chose—inexplicably—to offer kindness.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Hyde Park might have been the closest thing to paradise on Earth, as Isolde strolled with her two dearest friends, Valery and Amelia, down the sunbaked pathways. There was not a cloud in the sky, the plane trees and sycamores offering blissful shade, the breeze warm and gentle, cheering the spirits of even the gloomiest wanderer.

Of course, Edmund was not smiling, but that was of little surprise to Isolde. She knew he could smile, but he seemed incapable of doing so when he was near to her, as if her very presence was a sickness that sapped him of all pleasantries.

“Goodness, I wish that I had such a handsome escort,” Valery whispered, flashing a wicked smile. “It is rather counterintuitive, though. How are you supposed to concentrate on society’s eligible bachelors when the most eligible, and the most appealing, is forever walking ten paces behind you?”

Isolde rolled her eyes. “My dear Valery, what would you know of eligible bachelors when you have sworn off gentlemen of every kind? I am surprised you even noticed my irksome chaperone who, by the way, becomes decidedly less handsome when you get to know his character.”

“So, you admit it, you do think he is handsome?” Valery teased.

Amelia hid a chuckle behind her hand. “It would be such a romantic story, Isolde—two former enemies falling hopelessly in love with one another, and you would make such a beautiful pair.”

“Former enemies?” Isolde quirked an eyebrow. “There is no ‘former’ about it. As for falling hopelessly in love; there is a greater chance of Valery deciding that she will break her vow of spinsterhood and marry after all. Indeed, if Edmund were the very last man upon the face of this Earth, and I the last woman, I would choose solitude.”

Amelia nudged Isolde lightly in the ribs. “Methinks the lady doth protest too much.”

“Methinks the lady is entirely serious,” Isolde quipped.

Amelia chewed her lower lip in thought as they wandered beneath the sprawling boughs of an oak tree that, deep down, Isolde was desperate to climb. Of course, it was not ladylike, but she missed climbing trees and doing whatever she liked without fear of judgment or a scolding. If Valery were a tree-climbing person, for example, she would not have hesitated, for she did not have her family’s hopes resting on her making a good, fortuitous marriage.

“But did you not swoon even a little bit when he rushed to your rescue?” Amelia asked a moment later. “Was it not terribly heroic and stirring? The way you told the story made it sound utterly wonderful.”

“Then that is the fault of my impeccable storytelling talents,” Isolde insisted, her insides squirming, wishing her friends would not concentrate on the events of yesterday’s garden party any longer. All she wanted to do was forget about it and focus on finding her prince of thorns.

“I was not even injured. Not much, anyway,” she continued. “Yes, it was... kind of him to show such concern, but do not mistake the reason: he was worried my brother would box his ears if anything terrible had happened to me, he was not actually worried about my welfare.”

She did not know if that was true or not, but she had decided that it was, for her own

sake. Just as she had decided that any and all feelings that might have sparked during the port incident were to be blamed solely on her shock. Any relief or enchantment she may or may not have experienced, upon seeing Edmund beside her and feeling his hand upon hers was just a result of the fright that Robert had given her.

As for the way he had gently touched her stomach to make sure she was not severely hurt—the less she thought about that, the better, for it only served to fill her chest with a bubbly, restless sensation. Nor could she dwell too much on the feverish worry that had gleamed in his dark blue eyes for, in truth, it had seemed very real indeed.

“Well,” Valery remarked, “at least you will not struggle for suitors. I read Lord Spofforth’s apology to you in the papers this morning.”

Amelia nodded. “As did I. Did you read it, Isolde?”

“I must have missed it,” Isolde replied, neglecting to add that she done so deliberately.

She had no interest in anything that Robert had to say, though it had made her wonder if she ought to put a message of her own in the papers—an anonymous note, inviting the mysterious gentlemen from the palace gardens to make himself known to her. She would not have to give her name, just an allusion to her identity, something only he would recognize, so he would understand who had written it.

“He was very complimentary about you,” Amelia said. “I doubt there shall be any repercussions.”

Valery snorted. “Let us not pretend that he submitted that apology for any other reason than to save his own skin. Society relishes nothing more than a repentant rake. The ladies will be throwing themselves at him with twice the vigor now. The gentlemen, however, will be throwing themselves at you.”

“I do not want anyone throwing themselves at me,” Isolde said with a chuckle, her imagination conjuring visions that were far too literal. “I just want to find the right gentleman for me, in my own time, but swift enough to appease my mother and brother.”

Amelia dipped her chin to her chest, a bashful shade of pink coloring her cheeks. “I believe my own family has given up on me. I have been through three Seasons, and still have not had so much as a courtship. If I am not careful, they will drag me to a matchmaker or make arrangements themselves. I likely have another Season to search for myself, if I am lucky, but even that could change at any moment.”

“As long as you have me and Isolde, you will never be forced into a marriage of convenience,” Valery said fiercely, as protective as a sister to her friend.

Isolde nodded. “I quite agree.”

Although, what power would we really have to stop such a thing? She did not say that part out loud, for blunt honesty was rarely a kindness.

“I fear I have ruined the mood,” Amelia said sadly, her smile tight. “Come, let us speak of cheerier things. Tell us about His Grace’s face when he stepped into the Montrose’s drawing room again.”

Isolde’s own cheeks flushed with heat. “I could not. I should hate for you to grow tired of my very best tale.”

“Oh, but you must tell it to my cousin when she arrives in London!” Valery interjected eagerly. “I cannot wait for you to meet her, Isolde. I think you shall like Beatrice very much—everyone does.”

Amelia raised a hand. “Everyone who is a woman does. Gentlemen are... not so fond

of her.”

“She has a sharp tongue, you see,” Valery said proudly. “I have nary met a wittier individual, nor one who causes gentlemen such distress. They are lured in by her exceptional beauty, and within minutes of being in her company, they are making excuses to run away. Quite formidable.”

Amelia halted beneath the shade of a plane tree, leaning against the rough trunk for a moment, toying with the ribbon at her waist. “But you have told her to be more... amenable for my brother’s dinner party, have you not? I adore Beatrice, you know that I do, but I would hate for there to be any... um... difficulty. If Martin deems her to be a bad influence, he will forbid me from venturing out with you when she is here. Goodness, he might even forbid me from seeing you when Beatrice is not here, Valery.”

Obvious panic made Amelia’s pretty face fall, twirling the loose end of the ribbon’s bow around and around her forefinger with increasing agitation. Isolde knew that Amelia did not have many friends—indeed, she only really seemed to spend time with Isolde and Valery—so it would be a devastating blow to lose even one of her dear companions.

“Fear not,” Valery said, taking both of Amelia’s hands in hers. “I have spoken at length with Beatrice. I have instructed her to be on her best, most subdued behavior, and she has promised me that she will fulfil that duty.”

Amelia blew out a nervous breath, her chest rising and falling frantically. “I do not feel so well,” she mumbled, sliding down the tree trunk until she was sitting, her knees to her chest. “Forgive me. I need but a moment and I will be well again.”

“Are you dizzy?” Isolde jumped in, concerned for her dearest friend.

Amelia nodded slowly, scrunching her eyes shut. “The world is spinning somewhat.”

“Wait here,” Isolde said. “I shall fetch you something to drink.”

She hurried off in the direction of a barrow boy, who had been offering out tin cups of water in exchange for a farthing, realizing as she quickened her pace that she had not brought her coin purse with her. Still, she hoped she might be able to convince him.

“What are you doing?” Edmund’s firm hand closed around her wrist, halting her in her tracks.

Isolde tugged her hand free and gestured back to the tree, where her mother had just caught up to the two other girls. “Amelia is not feeling well. I mean to fetch her some water, if that is not disagreeable to you? I apologize; I forgot that I was supposed to ask my jailer first.”

Edmund folded his hands behind his back and dipped his head. “Considering it is a matter of great importance, I will assist you. I cannot have ladies fainting under my guardianship.”

“I would have thought you were used to ladies fainting in front of you by now,” Isolde remarked a note too sharply, waving her hand around the sprawling expanse of the lush, sun-warmed park.

Wherever she looked, ladies were staring and fanning their faces. It was the same no matter where Edmund went, for though he was a tremendous thorn in her side, the rest of society’s ladies saw only the roses of his unfairly handsome good looks and the possibility of being his Duchess.

“Actually, I find it rather burdensome,” Edmund replied, surprising her. “They are

rarely actually fainting, and as I cannot just leave them in a swoon, lest I be judged unfeeling, I am expected to be chivalrous. I must stay with them, fan them, bring them water, help them to their feet, and far too often I have been forced to carry them to a quieter room—usually at the behest of a scheming mother.”

Quite remarkably, Isolde found herself laughing. A true laugh, not the demure artifice that had been drummed into her during her ‘how to be a lady’ lessons.

“That is not why you ran away to the Continent for almost two years, is it?” she asked, smiling. She did not add that he had also avoided coming to Grayling House a year prior to that, though she knew Vincent had invited him. There had been an argument, she had asked her brother not to let Edmund visit, and he had not—something which had never made sense to her, because he was not one to ever obey her wishes.

“Partially,” Edmund replied. “My arms needed the rest.”

She cast him a curious, sideways glance, astounded that he had just made a joke in her presence. “Forgive me, Your Grace, I did not realize you were in possession of a sense of humor.”

He shrugged. “I was not speaking in jest, though my arms were rather a metaphor for my duties.”

“Ah... what a pity,” she remarked. “I thought, perhaps, I was discovering something new about you.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Edmund fell silent for a while, walking at Isolde's side though keeping a polite distance between them. His expression was blank, harboring none of the usual coldness in his eyes, his mouth less grimly set than normal.

Figuring that that was to be the end of their discussion, Isolde concentrated on finding the barrow boy, who had just disappeared behind some tall bushes in the distance.

At the same moment, she realized that the winding path she walked upon, cutting through the verdant grass like a stream, would take her right past a group of ladies who appeared to be in the midst of a charming picnic. She noted glasses of cloudy lemonade, condensation trickling most temptingly down the sides: the perfect refreshment for such a hot day, and the perfect cure for Amelia's dizziness.

Even more fortunately, the ladies enjoying the picnic were gawping at Edmund.

"Can you—" she began, but he was already talking.

"Forgive me, but I—oh, my apologies. Do speak first."

Isolde waved a dismissive hand. "No, you go first."

And it rather sounds like I am about to receive an apology... She thought of his hasty apology the previous evening, upon their return to the townhouse. He had spoken so gently, so meaningfully, that she had been too stunned to savor the contrition. And at the very moment where she had recovered enough to thank him or assure him that he

was not at fault, he had marched off.

“I could not help overhearing something you said,” Edmund continued. “You mentioned something about appeasing your mother and brother, and doing so with some swiftness. I... Well, I was under the impression that your mother and brother wished you to take your time, and you were the one rushing headfirst into ill-fated possibilities.”

Isolde laughed drily. “Then, you were mistaken. Do you think I would take an audience with so many callers in such a short span of days because I enjoy it? Actually, let me put it more plainly, do you think it was me who invited so many gentlemen to call upon me?”

Edmund furrowed his brow, sweeping a hand through his sleek mane of silky, warm brown hair. “I do not know.”

At least he was being honest.

“Well, I do know my duty. I know why I was thrown into endless lessons with endless tutors, to teach me frivolous, silly, often ridiculous things about being a ‘proper lady’ while my sisters have suffered no such fate,” Isolde said, pausing on the path a fair distance from the picnicking ladies, far enough that no one would overhear.

“I know what is expected of me. I have known since I turned three-and-ten,” she said, hating the slight tremble in her voice. “I am the eldest daughter, I set the example, I cannot afford to make any mistakes, and I cannot afford to find a less than perfect match. I am charting the course for my sisters after me. I am stamping down the weeds and briars so that they have a smoother path to their own futures. They do not even have to marry if they do not want to, as long as I am married, as long as I have made a fine allegiance between my family and another excellent family of

impeccable standing, to keep our family twice as secure.” She paused, watching some movement of feeling flicker across Edmund’s face. “My burden is to take a burden from my brother, and that burden is me.”

He stared at her for what felt like an eternity, saying nothing, observing her as if he was looking at a curio in a museum, trying to make sense of it. All the while, Isolde’s face grew hotter under his intense gaze, until she worried she had said too much. Truthfully, she did not know why she had said all that at all; it had simply blurted out of her.

A minute or so later, she could not bear it anymore. “Please ask those ladies having the picnic if you can ‘borrow’ a glass of lemonade. Ensure you only ask for one, or they will likely give you every glass they have with them, and we shall end up repeating the unpleasantness of the Montrose’s garden party. Glass everywhere.”

He squinted at her with that same confused look, and wandered off toward the picnickers without a word, leaving her to fan her face furiously in his absence.

It is Edmund, for pity’s sake! What are you blushing for? She wished she could walk over to the Serpentine that glittered in the distance and dive right into the cool waters, for she doubted anything else would work to cool the feverish feeling in her face.

Giddy giggles exploded from behind her, but she did not turn to look. She did not want to see those young ladies falling all over themselves to please Edmund, nor see how he might flirt back if he chose to.

Instead, she turned her attention back to her mother and her two friends. Amelia still sat on the ground in the shade of the tree, her shoulders hunched, her chin to her chest. Valery continued to fan Amelia with ferocious vigor, while Isolde’s mother had sat down next to Amelia and appeared to be talking to her.

As such, she did not hear Edmund approach until he was right beside her, holding not one but two glasses of the appealing lemonade. And in one hand, too, drawing her attention to how masculine his hands were. Capable hands. Strong hands.

“I took the liberty of getting a spare, in case your mother or your other friend are also feeling faint in this ferocious heat,” he said flatly.

She blinked at him. “But I gave you strict instructions.”

“And I chose to use greater initiative,” he replied as if it were nothing. “Shall we?”

Isolde nodded, too bewildered to speak.

Edmund, however, had never been more verbose, and as they neared the plane tree where Amelia sat, he had one last thing to say to Isolde. “While I have the opportunity, I would like to apologize for my conduct yesterday.” He handed her one of the full glasses, his fingertips brushing hers as he did so. “I am sorry that I saw your ankle. Rest assured, I have erased it from my memory.”

He pressed on ahead of her, leaving her once again in the height of the summer afternoon heat with an unexpected case of sudden fever that swept from the crown of her head to the tips of her toes. A warmth so fierce that she almost took a sip of the lemonade to try and coax it away.

By the time she remembered that she was meant to be back with her friends, and she had rushed forward to see how Amelia was faring, the furious blush had not remotely eased.

“My darling,” Isolde’s mother cried, hurrying to open out her parasol. “You have caught the sun! Come, you must stand under this before you are covered in freckles!”

Isolde swallowed thickly, her mother's words only making her face burn brighter. For she knew that the obvious redness had nothing to do with the summer sunshine and everything to do with the stern-faced man who stood guard over the ladies, refusing to look in her direction.

It did not take long for Amelia to recover from the sudden dizziness that had overwhelmed her, though Edmund suspected that she would have recovered much quicker if Isolde, Valery, and Julianna had not been crowding her and fussing over her so much. It had taken every shred of willpower he possessed to hold his tongue, for it had already gotten him into trouble and could not be trusted.

Why did I say that to her? He was still kicking himself, even as the trio of ladies began to walk again, making their way back to the carriages. Isolde did not mention it. She likely would never have mentioned it. She will think you were teasing her, and that can only make your task harder!

He had meant the apology, but it had not come out as he had hoped. To his own ears, it had sounded like mockery or a desire to torment Isolde.

"I shall catch up to you!" he called out, needing a moment to clear his head. And with the two empty glasses in his possession once more, both enjoyed by all three women, he had the perfect excuse.

Isolde did not turn or acknowledge him at all.

Julianna, on the other hand, whirled around. "Where are you going? What if Miss Thorne collapses again?"

"She is in capable hands," Edmund replied, gesturing to the group of ladies who were still enjoying their picnic in the beautiful summer afternoon. "I must return what I borrowed. I shall not be long."

Julianna smiled. “Very well. Do try not to make them all fall in love with you.”

At that, Edmund thought he saw Isolde’s shoulders stiffen slightly. Shaking it off as nonsense, or the tremor of a concealed snort from her, he headed in the direction of the other ladies, already dreading the interaction.

“You were so heroic, Your Grace!” one lady chirped as Edmund bowed to the women and handed back the glass.

Another woman nodded eagerly. “Such a chivalrous gentleman. I wish that every gentleman in society were as chivalrous as you.”

“We thought, perhaps, you were using the need for a glass of lemonade as an excuse to make our acquaintance,” a bolder lady teased, fanning herself as she made sultry eyes at him.

He straightened up, ignoring the remarks as best he could. It was not their fault that they did not know they were wasting their efforts, for it was not as if he had announced to the Ton that he was not, and would never be, in want of a wife.

“The only heroism was from Lady Isolde,” he said bluntly. “She was the one who noticed that you had glasses you might be willing to lend to a good cause. Nevertheless, I thank you for your part in helping a young lady in distress.”

The brazen woman who had teased him canted her head, eyes narrowing in curiosity. “Are you courting?”

“Pardon?” An odd lump formed in Edmund’s throat.

“You and Lady Isolde—are you courting?”

Edmund laughed uncomfortably. “Not in the slightest. I am merely assisting a dear friend—her brother—by watching over her in his absence. It is an assignment not a pleasure.”

The woman took a ripe, plump strawberry and plucked the green top off it. “Are you certain of that?”

“Quite certain,” he insisted.

She shrugged her narrow shoulders, her smiled tinged with mischief as she softly said, “Well, Your Grace, you could have fooled me.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Y ou!” The sharp voice echoed down the townhouse hallway, ricocheting across the walls of the entrance hall as Isolde removed her cloak.

She jumped in fright, startled so violently that she almost dropped the garment, but the footman she was handing it to reacted quickly, grabbing it before it could fall.

Rapid footsteps tapped along the pristine white tiles, heralding the arrival of a gentleman who had terrified Isolde for as long as she had known him.

“Good evening to you, Mr. Thorne,” she said politely, dipping into a half curtsy.

“It is not a good evening,” Martin Thorne replied, coming to a halt with his hands on his hips.

Being Amelia’s older brother and heir to a viscountcy, Isolde put on her most courteous demeanor, not because she thought him to be a potential suitor, but to ensure that Amelia had an enjoyable night. The poor girl had enough to worry about with Valery’s cousin, Beatrice, in attendance without Isolde taking umbrage with Martin’s unpleasant attitude.

“Oh? How so? It smells absolutely wonderful in here, and what I can hear sounds like rather amiable chatter,” Isolde pointed out sweetly.

Martin bristled. “I am certain I have told you before, but when the weather is too warm, I do not like Amelia to be out of doors. You are lucky she did not suffer

anything worse than a mild headache.”

“And she is lucky to have such a thoughtful, attentive brother.” Isolde’s smile grew more strained, aching her cheeks. “Surely, she does not still have a headache? It has been two days since I last saw her.”

“That is beside the point,” Martin muttered. “I understand that when ladies gather together there is an air of carelessness, but I would urge you not to be careless with my sister again.”

A shadow fell across Isolde, and though she had her back turned to whoever had just stepped into the entrance hall behind her, she knew who it was. The fearsome presence of him thrummed up her spine, tickling the nape of her neck, as if he had just brushed his fingertips against that spot to sweep away a loose lock of hair.

“Mr. Thorne,” a deep, familiar voice rumbled. “I do hope I did not mishear as I came through the door. It could not possibly be correct that you were chastising Lady Isolde, now, could it?”

Martin had to tilt his head up slightly to look at the newcomer, his alarmed, wide-eyed expression reminding Isolde of something that she could not quite recollect.

“Not chastising, no,” Martin said in a hurry. “I was merely... making suggestions for her next outing with my sister. Indeed, I heard you were rather heroic in her moment of great need. I must thank you, deeply, for taking such excellent care of her.”

Edmund moved to stand at Isolde’s side, and though she did not peer up to look at him, she could tell that he was wearing one of his most unimpressed expressions. A look she knew well.

“You should thank Lady Isolde,” Edmund said firmly.

“Well, of course, she was there. It is to be expected that a friend should help a friend, but when I heard that you had aided my sister, I was overcome with gratitude,” Martin rambled, clasping his hands together. “Truly, that was a very pleasant surprise indeed, to learn of your good deed.”

Edmund took a half step forward, casting Isolde in more of his shadow. “You mistake me, Mr. Thorne. I did nothing. And I would like you to thank Lady Isolde.”

“Pardon?” Martin seemed confused, frowning as though Edmund was speaking in a foreign language.

“She was the one who had the idea to ask some ladies for refreshments, to aid your sister,” Edmund replied. “So, thank her. I would hear it.”

Martin’s brow furrowed, his mouth pressed into an irritated line. Nevertheless, a few moments later, he dipped his head to Isolde and said stiffly, “Thank you for your kindness toward my sister. I am grateful to you for your swift thinking.” He gestured up the hallway. “Would you please follow me? Dinner will begin shortly.”

“The Dowager Countess has not yet appeared,” Edmund said, causing another flicker of irritation to cross Martin’s face. “She will not be long.”

Martin forced a smile. “Then, let us wait.” He glanced at Isolde. “Actually, if it is not too much trouble, would you be so kind as to go and find my sister in the dining room?” His attention flitted back to Edmund, his tone simpering as he continued, “I was hoping to speak with you alone, Your Grace. Only for a moment or two.”

“I would be delighted,” Isolde said, surprising herself as she looked to Edmund for his agreement.

He nodded discreetly, and Isolde did not need to be told twice, for though she did not

much like Martin, she had been looking forward to seeing her friends and the fabled Beatrice all day.

Edmund would have preferred to be anywhere else, for he hated dinner parties at the best of times, and after Martin Thorne's brief 'interrogation' in the entrance hall, he was even less inclined to have a nice time.

He thinks he is being clever. He thinks I cannot see right through him. But considering Edmund had found himself seated beside Amelia, any attempt at subtlety from Martin had unraveled. And that was without the talk Martin had tried to have with him.

"Have you had any success this Season? I suppose it is still rather early, but if the right lady were to come along, there is no reason to hesitate," Martin had said. "My father is unable to join us this evening, but I thought, if you are not otherwise engaged, that you might like to come to a smaller gathering next week, when he is in the city again."

"How small?" Edmund had asked, already suspecting the answer.

"Oh, well, it would just be you and me and my father. Perhaps a couple of friends, though everyone is so occupied with their own gatherings and parties that it is impossible to pin anyone down! You assuredly know what I mean," Martin had replied in earnest, glancing at the door every couple of seconds, probably to ensure that they were not interrupted by Julianna.

In the end, Edmund had told him that he would let him know in due course. Most gentlemen would have understood that as, "No, thank you," but it appeared to have bolstered some kind of determination in Martin. Some hope that he had no cause to have.

A soft murmur to his right diverted Edmund's distracted mind. "Pardon?" he said. "I am afraid I did not quite hear you."

Amelia's cheeks reddened, her gaze lowered to the napkin draped over her lap. "I asked if you were well, Your Grace."

"Very well, thank you. And you?"

"Quite well," she replied, puffing out an uneasy breath. Clearly, she was enjoying the evening as much as he was.

Taking pity on her, he cleared his throat. "The soup is very pleasant. You must have an excellent cook."

"Oh yes. I adore her. She makes the most delicious dishes," Amelia replied, her voice a little steadier.

Edmund paused, his attention drawn to the pair who sat opposite. He had been trying very hard not to look at Isolde, nor the gentleman seated beside her, but where he was struggling to think of anything to say to Amelia, the gentleman opposite appeared to have no difficulty engaging Isolde in conversation. And she, in turn, was responding with charming ease, her eyes bright, her smile genuine, her laughter somewhere between the artificial and the real thing.

"Tell me of your sisters," the gentleman, whom Edmund knew to be Noah Humphries, the Viscount of Mentrow, asked. The fellow's gaze was intent and interested, giving Isolde his full attention.

Isolde dabbed her lips with a napkin. "Well, the older of the two, Teresa, is one of the most intellectual people I have had the privilege of knowing. There is very little she does not know, and she reads so voraciously that one wonders if she sleeps at all. She

is what I would call the peaceful one. The mediator.”

“She sounds remarkable,” Noah said, nothing disingenuous in his tone.

Edmund concentrated on the last of his soup, listening discreetly. He had sat through enough mornings in the Wilds’ townhouse drawing room to know what signaled a good, worthy gentleman and also the opposite. He also liked to think he knew when Isolde was truly interested and when she was not.

She is enjoying this, he realized with a slight twinge of something like discomfort. Or, perhaps, the spoonful of soup had just gone down the wrong way.

Isolde nodded at Noah, smiling shyly. “She is, and I hope that when she enters society, she is able to find a gentleman of matching intellect. Someone who challenges her, someone who appreciates how wonderful she is. I can just imagine the educated arguments, the discussions, the way they would leave everyone else scratching their heads. That is what I want for her.”

“I do not even know her, and I want that for her.” Noah paused to sup a mouthful of soup, dabbed his mouth, and continued, “It is my belief that no one should settle for less than their ideal match, though I am not naïve enough to think that always happens. Nevertheless, it should.”

Isolde nodded. “I could not agree more. There would be far less discontent if everyone was at liberty to marry whomever stirred their heart and mind the most. But, as you say, it would be naïve to think that everyone has the privilege of choice.”

Lord Spofforth would have snorted at that. But Noah was nodding right along with Isolde, making attentive sounds of agreement. Edmund wished that he could show his assent too, for though he did not want to marry, he also did not think anyone should have to marry anyone they did not like. Instead, he washed down his soup with a gulp

of wine and kept right on listening.

“And what of your other sister?” Noah prompted.

Isolde laughed, and Edmund had to fight the urge to join in with a chuckle. He liked to think of Prudence Wilds as the more terrifying successor to Isolde in her younger years. A force of nature, one always had to watch one’s back whenever Prudence was around and in one of her mischievous moods.

“Ah, well...” Isolde hesitated, and Edmund braced himself for the true test of Noah’s character.

If Isolde spoke of Prudence honestly, Noah’s response would tell a great deal about him, and whether he was up to the task of being tied to the Wilds family. Whether he was brave enough, especially as some of Isolde’s former naughtiness still existed.

“Prudence is the youngest of us,” Isolde continued. “She is... remarkable in her own way, but I would be lying if I said she was always well behaved. I see it is a youthful sort of exuberance that often leans into mischief, with a creativity that defies belief on occasion, but her heart is good. She feels injustice and insult keenly, and I respect that, even though she makes me anxious about her future. At present, she has chased off twelve governesses, if that gives you some idea of her character.”

She chuckled nervously, fidgeting with the napkin on her lap as she waited for Noah’s reply. Edmund watched as subtly as he could, wondering how he would have responded to such a revelation if he were meeting Isolde for the first time.

I would probably ask why no one has disciplined her properly. He could not pretend otherwise, but knowing Prudence was different to hearing about her secondhand. He saw her more as a confused child who behaved the way she did as a means to gain attention from her mother, who left her mostly in the care of governesses.

Maybe, if their father was still alive, Prudence would not have been so wild, but there was no way of knowing.

“In that case, I hope I never give your youngest sister cause to dislike me,” Noah said, surprising Edmund. “My own sister is very similar, and though I know I should not, I cannot help but be amused by her antics. It is partially my fault that she is half wild, but I would not have her any other way. It is better to be too spirited, I believe, than to have nothing to say, or to make oneself small to appease society expectations.”

Edmund nearly forgot that he was supposed to be eavesdropping discreetly, for he had not anticipated such a considerate, understanding reply from Noah. He would not have expected such an answer from any gentleman, in truth. Yet, somehow, Noah had passed a test he did not even know he was part of.

You might just be the worthiest I have encountered.

Edmund should have been celebrating such a thing, trying to decide how to navigate the situation so that a courtship could begin without delay, knowing how thrilled Vincent would be, but the cheerful sensation would not come. In its place was a feeling similar to that of when a hunt was over, and all the excitement and purpose and camaraderie faded into nothing. A feeling he could not describe, but came close to remorse.

A feeling that was probably not useful for someone who was supposed to be helping to get Isolde married as quickly as possible.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

As Isolde proceeded to ask Noah about his sister, utterly invested in the gentleman, Edmund became aware of hissed muttering to his right.

Martin was seated on the other side of Amelia, and it appeared he was not too happy with his sister's quietude, nor her reluctance to be the one to force a conversation that went nowhere.

"Ask him about his travels to the Continent," Martin rasped, nudging Amelia rather hard in the arm. So hard, in fact, that she bumped into Edmund's side.

He glanced down at her, a spike of anger piercing through his chest. If there was one thing he could not tolerate, it was cruelty, especially from a brother. To him, there was barely anything more precious than a sibling.

"Are you well?" he asked Amelia.

She nodded sharply, eyes cast down, twisting her napkin into knots.

Edmund looked across at Martin, flashing him a dark look. "Did you have something to say, Mr. Thorne?"

"Me?" Martin waved a dismissive hand. "Not at all. It is Amelia who wishes to ask you about your adventures on the Continent, but she is so very shy, you see. Once you are acquainted with her, however, you will find her to be the most excellent company."

A muscle twitched in Edmund's jaw. "Maybe she is shy, maybe she has no interest in speaking with me, which is perfectly acceptable. I would not want her to talk to me if she does not want to."

"Does not want to? Nonsense!" Martin gasped, shaking his head. "Of course she is interested in speaking with you. Are you not, Amelia?"

Amelia raised her gaze to Edmund, her cheeks ablaze, her eyes gleaming with desperation. "It would be my honor to converse with you," she said quietly, and not at all believably.

"You are uncomfortable," Edmund whispered. "You do not have to do anything your brother commands. Eat your dinner in peace if that is your preference. I do not mind, either way."

He realized his hypocrisy a moment later, remembering Isolde's speech about duty and burdens. Had he ever paused to ask her if marriage was something she actually wanted for herself? Had he ever asked what sort of gentleman she would choose if she could?

She does have someone in mind, he recalled, his gaze darting to Isolde and Noah.

They were slightly turned in toward each other, as if they were in their own world, apart from the rest of the long, mahogany dinner table. Isolde was positively glowing with contentment, laughing and smiling and chattering at her leisure, all of it genuine, all of it brought out of her by Noah's words and questions. And he looked just as enamored, like he already thought Isolde was the 'ideal match' he had spoken about.

It left an unpleasant, tight feeling in the pit of Edmund's stomach. No one could look like they were falling in love with someone that quickly. It had to be a gentleman's trick, to snare the interest of the most beautiful debutante of the Season.

“I like the theater more than I like the opera,” Noah was saying brightly. “Call me a philistine, but I find the opera too shrill and too bewildering. I realize there are many who cannot understand Shakespeare, but I feel the same way about the opera. If my Italian was better, perhaps I would feel differently, but my Italian is atrocious.”

“Were you a troublesome student in your youth?” Edmund heard himself saying, interrupting a conversation that had nothing to do with him. He could not stop it, like a madness had taken over his tongue.

Noah turned to look at Edmund in surprise, frowning a little. “Not at all, Your Grace. I was a very diligent student, for the most part, but there are disciplines in everyone’s life, I like to think, where there are greater struggles.” He flashed a sweet smile at Isolde. “Your sister, of course, is likely exempt from that.”

“She has no struggles whatsoever when it comes to education,” Isolde agreed, concentrating solely on him. “However, I would say that she has some difficulty with social education. She does not tolerate idle conversation well, she does not much like social occasions, and she gets too embarrassed when it comes to dancing. Oftentimes, I have heard her describe herself as having two left feet.”

“We all have our supposed flaws, Your Grace,” Noah said, returning his attention to Edmund with a peaceable smile. No hint of satisfaction or triumph to be seen. “Languages have always been my difficulty. No matter how hard I try, I cannot retain much. Italian and French, most of all.”

Isolde, however, did not hesitate to cast Edmund a triumphant smile. “I have never been much good at arithmetic. The numbers always... tumble together and confuse my mind. It caused my governesses no end of dismay, but I believe the heavens are fair—I dance fairly well, I sing favorably, I paint well, I speak well in company, but I cannot balance a ledger. My sister can do everything well, except for dancing and speaking in company.”

“We shall have to substantiate that after dinner,” Noah said, eyes twinkling. “A dance, perhaps, if you are agreeable?”

Isolde clasped a hand to her chest, the gesture twisting that unusual feeling in Edmund’s stomach for a second time. “If there is dancing to be had, Lord Mentrow, I would be delighted.”

“But if one has struggles with certain things, should one not apply themselves more determinedly until it is not a struggle any longer?” Edmund jumped in, drinking down what was left in his wine glass, while the servants began to move in to take away the soup bowls for the next course.

Noah raised a curious eyebrow. “I imagine there are many who would believe that, and I have the utmost respect for such people. To my shame, I choose to avoid what I find difficult.”

“And if you had a wife who enjoyed the opera,” Edmund pressed, “would you leave her to attend alone, or would you learn to favor it for her sake?”

Noah chuckled softly. “I have heard that love can make a gentleman relish anything. I hope that love for my wife, whoever she might be, would have the same transformative effect.”

“What of your difficulties?” Isolde said suddenly, flashing a warning look at Edmund, as if to say, What are you doing?

In truth, he did not know what he was doing. He just kept talking, no longer in control of his voice.

“I have not thought about it much,” Edmund replied firmly. “I am not saying I do not have any weaknesses, but I would have to think about it first.”

Isolde nodded. “Then, perhaps you should do that while we wait for the next course.” Her eyes settled on Amelia. “Perhaps you might discuss that very subject with my dear friend, though I daresay Amelia does not have any flaws at all. Oh, Lord Mentrow, you have never heard anyone more accomplished on the pianoforte.”

“I am already in the midst of a conversation,” Edmund replied. “I have no need to divert my attention.”

Isolde’s gaze hardened, her hand curling around the stem of her wine glass. “It is polite to speak to whomever is seated beside you, Your Grace,” she said pointedly. “It is not polite to interrupt across the table.”

Her words were like a lantern being ignited in a darkened room, shining a glow upon Edmund’s inappropriate behavior. He sat back in his chair, a shiver of concern rippling down his spine. It was not like him at all to act so out of character, intervening where he had not been invited to speak, ignoring etiquette, shunning societal expectations.

He dipped his head. “Apologies. You are quite right, Lady Isolde. Having been your temporary guardian for a while, I overstepped. Please, continue as you were.”

“Temporary guardian?” Noah looked to Isolde for explanation.

She smiled back, though the expression was not as comfortable as it had been before. “My brother has gone to Bath to tend to some business, and as His Grace and my brother are dear friends, His Grace agreed to be my guardian until my brother’s return.”

“What a generous thing to do. I hope that, if I ever find myself in such a situation, that my own dear friends would not hesitate to take on such a role,” Noah said, not missing a moment to say the right thing and be every bit the perfect gentleman. What

was worse, it did not seem to be fake.

After dinner, the gentlemen were led into the library that served as a smoking room, where brandy and cigars were to be enjoyed. The ladies went on to the drawing room to do whatever it was that ladies did when the gentlemen were not present, but even in their absence—more specifically, Isolde’s absence—Edmund found his thoughts drifting to her.

Nevertheless, he did his best to behave normally, engaging in conversation with the other gentlemen. The only one who gained a wall of stony silence was Martin, who would not be dissuaded from trying to get Edmund to begin a pursuit of Amelia. And the only one who did not try to engage Edmund in conversation was Noah, which was likely a good thing.

It had felt like the longest hour of Edmund’s life, a jolt of relief cutting through him when Martin announced that they were all going to reunite with the ladies.

“Amelia? Amelia, where are you?” Martin barked upon entering the drawing room, where the ladies had all fallen silent, as if they had been in the middle of talking about him.

Amelia, head bowed, shuffled toward her brother.

Meanwhile, Edmund’s eyes found Isolde, who had not so much as glanced in his direction.

“There you are.” Martin puffed his chest, casting a pointed look at Edmund, who had no idea why. “Amelia, will you play the pianoforte for us? We ought to have some dancing, and you play so very, very well.”

Amelia immediately began to fidget with the capped sleeve of her jade green gown.

“Now? In front of everyone?” she murmured.

“Of course,” Martin replied sharply. “Show these fine people how excellent you are.”

By “fine people,” Edmund knew that Martin meant him. The man was determined; Edmund had to give him that.

With a barely concealed grimace, Amelia padded over to the beautiful, sleek pianoforte and sat down on the cushioned bench. At that same moment, Isolde hurried over with Valery, and another woman that Edmund did not recognize. Whispers were exchanged and Amelia’s face brightened, a smile curving her lips as she flexed her hands and began to play.

Only then did Isolde look in Edmund’s direction, but quickly looked away again. But with that fleeting glimpse, Edmund’s body tensed, uncertain of the meaning behind it.

In fairness to Martin, Amelia was a very accomplished player of the pianoforte, executing a soft, melancholic ballad with exceptional skill and even a rather astounding amount of emotion. So much so, that Edmund found himself rather moved by dramatic rise and fall of the music, yet his gaze was not fixed upon Amelia, but Isolde.

She must think me a fool, he reasoned, knowing he would deserve it after the way he had acted at the dinner table.

He was still observing her at a safe distance when the movement of another figure caught his eye: Noah, pausing to talk to Julianna.

“Of course you may, Lord Mentrow!” Julianna cried, taking hold of Noah’s hand and shaking it vigorously, before giving him a firm shove in the direction of Isolde.

Edmund suspected he should intervene, as Isolde's unofficial guardian, but instead he tracked Noah's proud stride to the pianoforte. There, Noah smiled and offered out his hand to Isolde, before leaning down to say something to Amelia, who smiled back and immediately flowed into a jaunty tune—the kind made for dancing.

With a coy demeanor, Isolde accepted Noah's proffered hand. She had never looked more radiant, her eyes gleaming, her cheeks rosy, her smile so white and beaming that it struck an odd blow to Edmund's chest. A sensation that was not unfamiliar but had not plagued him in many years. Envy.

Envy of Noah's ability to be so at ease and so well-liked, Edmund told himself, for he would not accept any other explanation.

He had felt the same way when he first became the Duke of Davenport, left all alone in the world to navigate the change. He had envied Vincent and his family. He had envied their ease with one another. He had envied Vincent's ability to take his own inheritance in his stride. He had envied all the things he no longer had or could never have. But he had learned how to overcome that, in time, and would do so again.

As Noah and Isolde took to the impromptu dance floor, Edmund put on a blank expression and folded his arms across his chest as he took a seat by the terrace doors. Anyone watching might have thought he was bored.

She was laughing already as her dance with Noah began. They held hands and crossed their arms in front of each other, moving into a promenade that held the drawing room rapt. Valery had her own hands clasped, wearing an expression of admiration, while the unknown woman at her side truly did look bored.

To the rhythm of the excellent music, Isolde and Noah bowed and curtsied to one another, before beginning a series of slow turns, their palms joined in the center. All the while, they smiled, their mouths moving in a conversation that no one else could

hear.

What are they saying? Edmund squinted, trying to figure it out, but he had never been much good at reading lips.

As the couple turned, Isolde's gaze drifted over Noah's shoulder, catching Edmund's eye. Again, she looked away quickly, returning her attention to her partner.

The pair ebbed and flowed gracefully, moving together and then apart, Noah dancing around her in a half circle before Isolde echoed the step. Even to Edmund's eyes, he could see how perfectly matched they were, neither of them aware of anything but the other person.

I should leave her to it...

Discreetly, Edmund got up and stepped out onto the terrace, determined to rid himself of the uncomfortable, envious feeling that swelled within him, as quickly as possible. It would pass as it had done before.

It had to.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“Remind me never to dance after eight courses again,” Isolde said, grinning as she sat down next to Amelia on the pianoforte bench.

Her friend did not miss a single note of the music she had begun to play, her fingertips so deft and skilled that she could probably play blindfolded. “You make a very handsome pair. Is he pleasant?”

“Always such restrained questions,” Valery jumped in. “Give us the juicier gossip. What did you talk about? You seemed to be conversing for most of the dance. Did your heart flutter when he looked at you? He could not stop staring!”

Valery’s cousin, Beatrice, leaned over the main body of the pianoforte. “Everyone thinks that those pesky stomach butterflies are a sure sign of attraction, but one ought to consider the other times that one feels that way.”

“What do you mean?” Isolde raised her gaze to Beatrice: a beautiful, exciting, feisty creature who was as intimidating as she was fascinating, just as Valery had said she would be.

“Well, the feeling is almost identical to the bad kind of nerves one gets before an important event, and the feeling you sometimes get when something is not quite right, but you cannot pinpoint what is wrong,” Beatrice explained, jewels jangling on the bracelet that draped from her slender wrist.

Isolde pressed her hand to her stomach, as if she might feel those butterflies trying to

free themselves. She had never thought of them as something unwelcome before, as her mother had always told her that they were a certain way of knowing if love could blossom.

“I am not sure that I felt butterflies,” she admitted in a low voice.

“Did you feel anything? A sense of calm, a sense of ‘rightness,’ a sense of complete ease?” Beatrice prompted.

Isolde frowned. “I confess, I was so occupied with the dancing and the talking, and not muddling either, that I do not believe I felt much of anything. But he is certainly the nicest gentleman I have encountered since my debut.”

The second nicest, she reminded herself although, if she was being honest, she had no notion of what her savior was like. He had rescued her, yes, but what if he was otherwise an awful person? What if he was cruel or unkind or rude? What if they met again, and he ruined the image she had of him in her mind?

“Are butterflies always something to be cautious about?” she asked Beatrice, who seemed rather worldly.

Beatrice shrugged. “It depends on the context.”

“So, if someone gave me butterflies, it might not be a bad thing?” In the palace gardens, and whenever she had thought of it afterwards, Isolde’s stomach had definitely fluttered.

Beatrice leaned closer, her eyes flitting toward the middle of the room. “Is it that gentleman who claims to be your guardian?”

“What?” Isolde gasped. “Heavens, no! Why, if you knew us, you would realize that

he is the very last person who could cause my stomach to flutter.”

Valery sighed. “He is so ridiculously handsome, though. When he was seated beside Amelia, I do not mind admitting that I was a little bit jealous.”

“There was no reason to be,” Amelia murmured as she continued to play for the new couples who had taken to the dance floor. “My brother has made it clear that he wants me to ‘enchant’ His Grace, but I have no interest in the man. Yes, he is handsome. Yes, he has been pleasant to me. Yes, he helped me in the park. But... he is not for me.”

Valery scoffed. “Whyever not? Any gentleman would be lucky to have you. Isolde could put in a good word for you if you asked; I am sure.”

The suggestion gave Isolde pause, for she had never considered that Edmund might find himself a wife before. Even before he went to the Continent for his grand tour, he had seemed disinterested in the idea.

She tried to imagine it: Edmund strolling around the park with a pretty wife upon his arm, dancing with her at balls, enjoying dinner parties at her side, making a home with her, but she could not get her brain to comply. In every vision that popped into her head, rather ridiculously, she was the one in the role of Duchess.

“Isolde?” Valery prompted. “You would do that for Amelia, would you not?”

Amelia grimaced. “I do not want her to. As I have said, I have no interest in His Grace, despite what my brother wants for me. And I doubt His Grace has any interest in me, either.”

Puzzled by the sudden flurry of activity in her stomach, and the warmth that flooded her from her cheeks to her chest, Isolde twisted her head around to try and find

Edmund in the room.

When she had started dancing with Noah, he had been at a table by the terrace doors. Now, he was nowhere to be seen.

“Well,” she said hesitantly, looking back at Amelia, “if you ever change your mind, do let me know. I would, of course, be happy to sing your praises to Edmund.”

Beatrice grinned at that, clicking her tongue. “Edmund, is it? You call one another by your names?”

The butterflies transformed into panicked moths, Isolde cursing herself for using his given name. In public, she rarely made such a mistake, and the more she attempted to explain herself, the more Beatrice would probably think she had something to hide.

“Did I say his name? Goodness, I did not mean to,” she said. “It must be the dancing; it has left me quite dizzy.”

She braced for Beatrice to press her, but she did not. Instead, Beatrice offered a sad sort of smile and stuck out her hand, saying, “Then let us be dizzy together, for I am in the mood to dance, but I am not in the mood to dance with a gentleman.”

Laughing at the surprising gesture, Isolde took Beatrice’s hand and nodded. “You shall have to lead.”

“It would be my honor,” Beatrice replied, as they joined the rest of the dancers arm-in-arm.

They had just begun a merry jig, hopping from foot to foot before whirling past each other to switch sides, when a breeze blew in from the terrace, drawing Isolde’s eye. Edmund stood there, as stern-faced as ever, but as he met her gaze and saw her

dancing with Beatrice, he did the strangest thing she had ever beheld in his presence: he smiled at her.

The next morning, Edmund slept late and took his breakfast in the guest chambers where Julianna had insisted on him residing until Vincent's return. He could have continued to commute from his own townhouse, but he had relented in the end, not wanting to insult Julianna's generosity.

As such, by the time he descended the stairs to see what might be on the agenda for the day, it was already ten o'clock. Ordinarily, that meant that suitors would start calling upon Isolde within the next quarter of an hour or so, but he doubted any would on that particular morning, considering he and Isolde had returned from Martin's dinner party after midnight.

Noah might , he realized, praying that ridiculous feeling of envy did not return, praying it had been a one-time sensation.

"There you are!" Isolde's voice stopped him just shy of the bottom step. "I did not realize you were a secret lazybones. My future husband might be arriving in a moment, and you still look half asleep! Have you decided not to fulfil the task my brother set you after all, hm?"

Edmund gripped the banister, knuckles whitening. He stared at Isolde as if she was appearing in the Assembly Rooms for the first time, making her debut—an event that he had missed due to a lame horse.

She wore a simple dress of magnolia muslin, her hair in loose waves that had been pinned into a bun, and nothing new or different about her face, but she looked impossibly radiant. More radiant than he had ever seen her, including the previous night. A glow that came from within. A glow he had heard about but had never witnessed for himself: the radiance of a woman in love.

My future husband might be arriving in a moment... Her words repeated in his head, sinking in this time. It did not require a great mathematician to put two and two together, and the realization left him feeling like he had wandered into a room to search for something, and had forgotten what it was he meant to find.

“Did the Viscount tell you that he intended to call on you today?” Edmund asked, realizing that she was waiting for him to say something.

She frowned as if she did not understand, then her eyebrows shot up in something like shock, before she finally descended into soft chuckles. “You thought I meant the Viscount of Mentrow would be my future husband? Goodness, let us not get ahead of ourselves. He and I barely know one another.”

“It was not an outlandish assumption,” he replied coolly. “You enjoyed many conversations, you danced when dancing was not expected, and you shared many smiles and laughs. Why would you not end up marrying him? Thousands of engagements have been arranged on far less.”

“I also danced with Beatrice. Should I marry her in haste, too?”

He narrowed his eyes. “Do not be juvenile, Lady Isolde. It does not become you.”

She waved his remark away and set off down the hallway, beckoning for him to follow her. Ordinarily, he would have taken offense to her expecting him to traipse after her, but since he had nothing better to do, he did just that.

“You could do worse than a Viscount,” he said upon entering the drawing room, where a tea tray already sat on the low table in the center.

Isolde had wandered to the far side of the room, to the garden windows, where the golden morning light bathed her in a remarkable halo. The heavens were certainly

smiling on her today, for while he felt as if he had been dancing a lively jig in his sleep, his body aching and his stomach sore, she looked as fresh as if she had slept for days.

“I know I said that I must marry quickly to appease my mother and brother, but I would like to think that I have a morsel of time left before I have to make a choice,” she replied, opening the door to let in a waft of earthy morning air. “Or would you like to just throw me headfirst down the aisle without delay?”

Edmund sighed, secretly pleased that she was exercising more caution than she had with Lord Spofforth. “No. All I am saying is that the Viscount of Mentrow is a very pleasant gentleman: he is of good stock, good standing, good fortune, reasonable looks, and you favored his company. One might ask what else you are waiting for?”

“Well, a proposal for one thing,” she shot back with a mischievous smile. “And there can be no harm in becoming better acquainted before we rush into marriage, can there?”

Edmund shrugged. “I suppose not.”

He watched her move around the drawing room with an air of anxiety, adjusting ornaments, turning vases, fluffing up the flowers that had begun to wilt, playing a strange game of chess with the teacups and plates on the tea tray.

When she reached the bookcase, he noticed her pause, her fingertips lightly brushing the spine of a familiar novel. A memory pulsed into his head, so vivid that he had to curl his hands into fists to stop his own fingertips from making the same accidental caress they had made once before, in that very room.

The peculiar intimacy of the memory made him realize, with some horror, that he was alone with Isolde when he should not have been.

“Should your mother not be in here, ensuring that everything is in the proper condition for visitors?” he asked tightly, wondering if he ought to step outside until Julianna was there.

Isolde drifted away from the bookcase to push the carriage clock on the mantelpiece a quarter of an inch to the left. “Probably, but she is not here.”

“Pardon?”

“She left with my sisters half an hour ago,” Isolde replied, moving the clock to where it had originally been. “I believe the three of them intend to do some financial damage to our family coffers at the modiste.”

Edmund’s eyes widened. “But... why would she do that?”

What he really meant to say was, why would she leave him alone with her unwed daughter?

“Prudence left a haddock in Mama’s vanity drawer, and Mama found it just before breakfast,” Isolde explained. “There is no telling when it was placed in the drawer, but Mama decided that Prudence played the trick out of spite.”

Edmund understood less and less with every word. “So, her solution was to take the girl to purchase a new dress?”

“In essence.” Isolde nodded, punching a few cushions back into plumpness. “She suspects that Prudence feels neglected because of all the attention that has been placed upon me of late, so she thought buying dresses and adornments might resolve the issue. Personally, I believe that Prudie just wanted to put a haddock in Mama’s vanity drawer because it is amusing.”

Edmund did not know how to feel about the Dowager's absence, his responsibility shunted from distant guardian to true chaperone. The trouble was, he was not eligible to be Isolde's chaperone.

"And your mother thought this was a good idea?" he said in disbelief.

Isolde came to rest on the side of the settee. "She would not have departed if she did not. I suppose she sometimes forgets that you are not, in fact, part of the family."

Taking himself to the garden doors to feel the refreshing breeze on his warm face, he paced back and forth for a short while, struggling to decide what to do. Julianna might not have seen any issue with the situation, but if there were any visitors, they certainly would.

"We shall just have to explain that Vincent has given me this responsibility," he said after a few moments, grimacing. "In the meantime, you should dance."

"Excuse me?"

Edmund sniffed, straightening his posture. "Last night, I noticed you missed a few steps. You cannot afford to be thought of as a poor dancer. While we are waiting to see if you have any callers, you should dance, so I can ensure you do not make the same mistakes again."

She pushed away from the settee and came to stand a few paces away from him, resting her hands on her hips as she cast a dubious look at him. He could not blame her; it was an odd request.

"Speaking of last night, you ought to address your manners. You were very badly behaved at the dinner table," she remarked, searching his face in a manner that made him want to turn his gaze away.

He forced himself to hold her curious gaze instead. “You are right; I was. I have apologized already.”

“Maybe so, but if I am to dance with no music and no partner, then you can stand there and think about what possessed you to act foolish last night,” she said with a smirk. “That way, we can both feel foolish at the same time.”

Edmund was walking before he could stop himself, closing the gap between them, until he was close enough to see the faint freckles that had appeared upon her cheeks. Rather charming, in his opinion.

Gazing down at her, noting the gleam of surprise in her eyes, he said softly, “I can do nothing about the music, Isolde, but who said you would have no partner?”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I solde's breath abandoned her lungs as Edmund reached for her hand and weaved it through his arm, leading her to an open span of floor by the windows on the other side of the room. As if they were at a real ball, and he had etched his name upon her dance card.

“Are you to be my tutor?” she asked, recovering her voice.

He mustered a faint smile. “There is no one else.”

“With respect, Your Grace, I do not think this is necessary.”

Panic struck her out of nowhere, all of the lessons, all of the etiquette, all of the society rules that had been forced down her throat for years suddenly kicking in. And the first rule was very clear: being alone with a gentleman who was not family or a husband was entirely prohibited.

“I did not miss any steps,” she continued in earnest. “The dance was not as strict as the usual kind. Call it an improvisation more than a mistake. Truly, you do not need to do this. I should speak with the cook and see how the cakes are faring.”

But Edmund kept leading her to the other side of the room, where he stopped and turned to face her, taking both of her hands in his. She glanced down, her heart leaping into her throat, for she had not yet put on her gloves. His warm skin touched hers, his palms rougher than she had expected.

She met his gaze once more. “Vincent scolded me terribly for being alone in the palace gardens with a gentleman, and that happened by accident. What do you think he would say if he could see this?”

“I think he would say that his best friend was instructing his sister in how to dance without error,” Edmund replied, undeterred.

His voice hardened as he added, “But why were you in the palace gardens alone with a gentleman? Your brother did not mention that.”

Isolde cursed herself for mentioning it, though it did surprise her that Vincent had not informed Edmund of that night’s events. Perhaps, he had thought Edmund would not be sympathetic, or worse, that he might feel the need to scold her a second time.

“It was an accident, as I said,” she muttered. “Mama was my chaperone, but she managed to get herself distracted by an old friend, and I did not realize she was not behind me until it was already too late. It could not have been more than a matter of minutes, though, until I did realize.”

And I shall not tell you the rest, for you will accuse me of being silly and romantic again. Nor would she tell him that her masked stranger was the reason she had not yet decided what to do about Noah. If there was still a chance that her champion might be found, she had to pursue it until all hope had vanished.

Of course, the ‘how’ of finding her shadowy champion continued to evade her.

“Who was he?” Edmund pressed, taking a step back and bowing to her.

Evidently, he was quite serious about them dancing together. A bewildering realization, for here was the gentleman who crowed about propriety and scorned her for the smallest misstep, determined to dance with her alone.

“Oh, he is of little importance,” she replied. “I did not like him very much, and I do not believe that he and I wanted the same things, so I would prefer to forget all about it.”

Edmund’s eyes pinched, and she could see him fighting off the urge to ask further questions. “You are supposed to curtsy,” he said thickly.

Rolling her eyes, she dipped into her most graceful, sweeping curtsy. “Really, Your Grace, this is not necessary. I feel more foolish than if I were to dance by myself.”

“Edmund,” he said.

“Pardon?”

“Call me “Edmund.” The formality is grating when I am already living in your family’s townhouse,” he replied, shocking her yet again.

Between his behavior at the dinner party, his fleeting smile in her direction in Amelia’s family drawing room, not running a mile when he heard that Isolde’s mother was away, and leading her into a most inappropriate dance, she was beginning to wonder if Edmund had been replaced with someone else. He assuredly was not the Edmund who Vincent had left in charge of her.

“Are you quite well?” She gaped at him. “Did you hit your head in your sleep, or is this some... trickery?”

Edmund put one arm across his waist and the other behind his back and turned in a slow, elegant circle, the movement highlighting his athletic physique: the broad shoulders, the height of him, the powerful arms, the sharp lines of his abdomen and the slight curve of his back.

“Trickery? Whatever do you mean?” he asked, returning to his original position.

Puffing out a strained breath, she echoed the movement. “You have not been acting at all like yourself, and it is starting to concern me gravely. So, I was just wondering what you have done with the real Edmund? Where have you put his sour face and clipped remarks? Where have you put his unshakeable sense of duty and propriety?”

“Do you want to enchant and inspire awe or not?” he replied more gruffly, more like the Edmund she was used to.

“I would like to make it through the Season with my reputation intact,” she urged, shaking her head. “I mean, for goodness’ sake, why did you bring us close to the windows where anyone might look in and see? Do you want me to be embroiled in a scandal? Are you trying to sabotage me?”

He flinched at that, his gaze darkening. And as he hopped from foot to foot, she could not help feeling that there was a thrum of annoyance in his leaps.

“The drapes are closed,” he pointed out, as she performed the same hops to the left and right, landing gracefully back where she started.

“My point remains—what are you trying to achieve here, Edmund?” His name came easily to her tongue, though not without conjuring a flush in her face. Speaking his name made her remember Beatrice’s grin the night before, when she had accidentally said it in public.

All of a sudden, he was right in front of her, grasping her hand and lifting it between them. He began to walk slowly in her circle, and though she knew she should break away from him, instinct and her ladylike education compelled her to turn with him.

“I am not trying to achieve anything other than your improvement on the dance

floor,” he replied, his voice thick. “But I will say this, while I have your unwavering attention; you are right to be cautious about choosing the gentleman you will marry.”

He stopped and moved his hand around, curving his fingertips around her hand as he began to turn in the opposite direction. Stumbling over the abrupt change, Isolde ended up much closer to him than she had intended. Indeed, there was barely a finger’s length between them.

“I do not need you to validate my caution,” she mumbled, breathlessly aware of his broad chest and the muted scent of lavender that drifted from him, mingling with the comforting aroma of woodsmoke. A heady, somewhat familiar perfume, though she could not place it.

He halted, catching hold of her other hand, clasping both between them. His chest rose and fell rapidly as if he, too, were breathless, though they had only been dancing for a minute or two. He could not have been closer without embracing her.

She waited for the panic to strike her again, but in its place was a pleasant sort of shiver, partway between excitement and nerves. And with that feeling bristling in her veins, she looked up into Edmund’s eyes, daring him to make the next move in a dance she no longer knew.

“You are not listening,” he rasped, his grip loosening on her hands. “You never listen. I am trying to tell you that you deserve a man who is worthy of you, and being worthy of you is no simple matter. I doubt there are even five gentlemen in all of England who would be able to claim that title.”

Her breath caught in her throat as he lifted his hands to her face, cradling it gently as if he wanted to just hold her head there for a moment, to make sure she was hearing him. The trouble was, though the words made sense, she did not understand what it was he was trying to say to her.

“Might you point me in their direction?” she whispered, her hand gingerly coming to rest on his lapel.

He flinched as if she had punched him instead, a ripple of turmoil moving across his handsome face. His mouth made the faint shapes of words, but no sound came out, like he was rehearsing what he wanted to say first. And as he did so, she could not draw her attention away from his lips, wondering if they had always been so... appealing.

His head dipped, that sweet mouth so close to her own that one quiet question would make their lips meet in a grazing kiss.

He paused there for a moment, his forehead touching hers, his thumb brushing her cheek gently, an expression of pain furrowing his brow and creasing his eyes. But what was hurting him? Assuredly, Isolde did not know, though if it was anything like the fierce burn in her veins, then she understood the unexpected ache entirely.

“Edmund?” she whispered.

He might have responded, had the squeak of door hinges not jolted them apart as if an entire wasp’s nest had erupted between them. Wide-eyed, the color draining from his face, Edmund staggered further back.

“Isolde? Are you in the breakfast room?” Isolde’s mother called out from the hallway, the front door banging shut.

“In here!” Isolde shouted back without thinking.

Edmund darted across the room and out of the garden doors before Isolde could say a word, leaving her standing there, wondering if she had just imagined the entire thing. After all, there was no possible way that her sworn enemy had been about to kiss her,

and she had not been appalled by the notion... was there?

A few seconds later, Isolde's mother blustered in. "I shall only be a moment, darling. Would you believe that I forgot my bonnet? I was in such a fluster this morning with the haddock business! And, of course, neither of your sisters thought to remind me. They are waiting in the carriage so I must hurry." She paused, frowning at her daughter. "Isolde?"

Isolde blinked. "Hmm?"

"Are you quite well? You look feverish." Her mother approached, resting a hand on Isolde's brow. "Not so warm, but perhaps you ought to take to your chambers and rest for a while. The housekeeper can turn away any visitors."

Isolde nodded slowly. "Yes, I think that would be a good idea, Mama. I do feel rather strange."

"Do you want me to stay?"

Isolde smiled. "No, you cannot disappoint Prudie, or you may end up with a whole salmon in your bed when you wake tomorrow morning."

"Goodness, what a thing to say." Her mother shuddered. "Do not mention anything like that to her; I do not want her getting ideas."

"I shall keep it to myself, I promise."

Her mother cupped Isolde's cheek, exactly where Edmund had held her not a moment ago. "Go and rest, sweetling. You have a ball to attend the day after tomorrow, and I cannot have you declining to attend because you are unwell. After all, that lovely Viscount is going to be there, and I should hate for some other lady to swoop in while

you are absent.”

“I will, Mama,” Isolde promised, though she was not thinking of the Viscount at that moment. All she could think about was the whisper of Edmund’s breath on her lips, the scent of soap and woodsmoke, the touch of his rough palms against her skin, and the impossible idea of what might have been about to happen if her mother had not forgotten her bonnet.

He would not have kissed me, would he? Maybe, she really was unwell, or he was, for that was the only rational explanation she could muster.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“ I nearly kissed her, Lionel,” Edmund confessed, expelling the words in a rush like he had been holding them in his lungs as a breath. “I do not know what happened to me. It was like... I cannot even begin to explain it, but it must have been a sort of... temporary madness.”

Lionel sat across from him in a quiet public house by the river—not their usual haunt, but Edmund had thought a change of scenery might be nice. A change of scenery where no one of the Ton might accidentally overhear and spread scandalous gossip about the woman he was supposed to be watching over.

“I suspect being alone with her played some part,” Lionel said coolly, pushing his glass of liquor back and forth across the table. “You, of all people, should have known better. Why did you not excuse yourself the moment you realized she was unaccompanied?”

Edmund chewed his lip, feeling utterly disoriented, as if his world had been turned on its head. He valued his own sense of duty and honor; it was the cornerstone of his existence, being the kind of Duke that his mother and father would have been proud of. In one foolish, tempting, otherworldly moment, he had almost undone himself.

“The funny thing is, that was my first thought,” he explained. “Isolde told me that her mother and sisters had ventured out, and my mind began to clang, urging me to leave her be. Instead, I suggested she ought to improve her dancing, though... there is nothing amiss with her dancing. She is very accomplished.”

Lionel raised an eyebrow. “And you offered to be her partner?”

“I do not even like to dance, Lionel,” Edmund mumbled, resting his forehead on his hand, staring at the stains and gnarls in the table’s surface as if he might find answers there. “I wanted to leave, knew I should leave, but I could not. And I am certain I would have kissed her if her mother had not returned when she did.”

Lionel frowned, drumming his fingertips against the wood. “How would she have responded if you had?”

“What?” Edmund’s gaze shot back up to his friend. “What sort of question is that? You ought to be reprimanding me, telling me what a reckless rogue I have been, scolding me for almost making a terrible mistake, insisting I keep my distance from her from now on.”

“It would only have been a mistake if she had not reciprocated the... affection,” Lionel said, as casual as if he were telling Edmund about the kind of eggs available for breakfast.

Edmund leaned in, his voice low. “It is a mistake for any unwed gentleman to kiss an unwed lady, but it is doubly so for me.” He lowered his voice further, just in case there was anyone listening in. “She is Lady Isolde. She is my dearest friend’s sister. She is the... crowning hope for my dearest friend’s family, and I nearly thwarted that. We were right by the windows, for pity’s sake—anyone could have seen!”

He had not taken Isolde’s own worries seriously at the time, but after he had escaped the townhouse to walk and clear his head, he had realized just how idiotic he had been. There were always people wandering past the townhouses of Mayfair, peering in at windows to satisfy their nosiness, and they had been right there, not only dancing, but standing too close, their intentions—Edmund’s, at least—as clear as day for anyone to behold.

“You lost yourself in the fire of the moment,” Lionel said evenly. “It can happen to anyone. It does not mean you are suddenly dishonorable or wretched.”

Edmund squirmed in his chair, wishing he was in his own townhouse where he would have the room to pace and fret. “Then explain why I have not been able to stop thinking about it—about her ?”

“You like her,” Lionel replied simply.

Edmund scoffed, as he had done when the picnicking ladies in Hyde Park had alluded to the same thing. It was ridiculous. It was utterly ridiculous. Of all the women in the world, she was the very last he would think of in a romantic fashion.

But there had, perhaps, been warning signs: the stolen looks, the ‘accidental’ touches, the way he sought her out in a crowd, the way he had intervened so forcefully during the morning visits of potential suitors, the fact he had behaved so out of character at the dinner party, and had felt a tightness in his chest upon seeing Isolde so enamored with Noah. Had it been leading to something like a kiss, without him realizing? Had he missed earlier opportunities to nip certain impulses in the bud?

“I do not hear you protesting,” Lionel prompted with a faint smile.

“Well, that is because I would not deign to give that suggestion any speech at all,” Edmund retorted, his mind buzzing with a hive of confusion and unease. “There has to be another reason. It cannot be affection.”

Lionel leaned back in his chair, swirling his glass of liquor before taking a pointed sip. “I would not assume to know what you are thinking, Edmund, but I do not see that there is anything wrong with seeing Lady Isolde in a romantic light. She is known to be very beautiful, I have heard that she is quite charming, she is of good standing, and she is already familiar to you. It would, perchance, be more unusual if

you did not develop some sort of affection for her.”

“Then consider me unusual, because I will not allow it of myself,” Edmund insisted, his leg jiggling as if his body could not bear the pressure of his wayward mind’s unyielding thoughts of her.

Distraction had not worked. He must have walked across half of London trying to tire himself out, so his brain would not permit him to remember how wonderful, how right it had felt to hold her in his arms. How soft her skin had been when he had cradled her face, how she had tilted her head up as if she wanted to be kissed by him.

Would she have hit me, pushed me, yelled at me? He had asked himself that question a thousand times since it happened, too.

“With respect, Edmund, whyever not?” Lionel’s tone held a rasp of frustration, as if he had grown weary of the conversation.

Then again, it was always difficult to tell what Lionel was thinking, for he rarely gave much away on his face or in his voice. It was what made him such a good listener, for one could talk for hours and he would not interject unless invited to.

“You know why,” Edmund replied, turning his gaze toward the window, where the river flowed slowly by, glinting in the afternoon sunlight. “It would not matter if she was a stranger I had met in the gardens of a ball, who had pierced my heart with longing; the outcome would be the same. I will not, cannot, and shall not marry. I have told you this before, Lionel.”

Lionel shrugged. “And I have always assumed that you would change your mind if the right lady happened to come along. You are a clever man, Edmund; I thought you would eventually realize that you do not need to punish yourself for things that were not your fault in the first place. Things that have nothing to do with having a wife and

being content in life.”

With a sigh, Edmund squinted at the glittering water, wondering if he had not explained himself well enough to the friends who knew of his stance—Lionel and Vincent—or if they would simply never understand because they could not.

They had not lost what he had lost. They had not had to carry the burden of being the sole survivor of an entire family. They had not had everything one moment, and nothing the next. They were likely incapable of putting themselves in his position, feeling what he felt.

“It has more to do with that than you think,” he managed to say. “I have no desire for legacy. My cousin will make a fine Duke when I die, or my cousin’s sons if he has already passed, and they will fill that manor with life and people again. That is what I want. That is why I cannot?—”

A face appeared at the window he had been staring out of, eager knuckles rapping on the glass. A face he would not have expected to see in that part of London at any time, least of all then.

His heart jumped in alarm, his stomach sinking as he realized there was another figure framed in the window too. Someone who would not look at him, despite her mother’s frantic attempt to gain Edmund’s attention.

Isolde—the very woman he had been trying to forget, haunting him in places he had been certain they would never cross paths.

“Did you tell them you would be here?” Lionel whispered, a subtle hint of cool amusement in his eyes. “Or are you, perhaps, more destined than you thought?”

Edmund shot his friend a dark look, downed what was left in his glass, and got up to

head outside and greet Julianna and her daughter. Indeed, though it seemed like a cruel jest from the heavens, perhaps it was a blessing in disguise, for if he was to keep any inkling of affection at arm's length, there was no better time to begin practicing than the present.

“Good afternoon to you,” Edmund said, bowing his head to Isolde and her mother as he stepped out of the rustic riverside inn.

A rather shabby establishment, in Isolde's opinion, but if that was Edmund's preference, she would not question it. She would not even mention it, for that might show she cared what he got up to when he was not standing guard over her marriage prospects.

And I do not care what he does when he is not acting like my shadow. I do not care a jot, she told herself, determined to make herself believe it.

“Good afternoon, Edmund,” Isolde's mother crowed, wearing a gleeful expression. “What a fortunate thing that I caught sight of you, or I might have missed you entirely.”

Edmund smiled tightly. “Indeed, I would not have expected to see you here. Did you lose your way? Do you require an escort to return to more... savory parts of London?”

“Oh, what a fine and caring gentleman you are!” Isolde's mother said, delivering a rather sharp jab of the elbow to Isolde's ribs. “But no, we are not lost. We have been at the modiste, and when we emerged, three gowns heavier, it was such a beautiful afternoon that I suggested we should wander along the river. What a bit of luck that we should find you here too.”

What a bit of careful orchestration, Isolde wanted to mutter, but held her tongue. All

morning and all through their hours of selection and alterations at the modiste, her mother had not stopped chattering about Edmund and how pleasant he was, and how Isolde really ought to consider him, and how happy Vincent would be if she did.

It had taken every lesson in being ladylike that Isolde had ever learned not to eventually snap at her mother. Instead, she had ignored it, praying her mother would eventually exhaust herself. It had been working until that moment, and Isolde sensed that the impromptu meeting would only reinvigorate her mother's misplaced matchmaking endeavors.

“Three gowns?” Edmund raised a quizzical eyebrow. “Are they... nice?”

Isolde could not resist any longer, her gaze drawn to him by the strange question. Since when had Edmund cared about her wardrobe? Why, she was more shocked that he had not taken the opportunity to scold Isolde and her mother for being atrocious spendthrifts.

He did not look away, his sapphire-blue eyes locked with hers. And in that look, it was like they were both holding a piece of string, the tension tightening, becoming unbearable the longer they held it.

Warmth tingled in Isolde's cheeks, rushing down her neck like a fever, her skin remembering the closeness of him. Her forehead grew hot, exactly where he had rested his brow against hers, her face intimately recalling where he had held her, and as she pressed her lips together, it was as if they were back in the drawing room, and she was waiting for him to take that terrifying step of kissing her.

Breathless, she finally dropped her gaze, wondering what on earth was wrong with her. She could not find her brother's dearest friend, her sworn enemy, appealing. It was impossible.

“Extraordinary!” Isolde’s mother replied. “Truly, the most exquisite gowns I have ever seen, though I rather think the beauty of them has more to do with the wearer. I have yet to see a gown that does not look exceptional on my daughter.”

Edmund’s voice sounded somewhat thick as he replied, “What colors have you purchased?”

Colors? Is he quite serious? Isolde snuck a glance at him, perplexed by the curious expression on his face.

“One is dark blue, one is a rather daring red, and the other is a gorgeous muslin in a very unusual color—How did I describe it, darling?” Isolde’s mother looked at her daughter expectantly.

“The shade of a lady’s blush in summer,” Isolde mumbled in reply. “I would call it a dusky rose, as that is how the modiste described it. Rather less poetic, but certainly easier to imagine.”

Edmund nodded. “They sound very charming.”

“Oh, they are,” Isolde’s mother said eagerly. “I only wish we could show you them now, but they will not be ready to collect until tomorrow. Today was for the final alterations. But the fabric moves so well, Edmund—I cannot wait to see her dance in them. She will be the belle of every ball; I have no doubt about it. Although, we shall have to purchase some additional adornments and?—”

“Mama,” Isolde interrupted firmly, “I do not think His Grace is interested in hearing about gowns and adornments. He is just being polite, and we have taken up quite enough of his time.” She pointed her chin toward the inn window. “Your friend must be awaiting your swift return.”

And I cannot be here, with you looking at me like that. Isolde's heart thudded out of time, her mind returning again and again to the drawing room.

She had often daydreamed about her first kiss, imagining a romantic scene on a sunny but windswept day, held passionately in the arms of her husband. His face had never been clear to her, no matter how fervently she dipped into her reservoir of beloved romance stories, but since her debut, every daydream 'husband' had worn a mask of roses and thorns. Now, after the dance in her family townhouse, the mask had come off in her imaginings, the gentleman of her first kiss dreams wearing the face of Edmund instead.

She did not know how to stop it, but spending time in his company certainly would not help matters.

"If you will excuse us. We will leave you to your afternoon," Isolde said, grabbing her mother's arm and tugging her away with all the force she could muster.

Vincent, when are you coming home?

Isolde prayed it would be sooner rather than later.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“And why, pray tell, are we suddenly ending our afternoon of revels to peruse such places as these?” Lionel asked pointedly, arching an eyebrow at the fine gowns displayed in the windows of the most famous modiste in London, Madame Versailles.

Edmund brushed his friend’s remark away. “Vincent asked me to ensure that his sister was well-attired for the Season’s events. I have been remiss in that duty, but I was reminded by the Dowager’s presence. I shall not be long.”

“Yes, well, you will excuse me if I take myself down the street to the tailor,” Lionel said, his voice tight. “I have no cause to be in a shop for ladies.”

Edmund smirked. “You mean, you have no inclination to be in a shop where there might be ladies. Honestly, for someone so intent on chiding me for not wanting to entertain the prospect of marriage, you are rather reticent yourself.”

“I have nothing to say to women,” Lionel said stiffly. “I certainly have nothing to say to a dressmaker. And let us not pretend that Vincent has anything to do with this abrupt notion to purchase a gown for Lady Isolde.”

He hurried off before Edmund could defend himself, leaving Edmund alone on a rather busy street, where several people were already looking at him strangely. Or, perhaps, they were simply looking at him with interest, wondering if they ought to shove their daughters into his path. It would not have been the first time, and he never had the heart to tell them that it was a fruitless endeavor.

I ought to wear a sign that says ‘Unwilling to Wed. Not a Prospect.’ But he had the most awful feeling that that would only encourage the desperate mothers of society, their determined minds deciding that the opposite must be true.

Pulling the peak of his top hat lower over his face and bowing his head, Edmund headed into the dressmaker’s shop.

There were only four other customers inside the shop: a young lady and her mother mulling over the respective beauty of a roll of purple silk and a roll of the finest, yellow-hued muslin; and two older ladies who appeared to be making fashion judgments for a woman who was not there.

At the counter, the famous Madame Versailles watched Edmund with interest, her intense brown-eyed gaze making him feel twice as awkward about being in the shop in the first place. She was, perhaps, fifty or so, with a severe bun that seemed to pull her eyebrows halfway up her forehead, and of such small stature that her shoulders barely rose above the counter. But woe betide anyone who thought that her smallness was any indication of a small personality.

“Wife, mother, or sister?” the little woman barked in a broad, northern accent that had never so much as glimpsed France, crushing any hope Edmund might have had of remaining unnoticed.

He moved quickly to the counter, praying his face had not been seen. “It is for the sister of a dear friend,” he whispered, suddenly wishing he had followed Lionel to the tailor instead.

This is stupid. It is not my place to choose a gown for Isolde. She will not wear it, no matter what I pick. He hesitated, tempted to turn around and walk right out of the shop without another word.

Madame Versailles nodded with a smile. “Ah, so a lady you hope will be your wife. Say no more.”

She disappeared into a back room, giving him no opportunity to protest. Truly, he was becoming rather frustrated with everyone scarpering before he could insist that he had no feelings for Isolde and had no desire for her to become his wife. And the more those words were left unexpressed, the more they lodged in his chest and his mind, muddling his thoughts until they were one tangled ball of yarn with Isolde at the center.

A few stressful minutes later, Edmund entirely aware of eyes on him, Madame Versailles reappeared with three rolls of the most extraordinary material he had ever seen: midnight blue silk embroidered with pearls and gleaming silver spangles; olive green silk overlaid with intricate, lighter green lace; and a roll of that dusky rose material that Isolde must have been talking about, the fabric having an ethereal sheen that made it turn almost bronze when the light hit it.

Madame Versailles dropped the rolls onto the counter with an almighty thud, flashing a wink. “Only the best for the Duke of Davenport,” she said, shocking him for a second time.

How does she know who I am?

“This must be for Lady Isolde, yes?” Madame Versailles continued, though she had the decency to quieten her voice.

Edmund nodded, mustering his confidence. “Her brother asked me to undertake this task on his behalf. I do not know what he had in mind, but as long as it is fit for an Earl’s sister, it will suffice.”

He touched the midnight blue fabric, tilting it this way and that, noting how it seemed

to sparkle in the light. “This one.”

“I thought you might say that.” Madame Versailles grinned. “Lady Isolde was just looking at it earlier, but her mother said it was too expensive. But you—I knew you’d have expensive tastes the moment you walked in. There’ll be no one in all of London with a gown made from this. I don’t let just anyone have a dress made of my best fabrics.”

Edmund tried not to grimace as he asked for the price.

“Nothing you can’t afford, Your Grace,” she replied. “When it came in, I knew it was Lady Isolde’s. There’s no other lady in the ton who could wear it the way it’s supposed to be worn.”

Edmund cleared his throat. “How soon could you have it made? I trust you have all of Lady Isolde’s... um...”

“Measurements,” the dressmaker interjected with a hoarse laugh. “Aye, I do, and I can have it made in... say, three days from now. I’ve been longing to create a masterpiece from it, so I won’t make you wait to see the artistry in real life.”

“It is not anything to do with me. It is her brother’s request,” Edmund tried to insist, but the dressmaker just laughed and waved his remark away.

“Of course it is, and I used to make gowns for the Queen of France.” She chuckled to herself. “I thought she had that look about her when she came in with her mother, and you’ve got the same look in your eyes. Now, it all makes sense.”

Edmund cast a discreet glance over his shoulder to see if the other customers were still nearby, but the four people seemed somehow disinterested in what was going on at the counter. Still, he refused to trust in appearances, worried beyond measure that

he would see his name and Isolde's in the scandal sheets tomorrow.

"There is no look," he whispered. "I thank you for making the gown, but please do not make unfounded assumptions."

Madame Versailles tilted her head to one side, eyeing him with amusement. "Very well. What would I know? I'm just a dressmaker." Her smile widened. "Come back in three days. It'll be waiting."

"Thank you," Edmund said as politely as he could, before turning on his heel and walking out of the shop with his head in a whole new world of disarray.

As he stepped back onto the street and began to walk toward the tailor to catch up with Lionel, he paused at the sight of his reflection in the passing windows.

Slowly, he turned to face himself, scrutinizing the man that stared back at him. He could see no secret affection etched across his features, he could see no unyielding love glinting in his eyes, he could not see the future that Lionel and Julianna seemed to want for him in the grim line of his mouth—all he could see was the face of the very last man that Isolde would ever want to marry. The face of a man who would never marry, even if there was an affection.

Which there is not, he told himself sternly. I would not have kissed her. I would have come to my senses in time. It was fleeting madness, nothing more.

That, he could see on his face, in the determined narrowing of his eyes, the defiant tilt of his chin, the stern press of his mouth, the squaring of his shoulders.

"Jewels, too?" a lightly teasing voice snapped Edmund out of his observation.

Lionel's reflection appeared at his side, making Edmund realize that he had stopped

outside the most prestigious jeweler in London. The display was as extravagant, and undoubtedly expensive, as the Crown jewels themselves.

“A pocket watch caught my eye,” Edmund lied, pressing on up the street.

Lionel did not run to catch up to him, but marched with longer strides until they were side-by-side once again. “I think it is more than a pocket watch that has caught your eye, Edmund.”

“It is not,” Edmund insisted, clenching his hands into fists.

Lionel shrugged. “In that case, if it is merely a pocket watch, why deny yourself? All you have to do is say that you want it, and I have no doubt that it could be yours.”

“It is just a dress!” Edmund rasped, wishing ever more fervently that he had not bothered with the endeavor at all. “And until Vincent returns, Isolde’s position in society is my duty. I must ensure that she is favored, talked about for the right reasons, and engaged to be married before the Season’s end. So, please, let us go to Golding’s and speak of other things.”

Lionel put up his hands in a gesture of calm surrender. “I do not know why you sound so exasperated. I was just talking about a pocket watch.”

“And I was just reiterating that I do not want one,” Edmund retorted, as his sneaky mind drifted back to the drawing room and her and just how much he had wanted that kiss.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“Should someone visit to make sure he is well?” Teresa asked, a closed book resting on the dinner table beside her barely touched plate of food.

Prudence snorted, devouring her dinner as if she had not eaten in a week. “Check he is alive, you mean.”

“Prudence!” their mother shrieked, sipping eagerly from her wine glass as she always did when her nerves were in need of steadying. “Why would you say such a terrible thing? He is perfectly well and perfectly alive! If he was not, we would have heard about it.”

Isolde remained silent, pushing half a roasted potato around her plate until it had absorbed most of the glistening sauce that had trickled away from the crisped leg of chicken.

For three days, she had walked back and forth to the front door, determined to make the short journey to Edmund’s townhouse to see what was wrong with him. Each time, she had stopped herself, certain that if he was keeping his distance then he had good reason for it. A reason that she should not bother herself with.

“Isolde?” her mother’s voice dragged her attention up from the sodden potato.

“Yes, Mama?”

“You do not know what has happened to poor Edmund, do you?”

Prudence stopped eating, a wicked glint of mischief in her eyes. “Oh, Izzie, what have you done? Did you chase him away with one of my tricks? Was it the bucket on the door? The mackerel sewn into his bedlinens?”

“It is most unlike him to neglect his duties,” Teresa added quietly, assessing Isolde with a more pensive look. “Did you quarrel again? I thought I saw you fighting from the carriage window, the day before he ceased coming here.”

The dinner that Isolde had managed to eat suddenly turned into a rock in her stomach, her throat closing as she stared back at Teresa. Surely, her sister had not seen what had almost happened. Either Isolde or Edmund would have heard a carriage coming to a halt that close to the drawing room windows, would they not?

I was rather distracted... Might I have missed it?

After all, they had not heard footfalls coming up the porch steps. They had only heard the squeak of hinges, moments before catastrophe could occur.

“Why are your cheeks red, Izzie?” Prudence crooned, no doubt thrilled to have suspicion turned on someone other than herself.

The girls’ mother set down her knife and fork and looked Isolde in the eye, her lips pursing as if she had just eaten something unpleasant. “When did you see this fight exactly, Teresa?” she asked without diverting her attention from Isolde. “What did you see, exactly?”

Isolde could not risk glancing at her sister, to silently implore her to remain quiet on the matter. She did not even know if Teresa did have anything to divulge, but it definitely felt like an axe was about to drop.

I did not do anything wrong. There was no kiss. Indeed, all I am guilty of is...

wishing there had been, but I have overcome that foolishness now.

She knew, deep down, that Edmund's sustained absence likely had something to do with that near-miss of a kiss. As time had worn on, she had thought of it with less fondness and more annoyance, for how could she actually overcome that memorable moment if he would not talk to her about it? Surely, discussing it was the more mature thing to do, so they could dismiss it and move on?

"I could be mistaken, as it was very dark in the drawing room and the drapes were partially closed," Teresa said nervously, not quite dooming Isolde but not relieving her either. "I thought I saw Isolde and His Grace arguing but, as I say, I might be mistaken."

Prudence pulled a face. "You did not tell me. I could have confirmed whether or not they were arguing, for my eyes are keener than yours. You have worn yours out with all of your reading by candlelight when you are supposed to be asleep."

Their mother put her hands up, the gesture commanding silence. "I shall talk to you about reading by candlelight later, Teresa," she muttered. "As for you, Isolde—is this true? Did you argue with Edmund? Is that why he has returned to his townhouse without a word?"

"There was no argument," Isolde said a note too quickly. "He came into the drawing room, realized I was alone and unchaperoned in his presence, and immediately left again. I do not know why he has not come back, but you saw our interaction on the riverbank—we were no different than usual. That was after what Teresa must have seen which, I repeat, was not an argument."

Isolde's mother lowered her hands and reached for her wine glass, taking another long sip as her gaze flitted between her three daughters. Obviously, she was searching for some agreed-upon subterfuge, but she would find none.

“But there was a difference on the riverbank,” the older woman said after a moment. “At least, I thought there was. A promising difference. That is why I have been so astounded by Edmund’s absence. He asked about your gowns—how could that not have been a fortuitous sign of interest?”

Prudence barked out a laugh. “Isolde and Edmund? You think Edmund is interested in my big sister? Are we speaking of another Edmund and another Isolde? Why, I know I am young, but I have never seen a less suited pair. They would kill each other!”

“When did you become so macabre, Prudence?” their mother tutted, turning up her nose. “And yes, you are young, so I would ask that you keep your opinion to yourself. They are not ill suited at all. Yes, they have not always seen eye-to-eye but they are older now, and he would be such an excellent choice. Vincent would be delighted.”

“Vincent would be marching Edmund down to the Serpentine to duel at dawn, more like,” Prudence interjected, grinning. “No brother wants their sister to marry their best friend, Mama. It is too bizarre.”

“Prudence, desist!” their mother yelped, her hand flying to her chest in horror. “Never mention dueling again in my presence!”

For once, the youngest daughter had the decency to look ashamed, dipping her head as she mumbled an apology.

Meanwhile, Isolde was only half listening, her mind stuck on Prudence’s words: I have never seen a less suited pair. Isolde had believed that firmly not so long ago, so why had she been so willing to kiss Edmund? There had not been a single doubt in her mind when it had seemed inevitable. She had even called his name when he had hesitated.

“Goodness, I do not know what the matter is with all of you tonight,” her mother grumbled. “I ask a simple question, and it descends into chaos.”

Teresa raised a nervous hand. “I would not say the question of marriage is a simple one, Mama. If Isolde is set against His Grace, you really should not push her to consider him. I, too, do not think Vincent would be as happy about the notion as you seem to believe.”

“Nor do I have the faintest affection for the man!” Isolde jumped in, feeling it was of great importance to state that, once and for all. For herself, more than anyone, in case her resolve wavered more than it already had.

A throat cleared at the doorway to the dining room, all four women whipping around at once, eyes wide at the intrusion. Before Isolde had even looked at him, she knew who would be standing there. Of course , it was him, forever appearing at the most inopportune moments.

“Apologies for disturbing you,” Edmund said, a strange fire in his gaze as it rested on Isolde. “I had no idea I would be entering such a heated forum, but I shall not trouble you for long. I merely came to speak with you, Dowager.”

“What is in the box?” Prudence piped up, recovering the quickest from the surprise arrival.

Isolde glanced at the large, cream box in Edmund’s hands, the package tied with a silky red bow. She would have known the design of the box anywhere, and where it had come from, though how Edmund came to be in possession of a box from Madame Versailles’ shop was bemusing.

“An express rider handed it to me on my way in,” Edmund said. “I believe it is destined for you, Lady Isolde.”

Isolde blinked, caught off guard by the way he was looking at her, those curious embers still burning in his eyes. “Me?”

“Do you think it could be from an admirer?” Isolde’s mother gasped excitedly. “A suitor, perhaps? Oh... could it be a gift from that absolutely charming Viscount?”

Edmund stepped forward and set the box down on the end of the long dining table. “I do not know where it came from. The rider did not say. It is a mystery that I am sure you will solve soon enough.”

“But the rider must have said!” Isolde’s mother urged.

Edmund bowed his head. “I am sorry to disappoint. Now, if you will excuse me, I should return to my townhouse.”

“Immediately?” Isolde asked, her voice suddenly tight. “Did you not say you had something to discuss with my mother?”

A slight crease appeared between Edmund’s eyebrows, his lips briefly turning up in a stiff, polite smile. “Quite right. I did say that.” He looked to Isolde’s mother. “I wanted to apologize for my recent absence. I have had important business to attend to, that could not wait, and it was easier for me to tend to it in my own residence. As the matter is ongoing, I believe it will be for the best if I remain in my own residence. Should you need anything, do not hesitate to send for me, and I will be at your service as quickly as I can.”

“But why?” Isolde’s mother asked, dismayed. “We have a perfectly good study, and no one is using it. You simply must continue to stay here with us. It will not be the same if you are elsewhere.”

“Nevertheless, it is my preference,” Edmund said, his tone a note colder than before.

“This way, if you should happen to venture out with your youngest daughters again, Dowager, I shall not be left in an awkward position. I may be representing Vincent, but I am not him, and there are rules to be obeyed, even as a guardian to Lady Isolde.”

Prudence flashed a wicked grin at Teresa. “I knew they had quarreled.”

“Oh goodness,” Isolde’s mother lamented, finally seeming to understand. “You are right, Edmund. I was entirely remiss, leaving the two of you alone in the house together. I am so accustomed to having you in this house that I did not even think!”

Edmund folded his arms behind his back, that flat, hollow smile fixed to his face. It did not suit him at all, the sight of it jarring Isolde. Then again, she could probably count on one hand the number of times she had seen a real smile from him... which was why it was so peculiar that he had wasted one on her, at Martin Thorne’s dinner party. She had not been mistaken, though she had replayed the moment in her mind a thousand times; Edmund had definitely smiled at her dancing with Beatrice.

“It is all right, Dowager,” Edmund said. “There was no harm done. I departed shortly after I realized.”

“Immediately after he realized,” Isolde chimed in, her skin flushing fever-hot though it was mild in the dining room.

She did not dare to look in the direction of either of her sisters, for Teresa would wonder why she was correcting Edmund so fervently, and Prudence would instantly pick up on the slight disparity in the story. With any luck, however, the girls’ mother would not notice at all.

Edmund raised an eyebrow but gave a nod of assent. “Exactly, that is what I meant. I was given an important duty by Vincent, but that does not supersede the duties of a

gentleman. So, with regret, I will be at my own residence from now on.” He began to walk to the door. “Please, enjoy the rest of your dinner. I have my own waiting for me.”

As he left, Isolde’s mother started to protest, rising from her seat as she called out for him to stay and join them. And, to her surprise, Isolde found that she was also rising to her feet, seeing an opportunity fading away with each of Edmund’s retreating steps.

“I shall remedy this,” Isolde said, hurrying out to catch Edmund before he left.

After all, she had a feeling that this was all her fault.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Edmund was already partway down the porch steps, the housekeeper in the midst of closing the door after him, when Isolde slipped out. She did not know what was possessing her, but she could not stop herself from reaching out, grabbing him by the wrist to turn him around.

A look of astonishment graced his face as he stared at her, though even from the lower step, he was still taller than her.

“What are you doing?” he rasped, shaking his head as if to dislodge something. “You should return inside at once! It is unseemly for a lady to chase gentlemen out of a house, and more improper still for a lady to... grasp at a gentleman who is not family or a husband.”

Nevertheless, he made no attempt to remove her hand from his wrist, just as she did not take her hand away. And as she looked into his eyes, she saw that odd fire still burning in the depths of those intense sapphires. She could not decide if it was a glow of hatred or hunger or something she had no name for.

Isolde straightened her posture, swallowing past the thickness in her throat. “I will go inside when you tell me why you have been avoiding this house for three days. I have missed two dinner parties, an afternoon recital, a poetry reading, and a luncheon because of you. Did you forget that I cannot attend anywhere without an escort, or did you stay away so I could not go anywhere?”

“Last I heard, your mother still has legs,” Edmund bit back, his entire demeanor

more... unraveled than usual.

He did not look like he had slept much, there was a rather appealing shadow of stubble across his jaw that immediately conjured an image in Isolde's mind of him wandering windswept hills; his hair was tousled and wild as if he had been running his hands through it often, and his cravat and collar were loose around his neck, revealing a hint of his collarbone that should probably not have been visible.

"Yes, well, my mother had prior engagements," Isolde replied, disarmed by his unexpected ruggedness.

Edmund shrugged. "From what you have said, it rather sounds like I saved you from at least four instances of utter tedium. Now, please, return inside."

"Why have you been avoiding me?" she insisted, her heart beating uneasily in her chest.

He glanced back over his shoulder, bristling with a similar unease, before he returned his gaze to her. When he did, she noticed a subtle flinch of his eyes and mouth, as if she had caused him pain. But she had not gripped his wrist any tighter, nor could she think of any other injury she might have inflicted.

"As I mentioned, I have been busy," he said flatly.

"With what?"

"With estate matters," he replied.

"Then, why have you not gone to your estate?"

He expelled a great sigh. "Because I made a promise to your brother, and it is better

for me to be nearby to undertake that duty, where I can also attend to my estate business.”

Gently, he prized her fingers from his wrist, but rather than let go immediately, he hesitated, holding her hand for a moment. His palm was rough and warm against hers, for she never wore gloves when she dined at home and had quite forgotten that she was without them when she had reached for him.

All at once, she was reminded of the garden party, and how he had come running to her side; the look of stricken concern on his face as he had checked her for injury, touching her stomach though many would have deemed that improper. Yet, in that instant, he had cared more about her than he had about society opinion.

It was the same in the drawing room. I felt it. You did not care about society opinion then either.

As if he could tell what she was picturing in her mind, he dropped her hand as if it were ablaze. “Go inside,” he growled. “I will not have you undo your own reputation because you refuse to listen to me.”

“Undo my own reputation?” she said, breathless. “And what of you undoing it with your... dance lessons?”

She could not bring herself to speak aloud the truth of it—that he had almost kissed her, and she had almost kissed him back. But he was no fool; there was no possible way he would not understand what occasion she was referring to.

He rose up until he was perilously close to her, stealing the last of the air out of her lungs as he leaned in and whispered, “Goodnight, Isolde.”

Whirling around, he marched on down the steps and into the night, leaving Isolde

with shaky legs and a racing heart as he blended seamlessly into shadow... rather like someone else who had made her feel that way, not so long ago.

Edmund slammed into his townhouse like a summer storm, panting hard as if he had sprinted all the way from the Grayling residence when, in truth, he had walked at an ordinary pace. His mind, on the other hand, was a different story: it was running several marathons at once, every race peppered with hurdles in the shape of Isolde Wilds.

“Your Grace?” a hoarse voice said, startling Edmund.

He recovered swiftly, tipping his head to his longtime butler, Mr. Phipps. The old man had been an old man in Edmund’s father’s day, and though Edmund knew he ought to seek a younger replacement who did not struggle with stairs and eyesight, he simply could not do it. It was the same with Sinclair, the steward of Davenport Towers, though at least he still had most of his wits about him.

“You should be in bed, Mr. Phipps,” Edmund said, taking hold of the butler’s arm, as thin and frail as a bird bone.

“I can’t retire ‘til the household is abed, Your Grace,” Mr. Phipps replied. “I heard you go out, so I’ve been waiting for you to come back.”

Edmund helped the man down the hallway to the old study that had been repurposed as a bedchamber for the butler, to save him the trouble of having to master the stairs every day. Mr. Phipps had been horrified by the study’s transformation at first, as Edmund had done it without mentioning it, but the butler had come to appreciate the gesture.

“Will Her Grace be wanting her sleeping tonic before she retires?” Mr. Phipps asked. “I was trying to find a maid, but I suppose they’ve all left their posts already.”

Edmund's breath caught, the wind knocked out of him for the second time in one evening. The third, in truth. The first had been when he heard Isolde declare that she did not "have the faintest affection" for him; the second when she had come running out to ask about what nearly happened in the drawing room; the third was realizing that Mr. Phipps was having one of his 'moments,' where he was somewhere in the past, living it as if it was the present.

"Her Grace is not here," Edmund said, swallowing past the lump that had formed in his throat.

Mr. Phipps frowned. "What do you mean? The family are leaving for the seaside tomorrow morning. Where else would Her Grace be but here?"

"You should rest, Mr. Phipps," Edmund urged, his head spinning with memories.

But there was a new layer to them now, an undercurrent of loneliness that tugged on him like a riptide. Isolde had done that. Isolde had thrown him off course, bringing things to the surface that had been shoved down so deep that he had assumed he would never have to feel them again. By distracting him, she had allowed old pains and agonizing solitude to slither past his guard.

I cannot be near her again. I ought to return to Davenport without delay and leave her to her mother's protection.

On the steps, he had almost kissed her cheek. He had wanted to, had wanted to discuss back and forth what might or might not have been about to happen in the drawing room, had wanted to force her to untangle the knots she had twisted in his head.

"I am muddled again, aren't I?" Mr. Phipps asked, diverting Edmund's attention.

“A little, but it is nothing sleep cannot fix,” Edmund replied.

The butler made his own way into the repurposed study, hobbling over to the desk where he leaned for a moment. “They’re gone, aren’t they?”

“They are.” Edmund clenched his hands into fists, digging his fingernails into his palms to distract himself from the influx of memories.

That, in turn, merely led him back to the distraction of Isolde. How soft and warm her hand had been in his, so fleetingly. How she had peered at him with shy intrigue, how she had asked about the ‘dancing lessons’ so brazenly, how desperately he had longed to tell her that, yes, he would have kissed her if her mother had not returned.

“I’m sorry,” Mr. Phipps said. “I’m sorry you only had us. We weren’t much of a substitute, I know, but it’ll not be long until there are younglings in this house again, and you’ll have a family of your own to replace what you lost. I think I’d like to see that before my days come to an end.”

Edmund mustered a smile. “Goodnight, Mr. Phipps.”

“And to you, Your Grace.”

Edmund closed the door and padded back into the entrance hall, too weary to do anything but lie down on the chaise-longue by the staircase. He lay there until his breathing slowed and his mind calmed somewhat, but it was not enough to shuffle off the twinge of guilt in his chest.

The staff at his London residence and at Davenport Towers had often, none-too-discreetly, asked when there might be a Duchess and children to look forward to. They missed the noise and vitality as much as he did, especially those who had been there when it was a happy place, and he regretted having to tell them not to look

forward to such things.

Still, that prickle of guilt would never overcome the sweeping flood of certainty that he would not have a Duchess or children at all. He did not deserve a legacy, when he had not been able to save the people that he loved the most. If they did not get to grow old and gray, surrounded by grandchildren to dote on, then he would not either.

“Thank you, Isolde,” he murmured to the ceiling, for she had made it that much easier for him to keep his distance. Indeed, though it had not been pleasant to hear in the moment, he was glad he had walked into the dining room when he had. Nothing cooled a man’s ardor faster than receiving an icy bucket of reality.

“Nor do I have the faintest affection for the man!” He played the words over and over in his mind, remembering every detail of the fervent fury in her voice.

Whatever had almost happened between him and Isolde, it would never happen again. In truth, it would be better for everyone if they went back to being enemies, as quickly as possible.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Isolde stared at the breathtaking gown that lay folded inside the box, the attached note detailing her exact measurements, letting her know that it would be a perfect fit. There was nothing else written on the note, other than her name, so there could be no mistaking who it was intended for.

“Your jaw will lock if you stay like that,” a voice said from the bedchamber doorway.

Isolde jumped, her hand flying to her chest. “Prudie, for the last time, do not sneak up on people.”

Catching her breath, Isolde’s gaze returned to the beautiful gown, unable to believe that it was hers.

Madame Versailles had shown her the exquisite, extraordinary material that looked like the universe itself had cut off a swathe of its divine fabric and rolled it up for one lucky individual. The modiste had explained that there was only enough for one gown, meaning only one society lady would have the privilege of wearing it, but Isolde’s mother had shrieked at the cost and asked Madame Versailles to take it away.

“A pity,” the dressmaker had said, rolling it back up. “I could’ve sworn it was made for you, and I’m rarely wrong when it comes to fabric.”

“I thought I would come and see how you are,” Prudence said, uncharacteristically gentle in her tone.

Teresa appeared behind her younger sister. “ I suggested it. It is unlike you not to come downstairs all day.”

“Mama said you were sleeping away a headache before tonight’s ball, but I can sniff out one of Mama’s white lies a mile away,” Prudence interjected. “We were going to come up earlier, but Mama was watching the stairs like a hawk. Probably thought I was going to play a trick on you or something. She still has not realized that I reserve my japes for her and the governesses.”

The two girls entered the bedchamber, while Isolde remained awestruck by the gown. She had not yet dared to take it out of the box, fearing that if she did, it would disintegrate like a dream upon waking.

As for her ‘headache,’ it was not a complete lie. She had spent the night after Edmund’s abrupt departure from dinner unable to sleep, tossing and turning. When she had managed to fall asleep, strange dreams had awaited her, of endless masked men chasing her through Kensington Palace gardens, demanding a kiss.

Time and time again, she ended up running into the arms of a shadow man who stepped out of the darkness as if he was made of it, and when she looked up, he wore that mask of roses and thorns that she had never forgotten. In her dream, she had reached for that mask, desperate to see who was behind it.

“Do not, dear Isolde,” the man had whispered. “You will not like what you see. I promise you that.”

“But I have searched for you. I have longed for you to find me again,” she had tried to protest, and the dream man had not stopped her when she took hold of his mask.

“Still, do not say you were not warned,” he had replied.

But every time she began to lift the mask away, she woke up with a start, panting and drenched in sweat. And no closer to discovering who it was.

As such, when morning had come, she had felt utterly rotten. Not wanting to miss the ball that night, she had insisted on spending the day in bed, but it was more than fatigue that plagued her. Edmund's dismissal, Edmund's outright assertion that he would not be talking about the near-kiss, Edmund's deliberate distance from her, it all weighed heavy on her mind. And what weighed the heaviest was that she could not understand why she cared.

"Heavens, maybe you are unwell," Teresa said, a tender hand resting on Isolde's brow. "You are not too warm, but you are very pale, Izzie. Are you all right?"

Prudence gasped, hanging off Isolde's shoulder. "And no wonder! That must have cost a small fortune, Izzie! I would be fainting if someone sent that to me, and I could not care less about what I wear!"

"Oh my goodness!" Teresa flanked Isolde from the other side, eyes wide as she gaped at the gown. "Is there a note? Is there a card? Who is it from? Is it from that lovely Viscount? It is... like magic crafted into a dress. How can it sparkle like that? Are you wearing it to the ball tonight?"

Prudence snorted. "What a silly question. Of course she is wearing it tonight. She would be mad not to."

Isolde hurried to jam the lid back onto the box, suddenly dizzy by the prospect of wearing such an incredible piece of artistry upon her person. "Actually, I thought I might wear the green gown that Mama purchased for me the other day."

"You cannot be serious!" Prudence muscled Isolde aside, taking the lid off the box once more. "You will be the talk of the Ton in this, and I have never known you to

shy away from attention. If this had not been sent by someone who clearly wants to marry you and adore you and have a thousand children with you, it would be the very gown to get you a million proposals of marriage!”

“Prudie, stop it!” Isolde cried, as Prudence took the gown out of the wispy snowbanks of delicate white paper and let the skirt fall, revealing the garment in its true, unbelievably beautiful glory.

All three sisters gasped in unison. Isolde had certainly never seen a more incredible gown in all her life, the design and material so... ethereal that she was almost afraid to touch it in case she broke something.

But as Prudence held it out to Isolde, something fell out of the gown. A square of thick, cream vellum with Isolde’s name upon it, that landed on the floor by her feet.

She stooped to pick it up, heart in her throat as she turned it over. A simple message had been written on the back in fine handwriting that she vaguely recognized: To the brightest star of the Season, I give you the night sky. I will look for you among the constellations.

“Oh, Isolde,” Teresa swooned, fanning herself as she read the note over her sister’s shoulder. “How poetic, and not at all gauche. I have often wondered how I might respond if a gentleman were to write me a letter or a poem, and it was too saccharine or, worse, possessed atrocious grammar. But this admirer of yours—How are you not completely in love with him already?”

Isolde swallowed thickly, glancing from the note to the gown. “Because I do not know who it is from. There is no name. The handwriting is... known to me, but I cannot place it.”

“It is Madame Versailles’ handwriting,” Prudence said, as if it should have been

obvious. “But who dictated the message. It has to be that Viscount, does it not? Who else would lavish you with such a gift?”

Isolde furrowed her brow, ever more certain that she should not wear the gown to the evening’s ball. It would not be appropriate to wear a gift if she did not know who to thank. Nor was she sure it would be appropriate to wear a gift from a gentleman she was not officially courting, though she could not recall the exact rules.

But it is so enchanting. How can I not wear such a thing? I would regret it forever if I left it in a box, unworn and unloved.

“We are forgetting one possibility,” she said, more for her own peace of mind than her sisters’.

Teresa quirked an eyebrow. “We are?”

“It is not absurd that the gown has come from Vincent,” Isolde replied. “He must be feeling terribly guilty for having to leave during my debut Season—he said as much in his last letter to Mama. Why, the only person who would spend such an obscene amount of money on a gown like this is our brother. Whenever he feels he has done something wrong, what does he do?”

Prudence tilted her head to one side. “He buys expensive things for whomever he feels he has upset.”

“Like that collection of leatherbound encyclopedias,” Teresa agreed.

Prudence nodded. “And that thoroughbred that I have never ridden.”

“He bought Mama diamonds after he came home inebriated last year,” Isolde said, determined to find an easier answer to the question of who had sent the gown.

It had to be Vincent. He must have arranged it before he left for Bath. Indeed, the note was not necessarily romantic; it was Teresa making it sound like it was romantic that had led Isolde's own mind astray for a moment. Those sweet words could just as easily be friendly or brotherly.

But they are not... a quiet voice whispered in the back of Isolde's mind.

"Please wear it, Izzie," Teresa urged. "It is the only way to be certain of where it came from. If it is from a suitor or an admirer, they will assuredly say as much tonight. If it is from Vincent, then no one will say they bought it for you."

Isolde could not deny it; Teresa had made a very good point. Going to the ball in the gifted gown was the only way to discover the sender, although she still hesitated. What if the gown had come from someone she did not want to have to thank? What if the likes of Lord Spofforth had sent it? Or Colin?

She shuddered as if a cold draft had just blown into the room. "Very well. I shall not disappoint the pair of you." She mustered a smile. "But you must promise not to stay awake to hear the conclusion. I will tell you in the morning."

"Spoilsport," Prudence said with a grin.

Teresa clasped her hands together. "What if we cannot sleep from the excitement?"

"Pretend," Isolde replied, sighing as she looked at the gown again.

It really was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen, and she hoped the sender, whoever they were, had the character to match. Otherwise, she would never be able to wear it again.

And Edmund will be there... that quiet voice whispered again, nudging a thought into

her mind that she had not yet considered. An impossible, improbable thought. He had said it himself—an express rider had handed him the box on his way into the house.

A coincidence, nothing more.

But what if— Isolde severed the notion before it could swell into something it was not. Edmund had decided to keep his distance. Edmund wanted nothing to do with her. There was a greater chance that the gown had come from the King of Spain than Edmund.

So, why was she already anticipating the look on his face when he saw her in that gown?

“Everyone out!” Isolde said, suddenly shaky. “Might you send my lady’s maid in as you depart? I must hurry. There is not nearly enough time to prepare myself for tonight, if I am to appear worthy of that dress.”

As soon as her sisters left, Isolde turned to face the oval mirror beside her vanity. A startled, anxious young woman looked back, and as Isolde met her own eyes, she whispered, “Do not be foolish, girl. It cannot be him. He would not do this for me. The gown could be explained, perhaps, but he certainly would not write such... enchanting words.” She expelled a breath. “But tonight, you will find your future husband.”

After all, if she could not find her great love story in the most heaven-sent dress ever created, then perhaps she deserved to be a spinster.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The Duke and Duchess of Farnaby's opulent ballroom had been transformed into a scene from Roman myth and history, emulating the triclinia of ancient days—everything designed for feasting and drinking and merrymaking.

False pillars had been brought in, bordering the sides of the ballroom, while heavy purple velvet draped luxuriously between. More velvets and silks and gauzy swathes of fabric in bright reds, burnished oranges, and rich purples billowed from one side of the ballroom to the other, creating a lower, swaying ceiling. And chaise-longues had been arranged around the space instead of the usual tables and chairs, for those who wished to spectate or rest awhile.

“It is outrageous,” an old woman in a stuffy black dress muttered, turning up her nose at the long, narrow feasting tables that could be glimpsed between the false pillars.

Edmund, who was standing to one side, minding his own business until he saw someone worth talking to, stifled a laugh at the woman's remark. He thought it was rather impressive, and the array of delicious food had already tempted him to wander by the tables a few times, picking at the plump grapes and sweet treats and roasted duck.

Since he had decided to return to his own townhouse to avoid Isolde, he had all but lost his appetite, so he had been rather pleased to rediscover it. Indeed, he hoped it meant he was recovering from his temporary insanity.

“I feel as if I am at a bacchanalia,” another woman—a friend of the first—said

haughtily, and rather too loud, as if she wanted the entire ballroom to hear her disapproval.

“Did you attend many of those in your youth?” Edmund asked, unable to resist.

The group of four older women stared at him as if he had taken leave of his senses. Perhaps he had, but as he did not know how to remedy his predicament, other than to let time fade his thoughts of Isolde, there was nothing else to be done.

“Say, are you the Duke of Davenport?” one of the women asked, eyes narrowing.

“Guilty as charged,” Edmund replied, raising his glass of red wine to her.

The demeanor of the four women shifted in an instant, their disapproval and turned up noses transforming into cheery smiles and a bombardment of questions: Had he met their granddaughters? Was there a lady who had captured his attention yet? Should he not be thinking about taking a wife rather soon? They could arrange a meeting with this granddaughter or that granddaughter, if he would like them to?

“Of course, you are still young,” one of them said, “but that is of great benefit for children. My own husband was about your age when we married, and he?—”

She stopped abruptly, as if the ability to speak had suddenly been snatched away from her. Her mouth remained open, making no sound, her eyes widening with every passing second. But she was not looking at Edmund anymore; she was looking at something over his shoulder.

The other three ladies followed their friend’s gaze, their expressions matching hers within half a second.

Indeed, though the orchestra, attired in Roman-style garb, continued to play a

pleasant tune for the dancers who had already taken to the floor, everyone else had fallen silent. Everyone staring at exactly the same spot. A few of the dancers—men and women—missed a step or forgot what came next, like the King himself had just wandered in.

Slowly, Edmund turned to see what all the fuss was about.

It was not the King, but a goddess, shimmering like starlight. The skirts of her evening gown moved like water reflecting the night, her skin as radiant as the moon, her honey-blond hair appearing like spun gold, fashioned into a pearl-studded bun.

She wore it... Edmund's chest clenched, wishing he had not purchased the gown for her. Not because it did not look exactly as breathtaking as he had imagined, but because it did. Madame Versailles was right: that material had been made for Isolde.

He had no doubt that it would make her the most sought after lady at the ball, for there was not a single gentleman who was not staring at her, visibly brimming with envy for the unknown husband who ended up with her. Edmund, despite himself, was no exception.

"Lord Mentrow, you are here!" Isolde cheered, grateful to find a friendly face among the crowd.

Noah, wielding two glasses of cloudy lemonade, bowed his head politely, a nervous smile on his face. "I would not have missed it. The Duke and Duchess always have such magnificent gatherings." He offered one of the glasses to her. "I took the liberty, in case you were thirsty."

"You are too kind." Isolde accepted the drink and sipped it delicately, though she really wanted to down it in great gulps to slick away the tight, dry feeling in her throat.

She had known the dress might cause a stir, and her mother had not helped matters by chirping in the carriage, over and over, “Oh, you shall be inundated, my darling! You will not have a single spot left on your dance card and I daresay we shall have to purchase a whole bakery’s worth of cakes to appease the hordes of suitors who will come to call on you after this!”

In truth, she was not sure she liked the intense attention. She certainly did not like the prickly sensation that flushed her skin every time she realized people were staring at her and not looking away. Gentlemen, mostly, but there were a few sour looks from ladies, too.

“You look... beautiful, Lady Isolde,” Noah said stiffly, no longer the relaxed and easy presence he had been at Martin Thorne’s dinner party. “I mean, you always look beautiful, but... um... exceptionally so.”

Isolde took another sip of her drink. “Thank you, Lord Mentrow, but it is the dress that is beautiful. I am so fearful of ruining it that I hardly dare to move.” She eyed him, wondering. “Have you ever seen such fabric before?”

“I confess, I have not.” Noah moved to stand at her side, so they could better observe the guests who crowded the ballroom. Or, perhaps, he did not want to have to meet her gaze by standing in front of her.

It is not him. He did not send it.

“Are you here with friends or family?” Isolde prompted, uncertain of what had come over the Viscount. Did he not like balls? Was he just uncomfortable?

He cast her a shy, sideways glance. “I am alone, Lady Isolde. There was an agreement between my friends and I that we would meet here, but they have not yet arrived.” He paused. “And you?”

“My mother is just over there,” Isolde said, pointing her chin toward the woman in question.

The instant they had arrived, Isolde’s mother had somewhat abandoned her daughter in favor of soaking up the adulations. Lots of other mothers had rushed in to ask about the gown, celebrating Julianna Wilds for having such a beautiful daughter, and Julianna had been only too willing to accept the credit.

At that very moment, Isolde’s mother was regaling a small congregation with tales of Isolde’s intense education in the art of becoming a lady: making recommendations of books and tutors, bragging about all the suitors who had called at the house already, insisting that any young lady could become a success.

Pride comes before a fall, Mama, Isolde wanted to warn, but her mother was happy, and that seemed like reason enough to stay quiet.

“My friends are also yet to arrive,” she added, discreetly searching for Amelia, Valery, and Beatrice.

They had promised they would be early, and she could not help feeling that her entrance might have been less overwhelming if she had had them beside her.

“That Duke fellow is not escorting you tonight?” Noah asked, with a small smile, as if remembering Edmund’s rude behavior at the dinner party.

Isolde swallowed thickly, for she had done everything within her power to try not to think of Edmund. At least, that was what she was telling herself, though he was the first face she had looked for in the crowd, and a sinking sensation of disappointment had weighed in her stomach when she had not been able to spot him.

If I could just look into his eyes, I would know if the gown came from him...

Despite herself, she looked for him again, scouring the Roman-themed ballroom for the shine of those sapphire blue eyes or the sweep of those luscious, dark auburn curls, or the stern expression of that infuriatingly handsome face.

“He was supposed to escort me again, at my brother’s behest,” she said tightly, her heart thudding an uneasy rhythm, “but he had other business to attend to.”

It embarrassed her to imagine the look that had been on her face when her mother had informed her that it would only be the two of them. Isolde had descended the stairs with nervous anticipation, expecting him to be waiting in the entrance hall as he had done on previous occasions, so he would be the first to see the gown.

Instead, she had been faced with her mother, complaining that they were going to be late when, if anything, they were unfashionably early.

“I see,” Noah said flatly.

Isolde cleared her dry throat, fidgeting with the scalloped, dark blue lace that fringed her capped sleeves. For an awful moment, she feared that Noah was not going to say anything else, leaving them in that silent awkwardness for the foreseeable.

Noah finally took a sip of his drink, his shoulders relaxing. “I apologize if I seem less conversational than the last time we saw one another. My sister and mother had something of a quarrel before I departed, and I cannot stop thinking of them at home, tearing one another to pieces.”

“Oh goodness!” Isolde blinked. “It sounds rather serious.”

Noah shrugged. “They are perpetually at odds with one another, but there was... a thrown vase this evening, which is new.”

“May I ask what caused the argument?”

“My mother is insisting on employing the services of a matchmaker, though my sister only debuted last year. She refuses to attend society events, you see, and has grand dreams of being a writer. She has the talent, that cannot be denied, but my mother cannot be convinced.” Noah tugged at his collar as if it were too tight. “My mother informed my sister that the matchmaker would be coming tomorrow. Chaos ensued.”

Isolde gazed at the man beside her, not with attraction or flirtation but with the greatest sympathies. “I am so very sorry, Lord Mentrow. Can it not be helped? Are you worried that she might flee?”

“I do not know,” he replied with a sigh. “I think it could be remedied, but... No, it is not your concern. I should not trouble you with my woes when there are revels to be had. Indeed, I should be asking you to dance.”

A funny feeling wriggled in Isolde’s chest as she observed Noah more closely. He did not have the same eager quality of some of the gentlemen she had entertained, nor did he appear to have an ulterior motive for being so sweet to her, but his words had just waved a rather interesting flag in her mind.

To help his sister, he must marry and marry quickly. It saddened her, to think that someone else’s happiness rested on his choice of a wife. Then again, her own situation was not so different.

“I do not suppose you were in the gardens of Kensington Palace on the night of the debut ball, were you?” she asked, already knowing the answer.

Noah frowned. “Me? No. I stayed in the ballroom with my sister, who did not want to be there. Why do you ask?”

“No reason.” She smiled. “I am sorry for your sister’s predicament.”

“As am I.” Noah hesitated, taking a larger gulp from his drink. “I do not suppose you would do me the honor of dancing with me, would?—”

“Excuse me, Lord Mentrow,” a gruff voice interrupted, a rough hand closing around Isolde’s upper arm. “I must borrow Lady Isolde for a moment.”

Noah frowned up at Edmund’s grim face, before his gaze flitted to Isolde. She knew what he was thinking: I thought you said he was not in attendance tonight.

But Isolde was just as surprised as Noah. Even more so, as Edmund pulled her away without another word.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

What now? Edmund asked himself, spurred on by a feeling that could only be madness.

He had no viable explanation for pulling Isolde away from Noah, just as he had no idea why he was leading her to the opposite side of the room. He just... kept walking, tugging her along with him, as if they were on important business. And the more he struggled for some sort of reason that she would accept, the more rationale slipped away from him.

“What are you doing, Edmund?” Isolde hissed, as he pulled to a halt beside the French doors that led out onto a pretty marble terrace.

The cool breeze did nothing to clear his head, but at least did something to lessen the heat in his face.

He contemplated ushering her out into the gardens, but doing such a thing would undoubtedly cause a scandal. At least in the ballroom, Isolde was still technically chaperoned, her mother being within sight, though utterly distracted by a group of likeminded older women.

“Edmund?” Isolde’s sharp voice snapped him out of his confusion.

“What?”

“What?” she parroted, brow furrowing. “Why did you take me away from Lord

Mentrow? He was just about to ask me to dance. I do not think you understand the enormity of what you have just done.”

Edmund cleared his throat. “Your mother was not there to grant permission for a dance. His name was not on your dance card.”

“How do you know?” she shot back, her chest rising and falling frantically. “You were not there to escort me. You were not there when I arrived. I did not think you would be here at all, in truth, so how could you possibly know whose name is on my dance card or not?”

The bristle of anger in her voice surprised him, for it was not the usual, sarcastic anger that he had grown accustomed to over the years. It was... more poignant than that, striking him right in the chest. A different vibration of fury that carried the thrum of pain with it.

Why does she sound like I have hurt her?

He frowned. “Why would you think I would not be in attendance? I promised your brother.”

“Because... because you were not where you were supposed to be!” she replied fervently, her cheeks pinkening, her eyes blazing. “If you cared so much about the duty my brother gave you, you would have been waiting in the entrance hall.”

Her voice caught in her throat, that subtle falter hitting him in the chest for a second time.

“It is more appropriate this way,” he said firmly, though he knew there was nothing appropriate about the manner in which he had just removed Isolde from Noah’s company.

Even now, he had no explanation, other than the fact that he had seen her listening intently to something Noah had been saying, and had been so overcome with a feeling he could not describe that he had marched on over. A feeling akin to irritation, that had prickled across his skin and would have driven him to restless agitation if he had not acted when he did.

“Appropriate?” Isolde scoffed. “I am beginning to wonder if you know the meaning of the word.”

Edmund folded his arms behind his back, his hands itching to take hold of hers, to soothe her ire into the same softness she showed everyone but him. She was right to be angry with him, after all; he had acted poorly, but he would not admit it, for that would mean trying to explain why he had behaved like that.

“Lord Mentrow was just telling me that his sister is in trouble, and I suspect the only way to get her out of trouble is for him to marry well,” Isolde continued, prompting a rock of alarm to drop into his stomach. “He is pleasant, he is charming, he is amusing, he cares deeply for his family, and I could do much worse than a nice Viscount who, I believe, would make an excellent companion.”

The rock in Edmund’s belly began to roil, as visions of a wedding day popped into his head: Isolde walking down the aisle to the Viscount of Mentrow, with that radiant smile on her face, looking forward to a future with him.

It should not have bothered Edmund. He should have been celebrating it, knowing he would have good news to impart to Vincent, but that was not the feeling that pulled to the fore of his mind.

“Yet you have just tried to intervene,” she ranted on, in a low, discreet voice, “and I cannot help but wonder what your complaint is, this time. Yes, you were right about Lord Spofforth, and I do not deny you were right about many others, but what is

wrong with Lord Mentrow?”

Edmund stared at her, his mind completely devoid of suitable answers. He had no complaint against Noah. The Viscount was as excellent a match as any young lady could want. Unlike other gentlemen who had come to call upon Isolde, Edmund did not believe that Noah was a fortune hunter or a deceiver or someone with sly motives; he obviously cared for Isolde, and helping out his sister at the same time was likely just an additional boon. Indeed, Noah telling Isolde about his sister’s predicament only proved that he was an honest, reasonable, honorable man.

“I thought so,” Isolde muttered. “Is it the power you enjoy?”

Edmund narrowed his eyes at her. “That is an insult, Isolde, and you know it.”

“Yet, I find it can be the only explanation for your actions,” she replied, glancing around, probably to make sure that no one was eavesdropping on their conversation. “Unless you can think of another that would satisfy me?”

His throat tightened as he gazed into her fierce blue eyes, hearing the soft whisper of her ragged breaths, admiring the flush of pink in her alabaster cheeks, and the slight parting of her plump lips. He was glad he had folded his arms behind his back, or he might not have been able to stop himself from cradling her face, brushing his thumb across her rosy cheek, watching her anger turn to starry-eyed longing.

I could never satisfy you, he realized with a jolt. You want love of the highest order. You want the romance of your favorite books. You want what you have always dreamed of, and I cannot even offer an engagement.

“It appears I saved you from making a mistake,” he said gruffly. “You should not trust a gentleman who cannot give you what you want. The Viscount has made himself clear—he is seeking a marriage of convenience to spare his sister. I cannot

tell you what to do, but I would be wary of that.”

She squared up, her eyes flinching as if he had wounded her a second time. “No, Edmund, you cannot tell me what to do.” She paused, as if uncertain of whether or not she should say what was on her mind. “And I regret letting you dictate what I should wear, too.”

A breathy gasp slipped involuntarily from his throat, his eyes widening at her bold words. How could she know that the gown had come from him? He had not put his name on the note, and, to his recollection, there was nothing in what he had had inscribed that could lead her suspicions back to him.

I should not have let Madame Versailles write a note at all. He cursed himself for letting the dressmaker persuade him, and he cursed himself all the more for indulging in a little poeticism.

To the brightest star of the Season, I give you the night sky. I will look for you among the constellations. Madame Versailles had told him to dictate what he thought of the recipient, and that was what had come out, as if the dressmaker had ensorcelled him somehow. Now, it had come back to bite him.

He was about to protest, about to come up with the first reasonable explanation that came to him, but Isolde was already walking away. And not back to Noah but, seemingly, out of the ball altogether.

Choking back silly disappointment that defied all reason and sense, Isolde marched out of the ballroom, desperately in need of peace and quiet to gather her thoughts. She could not be seen to be in a distressed state in front of so many people, where gossipmongers and scandal sheet informants were rife, especially not after spending time in Edmund’s company.

Of all the infuriating, aggravating, bewildering, mercurial gentlemen I have ever met, you are the very worst, Edmund.

She was convinced, now, that he was the one who had sent the gown. There had been no ‘express rider’ or coincidental encounter on the townhouse porch. He had brought the box and the gown, then he had changed his mind, telling a small lie right to her face so she would not know where the garment hailed from.

“Why write such a note?” she murmured, clasping a hand to her chest in a vain attempt to steady her breathing. “Were you mocking me? Taunting me? Tricking me, as I once tricked you?”

She did not want to believe that he had waited all this time to take revenge on a childhood jape of hers, but what if that was exactly what he was doing? What if he was not the mature, dependable, mostly honorable gentleman that everyone thought he was? What if, beneath that facade, he was just petty and juvenile?

She walked without knowing where she was going, eager to clear her mind of the maelstrom of confusion that swirled there. She knew she should have returned to Noah to continue where they had been interrupted, but she was in no mood to dance and make polite conversation, even with a gentleman she thought to be pleasant.

I can apologize later, once I am myself again.

Her hurried feet carried her through the labyrinth of the Duke and Duchess of Farnaby’s grand townhouse—a left turn here, a right turn there, losing herself without caring—until the music of the orchestra had faded to a muffled melody, the chatter of guests no more than a faint drone.

At that moment, she spied a half-open door on her left, and moved toward it, praying for sanctuary.

Hesitantly, she opened the door wider and peered around, her heart leaping with gratitude as she realized she had found the library. A few candles flickered in the gloom, but not a sound echoed back. There was no one else there; she had found her peace and quiet.

“Anyone here?” she asked anyway, to be certain.

Silence called back an invitation.

She proceeded into the vast room, where bookcases towered like peaceable giants, and the dusty, delightful aroma of leather and paper and ink greeted her senses. Teresa might have been the known devourer of books, but Isolde had never found anywhere quite as relaxing as a library. And, right now, the company of books was precisely what she needed.

Picking up a candle, she padded over to the front row of bookcases and raised the pool of amber light up. To her delight, there was an entire shelf of her favorites, right there for her comfort.

She traced her fingertips down the spine of a collection of stories that she knew so very well, one of them containing her namesake—the tragic tale of Tristan and Isolde. A forbidden love between a Cornish knight and an Irish princess that had always been her favorite, likely because she could better imagine herself within the story, sharing her name with the heroine.

As she was about to pull the book out, a rush of air swept past her shoulder, another hand covering hers, pressing the book back into the shelf.

Isolde gasped in fright, whirling around to see the face of her intruder. As she did, a strange part of her wondered if it might be her champion of bronze roses and thorns, come to declare himself at last. He lived in shadow, after all, so what better place for

him to reappear than in the candlelight gloom of a library, where all dreams could come to life?

“Do not run from me,” the man growled, his hand still pressed against the bookcase.

“If you run, I cannot keep you safe.”

Her heart leaped into her throat, her desperate whisper shivering through the air: “Is it you?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The illusion vanished as Isolde lifted the candle up to see the man's face, her daydream of finally meeting her masked savior dashed as familiar features emerged. It was not her rescuer, but the man she had been trying to get away from.

"Are you quite mad?" she gasped, her heart thundering as she pressed herself flat against the bookcases.

Edmund had not moved, his tall figure towering over her, his broad chest so close that she wanted to reach out and feel the beat of his own heart, his shoulders curved as if subconsciously trying to shield her, while his hand remained to the side of her head, his other hand half-raised like he had been about to cup her face.

But what did he think he was protecting her from, when his presence was the only danger at that moment?

"I needed a reprieve from you, Edmund," she croaked, heat rising up her neck and into her face. "Why did you follow me?"

He leaned in, his brow almost touching hers. "Because you should not be alone. It is not safe for a lady to be alone."

"I should not be alone with you !" she urged, as breathless as she had been in the drawing room on that fateful day, not so long ago. "You should leave, Edmund, and you should make sure that no one sees you."

His throat bobbed, his brow creasing as if she had caused him pain. “Why do you keep calling me by my name?”

“What?”

“My name. You keep using it. You used to call me ‘Your Grace,’ with all the sarcasm you could muster,” he rumbled. “When did that change?”

“I... do not know. I did not even realize I was doing it,” she replied, fighting the urge to touch his face, to slide her hand into his hair and pull him closer. It is what ‘Isolde’ would have done to Tristan. Then again, that had not ended particularly well for the pair.

“I suppose it is... because my mother has been doing it,” she added, fooling no one. It had changed after he had almost kissed her; she was certain of that.

Edmund took a half-step closer, the pressure of his proximity squeezing the air out of Isolde’s lungs, turning her stomach to a flock of violently fluttering butterflies, her limbs trembling with a nervous ripple that she could not control.

“How did you know the gown came from me?” he asked quietly, his other hand coming up.

But he did not cradle her face as she had expected—instead, he pressed his other palm to the bookcase. Not hemming her in, for she could easily duck under his powerful arms, but like he did not trust his hands if they were not anchored to the bookcase.

“I... had my suspicions,” she panted, glancing at the library door for fear of someone else walking in. But it was closed, making her wonder how she had not heard it. “But it...was your face. The... shock when I mentioned the dress. I suppose you thought

you were hilarious, making me think it had come from a mysterious suitor?"

He touched his brow to hers and his eyes closed, that expression of pain tensing his face once more. "It was not a jest, Isolde." His breath hitched. "I have forgiven you for the strawberry tart incident."

"Then... why?" Isolde felt the spines of the books behind her digging into her own.

"I do not know," he replied. "After seeing you on the riverbank, I felt compelled to do something. To... apologize."

She pushed him lightly on the chest, hoping the nudge would open his eyes again. For if he stayed like that, with his eyes closed, his expression pained, his closeness so intense, she did not know what she would do.

"To apologize for what?" she said, dismayed and intrigued in equal measure.

His eyes fluttered open. "For behaving against my creed. For putting you in a perilous situation. For losing my mind for a moment. For not leaving that room when I should have done. For almost doing something that I would not have been able to undo."

"Say it," she urged, certain that she should be leaving the room immediately. "Say what you almost did, or how am I supposed to know what you are apologizing for?"

He turned his gaze away slightly, teeth grazing his lower lip. "I cannot."

"I did not take you for a coward, Edmund," she rasped, her hand finally falling to his chest, feeling the rapid beat of his heart beneath.

He was nervous.

His eyes flared in a way that seemed familiar. “I am no coward, which is precisely why I will not play these games with you. I am trying to protect you. I am trying to do my duty as your brother’s friend, but you are making it so very, very difficult. As always.”

They held each other’s gaze with a ferocity that swelled by the second, transforming into something hot and feverish in Isolde’s veins. Her hand curled involuntarily, gripping his lapel, her breath ragged as she refused to be the one to look away first. If he thought she was difficult, then she had no choice but to prove how difficult she could be.

“Do you like the gown you bought?” she said in a breathy whisper. “Is it everything you thought it would be?”

She heard him swallow, but he did not answer, ignoring the bait.

“Am I the brightest star of the Season?” she pressed, her throat tight. “Is that why you did not come to the townhouse to escort me to the ball, so you could have the satisfaction of looking for me among the constellations?”

“Stop it,” he growled.

“Why give me the night sky as an apology, when you cannot even say what you are apologizing for?”

“I said, stop it.” His eyes burned, his chest rising and falling with each sawing breath he took.

But she could not, the words tumbling from her lips without her permission. “Why did you follow me in here, Edmund?”

“To protect you,” he rasped, taking the candle from her hand and setting it on a narrow ledge beside them.

“From what?”

“From...” His gaze flitted to her lips. “From myself.”

She was about to ask what he meant, and how that could be at all possible, when his mouth grazed hers. A soft, searing brush that ignited a spark in her belly that fizzed up into her chest, loosening a gasp from her tight throat.

At first, she was too shocked to kiss him back, her entire being overwhelmed by the wildfire that coursed in her veins. She had imagined her first kiss often enough, in the safety of her daydreaming where no one could scold her or obliterate her reputation, but her romantic ponderings were nothing like the reality; they were not even close. It was magic made real, her whole body tingling, her senses heightened, her soul soaring.

As he caught her mouth with his once more in a guiding graze, her lips finally caught up with the daydream. Gripping his lapel tighter, she closed her eyes and kissed him back, sinking into the moment without hesitation. She could no longer think of anything beyond the press of his lips and the touch of his hands as they cradled her face, his fingers sliding into her hair.

If this was what he had wanted to apologize for, at great expense, then he could keep his apology. She did not need it. How could anyone regret something so extraordinary?

One of Edmund’s arms encircled her waist, as if to protect her from the press of the books. The kiss deepened, slow and tortuous in the best possible way, like a promise made without knowing if it would be kept or broken. As she kissed him back with

equal fervor, she looped her arms around his neck, pulling him closer.

The Continent must have changed him after all, she mused, deliriously. Before he went away, she would not have dreamed of kissing him. She would not have dreamed of willingly being in the same room as him, yet here they were, closer than they should have been, and her relishing every second.

He pressed her harder into the bookcase with the ferocity of his kiss, the air crackling around them. But he must have pressed her too eagerly, the bump of her back against the stacks releasing a book from high above.

It fell to the floor with a thud and, with that jarring sound, the spell broke.

Edmund halted, his lips absently finishing the kiss with a peck before he stepped away. In the candlelight, he looked pale and alarmed, staring at her as if he did not recognize her.

“As I said,” he murmured, smoothing his palm down the lapel she had been grabbing, “I must protect you from myself. Evidently, you are in greater danger than I thought.”

Isolde’s heartbeat wavered, her wide eyes narrowing. “That is what you have to say?”

“It is what must be said,” he replied firmly, all warmth and ardor gone from his voice. “I should not have done that. I should not have pursued you into a room alone, and I should not have taken you away from the Viscount of Mentrow. You should return to him now. Take your chance while he is amenable.”

He might as well have struck her with one of the heavy, leatherbound books that filled the shelves. In the span of a few seconds, she had gone from feeling like she could fly to feeling herself tumble unceremoniously back to the ground, and the

landing was painful.

“What, did you just want to be the one to steal my first kiss before you pushed me off to marry the Viscount?” she rasped, hating the weak tremble in her voice. He did not have the right to hurt her like this.

He grimaced. “There was no premeditation, Isolde. Perhaps, there should have been, so I could have stopped myself.” He took another couple of steps away from her. “I am to blame for this and, I assure you, it will not happen again.”

“I do not understand,” she urged, trying to reach for his hands.

He put them behind his back, shaking his head. “Do you remember when I told you that you deserve a gentleman who is worthy of you?”

“Of course I do,” she replied, her voice thick. “It was shortly before you almost kissed me. That has a tendency to stick in a lady’s mind.”

He met her wounded gaze. “And I said that being worthy of you is no simple matter. I said I doubt there are even five gentlemen in all of England who would be able to claim that title.” He paused. “I am not one of them, but the Viscount might be. So, go to him and pretend this never happened.”

“You think it is that easy?” she shot back, shaking.

“It has to be,” he replied, beginning to move away, toward the library door. “I am not even fit to be considered, Isolde, because I never plan to marry. You, however, are the sort of woman that any man would be lucky to call his wife. You want marriage, you want romance, you want your dream to be a reality, and that is why you must go. Now.”

She slumped against the bookcases, breathless and bewildered. What baffled her the most was that she had never seriously thought about Edmund as a possible husband, but now that he had said he would never marry, she felt a pang in her chest as if she had lost something. Was it just the sting of betrayal, of wasting her first kiss on someone who was not her husband? She did not know. It was too raw.

Edmund reached the door and opened it quietly, poking his head out to ensure that the coast was clear. That done, he looked back at her. “I will write to Vincent and inform him that my duties have come to an end. From now on, I will not be your guardian, I will not escort you to events, and I will leave you to find the happiness you deserve.”

With that, he left.

Surrounded by all of her favorite stories of romance, Isolde’s dream of having that for herself had never felt further away. Indeed, perhaps it was fitting that her name was Isolde for, at that moment, her hopes for love and marriage did seem rather like a tragedy.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Edmund strode out into the chilly night, the cool wind stinging his white-hot face. The night above was clear and star-draped, the swathes of that velvety dark bringing Isolde in that astonishing dress to his mind. Not that she showed any signs of leaving his thoughts.

He could still feel the press of her mouth against his lips, the desperate grasp of her hand around his lapel, the tickle of her fingertips on the nape of his neck as she had pulled him closer. It overwhelmed him to the point where he struggled to breathe as he hurried along, determined to get to his carriage and return to his townhouse before he changed his mind and went back to that library.

She will not be there. After that, she will never want to be in a room with you again. And that was what he wanted, was it not? She could be happy with Noah, and though it might pain him to see them together in Seasons to come, he had made his choice long ago. A choice that could not be changed because of one... astonishing kiss.

“Going somewhere?” a sly voice asked, as a shadow emerged from between two carriages.

He halted abruptly, squinting at the night-shrouded figure in front of him. “Do I know you?”

“No, but I have my eye on you.” In the muted orange glow of a carriage lantern, her face emerged. “I saw you follow my new friend, and I saw you depart in haste without her, so I am... eager to know what you have done. I am loyal to my friends,

Your Grace, and I do not like to see them upset. Will Isolde be upset? Should I prepare for that?"

Edmund recognized her, though he could not remember her name. She was the one who had danced with Isolde at the Thorne's dinner party. The dance that had made him smile at Isolde in a manner that he had rarely done before.

"Beatrice," she said, as if reading his mind. "I saw the way you looked at her at the dinner party. I sensed there was something between you, but Isolde insisted there was not. I think, perhaps, I was right. So, what have you done?"

Edmund straightened up, prickling with indignation at the woman's presumptuous, arrogant attitude. Who did she think she was, talking to him like that? He was a Duke and she was... He did not even know what she was, but she certainly did not outrank him.

But, perhaps, she can protect Isolde in a way you cannot anymore. Beatrice definitely had the fire and the determination to be a replacement guardian, whether he liked her attitude or not.

"I angered her, that is all," he replied, still feeling Isolde's phantom touch on his skin. "We quarreled, she stormed off, I pursued her, she did not want my company, and we parted ways. If she is upset, that is why, though we argue often enough."

Beatrice tilted her head to one side. "Very well. I will not stand in your path anymore."

She stepped to the side and waved a hand as if to say, Go on then, off you go.

He knew he should stand his ground and rebuke her for behaving so outlandishly for a lady, but he did not have the vigor anymore. He was weary to his bones and wanted

nothing more than to return to his townhouse, put his city affairs in order, and venture off to Davenport Towers until all of this became a distant memory.

Is this why Lionel keeps to his country estate most of the time? Edmund's friend had always been wise, and maybe Edmund could learn a thing or two.

He was about to proceed to his own carriage, when Beatrice's voice called out again, snagging his attention. "Your Grace?"

"What?" he said, a note too harshly.

Beatrice smiled a wicked smile, pointing her chin at his chest. "Your collar is askew."

"You cannot leave us!" Amelia pleaded, holding onto Isolde's arm. "We have only just arrived!"

Valery nodded in agreement. "And you cannot waste a gown like that. Indeed, you must remain longer than anyone else, so that beautiful thing gets the glory it deserves."

Isolde had hoped to leave the ball with minimum attention. After finally mustering enough calm to depart the library, she had planned to collect her mother, feign a sickness of some kind, and return home without delay. She had not expected to run into her friends, who had arrived at the most inopportune moment.

"I am so very sorry," Isolde said, head bowed. "I have not been well all day and thought I would be able to endure the evening, but it seems that my ailment has claimed me. I must leave before I become even more unwell."

I must have quiet and solitude before I embarrass myself by bursting into tears. She had been fighting them back, but they kept trying to break through, her eyes stinging

with the effort.

“Cease bothering her,” another voice joined in, Beatrice sauntering up to the group. “If she says she is unwell, then she is. It does no one’s health any good to feel guilt on top of sickness. Pay them no mind, Isolde—you go home and rest, and I shall wish you a swift recovery.”

Valery eyed her cousin. “Where have you been? Were you not right behind us?”

“I had to pause to button my shoe,” Beatrice replied, slipping an arm around Isolde’s shoulders. “Come on, let us wave you off.”

Isolde hesitated, not knowing if Edmund had departed already. The last thing she wanted was to bump into him, especially with her unimpressed mother at her side. Her mother would engage Edmund in conversation, delaying Isolde’s return home, which was precisely what she needed to get away from him and the thought of him.

“I happen to think that your other friends are right,” Isolde’s mother grumbled. “It is such a tragedy to retire early in a gown like that. Are you certain you cannot just bear it for another couple of hours?”

Beatrice jumped in before Isolde could find a suitable reply. “Ah, but if she were to suffer through tonight, she might become worse, and then she would have to miss even more society events. Besides, a young lady of Isolde’s merit and beauty should always leave people wanting more. Even after she has gone, no one will talk of anything but her.”

That seemed to soothe Isolde’s mother, and Isolde flashed a grateful glance at Beatrice, who winked in reply. Almost as if she knew there was something more to the situation than Isolde was letting on.

Surely not. Isolde suddenly felt a very real wave of nausea, her stomach churning with nerves and anger and hurt and confusion.

Letting Beatrice guide her, Isolde did not say another word as she was led out into the night, and ushered into the waiting carriage. Whether Beatrice suspected something or not, Isolde doubted that it mattered. Beatrice would not say anything and, after tonight, there would never be anything to speak about again with regards to Edmund. He had shirked his duties, he had made his position patently clear, and if he had changed his mind, he would have come back to the library.

The momentary fairytale was over before it had even begun.

The carriage clock on the mantelpiece sounded out three chimes, reminding Isolde of the lateness of the hour.

She had not been able to sleep, for obvious reasons, and had tried everything to seek some respite from her racing mind. She had attempted to read, she had tried to work through some of her correspondence, she had gone to the kitchens for a glass of warm milk, she had paced and paced some more, but every couple of minutes, she found herself back in the Farnaby's library, kissing him, then feeling like she had just been tossed out of paradise.

I should buy a crate of strawberry tarts and leave them in his entrance hall, she mused, perching on the window seat for a moment, gazing out at the night-steeped street and the darkened park beyond.

She frowned, thinking of her promenade with Lord Spofforth. Edmund had been right about him, yes, but was he not also somewhat hypocritical? Lord Spofforth had touched her inappropriately, but at least he had not kissed her and then abandoned her with a paltry excuse.

“If anything, you are worse than Lord Spofforth,” she muttered at the windowpane, letting her sadness transform into anger. Anger was better. Anger was manageable. Sadness just felt... hopeless, and she refused to let Edmund make her feel like that.

We should have remained enemies. I should not have lowered my guard, because I always knew what you were—a man who takes things and does not say “thank you” or offer a real apology. It was a silly assertion, the kind of logic that her younger self would have called wisdom, but it improved her mood a little.

“If it is my dream that he wants me to have, then I shall have it. If he wants to abandon his duties, then I will make sure he never feels welcome here again,” she told herself defiantly, grateful that her mother was fast asleep along with the rest of the household, so no one could hear her solitary mutterings.

Suddenly revived, Isolde crouched down beside her bed and flailed an arm underneath, fumbling for the old, empty apple crate that she knew was there somewhere. She used to store her books there before Vincent had bought her another bookcase, and it was the perfect, dusty, decrepit vessel for the remainder of Edmund’s things.

You will no longer have a place here. If Vincent invites you to stay, you will be a true guest like everyone else. She smiled at her ingenuity and slipped out of the bedchamber with the crate in her arms, praying there were no spiders lurking in the corners. Or, if there were, that they only came out once Edmund was in receipt of his left-behind belongings.

On tiptoe, Isolde made her way down the hall and crossed over the landing, peering down discreetly to ensure there were no servants or sisters wandering around.

Satisfied, she crept on down the hallway until she came to the very last door on the left: Edmund’s former guest chambers. A room she had not entered in years, not since

it been designated to Edmund by Vincent.

If Vincent questions it, I shall tell him to ask Edmund for an explanation. She almost wished she could hear what untruth Edmund would tell, to avoid having to inform his dearest friend that he had kissed her and put her reputation in peril. Perhaps, there would be a duel.

She let herself into the guest chamber, pleased that it was not locked, and set the apple crate down in the center.

Standing back up to her full height, she rested her hands on her hips and looked around, taking in the sights of the unfamiliar bedchamber. It barely held any signs of recent life, aside from a greatcoat hanging on the door, a few books strewn on the writing desk, and a pair of boots left beneath the windowsill.

“What secrets might we find?” she murmured, stealing over to the writing desk.

There was nowhere better for discovering things about a person, and though she would not stoop to reading someone else’s personal correspondence, she would not draw her eyes away if one happened to be open for anyone to peruse.

Sitting down in the chair that Edmund must have used a thousand times, she traced her fingertips across his personal effects: an inkwell, a few prepared quills, a small stack of paper, a stick of wax and a Davenport seal, a signet ring with the letter ‘W’ engraved in gold.

“An heirloom?” she mumbled, turning it over in her hand before setting it back down.

As she sat there, assessing the various drawers and little wooden boxes, wondering what to look at next, a chill ran up her spine. The fine hairs on the back of her neck stood on end, feeling for a moment that she was not alone.

Hesitantly, she glanced back over her shoulder to the door she had left ajar. It had not moved, nor were there any nefarious shadows lurking on the threshold, peeking an eerie head around.

It is the residual surprise, nothing more, she told herself sternly, squinting at the corners of the bedchamber. Moonlight offered a great deal of comfort to her frayed mind, shining through the tall windows, illuminating most of the room. She was alone, but perhaps she was feeling the presence of the gentleman who had recently been the room's occupant.

"Why did you have to kiss me?" she murmured, her voice cracking. "If you had no good intentions, why did you do it?"

It was the part she understood the least about the entire event, for though she hated to admit it, Edmund was an upstanding, honorable gentleman of society. To everyone else, at least. And in their time together as ward and guardian, she had begun to see what the rest of society saw.

No longer.

As tears began to roll down her cheeks, smudged away with the sleeve of her housecoat, she pulled open one of the desk drawers, not expecting to find much... So, when she saw a pair of almond-shaped, empty eyes staring up at her from a tangle of bronze roses and thorns, she barely stifled the shocked yelp that slipped from her mouth.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

“Izzie, is that you?” Teresa’s voice could not tear Isolde’s watery gaze away from the elegant mask in her hands.

“It cannot be,” she whispered tremulously, praying it was a trick of the light or the mind. It had been a distressing evening, after all. She was not herself. She had to be mistaken.

The door creaked slightly. “Izzie? Who are you talking to?”

Isolde’s breaths turned shallow as she continued to stare at the mask she had plucked from the drawer. It was beautifully crafted, just as she remembered, but heavy in her hands, the metal cool to the touch. Indeed, it was as weighty as the mask that she had worn—a gift from her brother imported all the way from Venice.

Is that where you acquired this? Her heart lurched into her throat as more pieces slotted together in her mind, making it impossible to ignore the probable truth.

According to Vincent, Edmund had spent several months exploring Italy; it was not a leap to believe he had bought a mask from the city that was famed for its masquerades.

“Izzie?” A hand fell on Isolde’s shoulder, making her jump.

The jolt snapped Isolde out of her trance, and she whirled around to look into the worried face of her sister. Teresa was paler than usual in the glare of the moonlight,

her brow furrowed, her eyes searching Isolde's features as if she might find the problem written somewhere on her porcelain skin.

"Have you been crying?" Teresa gasped, sinking down into a crouch at the side of the writing desk's chair. She settled her hands on Isolde's knees, peering up. "What happened? Are you well? Shall I fetch you a handkerchief? Some brandy, perhaps?"

Isolde managed a smile, grateful for her sister's sweet nature. "That will not be necessary. I am quite well; it is the dust in this room, nothing more."

"Please, Izzie, do not lie to me," Teresa said softly. "You so rarely cry, so... I am certain something is wrong. You can talk to me, if you would like to."

Isolde dabbed her eyes with her sleeve and curled a hand around one of Teresa's. It was true that she rarely cried. When she was much younger, her mother had told her that it made her look terribly ugly. Ever since, she could count on one hand the number of times she had shed a tear, but they were flowing freely now. And, being unaccustomed to them, she did not know how to get them to stop.

I doubt I cried so much when Papa died... The thought jarred her.

"I had a strange evening, that is all," she said, after a moment or two.

"Did you find out who sent you the gown?"

Isolde swallowed uncomfortably. "I did."

"Was it the Viscount?" Teresa's eyes sparkled with hope.

Isolde shook her head. "It was not the Viscount. It was someone who should not have sent it. Someone I do not wish to talk about."

“Is that someone the same someone who usually stays in this room?” Teresa asked, too perceptive for her own good.

Fresh tears welled in Isolde’s eyes, catching on her eyelashes, clumping them together. “I really do not wish to talk about it. I know you are a wonderful listener, Tess, but... I cannot speak of it. It is... an open wound at present.”

She could sense Teresa’s curiosity, as tangible as a sea breeze on a warm day, but Teresa simply nodded in understanding and squeezed Isolde’s hand gently. If it were Prudence, Isolde would not have been permitted to leave the room until she revealed everything, so she was secretly glad their youngest sister had not been summoned by the sound of her creeping around.

“Goodness, that is beautiful,” Teresa said, staring at the mask that now rested on Isolde’s lap. “Did you find that in here?”

Fighting past the lump in her throat, Isolde nodded. “I did. It belongs to... It belongs to...”

For the life of her, she could not say it. Speaking it aloud would mean that it was real, and the mysterious masked savior she had been hoping to encounter again was the same man who had put a severe dent in her heart that night. Perhaps a crack, if she was being honest with herself.

“Edmund?” Teresa prompted.

Isolde scrunched her eyes shut, like that could somehow hide the blunt truth from her.

His name circled around and around in her head, taking her back to the library, mentally kicking and screaming. How his voice had rumbled as he had asked, “Why do you keep calling me by my name?” How his throat had bobbed, giving her a

sudden desire to touch his neck, to feel that intriguing movement.

He told me to stop it. I kept pressing him, reminding him of his note. If I had not, maybe I would not be feeling this way. She frowned, wondering if she was more at fault than she had thought.

Glancing at Teresa, she almost asked for her sister's opinion. Maybe, Teresa had read some manner of book about the art of rejection and what it meant when a gentleman kissed a lady, rebuffed her, then promptly left with the declaration that she would probably never see him again.

"Yes, the mask is his. I found it by accident," Isolde said, as evenly as she could. "I had intended to pack his belongings to send on to his townhouse."

Teresa smiled. "Would you like me to help?"

"Pardon?"

"Would you like me to help you pack his belongings? I hear it can be very cathartic, and though I do not profess to know what has happened tonight, I can make a reasonable guess," Teresa replied softly. "I... did see something in the drawing room that day. I saw more than I should have. But, my dearest sister, please rest assured that your secret is safe with me. And if you have decided to loathe Edmund, then I shall join you."

The sisterly gesture was so sweet that it nearly brought on a fresh wave of tears and stole Isolde's voice from her. All she could do was nod and be grateful, once again, that it was not Prudence who had intruded. If Prudence had had the slightest inkling of what had occurred at the ball, she would have screamed for their mother without hesitation. A sweet gesture in its own way, but not at all what Isolde needed.

“But may I ask you one thing before we begin?” Teresa said, getting to her feet.

Isolde hesitated. “Yes.”

“Did he... hurt you?”

Isolde’s heart truly broke at that. “No, my dearest Tess. He did not hurt me. I am unharmed.” She paused. “He is not that sort of gentleman. He is...”

Her mind wandered to the gardens of Kensington Palace, and the relief she had experienced when her masked champion had emerged from the shadows to save her. She remembered how swiftly he had leaped to her aid, how tightly he had held her against him, how soundly he had scared Colin into running off, how heroic her savior had seemed.

“You heard the lady. Take your hands off her. As for staking your claim, think again. And never again touch what is not yours. I do not tolerate anyone touching what is mine.” She could recall every detail of the words the masked man had spoken, and the effect they had had upon her. Her stomach still fluttered, even though she now knew who had spoken them.

Why did you say that, Edmund? Back then, they had not tolerated one another at all. So why had he called her his? Was it part of his act, or was there some... secret meaning in it that had been revealed in the library—a desire of his that he had kept wrapped up in enmity?

He had also mentioned that he had been keeping an eye on Isolde, which was how he came to be there in the gardens at the very moment she needed him. But that could not be true, could it? He would have had no reason to follow her, to keep her safe. That was before Vincent had charged Edmund with watching out for her.

“He is not someone I want to discuss anymore,” Isolde said with finality.

It was too painful and too bewildering to dwell on the events that had led to that moment. The more she thought about the man in the mask, the more her head throbbed, bringing on a sharp ache. All the time she had spent hoping to bump into her rescuer, and he had been right there, under her nose.

Wait... Does he know that the lady he saved is me? If not, then his words that night were just part of a heroic act. If he did, then it felt like a rather mean trick. As unkind as stealing her first kiss.

“Come on, then,” Teresa urged, taking hold of Isolde’s hand. “Let us clear all trace of him out of this house.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

“A pity there’s no Duchess to bring back with us,” Mr. Phipps said, his frail frame swaying to the jolting rhythm of the carriage as it bounced along the uneven countryside roads. “Are you quite sure you don’t want me to go back and open up the house again? It’s too early in the Season for you to be at your estate, isn’t it?”

Out of kindness, Edmund did not mention that the butler had said the same thing five times already.

“I never intended to stay very long,” he said, repeating the same thing that he had said five times. “I have decided to take inspiration from my friend Lionel. He spends the majority of his year at his country estate, and I have been away from mine for long enough. I cannot leave it all to Sinclair or he might stage a coup.”

Mr. Phipps raised a bushy gray eyebrow. “Do you want me to keep an eye on him when we return?”

“It was a jest, Mr. Phipps,” Edmund replied gently. “I am well aware that my estate is in capable hands with Sinclair, but I really do think I ought to dedicate more of my time to the running of it. I do not want to be a Duke who does not actually do anything for his estate and dukedom.”

Of course, he could not tell the old butler the real reason they were departing London in haste. Edmund’s country estate of Davenport Towers was a four-hour journey from the Capital, and even then, he was not certain it was far enough away from Isolde to keep her out of his thoughts. Maybe, there was nowhere far enough, but at least he

would not be tempted to call in to her residence to see how she was faring.

If there is news of her, I shall read it in the papers like everyone else.

Just then, the carriage turned off the winding road and passed through a vast set of entrance gates. They were crafted from bronze, but Edmund had never seen their original color. For as long as he could remember, they had been green with age, which happened to suit the intricate metalwork, designed to resemble the blooms and thorns of rose bushes: his inspiration for the mask he had had made in Venice.

I doubt I shall ever see that mask again, he lamented in silence, thinking of all the things he had left behind at the Grayling townhouse. He would have to write to Vincent to request their return, though the only item he would truly miss was his father's signet ring. Everything else could be replaced if necessary.

Almost everything.

He pushed the heel of his palm into his chest, trying to relax the tight sensation that had held his lungs in a vise since last night. It did not help. Nothing did. Not even packing his belongings onto the carriage to depart for the countryside had eased the guilt that hounded him.

"Are you quite well, Your Grace?" Mr. Phipps asked.

Edmund turned his gaze out of the window to watch the oak trees that lined the driveway pass by. "Yes, thank you. Perfectly well."

Who would not be after they had just kissed the most... beautiful, ferocious, astounding woman in the world?

For a brief few minutes, holding Isolde in his arms, savoring the returned passion of

her kiss, he had known absolute peace. If that book had not fallen when it did, he might have been permitted to stay in that glorious paradise for a few minutes more, though he had no doubt that his vow and his sense would have kicked in eventually.

But he would not forget that kiss, regardless of where he went or how many years passed by. Indeed, like the most exquisite art or the most wonderful performance of a play or the most heartrending piece of music, no one could forget perfection, no matter how much they might have wanted to.

Clearing the townhouse of all traces of Edmund had not had the desired effect upon Isolde.

There had been a temporary relief that had lasted until the morning after the ball, but it had been four days since then, and her devastation had wormed deep into her soul like a contagion: she could not sleep, barely ate, had no desire to attend any of the events she had been invited to, and rejected all visitors in favor of staying in her chambers.

Indeed, the only ‘visitor’ who would not be dissuaded was Noah. She had not agreed to have an audience with him, but he had left her sweet gifts every day: flowers, candied fruits, a little poem that he may or may not have written himself, and a paper crane, expertly folded.

“You must thank him,” her mother had urged, when delivering the gifts to Isolde’s bedchamber. “Use this time of sickness to at least write him a note of gratitude, so he does not lose interest.”

But it was Isolde who had lost interest in pretty much everything. She did not know where the time went, but mornings slipped swiftly into afternoons, and afternoons dove violently into night, the hours speeding by without reprieve. If months had passed, it would not have surprised her.

On the afternoon of that fourth day, a hesitant knock came at the bedchamber door.

“Izzie?” Teresa said from the other side.

Rubbing tired eyes, Isolde sat up in the window seat where she had been attempting a nap. “Come in.”

The door opened and Teresa poked her head around. “How are you feeling?”

“No better, no worse,” Isolde replied, her mouth stretching in a yawn.

“Well... Mama has had the cook prepare some of your favorites for luncheon, if you felt like coming down to eat with us all? There is lemonade, too, if you would like that?”

Isolde drew her knees up to her chin, frustrated by the lack of vitality in herself. She was not oblivious to her behavior, but it was as if a bizarre, life-sucking creature had taken hold of her, weakening her until she did not want to do anything but sit around, staring into nothingness, her mind a blank.

More than that, she knew her mother and sisters were worried about her. Teresa most of all, since she was the only one who had any notion of why Isolde had retreated from company and society.

“Please, Izzie,” Teresa said quietly, her voice catching.

Isolde’s numb heart sank into the depths of her stomach, hearing that woeful sound. “If you give me... five minutes, I will come down to have luncheon with you all.”

“You will?” Teresa’s pretty blue eyes brightened, her hands clasped together as though she were praying.

Isolde nodded. "I promise. I will wash my face, put on a dress, and do my best impression of a cheerful person."

"You do not have to do that last part, but the rest might do you some good," Teresa said, backing out of the room. "I shall leave you to it."

Exhausted to the point of feeling lightheaded, Isolde slid off the window seat and set about preparing herself for luncheon with her family. She splashed and scrubbed her face with cold water from the basin, neatly pinned her hair with one of her best slides, and went to the armoire to select a suitable dress for the occasion.

Her eyes settled on the sparkle of stars against the midnight blue of night, somehow captured and fashioned into a gown. She touched it gingerly, the spangles glimmering.

"I am sorry you will have to stay here, gathering dust," she murmured, picking out a simple day dress of duck-egg blue and closing the armoire door on the most beautiful thing she would ever possess.

In truth, she knew she probably should have put it into the apple crate with the rest of Edmund's things, but she had not been able to do it. The gown did not deserve that fate, regardless of how her own had turned out.

Ten minutes later, Isolde descended the stairs and headed for the dining room.

She had just passed the drawing room door when a voice called out, "Isolde, is that you? We are in here! We thought we would do something different this afternoon!"

Hearing her mother's falsely cheerful voice made Isolde want to turn around and run back up the stairs, but she had made an unspoken promise to Teresa. She would not let her sister down, no matter what intensity of interrogation she was about to face

from her worried mother.

With a breath, she pushed into the drawing room, wearing what she hoped was a believable smile. “Well now, this is unusual,” she crowed, hearing the false cheer in her own voice. “I have never heard of having a picnic in one’s own drawing room. Is this the new fashion? Have I been in my sickbed for so long that picnics are now done inside rather than outside?”

Her mother chuckled anxiously, while Teresa beamed from ear to ear at the sight of her sister washed and dressed. Prudence, on the other hand, seemed uncharacteristically quiet, her eyes brimming with sadness as she raised them to Isolde.

“What is wrong, Izzie?” Prudence asked. “Mama said you were very poorly, and I tried to sneak in to see you, but she had the footman guarding the hallway day and night. I have been dragged across the landing at least ten times these past four days.”

Isolde’s heart wrenched for a third time. “I do not know what sickness I had, dearest Prudie, but I can tell you that I am better now. I doubt it shall be very long at all until I am completely myself again.”

“So, you do not have the deathly melancholy?” Prudence said, quirking an eyebrow. “A friend of mine said their cousin had it, and almost died of it.”

Their mother clicked her tongue. “Is that why you have been so morose of late? Goodness, Prudence, why did you not say so? No one has died of melancholy. It passes. You see, this is why I do not like you spending time with those Horsham sisters. They are forever filling your head with nonsense.”

“Well, Prudie, one known cure for melancholy is a fine array of one’s favorites,” Isolde chirped, sitting down on the settee with her youngest sister, and putting an arm

around her shoulders. “So, what do you say we begin feasting?”

Prudence grinned. “I say we gobble up everything until we are sick to our stomachs.”

“Prudence!” their mother barked, rolling her eyes in exasperation.

But Isolde smiled back, already feeling a little more human and a little less like a scrap of paper that had been tossed aside. Maybe, being with her family, enjoying good food, talking of everything and nothing would be the perfect cure for her melancholy.

“I shall race you!” Prudence cried, haring after Teresa, who had volunteered to go to the kitchens to fetch a tea tray for everyone.

One of the maids or the housekeeper could have easily done it with the merest ring of a bell, but Teresa had insisted that it would ruin the authenticity of the picnic if they had the servants’ help. There would undoubtedly be a lecture during their teatime about the merits of not always relying on staff for simple tasks, but that would have to wait until the expert on the subject returned with the tea tray.

“Thank you, Mama,” Isolde said, once her sisters’ footsteps had faded into nothing. “Teresa said that you had orchestrated this. I am grateful.”

Her mother turned to face her on the settee they shared. “And I am relieved that you are out of your bedchamber, my darling.” She raised a hand to brush a wayward lock of hair out of Isolde’s face. “I have been so worried, dearest. I... cannot even begin to describe how afraid I have been. I thought you might stay up there forever.”

“I would have grown bored eventually,” Isolde replied, struggling to maintain a lighthearted tone.

The gentle brush of her mother's fingertips against her cheek was too much, conjuring up unbidden tears, though she had assumed she had no more to shed.

Her mother's brow furrowed as she swept away one such tear that landed on the apple of Isolde's cheek. "What has happened, my darling? You were happy... and then you were not." She took out her handkerchief to dab away another escaping tear. "Have I put too much pressure on you? Have I been too... invasive? I know I am supposed to believe that you are unwell, and you likely want me to play along with the pretense, but... I know you, Isolde. I can see that you are... in pain."

Isolde quickly turned away, embarrassed and dismayed in equal measure that her mother had seen right through her. Then again, Julianna Wilds had been young once, and likely knew more of what Isolde was going through than she thought.

Perhaps, it was that realization that made the truth bubble to the surface, perhaps it was the desire to have a knowledgeable opinion on the matter, or perhaps it was merely the fact that Isolde was too tired to carry the secret anymore.

"It happened at... the Farnaby ball," she heard herself whisper, like she was at a confessional.

Her mother's eyebrows shot up. "What happened?"

"Edmund... He..." Isolde paused to take a steadying breath. "At the Farnaby ball, I needed some peace and quiet and ended up in the library. Edmund... followed me there to see if I was... all right. After a while, he... he... Mama, he kissed me. He kissed me and then he left, saying, in essence, that I should not hope for anything from him. I do not think he meant it in a cruel way, but he said something about never wanting to marry, and then... he left."

"He did what ?" a voice that was not her mother's roared, the drawing room door

banging open as a livid figure stormed in. “I will kill him! My goodness, I will kill him!”

Isolde’s mother shot to her feet, panic-stricken. “Vincent, calm down.” She put up her hands. “Let Isolde tell the rest of the story. There is no need to be rash. Perhaps, there is a reasonable explanation.”

“A reasonable explanation?” Vincent seethed, hands curling into tight fists. “I put my sister in his care, Mother. I trusted him to keep her safe and out of trouble. For pity’s sake, I came back early because I received his letter, and was ready to apologize to him for putting so much responsibility on his shoulders!”

Isolde stared at her brother, unable to recall another time when she had seen him so furious. Even in her wilder childhood, he had never roared with such venom in his voice, his eyes like two smoldering coals of pure rage.

“It was a letter of guilt, a letter of deception, a letter of betrayal!” Vincent sniped, two patches of scorching red appearing in his cheeks. “I will kill him. Truly, I will.”

“Vincent, please,” their mother begged.

But all Vincent hissed in reply was, “My pistols. Where are my pistols?”

And as dread surged up from Isolde’s stomach, she wished she had thought to throw those in the apple crate too.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

In the gloom of his study, shadows dancing between the cobwebbed rafters, Edmund swirled a glass of brandy and watched the flames waltz in the fireplace.

His eyes were blurred by the many glasses of brandy that had gone before, the lashing tongues of the fire transforming into scenes he wished to forget: Isolde dancing with Noah at Martin Thorne's dinner party, Isolde chatting with Noah at the same dinner party, Isolde leaning in to hear what Noah had to say at the ball where Edmund had kissed her; Isolde looping her arms around Edmund's neck to pull him closer, Isolde kissing him back so fervently, Isolde staring at him with burning hurt in her eyes when he had left her standing there against the bookcases.

"Was I jealous all along?" he muttered into his glass as he took another deep sip.

Regardless of whether he was inebriated or sober, he could not fathom when his feelings toward Isolde had changed. It was understood that they were supposed to dislike one another, as they had done since the day they met six years ago. It was expected that they would carry on disliking one another—so much so that it had become a joke among friends.

We grew up.

The notion was quieter than the din of his memories and regret, puzzling him. Was that why things had changed? Had they both matured while he was away on the Continent, and she was preparing to enter society? Had they matured, somehow, at the same pace, bringing them together instead of apart?

“Where is he?” a furious shout exploded into the silence, propelling Edmund out of his armchair, the glass of brandy sloshing in his hand.

He backed up, squinting at the study door until he could make out the rectangle of it more clearly.

“If you do not tell me where he is, I shall search every inch of this manor until I have found the beast!” the voice bellowed again, more familiar this time, less muffled by the effects of the brandy.

Footsteps thundered in the hallway outside, and Edmund turned in a clumsy circle, trying to find something he could use to defend himself. Instead, he ended up so dizzy that he had no choice but to sink back into the comfort of the armchair and wait for the fury to reach him.

It did, a minute later.

The study door blasted open, a familiar figure marching in with a pitch dark cloud hanging over his head and the devil in his eyes.

“I trusted you,” Vincent seethed, wasting no time. “I asked you to guard one of the most precious things I have in my life, and you... you tarnished her! Not only that, but you ran like a coward! I went to your townhouse, I saw that it was closed up, but I knew where you would be. I knew where you would hide.”

He strode over to where Edmund sat listlessly and grabbed his oldest friend by the front of the shirt. Perhaps, Vincent meant to haul him to his feet, but the brandy and the dizziness had turned Edmund into a dead weight.

So, Vincent leaned in instead, leveling those burning eyes at Edmund. “I ought to kill you for what you have done, Edmund. I ought to beat you black and blue. She is the

best of us, Edmund! She is good and kind and sweet and honorable, and you... you took advantage!"

Edmund met his friend's eyes with resignation, his shoulders slumping as he set down his brandy glass. "Do what you will, Vincent. I deserve it."

"What?"

"If it is satisfaction that you seek, I will not argue. If you wish to duel me, I will accept. If you wish to beat me black and blue, I will not stop you. If you want to make an example of me, do what you must," Edmund replied, his words like thick honey in his mouth.

Vincent hesitated, frowning as if he had expected a fight from his oldest friend, a protest at least. "I brought my pistols. I am entirely serious, Edmund. For what you have done, a duel is not nearly enough to make amends."

"I am serious too." Edmund blinked slowly.

"No, you are drunk," Vincent spat, letting go of Edmund's shirt with a disgusted shove.

Edmund sank back into the chair, not bothering to adjust the twisted fabric or refasten the buttons that had popped open. He had already dishonored the vow he had made to his fallen family by kissing Isolde and feeling things he should not; it only made sense that he should resemble the wretch he was.

"I might be somewhat inebriated," he said, "but I am still serious. Punish me however you see fit. If it is to be a duel, give me until dawn to sober up and I will meet you wherever you please."

Some of the bluster seemed to drain out of Vincent as he took to pacing the flagstone floor of the study, sweeping a hand through his sandy blond hair. His eyes lost a few degrees of their intense burn, too, as they darted from Edmund to the door and back again.

“What if I want something else?” Vincent asked presently.

Edmund closed one eye to see his friend better. “What can I give to make amends?”

“What if I demand that you marry Isolde without delay,” Vincent replied, halting in his frantic pacing.

He looked as disheveled as Edmund felt, and it delivered a second sting to Edmund’s guilt, that he had caused his oldest and dearest friend such distress.

How did you find out? he wanted to ask, wondering if it was Isolde herself who had informed him. Not that he would have blamed her. In truth, part of him had been waiting for this moment, certain that there was some manner of repercussion coming for him. When one kissed a divine being, giving in to base, mortal impulses, the heavens rarely allowed that person to get away with it.

Edmund considered the request for a short while. “If that is what you want, and Isolde will have me, then I will do it.” He paused, rubbing his hand against the burning sensation in his chest. “However, I do not want Isolde to have to marry me out of duty.”

“It is rather too late for your concern; do you not think?” Vincent growled, resuming a slower strut back and forth.

“No, I do not think it is.” Edmund swallowed a hiccup. “Her honor, I assure you, is intact. And I should hate to see her forced into a union of misery because of a grave

mistake that I made. Why, unless I have missed some condemning news and all of society is aware of what happened, she is still free to marry whomever she pleases. Why not make it someone she could actually love?”

Vincent halted so sharply that his boots squeaked on the smooth flagstones. He whipped around, glaring at Edmund as if he was waiting for some sort of trick to reveal itself. Edmund stared back with a sad smile, wishing he had never pulled Isolde away from Noah, yet unable to fully regret the fact that he would always know what it was like to be kissed by her.

I may go on to live a solitary existence—even more solitary now—but I shall always remember that one shining moment.

It was bittersweet, remembering those fleeting minutes where everything was blissful, and anything was possible. If he had not been roused to his senses in time, he had no doubt that he would have broken his vow completely, there and then, whispering a proposal of marriage against her lips as he kissed her.

Vincent stamped over to the empty armchair, opposite Edmund’s, and slumped down into it. He draped one leg over the thigh of the other, jiggling his foot in anxious contemplation.

“I do not want to have to duel you,” he said darkly, scratching the shadow of stubble on his jaw. “I thought I wanted you dead, but the journey here cooled my ire somewhat. It has not removed it, but... I would prefer it if we both could live.”

Edmund nodded slowly. “So, you want me to ask for Isolde’s hand? That is your choice?”

“Yes,” Vincent replied. “That is my choice.”

With a groan, Edmund moved to rise out of his chair. “I suppose I ought to stow my belongings back onto the carriage then, if this is to be a London wedding.”

Vincent waved an irritated hand. “Sit back down. You can do all of that in the morning. Until then, I need you to sober up, bathe yourself, rest well, and ensure that you look halfway decent when we return tomorrow.” He stretched out a hand. “For now, pass me that bottle of brandy and a spare glass. I think I need a tippie far more than you.”

Edmund did as he was asked, handing over the liquor and a crystal tumbler. He watched as Vincent poured himself a hefty measure, and as his friend put the brandy to his lips, Edmund picked up his own glass and sipped what was left.

Feeling the warmth slip down into his stomach, Edmund returned his gaze to the fireplace, his heart somehow heavier than it had been before Vincent’s arrival. He could just about picture Isolde, sitting in the drawing room as he entered, glaring at him as he sank down on one knee and asked for her hand in marriage. She would hate him more than she had ever hated him for taking away her dream of an epic romance, crushing it with the vows she would not want to make to him.

In many ways, he would have preferred a duel, for at least the risk of that was something he felt he deserved.

But gaining Isolde as his wife, his Duchess, his companion—no, he knew he did not deserve that at all.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

“H e is here! He is riding up now!” Prudence cried triumphantly, her face pressed to the drawing room window, leaving a smear behind on the glass.

Isolde sat perched on the edge of the settee, holding a teacup and saucer that would not stop rattling together with the tremor of her nerves. The tea inside the cup had long since cooled, but she sipped it anyway, her throat arid with fear of what news they were all about to receive.

She still had not slept, tossing and turning through endless nightmares of Vincent shooting Edmund dead, or the equally awful opposite. Her fatigue showed, but there was nothing to be done about it. Indeed, if Edmund had been killed in a duel, she doubted she would ever sleep again.

“All will be well,” Isolde’s mother said hoarsely, as if she too had not slept a wink. She took Isolde’s hand and squeezed it. “Your brother is a reasonable man. Yes, he rode off in an abject fury, but I wager that the long ride tempered his anger somewhat. After all, Edmund is his dearest friend.”

Isolde squeezed her mother’s hand in return. “Is it wrong to wish I had never told you?”

“It is not wrong,” her mother replied softly, “but I am still glad that you confided in me. Secrets are a burden, my darling. They can destroy you if you do not share the weight of them, sometimes. And say what you will, but I know that secret was in the midst of destroying you.”

“Do you wish Vincent had not heard?”

Her mother laughed stiffly. “Oh, without doubt.”

Isolde peered into her mother’s eyes, those light blue pools a reflection of Isolde’s own. Over the past few years, they had not been as close as either of them would have liked, with the pressure of debuting taking precedence. But no matter what news came through the door, Isolde was pleased that a warmth and a trust had returned between her and her mother, for she had often missed having a parental confidante.

“Mama, did you... love Papa?” Isolde asked haltingly. “I remember that you argued a lot, and that he was absent often, but... was there ever love between you?”

Her mother’s eyes widened as she drew in a sharp breath of surprise. “There was... respect between us, which is a kind of love. By the end, he was dear to me, and I like to think that I was dear to him, but it was a... platonic affection. We were friends. Not always, I grant you, but I have missed him more than I ever thought I would. In the quiet moments, when I am preparing for bed, I still turn to tell him something.”

A smile tugged at the corners of Isolde’s lips, for she could not recall ever hearing her mother speak of her father so fondly. Julianna had grieved, of course, when her husband died, but after he was buried and the mourning period had ended, she had never liked to speak of him much.

Isolde had assumed it was indifference, but maybe she was mistaken.

“Would you have chosen him for yourself, if you could go back to your youth?”

Her mother frowned in contemplation. “If I knew him to the depth and breadth that I did in the end, I think I might. If I knew nothing of him, as I did when I married him, I do not think I would. I would still want to find the kind of love that one dreams

about from girlhood.”

What if the man that I was starting to care for very much is gone? What if all I can expect now is a marriage of convenience? Isolde was not nearly brazen enough to ask that question, considering her secret had caused her brother to ride off with pistols in his pack and vengeance in his heart.

Fortunately, the front door opened at that moment, squashing her thoughts into a tangled ball of terror. She knew from Prudence’s declaration that Vincent had returned, but what had befallen Edmund? She was not at all certain that she wanted to find out.

As footfalls headed down the hallway, Isolde held her breath... and expelled it in a rasping gasp of desperate relief as two figures stepped into the drawing room.

“I told you,” Isolde’s mother whispered, nudging her daughter in the arm.

Isolde gripped the edge of the brocade settee, struggling to suppress the urge to yelp at the heartening sight of her brother and Edmund, both in one piece. However, no one seemed to have told the men that they should be gladdened, their faces as solemn as a priest.

“You did not kill each other, then?” Prudence said, sliding down from the window seat. “With all of your roaring and ranting, Brother, I was certain there would be bloodshed.”

“Prudence Wilds, you will go to your bedchamber at once!” Julianna scolded, jabbing a finger at the door.

Prudence sniffed and folded her arms across her chest. “There is nothing to amuse me here anyway. After so much melodrama, this is quite the disappointment,” she

muttered, pushing past the two gentlemen to get out of the drawing room.

“Actually,” Vincent said, his gaze falling on Isolde, “I would like you all to leave the room. Everyone but Isolde.”

Teresa hurried out, forever eager to obey. But it became obvious where Prudence got her mulish, willful streak from, as Isolde’s mother immediately began to cause a fuss.

“I do not see why I should leave. If there is something to be said, it can be said in front of me,” she insisted. “Indeed, I have not sacrificed my rest and my peace of mind all night and all morning just to be sent away like a naughty child. No, I will not go. I shall sit here, as is my right.”

Vincent narrowed his eyes, a muscle twitching in his jaw. “Mother, you will leave, or I will throw you over my shoulder and make you.”

“You will do no such thing!” Julianna barked.

However, as Vincent moved toward her, she jumped up and rushed for the door, muttering rude things under her breath as she left. And she did not miss an opportunity to flash a disapproving scowl at Edmund as she passed by him, her loud tut of condemnation echoing back into the room.

You were desperate for us to marry not so long ago, Isolde mused, mildly entertained by the stark difference in her mother’s response to the Duke of Davenport.

“Isolde,” Vincent said, pulling her out of her thoughts, “Edmund has something he would like to say to you. I shall be just over there by the garden doors, to allow you some privacy.”

“Privacy?” Isolde repeated, casting a pensive glance at Edmund. “I do believe that is

what created the trouble in the first place.”

Vincent leaned down and kissed Isolde’s brow. “Yes, but I am here this time. All will be well, dear sister.”

With that, he wandered over to the opposite side of the room, leaving Edmund to step forward.

It had been almost a week since Isolde had last seen him, and the days in between had not been particularly kind to him. He seemed weary, his broad shoulders sagging, his head slightly bowed, his lustrous russet hair not quite as neat as usual, his beautiful sapphire eyes framed with dark crescents. And every step he took toward her appeared heavy, as if he was not there of his own volition.

I could have loved you if you had not run. I really think I could have fallen for you—I mean, I was already tumbling before I knew what the feeling was.

It hurt to look at him, even in his disheveled state. Meeting his eyes, seeing his plump, tempting lips, it just sent her mind spinning back to the library... and further back, to the gardens of Kensington Palace. The growl of his voice, calling her his. So many possibilities, so many unexpected hopes, dashed the instant he had walked out of the Farnaby ball.

With a breath, Edmund sank down to one knee in front of her. “Isolde, I realize that I have behaved poorly, and I am sorry for that. I realize also that this is probably the last thing you want to hear from me, but... would you do me the honor of consenting to marry me?”

Isolde sat frozen, her lungs forgetting to draw in breath. She stared at him for a while, uncertain of whether or not she had heard him correctly. After his parting words of “I never plan to marry,” how could he be asking for her hand now? It did not make a

lick of sense and, what was worse, it did not make her feel at all happy. Instead, it felt hollow and painful, like receiving a gift that had shattered to pieces on the journey.

“Why are you doing this?” she asked bluntly. “I know it is not what you want.”

Edmund’s eyes pinched, his brow creasing as it had done in the moments before he kissed her at last. As if she was the one causing him pain.

“I promised to protect you,” he said. “If this is what it takes to ensure that your reputation and honor remains intact, then I will marry you. It does not matter what I want. That being said, it would be remiss of me not to be honest with you, as I have... mostly always been: I can only offer a marriage of convenience. I cannot offer you your dreams. It is beyond my capability.”

She had been enamored by the man in the mask, but she did not like the mask that he was wearing now; the facade that he was content with this decision, when he evidently was not.

“Thank you for your honesty,” Isolde replied flatly. “Now, hear mine: No, I will not marry you. I have sought a marriage of love for as long as I can remember, and I will not sacrifice that now. If you cannot offer me love, I do not want what you can offer.”

“Isolde!” Vincent raced over, exposing the ‘privacy’ for the fib that it was. “Isolde, you have to marry him. You cannot reject his proposal. I have arranged this, Sister. He has agreed. After all these years of showing that you can be obedient and ladylike, do not revert to your old ways now!”

Isolde lifted her gaze to her brother, smiling a thin smile. “If I had reverted to my old ways, I would not still be sitting in this room. Or if I had a strawberry tart to hand, I would have pressed it to my chest and pretended that Edmund had shot me during the annual hunt.”

She flashed a bittersweet smirk at Edmund, who blinked in surprise. It was the event that no one mentioned, the ‘wicked’ trick that had shoved Isolde into years of intense education into becoming a proper lady, the final straw that had made Vincent believe for a while that his sister was irredeemable; the ultimate jest that had brought Edmund close to throttling her— after he had realized it was a trick, of course.

“You see, you do know how to say that you are sorry! Now, say it to my brother.” She could still remember crowing those words as she sat bolt upright with Edmund at her side, coming ‘back to life.’ He had been wheezing in frantic gulps of breath, apologizing profusely, thinking he had killed her by accident. And when she had sat up like that, he had looked like he might keel over.

“Brother, I appreciate that you have tried to remedy this in the only way you know how,” she continued, “and I am glad that no one is dead, but I will not marry him. I want love, I deserve love, and even Edmund would agree with that.”

If you would just say that you feel something for me, I will consider it. She gazed at him, hoping that her eyes might relay the message, but she was not foolish enough to wait for a confession. He had already stated his position.

“Besides,” she added. “I already have another proposal to consider, and that is an offer of love.”

“What?” Edmund and Vincent both asked in unison, one with an anguished frown, the other with a tone of pleasant surprise.

She got to her feet and curtsied to Edmund, who was rising up from his fruitless proposal. Her eyes followed him up to his full height, briefly lamenting the fact that she would never feel safe in his arms again, experiencing the singular wonder of him curving himself around her, as if he really would be a shield between her and anything that would cause her harm.

But he could not shield her from himself, and that was the problem.

“The Viscount,” she said curtly. “He has sent me gifts every day, and notes asking when he might see me again, for he has something very important to ask me. I hate to assume, but he is so... open with me that I do not think I am mistaken; I believe I know what the question will be.”

Vincent nodded, clapping Edmund on the back. “That must be a relief for you! I can certainly say it is a relief for me. Heavens, I thought I would have to brace myself for your entry into spinsterhood!”

Edmund did not say anything; he just stared at Isolde, his expression unreadable.

“The Viscount does not wear a mask when he is with me,” Isolde said, unable to help herself. “Indeed, I think I shall be very happy. So, if you will excuse me, I have preparations to make for this evening’s dinner party.”

She walked out of the room and up the stairs at a measured pace, only running the last short stretch to her bedchamber. Once she was inside, she closed the door behind her and pressed her back to it, panting hard as her heart wavered in her chest and tears threatened to fall once more.

For days, in her melancholic stupor, she had prayed that Edmund would come to the house and declare that he had changed his mind and wanted to court her, apologizing as profusely as he had during the strawberry tart incident. When he had not, the crack in her heart had widened.

Now, it splintered altogether, as she realized with all certainty that he was never, ever going to change his mind. He did not love her. He would not love her. Indeed, he would not even entertain the idea, leaving her with just one option: to throw herself into the next best thing, hoping it would not be the greatest mistake of her life.

CHAPTER THIRTY

“Will you be at the dinner party tonight?” Vincent asked, leading Edmund to the front door.

Edmund barely heard his friend’s question, his gaze turned back toward the staircase, wondering what Isolde was doing. She had not given him a second glance when she left the drawing room, and it stuck in his chest like a rope of thorns, wrapping around the hilt of the icy blade that she had firmly driven into his heart with the words, “Besides, I already have another proposal to consider, and that is an offer of love.”

“Tonight? I... had not given it much thought,” he replied. “After all, I assumed I would be in Davenport for the foreseeable. I also assumed that you would not want to be in my company for a while.”

In truth, I expected that I would lose both of you in one fell swoop.

Whether or not the kiss had ever been revealed to Vincent, Edmund had known that he would not be welcome at the Grayling townhouse or the Grayling estate again. Not until Isolde was married and living elsewhere, at least.

He had not thought that day would come so soon, nor had he suspected how much it would hurt.

Vincent laughed and patted Edmund on the shoulder, though there was a warning in his voice as he said, “As long as you swear not to cause any further upset or do anything to disrupt this... courtship of hers, I see no reason why we cannot continue

on as before. It was clearly an error in judgment. If Isolde can move past it, so can I.”

“If it is what she wants, I will not intervene,” Edmund replied, hating each word.

Vincent smiled. “Good. Well then, I shall see you this evening. If not, then let us make time to attend Golding’s one day this week—perhaps, if all proceeds well with the Viscount, I will have something to celebrate.” His eyes brightened. “I could even bring him along. It would be a fine thing to get acquainted with him, if he is to be one of the family.”

Like one of the vivid, visceral memories that assaulted his mind from time to time, Edmund suddenly saw the version of the future that had just been set in motion: Noah becoming like a brother to Vincent, Noah and Isolde greeting her family on the porch of Grayling House after months apart, Noah and Isolde celebrating birthdays, anniversaries, weddings, holidays as a couple and as an extended part of the Wilds family. Then, Noah and Isolde announcing the arrival of their first child, their second, their third, building a family together.

It was a vivid future in which Noah had taken the place that Edmund had not realized he wanted for himself.

“Edmund?” Vincent nudged him. “Are you well? You cannot be that appalled by the idea of inviting this Viscount along to Golding’s.”

Edmund shook off the visions, forcing a smile. “Not at all. The more the merrier.” He opened the front door and stepped out. “I will see you this evening.”

“I look forward to it,” Vincent replied, raising his hand in a wave as Edmund walked off up the street.

Out of sight of the townhouse, Edmund paused and bent at the waist, stooping to

catch his breath. He knew he was doing the right thing by Isolde, giving her the chance to find someone worthier, but he had never expected that denying himself the privilege of a happy future with her would sting so much.

I should have asked her differently. He flinched, expelling a rough breath. I should have told her that I would try to be what she wanted, if she would just say yes.

But it was too late now. She had rejected him, and rightly so, for he had made a very poor offer. To make matters worse, he had not even offered the full extent of what he was willing to give, if it meant that he could have her as his wife.

When he had made the vow to never marry, he had meant it wholeheartedly. He had wanted the punishment of it, to alleviate just a little bit of the guilt he carried with him. But, stubborn and defiant and tricky as she was, Isolde had swept back into his life like a whirlwind and turned everything upside down.

And I already miss it...

He had kissed her because he had wanted to. He had kissed her because she had captured his heart. He had kissed her because she was the only woman in the world who could make him give up that vow. He had kissed her because he had wanted more, and he had fumbled it completely.

Now, he would have to watch another man take his place. If that was not punishment in its most ironic form, he did not know what was. But he did know that it was going to hurt like nothing he had ever felt before.

Being seated in the same spot on the settee, with the same cup and saucer in her hands, drinking the same lukewarm tea, Isolde had to wonder if she was stuck in some bizarre dream. A nightmare of unsatisfying marriage proposals on a ceaseless cycle.

“Is that him?” Her mother, seated beside her, snapped her head up at the sound of a carriage rattling by the drawing room windows.

Isolde took a sip of the cooled tea. “I assume he will knock, Mama. Are you trying to make me nervous?”

It had been five days since Vincent had ushered Edmund in to make his offer of a marriage of convenience. She had seen him twice in the interim: once at the opposite end of a long dinner table, once from afar, at a sedate gathering that did not have enough guests to be called a ball. On both occasions, despite everything, she had hoped he might engage her in conversation or ask her to dance, but he had kept his distance, just as he had said he would.

“Goodness, I am nervous,” Vincent chimed in with a laugh, brushing his palms against his waistcoat as if they were clammy. “Yet, if I may say so, you look rather calm, Isolde.”

Isolde shrugged. “I see no reason to fret. After our discussion at the theater last night, I am certain he will propose today, and I know what I wish to say, so there is nothing to worry over.”

And I do not care enough to be nervous, she neglected to add.

She adored Noah, and looked forward to spending time with him, but it was not a romantic affection. It was more like the relationship she had with Vincent, like siblings. She felt nothing when Noah accidentally brushed her arm or bumped into her or swept back a lock of her hair. Her heart did not skip a beat when she held his arm during a promenade, or she looked up into his eyes.

“But you have been obsessing over this day for years,” Vincent pointed out, observing her with bemusement. “This is what you have been working toward—a

dream realized.”

She put on a smile. “And I am telling you, I feel no reason to be nervous. If you know it is the right thing for you, how can there be nerves?”

The knock they had been waiting for sounded throughout the townhouse, and though Isolde jumped at the noise, the knowledge that Noah had arrived still did not stir up any anxious anticipation. In truth, she was just eager to get it over with. The sooner she was married and committed to her decision, the sooner she could begin life anew, perhaps finding a different dream along the way. One that might come true, this time.

“Good afternoon, everyone,” Noah chirruped, ushered into the drawing room by the housekeeper.

He stood by the door for longer than expected, holding his hat in front of his stomach, fidgeting with the edges. Clearly, he had not escaped the day’s bout of nerves, his brow glistening with sweat though it was not too warm outside.

“Good afternoon, Noah,” Isolde replied, offering a smile.

Noah glanced at Vincent and Isolde’s mother, a line of confusion appearing between his eyebrows. “Are you both going to remain here?” he asked awkwardly, shuffling further into the room. “Or should I request a moment alone? I do not mind, either way.”

“It is nothing they do not already know, Noah,” Isolde said with that same, patient smile. “Do not be anxious. You have no need to be.”

His throat bobbed as he edged ever closer, though he did not sink to one knee as he ended up in front of her. Instead, somewhat clumsily, he stood with the backs of his calves pressed against the edge of the tea table, peering down at Isolde from his not

insignificant height.

“Well then...” he said, his voice cracking. “Apologies, I have not done this before.”

Isolde laughed softly. “Take your time. There is no rush.”

He cleared his throat and gripped the edges of his hat tighter. “Lady Isolde, I was... um... wondering if you would grant me the pleasure of... uh... consenting to be my wife?”

“Of course, Lord Mentrow,” she answered without a moment’s hesitation, for she had already spent five nights going back and forth, tying herself into knots about how to proceed.

Every possibility had screeched to the same outcome: she either married Noah or she returned to sifting through suitors, without the keen eye of Edmund this time. And if there was no one suitable, she would have to wait until next Season, disappointing her family in the process. If that was not a success, she would be firmly on the road to spinsterhood, which was something she simply could not do.

Noah seemed surprised, looking to Vincent for some kind of confirmation. “Is that it, then? Are we engaged to be wed?”

“You certainly are,” Isolde’s mother crowed, clapping her hands together.

Indeed, she appeared to be the only one thrilled by the occasion. Isolde felt nothing but a faint relief, Vincent had suddenly turned pensive, and Noah looked like he might keel over if he did not get away from the drawing room soon.

“Splendid! In that case, I shall... speak with my family, and we must arrange a dinner or something of that ilk, to make arrangements and to ensure that everyone is

acquainted,” Noah said, relaxing slightly, as if he had just had to undertake a less than pleasant task that he had been putting off for a while. “Isolde, I... um... I am glad that you accepted. I look forward to... well, marrying you.”

Isolde smiled. “Likewise.”

Within a matter of no more than five minutes, Noah had arrived, proposed, and departed again, leaving behind at least two dizzied souls. Indeed, Isolde was not entirely certain of what she had said to her future husband, only that she had accepted.

“I shall fetch wine for us to celebrate! Oh, and I must tell the girls! They will be thrilled, for there is to be a wedding at last!” Isolde’s mother cheered, jumping to her feet and hurrying out with the same haste that had driven Noah in and out so swiftly.

In her absence, Vincent moved to occupy the spot she had vacated. The settee gave under his weight, for it was not a piece of furniture he used too often, but he did not seem to notice as he turned to look at Isolde.

“What is the matter?” she asked, puzzled by the abrupt change in him.

He took hold of her hand, worrying her all the more. “I was about to ask you the same thing.” He laughed stiffly. “I have been watching you these past days, Isolde, and... I could not help but notice that you have not been yourself. You have been quieter, more reserved, and though I should be glad of that, I find myself concerned instead.”

“I have not slept much, that is all,” she lied.

He saw right through her, shaking his head. “No, it is more than that. Even with your friends at the various gatherings we have attended this week, you have been... distant. I have never seen you stare off into the middle distance as much as you have

done of late. So, please, put your old brother out of his misery. Tell me what is wrong.”

“There is nothing wrong,” she insisted.

“Isolde...”

She puffed out a breath and closed her eyes, concentrating on the warmth of her brother’s hand. “It is not the right word. There is nothing wrong, per se. I have just had a lot to think about.”

She paused, trying to find the right sentiment. “I have had to accept that I will never have what I wanted, and that has been hard for me because, as you said, I have obsessed over my wedding, my marriage, my dreams of romance, for years. However, I am coming to terms with it. I still have a duty to perform, and I will not be the one who lets you all down. I cannot end up a spinster, Vincent, so... I have had to make my decision, and that depth of thought has required a lot of staring off into the middle distance.”

An odd, wheezing sound emerged from Vincent’s throat. “What do you mean, you have had to accept that you will never have what you wanted? I thought the Viscount was what you wanted—that offer of love that you had been waiting for?”

“I gave up waiting, Brother,” she replied, opening her eyes. “I grew up instead. You see, Mama said that she loved Papa in her own way, and theirs was not a love match. Flowers bloom where you water them, Vincent; I am putting faith in the notion that love can be the same.”

Her brother paled, his eyes scrunched as if he was trying to remember a name that was dancing on the tip of his tongue. “You... do not love the Viscount?”

“I like him. I think we will be content,” she countered.

“Is there someone you do love?”

Isolde dropped her gaze sharply, terrified that her brother would see Edmund’s name etched across her face. She really had tried not to, she really had thought she had not yet fallen for him, but there was nothing to be done: her heart wanted her masked savior, and she was the cruel master telling it that it would have to go without.

I love him and I hate him for making me love him. I love him, but he does not love me.

“Not especially,” she murmured, praying this would be the one occasion where her brother did not see right through her lies.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Hazy sunshine slanted in through the casement windows of Edmund's study, the scent of cut grass and lavender drifting in on the mild breeze. He closed his eyes and inhaled the aroma, considering the prospect of taking a late morning walk through the grounds.

I should purchase a dog. That would keep me occupied.

His restlessness over the past couple of weeks since Isolde's rejection had proven to be rather useful, giving him more time to dedicate to his correspondence and estate affairs. Indeed, he had almost caught up on everything that had been waiting for him in the two years that he had been on his grand tour.

But he could not shake the loneliness that had settled over him like a heavy blanket.

A knock came at the study door.

"Come in," Edmund called, stretching out his aching arms.

The steward, Sinclair, walked in and bowed his head. "There is a visitor for you, Your Grace. I told him you were at your work, but he was insistent. I've left him in the Sun Room for you."

Sinclair was a hard-edged man with thinning gray hair and sharp, blue eyes that could pierce right through any nonsense. He had been around for as long as Edmund could remember, moving through the ranks of staff. He had begun as a gardener's boy, then

a footman, then a valet, and now the steward of Davenport Towers. And he took great pride in that, even though he showed no emotion on his face at any time.

Is that what I will become?

The steward had never married and never shown any inclination toward the institution. Edmund could recall his father scolding many a member of staff for dallying with other servants, but Sinclair had not been among them. Not once. He was always alone, with the sort of demeanor that kept most people at a distance.

“Should Mr. Phipps not be telling me this?” Edmund asked, rising from his chair, wondering who could be calling upon him.

Sinclair grimaced. “He has taken to his bed again, Your Grace. Another bout of his mad rambling. We’ll have to find a replacement soon.” He hesitated. “I can do it on your behalf, if you’d like?”

“Yes... I think it is time,” Edmund replied reluctantly. “Mr. Phipps will not be removed from this estate; he has more than earned the right to stay here until the end of his days, but a new butler will be necessary. Bring me a list of anyone suitable, and I shall select one.”

Sinclair dipped his head. “Very good, Your Grace.”

As Edmund headed out into the sun-dappled hallway, he paused and looked back at the steward. “Is the visitor a gentleman or a lady?”

Has she come to see me one last time before she is married?

He had seen the first of the banns in the paper, announcing the engagement between Isolde and Noah. The second would likely be in that day’s paper or the next day’s,

but he had neglected to check. Seeing it once had been more than enough, and if the knife in his heart twisted any more, it would undoubtedly shatter him.

“A gentleman, Your Grace,” Sinclair replied. “It is the Earl of Grayling.”

Edmund raised an eyebrow. “Why did you not say?”

He took off at a clip, nervous tendrils slithering across his chest, wrapping his lungs in a thorned vise. Maybe, Vincent had some manner of message for him, from Isolde. A farewell that might slick a temporary balm on his sore heart... or make it ten times worse.

“That man of yours is woefully rude,” Vincent declared, the second Edmund walked through the Sun Room door. “Was he always that way?”

He sat on a low stool by the terrace, the French doors open to let in the warmth and perfume of the gardens. That golden sunlight formed a fuzzy halo around him, reminding Edmund of the garden party where Isolde had fallen foul of Lord Spofforth. She had been so radiant that day, as if she had captured some of the glowing sunlight and drawn it into herself.

I shall never meet another like her, for as long as I live.

“It is, alas, his character,” Edmund said ruefully. “I cannot recall if he was the steward of this estate the last time you were here.”

Vincent smiled. “I have not visited this fine manor nearly as much as I should have.”

“Nonsense. It was me who always insisted on gathering at Grayling House.” Edmund picked up another low stool and took it over to the French doors, setting it down opposite his friend. “Back then, I did not want to be here in this manor very often.”

“It is understandable,” Vincent said, turning his gaze toward the neat boxwood hedges that bordered the rose garden. The scent of those blooms ebbed and flowed with the breeze, teasing the nostrils.

Edmund followed his friend’s line of sight, remembering the first time he had gone to stay at Grayling House after the loss of his entire family. All of the tricks and snide remarks that Isolde had thrown in his direction, long before the strawberry tart incident. He had not initially known why she seemed determined to be unkind to him, and once he had learned why, it had made him less inclined to do what she wanted.

It shamed him to think, now, of how juvenile he had been.

“I never did thank you properly,” he said haltingly. “For what you did for me after... I became the Duke of Davenport. I do not think I ever told you how grateful I was—how grateful I am. I doubt I would have survived the grief if not for you.”

Vincent looked back at him, eyes creased in a surprised smile. “You thanked me plenty, Edmund.”

“Perhaps, but... I know I did not apologize.” Edmund hesitated. “When you lost your father, I made no attempt to offer comfort or a safe haven. I gave you no generosity in your grief, when you likely needed it the most. As your friend, I should have done for you what you did for me. I am... sorry that I neglected my duty as a dear friend. Truly, I am sorry. As I am sorry that it has taken me so long to apologize.”

A soft laugh whispered from Vincent’s lips. “I have never needed your apology, but I do wish you had saved it for later.”

“Later?”

He nodded. “For when we return to London, so that I can knock your heads together

and make you see sense.”

“Pardon?” Edmund squinted at his friend, raising his hand up to shield his eyes from the sun’s glare. “Whose heads are you knocking together and why?”

Vincent shifted on his seat, leaning back against the doorjamb as he once again let his gaze trail toward the gardens and the lawns beyond, to where a line of woodland bordered the estate.

“I trust you have seen the announcement?” he said, furrowing his brow.

Edmund’s throat tightened. “I saw it in passing, yes. Most... fortuitous news.”

“Come now,” Vincent said, rather sharply. “You might have everyone else fooled, Edmund, but you do not fool me. I was furious when I heard what you had done, as you well know, but I have had time to mull it over and there are parts that do not make a jot of sense.”

“Oh?”

Vincent chewed his lower lip in thought. “I have never known you to do anything that could be considered dishonorable or impulsive. You are an abider of the rules, and a gentleman who takes pride in being an upstanding member of society.” He met Edmund’s eyes. “So, I had to ask myself—why would you kiss my sister? More to the point, why would you kiss Isolde while tasked with guarding her, when you always put duty above everything else?”

Because I love her, you dolt. I love her, but even if I were to propose marriage now with a confession of my affection, she would not have me, Edmund wanted to admit, clamping his lips together to prevent the truth from escaping.

“Then, I remembered,” Vincent continued. “It was such a small memory: we were having tea in the orangery at Grayling House, and the cook had made scones because I told her they were your favorite. I offered you one and you refused. I must have offered six times, feeling rather dismayed that I had gone to the trouble, and you did not want them. Do you recall what you said when I asked why you did not want one?”

Edmund shook his head slowly, for he could not remember the moment at all.

“You said, “I do want one, but I do not deserve one.” You would do the same thing here and there, so discreetly that it has taken me this long to realize that there was a deeper meaning in your refusals,” Vincent said more gently, his eyes swimming with sadness. “You were denying yourself happiness, and you are still doing it.”

Edmund stared at his friend, unblinking, feeling as if Vincent had taken a hammer and chisel and cracked him wide open. He had avoided putting a name to the reason he denied himself, but he knew when he was doing it, and he knew why he was doing it: if there were things that might please him that his family could not enjoy, then he would not partake.

That was his punishment for being alive when they were not.

“But denying yourself happiness will not bring them back,” Vincent said. “You are only hurting yourself... and my sister.”

Edmund swallowed thickly. “It was never my intention.”

“I know.” Vincent sighed. “I did not want to admit it, at first, but... I am ever more certain that Isolde is in love with you, just as I am ever more certain that you feel more for her than you would dare to say. That is why you kissed her—because you feel something for her, but then you felt happiness, and you pulled away to punish

yourself.”

Edmund did not need to say anything; the truth of the matter was probably written all over his face. It sounded silly when it was explained out loud, but grief and loss did strange things to people, and what might have seemed stupid to some was a crutch to others.

“She is not herself, Edmund.” Vincent’s face twisted into an expression of pain. “She is quiet, she is withdrawn, she has not bothered to involve herself in any of the wedding arrangements. All she does is sit in her bedchamber, and whenever I go to check on her, she is holding a mask in her hands. She used to try and hide it, but she does not anymore. I am worried that she will lose herself entirely if she proceeds with this wedding, when it is quite evidently not what she wants.”

Edmund sat rod-straight, a shiver running up and down his spine. “Did you say she has been holding a mask?”

“It is the one you were wearing at her debut ball, if I am not mistaken,” Vincent replied.

A sudden, shocking thought ricocheted through Edmund’s skull. “Vincent, was Isolde in the gardens at any point during that masquerade ball?”

“Indeed. She ventured into the gardens with an irksome little man. The Marquess of Fenton, if memory serves. My mother was supposed to be chaperoning her, but she got distracted by some friends, which left Isolde alone with that man for a time. I do not know exactly what happened, but I know that Isolde was rather distressed afterward—it is why I asked you to watch over her when I was called away to Bath, to avoid such a thing happening again.”

The Sun Room became a touch brighter, as if Edmund had been looking at everything

through a dark lens that had just been removed. He had not forgotten that night, nor the woman he had saved from Colin, the Marquess of Fenton. He had often wondered how she was faring, unaware that she was the very woman that he was destined to fall for.

It was you. I knew you were familiar. I knew... it was you.

He had not been able to explain it at the time, but had it been any other lady, he would not have dared to be so bold. He would not have pulled her to him or said the possessive things he had said, to scare Colin away. In truth, he had shocked himself with his behavior that night, and now he understood why—somehow, deep down, he had known it was Isolde.

“Have the second banns been announced?” Edmund said abruptly. “When is the wedding?”

He had made his vow to never marry at a time when the depth of his grief had been all-consuming. He had made it to make himself feel better, when nothing else could. But Isolde made him feel better. She made him feel more alive than he had done in an age, she made him feel hopeful, she made him feel... joyful and capable of love.

If he allowed his guilt to condemn her to an unhappy marriage and an unfulfilled life, then he would only end up carrying more guilt on his shoulders.

Vincent smirked. “I delayed the second announcement. The wedding, however, is set for a fortnight hence.” He leaned forward. “But I happen to know that she will be at Madame Versailles’ shop tomorrow, to look at fabric for her wedding gown. A private appointment, arranged by me, that I will ensure she attends. Alone.”

“How... could you be so sure of me?” Edmund asked, his heart thundering in his chest, his feet itching to rush out to his carriage to make his way to London

immediately.

Vincent shrugged. “I have known you for half of my life, Edmund. As I said, I know you would not have betrayed my trust for no good reason. You are not a rake, my friend—you are not even close to being one. As such, I was left with only one explanation: you fell in love with her. If I did not do something to see you both happy, what sort of friend and brother would I be?”

“Thank you,” Edmund rasped, jumping up. “I will not disappoint you, Vincent.”

Vincent stood with him. “I have every faith that you will not.” He paused, smiling. “But I will be sending Isolde to the shop with a chaperone, just in case. We cannot have a scandal before you two find your joy together.”

“A broken betrothal is not a scandal?” Edmund pointed out, aware that it was his fault. If he had proposed with his heart instead of cold logic, Isolde might never have accepted Noah at all.

Vincent shrugged. “Society will forget quickly enough, as long as the wedding follows swiftly. Indeed, there is nothing the Ton relishes more than a love story.” He began to walk to the door. “Of course, we are ignoring one important detail.”

“And what is that?”

Vincent turned on the threshold. “You must convince Isolde of your feelings first. I know she loves you, but we both know how stubborn she can be.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

D rizzling rain spattered the pavement as Isolde climbed down from the carriage, pulling her cloak tighter around herself to hold back the chilly breeze that tried to sneak inside.

Standing there as Teresa emerged behind her, Isolde stared at the pretty shop, urging herself to find some excitement in the sight of the beautiful gowns displayed in the windows.

She felt nothing, just a desire to get back into the carriage and return home.

“Shall we have tea instead?” Isolde asked her sister.

Teresa weaved her arm through Isolde’s. “ After we have chosen a gown for you. Vincent was most insistent, and I do not want him to be cross with us. The wedding is not so far away, and you cannot wear something you already have. Mama will not allow it.”

“No, I suppose the wedding is rather soon,” Isolde mumbled, shivering at the thought.

Since accepting Noah’s proposal, she had tried her very best to conjure some enthusiasm about marrying him. After the engagement had been announced, many letters of congratulation had arrived at the townhouse, but she had not bothered to read any of them; she had left that to her mother. A mother who was slowly losing her mind at her daughter’s new habit of retreating to her chambers, refusing all invitations, withdrawing from society altogether.

Noah himself had visited a handful of times, and though the conversation had been as pleasant as always, she suspected that he was as uninspired by the wedding as she was. He had asked her many times, in a nervy voice, if they were doing the right thing, and she had answered vaguely, since the course they were on could not be changed now.

“I do not profess to be at all fashionable, but I am here to help you,” Teresa said, pulling Isolde toward the shop door. “And think on this—the sooner we choose something, the sooner we can have scones and tea.”

Isolde managed a wan smile. “That is certainly a motivating thought.”

The two sisters were greeted warmly by the vibrant Madame Versailles, who shuffled out from behind her counter to embrace the women. She smelled of violets and rose water, and had mischief in her eyes as she ushered Isolde to a chair in the corner.

“You stay there while your sister and I select some fabrics for you,” the modiste insisted. “I’ll have some tea fetched for you, to whet your appetite for the gown of the century. I have so many ideas. Truly, I will be inundated with brides wanting the same when I am done with you!”

Isolde perched awkwardly on the edge of the chair. “I do not want anything elaborate. The simpler the better.”

“Nonsense,” Madame Versailles retorted. “It is your wedding—you must have a gown worthy of your beauty and future happiness.”

Then make it black, Isolde resisted the urge to say so, weary of her melancholy. She did not want to drag anyone else down with her, when it was her own fault that she was about to be unhappily married. Yes, Edmund did not propose in a romantic fashion, and had not offered her particularly enticing terms, but at least she would be

married to him if she had accepted. And he was the only husband she wanted.

As Madame Versailles disappeared into the back room, where their modiste kept her best fabrics, Isolde dipped a hand into her reticule and drew out the bronze mask of thorns and roses.

She traced her fingertips across the winding, weaving shapes, noting the spots where she had begun to wear the metal to a shine. Part of her wondered if she ought to ask for a gown that matched it, if such a thing were possible, though she figured that would only make the wedding more difficult.

At that moment, the shop door opened, tinkling a bell above the lintel.

“It is a private appointment! Please come back later!” Madame Versailles shouted from the back, though she did not emerge to see who had entered.

Isolde did not look either, transfixed by the beauty of the mask and the memory of the man who had worn it. She did not mind if there were other people at her private appointment. Indeed, she did not know why her brother had gone to the trouble of arranging a private appointment when everyone knew she was getting married anyway.

But when the bell did not chime again, signaling the customer’s departure from the shop, she finally glanced over... and gasped with such force that it promptly sent her into a coughing fit.

“Are you well? Do you need water?” Edmund rushed to her, sinking to his knees in front of her, taking hold of her hands as she spluttered and wheezed.

She nodded as best she could. “I am... quite well. You startled me... that is all.”

“I am sorry,” he said softly, peering up at her. “I did not mean to scare you. I thought you had heard the bell.”

“I did,” she rasped, “but I did not... expect to see... you. Why would... I?”

He winced, no doubt aware that she had a point. “I thought it best to stay away, but that was before. That was when I thought that you would be happy if I was away from you, and I have it on good authority that you have not been happy. In truth, neither have I.”

As the coughing eased, she stared at him, astounded by his words. After everything they had been through, every hurt he had inflicted, did he really think she cared if he had not been happy? Did he not realize that she had hoped he was as miserable as her, even though she knew she should not wish that on him?

He seemed to realize the lack of tact in what he had said, as he sank back on his haunches, still holding her hands. “I have been an idiot, Isolde. For years, I have had a... set of rules that I abide by, in order to alleviate the guilt that I hold in my heart. Those rules were designed to prevent me from feeling happiness, and when I felt happiness with you, I pulled away because I thought those rules were more important than anything. I have since discovered that one thing is more important.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “I am listening.”

“You are more important, Isolde.” His throat bobbed. “And though I know I have no right to ask for your forgiveness, I want you to understand why I have behaved so badly.”

She glanced over at the counter, but Madame Versailles and Teresa had still not emerged... almost as if they were hiding back there deliberately, allowing Edmund and Isolde to have a moment alone. It reeked of organized deception, which baffled

her more than trying to comprehend what Edmund was saying.

“You felt guilty? Why?” she asked.

He hesitated, dropping his gaze. “Do you remember the first time we met?”

She nodded.

“I had... just lost my entire family. We were venturing to our house by the sea, but the weather turned foul, and a fog rolled in across the roads. The driver did not see the carriage coming in the opposite direction until it was too late, and it was moving too fast.”

He cleared his throat, his voice thick. “The crash was... brutal. The carriage was thrown off the road, and it rolled down a hill. I do not remember much. I think I was rendered unconscious, but when I woke up, I was alone on a tree stump with a blanket around me, and a stranger was apologizing profusely for what had happened. I must have asked where my family was, because he told me, with tears streaming down his face, that they were gone.

“My mother, my father, my sister, my grandmother—there one moment, talking about how excited they were to swim in the sea, and then... just gone. I did not understand why I was alive, and they were not. I have never understood it, and... denying myself what they could not be there to share or see or enjoy became... a way of life that I relied on. It is why I vowed to never marry. I did not want a legacy that they would not be there to witness. I did not want to be happy if they were not there to share in my joy. I did not want to have what my sister, especially, would never have.”

Isolde gaped at him, her heart stinging. She had known some of what he had just said, through Vincent, but she had not realized just how much he had lost. Nor had she

realized how much it had haunted him, which made her feel awful about the tricks and jests she had played upon him, at a time when just waking up must have been a great effort.

“So, when I realized that I was falling in love with you,” he continued, “I retreated from it. I was overcome with a tremendous wave of guilt, and I thought that distancing myself would make it go away. Instead, I just... missed you. The regret of not being near you was greater than the guilt, and these past weeks, I have only felt regret.”

He... loves me? The shock was a visceral blow to her chest. She should have been leaping for joy, throwing her arms around him and confessing the truth of her own heart, but a different feeling rushed to the fore.

“What is wrong with you?” she rasped, shaking her head at him. “Why did you not say any of this before? Why make me think that you were toying with me, injuring me with your mercurial moods? I would have understood if you had been honest! Indeed, why say that you could only offer a marriage of convenience when, if you had said what you have just said, I would have accepted your proposal!”

She was furious. Furious and frustrated that she was now embroiled in an engagement she did want because he had been too afraid to be truthful. She liked to think she was a fairly reasonable person; she could have forgiven him if he had explained in detail. Instead, he had let her think that he was not interested and had scurried off to the countryside without another word.

Edmund blinked. “I made a mistake.”

“I should say!” she retorted. “Indeed, I would like to ask why you have had a sudden change of heart?”

“Because I finally found the courage to admit something I have not told anyone before—about my guilt, about the shame that I have carried. You are the first person I have wanted to tell. It has come a little late, admittedly, but I cannot lose you, Isolde.” He gripped her hands tighter. “I love you, and I am sorry it has taken me so long to confess it.”

He does love me...

She pulled her hands back. “I am getting married in two weeks, Edmund! There will be a scandal, my family will suffer, I will suffer, and... you have just waltzed in here with your charming confession, sending my mind into a spiral! Why on earth did you not say something before I became engaged? My goodness, you have such atrocious timing! I do not know whether to embrace you or smack you!”

He laughed, gaining a sharp glare.

“Isolde, if marrying Noah is what you desire, then I shall not stand in your way,” he said. “So, tell me—is it what you want? And do not speak of duty or scandal or your worries about society’s opinion. Just tell me truthfully if he is everything you hoped for.”

Isolde scoffed, as incensed as she was moved. “Just because he is not does not mean that you are, Edmund.” She rolled her eyes. “No, he is not what I want. I have been dreading the wedding ever since the engagement was announced. What is more, I do not think he wants to marry me either, but what is done is done. I have to do my duty now. So, thank you for making it even harder than it already was.”

He smiled—one of his rarest, most genuine smiles. Why he was so cheerful after what she had just said, she did not know. Could he not see that it was hopeless? Was he glad that his confession had come to naught?

“What if I told you that I could take care of the betrothal?” he said, lifting his hand to her cheek, his thumb brushing the flushed apple of it. “What if I told you that your brother is waiting for me to give him good news, and that you will not have to worry about anything?”

She squinted at him, gesturing at the shop around her, where swathes of fabric spilled from their colorful rolls. “Did you organize this? Did you arrange this so you could make a dramatic confession, leaving me oblivious all this time?”

“Your brother did,” Edmund replied. “He came to me yesterday and told me you were unhappy. He said that if I felt something for you, I should act now. And I do feel something for you, in case you missed it the first two times. I love you, Isolde. I will make all of this right, if you will consent to be my wife. Not in a marriage of convenience, but in a marriage of love.”

“That is very presumptuous,” she muttered, her heart pounding, her soul screaming for her to put him out of his misery and just tell him that she loved him too. But she had suppressed her stubbornness for years, and it wanted to make itself known one last time.

“Is it?” he murmured with a smile, as he leaned in.

The first searing graze of his lips against hers blew all of the obstinacy out of her veins, softening her temper, soothing the jagged edges of her frustrated ire. Perhaps, that was why he had done it, and she found she did not care. She just wanted to enjoy the singular pleasure of kissing the man she loved, without worrying about everything that might come with it.

She slipped her arms around his neck and pulled him closer, kissing him back with equal fervor. Indeed, she became certain that Madame Versailles was in on the deception, for the drapes of the shop windows had been pulled shut, allowing them

absolute privacy.

I missed you...

She hugged him tightly to her, sliding her hand into his silky, russet brown locks, kissing him as if she might never have the chance again. She kissed him as if she had lost the power of speech, and needed her lips to relay the message to his own with each passionate ebb and flow.

All too soon, he pulled back, sweeping a wayward lock of hair behind her ear. “Am I still being too presumptuous?”

“Yes, but, fortunately for you, your presumption is correct,” she replied, smiling for the first time in at least two weeks. “I love you, Edmund. I have tried not to, but I do. I have loved you, I think, since you pulled me into your arms and called me yours in the gardens of Kensington Palace.”

He chuckled warmly. “I did not realize it was you.”

“Oh, so you do that often?” she teased, pushing down the mild jab of jealousy that struck her under the ribs.

“Actually, I have never done that in my life,” he replied. “I mean it. I thought it was weird at the time, but now I understand—part of me must have known it was you I was rescuing. Part of me must have wanted the chance to call you mine.”

She gently stroked the side of his face. “I was looking for you. I was hoping you would find me. You were the mysterious man I mentioned what feels like forever ago.”

“Well, I am sorry that I made you wait for so long,” he murmured, kissing the tip of

her nose. "I love you. Truly, I love you. I shall never be hesitant to say it again."

She beamed from ear to ear. "As I love you, my masked champion."

"Does this mean I am forgiven?"

She tilted her head to one side. "Kiss me again, and I shall tell you."

"I will kiss you again, my love, but you have not yet answered the most important question," he said, cradling her face in his rough, strong hands.

She frowned. "What is that?"

"My love, my darling Isolde, will you make me the happiest man in the world—happier than I have any right to be—by agreeing to be my wife?" he said softly, his eyes bright with a hope she had no intention of dashing.

She chuckled and rested her forehead on his. "Was my answer not obvious?"

He shook his head.

"Well then, my love, be assured that nothing would make me happier," she told him. "And as soon as I am no longer engaged to Noah, I hope to marry you as quickly as possible. I have dreamed of love my entire life, of spending the rest of my days blissfully besotted with my husband, so let us not wait to make it a reality."

He brushed her cheek and brought his lips closer to hers, whispering, "I would marry you right now if I could." He smiled. "So... am I forgiven?"

She kissed him then, letting the press of her lips answer him.

EPILOGUE

“Izzie, you are going to be late,” Prudence said drily from Isolde’s bed, where she had been lounging all morning, being no help at all.

It had taken Vincent physically carrying Prudence out of the room to get her to put on her own dress for the wedding, though she had threatened to wear a pair of trousers that she had stolen from one of Vincent’s old wardrobes.

“I am hurrying as fast as I can!” Isolde said, clasping a hand to her chest, comforted by the exhilarated flutter of her heart. It surely meant that she was, at last, marrying the right man.

Isolde’s mother strode in at that moment, hands on hips. “Isolde, you are going to be late. You cannot be late. There are two-hundred guests waiting!”

“What?” Isolde gasped, whirling around on the vanity chair to stare at her mother in horror.

“I might have been somewhat... enthusiastic with the invitations,” her mother replied, looking a little sheepish. “But can you blame me, darling? I have been saying forever that you and Edmund would make a perfect match, and now it is finally going to happen. Of course I got carried away!”

Teresa tutted from the window seat, where she had her nose buried in a book. “Edmund and Izzie asked for a quiet ceremony, Mama. You should not have done that. You are exposing them to gossip that they do not need, considering they

emerged unscathed from the broken betrothal. You should not tempt fate.”

“For goodness’ sake, am I not allowed to take pride in my daughter’s wedding? At least I am not like the Duchess of Farnaby’s mother—she invited a thousand guests and insisted on the wedding taking place at Westminster Cathedral. I am not that bad,” their mother grumbled, stalking back out of the room.

In her absence, Teresa slid down off the window seat and walked over to stand behind Isolde. She rested her hands on her older sister’s shoulders and smiled, looking very pretty herself, with flowers in her hair and wearing a dress of beautiful purple muslin.

“Are you excited?” Teresa asked.

Isolde nodded. “I cannot wait.”

“Are you glad that I made you go into Madame Versailles’ shop instead of wandering off to the tea rooms?”

Isolde chuckled. “Certainly, I am, though I do wish I had not been the last to know of the deception. I thought it was very peculiar that you were the one insisting on accompanying me, when you loathe such things. Then again, such a clever scheme undoubtedly required the cleverest mind, so I suppose you had to be part of it.”

“I think Vincent was very rude, telling me I could not come,” Prudence chimed in, shuffling off the end of the bed. “I would not have spilled the secret. Indeed, I am a master of keeping my mouth shut when there is a trick afoot.”

It had been two weeks since that fateful visit to the modiste, and though it was customary to wait longer to marry, Vincent had managed to acquire a special license for Edmund and Isolde.

There had been some rumor and speculation, of course, and the scandal sheets had mentioned them several times, but it was Noah himself who had spoken out in favor of the couple. He had explained that he was the one who had severed the engagement, knowing that Isolde loved someone else and was loved by them in return. He had made it clear that she had been willing to marry him, being the dutiful lady that she was, but he could not allow her to do it.

“I am relieved, to be honest,” Noah had said, when Isolde and Edmund had gone to break the news to him. “I am very fond of you, Lady Isolde, but it is a platonic fondness. When I am with you, it is like I am with a cousin or a sister. I suppose it is what made me doubt our match, so I am pleased you have found a better love. Why, I suspected His Grace was in love with you at the dinner party, but you did not seem to notice, so I thought I was mistaken.”

According to Valery and Amelia, Noah had recently been seen dancing at a ball with a pleasant young woman called Lady Catherine Armistead, and did not appear to be suffering any ill effects from the broken betrothal.

“The carriage is here!” Vincent’s voice boomed from downstairs. “Everyone out!”

Isolde took a breath, assessed her reflection in the mirror one last time, and smiled in the knowledge that, very soon, she would be the Duchess of Davenport, married to the man of her wildest dreams. A man she had once unjustly hated, but now adored with everything she possessed.

“Come on, my cherubs,” she cheered, taking her sisters by the hand. “After all this to-do, Mama is right—I simply cannot be late.”

Edmund fidgeted with his cravat as he waited impatiently by the altar, glancing over his shoulder every couple of seconds to check if his bride had arrived yet. The smallest sound snapped his attention to the church doors, and every time he was left

disappointed, his agitation rising.

“What if she does not come?” he whispered to Lionel, who stood at his side.

Lionel cast his friend a withering look. “Be serious, Edmund. If she does not attend this wedding, I shall eat my hat. Heavens, I shall eat every hat in this church.”

“Of course, you are right,” Edmund mumbled, drawing his pocket watch out for the hundredth time, just to torture himself with the passage of time.

He straightened up and attempted to look calm, but his nerves soon got the better of him again. He glanced at Lionel, ready to ask another inane question, when he noticed his friend’s attention had been distracted elsewhere.

Following Lionel’s gaze, Edmund raised a curious eyebrow as he realized where his friend was looking. His curiosity, it seemed, had been captured by a familiar young woman, seated beside an equally familiar, irritatingly pompous gentleman.

“Seeking a bride of your own?” Edmund teased.

Lionel jumped as if he had been pinched. “What? Certainly not. My mother has threatened marriage often enough, but I am not yet ready for such a thing. Perhaps, I never shall be. I like my peace and quiet too much.”

“And I think you are protesting too much,” Edmund replied with a sly grin, discreetly pointing his chin in the direction of the young woman. “Miss Thorne.”

“Pardon?” Lionel croaked.

“The lady you were looking at. She is Miss Thorne and, unfortunately, that is her brother, Martin Thorne. Quite the most disagreeable gentleman I have ever had the

misfortune of meeting,” Edmund explained.

Lionel frowned. “Why are you telling me that?”

“In case you get any notions.” Edmund smirked, feeling much lighter for the distraction. “To get the lady, you have to go through the wretched brother.”

Lionel sniffed and pulled his shoulders back. “Yes, well, it is lucky I have no interest then. Indeed, you should worry less about me and more about where your bride is. She is late.”

A tremor of unease rippled through Edmund once more, as he gaped at his friend, unable to believe the casual betrayal. Lionel was standing at his side as a source of encouragement and comfort, not to make him fret all over again. Evidently, Edmund had touched a raw nerve.

Just then, and not a moment too soon, the church doors shrieked open, and the organist leaped into action. Resonant music thrummed across the packed congregation, who stood as one to welcome in the beautiful bride. In the front pew, Valery and Amelia held handkerchiefs to their eyes, already sobbing with joy. They were joined by Julianna, who was weeping openly; Teresa, who had the brightest smile on her face, and Prudence who seemed to be fighting against teary eyes.

“Goodness me,” Lionel gasped. “You really ought to turn now, Edmund.”

Slowly, Edmund did just that... and was rewarded with the ethereal sight of his beloved bride, striding elegantly toward him in a gown of cream silk, overlaid with gauzy lace and embellished with a sea of gleaming seed pearls. She held onto her brother’s arm, her radiant smile brighter than the hazy sunlight that streamed in through the stained glass windows.

The instant she met Edmund's eyes, that smile widened, her eyes shining with joy, brushing away and lingering nerves in his veins. In its place, an eager smile of his own.

Soon enough, she was at the altar, and Vincent was placing her hand in Edmund's.

"Take care of her, Edmund," Vincent said, his voice catching. "She is more precious than I can describe, and... I pray that you are as happy together as it is possible to be. So, please, do not make me have to threaten a duel again. Ever."

Edmund laughed, taking both of Isolde's hands in both of his. "I shall never give you or Isolde a reason to raise a pistol at me, and if anyone is going to do so, we both know it would be her before you."

"I have not the faintest idea what you mean," Isolde interjected, grinning. "I am a demure young lady. I would never so much as raise my voice to a gentleman, much less my husband."

Edmund smiled back at her, overwhelmed with a joy that no longer made him feel guilty. Instead, there was an ember of hope and faith that his family were looking down on his happiness with joy of their own. His only regret was that they could not be there, physically, to share in what would undoubtedly become one of his favorite memories.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the reverend began, opening out his arms to the congregation.

Edmund barely heard anything else the reverend said, finding greater divinity in the warmth of Isolde's eyes. The rest of the church faded around them, leaving them in a bubble of their own, holding hands as they pledged their loyalty, fidelity, and future to each other, trusting without a doubt that they were both making vows that would

never be broken.

“It is my privilege to pronounce you man and wife!” the reverend concluded. “Please, be upstanding for the Duke and Duchess of Davenport.”

The congregation rose in a flurry, awaiting the happy couple’s return up the aisle to begin their new lives together. But before he took a single step, Edmund could not resist lifting his wife’s hand to his lips, pressing a tender kiss to her silky glove.

Isolde blushed furiously. “Everyone is watching!”

“Let them,” he replied, grinning.

The pink lingered in her cheeks as Edmund weaved her arm through his and led her up to the aisle and out into the warm, sunlit world. If ever there was a sign that they were about to have a very happy, very bright future together, that was it—even the weather was smiling down on them.

“Did you arrive late on purpose?” he teased, approaching the waiting carriage.

She raised an eyebrow at him. “You think I would delight in making you stew awhile?”

“I think you would delight in raising the anticipation,” he replied, helping her up into the open carriage.

She smiled a sultry smile, leaning into him as he sat down beside her. His arm slipped around her shoulders, pulling her closer as he pressed a kiss to her hair, inhaling the sweet scent of her.

“Did you think I was not coming?” she whispered, peering up.

He shrugged. “For a moment, then I realized how silly that was. For if you had not arrived, I would have ridden to you and thrown you over my shoulder.” He curved his hand around her chin, smiling down at her. “I love you. My darling wife, how I love you.”

“As I love you, dear husband,” she replied giddily, her eyes flaring with joy.

“To think I was ever afraid of that blissful word,” he purred, stroking his thumb along her jaw. “To think I might have missed the privilege of being able to call you my wife.”

Her hand came to rest on his chest, her lips parting slightly. “Are you still afraid to be happy?”

“Not at all, my love. Indeed, I am eager to discover just how happy I can be, when I am already happier than I have ever been in my life,” he told her, unable to resist any longer.

He did not care if the congregation came out and saw, for what could the scandal sheets do to them now that they were married?

Slowly, tenderly, he kissed his wife and pulled her further into his arms, holding her with a silent promise to never let her go. Her hand smoothed up his chest and followed the column of his throat, coming to rest at the side of his face as she kissed him back in kind, every brush of her lips igniting a spark of bliss.

Still locked in that fond embrace, kissing her more deeply, Edmund thumped on the side of the carriage. Taking his signal, the driver snapped the reins and the carriage pulled away from the church, carrying them toward the townhouse that was now both of theirs. A house that he hoped would become a true home, the hallways and rooms filled with joy and laughter once more.

And, one day, perhaps there would be a new family— their family—to quieten and delight any ghosts that still lingered. But one thing was for certain: as long as he had her, as long as he loved her and was loved by her, he would live the happy life he had never dared to dream of.

The End?

CHAPTER ONE

“O h, would you look at that! My Lady, I believe there is a coachman across the road wearing a bright red... tunic! Oh my, I have never seen quite a sight!”

As the carriage trundled down the winding country road, it jostled its two passengers as it approached the grand Dunmore Estate.

Seated inside, Evelina smoothed her pale blue satin gown and adjusted her bonnet, determined to maintain a composed and dignified facade despite her inner trepidation.

Beside her, the Countess of Claymont chattered away excitedly about everything and anything, seemingly oblivious to her discomfort. At fifty-two, Clara Jones cut a striking figure in her elaborate emerald silk gown and overwhelming towering feathered headdress.

The eccentric aunt of the Duke of Dunmore was renowned among the London Society for her flamboyant attire and penchant for meddling in others' affairs.

“Now, my dear, there is no need for such nervousness,” Clara said, patting Evelina's gloved hand. “My nephew may seem a bit stern, but I assure you he is quite reasonable once you get to know him.”

Evelina forced a polite smile. “I appreciate your reassurances, Lady Claymont. I only hope His Grace will find me a suitable tutor for his daughter.”

In truth, Evelina's anxiety stemmed not only from meeting the notoriously reclusive

Duke but also from the desperate nature of her current circumstances.

At five-and-twenty, she was fast approaching spinsterhood, her chances of making an advantageous match dwindling with each passing Season. More pressingly, her father's gambling debts threatened to leave her sisters destitute if she could not secure more income.

This position as tutor to the Duke's young daughter was her best hope of providing for her family while maintaining some semblance of respectability. Evelina was determined not to let this opportunity slip through her fingers.

As the carriage rolled to a stop before the grand manor house, Evelina took a deep, steadying breath.

You can do this , for Margaret and the girls.

A liveried footman assisted them out of the carriage, and Evelina followed Lady Claymont up the sweeping marble steps to the entrance. The massive oak doors swung open, revealing an austere butler who regarded them impassively.

"Lady Claymont and Miss Balfour to see His Grace," Clara announced grandly.

The butler bowed stiffly. "If you would be so kind as to wait in the blue parlor. I shall inform His Grace of your arrival."

He led them to an elegantly appointed sitting room decorated in shades of cerulean and cream. Evelina perched nervously on the edge of a brocade settee while Clara bustled about, examining the various ornaments and artworks adorning the walls.

"Hmm, I see Gabriel has redecorated since my last visit," she mused. "Though he could do with some livelier colors. Perhaps some yellow curtains to brighten the

place up a bit.”

Before Evelina could respond, the door opened, and a tall, imposing figure entered the room.

She held her breath, her eyes widening as she watched him walk in.

The Duke of Dunmore cut a striking figure, with his broad shoulders, chiseled jawline, and piercing green eyes. Though only five-and-thirty, there was a hardness to his features that spoke of a man who had known his share of trials.

His eyes assessed the scene before him until they landed on her. It felt as though he was looking through her, inspecting her down to her very bones.

Evelina nearly broke eye contact, if not for the sake of manners. Something about the situation made her feel... odd. Her feet were rooted to the carpeted floor, yet she felt like bolting out the door.

Stifling the odd feelings, she rose and bobbed a perfect curtsy. “Your Grace,” she murmured demurely.

“Gabriel, my dear nephew!” Clara exclaimed, rushing forward to embrace him. “How wonderful to see you again. You really must visit more often, you know. You’ve grown even more handsome since last I saw you.”

The Duke endured his aunt’s effusive greeting with stoic forbearance. “Aunt Clara,” he said, his deep voice tinged with a hint of exasperation. “To what do I owe the pleasure of this unexpected visit?”

“Why, I’ve brought you the perfect tutor for little Eliza, of course!” Clara gestured dramatically towards Evelina. “May I present Miss Evelina Balfour. She comes

highly recommended, I assure you.”

The Duke’s sharp gaze raked over Evelina assessingly. She once again fought the urge to fidget under his scrutiny, keeping her posture erect and her expression neutral.

“Miss Balfour,” he said at last, inclining his head slightly. “I understand you seek the position of tutor for my daughter.”

“Indeed, Your Grace,” Evelina replied, striving to keep her voice steady. “I would be most honored to undertake the education and moral guidance of Eliza.”

His brow furrowed slightly. “And what, pray tell, are your qualifications for such an undertaking?”

The way he looked at her was almost electrifying.

Evelina squared her shoulders. “I have extensive experience in instructing young ladies in all the proper feminine accomplishments—music, art, dancing, and needlework. Additionally, I am well-versed in history, literature, mathematics, and the natural sciences.”

The Duke’s expression remained impassive. “I see. And your education?”

“I was fortunate to receive a comprehensive education from some of the finest tutors in London, Your Grace. I have also continued my studies independently, particularly in the areas of philosophy and classical languages.”

He nodded slowly. “Impressive. However, I find myself curious as to why a lady with such accomplishments has not secured a match. Surely a woman of your... maturity would have had ample opportunity to enter into matrimony by now.”

Evelina felt her cheeks grow warm at the subtle barb. “I have chosen to focus my energy on intellectual pursuits and the care of my younger sisters, Your Grace,” she replied, a hint of steel entering her voice. “I do not consider marriage to be the sole measure of a woman’s worth or success.”

The Duke’s eyebrows rose fractionally. “Indeed? How very modern of you, Miss Balfour. I wonder, do your unconventional views extend to other areas as well? I should not like my daughter’s head to be filled with improper notions.”

Evelina bit back a sharp retort, reminding herself of all that was at stake. “I assure you, Your Grace, that I hold the utmost respect for tradition and propriety. The young lady’s education would be conducted in full accordance with your expectations.”

The Countess’s short laugh interrupted the tense moment, “Of course, dear. I mean, look at you. Just from your looks alone, we can tell you are quite the proper lady.”

Evelina was grateful for the woman’s words, yet she could not look away from the Duke’s alluring eyes to offer a smile.

“Hmm.” The man’s piercing remained fixed on her face. “And what of your family background? I believe I recall,” he turned to Clara with a nearly wicked glint in his eyes, “my aunt mentioning some rather... unsavory rumors about your father’s predilection for games of chance.”

Evelina heard the Countess gulp beside her. “Did I ever?” Her laughter betrayed her guilt despite how low it was. “I do not believe I recall...”

Evelina was least concerned about the woman at the moment, however. She watched as the Duke’s eyes flicked over to his aunt, a portrait-perfect smirk spreading across his perfect features.

Then his eyes flicked back to her, his eyebrows slightly raised as he studied her expression, his smirk almost taunting her.

Her hands clenched in the folds of her skirt, mortification and indignation warring within her. How dare the man cast such aspersions on her character based on idle gossip!

“I fail to see how my father’s personal affairs have any bearing on my qualifications as a tutor,” she said, her voice tight with suppressed emotion. “I can assure you that I comport myself with the utmost propriety and discretion at all times.”

The Duke’s lips quirked up in what might have been amusement. “Come now, Miss Balfour. Surely you must acknowledge that one’s family connections can have a significant impact on one’s reputation and standing in society. I would be remiss in my duties as a father if I did not thoroughly investigate the background of any individual who might influence my daughter.”

Evelina’s composure finally crumbled. “And I would be remiss in my duties as an educator if I did not point out the logical fallacies in your reasoning, Your Grace,” she retorted.

Her tone was sharper than a knife as she continued, “to judge an individual’s character and capabilities based solely on the actions of their relations is both narrow-minded and short-sighted. I had thought that a man of your status and education would be above such petty prejudices.”

A charged silence fell over the room.

Clara gasped slightly, her eyes wide with shock at Evelina’s audacity. The Duke himself appeared momentarily taken aback, his customary mask of indifference slipping to reveal a flash of surprise—and perhaps a hint of admiration?

Good! This is what he deserves for belittling me, and I refuse to be ashamed of my words!

After a long moment, his lips curled into a sardonic smile. “My, my. It seems you have quite a spirited temper hidden beneath that prim exterior, Miss Balfour. I wonder what other surprises you might be concealing.”

Evelina lifted her chin defiantly. “I conceal nothing, Your Grace. Unlike some, I have no need for pretense or dissemblance.”

The Duke’s eyes narrowed. “A bold claim, indeed. Tell me, Miss Balfour, how do you propose to instill proper decorum and respect for authority in my daughter when you yourself seem to lack such qualities?”

“I beg your pardon, Your Grace,” Evelina replied, her anger rising, “but I fail to see how defending one’s character against unfounded accusations equates to a lack of decorum. Perhaps if you were less concerned with perpetuating baseless rumors and more interested in judging my actual skills, we might make some progress in this interview.”

A chilling silence echoed in the room. Evelina glimpsed the surprise that flashed behind the man’s eyes once again. For a moment, he seemed awed, sizing her up with an unreadable expression, sending tingles through her body.

Then, at last, his eyes returned to hers, and the fire in her eyes seemed to irk him.

The Duke’s jaw tightened. “You tread on dangerous grounds, Miss Balfour. I would advise you to mind your tone.”

“And I would assume you could be kind enough to mind your assumptions, Your Grace,” Evelina shot back with a fake smile, no longer caring about the

consequences. “If you are as concerned for your daughter’s education as you say, your only interest would be my actual abilities. Pardon me, however, if this is how you typically conduct your affairs. I assume I’m to be grateful for the dubious honor of receiving your particular brand of scrutiny?”

Clara let out a strangled sound that might have been a gasp or a laugh. The Duke, for his part, seemed to be wavering between feeling outrage and begrudging respect.

“You are either exceptionally brave or exceptionally foolish, Miss Balfour,” he said at last. “I have dismissed servants for far less impertinence.”

“Thankfully I am not your servant.” Evelina met his gaze unflinchingly. “And perhaps you should consider why a woman in my position would risk such impertinence. Could it be that I have faith in my worth and abilities, regardless of your attempts to undermine them?”

The Duke studied her for a long moment, his expression inscrutable. “A fair point,” he conceded. “Though I maintain that your methods of argumentation leave much to be desired.”

“As do your methods of conducting interviews, Your Grace,” Evelina countered. “I came here prepared to discuss my qualifications and approach to education. Instead, here I am, defending myself against unfounded accusations and thinly veiled insults.”

The Duke’s lips twitched. “Touché, Miss Balfour. It seems we have both failed to put our best foot forward in this encounter.”

Evelina took a deep breath, attempting to rein in her temper. “Perhaps we might start anew, Your Grace? I assure you, I am more than capable of engaging in a civil and productive discussion of Lady Eliza’s educational needs.”

The Duke regarded her thoughtfully. “A tempting proposal. However, I find myself curious to see how you might fare in a more... challenging environment. Tell me, Miss Balfour, how would you respond if faced with a particularly recalcitrant student?”

Evelina’s brow furrowed. “I believe in tailoring my approach to the individual needs and temperament of each student, Your Grace. Without knowing the specific circumstances, it would be difficult to provide a definitive answer.”

“Come now, Miss Balfour,” the Duke pressed. “Surely a woman of your experience and intellect can offer some insight into your general philosophy on such matters.”

Evelina narrowed her eyes, sensing a trap. “Very well, Your Grace. In general, I find that even the most difficult students respond well to a combination of firm boundaries, consistent expectations, and positive reinforcement. It is crucial to identify the root cause of any behavioral issues and address them with patience and understanding.”

“An admirable sentiment,” the Duke replied, his tone maddeningly neutral. “And how, pray tell, would you apply such principles to a student who, for example, openly defied your authority and questioned your every instruction?”

Evelina’s patience, already stretched thin, was on the brink of snapping completely. “I would remind the said student that respect is earned, not demanded,” she replied. “And that true authority stems from knowledge, wisdom, and compassion—not from an accident of birth or an inflated sense of self-importance.”

The Duke’s eyebrows shot up. “I see. And you believe such an approach would be effective in maintaining discipline and order?”

“I believe it would be far more effective than attempting to browbeat a student into

submission through intimidation and arbitrary displays of power,” Evelina replied, her voice sharp. “But perhaps you have a different perspective on the matter, Your Grace?”

For a moment, the Duke simply stared at her, his expression unreadable. Then, to Evelina’s utter astonishment, he cocked his head and laughed—a soft, genuine sound that seemed to transform his entire countenance.

“Bravo, Miss Balfour,” he said, his eyes glinting with what might have been amusement. “I do believe you’ve managed to thoroughly upend every expectation I had for this interview.”

Evelina blinked, momentarily thrown off balance by the sudden shift in his demeanor. “I... I’m not entirely sure how to interpret that statement, Your Grace.”

The Duke’s lips curled into a wry smile. “Take it as a compliment, Miss Balfour. It has been a long time since anyone has dared to challenge me so directly. I find it... refreshing.”

Evelina’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. “Does this mean you are considering me for the position, Your Grace?”

“Absolutely not,” the Duke stated matter-of-factly. “I would never consider someone so insolent and lacking ladylike qualities to school my young daughter.”

Evelina’s heart sank. However, she squared her shoulders, determined not to show any sign of disappointment to such a callous man. “As you wish, Your Grace. I’ll take this as a sign from the heavens. Perhaps there is more suitable employment for me elsewhere.”

The man’s eyes were dark as he clucked his tongue. “Oh, I doubt anyone would take

you in the way you are, Miss Balfour. Do not get your hopes up.”

“Thank you. Yet, what I do with my hopes is my concern only, Your Grace.”

With their gazes locked, the two breathed heavily, angling for another argument.

Evelina straightened her back, steadying herself. Yet, she still felt somewhat small under his piercing gaze.

There was something about the way he looked at her that made her want to melt...

“Well, I’d say things have finally come to a standstill, have they not?” The Countess’s anxious giggle filled the air, thankfully slicing through the tension.

“Good day, Miss Balfour. Aunt Clara.”

Not even bothering to give Evelina a second glance, the Duke gave a curt nod and then strode out of the room, leaving her reeling in his wake.

Clara hurried to her side, fanning herself vigorously. “Good heavens, my dear! I have never seen anyone speak to Gabriel in such a manner. I admit, I thought he might order you out of the house!”

Evelina’s jaw clenched. “He very nearly did, I suspect. However, I do not regret speaking my mind. The man is positively infuriating!”

“Now, now.” Clara patted her shoulder consolingly. “All may not be lost. Did you not see the look in Gabriel’s eyes? I do believe you managed to pique his interest, my dear. He does enjoy a challenge, you know.”

Evelina shook her head, still seething with indignation. “Be that as it may, I fear I

have done little to endear myself to His Grace. How am I to work for a man who seems determined to think the worst of me before I've even begun?"

As they made their way back to the waiting carriage, Evelina's mind whirled with conflicting emotions. The Duke's arrogance certainly made her upset, yet she couldn't deny the admiration that she had for his quick wit and deep intelligence.

And beneath it all, a small spark of... something, ignited by the memory of those piercing green eyes and that unexpected laugh.

Stop that this instant . You cannot afford such fanciful notions. Focus on finding a way to salvage this disaster of an interview.

She reminded herself as well that a man's charm, after all, was not enough to make up for his insufferable demeanor.

As the carriage rolled away from Dunmore Estate, she huffed to herself, sensing that she had not seen the last of the infuriating Duke.

With a quiet sigh, she turned her gaze to the passing countryside, steeling herself for the difficult task of explaining this calamitous turn of events to her eagerly waiting sisters.

Whatever happened next, she knew she must find a way to provide for her family—even if it meant swallowing her pride and facing that maddening man once more.

Evelina Balfour was not a woman to be trifled with, and she was more determined than ever to prove her worth—to the Duke, to Society, and, most importantly, to herself.

CHAPTER TWO

“Stop here, please. I would like a moment to clear my head.”

“Yes, Miss.”

As her carriage rolled to a stop a walkable distance from Elderglen Manor, Evelina heaved a weary sigh.

The facade of the once-grand estate showed signs of neglect, mirroring the state of affairs within. She gathered her skirts and stepped down from the carriage, her mind still reeling from her interview with the insufferable Duke of Dunmore.

The memory of their encounter made her cheeks burn with a mix of indignation and embarrassment. How dare he question her qualifications so thoroughly? And how could she have allowed herself to be provoked into such impertinence? Evelina groaned inwardly, recalling the moment her temper had gotten the better of her.

Surely, tutoring one little girl could not be compared to raising four completely different girls, each one with a special set of problems and challenges. If she had managed that, who was he to question her ability to do the same with his daughter?

“Miss Balfour!”

The shrill voice of Mrs. Higgins, their housekeeper, cut through her reverie. “Thank heavens you’ve returned. Miss Margaret has been in quite a state, and Miss Louisa has barricaded herself in the library again.”

Evelina pinched the bridge of her nose, willing away the headache that threatened to bloom. “I see. And what of Penelope and Alexandra?”

“Last I saw, they were chasing each other through the rose garden, Miss. I fear for Mrs. Wilmington’s prized blooms.”

“Very well, Mrs. Higgins. I shall attend to them at once. Has my father returned?”

The housekeeper’s face fell. “I’m afraid not, Miss. He left word that he would be dining at his club this evening.”

Of course he had .

Evelina nodded, dismissing Mrs. Higgins with a tight smile. As she climbed the steps to the manor’s entrance, she steeled herself for the chaos that awaited within, all the while unable to put thoughts of the Duke out of her mind.

The way he had managed to see right through her carefully constructed facade of calm competence with barely any effort. The way he had stood tall, every inch the arrogant aristocrat, had set her teeth on edge...

No sooner had she crossed the threshold than a blur of golden curls and pink lace came barreling towards her.

“Evie! You’re home, at last!” Margaret, her eyes wide with distress, clutched at her arm. “You must come quickly. I’ve tried on every gown in my wardrobe, and not a single one is suitable for Lady Ashworth’s ball next week. It’s a disaster!”

Evelina patted her sister’s hand, forcing a calm she did not feel. “Now, now, Maggie. I’m certain we can find a solution. But first, where are Penelope and Alexandra?”

As if summoned by their names, two more blurs—one of chestnut-brown curls, the other of honey-blonde curls—came tearing through the foyer, their laughter echoing off the high ceiling.

“Penny! Alexa! Cease this nonsense at once!” Evelina’s voice cracked like a whip, halting the girls in their tracks. “What have I told you about running in the house?”

Penelope, the youngest at twelve, had the grace to look abashed. “We’re sorry, Evie. We were only playing.”

Alexandra, fourteen and ever-practical, added, “We didn’t break anything this time.”

Evelina closed her eyes briefly, praying for patience. “This time,” she echoed. “And what of Mrs. Wilmington’s roses?”

The guilty look the two girls exchanged spoke volumes.

Evelina sighed. “Very well. Penelope, Alexandra, you will both write letters of apology to Mrs. Wilmington this evening. And tomorrow, you shall assist her in tending to her garden as recompense.”

“But Evie—” Penelope began to protest.

“No buts,” Evelina cut her off firmly. “Actions have consequences, my dear. Now, off you go to begin your letters. I shall inspect them before supper.”

As her two youngest sisters trudged up the stairs, Evelina turned her attention back to Margaret. “Now, about your gowns?—”

“Oh, Evie, it’s hopeless!” Margaret wailed. “They’re all at least two Seasons out of fashion. How am I to make a good impression at my debut if I look like a country

bumpkin?”

Evelina guided her sister towards the drawing room, her mind already calculating the cost of new fabric.

The memory of the Duke’s opulent study flashed through her mind, the stark contrast between his wealth and their genteel poverty making her chest tighten with anxiety.

“Let us examine what we have to work with, shall we?” she said, pushing those thoughts aside. “I’m certain with a few alterations, we can create something magnificent.”

As they entered the drawing room, Evelina caught sight of Louisa curled up on the window seat, with a book in her lap. At sixteen, Louisa was the most introverted of the Balfour sisters, preferring the company of literary heroes to that of real people.

“Louisa, dear,” Evelina called softly. “Would you be so kind as to assist us? We could use your discerning eye.”

Louisa glanced up, a flicker of interest crossing her face before she schooled her features into careful indifference. “I suppose I could spare a moment,” she said, marking her place in the book before joining them.

For the next hour, Evelina sifted through Margaret’s wardrobe, assessing each gown with a critical eye.

She laid out the most promising pieces, her mind whirring with possibilities for updates and alterations. All the while, her thoughts kept drifting back to the Duke and the opportunity she may have squandered.

She thought of the man’s daughter. Unlike her, Evelina had not had an army of

nursemaids at her disposal to help with her sisters, just the housekeeper, who had been sorely tested to run far away from the entire family but stayed on only due to a sense of responsibility.

If only Evelina had held her tongue, if only she had been more demure and acquiescent. But no, the very thought of simpering and bowing to that man's arrogance made her blood boil. And yet, was her pride worth the cost of her family's security?

Stop thinking of the man!

She closed her eyes to steady herself, allowing herself to return to the conversation with her sisters.

"Perhaps if we add some lace to the sleeves of the blue silk dress," Louisa suggested, her earlier disinterest giving way to genuine engagement.

Evelina nodded approvingly, grateful for the distraction from her tumultuous thoughts. "An excellent idea, Lou. And if we turn up the hem a bit, it will be perfectly in line with the current fashion."

Margaret, however, remained unconvinced. "But what of the gown for my debut? Surely I cannot appear in an altered hand-me-down!"

Evelina felt a pang of guilt. How she longed to give Margaret the debut she deserved, the debut Evelina herself had forsaken for the sake of her sisters.

"We shall find a way, Maggie. I promise you."

A commotion from the hallway drew their attention. The sound of the front door slamming shut, followed by unsteady footsteps, heralded their father's return.

“Yoo-hoo! Where are my lovely girls?” James Balfour’s slurred voice echoed through the house.

Evelina exchanged a look with her sisters. “Stay here,” she instructed them quietly. “I shall deal with Papa.”

She found her father in his study, fumbling with the lock on his desk drawer. “Papa,” she said, keeping her voice level. “I thought you were dining at your club this evening.”

James looked up, his eyes slightly unfocused. “Ah, Evelina, my girl. Yes, well, the evening took an unexpected turn. A stroke of bad luck at the tables, I’m afraid.”

Evelina’s heart sank. “How much, Papa?”

He waved a hand dismissively. “Oh, nothing to concern yourself with. A trifling amount, really. I’ll win it back next time, you’ll see.”

“Papa,” Evelina pressed, a sharp edge to her voice. “How. Much? ”

James hesitated, then mumbled a sum that made Evelina’s blood run cold. It was more than a trifle. It was more than they could afford to lose.

“Good God, Papa,” she breathed. “How could you be so reckless? Do you not realize what this means for the girls? For their futures?”

Her father had the grace to look ashamed, if only for a moment. “Now, now, Evelina. You mustn’t fret so. These things have a way of working themselves out.”

Evelina felt her carefully maintained composure begin to crack. “Work themselves out? And how, pray tell, do you imagine that will happen? Shall we simply wait for

pennies to rain down from the heavens?”

“Mind your tone, young lady,” James snapped sternly. “I am still the master of this house.”

“Are you?” Evelina challenged, her voice low and dangerous. “For it seems to me that you have abdicated that responsibility along with all others. Tell me, Father, when was the last time you inquired after your daughters’ well-being? When was the last time you concerned yourself with anything beyond your next game of chance?”

James recoiled as if slapped, his face flushing with anger and shame. “You forget yourself, Evelina. I have given you and your sisters everything?—”

“You have given us nothing but uncertainty and disappointment,” Evelina cut him off, her cheeks reddening with barely contained fury. “It is I who has raised them, I who has seen to their education, their needs, their futures. And now, with your carelessness, you threaten to undo all of that work.”

For a long moment, Evelina refused to look away. She had suffered enough for the day, and she couldn’t hold back anymore. Not this time.

Finally, James looked away.

“What would you have me do?” he asked, his voice small and defeated.

Evelina took a deep breath, forcing her anger back down. “Tomorrow, we should discuss how we might salvage what remains of our finances. For now, I will take care of this. You should get some rest.”

As her father shuffled out of the study, Evelina allowed herself a moment of weakness, sinking into his chair and burying her face in her hands.

How had it come to this? How much longer could she hold their family together by sheer force of will?

A timid knock at the door pulled her from her despair. She looked up to find Margaret hovering in the doorway, concern etched on her delicate features.

“Evie? Is everything all right?”

Evelina forced a smile, rising from the chair. “Of course, dear. Just a small disagreement with Papa. Nothing for you to worry about.”

Margaret didn’t look convinced. “I heard raised voices. And... and I heard what Papa said about losing money.”

Evelina’s heart clenched. Of course Margaret had heard. She was far too observant for her own good.

“It’s nothing we cannot overcome,” Evelina assured her, though the words felt hollow even to her ears.

“But what of my debut?” Margaret asked, her voice small. “What of... what of our dowries?”

The question hung in the air, heavy with implication. Evelina crossed the room, taking her sister’s hands in her own. “Listen to me, Maggie. I promise on my life that you will have your debut. You will have your Season, and you will shine brighter than any diamond of the ton . As for our dowries...” She hesitated, not wanting to lie but unwilling to crush her sister’s hopes. “We shall find a way. We always do.”

Margaret nodded, squeezing Evelina’s hands. “I know you’ll take care of everything, Evie. You always do.”

The trust in her sister's eyes was almost more than Evelina could bear. She pulled Margaret into a tight embrace, allowing herself a moment of vulnerability.

"Now then," she said, pulling back and plastering on a bright smile. "Let's see what we can do about that gown for Lady Ashworth's ball, shall we?"

As they made their way back to the drawing room, Evelina's mind raced. She had promised Margaret her debut, her Season, a chance at finding a good match. But with their finances in such dire straits, how could she possibly keep that promise?

Her thoughts turned once again to the Duke of Dunmore and the interview that morning. Despite her misgivings, despite the way his very presence seemed to set her nerves on edge, she couldn't deny the opportunity—if it still stood—presented.

The salary would surely be generous, given his status and wealth. It would be enough to secure Margaret's debut, to shore up their finances. But had she ruined her chances with her sharp tongue and quick temper?

Evelina recalled the way the Duke's eyes had narrowed at her impertinent remarks, the way his jaw had clenched as if holding back a biting retort.

And yet, there had been that moment—just before she had taken her leave—when something like admiration had flickered across his face.

Now, as she looked at Margaret, so full of hope and excitement for her future, Evelina knew she had no choice. For her sisters, she would do anything. Even if it meant putting herself at the mercy of the Duke.

As they reached the drawing room, where Louisa was still poring over fashion plates, Evelina made her decision. She would write to the Duke this very evening, apologizing for her behavior and reiterating her interest in the position—if he had not

already dismissed her from consideration.

“Evie?” Margaret’s voice broke through her thoughts. “You look pale. Are you certain you’re all right?”

Evelina nodded with a smile. However, as she bent over the swaths of fabric, her mind was far away, already composing the letter that would seal her fate. Given her father’s consistent desire to ruin their futures, this looked like a live-or-die moment for her.

And as night fell over Elderglen Manor, as her sisters retired to their beds and an uneasy silence fell over the house, Evelina sat at her small writing desk, quill poised over parchment. She took a deep breath, steeling herself.

Your Grace , she began to write, her hand trembling ever so slightly, I hope this letter finds you well. I am writing to you regarding our meeting this morning...

With each word, Evelina felt as though her pride was slipping through her fingers.

I cannot afford to have pride anyway...

CHAPTER THREE

“ M y dear Miss Balfour, how wonderful to see you again!” Lady Worthington’s familiar voice drew Evelina’s attention. The elderly matron approached, her ample form swathed in rich burgundy velvet.

Evelina curtsied, a warm smile gracing her features. “Lady Worthington, it is a pleasure. I trust you are well?”

“Oh, quite well, my dear. And how is your family? I see young Margaret has made her debut, at last. She looks absolutely charming.”

Evelina stood at the edge of the ballroom, her watchful gaze never straying far from her younger sister.

Margaret was a vision in pale blue silk, her lovely curls adorned with delicate white flowers. Evelina’s heart swelled with pride as she observed her sister’s graceful movements and polite smiles. All those hours of instruction had not been in vain.

“You are too kind, My Lady. We are all in good health, thank you.” Evelina’s smile faltered slightly as she thought of her father’s latest gambling losses, but she quickly composed herself.

Lady Worthington leaned in conspiratorially. “I must say, Evelina, you have done a remarkable job with your sisters. It’s no small feat to raise four young ladies, especially given your... circumstances.” Sympathy flickered in her eyes.

Evelina's spine stiffened imperceptibly. "You are most gracious, Lady Worthington. My sisters are my joy, and it is my privilege to guide them."

As Lady Worthington opened her mouth to reply, Evelina jolted slightly at the feel of feathers tickling her face. She turned to see the culprit, only to find herself face-to-face with the Countess of Claymont.

"Evelina! How delightful to see you!" Clara Jones exclaimed, her eyes twinkling with mischief. "I do hope you're enjoying the ball."

Evelina curtsied, her smile genuine. Despite her eccentricities, the Countess of Claymont had always been kind to the Balfour sisters.

"Indeed I am, Lady Claymont. It is a splendid affair."

Clara's expression softened. "My dear, I must apologize for my nephew's boorish behavior the other day. Gabriel can be rather... abrupt at times, but I assure you, he has a good heart beneath that stern exterior."

Evelina's cheeks flushed at the memory of her encounter with the Duke. "There is no need for apologies, My Lady. His Grace was... quite clear in his expectations."

Clara opened her mouth to reply, but her words were lost in a sudden hush that fell over the ballroom. Evelina turned, her heart skipping a beat as she saw the cause of the commotion.

The Duke of Dunmore had arrived.

Gabriel Jones cut an imposing figure as he strode into the room, his broad shoulders encased in a perfectly tailored black evening coat. His cravat was impeccably tied, and his dark hair was styled in a fashionable yet understated manner. As he made his way through the crowd, people parted before him like water around a ship's prow.

Evelina found herself unable to look away, even as she silently chastised herself for her fascination with him. The Duke was infuriating, arrogant, and entirely too sure of himself.

She had no business admiring the way his green eyes seemed to catch the light of the chandeliers, or how his strong jaw gave him an air of unwavering determination.

“Well, well,” Clara murmured beside her, “it seems my nephew has decided to grace us with his presence, after all. How... unexpected.”

Evelina tore her gaze away from the Duke, focusing instead on her sister. Margaret was now engaged in conversation with a young gentleman, her cheeks flushed with pleasure.

Good. At least one of them was enjoying the evening.

As the night wore on, Evelina found herself constantly aware of the Duke’s presence. He moved through the crowd with easy grace, exchanging pleasantries with various members of the ton . Yet, she could not shake the feeling that his eyes often strayed in her direction.

“Ridiculous,” she muttered to herself. “You’re imagining things, Evelina.”

“I beg your pardon, Miss Balfour?” Lady Ashworth, another of the ton’s respected matrons, looked at her quizzically.

Evelina’s cheeks flamed. “Oh! Forgive me, Lady Ashworth. I was merely... thinking aloud about the lovely music.”

Lady Ashworth nodded, though her expression remained skeptical. “Indeed. As I was saying, your sister Margaret is a credit to you. So poised, so well-mannered. Why, if I didn’t know better, I’d think she’d been raised by a duchess rather than...” she trailed

off, clearly realizing she'd overstepped.

Evelina forced a smile. "You are too kind, My Lady. Margaret has always been a quick study."

As Lady Ashworth fumbled for a response, Evelina felt a prickle of awareness at the back of her neck. She turned around, her breath catching in her throat as she found herself looking directly into the intense eyes of the Duke of Dunmore.

He stood mere feet away, his gaze fixed on her with an intensity that made her pulse quicken. For a moment, neither moved. Then, with deliberate steps, he closed the distance between them.

"Miss Balfour," he said, his deep voice sending an involuntary shiver down her spine. "Might I have the honor of this dance?"

Evelina's mind raced. To refuse would be a terrible insult, but to accept... She glanced at Margaret, who was watching the exchange with wide-eyed curiosity.

"Your Grace," Evelina replied, dipping into a curtsy. "I would be honored."

As the Duke led her onto the dance floor, Evelina was acutely aware of the eyes on them. Her ears picked up the conversation between the women she left behind as she walked away slowly.

"Well, I never! The Duke, dancing with our dear Evie?" Lady Worthington's voice was barely above a whisper as she addressed Lady Ashworth. "What could have prompted such an unusual pairing?"

Lady Ashworth's voice was tinged with interest. "Perhaps he's finally decided to take a wife. Though I must say, Miss Balfour seems an... unconventional choice for a man of his station."

“Unconventional, indeed,” Lady Worthington agreed. “But then, the Duke has always been something of an enigma. This is the most excitement we’ve had at a ball in ages!”

It was all expected. The ton thrived on gossip, and the sight of the reclusive Duke of Dunmore dancing with Miss Balfour, a quasi-spinster, would surely set tongues wagging.

On the dance floor, Evelina tried to focus on the steps of the lively country dance but found herself increasingly distracted by the Duke’s presence. Each time they came together, his hand on her waist, she felt a jolt of awareness that both thrilled and unsettled her.

“I must say, Miss Balfour,” the Duke began as they circled each other, “your sister Margaret is a credit to you. She conducts herself with remarkable poise for one so young.”

Evelina’s eyes narrowed slightly. “You seem to have taken quite an interest in my family, Your Grace.”

A ghost of a smile played at the corners of his mouth. “Merely an observation, I assure you. My aunt has spoken highly of your abilities as a tutor. She tells me you’ve educated all of your sisters?”

“Indeed,” Evelina replied, her tone cooling. “Though I’m sure Lady Claymont exaggerates my modest efforts.”

They came together again, his hand on her waist, hers on his shoulder. The Duke’s eyes bored into hers as he spoke. “I think not, Miss Balfour. Your reputation is quite pristine. Save, of course, for the matter of your... unmarried state.”

Evelina stiffened, missing a step in her indignation. The Duke smoothly corrected

their movement, his grip on her waist tightening almost imperceptibly.

“I was unaware that my marital status was a matter of such fascination, Your Grace,” she said, her voice low and tight with anger.

Gabriel’s expression remained impassive, but Evelina could have sworn she saw a flicker of amusement in his eyes. “Come now, Miss Balfour. Surely you’re aware that a woman of your age and position is something of an... anomaly in Society.”

As they parted again, Evelina fought to keep her composure. “Perhaps, Your Grace, I simply have higher standards than to marry the first man who deigns to propose marriage.”

This time, there was no mistaking the spark of interest in Gabriel’s eyes. “Is that so? How... intriguing. And, pray tell, Miss Balfour, what sort of man might meet your lofty standards?”

Evelina’s cheeks flushed, but she held her ground. “A gentleman of intelligence and integrity, Your Grace. One who values a woman for her mind as well as her appearance.”

“A rare creature, indeed,” Gabriel murmured. “And here I thought all young ladies dreamed only of titles and fortune.”

“You do us a great disservice, Your Grace,” Evelina retorted. “There are many women who seek more than status in marriage.”

Gabriel’s eyebrow arched. “And you count yourself among their number, I presume?”

“I do,” Evelina affirmed. “Though I fail to see how my aspirations are any concern of yours, Your Grace.”

“I usually find no interest in people, yet you...” A low chuckle escaped the Duke’s lips. “Miss Balfour, you are full of surprises.”

As they continued to dance, the other guests couldn’t help but notice the intensity of their interaction. Lady Worthington fanned herself vigorously, her eyes never leaving the pair.

“Did you see that?” she whispered to Lady Ashworth. “I do believe Miss Balfour just said something that made the Duke laugh! When was the last time anyone saw him so... engaged?”

Lady Ashworth shook her head in wonder. “Not since before his wife passed, I’d wager. This is most unusual, indeed.”

Evelina tried to ignore the rather loud voices of the women behind her.

“You still haven’t explained your sudden interest in my family, Your Grace,” she pressed. “I find it hard to believe that my sisters’ accomplishments are truly so fascinating to a man of your standing.”

Gabriel’s eyes glinted with amusement. “Perhaps I simply enjoy a good mystery, Miss Balfour. And you, I must say, are quite the enigma.”

Evelina furrowed her brow. “I assure you, Your Grace, there is nothing mysterious about me. I am exactly as I appear.”

“And that,” Gabriel said softly, “is what intrigues me the most. In a world of masks and pretense, your honesty is... refreshing.”

Evelina faltered, caught off guard by the sincerity in his tone. For a moment, she saw past the Duke’s stern exterior to the man beneath—a man who, perhaps, was not as cold and unfeeling as he appeared.

The music swelled, and Gabriel spun her expertly, breaking the spell. As they came back together, his expression had returned to its usual impassivity.

“Miss Balfour, I have come to a decision,” he announced, his voice low and serious.

Evelina’s eyes widened in shock. Surely he wasn’t...

“I’ve thought long and hard about my interview with you, as well as the unpleasantness that followed it. But since I received your letter, I’ve started to reconsider. My aunt strongly recommends you, and given my satisfaction with your skills and experience, I must say you’re the perfect tutor for my daughter, Eliza. I’d love it if you gave it some thought, and I hope this incident does not influence your response to my offer.”

Relief washed over Evelina, quickly followed by confusion. “I... I’m not sure what to say, Your Grace.”

Gabriel’s lips curled into a smile that was equal parts charming and predatory. “Say yes, Miss Balfour. Though I warn you, I will be keeping a very close eye on your progress with my daughter.”

Evelina bristled at his tone. “Do you doubt my abilities, Your Grace?”

“Not at all,” he replied smoothly. “I simply take a keen interest in my daughter’s education. You’ll find I can be quite... involved when it comes to Eliza’s welfare.”

“I see,” Evelina said, her voice cool. “And what, precisely, would my duties include?”

Gabriel’s eyes sparkled with amusement. “Eager to negotiate terms already, Miss Balfour? I admire your practicality. We can discuss the details at length tomorrow, should you accept.”

“Tomorrow?” Evelina echoed, startled.

“Indeed.” Gabriel nodded. “I see no reason to delay. Unless, of course, you have other pressing engagements?”

Evelina opened her mouth to protest, then closed it again. She could hardly tell him that her only plans for the morrow involved mending Margaret’s old gowns.

The music was drawing to a close, and Evelina knew she only had moments to make her decision. Every fiber of her being wanted to refuse, to tell this arrogant man exactly what he could do with his offer. Even though she knew she couldn’t do it.

But then, as they made their final turn, Evelina’s gaze fell on Margaret. Her sister was radiant, but Evelina’s trained eye caught the telltale signs of wear on her gown.

The tiny stitches at the hem where she’d repaired a tear, the slightly faded color of the fabric that had been carefully cleaned and pressed too many times.

At that moment, Evelina knew she had no choice.

As the final notes of the music faded, she met the Duke’s gaze. “Very well, Your Grace. I accept your offer.”

Gabriel’s eyebrows rose slightly as if he’d expected more resistance. “Excellent. Be at Dunmore House tomorrow morning at nine o’clock sharp. We’ll discuss your tasks in more detail then.” With a curt nod, he released her hand and stepped back. “Good evening, Miss Balfour.”

Evelina watched as he strode away, her emotions a tumultuous mix of anticipation and dread. What had she just agreed to?

As she made her way back to Margaret’s side, Clara appeared before her, her eyes

sparkling with curiosity.

“My dear,” the Countess said, her voice low and excited, “what on earth did you and my nephew discuss that had him looking so... intrigued?”

Evelina opened her mouth to reply but found she had no words to explain the strange turn her evening had taken. How could she possibly convey the magnitude of what had just transpired?

Around them, the ballroom buzzed with excitement. Lady Worthington was practically vibrating with enthusiasm as she spoke to a group of matrons.

“Did you see?” she exclaimed. “The Duke of Dunmore, dancing with Miss Balfour! And not just a perfunctory turn about the room, mind you. They were engaged in quite an intense conversation. I haven’t seen His Grace so animated in years!”

“Indeed, it was most unusual,” another voice declared. “And did you notice how he sought her out specifically? Perhaps our reclusive Duke is finally ready to rejoin Society.”

As more speculation swirled around her, Evelina felt a mix of embarrassment and amusement. If only they knew the true nature of her interaction with the Duke. How would they react if they learned she was to be employed as a tutor, rather than courted?

The night wore on, and as Evelina guided Margaret through the intricacies of her debut ball, her mind kept returning to the Duke’s proposition. She had accepted it out of necessity, yes, but there was a part of her—a part she scarcely dared acknowledge—that was thrilled at the challenge.

Gabriel Jones might think he could intimidate her with his stern demeanor and piercing gaze, but Evelina Balfour was made of sterner stuff. If the Duke of Dunmore

thought he could simply order her about like a servant, he was in for quite a surprise.

Tomorrow, she would enter the lion's den. Tomorrow, she would begin her new life as a tutor to the daughter of one of England's most powerful men.

Tomorrow, everything would change.