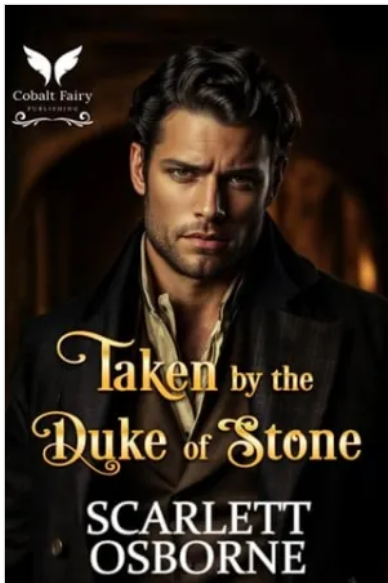




Taken by the Duke of Stone

Author: *Scarlett Osborne*

Category: Historical

Description: "You are the only one who makes me lose control"

To save herself and her family, Lavinia unfortunately needs a husband. And quick...

Duke Victor needs a marriage of convenience. So a desperate lady is exactly what he wants... except this one's lips are begging to be ravished in a way that spells trouble...

But he still cannot resist. Their agreement is simple: Marry and never speak of it again. Yet even as Victor vows never to lay with his wife, Lavinia cannot escape the desire he awakens within her. Threatening to ruin them both...

And all it takes is one touch...

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

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CHAPTER 1

"What do you think about Miss Mallory? Her shock of red hair is unfortunate but that's why there are dyes, powders and whatnot."

Victor shot his mother an unimpressed look.

"Well," she continued, "I am not quite sure I shall want the next Duke getting that ghastly head full of red. What do you think?"

"I don't believe I am familiar with any of the ladies you've so patiently named and taken your time to extol their virtues," he informed his mother.

On the other side of him, his sister let out a decidedly unladylike snort. The look he shot her would have made a man quake in his boots but she only grinned at him.

"Victor!" the dowager duchess cried. "How do you intend to find a wife with an attitude such as this?"

The Duke held back his retort that he had no plans of finding a wife this season or even the next. He had only just gotten his feet on the ground when it came to his title and now, he planned on getting Georgie a good match after which he would be free to live a little.

But he wasn't going to tell his mother any of that. She may just pass right out from the shock of it.

"This is neither the time nor the place for this conversation," he gritted his teeth as he led the aggravating women in his life up the wide stairs leading to the front door of Carlton house where a ball was in full swing.

If a passerby managed to overhear the topic of discussion between them, he was sure that it would be on the tip of every tongue in attendance even before he stepped foot inside.

And then he would be hounded the rest of the night... And the rest of his life.

Even now, he still had desperate mamas pushing their pale, pastel-colored clad daughters at him at every turn. If word ever got out that he was in search of a wife, he could only imagine the sort of pandemonium that would ensue.

"This is in fact very much the time and the place," The dowager duchess countered, "I can begin by introducing you to some of the women I've mentioned. I'm sure nearly all of them will be in attendance."

"Lady Amelia is the diamond of the season," Georgie said, "And you are the most eligible duke with the deepest pockets. A perfect match I would say!"

"I do so hope you shall not blurt out whatever comes to your head while you're speaking with a gentleman," their mother was appalled.

The Duke's mouth twitched. After all these years, his mother still wasn't used to how much personality Georgie had. He truly pitied whoever would set their cap for her.

As the party of three approached the double doors, the footmen gave a deep bow before pushing the doors open to reveal a glistening hall full of activity.

"His Grace, the Duke of Wyld in attendance with the Duchess of Wyld and Lady

Georgianna," the steward announced, drawing attention toward them.

The Duke sighed as he felt assessing eyes on his person. It was a good thing that unlike his sister, he didn't have to look polite and welcoming at all.

"Oh, there's Lady Amelia," his mother said, "and I believe I can see Miss-"

"If you'll excuse me, I think I see Lord Dillon," he cut in hurriedly.

"Where?" Georgie asked.

"I'm not letting you escape with me," he bent his head to whisper to her.

"I am not asking you to make a decision right now. I am only asking that you meet them at least. You may be pleasantly surprised," the dowager duchess said.

He cut his eyes over to Lady Amelia. Just like his sister had said, she was a blonde surrounded by eager bucks. She was beautiful, of course. But she was just another society mold that anyone could fit into. There had been a hundred Lady Amelias and there would be a hundred more.

Pleasantly surprised indeed.

"Do not stray from Mother's line of sight," he narrowed his eyes at Georgie.

"Yes, Your Grace," she rolled her eyes.

He ignored her and his mother's disapproving scowl in favor of spinning on his heels and disappearing into the crowd as fast as he could.

Patrick, Lord Dillon shot him an amused look, "I will take a wild guess and say that

you're escaping from the Duchess's marriage machinations."

"I knew there was a reason I always bet on you during card games," Victor replied, "What the bloody hell are you doing here anyway? Do not tell me you are jumping into the marriage mart."

Patrick made an irritated sound in his throat, "Trust me chap, the Carltons' stuffy ballroom is the last place I want to be. My aunt is making me do this."

"I need a drink," he glanced at the drink in his friend's hand, "Is there anything stronger than waterlogged lemonade here?"

"You know the answer to that," and then he tapped his breast pocket, "it's a good thing I came prepared."

Victor cursed under his breath, "Georgie had better get herself well on her way to the altar before the week ends. If I have to deal with more of this, I shall go insane."

Patrick slanted him a gaze, "I would not accept a sudden offer if I were you."

He knew that of course. His sister's large dowry and her relationship to a duke would make her an object of interest to fortune hunters and societal climbers. Which meant that no matter how much he wanted to foist her off to the first man who took an interest, he couldn't.

Damn it all to hell.

On the other side of the room, Miss Lavinia Proctor was trying her best not to fuss with her dress. Her lady's maid had cinched her corset too tight and she was beginning to feel a little lightheaded.

"I doubt anyone is going to approach you with you wearing that glower," her cousin's voice cut into her thoughts and she directed said glower at him.

"If you pulled us any further into the shadows," Noah continued, "we shall find ourselves standing outside the building."

"You say it like it's a bad thing," she said.

Lavinia couldn't think of anything better than finding her way out of here, locating their carriage and making their way back home.

He shot her a dry look, "at this rate, you are never going to make a match. Not even the footmen have managed to catch a glimpse of you."

"Good," she nodded, brown ringlets flying, "it means that I'm doing a good job."

His mouth curved up, "you are going to end up on the shelf."

"Again, I do not see the problem here," Lavinia told him. "It's actually quite ridiculous that at twenty and two years, I should be considered a spinster while men are allowed to sow their wild oats far into their dotage and are still considered very much eligible till the end of their lives. Take Lord Griffin, for instance."

As one, their heads turned to the dance floor where a balding man stood with a repulsed looking debutante in his arms.

Her cousin pressed his mouth into a thin line to bite back his laugh and she merely made a face at the couple.

"Lord Griffin still has about six years in him," he teased.

"Six years before his body turns into manure," she corrected. "The marriage mart is silly, Noah. Women are bartered off like meat at the butchers. How is one to decide they fancy someone if we are only meant to show a small percentage of ourselves? The rules are meant to turn us into exact replicas of each other. It is a bit like going to the modiste and trying to choose between several of the same dresses."

"Standing at the sidelines and bleeding my ear off about it is not going to do anything to change it," he said mildly.

Lavinia pursed her lips but didn't argue the point. "The fact is that women have everything to lose in a marriage and almost nothing to gain while men lose nothing at all and gain a broodmare."

"You cannot say things like that," he hushed her, glancing around wide eyed to make sure no one had overhead. With a groan, he dragged his palm down his face. "How about a compromise?"

She immediately perked up, "a compromise?"

"I'm here as not just your escort but to ensure you do not spend the whole evening hiding out in the Carltons' library."

The sheepish look she gave him told him quite clearly that he was on the mark.

Noah sighed, "eventually you shall have to speak to other people, so let me begin by introducing you to some of my friends."

She began to protest that his rascal friends were the last people she wanted to associate with, but he immediately cut her off.

"I am not trying to matchmake. Trust me, Vinny, I would not wish any of my friends

for a husband to even a lady I detested."

"Why are you friends with those buffoons anyway?"

He led her to where three men stood in a group talking about hunting dogs of all things.

"Thornton!" One of the men exclaimed, "where have you been, man?"

"For a moment there, I was beginning to think you had been leg shackled and gone off to marital bliss," another one guffawed.

"Allow me to introduce you to my cousin, Miss Proctor," Noah said with a stiff smile, "Vinny, meet Lord Vale, Lord Remington and Mr. Forsyle."

"My lords, Mr. Forsyle," she dropped into a curtsy.

"Oi, Thornton, where have you been hiding her?" Lord Vale asked.

Lavinia laughed along, wondering what was so hilarious about the question. The men were too self-absorbed to realize they were talking to her and not with her. There was a clear difference between the two. It was a good thing that she had no intentions of wasting her breath on them.

She was trying to swallow back another yawn when she caught sight of a flash of red hair.

"If you will excuse me, I see someone I know," she interrupted Lord whatever his name was embellished story about touring the world.

"Leaving so soon?" the storyteller asked, "but I was just getting to the good part."

Lavinia really doubted there was any good part to the tall tale.

"I would really love to hear the rest of it," a suggestive smile curled her mouth.
"Perhaps this will be an excuse to speak to you again."

The man's eyes lit up.

"Good evening, gentlemen," and with that she hurried away towards the redhead standing behind a large potted plant.

"Jen," a smile split her face as the girl turned and peered at her, "it's me, Lavinia."

Miss Jennifer Mallory was helplessly visually impaired and her mama wouldn't let her wear spectacles because they made her look like a bluestocking.

"How glad I am to see you," Jen said, "or not see you."

The two girls burst into laughter at Jen's words.

"I am far more relieved to see you," Lavinia told her, "you will not believe the sort of gentlemen Noah introduced me to."

"I am parched," Jen linked her arms with her friend's, "escort me to the refreshments and tell me all about it on our way."

"Of course."

They stepped out of the nook and made their way to the other side of the room where the tepid lemonade was positioned. For once, Lavinia wished a host would offer something better than the watered down, lukewarm juice.

She filled her cup and helped Jen fill hers too.

"I do so hate it when gentlemen talk at you," she began, "one of Noah's friends was telling me about his travels. If I was ever free to travel the world, I would not waste my time going to Paris and-"

Her words ended with a shriek as someone brushed past her and bumped his arm against hers, causing her to lose hold of her glass.

The contents of the glass ended up spilling down the front of her and soiling her dress.

With an outraged cry, she turned to the culprit and all the vile words she had wanted to spit at him caught in her throat as she came face to face with the most beautiful man she had ever seen in her life.

"You should watch where you are going," the man said in irritation.

She gaped at him for a second, shocked at his audacity. How dare he? All her outrage came back two fold, the utter perfection of the man forgotten. "You bumbling idiot!"

"Excuse me?" The man stared down at her.

Her green eyes flashed at him. "This is the part where you apologize."

He took in the rest of her surreptitiously. Her hair was a deep brown wrapped up in a complicated style with two some loose tendrils left to fall around her face. Framing her expressive eyes were thick, sooty lashes, she had a small rosebud mouth that begged to be kissed and a jaw that ended in a stubborn point. His gaze flicked from her face down to the expanse of smooth milky skin exposed by the scooped neckline of her dress. Further down, he saw the damage he had done to her dress and his retort

died on his lips. "My apologies, my lady."

The woman didn't seem all that satisfied with his apology and only narrowed her eyes at him.

"I fear your dress may have been ruined because of my carelessness," he continued.

"It has most definitely been ruined by your carelessness," the woman replied.

Despite himself, he found himself smiling and it only made the woman stiffen further.

"I was leading up to an apology, but now I'm beginning to think you don't need one," he said.

"An apology isn't going to fix my dress," the woman hissed.

"Say the word and I shall have the modiste here in no time at all with a selection of new dresses for you," he teased. "Or is there a color you are partial to?"

A flash of red bloomed high on the woman's cheekbones and she advanced at him, "You—"

"Vinny!" the woman beside her hissed. "You're going to cause a scene."

Victor reluctantly dragged his gaze away from the green eyed woman to her red-haired friend. He hadn't noticed the other woman until she spoke, which was strange.

He suddenly remembered his mother telling him about a lady with a shock of unfortunate red hair.

What had she said her name was? He couldn't for the life of him remember.

"I apologize for calling you a bumbling idiot," the woman said reluctantly, not sounding apologetic.

"It's quite alright, my lady."

A teasing smile pulled at his mouth, "I have never been called an idiot before and I must admit that it was an experience from you."

"The people in your life have not been honest with you."

His eyebrows shot up with shock, "So you were not honest about your apology."

She thrust her pert chin in the air, staring him down even though he was several inches taller, "I apologized for saying it, but it does not make it any less true."

"Vinny!" Her friend gasped.

Her plump mouth tightened, and then she dropped into a shallow curtsy that was over before it began, "my lord."

Victor didn't bother correcting her, "my lady."

And then she was gone, disappearing into the crowd with the redhead in tow.

Patrick approached him, staring after the women and then at him, eyebrows hiked to nearly his hairline, "what was that?"

"I find myself as perplexed as you are."

"I caught the end of that exchange, and it seemed the lady had no idea who you were."

Wasn't that something? Victor thought with more amusement than the situation called for. It was rare for him not to be recognized immediately by a member of the ton , which left him wondering who the lady was.

"Perhaps her family has only just come into a title," his friend mused, "Or she doesn't come from the peerage. A businessman's daughter, if I were to guess. The dowager duchess will know her. She knows everybody."

Victor scoffed, "I would much rather put up an advertisement in the newspaper demanding the lady's identity than ask my mother. I do hope she did not see that exchange."

The other man let out a bark of laughter, "No one will be so cruel to push that sharp-mouthed lady on you, least of all your mother. I'm sure she already has her hands full with Georgianna, and she will not want a daughter-in-law who will only encourage your sister."

The Duke shuddered at the thought of it. When he was ready to take a wife, it would be someone submissive and biddable. He had just about had enough of exasperating women.

"There you are, Victor."

Speaking of the Devil.

He turned to his mother with a smile fixed on his face, "Mother, how nice to see you. Where is Georgie?"

She pointed toward the dance floor, and he followed her finger to where a gentleman was twirling his sister. The Duke didn't recognize the man, but if his mother was letting her dance with him, then he must have passed muster.

"How delightful," he said honestly.

"Your Grace," Patrick bowed.

"Do you need something, Mother?" Victor asked.

"May I introduce you to Lady Hannah," his mother began just as a dark-haired woman appeared seemingly out of nowhere. "She's the last daughter of the countess of Farhall. Lady Hannah, the Duke of Wyld."

Victor stiffened. He should have suspected that his mother would pull a trick like this. It was just like her always to get her way.

"Your Grace," Lady Hannah dropped into a curtsy.

"My lady," he said, "how do you do?"

"I believe that is my cue to leave you two," Lord Dillon smirked at his friend, enjoying the mildly annoyed look he was trying to hide.

The look the Duke shot Patrick was a desperate plea for him to stay, but the man just chuckled and walked off.

A worse friend than Lord Dillon, the Duke would be hard-pressed to find in the whole of England.

The lady batted her lashes at him and giggled, and he bit back his groan.

"I believe I can hear the first strains of the waltz," the older woman said meaningfully, "Do you enjoy dancing, Lady Hannah?"

The woman smiled shyly at the Duke, "I am a most accomplished dancer."

"How perfect then," the Dowager Duchess cooed.

"Shall we, my lady?" Victor asked the woman with a smile he didn't feel.

She placed her smaller hand into his and he led her out to the dance floor, ignoring his mother's look of triumph.

If she thought that she had successfully thrust him into the marriage mart, she was going to be very disappointed. He was going to dance with Lady Hannah but that was all.

The lady looked content to stay quiet for the rest of the dance, a placid smile on her face.

"What are your interests, my lady?" he asked, trying not to wince at his own predictable question.

"I embroider, I play the pianoforte and I'm interested in building a family," she recited mechanically.

The Duke wondered how many times she had had to give that reply.

"How wonderful," he smiled at her.

The woman giggled and ducked her head, hiding her pleased smile.

"Anything else?" he enquired.

Lady Hannah looked startled, blue eyes flying up to meet his, "I-uh- I write letters to my cousins in Scotland. I write often. I'm excellent at that, too."

He kept his expression carefully blank, "But do you enjoy it?"

She blinked at him, "of course, Your Grace. I was hailed as having the finest penmanship in my year when I was a student at Mrs. Ravensbruck's finishing school for genteel ladies."

Victor remembered his mother repeatedly trying to press him into enrolling his sister in the finishing school. He had put his foot down about the matter much to his mother's chagrin and she never ceased to remind him that Georgie's outspokenness and free spirit was his own fault.

The two were quiet for a while, just going through the intricate motions of the waltz.

"And yourself, Your Grace?" Lady Hannah remembered to ask, "what are your interests?"

"I like to ride," he replied, an answer as mechanical as hers, "Do you ride, Lady Hannah?"

"Uh," she looked nervous for a second but quickly pasted on a smile, "Of course, it is one of my many interests."

Victor was tempted to invite Lady Hannah for a ride the next day just to see her squirm. From her reaction, he could tell that not only was riding not one of her vast interests, but she was also terrified of it. It was a good thing that he was neither cruel nor did he have any intention of spending further time with her.

As soon as the dance came to an end, the lady dropped into a deep curtsy.

He waited for her to get up and then offered her his arm. Victor all but dragged her off the dance floor and back into the dowager duchess's side.

He was beginning to suspect she didn't know the difference between enjoying something and being good at it.

"My dance card is full, Your Grace," she said, "But I managed to reserve the waltz."

She shouldn't have bothered since he had no intention of taking her for a spin on the dance floor. If he indicated that he was interested in Lady Hannah, his mother would find a way to get them to the altar by the end of the week.

"Is that Lord Charleston?" he asked no one in particular, staring off into the distance, "I have meant to discuss something urgent with him."

"Now?" The dowager duchess cried, "Must it be now?"

"If you will excuse me," he said, "It was a pleasure to meet you, Lady Hannah."

She blinked at him, shocked by the abrupt end of their conversation. Then she dropped into a curtsy, "it was a pleasure as well, Your Grace."

"Mother," he nodded at her, and before she could get in a word, he had marched off, long strides carrying him far from the pair.

From across the room, Lord Dillon caught his eye and raised a glass at him, mouth curled up into a mocking smile.

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CHAPTER 2

Ignoring him, the Duke made a sharp turn towards the French doors at the side of the room. It opened into a secluded balcony that overlooked the gardens below and it would give him some much needed reprieve from his mother and the rest of society.

He could only tolerate both of those things in small doses.

The balcony was poorly lit and blessedly empty and he gratefully tucked himself into the farthest corner, hoping that anybody who came out here wouldn't even notice him.

Cool air ruffled his hair as he stood there, itching for a cigar. But most of all, he wanted to be at home. Not his house in Mayfair though, the place never really felt like his home.

The one place he felt most at peace was in the country, with his steed and endless stretch of land.

Lost in his nostalgia, he didn't realize that he was no longer alone till he heard a sharp curse.

"Blighted corsets," the lady bit out.

Victor turned his head sharply to see a figure of a woman walking past his little darkened nook.

"Why do I have to even wear these things?" she continued, "I am quite sure that if

men had to wear it, it would have been a thing of the past by now."

His mouth ticked up at her words because he agreed with her. The bloody things took forever to undo. He had once resorted to cutting one off a lightskirt's body and then had to pay for her to get a new one.

He opened his mouth to announce his presence but the disgruntled sound she made stopped him.

And then she took another step forward till she was standing under the moon light.

Victor's eyes widened. It was the sharp tongued chit he had run into earlier. The silver light washed over her and made her look like something otherworldly.

His fingers twitched at his side, but this time, it wasn't the urge for a cigar. It was with the pressing urge to pull out the pins holding her hair up and let it Tumble down her back in soft waves.

"I wish I had not let them convince me into coming to this ball," the woman muttered.

When she whirled around, the Duke thought that he had surely been discovered, but her brilliant eyes never settled in his direction.

The brown haired woman grumbled something he couldn't hear and then began to walk back into the ballroom. He shook his head at the way she all but marched towards the French doors.

Two things happened at once. First, Victor stepped forward to reveal himself to her and second, she tripped.

With a squeal, she lost her footing and began to fall, squeezing her eyes shut and

bracing for the unavoidable contact with the hard ground.

Victor leaped forward and snatched her from the air, hurling her smaller body into his to save her fall.

She gasped as he pressed her against him, eyes flying wide.

"You!" she shrieked.

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CHAPTER 3

"We really must stop running into each other like this, my lady," the Duke said, a trace of amusement in it.

Lavinia opened her mouth to demand what he was doing out there, but the words died on her tongue as soon as she remembered who the man was.

Heat rose high on her cheeks as she recalled how she had insulted a Duke of the peerage, a man who could ruin her and her family with a single sharp glance.

Jenny had so helpfully informed her of his identity after her unfortunate encounter with him.

In her defense, he didn't look like any dukes she knew in the ton. The rest were ancient and always had a quizzing glass at hand.

The man before her was not anywhere close to ancient and there was no quizzing glass to be found on his person. He was the very definition of an Adonis, tall and finely built. It was a wonder the ladies hadn't flocked around him. Who wouldn't want to ensnare a young, wealthy duke?

"I apologize, Your Grace," she pulled away from him to curtsy, eager to get as far away from here as possible.

A moment ago, she had wanted to hide out here for the rest of the night, but the man's presence now demanded the opposite. The balcony was far too secluded for a single

lady and a gentleman to be out here innocently.

"Ah, I see that you have discovered my secret identity," he sounded annoyed, "I shall now brace myself for the Your Graces."

Her brow hiked up, "if it was truly a secret, then I must say that it is the worst kept secret in history." It immediately struck her that the Duke had been out here before her, "H-how long have you been out here, Your Grace?"

And most importantly, how much of her muttering had he heard?

From the way his eyes lit up with amusement, she assumed that he had heard a lot of it.

"Not long, why do you ask?" he asked with maddening calm that revealed to her that he had heard more than she had intended anyone to hear, least of all him.

Lavinia didn't have a temper, she didn't! In fact, she was a most mild and genteel lady in general. She liked to mouth off to her best friend and her cousin, Noah, but she had far too much home training and self-preservation to know that one simply didn't speak back to a man such as he.

That knowledge did nothing to stop the accusation from flying out of her mouth, "You were spying on me!"

The Duke blinked. "You intruded on my private sanctuary. It may come as a surprise to you, but I did not intentionally come out after you and skulk around to listen to your deepest, darkest secrets."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Simple courtesy would have been making your presence known, instead of- as you say it- skulking around, Your Grace."

A warning voice inside her head was urging her to retreat. This was no way to talk to one of the highest title holders in the country, but her forthrightness had always been one of her biggest flaws.

"I should keep you around, my lady," he mocked. "You are simply divine for my ego. First you call me a bumbling fool and now you call me a skulker. Whatever shall I be accused of next?"

"Are you mocking me?"

"Of course not, my lady," he drew back in feigned shock. "A gentleman would never do such a thing."

"You are no gentleman!" she hissed.

"I take offence at that."

"It was my intention that you do."

He pressed a hand against his chest, "you wound me with your callous words, my lady."

Something about the way he called her his lady brought an odd sensation in her stomach. They were words she had heard so often, but from his mouth, they felt... different.

"I am not your lady!" She said, her voice acidic enough to flay skin, "And you can stop pretending that you're- you're-

"I see that you have finally run out of vocabulary?"

Oh how dare he?

He probably expected to trip over her own feet in her haste to keep herself on his good side. She had always thought men with power were the most horrid of men, and The Duke of Wyld had just proved that theory right.

Despite having a face carved by a master sculptor and a body that made his finely made clothes look even more luxuriant, he was completely foul on the inside.

She stomped her foot. "You are a vile man, duke or not."

He tsked at her, "I would take your words to heart, but I believe they are the result of your overly cinched corset."

Her mouth dropped open in wordless shock. So he had really heard her. He was the most condescending man on the planet.

"It is not polite to say such a thing," she said through clenched teeth. If she were a man, she would have called out the Duke by now.

But alas, she wasn't a man.

Lavinia wondered if his nature was just to be impossibly rude or if it had to do with the fact that he was a tad above societal norms.

"What is polite to say then, my lady?" He leaned closer, voice an intimate purr that made her breathe seize in her chest.

This close, his scent filled her lungs; leather, spice and man. He smelled like the wild and the combination with his looming size was lethal. Her throat felt curiously dry and she swallowed.

"You are impossible and I shall not spend one more second out here with you," she wagged a finger at him, trying to hide how her voice trembled beneath censure.

"Running, my lady?" There was a challenge in his eyes that she tried her best to ignore.

Lavinia wanted to deny the accusation but the words wouldn't leave her mouth. She parted her lips but only a shaky breath escaped.

The Duke's eyes dropped down to her mouth and all of a sudden, there was an unusual tightening at the bottom of her belly.

"No," she finally said.

Those blue eyes narrowed at her and then he took a step back and the moment of madness was broken.

"Run along then."

It took Lavinia a moment to gather her senses back and then remember her previous indignation.

"You are impossible and I shall not spend one more second out here with you," she wagged a finger at him.

"A most excellent idea since after all, contrary to what you think, I was here first and you are intruding on my moment of solitude."

"Ugh," she huffed and flounced off in a mass of ruffles and indignation.

With the way the rest of the girls oohed and aahed over him, one would think that he

was the most polite, gentleman in the country. Instead, he was a bully and a bit of a cad.

"Lavvie, where did you run off to?" Noah asked, approaching her from the opposite corner.

She flushed, "I was on the balcony getting some fresh air. It is horribly stuffy in here and I think my lady's maid did up my corset too tight."

His eyes widened and he glanced around to make sure they didn't have anyone listening to them. "You must not say such things in public!" he admonished her.

"It's a good thing I do not want to be in public anymore then," she said then placed the back of her palm against her forehead in a dramatic rendition, "I feel rather faint, Noah. Can we call it a night?"

He hesitated, "we have been here barely an hour."

"Barely an hour!" she squeaked. It felt like they had been there a whole lifetime. She couldn't breathe properly and her feet were starting to hurt. She wanted her bed, to take all the pinching pins out of her hair, and a book.

"Noah, I may pass right out any moment from now," she pleaded. "I'm sure you do not want all of that drama. Can we just leave?"

He sighed, shoulders dropping in defeat, "alright. Let us leave."

As she settled into the carriage, she couldn't help the way her thoughts kept going back to the Duke. She didn't want to spare that man a second thought, so why couldn't she stop thinking about him.

"What do you know about The Duke of Wyld?" she blurted out.

Her cousin faced her, surprised, "not much. His father died about three years ago and he took over as the Duke. I was at Eton with him, but we never really spoke to each other. He had a different set of friends. I remember that they liked to ride horses. The Duke is an excellent rider."

She glared at him, annoyed. She didn't know what she had been expecting. Some raunchy gossip and a big scandal perhaps.

Lavinia didn't need one more reason why the Duke of Wyld was so arrogant. Next, she would probably find out that he was a terrific fencer.

"Why are you suddenly curious about him? Don't tell me that you've joined the gaggle of ladies who swoon over him."

"I most certainly do not swoon," she snapped. "And I was just curious. Jenny pointed him out and it came as a bit of surprise that someone so young would be in that position."

Liar, liar, a voice inside her was taunting.

"I would not want to be him," Noah shuddered. "At a time when his mates were still at school joking around, he was running a household, several estates and businesses. So many lives in his charge."

Lavinia felt a pang of sorrow for him and wondered where it had come from. They weren't friends, she didn't even know him so where was the overwhelming urge to go back and be kinder to him come from.

She pressed her forehead to the cool glass window. She didn't like this unwelcome

curiosity about him and she decided that it was best they didn't have any more future meetings.

Twice was more than enough.

Her aunt, the Countess of Hartfield was waiting for her in the sitting room and as soon as she walked in, the woman sat up and beckoned at her.

Felicity was a beautiful woman with dark gold hair and brown eyes. Her eyes were always soft and full of kindness.

"Why are you back early? Tell me everything my dear."

Noah snorted, "there is nothing to tell. She was about to pass out from lack of oxygen, hence, our timely return."

Her aunt's eyes shifted from her to her son. "Did you meet anyone at all? Who did you dance with?" Then her gaze dropped down to her dress, "What happened to your dress?"

"I introduced her to a bunch of my friends," her cousin said.

Lavinia and her aunt made a face at that and he grumbled at their expression. "They are not so bad," and then he walked away.

Lady Hartfield waited for him to walk away before she grinned at Lavinia, "I would not wish any of Noah's friends on you. I hope they are not the only gentlemen you were fortunate enough to meet."

Lavinia laughed, "I would not wish them on anybody."

"Well?" Lady Hartfield urged, "you haven't answered a single one of my questions. Do sit down, dear."

She knew that if she sat down, she might end revealing everything about the entire matter with the Duke of Wyld. "As Noah said, nothing happened. I spilled some lemonade on my dress, but it's not ruined, the stain can be cleaned out. Jenny taught me a trick that—"

"Lavinia, I don't want to hear about how to get stains out of dresses right now. I want to know if anyone caught your eye today at all," her aunt looked so hopeful that she felt ashamed to shatter that hope.

Her stomach roiled and images of the Duke crossed through her mind. Tall, dark, imposing, dashing. Like the protagonist from every book she had ever read.

"There was no one," she said quietly, eyes downcast.

"Oh," the older woman's shoulders dropped, and she shifted his gaze away. "Well, it's just one ball. There will be others with countless gentlemen."

"Yes, of course. There will be others."

But what Lavinia didn't add was that she had no intention of making a match this season, because what she wanted, she wasn't sure it existed outside the pages of her books.

She trudged to her room and found her lady's maid waiting to undress her. She turned her back to the girl, gratefully.

As she slipped into bed that night, she tried to empty her mind of all thought but she knew it was futile. Memories of that aggravating man assaulted her till she forced

herself into a fitful sleep to escape him.

But even in her sleep, she couldn't escape him.

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CHAPTER 4

"Miss, you have a guest," the butler announced the next morning.

"You don't have to announce me," Lavinia heard a familiar voice grumble before her best friend's red hair appeared at the door.

Ruben the butler sniffed at her with extreme disapproval before glancing at Lavinia, "Shall I fetch tea?"

"Oh you don't have to do that," she replied, "I'll just call for one of the maids."

An odd expression crossed his eyes, "I'm afraid that will be impossible, Miss. The maids are off to the market."

She blinked at him, "All of them?"

The corners of his mouth tightened, deep grooves appearing at the sides. "Not all of them. A few of them quit."

Her brows hooked up in surprise. Just last week two of the footmen and the cook had quit.

"Is there a problem?" she inquired, "we seem to be losing a lot of servants."

"Hmm. I can't say that I've noticed," his answer was evasive, "shall I get you that tea now?"

"Please," she smiled and he went off to do her bidding.

"You disappeared last night," Jenny began distractedly as she rifled through her reticule until she located the glasses she had had made behind her mother's back. She plopped them on her nose and a brilliant smile took over her face.

"You mustn't let yourself continue to walk around blind as a bat, Jenny. You ought to stand up to your mother."

The girl waved her hand in the air, "we are not talking about me right now. Anyway, she shall soon discover I'm hopeless in the marriage mart and leave me be."

"You are not hopeless," Lavinia snapped, "don't say such nonsense."

"It is the truth," then her eyes narrowed. "Do not try to distract me, Lavvie, it will not work. Where did you disappear to last night?"

She put a finger to her mouth as she caught sight of the butler approaching with the tea service.

"Shall I pour?" he asked.

"No, thank you, Ruben. You need not bother."

She waited until he was out of sight before she faced her friend, "I went out to the balcony to get some relief from the stiff air inside the ballroom. And then I ran into the Duke."

"Again?" Jenny screeched, "How unusual. Two run ins on one night."

"I assumed he had followed me out at first but then he cleared me of all my

suspicion."

Jenny wasn't convinced. "Did you argue with him again?"

She sucked in a scandalized breath and played up her look of shock for the red head's benefit, "of course not, Jen. I was perfectly civil. It was an exchange that barely lasted two minutes and then he was gone."

"Why don't I believe you?"

"I resent that," she grinned.

"You are impossible, Lavinia," she threw up her hands, "if you had played your cards right, perhaps I would have walked in on the Duke calling on you."

Lavinia's eyes went wide, "not so loud! The last thing I want is for my aunt to overhear and think that I have some entanglement with that man."

"Is she still pressuring you about finding a match?" Jen whispered.

Lavinia sighed and settled deeper into her settee. She had known that her guardians had sponsored her season so she could find an advantageous match. It was the whole reason for a season after all. But something was different this time.

Even though she still had a few years till she was on the shelf, it was almost as if her aunt thought this was her last good year.

She had been tempted to ask her if the world coming to an end.

If Lavinia was being honest, despite the fact that she mocked the social season and the whole dance of finding a match, she did want one. But not the soulless

transactions that were rampant. She wanted the sort of burning passion she had so often read about in books.

"Yes. It's worse this season. She even had the modiste lower the neckline of my dresses," she informed her.

"Whatever for?"

She slanted the girl a look, "use your imagination, Jen."

Jenny looked thoughtful for a moment before realization hit her, "Oh Lord."

Oh Lord, indeed.

"Well, has it worked?"

Lavinia threw back her head and laughed at her friend's intense curiosity. She was so close to the edge of her chair, she had almost fallen out of it.

"It has not, if you must know. It has only gotten me the attention of lechers," she informed her. "You know what, I think it is a quite brilliant way to separate the lecherous gentlemen from the decent ones."

Had the Duke stared at her chest? She couldn't for the life of her recall if he had, which was strange. He was just the sort of ill-mannered man to do something of the sort.

"Would you like some tea?"

The red head made a face and adjusted the glasses seated on the bridge of her nose, "no, but I can go for some of those biscuits."

A glance at the tray revealed a marked absence of the biscuits. "The cook used to make them, but she quit," Lavinia explained.

"Alright," the bespectacled girl shrugged, "I guess I don't mind tea."

The Duke of Wyld stared out of the large window behind his desk unseeing. Outside, the day was a rare sunny day and he knew that the members of the ton would have taken advantage of it. Women with their parasols and practiced smiles and men pretending to be interested in whatever dull conversation they got roped into.

If it were up to the Dowager duchess, he would be out there with the rest of them.

The absence of the genteel folk was one of the major reasons he preferred country living. The lack of activity in London was galling. Well, there were the soirees, balls and dinner parties, none of which he enjoyed the slightest bit.

He missed Whisper and he only hoped his instructions for the horse to be taken out daily were being carried out.

"Victor."

He turned around at the sound of his mother's voice and found her at the door, looking hesitant to walk into the room.

She still flinched whenever he sat at the head of the table during meals, and at the beginning, he had sat elsewhere, until the day he hadn't.

The Duke watched her steel her shoulders and then walk in.

"Mother," he greeted, hands clasped behind him, "is there something I can do for you?"

"I noticed you weren't at breakfast," she began.

"I broke my fast hours before you came down," he was still used to the way of things outside of London. In the country, he rose with the sun and began his days with a grueling ride.

The dowager duchess made a face at his words, "That's that, I suppose. It is not why I'm here in any case."

He had a sneaking suspicion about why she was there and she proved him right with her next words.

"Lady Hannah seemed to be interested in you."

He dropped down into his chair and clasped his hand over his stomach, "Did she now?"

"Yes," she replied sharply. "She was sad to see you leave so soon. She was really holding out for a second dance."

Which would have all but sealed his fate with the lady.

"Hmm."

His mother pursed her lips in irritation, "She's a wonderful girl. Beautiful and well mannered. I dare say she will make a most perfect wife."

"We are in agreement," he smiled, "Congratulations to the gentleman who wins her hand."

She threw up her hands in the air in dramatic annoyance, "Oh must you get on my

nerves? You know exactly what I'm saying, but you are being obstinate on purpose."

"Mother, I have no interest in Lady Hannah or the other ladies you've mentioned in the past few days. I believe I have made my lack of interest very obvious."

"What is wrong with Lady Hannah? She's flawless."

And that was precisely the problem. He didn't want the flawless ladies of the ton with their bland personalities. He wanted...

His mind flashed to the brown haired lady from the previous night who had stared down at him like she wasn't aware he had the power to destroy her. A woman like that would keep him on his toes, give him the excitement only a hard ride through his estate and the brewery ever gave him.

Even as he had the thought, he knew he could never marry a woman like that. It would be too easy to fall in love with her and he had sworn off love.

"When I am good and ready, there will be another Lady Hannah for me," he told her.

"With that attitude, you'll be walking with a cane and sniffing after fresh faced debutantes."

His jaw clenched, "then so be it."

She advanced, waving her index finger at him, "not under my watch."

"Mother, for the love of God, I hardly think I should be the one being poked and prodded. Don't you have your hands full with Georgie?"

"I'm trying to do what's best for the title."

His lips thinned, "I know what's best for the title."

"If you did, you would have a duchess and an heir by now. You can afford to be careless about anything else, but securing the line is the one thing I won't let you ruin, like you did Georgie's upbringing."

Jumping to his feet, the duke slapped his palm down on the surface of the desk, "Enough!" he thundered.

His mother went still with shock. In all her years, he had never once raised a voice to her in such a way and the fury burning in his eyes made her shiver.

"Leave, now," the lowly delivered words carried as much authority as if he had roared the words.

The dowager duchess squared her shoulders, gave him one last glance full of absolute contempt and then marched off, as regal as ever.

He slumped into his chair after she had left and dragged a weary hand through his hair, mussing it up.

"Damn it all to hell," he sighed. He owed her an apology, but for now he couldn't find it in him to feel apologetic. She had been driving him insane with her less than subtle matchmaking and this explosion was bound to happen.

Somehow, Victor had to make it clear to her that he didn't need her butting into his affairs. He had never wanted any of this, but then again, neither had she.

If only his father was alive.

He needed to get his mother off his back without hurting her feelings and without

also having to give in to her matchmaking schemes.

But how?

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CHAPTER 5

"The blue reticule or the silver?" Lavinia asked the lady's maid that she now shared with her aunt.

Hers had been one of the many servants that had quit mysteriously in the past few days.

"The silver," the girl said while attaching the last hair pin to her hair, "it brings out the color of the dress."

"I shall have the silver then," Lavinia nodded and rose from where she had been sitting in front of the dressing mirror.

Smoothing a hand down the front of her blue dress, she took a deep, cleansing breath and then made her way out the door and towards the spiral staircase.

Her cousin, who should have been waiting for her at the foot of the stairs, was curiously absent. She made to head back up to his suite of rooms.

"Lavvie, there you are," Lady Hartfield's voice stopped her.

She turned to see her aunt walking down the hall towards her.

"Aunt Felicity?" Her brow wrinkled up in confusion, "I see that you are dressed, are you out for the evening? Noah should be here any second and we can drop you off on our way."

"I heard all about the other night from Noah. How you spent most of the night arm in arm with Jenny."

She blinked at her aunt, "it was not as though I was rejecting gentleman left, right and center to spend time with my best friend. We were both relegated to the sidelines as usual."

Lady Hartfield tsked. "Neither of you should be on the sidelines. You are both beautiful girls. Jenny I can understand, the poor girl may just cause a mishap out on the dance floor. But you, Lavinia, you have no excuse."

Lavinia frowned. "The whole thing is ridiculous. It makes me feel like a commodity."

"Everyone is a commodity in some way. Right now, you have the power to be the one to sell yourself."

Before she could open her mouth and give a retort, her aunt cut her a sharp look, "save it, Lavinia. I'll be escorting you to the ball."

"Escorting me? That will not be necessary. Noah is doing a fine job being my escort."

Lady Hartfield nodded, "Of course he is. He is also doing a fine job of being wrapped around your little finger. I shall be escorting you to the ball tonight and that is that."

She watched the older woman with a feeling of mounting dread.

Just a few hours ago, she had complained to Jenny about her guardians' sudden interest about her marital chances, but the current exchange with her aunt left her feeling less annoyed and more panicked.

"O-of course," she stammered, "I'll be honored to have you there with me."

Her aunt's smile was small but sincere, "you look stunning, darling. If the gentlemen don't come running, then I shall know that they are blind as bats."

She gave her aunt a stiff, closed lip smile, annoyed by the fact that she even had to participate in this whole farce tonight.

Lavinia allowed herself to be led out to the waiting carriage and handed up into it, all the while keeping her smile fixed. Tonight, she had a plan to secure her position as a wallflower or as a thoroughly unmarriageable miss and her aunt's presence wasn't going to change that.

It was simple really and the best part was that she didn't need to get involved in a scandal.

The carriage deposited them at the front steps of Livingston house and the two women made their way up the stairs and past the front door.

"Lady Hartfield, is that you?" Lady Livingston exclaimed as they got to where she and the viscount were welcoming guests, "I did not think you would make an appearance. You have been rather scarce in public."

Lavinia's aunt chuckled, a nervous sound that caught the girl's attention and she turned to the older woman worriedly.

"I've been busy is all," the Countess replied, "Have you met my niece, Miss Proctor?"

The golden-haired woman turned to Lavinia, "Welcome to Livingston house. Have you met my son?"

It was then that Lavinia noticed the slender, baby-cheeked gentleman beside the viscountess.

Her son couldn't be a day above twenty, but from the calculating look in the woman's eyes, Lavinia saw that she was eager to foist him off to the first respectable lady she got her hands on.

She held back her shudder.

Mr. Livingston was trying and failing to make eye contact and she decided to get him out of his misery.

"Ahn, we seem to be holding up the line," she said with mock regret, "If you'll excuse us."

Grabbing her aunt's arm, she managed to steer her away and into the ballroom.

"Bless you, Lavvie," the older woman's eyes twinkled, "I was looking for the most polite way to leave that conversation. I do not wish Lady Livingston's wet behind the ears boy on you."

The girl laughed. How ridiculous it was that at her age she was an adult and at his, he was a child.

"I think I see Beatrice, come, let us say hello and get an introduction to her brother. He's an earl," Lady Hartfield said and began to lead them to a voluptuous, dark-haired woman.

Moments later, Lavinia was in the arms of an Earl whose name she couldn't remember. He was about her height and pudgy and he had stared unnecessarily too long at her chest.

"Where has the countess been hiding a beauty like you?" the man cooed.

"I have been doing the hiding all on my own," she shot him a smile.

"And why, pray tell, would you do something as terrible as deprive society of your charms?"

Judging by the fact that his eyes had not yet shifted away from her breasts, she knew exactly what charms he meant.

"Because people like you exist," she said so sweetly that it took him a while to process that she had just insulted him.

He jerked, trying to pull away but she held on tight. "I'm thirsty, I shall like to have a drink now," then just as she released him, the dance ended and she walked away, leaving him wide eyed behind her.

"How did it go?" her aunt asked her.

She swept her gaze over the crush, searching for a familiar head of red, "Oh it was nice."

Her aunt introduced her to a naval hero next and he asked her to dance. She readily accepted and let Sir Richard take her out to the floor.

"... And I practice discipline in my daily life. When I get married, my wife will be an extension of me and must learn to comport herself in public in a manner befitting my status."

Her first thought of his was that he was pompous and the second was that he loved the sound of his own voice a little bit too much.

"Hmmm," she nodded at him, "I-"

"Another thing to note-"

"I have no interest in knowing what rules, regulations and restrictions you shall impose on your future bride as I am not in the running for such a position," she cut in. He hadn't let her get in a word edge wise and she was sick of him.

"My feet hurt and I think I shall go sit down," she announced, "best of luck on your search."

She left him as slack jawed as she had left the Earl earlier.

"What happened? I can see the captain walking away," Lady Hartfield strained her neck to catch a glimpse of the man.

Lavinia shrugged, "something urgent came up."

Suspicion clouded the woman's eyes and she fixed her gaze on Lavinia's for a moment before turning away with a sigh. "Come let me introduce you to..." she trailed off, as her eyes caught something, "Oh goodness gracious, I see Lady Amarinthe with the Duke of Wyld."

Lavinia's heart gave a painful thud in her chest, "W-what!" she croaked, "a duke?"

"Come along now," she grabbed her wrist with an excited smile splitting her face.

"Your Grace, Lady Amarinthe," her aunt curtsied and Lavinia followed suit, trying to keep her eyes downcast so as not to meet the man's.

"Have you met His Grace, The Duke of Wyld?" Lady Amarinthe smiled, "Your Grace, The Countess of Hartfield and her niece Miss Proctor."

"A pleasure to meet you, Your Grace," Lavinia said through clenched teeth.

"Oh, is that a waltz starting up?" Lady Amarinthe asked, "You young people should dance. I need to talk to you, Hartfield."

Lavinia couldn't breathe. Was this really happening? She hadn't planned to run into the Duke tonight or any other night anymore. Two run-ins had to have been enough for fate.

The Livingston ball was one of the lower rank events and she assumed he would only be found in much more exclusive events.

He was as large and as striking as ever and he was staring down at her with amusement carved into his features.

"Shall we?" He held out his hand to her.

She didn't want to. Not at all. In fact, she was tempted to cry off for a completely made up reason. Unfortunately for her though, this was the young, eligible Duke and the whole room was watching them.

If she dared embarrass a man of his standing, she would be torn apart in seconds.

With a tight smile, Lavinia placed her gloved hands in his. A spark of electricity shot up her hand. She had never felt such a thing before and before she could yank her hand away in shock, his hand tightened around hers and he shot her a warning glance.

They took their place on the floor and he put a hand around her waist.

She sucked in a breath at his indecently close he felt. This close, his scent filled her lungs. Leather, man and something spicy that made her head whirl.

"Try not to step on my toes," she said quietly, still recovering from the disorienting sensation that was the Duke.

"I shall try my very best."

She glared up at him and the sides of his mouth curled up in obvious amusement.
"You are very prickly."

"Prickly? How dare you?" she hissed.

"How dare I?" He raised a brow, "I thought we were being blunt? Or do you only appreciate bluntness when it is coming from you?"

She snapped her mouth shut and settled for just glaring at him.

"You do not seem to be having fun, Miss Lavinia," he continued.

"You only seem to be having fun at my expense," she countered as he spun her around.

"One has to get his little pleasures in life where one can," he shrugged. "Meanwhile, you looked like you were being led to the guillotine."

"That is..." she trailed off. Had she really?

"If you do not want to be here, then why are you?"

She scoffed, "easy for you to say, Your Grace. You are both a man and a duke with one of the oldest titles in the country. You are practically free to do as you please without any consequences."

He stiffened and his voice was a little cooler when he replied, "I wish."

Lavinia ignored him. "Whereas I am a woman, whose fate is determined by the whims of societal norms and the men, whether they be father, guardian or husband. There are very few options for women and this nightly charade is one of them."

If she weren't watching him so closely, she wouldn't have caught the flicker in his eyes. His expression turned thoughtful. "Hmm," he hummed, "Miss Proctor, I may just have a solution for you. For both of us in fact."

"A solution?" Lavinia asked doubtfully.

The tall man nodded seriously, "Yes. Meet me at the back garden five minutes after this dance."

Jade green eyes widened, "W-what? How dare you suggest an assignation?"

"It is nothing of the sort, I assure you," he replied, "it may come as a surprise to you, but I'm in a bit of a- er- stint. And I know just the way for both of us to get what we want."

The orchestra brought the music to an end and Lavinia curtsied to her partner before she placed her hand on his arm and he led her back to where the two older women stood.

"My ladies," then he looked at Lavinia and said too lowly for the others to hear, "I shall be waiting."

Lavinia watched him walk away, admiring the long lines and strong form. She shook her head to rid herself of the thoughts and turned to her aunt who was giving her a big, proud smile. She sighed. It was too bad that she was going to have to let her

down.

"Excuse me, I think I see Jenny," she lied after a while.

"Alright, dear," Lady Hartfield said. "You two shouldn't wander too far."

Lavinia slipped through the crowds on a steady pace, making sure to not draw any attention by rushing out of the room. The garden was dark and looked deserted and for a second she was struck with a sharp disappointment.

"Miss Proctor," the Duke's voice called out from behind a row of hedges and she ducked under the arch to meet him.

It took her a while for her eyes to adjust to the dark only illuminated by a pale flash of moonlight.

"I cannot be gone for long," she warned him.

"This will not take long," he gave his assurance, "Miss Proctor, everything we discuss here will be in confidence, can I trust you?"

"Yes."

"Good, because I would hate to have to come after you."

Her jaw dropped to the ground.

"I am under a bit of pressure to get a duchess and secure the line," he began, "but as of the moment, I have no interest in that. Which is why I have decided to come to you with a business agreement. You need a husband and I need a duchess. You will have no obligation to me except your duties as a hostess. You will have as much freedom

as you wish, a sizeable stipend and as my duchess, you can do anything you want with the protection of my name."

She blinked at him, "y-you want me to marry you?" she screeched.

He leapt forward, slapped his hand over her mouth and then hissed at her, "not so loud."

If she had thought they were close during the dance, now they were pressed together indecently. Anyone who walked in on this scene would surely get the wrong message. Her reputation...

Ah, well, the Duke was offering her marriage after all.

His dark eyes caught hers for a second and he pulled his hand away, but didn't step back. She watched his gaze settle on her mouth.

Something was wrong with her, because she could not for the life of her move away. She was rooted to the ground by a strange force. Or maybe it was the intensity of his gaze as she swiped her tongue over her lips and they chased the movement.

"Y-Your Grace," she stammered breathlessly.

It snapped him out of whatever had come over him and he stepped back. The distance managed to bring her back to earth and she pressed a hand to her racing heart, feeling lightheaded and confused.

"That is my offer," his voice came out raspy and he cleared his throat, "it's the best offer you can ever get and you know it."

The arrogance of him!

"How dare-"

"Think about it, Miss Proctor," he cut in, "I will be expecting your reply before the week runs out. Excuse me."

Before she could even tell him that he didn't need to wait because her mind was made up, he was walking away.

She stared after his broad back until his dark coat blended into the night. Lord, but she had never met anyone as impudent as the man.

With an annoyed huff, she turned and stomped off in the opposite direction.

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CHAPTER 6

Lavinia was curled up in the chaise lounge in the sitting room, a book open on her lap when there was a knock on the door.

She raised her head from her book to see one of the maids at the door.

"Miss, his lordship wants to speak to you," she said. "He's waiting for you in the office."

"Oh? What about?" she asked even as she got to her feet and tucked the book under her arm.

The girl shrugged and continued on her way.

Her forehead wrinkled, the brown haired girl headed to her uncle's office at the other end of the house. She knocked lightly before cracking the door open and walking in.

She had only been in the space a handful of times. It was a bright and airy space with books bursting out of every end as it doubled as a library annex since the main one was far too small.

"Uncle, you called for me."

"Yes," the Earl of Hartfield responded with a nod, "Please, come in and take a seat."

It was as she made to take a seat that she realized they weren't alone. Tucked into the

chair near one of the shelves was her aunt wearing a pinched expression that was alien on her face.

"Is anything the matter?" she couldn't help but ask, feeling like she had just walked into a war tent.

"Of course not," Lady Hartfield replied in a voice that rang false, "There is really nothing to worry about."

Her uncle sighed, pressing his thumb and index finger to the space between his eyebrows like he was trying to push off a headache.

"It has to do with, uh, your season," Uncle Thomas began.

"My season? What of it?" she asked, gaze swinging between the two other occupants of the room.

Had they finally come to their senses and realized they were wasting their time by giving her one?

"This may just be your last," her aunt said regretfully.

"Truly?" She tried and failed to hide her excitement.

Her guardians exchanged a wordless glance and then finally her uncle sighed, "I did not want to tell you because It is not right to get you involved in such matters, but after some contemplation, we have decided that you have a right to know."

Her brows drew up, "know what?"

"Darling, we are in financial straits at the moment," her aunt informed her.

Lord Hartfield snorted, "Do not sugarcoat it for her. We've been in financial straits for a while. We only managed to shell out enough for your season and a dowry for you."

Blood drained from Lavinia's face, "H-how?" She had known her guardians weren't swimming in money, of course, but she had never thought it was this bad.

The older man dragged a hand across his face in a gesture of exhaustion and it was only then that she noticed the eye bags and how lined his face now was, "A couple of bad investments and then some steep loans to try to mend my bad luck. And that's what it was, blasted bad luck."

"Don't curse, Tommy!" The countess snapped at him then turned to the younger woman with a shaky smile, "We don't want you to be bothered by any of this."

"Is that..." Lavinia trailed off and swallowed, "is that why you have been pressuring me into making a match?"

Her aunt's eyes went wide, "We are not trying to use- oh Lavvie- we have no intentions of using you as our cash cow. I hope you don't think that, for it isn't true! We only want you to be far away from all of this with a gentleman who will be able to take care of you."

She fisted her dress and dropped her gaze to where her knuckles had turned white from her tight grip.

She knew that her uncle and aunt loved her. They had taken her in after her parents had passed and treated her as theirs. She was the daughter they had never had and she appreciated them for everything they had done for her.

So how could she in all conscience go off and get married and let them drown? Or

worse, how could she turn her back on them now and stand her ground about never getting married until she met someone that made her soul sing.

"I am a part of family," she insisted, "and as such, I am required to pull my own weight."

The Earl shook his head sadly, "unfortunately, there is not a thing you can do about this string of bad luck. The only thing you can do is give your aunt some peace of mind and she can only have that when she knows you will be well taken care of."

She rose to her feet, determination lining her features and declared, "I shall be well taken care of. I am going to secure the best match in the whole country."

Her guardians exchanged a confused glance, but before they could ask her to explain herself, Lavinia had slipped out of the office and was running up the stairs to get to her room.

She knew exactly what she had to do.

Even as her heart pounded in her chest, she had never been so sure of a decision in her life.

It took Lavinia four wrong tries to finally pen down the perfect letter to the Duke of Wyld and then she tucked it in the folds of her dress and raced downstairs.

She handed the letter to the first footman she ran into.

"I need you to deliver this personally to the Duke of Wyld's residence," she wasn't sure exactly where he lived, but if she had to guess, she would say one of the large, gaudy houses in Mayfair.

"It is rather urgent," she continued, "so make sure the Duke reads it at once. I do not know how you will make sure of that, but I know you can. I shall be waiting down here for his reply."

The young man nodded rapidly before rushing off.

Lavinia bit down on her lower lip. While she was nervous about this harebrained scheme, there was also a tendril of excitement she didn't want to examine too closely.

Exactly half an hour later somewhere in Mayfair, a butler walked into a sitting room with three occupants, "Letter for you, Your Grace," the slender, elderly man announced.

Victor reluctantly dragged his gaze away from the newspapers he had been reading.

"Put it away with the rest of my correspondence," he nodded towards the endless stack of letters lying in a silver tray in the hallway.

"This letter is from a lady and her footman is waiting outside to convey your reply," the butler clarified.

The two women in the room glanced up sharply, their amber eyes shining with curiosity.

"Oh let me read, let me read," Georgie tossed her embroidery away like it was trash and from what The Duke could see, her work deserved to be in the bin.

As the younger woman reached for the letter, he snatched it away from her reach. "Did no one teach you that it is bad manners to snoop into someone's letters?"

She pouted at him, but it was his mother that responded, "I believe that was one of the

many things you failed to teach her."

The Duke ignored her and grabbed the letter opener.

"Who is it from?" his sister asked, "I did not think you were interested in any of the ladies."

His mouth pulled up at one corner, "who said anything about the sender being a lady?"

"Victor!" His mother hissed, looking utterly scandalized, "How dare you?"

"Relax, Mother. It was just a joke."

"It wasn't a very funny one," the dowager duchess retorted.

The letter was simple to the point.

Your Grace, I have thought about it and my answer is yes. Can we meet up to discuss further?

A slow smile took over his expression as his gaze ran over her swirly penmanship for the third time. She was truly the most unpredictable woman on earth. When he had come up with this sudden plan, he had expected her to fall to her knees with appreciation for considering her to be his duchess.

Instead he had gotten a cutting glance and an accusation.

He hadn't thought she would accept, not in a hundred years and yet, here was the evidence. He only imagined what had pushed her into suddenly changing her mind.

The Duke decided he would find out the reason why when they met.

Grabbing his pen, he quickly scribbled down his one line of reply, folded back the letter and handed it to the butler.

"You mentioned that the footman was waiting for my reply."

"Yes, Your Grace," the butler bowed and walked out.

"What is that smile all about?" his mother asked, eyes narrowed on him.

The Duke hesitated, wondering if he should inform his mother about Miss Proctor before he had spoken with her. But then again, she had agreed, had she not? The only thing left was to iron out some terms for their association and then they could go public with the announcement.

There was nothing to it than for the dowager duchess to start getting used to Miss Proctor.

"You will be glad to know that I have managed to secure a bride, Mother," he announced with a gleam in his eyes.

The two women went silent and exchanged a confused glance before turning to him.

"Oh, who is it, brother?" Georgie cried, "Do not keep me in suspense. Do tell! Is it Lady Hannah? I never suspected you had a fondness for her."

He made a face, "It is not Lady Hannah."

"Well, I for one am just glad you've gotten around to doing your duty," his mother nodded at him, "Now I trust that you have selected a woman of good breeding and

mannerisms. Not just anyone would do as your duchess."

"As long as it is not that horridly dull Miss Proctor, then all is well," his sister said magnanimously, "I doubt a lady like that would have knowledge of anything past the books she always has her nose stuck in."

Victor went eerily stiff, "Miss Proctor is in fact the woman who will be the next Duchess."

"Do not play such games. They are beneath you," the dowager duchess grouched, "now tell me the truth, who is she?"

"Georgie has the right of it, Mother, it is Miss Lavinia Proctor."

His mother exploded out of her seat, practically foaming at the mouth, "I knew there was something afoot when you so willingly took her to the dance floor the other night. Oh, Victor, how could you?"

He crossed his legs and leaned back into his seat, "how could I what? Finally do what you have been prodding me to do for weeks? Why am I not surprised that I have done what you have always wanted and somehow, you are still not satisfied."

"Anyone but her," his mother roared. "There are dozens of unmarried girls who would have made wonderful duchesses. There is Lady Amelia, Lady Hannah. I made you a list. Did you not see the list I made you?"

"You did?" Georgie asked, mouth trembling with suppressed amusement.

He shot her a quelling glare, "I saw the list, Mother. I doubt there is anyone in this household who did not see that list. It was not exactly small and easy to hide."

"Victor!" she chided.

"Your list was unsatisfactory to me," he continued, "I have made my decision and there is no amount of dramatics you can display to make me change my mind. The title requires a duchess, well, now it has one, end of the matter."

"I know you only did this to punish me," his mother sucked in a breath.

The Duke, who had had quite enough of his mother and also had a meeting with his soon to be duchess, rose up from the chair and straightened the labels of his waist coat.

"If you will excuse me," he said.

"Where are you going?" the older woman asked.

"Good day, Mother," he cheekily saluted before grabbing his coat and walking right out.

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CHAPTER 7

Lavinia was already leaning against a secluded tree at the park when the Duke joined her.

"Miss Proctor," he said from behind her, and she started.

She turned to face him, and he braced for the inevitable attraction he felt towards her. Still, he wasn't ready when her startling green eyes met his.

"Your Grace," she dropped into a pale imitation of a curtsy and he bit back his smile.

"We should do away with formalities. After all, we are to be married, aren't we?"

She hesitated momentarily before letting out a sigh, "Y-you can call me Lavinia then."

"And you should call me Victor."

"Victor," she tested the words on her mouth and the sound of his name from her did something to him. He bit his tongue to hold back the urge to demand she say his name again.

This was the sole reason he hadn't wanted to have anything to do with a woman like her. There was something about her wide, guileless eyes and the bow of her mouth that drove him a little bit insane.

Desire, he knew, was just a step away from affection.

"Why did you say yes to marrying me?" He needed to know. He wasn't sure why, just that he needed to know what drove her, what went on behind those expressive eyes.

She glanced away sharply and his belly knotted. Was she in some sort of trouble? He didn't know much about Lavinia.

In fact, it was safe to say he knew nothing about her at all, but he had good judgement about people and she didn't strike him as the type that would rush into a marriage while pregnant with another man's child.

"I do not see how that is any of your business," she glanced up at him, chin in the air, "What matters is that I'm dedicated to this now and you had better not take back the offer."

From being so adamant with her refusal to being eager, it was more than a little suspicious. He should have been thinking about that. And not about the tendril of hair that had escaped and was now brushing over her jaw.

His whole focus was on resisting the urge to push that hair out of her face.

He took a step backward. "This marriage will be strictly an arrangement."

"An arrangement?"

"Yes," he said firmly, needing to drive home the point that he had no love to give her. "Do not come into this with any delusions. I'm never going to feel anything for you and I hope you'll save yourself the heartache of getting attached to me. The sooner you see this as a business deal with no emotions welcome, the better for you."

She bristled, "you scoundrel! Do you think me a fool? Willing to give my affections to just any one at the drop of a hat? I could never be stupid enough to love a man like you."

"A man like me?" he echoed.

"Yes," she stabbed her index finger into his chest, teeth bared, "Behind this flesh is a cold black heart. I am not a ninny brain. I know what this arrangement is, so do not bother to lecture me."

The top of her cheekbones were a distinct red and her eyes were flashing fire at him.

"And do not make it seem like having emotions is a thing to be ashamed of," she continued, "I am forever glad that I am not all stone and ice like you."

"Trust me," he said in a ragged voice, "I am far from stone and ice."

She was so close, so achingly close and the finger that had been stabbing at him was now replaced by a dainty palm against his breast. This close, he could see the tiny freckles dotted across the bridge of her nose and the apples of her cheeks.

Lavinia smelled like flowers, so sweet that it made his teeth ache.

If she got any closer, she would realize that she was half right; only a part of him was stone but bloody hell, he was the opposite of ice.

"Yes, you are," she said. "You wouldn't know a real emotion if it hit you in the face."

There was one that was at the forefront of his mind now. One that could burn them both into ashes.

"You do not know what you are talking about, Lavinia."

Her throat bobbed with a swallow, "then show me, Victor."

It was his name breathed out so feather soft that did him in. One second he was telling himself he ought to step away, the next she was in his arms, his mouth slanted over hers.

The first contact of their mouths rearranged his whole autonomy. It was supposed to have been a kiss, a demonstration that he was not the ice cold Duke she thought he was, but Victor didn't just kiss her, he devoured her.

And the best or maybe the worst part is that she let him.

She dissolved like ice on a hot day in his hands and took what he gave her. Took it like she had been waiting all her life for that moment.

He knew he should stop. They were only hidden by some trees and a small fencing. If anybody cared to inspect further, they would come upon them.

As if Victor cared.

The ton could go to hell.

He was going to stop, but then she let out a soft mewling sound. He didn't know if the sound indicated a desire for more or a desire for him to stop, but it only urged him on, made his body thrum.

Her waist was slender under his palm and she fit into him perfectly. She tasted so perfect too. Like sweet surrender. Like innocence and a hunger that matched his all at once.

And-

The flapping wings of a bird taking off made him pull away from her. Her mouth was wet and swollen and a sense of barbaric smug satisfaction filled him.

He had done that.

She raised one trembling hand and brushed the backs of her fingers across her bottom lip.

"Wh-wh-"

"Was that enough emotion for you?" he put as much hardness into his voice as he could and it worked.

Right before his eyes, Lavinia snapped out of whatever spell that kiss had put her under. Hazy green eyes turning sharp once more.

"You absolute cad!" she cried, then turned and fled.

He waited until she had gone out of view before he slumped back on the tree behind him, panting like he had run a marathon.

The Duke told himself that he had only done it to prove a point, but point or not, he knew he was going to be replaying that kiss in his head for days.

Hours later, he lounged against the leather chair in his office, a glass of whiskey hanging limply from his hands.

Across from him, Lord Dillon had his feet kicked up on the desk, cravat loosened and waist coat unbuttoned, looking the very picture of a cad.

"I'm sure she's all bark and no bite," his friend assured him. "Women are generally pigheaded until they recognize a dominant power."

"For the sake of you getting to old age with your bullocks intact, I suggest you never say that to a woman," the Duke told him, shaking his head.

"This conversation is confidential," he raised his glass in a mock salute before throwing it back, "what do you plan on doing about the chit?"

Victor gritted his teeth. That was the question he had been asking his own self. They couldn't continue how they were going. He had to establish the fact that she was to respect him in society and none of her obstinate behavior.

"When we get married, things will be different," he said. "They have to be. I cannot expect her to obey me now. I have no rights over her. But under my roof, she will understand that there will be none of that surly attitude."

"Hear, hear," Patrick raised his glass, then threw his head back and let out a roar of laughter.

"What's funny?" He glared at his friend, still firmly of the opinion that he needed to get himself a new friend.

"You are, Your Grace," the viscount smirked, "I do not believe that things will be as easy as you have just said. But then again, I shall be here to watch the unfolding drama."

"Do you not have responsibilities?"

"None whatsoever," Patrick chuckled, "I'm completely at your behest."

"I do not want you at my behest."

He shrugged. "You have me regardless."

Patrick climbed to his feet and grabbed his coat that had been thrown over the back of his chair, "Majestique opens its doors for the first time tonight. Are you coming?"

Victor raked a hand down his hair, "No. I've sent a letter over to Hartfield house. I am to meet with Lavinia's guardian."

His friend shrugged, "The doors will be open to late. Let us get some debauchery done before you settle into the boring life of a leg shackled man."

"This marriage is not going to change anything."

"We'll see," Patrick said cryptically before walking out.

The Duke didn't have time for his friend's games. He had just a few minutes to get to Lavinia's house and he hoped he could catch her before she left for the night.

He had to reinstate one rule of this arrangement.

As soon as he walked into Hartfield house, the butler bowed and collected his coat and hat.

"If you just follow that hallway, you will end up at Lord Hartfield's study," the man said.

"Thank you," he said. Just as he made to ask if Lavinia was in residence, the lady in question appeared at the top of the stairs.

Victor's breath caught in his throat as the brown haired lady floated down the stairs, looking like a dream in a mint green dress that settled over her curves like she had been poured into it. Her gloves dangled from one hand.

There was something interesting about the muted color of the dress, and the softness of her skin, contrasted with the stubbornness of her face.

"Your Grace," she curtsied as she got to the bottom of the stairs where he stood.

"Lavinia," he took her hand and placed the shadow of a kiss on the inside of one wrist. The feeling of skin against skin made them both freeze for a second.

She flushed, "What are you doing here?"

"I've come to speak to your uncle, but I was hoping I would catch you first."

She glanced over her shoulder before motioning him into a side room and then she shut the door almost the whole way. "Is there a problem?"

The problem was that she was gnawing at her lower lip and he was jealous because he wanted to be the one gnawing on that-

Goddammit!

"There is something I must inform you about before we go ahead with this."

Panic flashed in her eyes, "What is it?"

"What happened today at the park cannot happen again," he whispered, waiting for her to protest or call him out on the fact that she had had no hand in what had happened and he ought to be cautioning himself and not her.

To his surprise, she only lowered her lashes and then nodded, "you're right."

"I will not touch you again, Lavinia. This is not that kind of marriage. You understand? This is-"

"I heard you the first time, Your Grace," she cut in, glancing up at him. A small furrow had formed between her eyebrows and her mouth was pulled tight, "If that is all, I'm afraid I'm going to be late."

Looking like that, he would be shocked if a moron didn't take one look at her and drop to his knees spouting poetry. It would be too late anyway.

"I was thinking my butler had turned into a liar when he announced your arrival," the booming voice of Lord Hartfield said from the door, "I saw the calling card but there was no evidence of the man himself."

The two jerked apart like they had been caught doing something illicit and faced the man that had just joined them.

"Your Grace," Lavinia's uncle bowed then glanced between them suspiciously. "I'm honored to have you in my home. Shall we go to my study?"

"Of course," Victor said then to the brown haired woman, "Come along."

Lord Hartfield's eyes went wide, "I take it this is not a business meeting."

The Duke decided to just come out with it because the man's eyes were starting to go from curious to suspicious to angry and he could only guess what the man was thinking.

His niece was as innocent as ever. And in fact, the Duke planned on her staying that

way until-

He hadn't planned that far if he were being honest.

"I have come to ask for your niece's hand."

The man's forehead wrinkled, "Why?"

"Uncle Tommy!" Lavinia cried, embarrassed, "you cannot ask him that."

"Well, I have not heard a thing about you in this house, Your Grace, so forgive me if this comes as a bit of a shock," her uncle said.

"We were formally introduced at Livingston house," Victor stated, "We danced and we talked, and this is what we both want. We greatly admire and respect each other."

Even as he said the words, they felt less than enough. But they were more than many of the ton marriages were built on. If her uncle was waiting for a grand declaration of love or anything of the sort, he was going to be very disappointed.

"Is that so?" Lord Hartfield turned to his niece. "You want to marry this man?"

When she blinked, Victor swore he had seen something like loss and defeat in her eyes and it made him curious again about why she had accepted this union.

Were her affections engaged elsewhere?

And why did the thought of that make him want to hit something?

"Yes, Uncle. I do," her voice was firm and sure.

"In that case," Lord Hartfield hesitated, "we should talk in my office. I believe we have a lot to discuss, Your Grace."

"Of course," he agreed and began to follow the older man out the door, but at the last moment, he glanced over his shoulder and saw her standing there; beautiful, brave, but defeated.

"Goodnight, Lavinia."

"Good night, Your Grace."

She dropped into one of her careless curtsies and then slipped past him quickly, making sure that no part of them brushed against each other, like she didn't want to spend more time than necessary in his presence.

It wouldn't bode well for many relationships, but it was perfect for both of them.

The success of their marriage of convenience was based on their abilities to keep this as clinical as possible. They needed as many boundaries as they could get.

CHAPTER 8

"How about this one, Miss?"

"I look like an overripe tomato in that dress," Lavinia discarded the fourth gown she had tried on that afternoon with an irritated groan.

None of the dresses felt right and she didn't know why she was over thinking it anyway.

It wasn't like she was dressing to impress a man who was courting her.

The Duke didn't care for her in any way. He wouldn't see her in a pretty dress and suddenly realize that he was a fool for ever thinking he could be able to keep his hands off of her.

She sighed. The books she read were beginning to rot her mind.

"This one?" The maid waved a lilac dress at her and she ignored it, tempted to fish out the green dress she had worn two nights ago when the Duke had come over to see her uncle.

She had felt like a princess when his eyes had swept over hers from the bottom of the stairs. Like she could walk on the clouds and float through life.

That was what she wanted to recreate.

Why she wanted it, she had no idea. She wasn't trying to impress the Duke. That would be absurd. There was no reason to anyways. They were already engaged.

Moreover, it was a business relationship. He didn't plan on giving her more of those burning kisses so she could as well wear a sack cloth to meet him.

"The lilac dress, please," she finally conceded. She liked the dress and if he didn't, then it was too bad for him.

She tied her hat into a jaunty angle on her head then grabbed her parasol and made her way down to the living room to wait for the arrival of her husband to be.

To Lavinia's surprise, her aunt was already seated there, waiting for her when she stepped in. She had been expecting and somehow dreading this meeting.

Lady Hartfield had been shooting her accessing glances since she had been informed of her engagement to the Duke.

Lavinia had been doing her best to pretend that she couldn't notice her aunt's querying looks.

"Lavvie dear, I'm glad I caught you before you left," the woman said with a strained smile. "Do sit down, dear," she patted the cushion beside her.

From the tone of her voice, it was obvious her aunt wouldn't tolerate any excuse for her to escape the conversation so she obediently dropped down into the chair.

The woman stared at her thoughtfully for a moment and Lavinia kept her expression open and placid as if her stomach wasn't getting twisted into knots and she wasn't a second away from confessing the entire scheme.

"The Duke of Wyld, eh?" she began.

"You introduced us at the Livingston ball," she smiled, "remember?"

"You never mentioned anything about an interest in him."

She lowered her gaze, trying to act demure, "may I be honest with you, Aunt?"

"Please."

"I saw him for the first time at the Carlton ball. He ran into me and spilled lemonade on my dress."

Lady Hartfield gasped, "he was the one?"

She nodded, "yes. At the time I didn't know who he was. He apologized and acted so cordial," oh Lord, of all the lies she had told in her life, this one hurt her the most to say. "He offered to replace my dress but I told him it was unnecessary. After that, Jenny told me who he was and I was shocked that such a man would be so kind and humble."

Her aunt's eyes went soft and Lavinia knew she had won.

"I was elated when you introduced us."

"But I remember you being hesitant," the older woman accused, her eyes narrowing.

"To be honest, I was a bit hesitant," she chuckled. "I didn't know if he would even remember me. I was nervous about not having made an impression. But to my surprise, he remembered everything. Oh, Aunt Felicity, he was so dashing and wonderful. When I'm around him, I do not even recall that he's a duke. He's just a

man to me. An admirable man."

Later, she was going to have to kneel on the hard floor of the chapel and ask the Lord for forgiveness for all these lies.

"I'm so happy for you," her aunt exclaimed, and threw her arms around her. "I knew you would find exactly what you were looking for and I was right. I am so glad we insisted on a season for you. The duke will protect and provide for you and your children."

Immense sorrow washed through her at once and it was a battle to keep her smile in place, but she did her absolute best.

There weren't going to be any children, because he had told her quite clearly that he wasn't going to touch her again and this was a business arrangement.

She almost felt sick at the knowledge that she was throwing away the rest of her life for the good of her family.

Lavinia reminded herself that they have were worth it.

They had done so much for her. She could give them this little. Victor could change his mind later. He was a Duke after all, he needed the required heir and a spare.

But it didn't manage to push the choking feeling away.

Lord Dillon walked into the Duke's residence with a delighted smile on his face. It was a beautiful, sunny day and he was about to be thoroughly entertained by the newest couple in the city.

The Duke glanced up from his pocket watch as the doorway darkened with the figure

of his smirking friend.

"You're late," he chastised.

"By two minutes."

Victor was already too on edge to deal with Patrick, "Let's go."

He just had to get today done and over with. In fact, he planned to get the whole marriage business with over as soon as possible so he could go back to the country and be on hand to manage the brewery.

He trusted that Georgie and his mother could fend for themselves out here without him.

Speaking of his mother, she had taken to her bed since he had informed her of his relationship with Lavinia. He knew she would soon be up and about and wailing like he had done something worse than choose a duchess she didn't approve of.

"You look like you need a drink before we leave. You're tense," Patrick raised an eyebrow.

"I need several drinks. Two glasses each for the women in my life," he countered and then went to grab his hat.

"Wait for me!" His sister barked, flying down the stairs, eyes gleaming.

"No," Victor said without sparing her a glance, "You're not coming."

"Says who?" She put her hands to her hip, a scowl marring her face.

"Says me, go back to your room."

"But I want to meet her," the girl whined then turned big, puppy eyes and a pout at Patrick, "Tell him to let me come."

"You should let her come, chap," the viscount said.

The look he shot his friend was rife with betrayal, "You'll just be a bother."

"No, I shall not. I shan't even say a word. I just want to leave the house. Mama is about to drive me into the madhouse with her attitude and I cannot stand it a second longer, brother."

He pressed a thumb and forefinger to the bridge of his nose and made a mental note to speak to the dowager Duchess as soon as he returned home.

"Fine," he conceded, "But you better behave."

He was too distracted by thoughts of seeing Lavinia again to notice the glance his companions shared.

The three set out for Hartfield house, with the Duke coiled as tight as a spring, Patrick trying to bite back his amusement and Georgie staring at the viscount with adoration.

"You two, wait here," Victor said as he climbed down from the carriage and went to knock on the front door.

The butler opened the door and ushered him into the sitting room where he came upon Lavinia and Lady Hartfield.

"Your Grace," the older woman rose up and dropped into a deep curtsy while the

green eyed woman shot him a look before curtsying.

All the tension he had felt on the way over immediately melted away at Lavinia's display. It never ceased to amuse him how she acted like it was such a chore to her. She was in a lilac dress with a neckline that scooped low enough to reveal smooth, milky skin dotted with a few freckles. He idly wondered how far the freckles went on her body. He wanted to find them all and put his mouth on them.

Damn it, this was the wrong time to be thinking of debauching his new fiancée. There was really no good time to be thinking such thoughts since she was off limits to him.

"Lady Hartfield, Miss Lavinia," he nodded in greeting.

"Take care of her," Lavinia's aunt said with a serious look in her eyes. He nodded and then held out his arm for the brown haired woman.

She placed her small hands on his sleeve and they made their way out to the waiting carriage, "My sister, Georgianna insisted on coming along."

"Oh," she said, "That's eh- good."

He couldn't make out her reaction because she had turned her face in the opposite direction and he had the inane urge to order her to look at him.

He helped her up into the carriage and then slipped in beside her. He occupied too much space on the narrow bench and they ended up pressed side by side against each other.

"This is Georgianna, my sister and Lord Dillon," he said, "They will be escorting us today."

"Miss Proctor," the viscount nodded, "It's a pleasure."

"Nice to meet you too," then she turned to Georgie who was giving her an accessing look, "And you."

The carriage rambled on towards the ice house and the interior was plunged into awkward silence.

From the corner of his eye, Victor could see his sister shooting Lavinia wary glances and Patrick studying her intently. He narrowed his eyes at his friend as he got the sudden urge to toss him out of the carriage. The viscount was a good looking man, and many women were known to throw themselves at him. He turned sharply to Lavinia, oddly relieved to see that she had her gaze intently fixed outside the window.

It was one big disaster and he suddenly wished he hadn't brought the other two along. He would take his and Lavinia's bickering any day to the stilted silence of the cab.

It was while they were ordering ice flavors that he realized he didn't know anything about the woman he was to wed. All the times they had met, they had either been taunting each other or he had been kissing the sense out of her.

"Vanilla please," she told the server.

"Vanilla?" Georgie made a face, "There are hundreds of flavors and you choose nothing?"

Lavinia's mouth quirked up, "Vanilla is a flavor. I have had them all and while some are wonderful and some are honestly too disgusting for words, my favorite remains vanilla."

"I shall make you a lover of strawberry yet."

"I find myself unsurprised by your horrid choice," Patrick said, "Banana flavor is superior."

The three jumped into an argument about the merits and demerits of all their favorites, an argument which ended when the server arrived with the Duke's mint flavor and they all agreed that he the crown needed to strip him of his title and lands.

He let them eviscerate him as they wished, just relieved that they had found a common interest.

"Do you want a big wedding?" he asked out of nowhere as they sat there in silence while Patrick and Georgie discussed something.

She glanced at him, eyes wide, "no. It's not a marriage, Your Grace. We barely even need a wedding."

Something inside of him hardened at her words, and he tried to keep his tone even. "My mother will not let us get away with a small one and also, it will cause the gossip mongers to run amok."

Lavinia laughed, but it lacked humor. "My aunt will never forgive me if I did not let her get involved in planning me an extravagant occasion. I believe we should toss them together and elope."

Her smile slipped away, "But it does not matter if she's upset with me now. When she finds out I have signed my right to have children away just to..." she trailed off and pressed her lips together as if she had said too much, "Your sister is delightful."

The Duke narrowed his eyes at her obvious evasiveness, but he had been the one who had made it clear this was not a marriage, so what right did he have now to insist that she be honest with him.

It was just barely two days since he had set up a fence between them and he already wanted to break it and burn it down to nothing.

CHAPTER 9

Two days later, Lavinia found herself squirming under her cousin's intent gaze as the carriage rambled down toward a soiree at the Perkins house.

"Stop that!" she chided him.

He raised a hand in surrender, "I am not doing a thing. I'm all the way over here and you are all the way over there."

"You are infuriating."

"And you are a brilliant actress. You could make a fortune on the stage if your farce marriage to the Duke does not work out."

"Noah!" Lady Hartfield snapped, "Do not say such things to Lavinia. Lavvie, dear, pay him no mind. I do not know what has come over him."

"Other than the fact that I seem to be the only one who can see through her?" He raised a brow at her.

She shifted her gaze away from his, "I do not know what you are talking about."

"Be happy for her," Lavinia's aunt said. "She managed to land a man who she adores. It is so very rare in society to find so many good traits in one person. The Duke is not just well to do, but Lavinia says he is a genuinely kind man."

"Hmm," her cousin hummed, "he is so perfect and dashing," he said sarcastically.

"I loathe you," her mouth twitched.

He guffawed and then the two of them were doubled over laughing much to Lady Hartfield's confusion. She shook her head at them and stepped down from the carriage as it came to a halt.

"Rumors are flying about you and the Duke, dear," her aunt informed her, "I have already gotten several more invitations and people leaving their calling cards. But, if the dowager Duchess fails to acknowledge you tonight-

She didn't need to complete her statement for Lavinia to realize the effect of that.

"It will be fine," Noah patted the hand she had on his arm, "The dowager Duchess is not going to snub you publicly. I'm sure she does not want the sort of rumors that act will bring about."

After their day at the ice parlor, Lavinia had noticed that Victor's sister was skeptical about her. And if the girl was, it wasn't farfetched to assume that her mama may share the same opinion.

She took in a deep breath, "we are holding up the carriage line."

The group of three, with the two women hanging off each of Noah's arms approached the large, double doors of the house, head held high.

It was quite obvious that her presence had been long awaited as she immediately spotted people whispering to each other as she stepped in.

The eyes on her were a mixture of awe, envy, surprise, contempt, derision and

curious. She had suspected that after their public outing, she would have to face something similar to this, but lord, she hadn't thought it would be this obvious.

"I am not the one being scrutinized but I want to tuck tail and run," Noah whispered to her, "This is almost terrifying."

The horror in his voice caused her to bite back a deranged laughter.

"I believe she was compromised," she heard someone whisper, "It is the only way the Duke would ever agree to wed her."

"I heard she trapped him."

"I heard they have been betrothed from childhood. The former Duke arranged it before he passed and the current Duke has no way of breaking out of it."

"Poor man," someone else tsked. "If he had only known she would grow up to be so plain."

Lavinia's ears were burning, but she was a soon to be duchess, she couldn't give in to her temper. She had known people would talk, she just hadn't realized they would be so shameless about it.

The crowd suddenly parted to reveal the Dowager Duchess of Wyld. For one terrifying second, Lavinia thought she would snub her in public, but the woman hadn't gotten to where she was by being a fool.

"Come, child," she smiled at her, a stiff and false smile but a smile nonetheless.

The ton's penchant for gossip was only surpassed by how gullible they tended to be and so they watched with bated breath as Lavinia approached Victor's mother, a

woman she had never met before in her life with a fond smile.

"Your Grace," Lavinia dropped into a curtsy worthy for a queen and the Dowager Duchess laughed.

"Nonsense," she said, loud enough for the people around to hear, "You mustn't address me so formally. We are soon to be family, after all."

With that single move, Lavinia's place had been secured and the gossip around her engagement to the Duke was squashed.

"I had no idea you were capable of showing such deference," someone whispered into her ear.

She turned with a small gasp to see the Duke standing beside her wearing a smile so small that she knew it was just for her.

She smiled sweetly at him and whispered back, "My deference is reserved solely for people who deserve it."

"Let me guess," he said, stealing her away from his mother's side with a practiced ease that to anyone else wouldn't reveal that he was saving the two women from each other, "Everyone but one certain duke?"

She looked thoughtful, "I think that is about right, Your Grace."

"I thought we had gone past Your Grace."

"Have we?" She raised a brow. "I thought that was for when it was just us."

"Do you plan on Your Gracing me into old age?" he asked.

She froze. Honestly, she hadn't thought past a few years from now. It was just now hitting her that she was going to spend years and years of her life with this man.

In an arrangement.

Not a marriage.

The breath sawed out of her and she turned away to comport herself, "I do not see Georgie anywhere."

"Patrick escorted her to get some fresh air. She did not want to be around for the whole display that was going to happen when you arrived," he looked at her, "they have been waiting for you."

"The sharks waiting for a taste of blood which in this case would have been a hint of weakness."

"Or my mother giving you the cut direct."

She sighed, "she does not like me very much, I can tell."

His jaw clenched, "she'll come around."

Lavinia could still feel eyes on her back and they left her feeling tense and too self-conscious. "How long will the curiosity last?"

The Duke winced. "Probably for the rest of your life."

Her jaw dropped to the ground. "For the rest of my life? Impossible. There will always be something new for them. Some new scandal. The interest of the ton is fickle."

They made a sharp turn away from the room and he slanted her a serious look, "Trust me, my lady, the ton can multitask when they set their mind to it. They will always have their eyes on you, just waiting for you to do something completely unforgivable so they can collectively decide that you are not good enough or you are besmirching a great name."

There was something bitter in his voice that made her snap her head to stare at him. When she did, she found that his jaw was clenched tight.

It suddenly hit her that the title had been thrust unto Victor too early. Where everyone was marveled by the young, dashing Duke, she wondered who had ever pitied the youth who had to grow up too fast.

The responsibility must have been daunting to him. She felt her heart ache for him and she resisted the urge to slide her hand into his or hug him, or something as equally ludicrous as that.

"In that case, I shall have to leave you to deal with their curious eyes while I retire to the country and live out the rest of my days."

She felt him still momentarily, "I did not think you would fancy the country life."

Lavinia raised a brow, "What is not to like about riding with the wind in my hair, fresh air and an absence of nosy neighbors?"

"I thought it would be rather dull for someone like you."

"Why is that?"

He rolled his broad shoulders in a shrug, "It seems I do not know you all that well after all."

"It's a good thing you have several years ahead to find out then."

Right as the words left her mouth, she froze and she could feel how still he had gone too. It seemed that it was only just dawning on the both of them that there would be nothing temporary about their arrangement. They could choose to live apart the rest of their lives, but they would still be tied together.

Being tied to the man before her for the rest of her life, she mused, then ruthlessly squashed the hint of giddiness that came to life inside of her.

"I wonder what mysteries I may find," his voice was low, almost intimate and it slid down her skin like a touch.

"Find away," she replied, eyes locked on his, "I'm an open book, Your Grace."

"I also prefer life in the country."

Which meant that they were going to be living under one roof, and most likely with just a wall separating them. Or would she be banished to the other wing of the house? Did she want to be so close to him? Going to bed each night just knowing he was on the other side.

It was only then that she realized they had found their way into a dark alcove, partially hidden by one of the thick pillars that encircled the room.

"Do you have dogs?" she blurted out.

He looked taken aback for a second. "Yes, but I have no fondness for the beasts. Georgianna found them half dead in the woods and brought them home. She's got a dire case of a bleeding heart."

Lavinia laughed. "Truly? How many are they? What are their names? I've always wanted dogs but my aunt dislikes them, they make her sick."

"There are three of them and about their names, you will have to ask my sister. I've never concerned myself with such things," he made a face, "They scratch up the furniture and make an awful amount of noise. Worst of all, they completely ignore Georgianna and insist on following me everywhere."

Her mouth curled up into a fond smile, "You play the brute so well."

The Duke glared at her, very much unamused, "There is nothing feigned about my dislike for those three."

She couldn't help but laugh, entertained by how disgruntled he looked.

"There you are," someone said, approaching them, "This is quite a romantic scene."

They hurriedly pulled away from each other and Lavinia looked over the Duke's shoulder to see Lord Dillon staring at them curiously. Even though their interaction had been completely innocent, Lavinia felt her cheeks heating up like they had been caught doing something bad.

There was also the slightest bit of annoyance at being interrupted, which made no sense.

"My lord," she dropped into a curtsy.

"I had better start getting used to calling you Your Grace," he replied with a twinkle in his eyes.

"Did you need something?" Victor asked curtly and the Viscount turned to him with

barely concealed surprise.

"I came to congratulate the happy couple and get away from some people who believe your new and sudden marriage fever must have affected me too."

She managed to chuckle, "if you'll excuse me, I must go back to my aunt. I have dithered enough."

The Duke opened his mouth to say something and then promptly snapped his mouth back closed. She could have sworn he was going to protest against her leaving. Or maybe it was just wishful thinking.

But as she crossed the room back to her aunt's side, she couldn't help but wonder if she wasn't the only one who hadn't wanted their conversation to end.

Lavinia looked over her shoulder and met those intense blue eyes, staring right at her and paying no attention whatsoever to the man before him. The breath froze in her throat and she quickly snapped her head away.

"Are you alright?" Lady Hartfield asked her, "you look rather flushed."

"I'm alright."

Even as she replied, she could feel his heavy gaze on her like hot poker pressing against her skin. It stayed that way for the rest of the night.

CHAPTER 10

"The green dress will bring out the color of your eyes, dear," Her Aunt said the next day as she stood in the middle of her room in just her petticoat.

"You do not think it makes me look washed out?" She took the dress from the lady's maid and held it up in front of her. It was an apple green color with a bit of lace lining the throat and the ends of the sleeves. A darker green sash made a bow around the waist.

"Not at all."

"Very well then," she nodded at the servant then handed the dress back to her, "This one please."

"I'm surprised Jenny has not come around and I do not remember seeing her at the ball last night either."

Lavinia bit her lip in guilt and avoided Lady Hartfield's probing gaze. "I was planning to check up on her soon."

The truth was that Jenny had gotten a nasty cold and had taken to her bed. The letter she had written to Lavinia said as much. The response she had sent back to her friend wished her quick recovery and some other mundane gossip tacked on, but she had written nothing about her entanglement with the Duke.

On one hand, she didn't know if she was allowed to tell Jenny the truth. She didn't

think even Victor had told his friend the Viscount. On the other, well, she hated to lie to her friend, and she knew that Jenny would take one look at her and know she was lying.

Lavinia was conflicted, and she hated to admit it, but she was glad Jenny was away for a while. At least until she could put her story together.

"She's in bed with a nasty cold," she replied, "I'll pay her a visit soon."

The older woman made a noncommittal sound and then rose up from where she had been sitting, smoothing down the front of her dress, "Very well then, I will be waiting downstairs. Do hurry up, but not too fast. It will not do for you to appear too eager for him."

With that, she left Lavinia to get dressed.

By the time she got downstairs, hair swept up into a secure bun, with a few loose tendrils left to frame her face, The Duke of Wyld was already there, seated in a bright orange sofa. He dwarfed the furniture and the way he lounged back on it made him look like a king on his throne overseeing his subjects.

She wasn't sure if the authority that enveloped him was a result of his title or if it just came naturally to him.

"Your Grace," she curtsied and he rose to his feet. To her surprise, he took her hand and brushed a kiss against the inside of her wrist, right above her gloves.

The feeling of his lips lingering against her skin made her breath stutter and she froze. The touch had barely been enough to be a thing of note, but it affected her all the same.

And then his eyes rose and met hers, rooting her in place.

Lady Hartfield's throat clearing pointedly behind them caused them to jerk apart.

"These are for you," it was only then that she noticed the flowers in his hand. She took the roses with a pleased smile and a moment later, her aunt was at her side, taking them from her hand.

"Thank you, Your Grace, they are beautiful."

"Please sit," he told her.

A smile curved her mouth, "I believe that is my line," she replied before dropping into the bright sofa.

It was only when he joined her in the chair that she realized how small it was. Or maybe he was just so large. His thighs pressed into hers and even through layers of fabric, that contact seemed to burn through her. She could only imagine what the contact would feel like without anything separating their skin.

Lavinia swallowed nervously, refusing to meet neither her aunt's nor her fiancé's gaze. For some reason, she thought they would be able to read her lurid thoughts and be appalled.

"How are you?" Victor's voice cut into her thoughts.

"I've never had a gentleman or any other type of man call on me," she said honestly, "I must admit that I am at a loss. Are we to talk about the weather now?"

"It's a dreary gray that looks like it will be rain."

She shook her head at him, "You could have made some attempt to be poetic."

"I've never seen the appeal in dressing words up when it could be just simply said."

"I still find it hard to believe that there are so many male poets and writers with how common it is for men to think like you," she mused, "I suspect that they are all women who have taken male pseudonyms and identities to avoid a scandal."

"Do you read a lot of poetry?" he asked curiously.

"No," she replied, "But I do read a lot of books," then she lowered her voice, embarrassed, "Mostly romance books, but I've been known to dabble in some mystery and some work about travel and geography."

"I must admit that I've never read a romance book, but I have several travel journals that describe the locations so perfectly, one could almost feel that they have been transported by the words."

"How fascinating," she said, "I have always wanted to travel."

"Where would you like to go?"

"I really have no idea where I would start from. The wall in China perhaps, but then again, I am far too restless to even think about being cooped up in a boat for weeks on end," she let out a breezy laughter, "It is the most contradictory thing ever."

"You are a contradicting woman."

She peeked up at him through her lashes, unable to read his expression. There was something very intense about the way he was staring down at her, like he could see something that she couldn't.

It made her squirm in her seat, "I don't know if that is an insult or a compliment."

The Duke merely smiled at her, unwilling to clarify what he meant. She huffed.

"I did not travel much because I was the sole heir to the duchy, even now my responsibilities keep me rooted to the country. I must admit that it would be delightful to see the world," he looked thoughtful for a moment, "But I'm afraid I could never abandon my duties so callously."

He was as much of a prisoner as she was. Oddly, it made her feel more connected to him than she had ever felt. They were both stuck to an extent. Her by her gender and him by the thing people envied him of; his title.

"What use is a lofty title and wealth if one cannot just toss everything aside and disappear?" She shook her head.

"Those two things are the most attractive thing about me," he pointed out, "Even you must admit that I am only seated here and you are only bound to me now because of those things."

She flinched, a little hurt but it was the truth nonetheless, "You are wrong. Not about me being with you because of those things, I will not bother claiming to be a much better person than I am."

"What then am I wrong about?"

"Those are not the most attractive things about you," she said, "you're an interesting man, Your Grace and I'll take a conversation with you over one with any other gentleman of the ton . If you have ever listened to an impassioned monologue about horses by one of my cousin's friends, you would say the same."

The Duke let out a snort of laughter, "At least he's passionate about something."

She made a face, "Or he just really likes to listen to the sound of his own voice."

"As much as I don't wish the horse whisperer on anyone else, I must say that the ladies of the ton are far worse," he shook his head, "There is so much batting of lashes and fluttering of fans. It still comes as a surprise that my hair does not get wind ruffled after conversations with them."

"You are terrible," she laughed, imagining the picture he painted for her of ladies batting their lashes hard and rapidly enough to create wind.

The conversation progressed, sliding effortlessly from one topic to another. There was never a moment of awkward silence between them.

"The one thing I would like to try if I were a gentleman," Lavinia thought about it for a minute, "Drinking myself to a sore head perhaps. My cousin Noah swears he would stop every morning, but there must be something great about it because he always goes back to it that very evening."

The Duke threw his head back and let out a loud bark of laughter that made the Adam apple on his throat bob. Her eyes were immediately drawn to the strong column of his throat. Her mouth dried up and she felt curiously parched all of a sudden.

"I shall save you a sore head and humiliating nights by telling you that it is not as appealing as your cousin has probably made it to seem. In fact, from someone who has had his fair share of drunken nights, I will warn you to try something else."

She pouted, "I cannot think of anything else. I may just have to try them all till my time runs out."

The Duke shrugged and pressed his leg harder against hers, "Very well then, my lady. I shall help you try them all."

"What do you mean?" She blinked at him, confused.

He leaned closer, almost caging her into a side of the chair. She would have felt trapped and irritated if it were anybody else, but it was him, his leather and spice scent filling her lungs.

"I've never planned to live my life in the drudgery of regular genteel life," he hesitated, "And you do not have to either. I shall sweeten the pot of becoming my Duchess for you. If you want to imbibe in alcohol or ride astride, I shall be all too willing to indulge you in that. Under my supervision of course."

"Good," all the words she knew had departed her and she could only give that bland reply.

Amusement lit his eyes, "Good?"

Lady Hartfield cleared her throat from the sofa across the room, but instead of springing apart, the Duke took his time moving away from her till he was completely on his side of the chair again and she could breathe fully.

"I think calling hours are over," he dug out his pocket watch and she was shocked to see that it was a beaten up silver piece.

"It belonged to my grandfather," he explained when he caught her staring, then rose to his feet, "I must leave now."

She stood up too and then curtsied, "Your Grace."

Lady Hartfield curtsied as he walked past her and out of the room. As soon as he was gone, Lavinia fell back into the chair with a sigh, her hand over her chest. Why did he affect her so much?

An arrangement such as theirs should have been devoid of any thing that wasn't platonic. Was she the only one being affected then? The thought made her chest feel tight.

"Are you alright, dear?" Her aunt asked, eyes searching hers.

She nodded, unable to form the lie in her mouth that she was fine.

"The way he looks at you darling," Lady Hartfield sighed wistfully, "He must be really taken with you."

She sat up, eyes wide, "And H-how is it that he looks at me?"

"I do not have the words to explain it, but quite simply put, only a man who is smitten can look at a woman like that. Everything else can be feigned, but the eyes stay honest."

Those words replayed in Lavinia's head for the rest of the day and haunted her even into her dreams that night.

CHAPTER 11

Lavinia stared at the selection of dresses strewn over her bed and heaved a sigh. Now that she knew that her family was in financial straits, she understood why she had only been given enough for very few clothes for the season.

The knowledge did nothing to solve her problem though. The clothes should have been more than enough for one season but as it stood, she had worn and repeated most of them and soon, the members of the ton would begin to whisper about her being painfully unqualified to be duchess or worse, that she was a fortune hunter, eager to get her hands on his money because the Hartfield's didn't have two pennies to rub together between them.

With another sigh she dropped into the nearest chair, biting at her lips in thought.

She supposed that she could get the lady's maid to make some brilliant adjustments on some of the dresses to make them appear to be completely different ones.

Annoyed with her line of thoughts, she made to walk out of the room and ran right into her aunt.

"Oh I'm so sorry. Are you alright?" She said apologetically.

The woman rubbed her forehead where her niece's had bumped into hers, "Quite," she ran an assessing eye over her, "What has got you in such a conniption?"

"It's nothing," she replied with a stiff smile.

Lady Hartfield's gaze shifted to over her shoulder and immediately took note of the dresses littered about the bird, "What's going on here?"

"It's nothing at all," she hurried to say, but her aunt's narrowed eyes clearly said she didn't believe her.

"I am not going to stop asking so you may as well come out with it, Lavvie."

She scowled, hesitant to look ungrateful but she knew Lady Hartfield wouldn't accept anything but the entire truth. Her shoulder drooped with defeat.

"It seems that I'm about to run out of suitable clothes. I do not mean to be greedy or ungrateful. Nothing like that, I promise," the words tumbled out one after the other almost in one breath, "But I never expected to be out so much. Getting engaged was unexpected much less getting engaged to a Duke. And I-"

Her aunt raised a hand to stop her, "I completely understand, and I honestly feel silly for not realizing it earlier. I've just been so happy to see you out and about and enjoying the season that I did not think of your wardrobe."

"I can get some of my clothes worked on to make them look different."

Lady Hartfield shook her head sternly, "You will do no such thing."

"Well, what would you have me do?" She threw her hands up in the air.

"We are going to the modiste," Lady Hartfield said, "And now don't give me that look. You'll be a duchess soon and I will not have the entire ton looking down at you and seeing you as less than worthy to be with the Duke. I have a bit of money I managed to put aside."

"I cannot allow you-"

"I am not asking for your permission, Lavinia," she sniffed, "Get dressed, I'll have the footmen get the carriage ready."

With that, she whirled around and left, leaving Lavinia feeling both immensely grateful and guilty. She decided that she would swallow her pride and accept her aunt's generous offer, but she would pay her back every dime as soon as she became the duchess and got some pin money or stipend.

With her mind made up about that, she changed into a striped blue and grey dress, tied on her bonnet and left the house.

The carriage stopped at one of the cheaper dressmaker's shops and they alighted.

"I'm thinking one or two ball gowns and day dresses, a new glove perhaps," Lady Hartfield nodded, "We can add a-"

"Lady Hartfield, Miss Proctor," someone called.

The women turned to see the dowager duchess of Wyld standing at the end of the street, her lips pursed.

They exchanged a glance before moving towards her.

"Your Grace," they curtsied.

"I saw you headed toward that shop," the words were spat out of her mouth with mild disdain, "That will not do, Miss Proctor, unless you plan on completely embarrassing my son. What would people think if they walked in there and saw you rifling through cheap fabric and plain designs."

Lavinia exchanged another glance with her aunt, "I'm afraid, Your Grace, that that is all we can afford."

"For someone whom the ton has dubbed a fortune hunter, you are rather terrible at being one," the dowager duchess said, causing Lavinia's eyes to go comically wide, "Come along now, I booked the day with Madame Vandeleur and it's a good thing I did too."

They watched the woman walk away, head held high and spine straight as a ruler.

"Unless you plan on disobeying a direct order from your soon to be mother-in-law, let's go," Lady Hartfield said.

Shaking her head, she followed after her aunt.

The interior of the modiste shop looked like no other shop she had been in. It was very obvious that the place catered to people with much deeper pockets. The dowager Duchess had the position and money to not just shop at will from Madame Vandeleur, she could also book the shop for the whole day to avoid dealing with other people.

Madame Vandeleur was a very slender, pale woman with onyx dark hair tied into a severe bun at the base of her neck.

"This is Lady Hartfield and her niece, Miss Proctor," the dowager duchess announced as they stepped in, "Miss Proctor is to be married to my son."

Lavinia winced at the dowager duchess's tone that clearly implied what she thought about the match. Apparently, she didn't think much of it. At her side, her aunt stiffened and then squeezed her hand in support.

"Welcome," the modiste said in a deep French accent, "What would you like to get today?"

Lavinia opened her mouth to reply, but the dowager duchess beat her to it, "Three ball gowns, day dresses, riding garb and gloves."

At the younger woman's gaping look, she rolled her eyes, "Consider it an advance on your pin money. And if things do not work out between the both of you, then consider it a gift."

Lavinia shifted her shocked stare to the Frenchwoman who stood off to the side, nonplussed by the conversation.

The dowager waved her hand, "Do not worry about her. She's discreet."

"Well in that case," Lady Hartfield took her niece's hand, "I believe we will be leaving and you shall have to find some other people to belittle."

"Belittle? On the contrary, Lady Hartfield, what I'm doing is speaking my mind. So I shall be quite blunt with you, several people saw us walk in here together, if you insist on walking into that other shop, you may either ruin Madame Vandeleur's business or cause them to speculate that we are not on the good standing we have managed to convince them we are on."

"Take a seat, please," the modiste motioned to the sofa at the side.

The dowager's eyes narrowed at them, waiting to see what they would do. Lavinia knew she was right and it didn't matter that her opinion of them or rather her was poor, they couldn't afford to put the match between her and the Duke into more public scrutiny, especially as they had been doing so well in the public eye.

She gently urged her aunt into the seat.

Madame Vandeleur's assistants appeared one by one with bolts of fabric held out on their outstretched hands. With her aunt's help, she chose a few fabrics in pastel colors.

"Is that acceptable?" she asked the Frenchwoman when she stared at Lavinia's latest selection with her mouth pressed into a thin line.

"People who come to my shop, do not do so for the sake of playing it safe," she replied and walked away to bring more fabric.

"What does that mean?" she asked.

The woman stopped in her tracks and then turned around slowly, "Anyone can give you the pastels and the forgettable dresses. I prefer a challenge."

The dowager scoffed, "Do not encourage her. You shall only give the ton more reason to call her wild and unsuitable."

Lavinia had never met a challenge that she didn't want to face head on. Her stubborn streak was the sole reason she had caught the Duke's attention and was now well on her way to becoming his Duchess, so she was long past seeing it as a flaw.

She should want to please the dowager if she wanted any sort of peace in her future marriage. Being seen as unsuitable by the woman would not do at all.

But Victor hadn't chosen one a fragile flower, he had chosen her, knowing exactly who she was. Well, the dowager duchess was just going to have to try harder to get rid of her if she didn't think she passed muster.

"I would like to revise all my choices."

The shop went eerily quiet and her aunt bent to whisper furiously into her ear, "What do you think you are doing, young lady?"

"Giving that judgmental woman something to be appalled about," she whispered back, brown eyes bright and excited.

Lady Hartfield only let out a sigh and shook her head at the girl.

"Pardon?" the Frenchwoman asked.

"Do you have fabric in bolder colors? A navy blue perhaps?"

The woman's eyebrows went up, "I do. I also have a light shade of red that will be most excellent for you. Would you like to go through my latest catalog?"

The dowager spluttered, mouth dropping open in shock, "What do you think you're doing, girl?"

"You did say it was an advance on my pin money," Lavinia responded breezily, already headed deeper into the shop with the assistants in tow.

Her aunt, not wanting to be caught alone with the fuming dowager duchess hurried after her.

Neither of the shop's occupants saw a smile tug at the dowager's mouth a moment later.

Lavinia and Lady Hartfield arrived back at their house hours later, exhausted but satisfied. The Madame had promised that her clothes would be made a priority and would be ready in a week.

She had been able to leave the shop with a light yellow dress that appeared almost gold and trimmed with lace and hand beaded. It had been made for a lady whose family had had to flee the country hastily and adjusted to fit her.

"She detests me," Lavinia wailed as they stepped into the house.

"Who is that?" Lord Hartfield, who had just stepped out of his study, asked.

"The dowager duchess of Wyld," Lady Hartfield replied, "we had a very eventful day."

His gaze zeroed on the package in the footman's hand, "what is that? Did you go for some shopping?"

"Some light shopping," the older woman shrugged, "and then we ran into the duchess who all but insisted we join her in a more upscale establishment."

"She detests me," Lavinia reiterated.

"I do not believe the Duchess likes anyone in particular, except her late husband. She tolerates the rest of us," her uncle said.

"Go on up to your room and rest, my dear, you must be exhausted," her aunt said, "And do not worry yourself about the duchess. If she cannot see that you love the Duke and the pair of you are happy together, then she must be blind."

She tried not to wince at her aunt's words, instead, she pasted on a smile and hurried up the stairs before the Hartfield's could see through the strained smile.

Falling back into her bed, she lay there, staring up at the ceiling while her mind raced with thoughts.

She and the Duke were getting along, but was she foolish to be holding out hope for more? She refused to believe that a cordial friendship with no love or passion was as far as this thing between them would ever go.

CHAPTER 12

"Letter for you, ma'am," the butler announced as he walked into the breakfast room, one hand at his back and the other holding out a letter with a regal seal.

Lavinia knew who it was from even before she took it, "Thank you, Ruben."

The man nodded and walked away. Ignoring her aunt's curious glance, she hurriedly ripped open the letter and read it.

"Is that from the Duke?" Lady Hartfield asked.

"Yes," she ducked her head, "He has invited me for a ride through Hyde Park in his phaeton."

When she looked up, she found two pairs of eyes fixed on her. Her uncle had even lowered his newspaper to stare at her with surprise.

"Is there a problem?" She asked worriedly.

"Not at all," Lady Hartfield smiled, "I don't think we've just never heard you sound so excited about being in a societal gathering."

"It's not a societal gathering," she argued.

"What's not a societal gathering?" Noah stumbled in, hair standing on end and eyes bleary.

"Good morning," she smirked at him, "Did you get any sleep at all?"

He dropped into the chair beside her with a groan, "I am never going out with Remington again."

His mother scoffed, "We've heard all of that before and yet here you are, looking like something the cat dragged in."

"Not so loud," he winced, burying his head in his hands.

"You should have just stayed in bed," Lavinia pointed out.

"And miss the early morning gossip? Never," he peeked up at her from the spaces between his fingers, "What is this I hear about you thawing out the Dowager duchess? Someone at the club said the both of you were seen walking down the street arm in arm."

"I used to think it was only ladies that were known for gossiping," she shook her head.

"With age comes wisdom," Lord Hartfield teased before picking his paper back up.

"What's not a social gathering?" Noah repeated, fixing a plate for himself.

"A ride through Hyde park in an open carriage," Lavinia replied, marveling at the amount of food he piled onto his plate. If she ate like that, she would have been the size of a horse.

"There's not a more social gathering than that," he replied, "Everybody is going to be gawking at you and calling out greetings from their own carriages. It's almost as bad as a house party."

"Do not discourage her," Lady Hartfield chided, "She is very excited to see him."

Her cheeks heated up as her cousin's head snapped to the side to stare at her, "She is?" Then, "I should not have turned so fast."

"Shall I have Ruben make you some medicine for your head?" His mother asked worriedly.

Lord Hartfield snorted from behind his paper, "Ruben's care may just be worse than the sore head he has."

The young man shuddered dramatically and Lavinia let out a peal of laughter, "You do not have any of my sympathy. By now, you should know your limits and stick to them."

Then she rose to her feet, "Thank you for breakfast, and I wish I could dither, but I must go get ready for my day."

Her cousin narrowed his eyes at her, "I cannot believe it. She's positively glowing! I used to think the Duke was such a stick in the mud but I have changed my mind. If Lavvie can find his presence tolerable, he must be swell."

She rolled her eyes at him, refusing to confirm or deny.

"Young love," she heard her aunt sigh wistfully before she went out of earshot.

She couldn't help but wonder if she was really just fooling everyone into thinking she felt something for the Duke...or if she wasn't.

"May I come along?" Georgie batted her eyelashes at him as he made his way to the foyer.

The Duke propped his hat up on his head and raised his brows at her in surprise, "You may not."

Her sudden interest in wanting to join him was suspicious and he wondered what her ploy was.

"Do you need extra money?" He scowled at her, "You cannot just spend all your allowance in a matter of days, Georgie. You must learn some discipline."

She rolled her eyes, "It's not about my allowance. I do not want to stay at home all day and I have no suitors coming to call on me."

"It is entirely your fault that you do not."

She gaped at him, "You called them all fortune hunters!"

"And you told Lord Marksens that he is starting to resemble the horses he breeds. Honestly, Georgie, you are going to find yourself firmly on the shelf and Mother is going to blame me for it."

"Have you seen him laugh? The resemblance is uncanny," she retorted, "And I shall not end up on the shelf. A ride through the park will offer me opportunities to scout for decent gentlemen."

His eyes narrowed and he tried to keep his voice even when he said, "and how are you to know they are decent? From the way they handle their horses or their conveyances? You're not coming with me, forget about it."

He continued on his way to the front door. To his surprise, he pulled it open to find Patrick standing there.

"Are you leaving?" he asked.

"He's going for a ride with Miss Proctor," his sister piped up behind him. "And he will not let me come along. My brother is being quite greedy with his betrothed's attention."

"That so, chap?" the Viscount smirked, "I never thought I'd see the day."

He shot his sister a quelling glare over his shoulder, "what is that supposed to mean?"

"How about we both come along? That way I can keep Georgie occupied while you are busy with Miss Proctor," Patrick suggested.

The Duke bought time by adjusting his dark green jacket. In truth, he didn't want either of them to come along because he planned to discuss some marriage terms with her after what his mother had told him about her run in with them the other day.

He supposed they could have the discussion at a later date, "all right, you may both come along."

Victor ordered the footmen to switch the phaeton for a barouche and climbed onto the vehicle.

"Are you taking a fancy to the chit?" Patrick asked as soon as he climbed on.

Victor jerked, surprised by the blunt question, "what the bloody hell are you on about?"

"Georgie was right when she said you don't want to share Miss Proctor's attention. Like the other night when-"

"I'm this close to tossing you over and riding off without you," he said through clenched jaw. "She's different from the other wax figure debutantes and that is as good enough reason as any to marry her."

"Hmmm."

He was about to ask what exactly that sound meant but his sister's footsteps against the cobblestone made him snap his mouth shut.

Of course he didn't fancy Lavinia. She was just a means to an end for him. He needed a duchess to get his mother off his back and she was as good as any. That was all there was to it.

Victor was silent throughout the ride to the Hartfield town house while the Viscount and his sister made idle conversation which they tried and failed to rope him into.

He stepped down from the carriage and made his way to the front door of the Hartfield house. The door was pulled open by the dour faced butler after the first knock.

"Your Grace," he bowed, "if you-"

"Your Grace," Lavinia cut in, rushing into the foyer, still tying her bonnet into a knot under her jaw.

He took his time taking her in. Her cheeks were flushed in excitement and her eyes were bright. He wondered if that flush in her cheeks would be there when he covered her body with his and...

Pushing that thought away, he cleared his throat and then held out his elbow, "My lady, shall we?"

She placed her small hand on his sleeve and together they walked out of the house. Her steps faltered as she caught sight of the other two occupants of the vehicle.

"They insisted," he explained with a wince.

"It's alright. I appreciate the company."

The same couldn't be said about him unfortunately. He scowled at her as he helped her onto the carriage, wondering why he felt irritated that she wasn't more annoyed by their unexpected company.

"My lady, you look lovely, as always," The viscount said with a rakish smirk that made Victor itch to knock out a tooth or two from his mouth.

"My lord," Lavinia nodded a greeting with a smile.

The greeting between her and Georgie was quite stiff to his surprise, the raised eyebrow Lavinia shot him clearly told him that she too was puzzled by his sister's sudden hostility. He scowled at his sister, regretting allowing her to come along.

"I hope I'm not intruding on any prior plans you had for the day," he turned to face her.

She smiled, "As a matter of fact, I planned to browse through the bookshop for something new."

"We can make a stop along if you wish."

"An entire day is wasted on that endeavor. It is an errand best done by myself. I would hate to bore everyone else out."

"You underestimate yourself," he said frankly, "I could never be bored with you."

He only realized what he had said after the words left his mouth but he didn't regret them when he saw the open pleasure that filled her eyes.

"Then perhaps we may turn it into a future outing?" She asked.

The sun slanted above her, burnishing the ringlets that escaped her bonnet, a brilliant chestnut and the barest hint of copper. He only just realized that her eyes weren't just green, they were a brilliant mix of gold and brown.

Where he had once thought she had completely ordinary features, now he realized how lovely she was. Her beauty was quiet, but it hit like a bullet.

He wanted to kiss her.

He wanted to take that plump lower lip in his and suckle at it.

"Yes," he finally said when he remembered that she had asked a question.

The carriage rambled into Hyde Park and Victor braced himself for the staring and gossiping that awaited them. He wasn't disappointed when a matron and her brood of daughters ducked their heads and began to whisper furiously.

"I'm reconsidering waiting through the bans being read and an elaborate wedding," he bent his head to whisper to her.

"Oh? I'm assuming you have an alternate plan."

"Gretna Green and then to my country seat, never to be seen again."

She giggled, "How scandalous, Your Grace. You would send the dowager Duchess to drink."

"I do not think that is necessarily a bad thing."

Lavinia slapped a hand over her mouth to cover her laughter but the mirth was apparent in her eyes.

"How naughty," she said, "And here I was thinking you were a model of decorum."

He recoiled, "Whatever made you to think that?"

She gazed at him like they were alone in the world, and that nothing else outside of him mattered. It was enough to make a man a little crazy. He was used to being deferred to and seen as important everywhere he went, but never in his life had he felt such singular focus.

It made him feel greedy.

"Maybe it's just something about your-" he never got to hear the rest because at that moment, her eyes caught something in the distance.

"Oh no," she cried.

The barouche had slid to a stop because of some traffic ahead, and she took advantage of that to unlatch the door and jump out.

"Lavinia!" He roared as she raced forward.

"What is she doing?" Patrick asked but the Duke was already leaping out and racing after her.

Ahead, he saw the white ball of fur in the middle of the street and a distracted phaeton driver about to crash into it.

"Goddammit," Victor cursed under his breath. Lavinia was extremely fast for a lady and the phaeton was now dangerously close to the terrified dog. Even if she managed to rescue it, she would unlikely get hurt in the process.

"Stop! Stop!" He roared at the driver, attracting attention.

The man turned to him confused, and that was when the reckless chit jumped right in front of the vehicle and grabbed the animal.

Lavinia's impulsiveness must have been contagious, because the Duke didn't think. He jumped straight into bedlam and snatched the lady and dog out of the way.

Lavinia tumbled into him with a surprised shriek and they ended up sprawled on the side of the street, the Duke lying under her and his arms around her.

Barely a second later, the phaeton rushed past them in a blur of wheels.

"Are you well?" he asked her.

She blinked wide eyes down at him, looking lost, and then a moment later she scrambled away, color high on her cheeks, "yes, I believe I am fine."

"Now that that is out of the way. Are you out of your senses?" Victor bit out, climbing to his feet and trying to ignore the way his heart was pounding with terror.

If he had hesitated even for a moment...

He refused to think about what could have happened.

"Me?" She reeled back, "he would have hurt poor Andrew."

He looked between her and the dog she was petting lovingly, saw her defiant stare and realized there was no use chastising her.

"You named the dog already?" he asked instead. "You do not even know if he belongs to someone."

She held the ratty thing up. "Anyone who will let their dog look so sickly does not deserve it."

The thing was already staring up at her with a disgusting amount of devotion and he made a face at the pair they made. "You would have gotten yourself killed. Never do that again."

"But the dog-"

"I do not care about the blasted dog, I care about you!" he roared.

Lavinia went so still that she could have passed for a statue, "oh," she finally said after several moments of simply staring at him wide eyed.

"Is she alright?" Patrick asked from behind them.

"She's fine," the Duke responded.

"I've just realized I cannot take the dog home," Lavinia said, mouth turned down at the corners and then she turned those brilliant eyes at him. "I cannot leave Andrew here."

Even before the words left his mouth, he knew he was a fool for falling for those

puppy dog eyes and he knew he was getting more entangled in her than he ought. "I will keep him for you."

CHAPTER 13

"Y ou cannot intend on keeping that thing in this house," his mother looked aghast as the footman carried the dog through the house.

"Hello to you too, Mother," Victor replied, taking off his hat and jacket and handing them to his butler.

"It is most probably flea-ridden," the dowager Duchess cried, "Where did you find such a creature from and what compelled you to bring it to this house?"

"My house," he shot her a level look that made her splutter.

His sister was only too glad to narrate everything that had happened on their outing, "The poor dog was left in the middle of the street and a reckless phaeton driver almost ran over it, but Miss Proctor jumped into the street and saved it at the risk of her own life."

"Sacrificing your own life for a homeless dog is not admirable, Georgie," the Duke snapped. "So you can quit making it seem like she did a heroic feat. It was more stupid than valiant."

"The girl is nothing but trouble," his mother threw her hands into the air dramatically, "Oh Victor, is it not obvious now that she is less than suitable?"

"She is perfectly suitable for me, mother," he said matter-of-factly.

"She is alright, I suppose," Georgie added with a shrug, earning her a deadly glare from the dowager Duchess.

"You cannot really think to go ahead with this wedding!" The woman clutched at her pearls and met air as she hadn't put them on this morning.

"I thought your opinion of her had improved after the affair with the modiste."

She harrumphed, "I only did that for your sake. She would have given you a bad name as being tight with the purse strings otherwise."

"Hmm," he said uninterestedly while rifling through the invitations stacked on the silver tray. He held up an announcement for a show by the royal Opera and decided that he would take Miss Proctor as his guest.

Did she like the opera? He would make sure to enquire.

"Miss Proctor saving the mangled mutt still does not explain why it is here and not in the Hartfield house."

He gathered the invitations he had an interest in and began to head towards his study, "Lady Hartfield does not like dogs."

"Neither do I!" she screeched.

Georgie covered her mouth with her hand to hide her giggles. The Duke ignored them both and disappeared into the sanctuary of his study for some much needed peace.

What had he been thinking adding another exasperating woman to the mix?

Speaking of which, he suspected Lavinia would want to see the dog soon. Which

meant he would have to plan an appropriate outing.

He sighed.

The next day, he was not at all surprised to find his sister eagerly waiting for him at the foyer with her parasol in hand and a blinding smile on her face.

"Let me take a guess, you are so utterly bored and would like to come along with me for a walk in the park with Miss Proctor."

"You are catching on rather quickly."

He dragged a hand through his hair, "Let's be on our way then."

"Let's."

Earlier he had sent a note around to the Hartfield house inviting Miss Proctor and her aunt for a stroll through the park.

"Hello, chap," Patrick waved at him from where he had been lounging against a tree. Then he made his way towards them, "Surprised to see you here."

And then he looked over Victor's shoulder and saw the footman with the now cleaned up dog with a smart blue now tied around its neck.

"Is that the mutt from the other day?" The Viscount's eyes were saucer wide.

"Yes," he said with irritation, already looking around for a familiar head of brown hair.

"He looks quite distinguished now," Patrick laughed.

It was at that moment that he spotted Lavinia in tow with Lady Hartfield. She was in a deep pink dress and a matching bonnet, a snowy white parasol propped over her shoulder.

Her eyes lit up with excitement as soon as she saw him, but the excitement doubled when she caught sight of the dog being held by the footman behind him.

"Andrew!" she cried, increasing the length of her strides till she had the dog in her arms, cooing and fussing over it, "You look so smart and healthy now. How adorable."

He cleared his throat, "do I have to compete with a four legged creature now?"

"Your Grace," she laughed, dropping into a deep curtsy, lashes fluttering at him, "are you jealous of Andrew?"

He smirked at her.

"Your Grace," Lady Hartfield reached them and then made a face at the dog, "Lavvie, you know dogs make me sick."

"I rescued him from certain harm yesterday and the Duke was kind enough to keep him for me," she dropped the dog back on the ground and grabbed hold of its matching blue leash.

"Do you think Andrew would make a wonderful addition to your dogs in the country?" She asked as they began to walk.

Victor thought about the large beasts who weighed almost the same as her and couldn't see any good outcome for Andrew who looked more or less like a large, hairy rat.

"Of course," he said, "but I already have to deal with those two hounding my every step, I am loathe to add a third. And moreover, Andrew might just get lost in the factory."

Her head snapped to him, gaze full of curiosity, "there's a factory? Is it yours? What do you make?"

"It is in fact a brewery. I make and process my own alcoholic beverage. It is the major source of income and employment on my lands," he glanced over at her. "Most people do not know about the brewery though, I am not ashamed of it but neither do I advertise it. It is not the thing for a titled gentleman of my ilk to get his hands dirty with such a menial occupation, but the brewery is my biggest source of joy."

"Tell me everything about it!"

"Are you sure?" He raised a brow, shocked at her apparent interest, "I am afraid it might get quite boring for you."

"Please?" she requested. It was a step to learning about him, to fitting into his life.

"We start with barley," he began. "First we steep it in water and let it sit. It goes through a process called fermentation where the barley is converted to organic acids. Yeast is necessary for the process. It is quite more complicated than it sounds and requires a lot of patience. My great grandfather established the brewery back when our lands stopped turning a good yield and the sheep were dying. The land was suffering and the tenants too," he explained. "It started off as a sort of experiment with his brother and then there was a fire that tore the whole thing down."

She gasped in dismay. "Oh no. That must have been horrible."

"It was, or so I have been told," he shrugged, "he was a persistent man though, and so

rather than give up on the brewery, he rebuilt. My father used to say I inherited his passion for it."

"He did not have an interest in it?"

"No," Victor said, "neither my father nor grandfather did. They turned it over to managers and generally ignored it, focusing more on the land and working hard to ensure it became fertile again. When I got the title, my first order of business was enlarging the factory and purchasing some necessary machines that would aid the process. That way, I was able to employ more of the tenants."

"How long does all of this take?" They had stopped walking as they got to a weeping cherry tree and stopped under it to shade themselves from the sun.

"There are several processes involved in the production. As I said, it is a thin that requires patience. There is the Malting process which takes about ten days. This is where we soak the barley and then dry it afterwards. The resulting product which is the malt is crushed."

"Is that where the machine comes in? In crushing it? Or are they hand crushed?"

His mouth quirked up, "I think if I am not careful, you will milk me of all information and then go on to set up your own factory which would rival even mine."

She blushed, "Nonsense, a woman cannot own and operate a factory."

"You may just be the first."

"I would love to see all the things you have described, they sound so fascinating," Lavinia breathed, "What happens next after the malt is crushed?"

"The malt contains some sugar, not the sugar you are familiar with, mind you," he pointed out when she looked confused, "The sugar needs to be extracted and we do that by mixing the crushed malt with boiling water. It creates something we call a mash. Later we strain the mash, boil it with additives like herbs or sugars, mostly for taste, color and aroma of the brew."

"Adding yeast is the final step and then the entire thing is left to age in barrels. It can take weeks, months or years. I have a brew that has been sitting for about three years now and I plan on letting it age for many, many more."

When he faced her, her jaw had dropped open and he found her gaping at him.

"Is there a problem?"

"You may just be the most fascinating man in the whole of London."

A startled laugh burst out of him and she smiled in response, "I have just realized that I am no better than your cousin's friends who bore you with monologues of their horses."

"Nonsense," she waved him away, "it is far different."

"How so?"

"Well, I enquired about your work and it was enlightening to listen to. I do not know any other lords who own a brewery and are very invested in it. Meanwhile I know a hundred lords who own horses and spend all of their money purchasing even more expensive ones just for the sake of feeling superior to the rest of the gentlemen of the ton," she pursed her lips, "I have never in my life been impressed by a man for his stallion's ability to race around London in mere minutes. Impressed by the beast itself, sure, but impressed by the owner, never."

The dog began to tug at his leash and she tugged it back to her side, "Do you think he has seen a friend?"

"A Rodent most likely," he said.

"Andrew is not like that," she declared staunchly, "He would never bully the weaker animals."

The Duke threw his head back, laughter rumbling out of his mouth, "Believe me, Miss Proctor, your Andrew is just about the same size and may be even less vicious than a rodent. He would need to be protected from one as a matter of fact."

Lavinia's grin was sassy, "He may be small but he is fearsome."

He nodded in support, but the twitching of his mouth gave him away and she rolled her eyes. He had to admit that he had never had as much fun with a lady in his life.

Not even those nights of alcohol and depravity with nameless women in his much younger years had been quite as entertaining.

What was it about Lavinia Proctor?

Part of it was her wide eyed innocence, there was nothing scheming or coy about her. Speaking to her was not an elaborate word parry. There was no need to search for hidden context or disguised meanings.

There was also no strained silences or a need to be careful with words to avoid giving any lady false hope.

With Lavinia it was banter and laughter and the magnetic attraction he had been trying so hard to bury.

"Do you like the Opera?" The Duke asked.

"Your sister and the Viscount must be very close," she was staring over at them, wearing a thoughtful expression.

"They are," he replied impatiently, "I was asking if you liked the-"

"Andrew!" Lavinia suddenly cried as the dog leaped forward and tore away from the leash in her hands, "Andrew, no!"

Then she turned those big, brilliant green eyes at him, "Help me."

He was embarrassed at how eager he was to do her bidding when she looked at him in that way.

As the dog disappeared in a blur of white fur, the Duke took off after it and she followed after them, holding her dress up and trying not to trip over the end of her skirt.

"Lavvie!" Her mother called as she jumped into action but she ignored her, too focused on the ball of white dashing through the park.

Andrew made a sharp turn just before Victor could get his hands on him and the dog disappeared into a neat row of hedges to the side.

Oh goodness, he was going to get stuck in one of the thorny bushes and get seriously hurt. Did the stupid dog have no sense of self-preservation whatsoever?

Lavinia followed after dog and man into the hedges. When she came out of the other side of the fence of shrubs, she found that the both of them had disappeared in the maze like structure of vegetation.

Paths stretched out from every direction and she immediately continued forward, deciding that she had the least penchant for getting lost if she just continued to move straight ahead.

"Your Grace!" She called, then, "Andrew."

The dog probably wasn't familiar with the name, "Your Grace!" She called louder, pushing through the network of plants.

She heard a bark in the distance and picking up her skirts she immediately began to race forward. Until she found herself at a dead end. Narrowing her eyes in annoyance, she retraced her steps back to where she assumed she had come from only to meet another dead end.

Oh no, she thought miserably. She could have just waited at the tree for the Duke to get the dog.

He might not even know she had followed him in and when he managed to catch the dog, he would leave her all by herself in this confusing maze.

"Victor!" She yelled, "Victor! I'm here!"

When that didn't work, she decided to keep on trying her luck and after a few more dead ends and frustrated groans, her work paid off and she emerged at the other side of the maze.

There was a clear pond on the side and the dog was racing towards it.

"Andrew, no! You cannot swim," she could not swim either, but she felt confident that she could get to the dog before he made it into the water.

Andrew paused at the edge of the pond and for a second, she was relieved, "Good boy, Andrew."

The dog turned its head to stare at her with its big puppy eyes. The next second Andrew leaped into the water.

"Miss Proctor, don't you dare!" The Duke's voice roared.

The dog began to whimper, and Victor was a fair distance away. She bit her lip in indecision, glancing between the drowning dog and the approaching Duke.

Lavinia didn't think. She leaped in after the dog.

"Blasted woman! Why do you have ears when you never listen?"

"Victor," she screamed, water rushing into her mouth, "I cannot swim."

When she turned around, she found Andrew barking from the river bank. It seemed the little demon could swim after all.

The mild current of the stream began to push her downstream and she flailed her hands, all while her dress weighed her down.

There was the sound of splashing water and then large arms wrapped around her waist and began to pull her out of the water.

She clung to the large man desperately, terrified and relieved at the same time.

"What were you thinking?" He snapped at her as he dropped her down on the grass and knelt before her.

"Andrew was drowning," she defended.

They both turned towards the dog which was now leisurely walking around the bank, shaking himself off and looking like he hadn't just caused a carriage load of problems.

"Well, I thought he was drowning," her teeth began to chatter and he immediately pulled off his jacket and placed it over her shoulders.

"You and Andrew should stay as far from each other as possible starting right this second. The combination of the two of you is a recipe for disaster," he sighed, "How are we going to explain disappearing into a maze and getting drenched?"

She giggled, "If I were not already set to marry you, I would be worried about being ruined."

"You should take more care with your life, Miss Proctor," he shook his head, "At this point, I am afraid to leave you alone for even a second lest you find yourself entangled in a similar situation."

She only laughed at how disgruntled he sounded, pleased to note the hint of worry and panic in his voice. He cared for her. He truly cared for her.

Blinking up at him, she allowed her eyes to travel up his arms. His cotton white shirt was now entirely translucent and she could see the strong muscle of his arm, the wet fabric plastered to it provocatively.

His hair still dripped water and was beginning to curl the slightest bit, falling over his face and giving him a callous air.

She watched as his own gaze took her in in turn. She followed his gaze to where her

nipples stood visible against the wet fabric of her dress. The material molding against her breasts and leaving nothing to the imagination.

Her fingers itched to close his jacket around her, but instead, she opened her fists and allowed the jacket to slip off her shoulders.

"Lavinia," her name was a tortured sound bursting out of his mouth.

The Duke's nose flared and when his eyes met hers again, they looked conflicted. He looked like a man that was fighting for control and oh, how she wanted him to lose that battle against his own control.

Lavinia should have felt afraid, she was in a secluded area with a man that was staring at her like he couldn't wait to devour her piece by piece but all she felt was an answering desire to submit to the pulsing desire between them.

"Lavinia," he was closer now and his voice was barely a puff of air between them.

"Yes," she said just as softly.

His mouth brushed over hers, once, twice, the featherlight contact making her tremble. There was an ache inside of her and she knew that only the Duke could make it stop.

After what felt like years of the sweetest torture, his mouth slanted over hers in a kiss that robbed her of all thought.

Heat raced up her spine and made her curl into him. She wanted more, she was ravenous for the taste of him and when his tongue teased against the seams of her mouth, she opened for him willingly.

His hand cupped her jaw and he pulled her closer. It wasn't nearly close enough for her.

Just as his tongue slid into her mouth, the dog barked and the moment was shattered abruptly. Much to her disappointment, the Duke tore his mouth away and rose to his feet and held out his hand to her, "Come. We must go. You will catch a cold."

Ducking her head to hide her disappointed pout, she allowed him to help her to her feet and then he grabbed the dog.

As they arrived at the end of the maze, Lord Dillon, a footman and Lady Hartfield burst through the fence of shrubs. The newcomers took in their drenched appearance and then stared over at the stream behind them and then the dog with its tongue lolling out the side of its mouth.

"The dog was drowning," Victor said.

"Of course, Your Grace," her aunt said with a healthy amount of skepticism.

The brown haired man handed the dog off to the footman with an irritated grunt and then left the other four to trail after him.

"What happened?" Her aunt asked as they climbed into their carriage later, the large jacket still slung over her shoulders.

"The dog was drowning," she repeated the Duke's explanation.

"But you cannot swim."

"I was drowning too." Ignoring her aunt's wide eyed stare that promised more questions, she pressed her face to the glass window and closed her eyes, utterly

exhausted by the excitement of the day.

CHAPTER 14

A few days after the incident with the dog, the maze and the pond, Lavinia found herself pressed into the Duke's side again in the bright orange sofa of the Hartfield's drawing room.

"What do you think of the opera?" Victor asked her.

She thought it was a dreadfully dull event with pretentiousness that may have just been greater than that of a ballroom.

"I have never been," she replied instead.

"Why ever not?"

"I do not think the Hartfields care for it all that much and I do not think it would be all that entertaining."

"Do you not like music?"

"Well, I mostly grew up in the country and so I am only familiar with a few jaunty tunes. My education on more refined music has been sorely limited."

With any other man, she would never have been so free to admit such a thing, but she could always count on the Duke to give her the freedom to be exactly herself. No pretenses or putting on airs needed.

He might have a high and mighty title, but not once had he ever reprimanded her for being her slightly unconventional self.

"The royal Opera will be at the Opera house this evening and I would like to invite you and the Hartfields to my private box."

"Oh, I do not know that I would like to attend."

"You will not know until you have tried and I have never taken you for one who shied away from new experiences," his eyes twinkled at her.

It was an obvious bait and Lavinia was nothing if not determined to prove herself.

"Very well then," she sniffed.

He rose to his feet with a triumphant smile, "I shall come to fetch you by seven this evening."

Later that afternoon, the dresses from Madame Vandeleur arrived and she was only too glad that she would be able to sit with the Duke and his mother looking as fancy as them.

She chose a dress in a stunning turquoise with puffy sleeves and a line of handsewn beads dotting the bodice of the dress.

In the absence of matching jewelry, her lady's maid helped her to fashion a choker out of a dark green ribbon which she tied into a bow around her neck, leaving the ends to trail down her front.

"I look like Andrew," she laughed as she descended the stairs arm in arm with her aunt.

Noah and Lord Hartfield had opted out of coming, her cousin preferring to spend his night cavorting around the city with his friends while her uncle had no patience for the Opera.

"You most certainly do not," Lady Hartfield protested but she didn't quite succeed in hiding her amusement and soon, the two women were doubled over, shoulders shaking with their laughter.

Noah who had been on his way out of the house stopped at the hallway to stare at them incredulously, "I am not even going to enquire as to the source of your amusement. Do try to not fall over his box, I hear it is quite high up."

She rolled her eyes, "I am not going to fall off."

"Who would have thought you would come home soaked after a day in the sunny Hyde park," he gave them one last salute and then slipped away from a night of debauchery and whatever else he did.

"Ignore him," her aunt told her.

The butler appeared seemingly out of thin air, "The Duke of Wyld's carriage has just arrived, my ladies."

"Excellent. Thank you," the older woman tugged on her gloves, while Lavinia grabbed her shawl, together they left the house.

The carriage was a gleaming black and an enormous vehicle pulled by four matching bays. The duchy symbol was boldly displayed in gold on one side of it and as they moved towards it, a footman jumped down to open the door and let down the steps.

Lavinia froze as she climbed on and realized the dowager Duchess would be coming

along.

The woman ran a scrutinizing eye down her body and then nodded as if the girl had passed some test she hadn't even been aware she had taken.

"Your Graces," the women chorused.

"We are honored by your invitation," Lady Hartfield smiled politely.

"Hmm," the Duke's mother made a sound in her throat and then fixed her gaze pointedly on the passing scenery.

Lavinia ignored her in favor of admiring the man before her. He looked extra fine in his dark tail coat, the white cravat gleaming at his throat.

"Miss Proctor, Lady Hartfield, we're pleased to have you."

She raised a brow at him, telling him quite clearly that it was obvious the dowager did not share his pleasure at hosting them.

He only shrugged, clearly unbothered by his mother's opinion.

She had crossed past the Opera building countless times but that was the first time she was stepping foot inside the structure. Every inch of it gleamed and sparkled, chandeliers and red carpets lining the hallways.

The place was both tasteful and ostentatious, clearly intended for the upper echelon of the society.

She hadn't know what she had been expecting, but it felt very much like a stuffy ballroom as people noticed their arrival right and began to approach them for

introductions.

"This is Lady Hartfield and her niece, Miss Proctor," Victor said for the umpteenth time as an older couple in tow with their perfect blonde daughter came over to greet the Wylde.

The blonde girl stared down at Lavinia from under her nose with so much derision that she had to wonder if they had had an encounter prior to that meeting.

"This is the Earl of Langham and his Countess, and their daughter, Lady Amelia."

"How do you do?" Lady Hartfield said kindly.

Lavinia did her best to pretend like she couldn't feel the younger woman's hatred filled stare, affecting a placid expression and looking anywhere but at the girl.

It turned out to be the same with the other ladies and she quickly caught on that her association with the Duke had made her an object of envy and consequently hatred. As far as she was concerned, she hadn't snatched him away from any other of the ladies and his affections hadn't been otherwise engaged when she had met him.

"You must join us in our box," the Dowager Duchess told the Earl.

"I'm afraid we must decline," the Countess said with a chuckle, "We are expecting a guest, some other time, perhaps."

"Of course."

Lavinia had never been so glad to hear someone refuse an offer. She could only wonder how uncomfortable they would have been.

After what felt like forever, they finally moved into the dome like space of the Opera. It was even more elegant than the outside and it was packed full.

The Wyld's box was located at a prime position at the very top of the room, directly beside the royal box. Even though the Queen's box was empty, it was the closest Lavinia had ever been to royalty.

"It's beautiful," she whispered, marveling at the sea of people beneath them. Different colors assaulted her eyes from every direction and she sat at the edge of her seat in wonder.

The lights went off and the noise tapered off as everybody settled into their seats. You could hear a pin drop as the curtain on the stage slid open and the first singer took to stage. A dark haired woman in a black dress and a fierce expression.

Her voice rose up and tore through the room with such power that Lavinia was left in shock.

"I did not know such feats were even capable," she told the man beside her, "It is no wonder my parents adored the Opera."

"They did?"

She nodded, "Lady Hartfield has told me a lot about them. I do not remember them much. I was no older than three when they passed in a carriage accident."

"Have you lived with the Hartfield's since then?"

"Yes, they are the only family I have ever known," she bit down on her lower lip, "Sometimes I feel like the most terrible of daughters for not remembering them. There is only the faintest memory of my mama singing me to sleep."

He didn't stare at her with pity, and she appreciated it.

"It is a small mercy that you cannot remember them, Miss Proctor," the Duke said, "I wonder if the hole my father's death created would not have been so glaring if neither my sister nor I could remember him. But then again, I cherish every memory I ever made with him."

"He was a good father then?"

His smile was small but oh so fond, "Yes, the very best of fathers and an excellent man too."

She almost told him in that moment that she believed he would make an excellent father too, but she was loathe to ruin the moment, especially as his hand inched closer to hers and his pinky finger brushed against hers.

Her throat bobbed with a swallow and she kept her gaze fixed forward, an illicit thrill making her heart pound.

"After my father died," Victor said in a near whisper, "I came home, believing that I was ready to take on the responsibility of the title, the lands and all of it. I never factored in the fact that there would be real people under my care. Like my mother and sister."

She allowed her pinky to hook around his.

"It was then that it struck me that I could not afford to fail, because if I did... I do not want to think about what would have happened if I did."

"Was it hard?"

"Extremely," he admitted, "But the worst part was the resentment I felt, that I was expected to pick up the mantle and be as perfect as a man I could never dream of even being half as good as."

Tears filled her eyes and she blinked them away, "You must have done well regardless, but I wished you did not have to."

Light applause scattered over the room, and the both of them turned to where the woman in black was curtsying on stage. The red curtain slid closed and the applause trailed off, replaced by excited murmurs.

"What's going on?"

The curtains opened again and a woman in a gleaming silver dress came into view. She had flaming red hair that had been left loose to fall around her shoulders down to her waist.

She looked angelic and utterly iridescent. Her expression was inscrutable and she appeared to have been carved out of marble with how still she was. Only her eyes moved, taking in the crowd.

"She is called The Sirius," the Duke bent to whisper into her ear.

"Why?"

"Sirius is the brightest star in the sky according to experts. She always wears silver and just like the star is the object of attention when one looks up into the night sky, so does she manage to capture all attention."

Lavinia stared at the pale woman. She had a beauty that was ethereal, entrancing. She could see why many of the men were leaning on the edge of their seats.

When she turned to check if Victor was as caught in the woman's charm, she found him looking right at her.

"She is that good?"

"You will see for yourself I suppose," he told her, "she came into the scene in England three years ago. Nobody knows her nationality, but some speculate that she is German. The mystery is a large part of her allure."

Then The Sirius took a step forward slowly. She was a vision in the muted light, calm and poised and cold. Lavinia could feel her excitement growing and she wondered if everyone felt the same.

The soft sounds of the piano filled the room followed by the draw of the Cello. The melodic sound caused the room to go still.

And then the silver clad woman took a deep breath and her voice finally joined in.

Lavinia's breath caught in her throat at the woman's voice.

Like a siren, her voice put you in a trance and held you there. It was soft and yet commanding and it made goosebumps to rise up on her skin. She could feel her emotions being drawn to the surface by the lure of the music.

"My goodness," she breathed, "She is something isn't she."

"Yes, she is."

There was an undertone his easy reply and when she glanced over, her eyes met his. The room disappeared around her till it was just the both of them and the siren song flowing through them. The way he looked at her in that moment, if she could have

bottled it up and sold it, she would have been able to buy the whole of England with the proceeds.

It was a look that flayed her open and left her raw and vulnerable, and yet it didn't cause any discomfort. On the contrary, it settled her, her heart rate slowing to something languid.

His hands finally shifted fully over hers, fingers tangling with hers. She glanced down at where his snowy white gloves and her milk colored ones were intertwined.

She only turned back to the stage when a deafening applause and cheers went up around the room. Most of the guests still felt entrapped by the after effect of the song and were slow to clap.

Lavinia couldn't even move to clap, she could only stare, trying to come down from the high The Sirius' voice had pushed her up to.

"So, what do you think about the Opera?"

She raised her hand and touched the wetness on her cheeks, "It was- oh my, I do not have the words."

"My reaction exactly the first time I heard her. It's a transcendent experience."

"And I'm pleased and grateful you gave me the opportunity to experience it for myself."

"Please," he smiled, "The pleasure is all mine."

After that, they sat there in perfect silence, fingers locked together in the darkness of the Opera house, neither of them wanting the night to end.

CHAPTER 15

"O h sweetheart, you look perfect," Aunt Felicity cooed as Lavinia reached the bottom of the stairs.

Lavinia looked down at the new red dress Madame Vandeleur had made for her. The dress was truly a work of art and she now believed all of the fuss about the Frenchwoman.

She had succeeded in making her look sensual.

The red fabric clung to her body and had a low square neckline that showed off her cleavage. It had small cap sleeves, a high waistline and it split open to reveal an inner paler red fabric. Her lady's maid had also done wonders with her hair, twisting it into a complicated updo woven with jewelry that glittered in her hair. The white kid gloves that stretched up above her elbows made a startling contrast with the white.

She had taken care with her appearance tonight and the dress gave her a necessary boost of confidence.

And it wasn't because of the Duke. She was just in the mood to dazzle tonight. That was all.

"Thank you, Aunt."

"You seem rather excited to be going to the ball tonight," Lady Hartfield slanted her a sly glance, "I vividly you remember dragging your heel against being forced to wear

uncomfortable corsets and associate with the ton ."

Her cheeks went ruddy, "what can I say? I have become accustomed to the life."

"Accustomed," her aunt echoed, a dimple peeking out of one cheek, "are you sure it has nothing to do with a certain duke?"

She cleared her throat and tried to look anywhere but at the knowing eyes staring at her, "I still think the entire ton and the stifling rules are ridiculous."

With a chuckle and a glance that told Lavinia that her aunt had clearly noted her quick topic change and she was hardly done with the topic, she turned for the front door. "Well, soon you shall be a duchess and then, you may choose the rules you wish to follow."

"I hardly think I shall be free to ride through the park in breeches and seated astride. As a matter of fact," Lavinia continued while trailing the other woman out of the house, "I believe that there shall be even more rules for me to follow. I have never been so ogled in my life as I have been these past few days. How then am I expected to be anything but perfect while I am being so closely watched? It is enough to drive one insane."

Lady Hartfield shook her head fondly, "only you, Lavvie, would dare complain about becoming a duchess."

"I am sure all of the duchesses of the world have all complained at one time or another," she shrugged.

Her aunt chuckled, "in that case, let us be on our way then or we may be past being fashionably late."

Noah gaped at her as he stumbled upon them in his own evening clothes, "God, Lavvie, you look- you look-"

She laughed when his words trailed off, delighted by his speechlessness.

"I cannot wait to see the Duke's reaction," her cousin crowed.

"And the rest of the ton's ," his mother added conspiratorially.

Noah held out both his arms and said as regally as he could, "My ladies."

Dalton house was one of the largest houses in the city, with elaborate columns in front and a long staircase leading up to the front double doors.

The Hartfield carriage drew to a stop right at the foot of that staircase and Noah jumped down from the vehicle, releasing the carriage stairs and helping the ladies to descend.

The Daltons threw some of the most exclusive parties and luckily, Lavinia's new association with the Duke had made her a bit of a hot commodity, the invitations piling up in the tray in the front hall.

"Lady Hartfield, Lord Thornton, and Miss Lavinia Proctor," the liveried man announced, causing all eyes to swing towards them.

And then her family stepped aside to allow Lavinia to precede them. Shocked gasps and whispers tore through the crowd as the lady in red was revealed. Keeping her eyes forward and her shoulders squared, she began to descend the short stairs into the ballroom.

At the bottom of the stairs, she took one purposeful step to the side, right under the

chandelier hanging there. Madame Vandeleur's genius was revealed as the dress came to life, sparkling and glittering, the hand-sewn beads that had been stitched into the dress catching the light.

"What an entrance," Noah whispered at her, "I did not think you had it in you."

Lavinia was barely listening to him, instead her focus was on the man across from the room who hadn't yet taken his eyes off her, not even once. Even from a distance, his gaze still had the power to disarm her completely.

She watched him throw back the contents of his glass before peeling away from the men standing with him.

He stalked towards her, a predator who had just caught sight of its prey. Excitement and a hint of danger spiked inside her while she tried to appear unaffected.

"Are you even listening to me?" Her cousin's voice snapped her out of her thoughts and she looked over at him to see her staring down at her with amusement. "You can at least try to make it less obvious that you feel something for him," then he looked over at the approaching man and chuckled. "Between the both of you, I don't know who is more obvious."

She cleared her throat and looked away, "it's not what you think."

"What do you mean?"

But the Duke of Wyld had already caught up to them.

"Your Grace," Noah bowed smartly and then disappeared into the crowd. She guessed it was to meet those dull never-to-do-wells.

Lady Hartfield and Lavinia dropped into a deep curtsy, "Your Grace."

He nodded at their show of deference, but his gaze still held Lavinia's captive, "you are breathtaking."

"All thanks to the modiste," she laughed.

"It's not her, it is you," he said in a voice that was too low for the older woman at her side to overhear. "Yes, the dress is stunning, but it takes a beautiful woman to turn a good dress into art."

"Are you saying I look like art right now?"

He took her hand in his, holding it out, his large hands dwarfing hers. She wondered what those hands would feel like holding hers without the barrier of their gloves.

And then he bent over her hand and skimmed his lips over the back of her hand, "your first waltz is mine."

The possessiveness in his voice did something to her. A flash of heat raced down her spine and she bit down on her bottom lip.

"It'll be a real struggle to keep my dance card from being filled up," she teased.

"Mine," he reiterated before walking away. She watched him go and only when he disappeared into the crowd did she look away. And it was just in time too, because Jenny appeared at her side the next moment, looking a tad pale.

"You, my friend, have been holding out on me," she chided, then ran a wide eyed stare down her frame. "That dress is divine and you wear it so well. Oh, Lavvie, you look so gorgeous, I barely even recognize you, and yes, I know that I could barely

recognize my own self in the mirror without my spectacles."

She smiled at the other girl. "How are you feeling now? I do hope you're better."

"Much," Jenny said then peered over at Lady Hartfield. "My lady, I did not see you there."

"It's quite alright, Jenny," Lavinia's aunt said, "I hear you were down with the cold."

"Much recovered now," she told her before turning back to Lavinia. "I have a lot of catching up to do and you are going to tell me everything."

Their arms linked together, they excused themselves for a turn about the room. "Imagine my surprise when I left my house and could not stop hearing about you and the Duke!"

Lavinia glanced in either direction before pulling her friend into an empty hallway, "I am sorry that I did not write you about it. I wanted to explain everything to you, but I did not know where or how to start."

"You feel for him?"

Why did everyone keep on asking her that? Well, she had long been an advocate of only ever marrying for love and had been very vocal about it to those close to her, which by the way only consisted of her family and Jenny.

Lavinia felt hope about the progression of her relationship with the Duke. She could safely say they were friends now, or even something more than friends. There was no use telling Jenny the entire plot, maybe sometime in future she would laugh about how they begun.

"I-I do," she croaked but it was the first time she had allowed herself to believe that she felt something for him.

And that look in his eyes earlier had been worth the time it had taken her lady's maid to get her ready.

The red headed girl squealed and Lavinia was quick to slap a hand over her mouth, "shush."

Jenny pushed her hand away. "This is far too exciting for me to stay quiet about it. Imagine being able to say I am friends with a duchess. I will be the godmother to your son. A godmother to a duke!"

It was at that point that Lavinia's smile stiffened, because despite the progress they were making, there had been a marked absence of the devouring kisses or even any kisses at all. The heat and tension she now recognized as desire was still very much alive between them, but it seemed he was devoutly keeping to his rule of never touching her.

Which had to mean that he was touching someone else.

Her stomach churned with discomfort and she shied away from the thought.

"You are ridiculous," Lavinia rolled her eyes, "the dowager duchess does not like me and I wonder if she will allow the marriage to happen."

"If the Duke wants you enough, then Her Grace's opinion should not matter," she declared firmly.

With a laugh that she didn't really feel, Lavinia led them back to the crowded ballroom and in minutes, she had gathered quite a slew of admirers, much to the other

ladies' annoyance.

Usually, she would hate being the center of such attention, but this time around, she was completely at ease and it had a lot to do with the fact that most of the men were there to flirt harmlessly, knowing fully well that she was to be married to the Duke and there was no need to try and compete with such a man.

Without the strain of the marriage mart and the expectations hanging over her head, she was able to enjoy conversations with them and best of all, she managed to get the red head to say more than three words to the gentlemen.

"Where have you been hiding yourself, my lady?" one of the men asked.

"Where gentlemen with such sugary tongues could not find me," she quipped causing them to explode with laughter.

"You are a delight, Miss Proctor," another praised. "Allow me to call on you tomorrow."

"I am not any fun when I do not have a ball dress and jewels on."

"I'll drape you in jewels for the rest of your life m'lady."

She smiled at him, "I plan to live a very long life and I'm afraid you would have run out of jewels before I ran out of life."

"I have never envied the Duke of Wyld up until this very moment," another said with a slight pout. "Do consider me if you decide he's not nearly good enough for you."

"Certainly, Lord Pembroke," she tilted her head at him with her lips curled up into a small smile that the gossip rags would later go to describe as 'a smile that is full of

secrets.'

While she delivered sharp but amusing retorts to her new admirers, she felt the weight of the Duke's eye between her shoulder blades and she wondered if she were the only one counting down the seconds till it was time for their dance.

CHAPTER 16

As soon as the first strings of the waltz sounded through the room, Lavinia's heart skipped a bit. A thrill racing through her and making her feel more alive than she had ever felt.

"Do me the honor of dancing the first waltz with me, Miss Proctor," one of the gentlemen said.

"I have promised the dance to the Duke," she smiled. And just as soon as she said the words, she felt the large presence of the man himself behind her. It was almost as if her body had become attuned to him.

She turned around slowly and met that dark brown gaze that slid down her body almost leisurely.

"Your Grace," she said breathlessly.

His mouth twitched and he held out his arm to her wordlessly. She took it without hesitation and allowed him to lead her to the floor where other couples had begun to gather.

They parted for them, allowing them to get to the very center, her bright red dress standing out in the sea of pastels and lighter colored fabrics.

She felt like she was floating as the Duke took her in his arms. Were they too far apart? Or was it just her imagination? His palm against her back made her shiver and

she knew right there and then that this thing wasn't just a mere attraction.

What it was, she couldn't tell yet.

She managed to tear her eyes away from his only to see dozens of eyes peering at them with obvious curiosity. She felt like a circus animal.

"Everyone is staring," Lavinia said.

"They are looking at you," his hand on her back pressed tighter against her. "How could they not? You look divine."

Her mouth parted in surprise. She had been called beautiful and lovely, but never had she been called divine with such naked honesty.

"Every man in this room wishes they were in my place," he continued, "with such an exquisite woman in their arms."

Heat flamed across her cheeks and she ducked her head shyly.

"I have never before in my life been so curious to know what someone else was thinking about."

She raised her head, "w-what?"

"What goes on in that head of yours, Lavinia?"

She tried to swallow, but there was a ball lodged in her throat. Her name rolling on his tongue was a caress against her senses. Her name had never sounded so indecent.

"Your Grace-"

"Victor," he cut in, "please."

They were too close and his eyes were too compelling and his scent was far more intoxicating than any alcohol ever formed. She couldn't form one complete thought, reduced to the blazing heat inside of her and the tingles buzzing on her skin.

"What are you doing to me?"

His eyes dropped down to her mouth, thick lashes lowering, "I could ask you the same thing."

At that moment, all sense of propriety and the crowd around her disappeared. She and the Duke were the only two people in the world and she wanted him to kiss her. She wanted him to cover her mouth with hers again and make her feel owned.

I cannot touch you again. This is not that kind of marriage.

His words from what seemed like years ago echoed through her head, threatening to burst the bubble around her, but she pushed the words aside.

They had come so far from that. He may have meant his words then, but so much has happened between them now. Surely he wouldn't still abide by those words.

"I want you to kiss me," she whispered boldly.

"You cannot say such things," he gritted out. "Not here, in the middle of a stuffy ballroom with you looking like..." he trailed off, jaw clenched tight.

Hope soared inside of her, and she smiled. "Will you kiss me again, Victor?"

He stared at her for several breathless seconds where it felt like he was going to

whisk her away and have his wicked way with her, but then his eyes shifted away from her and ice replaced the scorching flames.

"I know that this must be hard for you," he finally said. "You are most probably curious about such experiences and are eager to explore."

Only with you, she thought.

His mouth pulled up at the sides, it was far too stiff to even be considered a smile. "I am under no delusions that you will remain chaste and untouched for the duration of this marriage."

Lavinia suddenly felt cold.

"You may have your discreet dalliances, of course."

"Discreet dalliances," she repeated, eyes searching his.

"Yes," he said, "the discretion is necessary because of our position in society and-"

"And what about you?" she spat. "Have you been having these discreet dalliances?"

He sighed, "you do not want the answer to that, Miss Proctor."

"I would not have asked if I did not want the answer," she snapped, suddenly wanting to be as far from him as possible, but knowing that she couldn't just storm off in the middle of a dance. She tried to rein in her fury and most importantly, the feeling in her chest that felt like a blade had been driven through her heart.

"You mean that I may request a kiss from any man here tonight and you would not care?"

"What do you want from me?" he gritted out. "I told you that this would not be that sort of marriage, and you agreed to it. It is unfair of you to suddenly decide my rules were forced upon you. Or that you had no prior knowledge about them."

"I thought-" she swallowed back the pathetic words about how she had thought things had changed.

"You thought what?" he pressed.

"I want you to say that I may kiss any man in this room and you would not care."

"I would never be so cruel as to force you to live the rest of your life without knowing pleasure."

Thankfully, at that moment, the musicians struck the last chord of the waltz. Lavinia dropped into a curtsy, and kept her gaze to the ground as she was led off the floor and to her aunt's side.

How dare he? How dare he act like he was doing her a favor by giving her the freedom of an affair? Why could he touch other women but not her?

She could just envision the years stretched before her. Years of perfect civility between her and the Duke, knowing that he was going straight from the dinner table to his mistress' house.

Civility indeed.

She would absolutely loathe him.

What had she signed herself up for? Had she perhaps been too hasty in agreeing to this arrangement? Because she could only now see that it was not going to be

anything other than what he had termed it. A cold, black and white arrangement.

"Are you alright?" Her aunt looked over at her. "You look like you are plotting."

Oh she was.

Lavinia stared at the broad back of her soon-to-be husband and decided that since he was so nonchalant about her having an affair, she would give him exactly what he wanted.

"Perhaps," she finally replied to her aunt.

"Oh dear."

She chuckled and then allowed her gaze to roam around the room, searching for someone who would make Victor pause. Noah's friends wouldn't do, especially not after she had revealed to Victor how droll they were.

Her eyes caught on a gentleman with dark gold hair who stood beside a matron.

"Who is that?" She asked her aunt, motioning to the pair.

Lady Hartfield followed her gaze curiously, "Oh that's-"

She paid no attention to the rest of her aunt's words past the fact that she was acquainted to the woman. Her scheme began to take life and shape in her head. "Can you introduce us?"

"Why?" She looked startled.

Lavinia had never been a good liar, and she knew she couldn't fib her way through an

explanation of why she wanted to meet the man, so she decided to try some honesty.

"I cannot tell you right now, but it's very important, Aunt Felicity, please."

The older woman looked more concerned than suspicious but finally, she let out a breath, "very well."

Together, they crossed the room to where the pair stood. The woman with the pale blonde hair noticed them first.

"Felicity, how do you do?" She smiled, "It's been years!"

The man's eyes shifted from her aunt's and landed on hers and his eyes widened but a second later, he had forced his expression back into a blank mask.

"I did not know you were back in the country," Lady Hartfield said.

"Paris is entertaining but sometimes, you need a break from all of it. You think London is intense until you have lived with the French."

"You must come around and tell me all about it."

"Certainly."

"How rude of me," Lady Hartfield laughed, "This is Miss Proctor, my niece. Meet the marchioness of Forsythe and her son, the marquess."

"How do you do?" Lady Forsythe smiled at her and she dropped into a curtsy.

"My lady, My lord."

"Do take her for a dance, Wren," his mother urged, "I have a lot of catching up to do with Lady Hartfield."

The man's square jaw ticked. "Of course," then he turned to Lavinia, "shall we?"

She placed her hand on his sleeve and together they walked towards the floor just as another waltz began. The man was handsome enough she supposed. He was tall, with dark gold hair and blue eyes, and his evening clothes fit against an impressive frame. He was a bit older than the Duke too.

In fact, he was the perfect candidate to show that infuriating man that she did not care a lick about him, and she was taking his advice to have a discreet affair.

"I heard Forsythe was back in town, but I never thought he would be out and about so soon," Patrick mused as he sipped on his drink.

Victor had no interest in the idle gossip. His mind was full of stomach turning images of Lavinia underneath another man.

Why the bloody hell had he said that nonsense about her starting an affair?

But from the way he itched to hit something at the thought of her with someone else, he supposed he had done the best thing by using every ounce of his willpower to stick to the rules of their arrangement. He was already far deeper than he had ever thought possible. If he touched her again, there would be no saving him.

"Are you listening, man?" The viscount narrowed his eyes at him.

"Something about Forsythe," he replied.

"I assumed you would be more interested in the marquess, considering that he wasted

no time at all in snagging your future duchess."

"What?" Patrick's words weren't all that clear to him, still too lost in contradicting thoughts.

The flash of red on the dance floor caught his eye and then he saw the man with his arm around her next.

"What in the-"

"That's more like it," his friend sounded amused. "I was beginning to wonder why you were so aloof about it."

The Duke's hands curled into fists at his side, and he badly wanted to hit something, preferably the face of the golden haired man.

Lavinia threw her head back and laughed and he wondered what the hell was so funny. The marquess didn't exactly look like he had a lot of humor beneath his too starched collar. He was a spineless git who stuck to his mother's skirts and he had no right to-

His thoughts came to a stumbling halt.

Did she plan to kiss that blackguard? Well, he wasn't going to sit back and watch her disappear into a dark corner with bloody Forsythe.

"I find myself suddenly terrified for Forsythe's life," Patrick chuckled behind him, "You might want to cool it, man."

What did she think she was doing? Victor thought darkly. Dancing and laughing with a man in public wasn't exactly the definition of being discreet. He was going to wring

her goddamn neck.

As soon as the music ended, he began to march forward, ignoring Patrick's panicked warning for him to not do anything stupid.

"I will take it from here," he informed the man coldly as they moved towards Lady Hartfield and the marchioness.

"Your Grace?" Lavinia asked, "what are you-"

"Come with me," he said impatiently and gave her his arm. He knew he was being rude, and by the way the other man's eyebrows were raised almost to his hairline, he realized he should attempt some civility, but dammit all to hell, he was this close to doing something insane and the sooner he left the ballroom, the better.

He marched the brown haired woman towards the French doors that led to a balcony, but at the last minute he made a turn and directed her into a dim hallway.

"Where are you taking me?" She sounded more curious than scared.

He pushed her into the first door he saw and locked the door behind them. The room turned out to be a library with the only light coming from the moonlight spilling in through the large line of windows at the back of the room.

"What do you think you're doing?"

She scoffed, arms folded over her chest, "I could ask you the same thing. You are the one who brought me here after all."

He stalked forward and her eyes went wide, some hint of wariness in them.

"Do not play dumb, Lavinia," he growled. "Tell me, did you plan on cornering the marquess into some dark corner and kissing him?"

"And if I did? Do not worry yourself, Your Grace. I planned to be very discreet about it," she thrust that pert chin in the air, looking as lofty as a queen.

"Did you now?" His voice was mild, but there was a storm brewing inside of him.

"Uh, yes?"

"And did you think he would be able to kiss you like I did?" He reached her, crowding her into the side of the table. "Tell me, Lavinia. Would he have made a suitable replacement?"

"P-perhaps," she gnawed on that abused lower lip, "I shall be all too willing to let you know if he passed muster. If that is all-"

He cupped her jaw with a close lipped smile, "You are the most vexatious woman I have ever met. The most stubborn and maddening."

"How sweet," she hissed.

"You don't want sweet, my lady."

"You don't know what I want," her words were small and shaky and he could see where her pulse fluttered at the base of her throat.

"I do."

"Tell me then."

"No, I'll show you instead," and then he couldn't deny himself anymore. That first kiss felt like it had happened centuries ago, too damn long ago in his opinion.

He covered her mouth with his, swallowing the small gasp that escaped her mouth.

His hand tightened on her jaw, pulling her face closer and she went willingly, pressing into him, her small hands clutching at his arms.

Victor had never felt so out of control in his life. Right from a young age, he had known that his position would keep him in the public eye and so he had had to learn discipline. A man like him couldn't afford outbursts and giving in to his impulses.

This woman in his arms had destroyed all his previous resolve. Brought it crumbling to the ground with no effort whatsoever. He should never have touched her to start with, because now that he knew what she tasted like, he was always going to be hungry for more.

It would never be enough with her.

But that was a problem for future him. The him of the moment couldn't think, all the blood in his head had rushed southwards.

He grabbed her by her slim waist and hoisted her on top of the desk, never breaking the kiss. Spreading her legs, he stepped into the gap between them.

Still, it didn't feel like he was close enough.

His tongue licked across the seam of her mouth and she opened for him with a moan, allowing him to lick into her sweet mouth, to completely possess her. She tasted like the most perfect blend of wine, and he chased that taste with his tongue.

Lavinia kissed him back with no finesse, but somehow her untrained, eager mouth made him burn hotter than he had ever been in his life.

"Victor," she gasped as he dragged his lips down her jaw, leaving open mouthed kisses down to her neck and then the top of her exposed breasts.

"Oh," she cried as his hand began to slide up her leg, hiking her dress up till the red fabric was bunched above her knees.

His mouth pressed over the swell of her breasts before he grabbed the neckline of her dress and pulled it down, her breasts spilling out of the gown.

She hurriedly covered her chest with her hands, gaze downcast.

"Let me see you, darling." He took her hand and gently pulled them away, "don't hide from me."

Her pupils were blown, her mouth red and swollen, face flushed and breasts tipped with stiff, pink nipples bared to him. She looked utterly delectable and nothing like the innocent that she was.

At that moment, with dress in disarray around her, she was a temptress, drawing him in with a force that no man could resist. Not even him.

He bent his head and took one of her nipples into his mouth. She let out a cry of pleasure, her back arching as she sucked her deep, his other hand cupping the other breast, rolling the nipple between his fingers.

"Victor. Oh God, Victor," she moaned.

He kissed her again, unable to get enough of the taste of her, while one hand trailed

up the inside of her thighs, marveling at the feel of her silky soft skin. His touch caused a shiver to wrack through her.

And then he found the slit in her drawers, finding her wet and ready for him.

"Please," she made a mewling sound that disarmed whatever defenses he had left.

He cupped her between her legs, and she spread her legs further, allowing him more access to her. His fingers brushed through her folds, causing her to cry out, eyes rolling back in pleasure.

Finally, he pushed one finger inside her tight, wet heat and they groaned into each other's mouths.

His fingers slipped into her hair and he distantly heard the sound of something clattering to the table.

Lavinia began to rock her hips, chasing the sensation of fullness inside her. He pushed another finger into her, thrusting deep, while their kiss progressed to complete chaos.

Teeth clashing and nipping, mouths sloppy and feral.

"Yes. Yes," she panted.

"Lavinia," he gritted, hands trying to touch all of her at the same time, "so damn lovely. Bloody hell, darling. You drive me insane."

"Do not stop!" she screamed, fingers digging into the flesh of his arms.

He pressed his fingers against the sensitive bud at the apex of her mound and with a

choked cry, she came apart, body shuddering, and her channel spasming around his fingers.

He reached for the placket of his trousers with fingers coated with evidence of her desire, eager to push into her and rid himself of this constant ache that had plagued him from the very first moment he had clapped eyes on her.

"Victor," she whispered drowsily, a soft smile playing on her lips.

It took only his name on her mouth to snap him back into his senses and he stared with horror at the marks he had left on her and the smell of desire permeating the air.

The Duke took a step backward, as if distance would rid him of his hunger. Or the sight of her lounging so decadently against their host's desk.

"Cover yourself," his voice was as sharp as a whip.

She raised her head, blinking at him, "hmm?"

"Cover yourself, Miss Proctor," he growled. "They will soon be missing us."

"I do not understand," her voice was husky.

"What is so difficult to understand?" He glowered. "Put yourself together. This was a mistake."

The blood drained from her face, and she stared at him for one breathless, uncertain second before she began to arrange her clothes with urgency.

"Lavinia-"

"Do not bother, Your Grace, you have made your opinions quite clear, and I am frankly tired of hearing them."

A moment later, the door banged shut behind him and she was gone, taking along with her all the light in the room, it felt colder and darker and he staggered to the desk.

Something glinted against the surface of the desk and he reached for the object, one of her silver hairpins.

What had he done?

CHAPTER 17

Lavinia staggered away from the library, her legs barely holding her up now that she was away from the Duke and didn't have to pretend to be tough and uncaring about what had gone on between them in there.

Tears slid down her face and she wiped them away quickly, refusing to waste a single tear over that heartless rascal.

He had warned her that he would not touch her again, and she had foolishly thought that...

She made a choking sound, slapping a hand over her mouth. She couldn't go back into the ballroom. Not in the state she was in. She was sure her hair was a mess, but even worse she felt like she had been split from the middle and it was all her damn fault.

"Lavinia," Jenny's soft voice called and she turned slowly to face the shorter girl.

She didn't even have it in her to hide her ragged appearance.

"W-what happened?" Jenny rushed towards her, eyes wide, "Tell me this instant!"

"I cannot talk about it now, but I promise you, it is nothing. I was just foolish and I have come to my senses now," she gave her a wobbly smile.

"But-"

She clutched the girl's hand, eyes desperate, "please, help me find Noah. Tell him it is urgent that I leave at once. Tell him I am not feeling well or something like that. Will you help me?"

"Of course I will help you, you are my best friend, but do not think I shall let this go."

"Alright."

"There is a door right through there," the red headed girl pointed in the direction she had just come through, "it leads to the gardens at the back. From there, you can get into the carriage without being seen. Shall I tell Noah to find you there?"

"Yes. Thank you," she sniffled, "I will be most grateful."

Shooting her a narrowed eyed, worried look, Jenny hurried away, leaving her standing there alone and trying to quiet her raspy breaths. How could one go from feeling so much pleasure to being so wrecked?

Squaring her shoulders, she followed the direction her friend had showed her to the glass doors leading into the poorly lit garden. There was a couple at the balcony, but they were far too distracted with each other to notice her slipping away beneath them.

To her relief, her cousin was already there, pacing in tight circles as she appeared.

His eyes zeroed on her pale face and then her mussed up hair, "I am going to kill that good for nothing cad!"

Noah made to walk back into the building but she clutched his hand, panicked, "what do you think you are doing?"

"Defending your honor," he barked, eyebrows pulled down into a scowl.

"He has done nothing!" Except make it clear that no matter how far she so stupidly thought they had come, his unknown reasons for keeping her at arm's length still remained concrete.

"Then why do you look like that?"

She lowered her lashes, trying to buy herself some time to give him some version of the truth, but it only set off his fury again. "How dare he? Does he think that because he is a duke that he can get away with anything."

"Oh, Noah," she cried, "my virtue is still intact." Was it? She wasn't even sure anymore. "We merely kissed. That is all. I am simply shaken up by the torrent of emotions inside of me."

"You can fool Mother and everyone else, but you cannot fool me, Lavinia, " he scoffed, "I knew there was something amiss between you and the Duke from the very beginning and I know that he must have said or done something that-"

It was at that moment that she snapped. "If you do not believe me, then by all means, go in there and cause a ruckus and announce to the whole world what I have done in secret. Call out a duke and then kill him and be hanged for murder. Go on, Noah! Go and behave like a caveman whose property has been damaged. The Duke and I are set to marry, so what does it matter anyway?"

"It's a matter of honor and principle," he gritted out.

"I shall wait in the carriage while you go and defend my honor then," she stomped her way to the carriage, sick and tired of infuriating men and the entirety of society.

She would still marry the Duke but now she would allow him to keep to the rules of their arrangement, because she was the only one who seemed to be able to get hurt.

"What is the matter?" She met her aunt standing by the conveyance, shawl wrapped tight around her shoulder.

"You do not have to end your night on my behalf," she said without looking at her, "I think it might be the flu."

"The marquess enquired about you after you disappeared from the ballroom," it was as much a question as any. Where had she gone was the subtext and with whom?

Lavinia decided to take the statement as it had been rendered, "did he? How nice."

She had laughed too hard at everything he said and only used him for the sake of getting back at Victor. Her stomach churned at the knowledge that she had used someone so callously for her own selfish purposes.

And it was all because of the blasted duke.

This thing with him had the power to destroy innocent bystanders in its wake, but they were too far gone to end it.

Unless of course she was willing to face complete ruin and bring down the Hartfields along, and after all they had done for her, they didn't deserve to suffer for her harebrained decisions.

Mouth set in a firm line, she stared ahead unseeingly and stayed that way the entire journey back home.

Victor moved out of the library and out into the ballroom like a ghost, his mind racing with image upon image of her.

No matter what he told himself, he didn't succeed in erasing the taste and feel of her

from his brain. The sounds she had made, he was afraid he would be replaying them for the rest of his life. The entire encounter with her in fact was going to be the sole subject of all his dreams going forward.

Why the bloody hell had he touched her tonight?

As soon as he caught sight of a flash of dark gold hair floating through the room, his mother in tow, he remembered why.

He had wanted to wipe the feel of the marquess's hands from her body, replace them with his until she couldn't remember anything about the man.

Had he succeeded? He didn't know.

It didn't matter anyway, he had acted like a right bastard and he had to apologize. But maybe not now, not when her taste was still so fresh in his tongue.

Never in his life had he lost control like that. For god sake he had almost taken her against that table like an animal, or like a light skirt, and not a lady that he planned to make his duchess.

No, he had to apologize this instant.

He searched the room for her frantically.

"If you are searching for your duchess, she's gone," Georgie appeared at his side, giving him a curious look.

"How do you know that?"

"I was just at the balcony and I saw her leave the house, her cousin was waiting for

her with the carriage. Perhaps she had a headache."

Shame filled him. Because of him, she had had to escape like a disgraced woman, when earlier she had floated in like a beguiling vision in red, catching his eye and the interest of the rest of the room.

She should have been dancing her feet off right now, but instead...

"Have you seen Patrick?" he asked her.

The girl spluttered, "Why would you ask me? I am not his keeper. How am I to know where he is?"

If he hadn't been so distracted by the entire thing that had happened with Lavinia, he would have noted the guilty look in his sister's eyes and the way she was now trying to avoid his gaze.

"Where is Mother? I must take my leave."

"Is the ball no more fun with your lady love gone?"

He ignored her, "when you see Patrick, tell him to come around if he can."

Victor planned to drink himself to mindlessness, but it was pathetic even for him to drink alone. Maybe if he was drunk enough, he would have the guts to tell his friend about how irresponsible he had been.

Or maybe not.

The Viscount didn't know about the arrangement with Lavinia, neither did he know about the Duke's resolve to never fall in love and how he was now scrambling

desperately to keep that resolve.

He hardly recognized himself these days and a small part of him wished Lavinia would do him the small mercy of ending the arrangement. That way, he would be free of all this.

Dragging a hand down his face, he wondered why he had been so averse to marrying one of his mother's selections. Lady Hannah might have been terribly dull, but at least she would never have made him so green with jealousy to the point of almost taking her innocence at a ball. It would have been easy for him to keep his hands off her. He would never have felt this ache.

"You are behaving rather strangely," Georgie peered at him, "are you alright?"

No, he thought. He wasn't and he didn't think he had been for the longest time, but he was finally brave enough to admit it to himself.

"If you'll excuse me." He walked away before she could get another word in.

He pushed past the throng of people in the room, gaze determinedly ahead of him. Everyone who watched him walk past saw the look in his eyes and decided that he wasn't to be approached, which was his intention. The Duke just wanted to get home, get a head start on clearing his mind of everything Lavinia related and have join him later.

"Georgie said you were in a bad mood, but I didn't believe her," his friend's voice said from behind him as he made to step into his gleaming black coach.

"Get in," Victor bit out and disappeared into the dark interior of the vehicle.

Patrick raised one brow in apparent surprise before joining the Duke, "What has got

you in such a snit? Let me guess, her name begins with the letter L and rhymes with vanilla."

"Lavinia doesn't rhyme with vanilla."

"Ah," he smiled, "so it is her after all. Who would have guessed? The answer to that question, by the way, is anybody with half a working eye and anything but air between their ears."

At that moment, the carriage passed under a streetlamp and Victor was able to see the smile that stretched the other man's mouth. He was greatly tempted to put his fist into that smile and knock a few teeth loose. But then, he remembered that the man had nothing to do with his predicament.

If there was anyone who should be losing a few teeth, it should be him. He had been in his full senses when he had dragged her away from the dance floor and marched her to that study like a criminal being led to the guillotine. He even distinctly remembered Patrick trying to talk him out of his stupidity. He really should have listened.

"I need a drink," he finally said.

The viscount snorted, "You need several drinks my friend. I don't think one is going to do you any good," a pause, "I don't think several will help either come to think of it."

"You know what will help?" Victor drawled, "a round or two with you in the fighting ring."

The other man's smile died instantaneously. The Duke may have been a gentleman and the holder of one of the most ancient and powerful titles in the country, but in the

ring, he was a beast. It had been long since the two men had gone against each other for some stress relief, and the Viscount was in no hurry to change that.

"I do hope you've got whiskey. Brandy is not going to cut it tonight," he conceded.

Victor chuckled, "What brewery owner worth his salt drinks bloody brandy?"

CHAPTER 18

"What did that fire ever do to vex you?"

Victor didn't look up from where his gaze was fixed on the fireplace in his study. Rolling his broad shoulders in a shrug, he put the bottle to his mouth and took another swig of the golden liquid that wasn't doing its job of emptying his head fast enough.

"Are you going to tell me what happened between you and Miss Proctor? Or shall I guess?"

He finally tore his gaze away from the fire to stare at the Viscount, "I'm too sober for that conversation."

"It looks to me like you're not trying hard enough to change that," the man pointed out.

"What does that mean?"

Patrick wisely changed the topic, "is the engagement over then?"

The Duke dragged a hand through his dark hair, mussing it up. It was getting a tad overlong and was looking rather rakish. He would have to cut it soon for the wedding.

"No," he insisted, "the wedding will take place as planned. The situation isn't that dire."

Patrick blinked at him, "then why in all that is holy are we drowning ourselves in whiskey? Not that I'm complaining about the free alcohol. It's a rather wonderful bottle. Say, Victor, how long do you plan on letting that barrel sit before you make your magic?"

"She's far too tempting," was the Duke's bitter reply. "And she was going to kiss Forsythe. I could not let her kiss that bastard. She's betrothed to me and he is a mystery. I do not believe he's a good man. I could not let her get close to him, you know? He must be dangerous and she would have been in harm's way."

Patrick's eyes were wide with shock, "What are you going on about? I can't make heads or tails of your blathering. Why would she want to kiss Forsythe? I do not think she knows him at all."

A chuckle echoed through the room. "It would have been for my benefit and it was all because I told her that I will not touch her."

It was impossible, but the Viscount's eyes went wider. "You told her what? Now why would you do that?"

The Duke took another swig of his drink and prepared to have the entire sordid tale come out, "It was supposed to be a marriage in name only. I do not know why she agreed to it."

"Because her aunt wears clothes from a few seasons ago."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

Patrick rolled his eyes and muttered, "bloody obtuse."

"It was supposed to be cut and dry," he mumbled. "Someone to fend off my mother

and the rest of the ton . Now, it feels like it would have been far easier for me to go charging at the ton with a blunt sword and half lame horse."

The viscount snorted, "that is a delightful image. But truly, man, it would not have taken a genius to realize that your entire mad scheme would end up with drink and regret. What were you even thinking getting into any sort of arrangement with a woman you were already fascinated with."

He glared at his friend. "It was not fascination."

"From the moment you bumped into her and she gave you that dressing down, I knew she was trouble. I thought you would have run in the opposite direction. After all, you have spent your entire life running from the slightest hint of a connection."

"If I had kept my hands to myself..." he trailed off. When he looked up, he found his friend studying him with eyes that said more than words. Patrick thought he was crazy for touching her, but the truth was that he was crazy for ever thinking he would not touch her.

Too much faith in his own willpower.

His collar felt too tight, but when he reached for it to loosen his cravat, he found that he had already discarded it and the top buttons of his shirt were undone.

"We always make that mistake," the Viscount said quietly. "Men like us always think we have it all under control and then a little wisp of a thing comes and snatches that control from right under you."

Victor laughed, "infuriating, isn't it?" And then the other man's words hit him. He tried to blink his inebriation away, "don't tell me you've gotten tangled in some debutante's net."

"I wish I could tell you that," he tried to grin but it came out looking rather like a grimace, "but the thing is, there is nowhere else I'd rather be."

The Duke plopped his bottle down on the desk and leaned forward, "Who is she?"

"The most bewitching woman on the face of the earth," his gaze was miles away and a soft smile played on the corners of his mouth. It was an amazing sight because Victor had seen no indication that his friend had met someone new.

Perhaps it was one of their old acquaintances. But why had he never mentioned her before tonight? Could it be that he had been too lost in Lavinia to notice anything else? Guilt twisted inside of him.

"I fear that I've fallen madly in love with her, and I cannot live another day without making her mine."

"I do not believe this," the Duke laughed, "I do hope that whatever plague you have caught is not transmittable, because I shall have to protect myself from it."

"It may be too late for that," he said seriously.

Victor frowned, "what?"

He decided that it was a discussion for another day, "Victor, I am in love with your sister."

There was a deathly silence in the room for a moment, "what sister?"

The viscount rose to his feet, "I am in love with Georgie and I wish to get your blessing to marry her."

Victor's face went from confusion to surprise to anger and then finally settled on a cold fury. "Get out."

"I don't suppose-"

He flew to his feet before he could finish his sentence and the bottle on the table teetered and crashed to the floor, raining glass and the remnant of whiskey. "Have you been putting your filthy hands on my sister?"

"It is not like that, I've loved-"

"How long?" His voice was whip sharp, "how long have you had your sights on her? How long have you been betraying me?"

Patrick's eyebrows drew downward, "this has nothing to do with you!"

"She is a child!"

"She is no more a child than Miss Proctor is. And don't you make it sound like I have been harboring thought of her for years. Georgie is wonderful and we have been friends for years but of recent, that friendship has transformed-"

Victor didn't want to hear it. "You had no right. She is my sister for God's sake."

"You may not realize this," Patrick said blandly, "but your sister is a woman. She is a marriageable lady of the ton. In fact, you were all too willing to foist her off on the first suitable gentleman that crossed her path, so why not me?"

"It is different. You have been carrying on behind my back."

"I doubt you would have looked away from Miss Proctor long enough to notice us

even if we had been carrying on right in front of you."

Victor's jaw clenched, "what is that supposed to mean?"

"You know exactly what it means. You have had your entire focus on her from the very first moment, and it has blinded you to everything else including the fact that Georgie and I are in love and she's happy."

A thought suddenly struck him, and he froze, hands curling into fists, "Have you taken her innocence? Is she-" he couldn't even get the words past his mouth. The horror of it was too great.

The Viscount's eyes flashed with something that resembled hatred, "Do you think so little of me? I could never do that to her. I would never dishonor a lady in such a way, not to mention Georgie."

Victor tensed, but this time it was with guilt that he tried hard to conceal, because his friend was a much better man than him, "Get out!"

"What did I expect from you?" He scoffed. "You are so hellbent on spending the rest of your life alone that you cannot bear to see someone else happy and in love."

"You bastard," the Duke growled, "get out before I toss you out."

The other man watched him for a second and then sighed. Grabbing his coat and hat he stormed out of the room, leaving a silence that was far more oppressive than their angry exchange of words.

He needed to speak to Georgie. He needed to hear her say with her own mouth that she knew nothing of Patrick's intention to marry her. But when he stepped out of the study, he found his sister weeping into the chest of the man in question.

"It will be alright, darling," Patrick was saying, stroking her back.

"How could he!" was his sister's tearful reply.

"Georgie, come here this instant!" Victor roared, and when his friend made to pull away from the woman in his embrace, she fisted her hands into the front of his chest and held him in place.

"You brute," Georgie turned accusing eyes on him.

"Please, don't," the Viscount said in a defeated voice.

She glared at him, "do you expect that we should just stay silent while he tries to ruin our life?"

"I am doing this for your own good."

Georgie's eyebrows hiked up in disbelief and she rounded on him. "My own good? You do not even know what is good for yourself, so how do you presume to know what is good for someone else?"

His only reply was to shift his gaze to the man behind him. The man who he had thought of as a brother, "I do not like to repeat myself."

Without another word, Patrick turned around and walked out. He didn't watch the man exit. No, his eyes were on his sister and he watched her forlorn gaze track the Viscount's exit.

"I will never forgive you," she didn't scream at him, but the words made him flinch anyway.

"He's no good for you," he tried to explain. "Up until a while ago, he was firmly against the idea of marriage."

"He changed. People change. You changed."

He scoffed, "I haven't changed."

"Keep telling yourself that," she scoffed back at him, "I do not care what you tell yourself, brother. What I do care about is you ruining the one good thing in my life. I will not let you destroy this for me. I refuse to let my chance at a great love pass me by because you thought you knew better."

"I know-"

"Nothing!" she screamed at him. "You know absolutely nothing."

And with that, she swept away from him and raced up the stairs, but the sound of her heartbroken sobs still echoed through his skull. Christ, what was it with him and making women cry today?

He decided that it just wasn't his day and he had best get himself to bed and forget about the entire affair. It didn't matter how much his sister cried, he was not going to change his mind about it. He knew the sort of man Patrick was and despite his heartfelt speech, there was no way his friend had done such a huge turnaround and decided to advocate for love.

It must be a cruel prank or something. The thought made him want to hit something and he suddenly regretted not taking out his frustration on the Viscount. Had the blighter really thought he would just hand over his sister to him on a silver platter?

And as for the girl herself, he would put his focus into finding her the right man and

in time she would forget all about this nonsense.

Plan in mind, he made his way up the stairs and to his own bed, but sleep didn't find him until the small hours of the morning.

CHAPTER 19

Miss Proctor had planned to spend the entire day in bed moping and driving herself crazy with endless thought of how stupid she had been to let herself fall in love with the Duke.

Her hopes of him suddenly realizing that he was also hopelessly in love with her were dwindling by the day and all that remained now was the barest sliver of it.

"What are you still doing in bed?" The door flew open and she raised her head to stare at her aunt and the woman let out an unladylike squeak, "Did you sleep at all? Oh dear."

Lavinia frowned, "what is the matter?"

"You look a fright, darling and it's almost calling time."

She dropped her head back on the pillow, "Nobody is calling on me today, Aunt. Even if they do, tell them I am unwell."

The woman pursed her lips and stared at her niece who was looking rather defeated. It was obvious that something was wrong with the girl. Lady Hartfield didn't even have to have been present last night when Lavinia had raced away from their host's house like she had been on fire.

"That will not do, child," she chided, "if I had to guess, I would say that whatever happened last night between you and the Duke had been unpleasant."

On the contrary, Lavinia thought, it had been the most pleasant, earth shattering experience of her life. It was just too bad that he had gone and ruined it with his sudden change of attitude. Was she to spend the rest of her life enduring his hot and cold attitude? Wondering if he wanted her or not? Oh she would most likely end up in bedlam if she had to live like that.

The sigh she let out was weary and it made her aunt's eyebrows crawl up further. She cleared her throat and continued, "but whatever it is, I believe the both of you can talk it out and fix things. That will not happen if you hide away up here and turn him away. And anyway, it will only create nasty gossip if some silly bird saw him being refused at the door."

With a groan she finally sat up in bed, "I shall be down in a moment."

"Put a cool cloth over your face, darling. It will do wonders for you," with that piece of advice, the door finally shut behind Lady Hartfield and she took a deep breath.

And then she wondered if he would come, and how the discussion about last night would go. It would be rather embarrassing to look him in the eye now, after he had seen so much of her. However did the married couples manage to talk to each other in public after what they must have been up to the night before?

Her cheeks were flaming when the lady's maid rapped on the door and then walked in, "ma'am, I have been sent to get you ready for the day."

"Very well, thank you."

She felt better after washing and getting dressed in one of the new day dresses the dowager Duchess had practically forced on her. And she was glad her aunt had insisted on her getting out of bed because when she walked past Noah on the stairs, she saw the way his eyes narrowed on her, trying to find the tiniest hint that she was

less than fine.

Lavinia offered him a close mouthed smile and continued on her way.

Lady Hartfield shot her a proud look as she appeared in the drawing room and she gave an answering smile before arranging herself into the settee.

"Would you like to embroider with me to pass the time?" the older woman asked.

Nothing had ever sounded less appealing to her and she showed it by shaking her head thoroughly. Her aunt only let out an exasperated huff and went back to her embroidery.

Lavinia wrung her hands and waited with bated breath for her aunt to bring up what happened last night, but the woman didn't spare her another glance.

She wasn't sure if she felt relieved or more distraught by her silence.

"His Grace, the Duke of Wyld is here," the butler announced and Lavinia glanced up in surprise.

"How wonderful," Lady Hartfield exclaimed, "I knew he would be here. Aren't you glad you got out of bed?"

She wasn't so sure. Smoothing down the front of her dress, she sat upright. "Let him in."

Barely any time later, the Duke walked into the room. He paused briefly at the door and their eyes met. That thing that existed between them flared to life as brightly and intensely as ever despite what had happened the previous night.

She gulped and then stood up to curtsy, "Your Grace."

"Miss Proctor," he smiled at her.

He settled into the space beside her, and she immediately noted the frown wrinkling his forehead.

"What is the matter?" she asked.

"My sister," he bit out and she let out a sigh of relief. "Can you believe she and Patrick have been carrying on behind my back?"

Disbelief made her brows inch up and she stared at him, "Behind your back? I didn't think they were even trying to hide their relationship at all."

He paused and there was a hint of betrayal in his eyes, "you knew about this?"

She hurriedly defended herself, "I didn't actually know they were involved, I just assumed that there was some affection there. But I do not see the problem with them being attached. He is your friend after all, and you must trust him very much to allow them to spend so much time together."

"Spend so much time together?" He gaped at her, "I have most certainly not permitted them to spend so much time together."

Was he being purposefully obtuse, "what about all those times they escorted us on outings? And Lord Dillon must have spent a lot of time at your house. It is only natural-"

"There is nothing natural about this," he bit out. "He's a cad! He waited for my guard to be down from alcohol and then began to spout his rubbish about being in love with

her and she with him. As if I will believe any of that drivel."

She threw up her hands, exasperated, "what is so difficult to believe about them being in love?"

His mouth set into a firm line. "Love is nothing but a carefully constructed myth that is sold to fantastical people and even if I somehow believed in it, I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy."

There was a sickening lurch in the bottom of her belly and she suddenly wished she had never gotten out of her bed today. She could have buried herself under her bed covers and continued to lie to herself that the man she loved was capable of loving her back.

"And why is that?" Her words were small, careful, terrified.

Brown eyes flashed at her, "because it does nothing but destroy everything in its wake."

"Would you rather your sister is forced into a loveless marriage while knowing that something better exists?" Lavinia asked. "Would it not be better that she explore this feeling and learn from it?"

He stared at her for a long time, thoughtful and she felt the faint stirring of hope. Could it be that her words had gotten through to him?

"I thought you would be on my side."

Those words shattered any illusions she had left. "There aren't two sides here. I am simply on the side of-"

"If you are not on my side then you are on theirs and you believe that it is right that my own friend has had his sights on my sister for- I do not even want to think how long."

"You are making this entire matter about yourself."

"It is about me."

"No!" she hissed. "It has nothing to do with you. What they feel for each other has nothing to do with you. I would have thought that you would be relieved to see your sister in the hands of a man you trust, but instead, you have twisted it all up to look like they have plotted to ruin your life."

"Lavinia," a sharp voice warned and she looked over to see her aunt staring at her wide eyed. She shot the older woman a strained smile and then turned back to the Duke.

She was barely keeping a lid on her fury. A fury born of heartbreak and loss.

"I am not the unreasonable one here," he spat. "And you do not understand what love is. It does not just destroy the people involved. It destroys everyone around it."

All the hope she had had left fizzled away and she clutched her chest, trying to rub away the ache she suddenly felt. Victor would never love her. He could never love her and he would never allow himself to love her.

"I understand," she said placidly, "I understand."

She did understand, not his entire argument about how his sister and the Viscount had betrayed him though. What she understood was how hopeless it all was.

"You do?"

She nodded, trying to keep the hurt off her face, "Yes, I do. You are only trying to look out for her. You feel betrayed and you are-" she choked on the lies coming out from her mouth.

"Yes. I am."

They stared at each other silently and all she could think was that the arrangement had been doomed from the very beginning. What had she been thinking getting entangled with such a man? He was far too interesting and he made her feel too alive. He had told her he could not touch her and then he had and she had thought it was a turning point for them.

Those heated kisses and even the crackling heat between them at the moment meant nothing.

"I must go," he smiled at her and then his hand covered hers and squeezed. He stood up and she stood with him and dropped into a curtsy with an answering smile on her face, but the entire time her heart was breaking.

"Will you be at the Greenwoods' ball tonight?"

She couldn't remember if she had gotten an invitation, but she doubted she hadn't gotten one. Her status as the soon to be duchess had made the invitations triple. Nobody wanted to become an enemy of a duchess.

"Of course."

"Save your first waltz for me," he leaned over her hand and brushed a kiss on the back of her palm.

She watched him leave and just as the door shut behind him, her smile disappeared.

"Are you alright?" Lady Hartfield asked her and she turned to the woman with another painted on smile.

"Of course," the lie tumbled out of her mouth too easily.

"Oh?" She didn't look like she believed her at all. "Did you and the Duke manage to resolve your issues?"

"It was a minor matter," she waved her hand dismissively. "It was easily resolved."

Lady Hartfield's eyes searched hers, "It sounded rather heated from where I was sitting."

"I briefly lost my temper, but it's all settled now."

"Alright."

She smiled, "I think I shall join you for some light embroidery then. What pattern are you stitching?"

The woman's eyebrows scrunched up. If Lavinia was trying to pretend everything was fine, offering to join her aunt to embroider was the wrong move to make.

"Are you sure?"

Lavinia swallowed and tears threatened her vision. She wasn't sure of anything at all anymore. The biggest question now was if she could allow things to go on as they were. A few days ago, she had felt so optimistic and now...

Now she couldn't put the feeling into words. She merely nodded numbly in response.

"Alright then," her aunt settled back into her seat and patted the space behind her, "I distinctly recall the disasters that were your previous attempts at this. I do hope you have made some improvement."

CHAPTER 20

"Is that a horse?"

Lavinia peered at the image she had created and wondered if perhaps her aunt had not begun to lose her sight too early, "It is not a horse. It's a flower," she stabbed her finger at it, "Those are the petals, and that is the stem."

"Oh," the woman turned her neck this way and that trying to see what the younger girl was seeing. No matter how much she tried though, the image still remained a crudely done horse with its ears standing upright.

"You do not see it, do you?" Lavinia sighed, defeated.

Lady Hartfield shot her an apologetic smile, "I know how hard you worked on it."

"I'm rubbish at it, just say it," she tossed the piece of fabric away, "You do not have to coddle me. I do not begin to understand what I was thinking when I decided to join you."

"If I had to guess, I would say you just wanted to clear your mind of whatever that is troubling you and I believe I'll be right to say that it has something to do with His Grace."

"Perhaps."

The woman took her hand and stared deep into her eyes, "I wish you would not think

so much about things you do not have control over, and focus on other things. That sadness in your eyes that you are trying so hard to hide, I see it and it makes me sad for you."

Lavinia lowered her lashes to hide the emotions shining in her eyes. She had set out on this commitment for the sole purpose of saving her family from financial ruin. Or so she had told herself. She was beginning to suspect she had been taken with the Duke from the very beginning.

If she ended things, what would become of her family? Would they be able to keep their head up in polite society after the scandal?

"What thoughts plague you?"

She needed to talk to someone and she knew just the right person. After all she owed her friend an explanation for the other night.

"I must go to Jenny's," she jerked up to her feet, "May I?"

Lady Hartfield sighed, "Alright. Take one of the maids with you."

She turned around and raced up the stairs to grab her parasol and bonnet. The Mallory estate was just a few houses down from theirs and she hardly saw the need for an escort, but she had been in no mood to argue with her aunt.

The butler only shot her a curious look when he opened the door, but stepped aside to grant her entry.

"I believe she is in her room," he said stiffly.

Lavinia made her way up the stairs and down the hallway till she finally came up on

Jenny's bedroom door. She rapped lightly on the door and at the sound of a muted, "Come in," she pushed the door open and stepped in.

"Lavinia?" Jenny asked in surprise, sitting up in bed.

"Oh Jenny," she wailed, "I have made the stupidest decision of my entire life."

The girl peered at her from behind the round frame of her spectacles and then she carefully shut the book she had been reading and pushed it aside, "Does this have anything at all to do with last night? Or is that an entirely different conversation that we are yet to have?"

She walked forward and dropped down into the space beside the red haired girl.

"I do not know what to do. I thought I had it all under control but it seems to me that I do not and as a matter of fact, perhaps, I've never had any of it under control."

"You are making no sense, Lavvie."

"My marriage with the Duke," she revealed, "it was a sham."

The other girl paused. "Nobody thought it was a love match if that is what you're driving at."

Lavinia scoffed, "It is a love match. Or at least it is now, for me. I agreed to his harebrained scheme to save my family. My family- they- it was all for them. We're on the very brink of financial ruin and I was going to save us. This arrangement with the Duke was supposed to save us. But when he kissed me, it didn't feel like an arrangement."

She leaned forward, "what did it feel like? Was it everything they described in the

books?"

"Yes, and more," Lavinia sighed, "I do not think it will ever feel like that again, not with someone else. None of it was real though. I fell in love with him, and he cannot love me."

Jenny clutched her by the arms and pulled her forward. "What do you mean he cannot love you? Everybody is capable of love."

She dragged a hand down her face. "He is, but he will not let himself love anybody or be roped into something as silly as love. I'm afraid that I have become one of those pathetic girls who falls in love with an unattainable man."

"How could he be so cruel?" The bespectacled girl jumped to her feet and began to pace. "He should never have pulled you into such an arrangement if he had no plans to-"

"You don't understand," Lavinia cut in hurriedly, "I knew from the beginning that it would be a marriage in name only. He said as much. It sounded like a dream come true at the beginning, I would be free to do as I wished with the protection of the Wyld name, a generous stipend and a mutual respect between the Duke and I."

Jenny's eyes went wide, and her voice dropped to a whisper. "What about the family line? I do not know much about the process of it, but I am quite sure you have to consummate the marriage to be able to bear an heir, and it sounds like the both of you have no intentions of doing that."

She ducked her head, blushing, because she had had every intention of consummating their marriage. "He was not all that interested in continuing his line."

Jenny gaped at her, "what were you thinking Lavinia!" she cried.

"I was obviously not thinking," she dropped to her back on the bed and stared up at the ceiling. "If I was, I would never have allowed myself to fall hopelessly in love with him."

Tears began to slide down her eyes, and her lips trembled, "I have fallen for him and I do not know what to do. I do not know whether to try harder with him or to leave him be. But then the thought of never speaking to him again."

"And my family," Lavinia continued, "they will hate me if I do this to them. I cannot smear their names because of my selfishness. I should never have attempted to save us if I had no plans to follow through."

"Oh, Lavvie," the other girl sighed, "it is by no fault of yours. How could you have known that this would happen?"

That was when she burst into tears, huge racking sobs that made her curl up into a ball and bury her face in her hands, body trembling. Jenny was at a loss because she had never seen her strong and capable friend in such a state and she felt a little panicked as at what to do, but finally, she crawled into bed with her and put an arm around her shoulders.

"Do not cry, Lavinia."

"H-how can I not?" she sobbed. "I cannot break the engagement because my family and I will only suffer from it but neither can I go ahead with it because I do not think I will be able to live that way. He is perfect in every other way but for that one unforgivable flaw."

She rubbed her hand up and down her friend's back, trying to soothe her. Lavinia knew she was acting like a fool, and she hated to cry because it made her eyes puffy, gave her a headache and didn't solve anything either. What she should have been

doing was thinking of a way to fix this.

But she was tired.

So very tired of wearing a smile and pretending that everything was fine when it was not.

"Do you think I should end it?" She opened her eyes and stared at Jenny through blurry vision, "I do not want you to pity me. I want you to tell me what you would do if you were me. It appears that this entire situation has made me impractical and I desperately need someone to be my voice of reason."

Jenny paused, looking thoughtful, "I cannot tell you what to do, Lavvie, I'm sorry. You're the only one who can decide your course of action."

That was exactly what she had feared. She squeezed her eyes shut and tried to imagine being married to Victor. In her mind's eye, her future stretched ahead of her endlessly filled with unfulfilled longing and unreciprocated love. She saw herself withering away ever so slowly.

But then she imagined a life without him, he would find someone else of course. He was a young, wealthy and handsome Duke and within minutes of the news that he was back on the marriage mart spreading through the ton, he would have women beating down on his door.

Either way, her story would be tragic.

"What if you managed to find another gentleman to marry you?" Jenny suddenly piped up. "That could save your family from the gossipmongers. The story would be that you jilted a Duke in the name of love and it would be très romantique."

Lavinia sat up and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand, "Who would marry me? You forget that before the Duke came along with his scheme, I did not exactly have a line of callers or admirers."

"Only because you are oblivious and you decided that none of them are nearly good enough."

"I was holding out for love," she pouted.

"Of course, of course," Jenny agreed easily, "but now, you have caught the attention of the ton by being involved with the Duke. It is time to use that attention for your own good."

"Are you saying that I should..." she trailed off, thoughts racing. For the sake of her family's reputation, she could get herself another gentleman. But who? Not Noah's friends of course. Someone else. Like the marquess perhaps.

The idea began to cement in her mind, but then Victor's face flashed in her head and her plans stuttered to a stop.

"I cannot," she finally said, "I love him too much."

"I understand," Jenny told her, "I do not expect you to make any decisions now, Lavvie. I believe you will make the right choice though and I will support you through whatever you decide."

She began to nod and then froze. It only just occurred to her that she had made this decision to save her family from ruin by herself and if her aunt ever found out, she would be disappointed. She had lied to her about the nature of her and the Duke's relationship. Well, she hadn't exactly lied.

She had just made her believe that they were both equally attached to each other.

"What am I going to tell my aunt?" she wailed. "She thinks the Duke loves me and I don't know where she has got that idea, and I have no idea what I will tell her if I ever decide to end the engagement. She will be so disappointed if she finds out the truth."

"You will figure it out," Jenny soothed.

"I'm afraid I may not, Jenny," she sniffled.

She was afraid that she would only make things more complicated if she tried to figure it out. What she wanted to do was crawl into her bed and pretend like none of this had ever happened. But she couldn't just bury her head in the sand.

"It will be alright," the red head whispered.

She could only hope so.

CHAPTER 21

Her reflection in the mirror didn't succeed in improving her mood. Her stomach felt too tight and achy and she couldn't even blame her corset because the lady's maid hadn't tied it too tight.

The dress was perfect and once again, Madame Vandeleur had outdone herself. It was a very pale blue that appeared almost silver, especially with the tiny beads sewn into it. The small cap sleeves were trimmed with the tiniest bit of lace and the décolletage exposed a hint of cleavage. She should have felt like a princess in the dress but all she felt was a sense of foreboding.

"You look perfect," Lady Hartfield said as they climbed up into the carriage.

"Thank you," she tried to smile but she didn't quite manage the expression. Her aunt's eyes went wide with panic and just as the woman opened her mouth to say something, she pointedly turned her face to the side, staring out the glass window.

"Halt! Halt!" Noah's booming voice sounded and the two women turned to where he was hurrying down the steps of the house and toward the carriage.

He climbed in and settled beside Lavinia with a wide smile.

"I cannot believe that you are willingly coming to a ball room," she teased her cousin.

"Do not tell me you have formed a tendre with one of the ladies of the ton."

He shuddered dramatically, "I can safely say that I have done no such thing."

Lady Hartfield tutted, "you should."

The man rolled his eyes with a smile then turned to Lavinia, "Yyou look wonderful, cousin. Will the Duke be at the ball?"

"Of course," she narrowed her eyes at him, "why?"

He only shrugged, "no reason. But I will not let you out of my sight tonight."

She fisted the material of the dress at her thighs, "I do not remember hiring a personal guard."

"You would not be able to afford me anyway," he shot her a look that was rife with meaning. "I will be doing this completely free of charge."

"I don't need you to watch me," she snapped, "I have Aunt Felicity with me."

"What is going on here?" Lady Hartfield asked, gaze flying between them.

She pressed her mouth into a thin line and stared at her cousin with irritation. How dare he be an overbearing oaf tonight of all nights? She had planned to have a private discussion with Victor tonight but that would be impossible with Noah watching her like a hawk.

He was probably trying to protect her from whatever he thought happened the other night.

With a huff, she sat back in her chair and turned to the window.

"Nothing, Mother," Noah replied, "I am only trying to look out for Lavvie."

She didn't need to be looked after. She was an adult and she could handle herself. After all she was to be a Duchess in a short time. Or not.

The carriage finally pulled to a stop in front of Greenwood house and the party of three climbed out and then made their way into the house.

When Priscilla, a duke's daughter had shocked the ton a few years ago and married a man without a title, so many members of polite society had gossiped and mocked her, until it had been revealed that Greenwood was as wealthy as Croesus. Since then, the Greenwood yearly ball had become one of the most exclusive parties of the season.

It was the first time the Hartfields had been invited.

"You must be Miss Proctor," Priscilla Greenwood smiled at her at the receiving line, "Welcome to Greenwood house. I have heard a lot about you and I do so hope you live up to the reputation."

She smiled back, "I hope I do too."

The ballroom was already packed with people and Lavinia immediately tried to spot the Duke or his sister.

"Looking for your duke?" Noah teased.

"He's not mine," she said absently.

"Has something happened?" Lady Hartfield piped up and Lavinia had the insane urge to tell her the entire thing, get it off her chest and allow her to tell her exactly what to do.

"Of course not," she chuckled, "I just think it is quite presumptuous to call him my

anything. Don't you think?"

"Oh, Lavvie," the woman sighed and her eyebrows were drawn down into a sad look.

"Why are you looking at me in that way?" Panic gripped her chest. Did Lady Hartfield know something?

"Felicity!" A woman's excited voice cried, saving the conversation from delving into something else that she wasn't ready to talk about.

Lady Forsythe approached them, her son in tow and as usual, wearing an ominous frown like an adornment over his exquisite clothing.

She quickly dropped into a curtsy, "My lord, my lady."

"Miss Proctor," the Marquess nodded, "May I interest you in taking a stroll about the room with me?"

She wondered if she would be able to sneak away from him to have a private conversation with the Duke and then felt ashamed for once again thinking of how to use him for her own purposes.

"Of course, my lord."

Her cousin stared at her strangely as she placed her hand on his sleeve but eventually turned away.

"I hear you are engaged to the Duke of Wyld," he began as soon as they moved a little distance away, causing her to glance up sharply at him.

"You do not strike me as the sort to listen to gossip."

"It is not true then?"

She suddenly remembered her conversation with Jenny earlier and the advice the girl had given her. "It is true. Can I speak to you in confidence?"

"Please."

She gulped and tried to calm her racing heart, "My- eh- arrangement to the Duke may be coming to an end."

His steps didn't falter, "and may I ask why?"

"You may ask, but I shall not answer."

One corner of his mouth kicked up. "Why is it that you are telling me this? I do not believe it's because I look trustworthy."

She bit her lip in thought. Here came the complicated part, "I cannot end the engagement without thrusting my family into a terrible scandal. But I believe that if I can make it appear that I ended the engagement because I fell in love with-

He made an amused sound deep in his throat that made her glance at him sharply. By now, they had reached a secluded area of the room and she let him go and faced him. "What is so funny?"

"Has anyone told you that you are impertinent?"

"Are you telling me that I am, my lord?" She narrowed her eyes at him.

"What exactly are you asking me, Miss Proctor?" he asked with all seriousness and she almost changed her mind. Almost abandoned the whole scheme and told him she

had made a mistake.

She squared her shoulders and stared at him, "I am enquiring if you are in the market for a wife."

He smiled at her but there was something cold about the smile. The Marquess was an attractive man, but he also made her uncomfortable. The Duke on the other hand put her at ease, perhaps too much at ease.

"I do not believe I am."

"Then this conversation is over. I hope you will not gossip about this to someone else."

"Who would I gossip to?" he asked. "Have you truly not noticed that I am something of a pariah in society?"

The question gave her pause, and she didn't know if it was because the words were rendered without inflection, like he couldn't be bothered with what everyone thought about him or because she was suddenly realizing that they had several eyes on them.

"Why?"

He chuckled, "I will allow you to find that out by yourself and then you can decide if you want to rescind your offer of marriage or not."

"I am desperate."

He took her hand and bowed over it. "Let me escort you back to your mother."

The marquess took his leave just as the first strings of the waltz sounded through the

room. Lavinia felt his presence even before she heard his voice.

"Miss Proctor," the Duke's voice washed through her and made her knees weak. She almost fell to her knees at his feet but managed to lock her limbs together and smile up at him. By some cruel miracle, he managed to get even more beautiful each time she saw him and the slow, leisurely way his gaze dragged down her frame only made her remaining senses fly away with urgency.

"Your Grace," she and her aunt dropped into a deep curtsy.

At their side, Noah gave a shallow bow and watched the man with distrust.

"You promised me your first waltz," he smiled at her and offered her his arm. And then she was being swept away and to the dance floor with the rest of the couples there.

"How is your sister?"

He sighed, "she still believes I am the very devil. I am setting plans in place to find her a suitable match."

"Oh," she said carefully, but she wanted to roar at him about why he didn't trust his sister's judgement.

"Someone who is far too sensible to submit to something as ridiculous as love," he scoffed. "The best marriages are built on friendship, respect and an understanding. Like what we have for example."

They didn't have anything in her opinion. Nothing that she wanted any part in to be precise. It was then that she made up her mind about their doomed arrangement.

"I have to speak to you," she began but before she could say anything else, she looked over his shoulder and caught someone's eye.

"About what?" he asked.

Lavinia couldn't exactly blurt out that she wanted to end the arrangement here in the middle of the dance floor where anybody could hear. This discussion was far too important to have in a public place.

"Not here," she smiled. "It's not important. I will tell you later."

His hand around her tightened and she was pulled closer into him. "What is the matter? I saw you with Forsythe earlier."

She was only too glad when the music came to an end and she distracted him with irrelevant observations till she was back at her family's side. It was a cowardly move, but she didn't care. She was overdue some cowardice.

"You cannot continue to escape me, Lavinia," her aunt told her after the Duke had walked away. "There is something going on and sooner or later, I will find out."

"What is going on?" Noah asked, peering at her closely.

"Nothing is going on. Nothing at all."

"Has the Duke done something again?" he hissed.

Lady Hartfield gasped, "what did he do?"

She glared at her cousin, "nothing at all."

"I am tired of hearing that word nothing. It may be my least favorite word of recent," her aunt growled. She had never heard her sound like that before and it shocked her into silence briefly.

"I can handle it," she told them, "I am handling it."

"You do not look like you are handling it at all," the older woman said softly. "You look unhappy and stressed and harried and I hate to see you like this, my child. I truly do."

She lowered her lashes, "I am in love with the Duke. And he does not love me back. He will never let himself love me."

The Hartfields exchanged a confused gaze and it was her cousin that finally spoke, "what do you mean he will not let himself love you?"

"Noah, do not," Lady Hartfield said, then turned to a pale Lavinia. "Whatever decision you make, we will all support you."

She wanted to bury her face in the woman's perfumed neck and weep, but instead she gave a brisk nod and continued to stare unseeing ahead of her.

Lavinia was about to make the most terrifying decision of her life and the worst of it was that there was only a small part of her that wanted her to do the right thing. And at the end of the day, she didn't know if it would win.

CHAPTER 22

"Y ou should not be here, Miss."

Lavinia knew that. Of course she did. Her presence here would mean certain ruin. But she had to have this conversation tonight. It was now or never.

"I know."

"Wait here," the butler said, his face full of apparent disapproval and then he disappeared into the house, leaving her alone in the foyer with only a single candle lighting up the massive space.

She had only ever seen the Wyld house from a distance, but tonight she was inside the impressive building. Uninvited and in the middle of the night. Or was it the early hours of the morning? She wasn't sure.

Brisk footsteps sounded ahead and a short while later, the butler appeared again and said without any expression, "Please, follow me, Miss."

Together, they navigated the endless hallways, spiral staircase and then more hallways till they finally stopped in front of a door. The older man rapped on it, once, twice and then pulled away. In the blink of an eye, he had disappeared like a phantom.

The door creaked open and she caught sight of the Duke.

"Lavinia, what are you doing here? Come on in," he held the door open for her and she slipped in. The room was far larger than hers with a massive four poster bed against one side of the wall. The only source of light in the room was the silver moon light seeping in through the open window.

She could see him clearly. He was in a dressing gown that was fastened loosely about him, revealing his golden skin from neck to chest. She swallowed uneasily, unable to tear her eyes away from that exposed flesh.

"Lavinia?" he asked again. "Why are you here? How did you get here? Does anyone else know you're here?"

"I was careful and nobody saw me if that is what you are asking."

"You should not take such risks," he grabbed her by the shoulder. "I do not enjoy the thought of you running around so late where any brute and boulder can get their hands on you. You must never take such a risk again."

She nodded and then he stepped closer and pushed the hood of her cloak off her head.

"I had to speak to you," she told him.

His eyebrows furrowed, "about what? Is it so important that you risked your life in such a way?"

She rolled her eyes, "I had one of the footmen accompany me."

Then she pulled away from his hold because with his hands on her even in a touch as innocent as his hands on her shoulder, she couldn't think.

"I think we should end our arrangement."

He blinked at her for a moment and then his eyebrows climbed up his forehead. "Our arrangement? What do you mean by that?"

"Our engagement," she blurted out, gathering all her courage, "I came to tell you that our engagement is over."

He stepped closer to her and growled, "no, it is not. I do not agree to this."

She stomped her foot in annoyance. "Stop being so infuriating. I-I cannot do this. I thought I could, but I cannot."

He stepped even closer and that bare chest was suddenly in her face, his leather and spice scent filling her lungs. She had never wanted to lose her sense of smell so badly.

"What is going on, Lavinia?" Victor's voice was intimately low and she began to wonder if coming there had been a good idea. Perhaps she could have waited till he called on her to have this conversation.

"I am not the right fit for this. There are a dozen other girls that would make better duchesses than me. I-"

"You would make a perfect duchess."

"No, I will not."

He cupped her jaw. "How could you ever think that you would be anything less than absolutely perfect as my duchess? If that is your problem, then I hate to tell you that you have wasted your time coming here."

"Have I?" Her voice was shaky.

"Yes," he chuckled, a rumbling sound that settled southward and brought her alive in more ways than one. She shivered.

"Please, Victor. You must understand. I cannot be what you want me to be."

"I have only ever wanted you to be yourself."

She wanted to roar at him that he was a liar. He didn't want her love, which meant that he wanted her to become a different person. The sort of person that could swallow her feelings and forget they ever existed. The sort of person who didn't believe in love.

"N-no."

"Yes," he murmured into her ear. She was pressed into him now and the layers of cloth between them became insignificant.

Lavinia had never thought she was so pathetic and so weak, but here she was. She was supposed to be telling him that she was in love with him and that she couldn't be with him because she couldn't possibly marry a man who didn't love her.

"I need to say something," she tried, "something important."

"What is stopping you?"

He knew exactly what he was doing and the smile curving his mouth confirmed it.

"I cannot think when you are so close to me," she confessed, "I cannot marry you, Victor."

The man made a feral sound against the skin of her neck and buried his face into the

junction between her neck and shoulders, "Say my name again. Say it."

"Victor," she gasped.

"Tell me why you cannot marry me," he commanded, "tell me."

"You will not touch me."

His hand settled on her hip, "I am touching you now."

Oh God. But he sure was, "yes, but there are other reasons why."

"What other reasons?"

How was she expected to remember when he was so close? With his hands on her hips and his breath fanning her skin?

"Please," she whispered, and those words shattered the remaining restraint between them. Lavinia didn't know who moved first but the next thing she knew, his mouth was on hers and she was being robbed of all breath. While simultaneously giving her his.

His mouth was hot on hers and she gasped at the first contact of mouth on mouth.

His tongue pressed insistently against the tight seams of her mouth and she readily opened for him, mewling when he deepened the kiss.

She clutched at him, trembling with the need to be possessed, so desperate for him that she couldn't have told you her own name.

He licked into her mouth, chasing her taste, unable to get enough of her addictive

taste. She wrapped her arms around his neck and went up on her tiptoes, feeling something hard and insistent pressing against her stomach.

When he pulled away, she let out a sound of dismay, lips swollen and wet, eyes glassy with desire.

"Why did you stop?"

"I want to undress you, and then I want to look at you, worship you with my eyes."

"Victor."

"Do you know how long I've dreamed of this? Of having you here in my bedroom, completely at my mercy?" Even as he said the words, his hand was already reaching for her pinned up hair.

With excruciating slowness, he pulled out the pins from her hair, one after the other. Neither of them seemed to be breathing as he dug out each pin, and then finally her luscious brown hair fell down to her back in endless waves.

The Duke dragged his hand through her hair and then wrapped the length around his fists and tugged lightly.

A moan slipped out of her mouth unbidden and her lips parted. The way he looked at her should have been outlawed. It was a look of urgent hunger, a look that promised nothing good and yet everything good at the same time.

"Turn around," he whispered and without a second thought, she gave him her back.

His hand deftly began to undo the endless line of buttons on her back and in no time at all, he slipped the cap sleeves down her arms and the dress pooled to the ground.

The Duke pushed her heavy hair over one shoulder and then dropped an open mouthed kiss against the exposed side of her neck.

Lavinia felt her eyes roll to the back of her head at the feel of his tongue peeking out to lap against her skin.

He undid her corset and it joined her dress on the floor too and then he spun her around to face him and his mouth brushed against hers. She couldn't take the torture anymore. There was a roaring furnace inside of her and she felt like she would soon combust and set the rest of the world on fire along with herself.

This time she was the one who deepened the kiss, who turned their careful exploration into an explosion.

The growl he let out informed her that the Duke didn't mind. His hands became urgent against her body, everywhere at once, touching and groping and clutching and soon, it wasn't nearly enough for him. He undid the lace tying the collar of her shift together and when it slid down, the fabric brushed over her pebbled nipples, making her gasp.

And then she was completely nude before him except for her stockings and shoes.

He pulled away to watch her and she pulled her shoulders back and thrust out her chest, feeling desirable and wanton as his dark eyes took her in. Every part that that molten gaze touched made her burn.

And then she watched him reach for the rope of his dressing gown and slip the material off his large shoulders.

"Oh," she stared unabashedly at his broad, hairy chest and the row of muscles that led down into his trousers.

She wasn't nearly ready when he stepped out of the trousers. The moonlight allowed her to see every inch of him. From his slender hips, to his muscled thighs to the thick length in between his legs.

"I want you, Lavinia. I want you like I have never wanted anything else in my life and I must have been out of my mind to think I would be able to keep my hands off you."

Lavinia didn't let the bout of sadness that his words caused to destroy the moment. It was too wonderful a moment to allow reality to intrude.

Wanting her was good, but it was not enough for her. She wanted the entirety of his affection and love and nothing else would do.

He reached for her and his mouth landed on the corner of her mouth, and then it slid down to the edge of her jaw. His large hands cupped her bottom and before she could feel shy about his hands on such an intimate part of her, he had lifted her into his arms and was carrying her across the room and into his bed.

He dropped her down into it carefully and he sat back on his heels between her legs to watch her.

"Please," she cried.

The Duke reached for her feet and slid off her slippers then tossed them over his shoulders. She felt over stimulated, achy on the inside and out and she wanted his hands, his mouth everywhere. His hot, large body covered hers and his mouth covered one nipple while his other one spread her legs further.

Of their own volition, her legs wrapped around his hip and arched up for something...

Something she couldn't name.

He caressed her skin while he sucked her breast deep into his mouth. She trashed against the bed, fingers racking into his hair and mussing it up.

He released her breast with an audible plop and moved to the other, fingers plucking at the other wet nipple. She arched off the bed, offering more of her to his willing mouth.

"I want to taste you so badly."

She didn't know what he meant but, "yes." She trusted him with her body even if she didn't trust him with her heart.

His mouth continued down, swirling against her belly button and nipping at the skin of her stomach before he buried his face in between her legs.

She gasped when his tongue lapped across her most private place and then she tried to pull him away, embarrassment turning her face a distinct red.

"W-what are you doing?"

He groaned, "you taste so good, darling. Allow me to worship you."

His tongue was like a brand of fire against her wet heat and when he pushed that velvety muscle inside her, she let out a cry of pleasure, legs trembling.

Victor pushed her thighs further apart and thrust one thick finger inside of her. Her hips shot off the bed, and his hand on her hip pressed her back into the bed, back into his mouth and hand and the impossibly wonderful fullness.

"Oh God. Oh God," she chanted as his finger began to move within her.

Another finger joined the first and she screamed his name. Pleasure curling inside of her faster and faster. She stood at the brink but something was missing.

"Victor. Victor please!" Tears slipped down the sides of her eyes like jewels standing against her skin.

"Not yet."

"Now!"

"You're so tight," he gritted out, "I will hurt you."

"You could never hurt me. I trust you." I love you . The words remained unspoken between them. If she ever let those words out of her mouth, he would pull away. He would stare at her like she had betrayed him, like she had tricked him into something.

"Lavinia, what you do to me."

He rose up fully on his knees and leaned over her, eyes filled with something that she could pretend was love.

Lavinia felt something blunt against her entrance and she sucked in a breath, waiting.

"I am sorry."

"Do not be," she whispered. She was the one who should be sorry.

And then he pushed into her.

"Argh!" She cried at the size of him. She wanted to tell him to stop, she wanted to shut her legs and push him away, but he wasn't done. He moved his hips back and then drove into her fully.

The tears that filled her eyes were no longer ones of immense pleasure. They were tears of pain as she felt the barrier inside of her give way. Blinding pain filled her, and she wondered why people enjoyed this. It was horrible. Truly horrible.

"Shh," he kissed down her face and then her mouth, his fingers stroking her. Soon she began to feel pleasure unfurl inside her again, till she was trembling with it again.

Her hips began to undulate, seeking friction. Little sparks of light shot behind her eyes, but it still wasn't enough.

"I need," she gasped, "I need."

"I will always take care of you. Always." He began to move inside her, drawing his hips back and forth and rolling them, gaining speed with each thrust till they were both moving in a mindless rhythm. She felt so full to bursting and every thrust wound her up tighter and tighter.

He was so deep in her that she didn't know where she stopped and he began.

They groaned and moaned and grunted. She clawed at his skin with her nails, aching for a release only he could give her.

His fingers stroked down her center, just above where they were joined and he touched something there that made her scream even louder, till her throat was hoarse.

"I..." she panted, "I want you. I want you." I love you. I love you.

"Come for me, darling," his words were an order her body couldn't refuse and she let go, dropping into the crevice and shattering into a million pieces. The whole world went white around her and she could hear her own heartbeat.

Lavinia felt like she was floating and only the man above her was keeping her from floating away.

"So perfect, so beautiful," he was whispering, stroking her face, her hair, her body, mouth following every touch. She was in heaven and she wanted to remain there forever.

She clung to him as tight as she could and pressed her mouth to his shoulder to keep her useless feelings in where they belonged. There was no room for such feelings here.

They weren't welcome.

And so she held him tight because she knew that it was the last time she ever would.

Lavinia woke up slowly, body loose and relaxed. There was a warm body wrapped around hers and she had never felt so content in her life.

She sighed, wanting to remain like that forever.

She was happy, until she remembered where she was and what she had done. Raising her head from the pillow, she stared down at the man at her side. The first rays of sun were just beginning to fill the room, and he had never looked more attractive to her.

His brown hair was tousled carelessly over his head, the long locks falling into his shut eyes. His long lashes fanned over his cheeks. The bed cover was pulled to just over his hip and his entire upper body was on display, those strong arms curled over

her.

Last night he had taken her over and over again till neither of them could even do so much as sigh.

In the light of a new day, her night of pleasure now stared at her like an accusation. And it suddenly occurred to her that there could be consequences of their actions.

Carefully, she slipped out from under his arms and out of the bed. Then carefully and without making a sound, she began to drag on her clothes, hastily doing up most of the buttons of her dress and shrugging on the heavy, dark green cloak she had used to sneak out the previous night.

Ransacking through his desk, she found some stationery and a pen and scribbled down a note that only made her feel more miserable. She placed it on her side of the bed and then dared to say the words that had been in her heart for a while now.

"I love you, Victor."

The words brought her no relief and finally, she slipped out the door and stole down the stairs like a thief. The butler was waiting for her at the bottom of the stairs like a menacing shadow and she gasped as she came upon him.

"What are you doing here?" she whispered.

"My lady," he nodded, "I have taken the liberty of calling you a hackney with a trusted and discreet driver."

A dark feeling curdled in her stomach as she wondered how many other times the man had had to make such arrangements for the Duke's other paramours.

She nodded in gratitude and then left the Wyld house just as silently as she had come hours ago. Nothing had changed and at the same time, everything had. For the rest of her life, she knew she had no hope of ever feeling anything close to this again.

Leaning her forehead against the glass door of the hackney, she closed her eyes and wept.

"Your Grace, shall I draw you a bath?"

The Duke of Wyld opened his eyes slowly and blinked, wincing at the light pouring into the room. He stretched his arms, yawning and the whole time there was a smile stretching his lips. He had had the best night sleep of his entire adult life and-

His thoughts came to a screeching halt when the events of the previous night came rushing back.

Lavinia had been there.

It hadn't been a dream.

He turned his head sharply and glanced at the empty space at his side. There was no hint of a brown haired minx at his side and his heart gave a painful clench at her absence.

"Where is she?" he roared at his valet and the man jerked with shock.

"Where is who, Your Grace?"

He jumped out of bed and reached for his trousers, kicking them on hurriedly. It was as he began to pull his shirt on that he saw the hint of white peeking out from under his bed.

Frowning, he picked up the paper and stared at it with confusion before opening it up. It was three lines of text and thirteen words, but they managed to nearly bring him to his knees. His eyes swept over her flowing script over and over again and then he brushed his fingers over the paper like he could feel her on the page.

I'm sorry.

I have fallen in love with you.

I cannot marry you.

"Your Grace, are you quite alright?"

He stared up at the man wordlessly. No, he wasn't. He felt like someone had taken everything he knew about life and turned it upside down.

She loved him.

It almost seemed impossible but it was true. He couldn't be hallucinating the words on the paper and neither could this be a dream. No dream had ever succeeded in causing such a sharp pain in the place where his heart was.

"She's gone," he whispered.

He watched the valet open and close his mouth, at a loss of words and then finally the man said, "I am sorry, Your Grace."

Victor tugged on his shirt and shoes and raced down the stairs, the letter clutched tight in his hand. He found his mother in the breakfast room sipping her cup of tea daintily, a book in her other hand.

"Victor, dear," she tutted. "What has possessed you to run around the house in that state. I do hope you are not planning on leaving the house looking like that."

Before he could respond, his sister walked in and took a seat at the table, "I would not be surprised. After all, he has lost his senses. What else could possibly make him turn Patrick away."

"Georgie!" his mother chastised, then, "she has a point dear. I heard about you refusing Patrick."

Victor wasn't in the mood to talk about his sister's crazy, whirlwind romance with his best friend. They could run off and shackle themselves together for eternity and see if he cared. He had more pressing problems than them as far as he was concerned, and a burning grudge against the world.

He waved the letter about, "Lavinia is in love with me."

It was Georgie that snorted, "poor girl. Does she know that you traded in your heart for a barrel of beer years and years ago?"

"Georgie!" the dowager duchess cried, "Do not be so insensitive."

The girl's expression turned mulish, "well forgive me if I am unable to scrape out any sympathy at all for him. I am afraid that I have exhausted all of mine on myself."

The older woman decided that ignoring the aggrieved girl was the best course of action. She turned to her son, "I do not understand. Why do you sound mournful about something as beautiful as love?"

"I really did think Miss Proctor had more common sense than to give her heart to a blackhearted man like you!" Georgie roared, jumped to her feet and dashed away,

tears running down her cheeks.

"You have hurt your sister greatly," his mother said. "What do you plan to do about that?"

"I was only trying to protect her, the same way I've been trying to protect myself," then he smiled bitterly. "You, on the other hand, you must be relieved to see the last of her."

She stared at him silently, an unreadable expression on her face, "Believe it or not, Victor, but I have only wanted what was best for you and that is a life full of love and joy. But when I saw you were so closed off towards the possibility of love, I became intent on seeing you be at least content."

He dropped into the chair his sister had vacated and began to brush the back of his fingers over Lavinia's words. "What am I going to do?"

"About what?"

He lowered his gaze, "about Lavinia. I cannot lose her."

"Should you not be relieved that she has ended the engagement on her own? You never wanted to be in love and now she has been so thoughtful as to take herself away before she can contaminate you with that horrible feeling."

The glare he shot her could have made a lesser person tremble. Unfortunately for him, she was both his mother and a formidable duchess in her own right.

"I cannot bear the thought of going on without her," he admitted. "I do not see why her loving me should make her end the engagement. It makes no sense."

The woman sighed. She loved her son, but like every other man, he could be very obtuse when it came to such matters.

"I do not know Miss Proctor personally, but I believe that, like every other woman on the planet who has been unfortunate to fall for a man whose heart is unavailable, she does not want to spend the rest of her life in misery."

"I will treat her right. I will-"

"Not love her back."

That snapped his mouth shut, "but I cannot let her go."

"Then you must ask yourself if you love her or not."

He thought about it, or rather, he tried to. Every time his mind began to go close to that four lettered word, he mentally recoiled from it.

"It brought nothing but pain to you. Why would you want the same for me or anybody you care about? "

"Oh my goodness," she covered her mouth with one hand, tears filling her eyes. "Has this been about me from the start?"

His jaw clenched, "I saw what love did to you after Father passed. You were a wreck, and nobody could get through to you, not even Georgie. Did you know that you ignored her so much that she decided to run away? She got on a horse and planned her escape and if I hadn't acted fast, I don't know what would have happened to her."

The tears ran down the dowager duchess's face in rivulets. "I had no idea."

"It's not that I do not believe in love, Mother. Or that I do not think Georgie is capable of loving someone. It is that I do not wish it even on my worst enemy. I have protected her since Father died and I will continue to protect her forever."

His mother stared at him aghast, "I am sorry."

The Duke's face twisted with surprise, "whatever for?"

"I'm sorry that your father died too soon, and I am sorry that I neglected being your mother for so long. You should never have had to grow up so fast and become so responsible at such a young age."

"It was my duty."

"It shouldn't have been," the words were an echo of the ones Lavinia had said to him that day at the opera and it made his chest ache with loss and sorrow.

"I should have taken care of the both of you, but I admit that it was far easier to bury myself in my grief and shut the rest of the world out. I thought I was doing what was best for you children, taking the time to fix myself so I could be the best version for the both of you. What I should have done instead was grieve with you. We should have all shared the grief and grew with it together, but I allowed you to live with both the grief and the burden of everything and I was glad that you were so capable. You shouldn't have had to be capable."

The dowager duchess sniffled, "I loved your father, I still do. That love never destroyed me, Victor. It gave the both of you, my precious darlings, to me and the years we spent together were wonderful. Yes, there is a risk of losing the one you love, and it will hurt you. You will feel the ache like a physical pain crippling you, but what if they do not? I would not choose to have never met your father even with what I know now. The time I spent with him was more than worth it. Will you let

yourself miss out on finding and experiencing something so beautiful because you are afraid to lose?"

"You do not understand," he shook his head. "The horror of what it did to you affected all of us. It-"

She stood up, the chair screeching against the floor and then walked to where he sat and put her hand on his shoulder, "listen to me Victor. I want you to listen and listen well."

He stared at her, "I am listening."

"How does forever without Lavinia sound?"

The Duke resisted the urge to rub his chest where a sharp pain had suddenly begun. He opened his mouth and then closed it stubbornly.

"If what I am thinking is correct, then it must sound like hell to you," she stared at him sympathetically. "If you let her walk away now because of your fear, you will lose her forever. She may choose to spend the rest of her life alone or she may find someone who will help her heal."

He shot up to his feet growling, "she is mine." The thought of someone else in his place made him want to commit murder. She would use that sharp wit on someone else and be charming and exasperating to him.

She would kiss him and he would run his hands over her satin smooth skin.

No!

"Then you admit that you feel for her?"

The words were like nails dragging up the inside of his throat, "I love her and I believe I have loved her for a long time, Mother. I cannot lose her."

She may be quickening with his child at the moment, and he was not going to let any child of his grow up as a bastard. Lavinia would be his wife, his duchess, and the mother of the future Duke of Wyld. No other person would do, because he loved her.

The words felt easier in his head now and a tentative smile curled his mouth. His mother smiled too.

"I love her, " he breathed.

"Do not just stand here and tell me. I am not the one who needs to hear the words," she huffed.

He made to head for the door and she cleared her throat sharply, halting him. Then her eyes swept down his body pointedly, "I know love makes one a little bit crazy, but I am afraid you will be hurled off to bedlam before you can tell your Miss Proctor how you feel."

"You do not understand, there is hardly any time," even as he grumbled the words, he knew his mother was right.

He also needed to speak to his sister. For the first time since he had received the news at school that his father had passed, he felt something like hope fill his chest. Accompanying that hope was trepidation though, but he loved Lavinia Proctor and that had to be good enough.

Love.

The word only made him pause a little now.

He burst into his room and stared his valet down. "Set out my best suit. I have somewhere very important to be."

CHAPTER 23

The Duke of Wyld felt like a school boy as the carriage rambled down to the Hartfield house half an hour later. Never in his life had he felt so nervous, not even when it had dawned on him that he was now the Duke and had hundreds of new responsibility.

And so when the vehicle drew to a stop, he sat in the luxurious interior of the carriage and took deep breaths. Then he climbed down and crossed briskly to the front door of the house. Before he could even raise his hand to knock, the door was pulled open by the Stony faced butler.

Victor could swear there was a look of disapproval on the man's carefully blank face.

"Your Grace, please come on in."

He followed the man to the drawing room and took a seat at the edge of the settee. The butler offered him a bow and disappeared to go and inform the women about their guest.

"Your Grace," Lord Hartfield said from the doorway.

"Lord Hartfield," Victor climbed to his feet trying to keep his strained smile in place.

The older man sketched a bow, "I am glad I caught you today, Your Grace. Some of the men and I were discussing investing in a vineyard in France and we wanted to pick your brain about it."

Victor blinked at him in surprise, "I believe you should speak to Greenwood about that. I am afraid I know nothing about vineyards. I am unbelievably dense in anything outside of casual agriculture, livestock, and beer."

"Beer?" Lord Hartfield's eyebrows went up, "I heard tale about your brewery, but I thought it was just a rumor. Do you really work in it?"

He let out a laughter, suddenly at ease at the familiar topic of conversation, "I am more hands on than is conventional."

The older man's mustache twitched with a smile. "What is convention if not a set of stiff, silly rules? Tell me though, how do you find the time to manage so many vast businesses all the way from London?"

"Competent staff," he confessed. "But I think that I will settle fully in the country after I get married."

The man let out a booming laughter, "It is a good thing then that she cherishes the country. Give her a horse and enough land to traipse around and she will be content like a woman who has been given a box full of diamonds."

"She is different," the Duke said. "Special. Perfect."

Lord Hartfield stared at him in surprise for a long moment, long enough to give Victor pause and then he smiled. "Every day, I find myself glad that my Lavinia will be under your protection. She is my daughter in every way that counts and all I have ever wanted for her is the best."

The sound of approaching footsteps made the two men raise their heads and they watched the women come down the stairs. Victor couldn't look away from the vision that was Lavinia in an egg shell day dress. And then his gaze caught on her puffy

eyes and he froze.

"Are you quite alright, dear?" Lord Hartfield asked.

"I-uh-"

"She did not get enough sleep last night," it was her aunt that piped up with a stiff smile. "She will be alright after a little, much due rest."

"You all take care," the older man grabbed his hat, waved it at them and then left the house.

"Miss Proctor," he began but she shifted her eyes away quickly and walked past him into the drawing room. He watched her walk fully into the room and settle into the farthest corner of the chair, shoulders drooping with defeat.

As soon as he joined her on the seat, she spoke, "did you not get my note?"

"I got your note."

"Then why are you here?" There was accusation in her voice and then her eyes widened. "Is it about- er- our activities from earlier? If you are bothered about any future consequences-"

He tried to control his temper, but he wasn't sure he was doing all that good of a job, "Consequences? Is that what our child will be? A consequence."

Her eyes narrowed, "what would you have me call it then?"

Victor took a deep breath, "I do not want us to end the engagement. We will go ahead with the marriage."

She gaped at him, green eyes searching his for something, "Did you not see where I explained my reasons?"

"Explained?" he burst out. "Those three lines do not constitute much of an explanation to me. And by the way I do not see how you being in love with me changes things."

He knew those words were a mistake even before they fully left him mouth but bloody hell, he was no good at this. In his entire life he had never had to bare himself in this way. Saying it to his mother was one thing but actually saying it to Lavinia's face was another. What he felt for her was huge and indescribable and all-consuming and those four letters felt too inadequate.

There should have been a whole new language created exclusively for the purpose of explaining what was in his heart.

"Do you want to be bothered with my silly feelings for the rest of your life?" she scoffed.

"Your feelings are not silly," he inched closer, "and honestly, I will not mind you being- feeling for me. On the contrary, I will welcome your feelings and-"

"Please stop!" she hissed, tears filling her eyes. "it is better you told me to go straight to hell with my feelings than trying to patronize me. I do not need you to tolerate or in your own words, merely welcome my feelings. I would much rather disappear to the edge of the world and live out my days there than be indulged by a man I loved."

I love you.

The words stayed stuck in his throat.

"Our child," he began.

"If you are here only for the sake of our child then I will assure you that he or she will be fine. It will not know any other life except-" she choked on her next breath and turned away to compose herself. When she faced him again, she wore a placid smile. "Anyway, it does not signify because there is no way to know that there will even be a child. I do hope there is not."

He froze and then leaned forward and asked urgently, "do you suddenly hate me that much?"

Lavinia's eyes filled with more tears, and he decided that for the rest of his life, he never wanted to see her cry, worst of all because of something he had done.

"Lavinia," he reached for her, and she flinched away.

"Please leave, Your Grace."

"Not until I tell you what I came here to."

She rose to her feet, chin thrust in the air, "I think you have said enough. U-unless there is something else. Is there something else, Your Grace?"

There was so much hope in her eyes that it made him feel like the worst type of bastard. "I will give you the best life you could ever dream of."

"No, you cannot," she shook her head in denial. "Not with only a part of you. You can either give me all of you or nothing at all."

He wanted to kiss her. He wanted to take that pert mouth and devour it and her whole. It was that thought that finally broke the gate inside of him that held all of the

words he felt back. The very thought of never being able to kiss her.

"I watched love destroy my mother and us by proxy after my father passed. She was not herself for months afterwards. She drew into this shell where none of us could reach her. It was Georgie that needed her the most, but I needed her too."

Lavinia stared at him wordlessly, and he continued, "I came to associate love with that dark time. It was loss and pain and isolation. It was something that turned the most vicarious soul into a husk of a person and I swore never to let it dig its claws into me. If I kept myself from love, I would be safe from feeling what my mother felt."

"Oh Victor," she whispered, staring at him with understanding instead of pity. He appreciated her for it more than she could imagine. Her pity would have made him shut down in defense.

"I must not have done all that good of a job protecting myself because here I am, on the brink of losing you and knowing that if I do, it will hurt just as much as the loss my mother felt those years ago."

She stepped forward, "w-what are you saying?"

He took her in, the woman he loved. Every inch of her was perfect, as if she was custom made for him, "I am saying that I do not know what love is, Lavinia. But I want you close to me forever, I want to make you happy, I miss you when we are apart, and I do not want to go another moment knowing that you are not mine."

The Duke swallowed. Now that the words had begun to come out, the rest of it tumbled out, "I am saying that it feels like I have been waiting for you my entire life. I am saying that I want to grow old with you and live a full life cherishing you. I am saying that I want to go to bed every night with you in my arms and wake up like

that."

"What if I snore?" she laughed through her tears.

"I do not care," he told her, "there will be no separate rooms in our future."

She rolled her eyes, "I have not even agreed to this future, or do you plan on marching me with shackles to the altar?"

He smiled, "if I must."

"You love me," she smiled. "Oh Victor, you love me."

"I love you," he said quietly and the way her eyes lit up made him feel warm on the inside. If he had known such simple words could make her so happy he would have said them a lot sooner.

"I love you too," a pause. "You are not saying this just because of the baby?"

He laughed and pulled her into his arms. "We are not even sure there is a baby. I want to have lots of children with you, Lavinia, but for now, I just want to keep you to myself."

She laughed, delighted, allowing herself to be pulled closer to him, "how selfish of you."

Lady Hartfield cleared her throat loudly at their sudden proximity but neither of them could tear their eyes away from each other long enough to pay her any attention.

"I knew you were trouble from the very first moment," he whispered to her, "I should have known I had fallen for you when I kept that stupid dog."

She gasped in mock outrage, and slapped his chest playfully, "he is not a stupid dog."

Lady Hartfield cleared her throat again, and from the corner of his eyes, the Duke saw her rise to her feet.

"How soon can we be married?" he asked.

"Say you love me again," she countered.

"I love you."

The smile that split her face was blinding, "I will never get tired of hearing those words."

"I will never get tired of saying them," he fingered one springy lock of hair escaping from her coiffeur. "You are so beautiful."

She made a face at him, but color rose up her cheeks, revealing her pleasure. "Kiss me, Your Grace."

In that moment, he could have been standing in court, or in the middle of a stampede, and he wouldn't have cared. The only thing that mattered was what this woman wanted and for the rest of his life, he swore to give her whatever she desired.

He covered her mouth with his, ignoring Lady Hartfield's drawn out scandalized gasp.

If only the Duke could have lived in that moment with Lavinia forever, unfortunately he knew that there was something else he needed to do. Someone he needed to fix things with. Two people if he were being literal.

He left the Hartfield house with a smile on his face that faded away slowly as his carriage made its way down to Patrick's town house.

"Lord Dillon is not at home," the butler told him when he opened the door, "You may find him at his club."

Damn it, Victor should have thought as much. He knew that his friend stayed far away from his house to escape his aunt and her persistent nagging for him to get leg shackled.

Jumping back into the carriage, he ordered the driver to take him to Whites, a club that the both men were members of.

Inside, he found his friend seated at a table tucked into a dark corner. There was a full, untouched bottle of whiskey on the table before him and his hair and clothes were disheveled.

"You," Patrick drawled, "if you have come to call me out for laying my filthy hands on your sister, I will have to warn you that I am an excellent shot and I will not deflect."

Victor dragged a chair forward and dropped into it. "If you kill me, you will not be able to marry Georgie. It will be in my favor regardless."

The man's jaw clenched visibly, and his eyes narrowed dangerously. If the Duke didn't know him so well, he would have been terrified.

"What do you want?"

"To make amends," Victor poured himself a drink and leaned back into his chair.

The other man snorted, "if you think that I am just going to take the olive branch and forget all about Georgie, then you do not really know me. I will also advise you not to waste your time. I am not going to let her go, Victor. Or should I say, Your Grace?"

"You would only be proving me right if you let her go now," the Duke admitted.

Lord Dillon slanted him a sharp look, "what are you implying?"

Damn it, he did not want to have to spell it out for him too, "you say you love my sister?"

"More than life itself," he said resolutely. "And she is going to become my wife. With or without your blessings. I know she would prefer your blessings though, and that is the only reason I have not carried her off to Gretna Green and shackled her to me for life."

One of his eyebrows went up in surprise, "what is the hurry?"

Patrick shook his head, "I am afraid it is not something I can explain for someone who has not experienced it. You would not understand."

The Duke laughed, "that statement is very far from the truth, my friend. I have recently found myself in the same situation."

"Recently?" Patrick laughed too, "you lost your senses the moment you met Miss Proctor, and I do not think you have recovered them."

It was such a ridiculously apt statement and it sobered Victor. He imagined being in his friend's shoes, being told by Lord Hartfield perhaps that he could not let him love his daughter. He did not think he would have been quite as calm as the viscount.

"You have my blessing to marry Georgie."

Surprise lit up the other man's eyes, "what made you change your mind."

"Does it matter?"

"Yes," he gritted his teeth, "it matters."

He thought about that awful feeling in his chest when he had read Lavinia's letter, that awful feeling when he had thought he had lost her. He could never put anybody through that.

Patrick already looked like a wreck, and it was all his fault. And God, he had made his sister cry. The same sister he had sworn to take care of and protect.

"I love Georgie," he finally said, "I want her to be happy and her happiness trumps my fears. Love should always win over fear."

With that he rose to his feet and threw back the glass of whiskey. "If you ever hurt her-"

"I will not."

"If you ever hurt her," he insisted, "there is no corner of the earth where I will not find you Patrick. I will use all the wealth and power at my disposal and rain down hell on you."

The promise hung in the air for a moment and then the viscount nodded.

As the Duke began to leave, the other man stopped him.

"Wait."

He looked over his shoulder and saw that Patrick had risen to his feet too, "thank you."

The Duke continued on his way.

"You look happy," Lady Hartfield said as soon as the Duke left the drawing room.

Lavinia turned to her aunt with a blinding smile, "he loves me."

The woman snorted, "I could have told you that for free. In fact, I distinctly remember telling you exactly that a while ago. He looks at you like you are the brightest star in his sky."

"I think I just needed to hear him say it."

"Finally, you can stop giving me sleepless nights with your sad eyes."

A memory suddenly flashed in her head and she raised her head sharply to stare at her aunt, "what is the story behind Lord Forsythe?"

The older woman pressed her mouth into a thin line, "what is this about? Is there a problem?"

She shrugged innocently. "I am simply curious. I heard rumors about him, and I think I consider him an acquaintance now, so I would like to know."

The older woman waved her hand, mouth set in a mulish line, "you should not pay any of the gossip any mind. They are just needlessly cruel. There has been a lot of tragedy surrounding the Forsythe family but none of it has been by any fault of theirs.

They are just victims of unfortunate circumstances. That is all."

Of course Lavinia knew how cruel the ton could be, but she also suspected that there was something about the Marquess. She decided to forget the entire affair though. After all, she had only wanted to know for the sake of him becoming her replacement groom.

"There is something that I must do," she told her aunt and then dashed away, up the stairs to her room. She grabbed a sheet of paper and scribbled down a message to the Marquess that she needed to see him. She would have the courtesy of telling him to his face that she had been wrong about ending her engagement to the Duke.

Done writing, she handed the letter off to one of the remaining footmen with precise instructions to get back a response before he returns.

In about a half hour, the footman returned with a message from the Marquess to meet him at the park. She changed into a walking dress and boots and left the house, her maid trailing after her.

It was easy to spot the Marquess at the park. In every setting, he seemed to be set apart from the crowd, and yet their eyes were drawn to him, always staring and whispering.

As soon as he caught sight of her, he began to walk around the wide trunk of the tree he had been leaning on. She followed after him slowly, unsure.

"I wanted to save you the pleasure of being gawked at," he told her as soon as she was in front of him, "What have you decided?"

She shrugged, "that I do not care what your story is after all. It must be bad for you to become something of so much gossip, but it would not have stopped me from

wanting you as my groom."

"Ah," he chuckled.

"What is so amusing, my lord?"

"You have decided to hedge your bet on your Duke at the end of the day," he pushed off from the tree, "I must commend you for taking the easier, smarter option."

"He loves me," she didn't think that reality would ever cease to be wonderful to her. He loved her. He had not just said the words to her, he had given her a full picture of exactly what she meant to him, and it bore a striking resemblance to what she felt too.

"I see."

"Thank you for indulging me, though. I believe we can be friends, my lord," and then she held out her hand.

He stared down at that hand like it was a venomous serpent for so long that she almost decided to pull her hand back, but just at that moment, his larger hand engulfed hers. There were no sparks of heat or weakness in her knees, and it made her smile.

"Your new husband will not approve of this friendship, my lady."

She raised a brow, about to protest but then his words resounded in her head. Husband. He would be her husband and then she could do nothing else but laugh in unbridled delight.

EPILOGUE

"Everything is ruined," Lavinia wailed a fortnight later, "Victor will never marry me now!"

"What is going on?" Her aunt burst into the room and stared at her, forehead scrunched up in confusion.

Jenny was the one who replied, "I am not really sure, but I think the dress does not fit."

"Of course it fits," Lady Hartfield waved the redhead away, "it fit a few days ago."

"That was a few days ago!" Lavinia snapped and then dissolved into more hysterical sobs. She had never been such a watering pot but since she had woken up earlier, the entire day had just found one way or the other to frustrate her.

Could it be a divine sign that Victor was no good for her? Or maybe and most likely, she was no good for him.

"Am I no good for him anymore because I do not have a dress?" Her bottom lip trembled.

The doors burst open and this time it was the newly married Lady Dillon that walked in, taking the room in with a curious eye, "I cannot tell exactly what is going on here, but it looks to me like the bride has no intention of getting married today."

"Is that what Victor thinks?" Lavinia threw her hand up into the air and tried to hold back more tears.

"I haven't spoken to my brother yet," Georgie continued, "but I have a strong feeling he will at the moment be regretting not calling a priest to bless your union in our family chapel like Patrick and I had done."

"He wanted to," Lavinia admitted, "I foolishly requested a big wedding. Have I ruined everything with my demands?"

The other three women exchanged glances that ranged from confused to incredulous to exasperated.

"It is not foolish to want a proper, big wedding. Mama would not have let you two get away with anything else, anyway," Georgie soothed, "so even if you had wanted to follow my footsteps, she would not have let you anyway."

"Your mother hates me."

"She- uh- does not," but even the Duke's sister didn't sound all that certain. "What is the problem right now?" she asked instead of continuing that line of conversation.

Lavinia saw it for the evasion it was and decided not to press the issue, but she was most definitely going to have a word with the Dowager Duchess or the Duke either. She would rather not be in enmity with her own mother-in-law, one whose son she was desperately in love with.

"Her dress will not fit," Jenny piped up.

"Let me try," Georgie smiled and she gave her her back immediately.

With the help of the three women, they were able to tighten her stays and secure the intricate lacing at the back of her dress. Madame Vandeleur had once again displayed her creative prowess with Lavinia's wedding dress.

The dress was a very pale lilac of a silken material, and over it was a netted lace, black slip that formed a small train behind her. The colors offset her complexion perfectly and the Duke had gifted her a glittery, waterfall diamond necklace that was currently nestled into her cleavage.

After that, they rushed through arranging her hair, dusting her face with powder and applying a stain to her lips.

And then she was ready.

Late, but ready.

Lord Hartfield was waiting for her outside the doors of the chapel and she placed her hand on his sleeve with a teary smile. "You are beautiful, my dear child."

When the double doors were pulled open a second later, there were new tears in the bride's eye, but her groom couldn't take his eyes off her. Not even once throughout the ceremony.

Everyone who was in attendance at the Duke of Wyld and his new Duchess's wedding testified that the two only had eyes for each other. Besotted was the word that flew about the room.

"I now pronounce you husband and wife," the priest declared.

Everything that had led them to this moment had seemed like a fever dream to Lavinia, but the priest's words finally sealed the fact that this was reality. She really

was Victor's wife now, his duchess.

"Regrets?" He leaned forward to whisper to her.

She shook her head with a face splitting smile, "None whatsoever."

"I want to kiss you."

She laughed. "You will get the tongues wagging and then we will be exiled from polite society."

"And finally left alone? Well then, Your Grace, let us give them a show."

And she laughed some more.

As soon as the door to the Duke's carriage shut behind them, they were on each other, hands grasping, mouths needing.

"I feel like I have not seen you in years," Victor grumbled, pressing hot kisses to her skin.

She wrapped her arms around his neck to keep from tumbling to the floor of the vehicle as it rode through uneven cobblestone streets. She was in her husband's lap and his arms and scent surrounded her.

Lavinia was tempted to order the driver to ride them straight to the Wyld country seat where they could disappear from the curious eyes of the ton and straight to their bed till whenever they saw fit to resurface.

"You are exquisite, Lavinia," he kissed her again, like he couldn't quite get enough of her and it was the same for her. She wondered if this urgency she had to be in her

husband's arms would fade with time.

The cruelest thought suddenly occurred to her, and she immediately blurted it out.

"What about when you no longer love me?"

He stared at her wordlessly and then he chuckled, "I will never cease to love you. I do not know how I know this, so please do not ask me. What I do know is that you will forever be in my heart."

Victor took her hand and guided it to his chest and against his beating heart through layers of clothing. "You are inside of me like the blood that flows in my veins, Lavinia. Do you understand?"

When she stared at him, all she could see in her eyes was an honesty that rocked her to her core, and she nodded.

"I will love and cherish you forever." She cupped his jaw and then brushed her mouth over his. His fingers dug into the back of her hair and he began to pull her close.

A sharp rap on the door stilled them and then Lord Hartfield's voice following the knock on the door caused them to spring apart like debutantes about to cause a scandal. When they realized what they had done, they stared at each other silently and then burst into laughter.

Lavinia stared at him at that moment and she had never loved him more. He was so gorgeous and so perfect, and the very best part was that he was all hers.

She still recalled how she had stormed into his house the previous work, full of righteous indignation.

"Do you plan on setting up a mistress somewhere in the city?" she roared. "Because if that is your plan, you can go ahead and call the entire affair off because I will not sit back and watch you humiliate and hurt and break my heart in such a fashion."

The Duke had stared up at her from his large oak desk and then he had frowned, "What is going on with you?"

"Do you already have one then?"

"It will be impossible to have a mistress without having a wife, don't you agree, Lavinia?"

"Victor," she hissed furious on the outside but on the inside, she had been trembling with fright, terrified that he would agree to the horror she had heard her cousin and his friends discussing.

She had never thought of herself as a particularly possessive person but when it came to the Duke, she knew that she would go feral if she ever discovered that he was keeping a woman on the side.

He had smiled at her, "you are more than enough for me to handle Lavinia and not only that, I am far too taken with you to bother with anyone else, and also, no other woman could hold a candle to you, so there really is no use of me searching or bothering myself with the complications of keeping a second London home to house a mistress."

Victor had then cocked his head, his expression turning heated, "that dress is very fetching on you."

"What are you thinking about?" the Duke's voice pulled her out of her reverie and she smiled.

"Nothing. We are going to be late to our own wedding breakfast."

He opened the carriage door and stepped out of the vehicle then held out his hand for her. "Are you coming?"

She allowed him to help her out and then together, they proceeded into the hall where their guests were already waiting. For the wedding breakfast, they had invited only a few family friends, including the Forsythes.

"Congratulations, Your Grace," someone said. Lavinia's gaze remained straight ahead for a second before she realized that she was the one being addressed.

"Oh- uh- thank you." She was a duchess now. It wasn't just a word, it came with responsibility. She should have felt anxious of her new title, but all she felt was excitement. She had no plans to disappoint Victor, but she also knew that he didn't expect her to be anybody but exactly who she was.

While Victor was speaking to some acquaintances, she spotted the dowager duchess giving instructions to one of the footmen. It was the last thing Lavinia wanted to do, but she knew she had to speak with the woman and clear the air once and for all. The dowager duchess hadn't been notably rude to her, but she had been standoffish, her eyes full of judgement and doubt. She didn't need them to be best of friends, but the woman loved her son and cordiality should not be too hard for them.

"Excuse me," she began to peel away from Victor's side but his hand tightened about her waist.

"Where are you off to?"

"I need to speak to your mother."

"She does not hate you," he whispered.

She shrugged, "she does not like me either. If you will excuse me."

Lavinia took her leave and marched towards the dark haired woman who stood as regally as any queen. As soon as she spotted her approaching, the older woman stiffened and her mouth pressed into a thin, disapproving line.

"It is obvious that you do not like me," she began and the dowager Duchess scoffed.

"I do not make it a habit to like everybody I come across."

Lavinia's eyes widened in disbelief, "I am not anybody, I am your son's wife and the new Duchess. If you are going to insult my intelligence, Your Grace, then I see no need for this conversation and to be frank, I am disappointed that you are taking the easy way out."

Her eyes narrowed and she drew herself even tauter, "what is that supposed to mean?"

"At least have the guts to admit your true feelings about me," she challenged.

"You want to know my true feelings, Your Grace," the title spilled out of her mouth with a grimace and Lavinia flinched, "I do not think you are suitable for my son, or this title. I do not even think you know what being the Duchess of Wyld entails. It is not just throwing parties and running amok when you think no one is watching. Someone will always be watching and you will have people relying on you. They will all want a piece of you and a girl like you will not know how to stop giving until there is nothing left."

Lavinia's mouth curved up into a smile, "anything else?"

The dowager duchess studied her. "My son is a very busy man. He may not show it, but he has been working nonstop for far too many years now and I hate to see him marry someone who would only become another job for him."

Her amusement fled at once. She wanted to get in the woman's face and tell her that she knew exactly how hard Victor had worked in taking care of both his sister and mother. Lavinia had no intention of becoming a job for him like his mother had been after the former Duke passed, but pointing fingers now would not do any of them any good.

"You think you know me, but you do not," she informed the older woman. "You believe that I am a flighty, wild girl with no sense of decorum or responsibility. Perhaps it is true, perhaps it is not. But what is certainly true is that I love your son with all my heart and because of that, I will never, ever allow myself to become another burden to him. I do not intend to change and mold myself into a likeness of you just to fit this position. I am myself first, a wife, someday a mother, a daughter, a niece, a cousin, before I am a duchess. I will not fit myself into a box to please you or the rest of the ton. You can continue to judge me from the sidelines, waiting for me to either fail or change, and believe me, Your Grace, you will be waiting a very long time and will miss out on the lives of your son and future grandchildren."

She paused, allowing those words to sink in, "he married me for me and I plan to continue to be the woman he married. At least trust that your son knows his own mind and is capable of making good decisions," she couldn't help but add, "after all, you trusted a grieving boy all those years ago to make decisions affecting hundreds of lives."

The dowager duchess looked stricken, "I-I mean-"

"I do not want to be your enemy. Do not add the burden of having to choose between us to his plate," Lavinia said softly and then she walked away without another word,

straight back to her husband's side.

The older woman watched her walk away and then she smiled.

"What was that about?" the Duke asked, "it appeared rather heated."

She waved her hand breezily, "oh it was really nothing. Your mother has done an excellent job with the meal. Shall we sit now?"

"Of course," he held out his arm for her. "Have I told you how beautiful you look today?"

She giggled, "once or twice, but I would not mind hearing it again."

"I love you, Your Grace," he smiled down at her and she looked up to meet his eyes with an answering smile of her own.

She opened her mouth to say the words back but at that moment, one of the guests let out a horrified screech and they turned to see a white ball of fur dashing through the room and weaving its way through the guest's feet. Trailing the dog was a harried looking footman trying to grab it before it caused more chaos.

Lavinia buried her face in her husband's shoulder and dissolved into a fit of laughter. The Duke let out an exasperated sigh but he was smiling too.

The End?

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One Year Later

The Duke of Wyld watched the woman nestled into him with a look of adoration. Her brown hair fell free over her face and shoulders and her rosebud pink mouth was parted slightly. She was in a snowy white rail which she insisted on wearing to bed each night even though she knew he would just divest her of it the second she woke up.

He dragged the back of his fingers over the silky skin of her arms and face then brushed the pad of his thumb across that plump lower lip.

Her face scrunched up into a frown and she batted his hands away. Finally, her lashes fluttered open, green eyes peering up at him grumpily.

"Good morning, wife."

"Hm," she murmured, "why do you look so excited?"

He pulled her closer to him till she was laying over him, head tucked under his jaw, "Mornings are my favorite part of the day because I wake up and you are in my arms."

"How poetic," there was a smile in her voice.

"Are you up for a ride?"

Lavinia raised her head, eyes shining with naughty intent, "depends on the type of

ride you mean."

"Naughty minx," he laughed, "I mean the kind you do with all your clothes on."

Her bottom lip poked out in an adorable pout, "I find that I prefer the other kind."

The Duke snorted, "you are far too greedy to settle for one and leave the other, or have you forgotten how you almost got us thrown into a ditch a few days ago."

"If I recall correctly, you were a willing participant. I did not hear a single complaint or protest."

"Why, Your Grace," he said with mock offence, "I promised to grant you all your heart desires, did I not? How then can I refuse my lovely wife?"

The Duchess had been feeling poorly and so he had had them ride together on Whisper. Halfway into the ride, she had turned around in the horse and kissed him, which had led to them almost getting into an accident.

"All my heart desires, you say?" And then she began to crawl up his body till her mouth was just a hairsbreadth from him.

He brushed his mouth over hers, nipping at them.

She was the one who pressed closer, slanting their mouths together. Each kiss still felt like an experience, like something new and wonderful. It still made a shiver move through him. He wrapped his arm about her waist and then moved his hands down to cup her bottom.

The kiss wasn't deep enough for him and so he spun them till she was lying under him. She laughed into his mouth, fingers digging into his hair as he deepened the kiss.

One hand cupped her breast through the thin cotton night dress and he squeezed, palming the soft flesh. His other hand pushed her dress up her thighs till it was bunched around her waist.

He could never get tired of this woman.

Victor kissed down her chest, undoing the tie that held the collar of the dress together with his teeth. She giggled as he dragged the rope open.

He began to slide her dress down her body with a smile, but she suddenly stilled.

"What is the matter?" he asked worriedly.

Her only response was to push him off and hurriedly right her dress before slipping out of bed and rushing out of the room. The Duke immediately got to his feet after her and followed her to the bathing room where he found her kneeling over the chamber pot and casting up her accounts.

Panicked, he rushed toward her and gathered her long tresses away from her face, rubbing her back soothingly.

"Is it something you ate? How are you feeling?" He pressed the back of his hand to her forehead and then her neck, at a loss. "Come back to bed and I will go call for the doctor. Shall I have them get you some tea? Or broth perhaps? A cool cloth?"

She glanced up at him and smiled, "you are adorable."

He gaped at her, wondering how she could still smile in her current condition, "it must have been the fish from dinner."

She rose to her feet and he was immediately by her side, steadying her. "It is not the

fish, Victor. As a matter of fact, I do not believe it is anything I ate at all."

He led her back to the room and rang for the maid.

"The doctor will know better when he arrives."

She grabbed his arm and turned to face him with a smile, her eyes filled with tears. His stomach clenched painfully at the sight of her wet eyes and his mind had already begun to race with thoughts of how to fix everything.

"I believe, Your Grace, that I am with child."

His thoughts immediately came to a startling halt. "W-with child? What do you mean with child?"

She laughed, "it means that the next Duke of Wyld is growing inside of me," a pause, "or perhaps it could be a girl."

"Are you sure?" he asked.

She nodded happily, "I have been sick a lot in the mornings and Mrs. Tremaine said it is a clear sign, along with- er-" she trailed off blushing.

Well, if there was anyone who would be knowledgeable about pregnancies, it was Mrs. Tremaine, the housekeeper and a mother of eight.

"We are going to be parents," he whispered with such wonder and then he grabbed her around the waist and twirled her around the room. He loved her so much and he would love all the children she gave him. He decided that he wanted children with her vivid green eyes and her humor.

"What would you like it to be? I think I shall like for it to be a boy," she mused.

He shook his head resolutely, "it has to be a girl, she will be just as stubborn and opinionated as you."

Lavinia rolled her eyes, "only if you agree that you will not fill my ears with complaints about her behavior for the next few years."

He thought about it for a moment, "I make no promises."

There was a soft rap at the door and the Duke called for the maid to come in.

"Draw a bath for the Duchess," he ordered. "Have someone send for the doctor and get her a pitcher of water."

"Your Grace," she bowed and the door shut behind her as she went off to carry out the instructions.

"There is no need for a doctor," she grumbled.

"Indulge me," he pressed a kiss to her temple and she melted into him.

"I have some idea about baby names, " the Duchess finally said, "And we shall have to tell the family after the doctor confirms the news of course. And I was wondering which of our friends or acquaintances would make a wonderful godparent."

"Patrick, most certainly."

She made a face, "he will already be the child's uncle. What about Lord Forsythe?"

The Duke narrowed his eyes at her, "no."

She giggled, "what do you think of Miss Mallory?"

"What do you think of spending the rest of day in bed with me?" he asked instead.

"Why, Your Grace," she batted her lashes at him, "that sounds positively delightful."

The End

PROLOGUE

Lady Frances Johnson clung desperately to the fingers of her friend, Miss Emily Rutley. If she focused on how Emily's hand felt in hers, she could not spare a thought for the other things.

She could not bear thinking of those other things. Panic threatened to bubble up in her throat at the mere idea. So, she focused on the clench of Emily's fingers in hers, warm through the gloves they both wore, a stark contrast to the cool spring air, to the night where?—

Frances squeezed her eyes shut, willing her heart to slow. Panic would do her no good.

The sounds of panic spilled into the garden regardless though they did not come from Frances nor from Emily. Instead, the alarmed cries and frantic footsteps came from various members of the ton as they rushed toward where Emily and Frances stood, summoned by their friend Lady Diana Fletching.

As they grew closer, the sounds coming from the crowd formed into words. "Grace? Grace! Lady Grace!"

Frances' heart threatened to burst. Grace. Lady Grace Miller, the fourth of their little quartet of friends, their vibrant, beautiful, joyous friend.

And the woman whose scream they'd heard echo over the dark gardens only moments before.

The crowd got closer and individual faces became discernible. Leading the pack was the Duke of Graham, Grace's father. The Duke was one of the leading politicians of the day, and Frances had never seen him look disheveled—had never seen him have the slightest hair out of place. Tonight, though, he wide-eyed, the very picture of alarm.

"Grace?" he called. He rushed directly to Frances, seizing her by the shoulders sharply enough that it tore her grasp from Emily's. "Did you see her? Where is she? Grace? Grace?"

"I—n-no," Frances stammered. She was shy even at the best of times, and this was far from the best of times. She could scarcely get the words past the knot clenching her throat. "We—we heard?—"

"A scream," Emily said. Her voice, too, sounded shaky, but she could at least get the words out. "We were looking for her, and then we heard a scream."

The Duke was looking at Emily, but his fingers clenched painfully around Frances' shoulders. He scarcely seemed to notice what he was doing, not even when his son, Grace's brother Evan Miller, the Marquess of Oackley, prised his fingers from Frances. His gaze, too, was fixed on Emily, his face even more ashen than his father's.

"Where?" the Duke was demanding. "Where did you hear it?"

Emily was competent, made so by years of managing her challenging younger sisters, but she seemed fragile under the Duke's furious gaze.

"H-here," she said, gesturing with her arm. "I mean, we were over there, by the veranda, but the sound—it came from here."

The crowd rippled as Diana tore her arm from her mother's grasp, surging forward to wrap a protective arm around Emily's shoulders. Frances likewise edged closer to Emily until all three girls stood together.

All three, but still missing one. There should have been four.

"So, you could be wrong?" the Duke demanded. "You could have heard someone else—from somewhere else?"

Emily blinked, shaking her head as if to gather her thoughts, but Evan interrupted before Emily could respond. "Father, we must hurry. We have to search. If someone has apprehended Grace—" His voice broke off, a sharp crack in his words showing the pain he suffered in speaking to them. He sounded no less haunted when he continued, "We must hurry before they get away."

The Duke swung his gaze from Emily to his son as if he was in a daze, as if he could not process all the things happening at once and so needed to move extra slowly to compensate. He looked at his heir like he was seeing a stranger.

"Yes, of course," he said. He blinked twice more before the self-assured politician seemed to take charge once more. He looked over the gathered crowd, addressing some of the men. "Banford, go tell the footmen to search the gardens. Gillman, go inside and prevent anyone else from leaving before we've concluded our search. Van Houten, search inside the house. Leave no room untouched."

The three men he'd identified, all contemporaries of the Duke, aristocrats who were no doubt unused to being ordered around, nodded sharply, looking as pleased to have been selected as if they had been schoolboys preening under a teacher's praise.

"I'll search out here, too, if that's where the girls said they heard her," Evan said, his voice choked. He was already peering into the dark. "I'll find her."

Even though everything seemed hopeless, in that one moment, listening to Grace's brother, Frances had the tiniest flicker of hope that it would all be well. He sounded so determined . Surely that kind of determination had to mean something?

“Diana!” Diana's mother, Bridget, the Countess of Preston, had finally elbowed her way to the front of the crowd. She snatched her daughter's arm again. “Come here this instant! We are leaving right now!”

It was foolish, but Frances glanced out over the crowd for her own parents. They were no more likely than Lady Preston to offer comfort in this intensely trying time, but she was still perversely disappointed when she looked and saw they weren't there.

The Duke drew himself up fully as he looked down at the Countess. “No, Madam, you are not. If your daughter has seen something tonight, I need to know what that is. I shall be speaking with these three young women until I am satisfied that I have every detail about what has happened to my darling Grace. Is that clear?”

This last question was delivered with all the power of his Parliamentary speeches, the ones that were printed in the newspaper the next day, the one that various noblemen, including Frances' father, read aloud over the breakfast table to admire their turns of phrase.

The Countess of Preston wilted, and who could have blamed her? Frances, who did not enjoy being in the line of sight of any man, let alone one so imposing, wanted to wilt as well.

She wouldn't though. It took every ounce of her willpower, but she steeled her backbone. She could do this. She would do it.

For Grace.

CHAPTER 1

“Well. Now we’ve only you left to deal with.”

The second worst day of Frances’ life was the day her sister got married. In a normal life, Cordelia’s wedding would have taken the top slot without competition, but the day that Grace had been abducted and killed would forever hold that place in Frances’ personal history.

Not that Frances was jealous of Cordelia’s marriage. For all that her sister had always been a bit self-absorbed, Cordelia was clearly thrilled with her new husband, and Frances was happy for her, if not entirely certain why Cordelia wanted to be married to a preening peacock of a man, for all that he was rich and highly placed in Society. Besides, the cake served at the wedding breakfast was uncommonly good, and Frances did have a bit of a sweet tooth.

No, like the first worst day of her life, Frances hadn’t known that day was destined to be her second worst until the very end. She’d thought everything was going just fine until, after her sister had tearfully decamped for her new home, her mother turned on her with an assessing frown and made her unfeeling proclamation.

Frances didn’t think her mother had intended to be cruel, but still. Goodness. That had stung a bit.

Frances had always known that she was the least beloved of her five siblings. She knew, in her parents’ eyes, that she held little appeal compared to Harry, the heir, Peter, the devoted clergyman, George, whose brilliance in business turned everything

he touched to gold, and Cordelia, who shone so brightly as a perfect diamond of the first water that she was practically blinding.

And then there was Frances. She was clever, though not so clever as George; she was pretty enough, though not nearly as beautiful as Cordelia. And she didn't give her parents anything to brag about, not as Harry and Peter had always done.

She was just there. On the end, like a loose thread of an ill-made fabric. Left behind for her parents to "deal with."

Lady Frances Johnson supposed, then, that she should be grateful that what promised to be the third worst day of her life was one she saw coming from a mile off. Small mercies, and all that.

But by the end of the four-hour carriage ride, which her father had spent lecturing her without ceasing, Frances was struggling to cling to any shreds of gratitude she might have once possessed.

"I despise house parties," her father muttered. He'd run out of content for this lecture after about an hour and a quarter and had taken to repeating material. "They are wretched."

I, thought Frances, also hate house parties. This was, she allowed, probably true. She had never been to a house party before this one, but she hated a great number of the things that promised to occur at them.

"It's criminal," he went on sourly, "to be trapped with the same people—in the same house—for days, nay weeks, on end. I am not a bear in a menagerie. I am a marquess and I deserve far better."

Going to the house party, Frances did not say out loud, was your idea, Father.

He was, she knew well by now, working up to his grand finale. He would have to be, after all; they were coming close to Winchester Manor. Frances could see their destination in the distance, a blurry blob growing larger by the minute.

“I shan’t do it again, Frances!” her father railed. “Mark me! I shan’t! I am too old for this nonsense. I am too old for the kind of...absurdities that people get into while at house parties. It’s unbecoming. It’s uncouth.”

Frances thought it rather uncouth and unbecoming to grow quite so red in the face, or to speak for quite so long without even attempting to dialogue with one’s companions, but what did she know? She was just a wallflower.

Besides, saying as much would only cause her father to grow rather redder in the face and would lead to him to speak for just as long but at a much, much higher volume.

“Do you know what this means, Frances?”

Frances, who did in fact know what this meant, figured that a noncommittal sound was her best response and acted accordingly.

“It means,” her father said, puffing himself up as though he were about to conclude the political speech of the decade, “that you shall find a match at this party, Frances. I don’t care what it takes. When we leave Winchester Manor, you will be affianced.”

Silently, Frances looked out the window of the carriage. The manor in the distance was closer now, windows glinting in the sun and lush gardens extending out the back. It was a pretty enough estate, and Frances might have even enjoyed staying there, if not for all the people she would no doubt be forced to converse with.

She stifled a sigh. Sighing would only irritate her father further.

Frances knew there was no winning, not in a game where she was a pawn and the rest of her family kings and queens (except her clergyman brother Peter, of course, who had to be a bishop because Frances was not one to let a good joke pass her by, not even when her entire future was on the line).

But she could attempt to cling to her dignity. And if that wasn't quite a victory, well, it wasn't nothing, either.

And so, she bit her tongue, even though the part of her that liked a sharp wit and a clever quip—the part of her that her parents, despite their best efforts, hadn't quite squashed out of her—longed to retort.

Or, rather, she held her tongue right up until her father added, tone ominous as thunder, “Or else.”

Frances' head whipped back towards her father. “What?” she asked, almost believing her ears had deceived her.

The smile her father shot her was practically a sneer.

“Oh, that got your attention, did it? Well, you can't have imagined that I'd let you carry on with this little tantrum of yours forever, could you?”

It was, Frances felt, staggeringly excessive to call her lack of husband a “tantrum.” After all, it wasn't as though she'd been rejecting proposals left and right. And while she perhaps hadn't been actively seeking a husband, as her friend Emily had done prior to her marriage to the Earl of Moore, neither was Frances actively avoiding a husband.

She was just...shy. Rather helplessly so.

For yes, while there was a part of her that enjoyed clever repartee and smart discourse, that part of her tended to hide whenever she was around any but her closest friends. And even that had been a bit challenging of late, as Diana had chosen to marry the terribly imposing Duke of Hawkins and Emily the taciturn Benedict Hoskins. Frances had only just come around to being able to speak directly to Andrew, Diana's husband, and that was after a year of regular interaction and having seen him weep a few masculine tears at the birth of his daughter, Grace.

There was nothing like seeing a man cry over a squalling baby to humanize him, Frances had learned that day.

The upside to her shyness, however, was that Frances could not imagine what her father intended to hold over her with that "or else." What, did he intend to blackmail her with her completely unsurprising proclivity for reading?

She fought an eye roll as she imagined the thundering silence that would greet this revelation. A wallflower, bookish? Quelle scandale .

Still, her father's smugness indicated that he did feel he had leverage in this matter, and Frances—damn it!—needed to know.

"Father—" she started cautiously. His smugness grew, taking up physical space in the carriage.

"Oh, do stop it, Frances," her mother interjected, sounding as exhausted as if Frances had been the one railing on for the last several hours. "We're nearly there. Let's gather ourselves."

Suppressing her secret, childish longing to give both her parents a swift kick to the shins, Frances drew in a deep breath and gathered her calm about her. She'd need it if she was going to survive a house party, let alone one where her parents would

obsessively matchmake.

The carriage rolled to a stop in front of the grand front entrance of Winchester Manor. William, the Earl of Winchester, stood ready to greet his guests, a charming smile on his face. The woman on his arm, Frances recalled, was not his wife, but rather his sister, Mary, who was unmarried despite being six and twenty.

As Frances' father helped her mother descent from the carriage, the Earl stepped away from his sister to offer Frances his hand with the kind of social ease that Frances could only dream of.

“Lady Frances,” he said with a polite bow over her hand before releasing it. He turned to her parents. “Lord Reed, Lady Reed. Thank you so much for joining us for our little gathering. Do allow me to introduce you to my sister, Lady Mary Norton.”

Lady Mary was not quite as effortlessly smooth as her brother, but her smile seemed equally genuine as she gave a jaunty nod. “Hullo. Pleased to have you.”

The siblings were both dark haired and dark eyed, handsome in a way that made Frances' stomach turn—not because she was attracted to Lord Winchester, for all that he was objectively attractive, but because she could already see the way her parents were gleefully eyeing first the Earl and then one another, practically already drafting wedding contracts in their minds.

Frances could not imagine a worse match for herself than one with a man who invited numerous people to his home, some of whom were near strangers, for multiple days on end.

For fun .

If her parents attempted to marry her off to a man like that, she'd no doubt end up

grinding her teeth into dust within the year, and then where would she be?

Indeed, she had to forcibly unclench her jaw now so she could respond.

“We’re very pleased to have been invited,” she said, one of the most blatant lies she’d ever told.

The corner of Lady Mary’s mouth twitched, and Frances wondered if her dread was apparent to the other woman.

If the Earl noticed the way Frances struggled under the creeping discomfort that was already overtaking her, as it always did when she was in social situations, he was too genteel to comment.

“Of course, of course,” he said grandly, offering his arm to Frances’ mother. “But let us go inside, shall we? We’re still waiting on one or two arrivals, but most of the party has arrived. Would you like to come inside and rest, refresh yourselves after your travels? We’re set to gather this evening for dinner, but I know how trying carriage rides can be, so Mary and I have left this afternoon leisurely...”

The Earl maneuvered Frances’ mother to the house, her father in step beside them, keeping up his polite prattle that both left room for his guests to chime in and left them feeling perfectly at ease if they preferred to remain silent. It was, to Frances, nothing short of a magic trick as she herself had the opposite effect: she tended to make things awkward and uncomfortable when she spoke and when she held her tongue.

Lady Mary lingered a step then looped her arm through Frances’ with a casual familiarity that, somehow, put Frances at ease.

“Forgive me for being so forward, but I’m terribly pleased to have you in particular,

Lady Frances,” the older woman said with a smile. She had freckles on her nose and a highly unfashionable golden tint to her complexion that suggested time in the sun without a bonnet. It suited her. “My brother has mostly invited his set—I believe he has had business dealings with your father?—which has left unmarried women a bit thin on the ground. I have thus nominated you as my especial friend for this party.”

Lady Mary reminded Frances a bit of her friend Diana Young which made the smile spring to her lips naturally.

“That sounds very pleasant,” she said.

“I shall do my very best to live up to that promise,” Lady Mary said with a wink. “But do feel free to shoo me away if I become bothersome. I am known as quite the eccentric spinster—” She sounded simply delighted by this descriptor. “—but I understand that not everyone prefers such an association.”

Several dry retorts popped into Frances’ head. I hadn’t heard that spinsterhood was contagious. Is it like influenza? Or, Do tell me how I can achieve this marvelous ‘spinsterhood’ of which you speak!

But for all that Lady Mary reminded Frances of Diana, she wasn’t Diana, and so Frances could not shove aside her shyness enough to joke, not yet.

Instead, she gave another small smile. “I very much look forward to an association with you, Lady Mary.”

This, it seemed, was sufficient for Lady Mary. “Splendid,” she said warmly. “Now, Amelia here—” She nodded to an approaching maid. “—will show you to your room, and—oh, excuse me, Lord Oackley!”

The two women drew up short as a man exited a parlor off the foyer, coming close

enough to Frances and Lady Mary that their paths threatened to collide. Frances, who did not do well with new and unexpected social interactions at the best of times, let alone when she was already in the midst of another new social interaction, ran quickly through the requisite niceties in her head.

He would introduce himself; she would introduce herself in turn and say it was nice to meet him then gesture to her parents and explain how they knew Lord Winchester and came to be at the party and?—

Wait. She already knew this man.

“Frances?” he said.

For perhaps the first time in her life, Frances felt grateful for her shyness, for it was only that ingrained social reticence that prevented her from speaking his Christian name as well.

Evan. Evan Miller. The Marquess of Oackley.

And Grace’s brother.

She bobbed into a curtsy, lowering her eyes. Frances could only assume that whatever person had decided it was humble and demure for young ladies to glance downward when greeting a gentleman was as afflicted by shyness as Frances. The floor had never judged her or made her flustered. And this floor was quite nice, white marble shot through with darker patches. How pleasant.

Sadly, there was a point when looking at the floor crossed from demure to downright odd, and Frances was hurtling towards that moment. She risked a peek at Lady Mary first, as a bit of a trial, and found her looking intrigued and amused.

Drat , Frances thought.

Still, there was nothing else for it. She looked up at Eva— Lord Oackley .

“I take it the two of you are already acquainted?” Lady Mary probed gently.

There were three categories of people, per Frances’ estimation. Those she liked (Diana, Emily, little Gracie, and, begrudgingly, her friends’ husbands), those she tolerated by necessity (her family), and those she avoided. As Evan Miller was in the third such category, she’d had little to do with him, even when Grace was alive.

She’d known, however, in an abstract sort of way, that he was handsome. One glance now told her that he’d grown even more handsome in the intervening years.

“We do,” Lord Oackley confirmed. “Lady Frances—” Oh, so it was Lady Frances now, was it? “—was friends with my, ah, sister.”

The briefest flicker of pain crossed his expression at the reference to Grace. Lady Mary ignored it out of tact; Frances ignored it because doing otherwise would have required a sensible sentence.

And she could not have managed such a sentence because, when Lord Oackley mentioned Grace, there was one infinitesimal instant where his gaze and Frances’ met, and they were, she was certain of it, in perfect harmony with one another, a moment of unity brought on by mutual pain and grief.

Frances felt, therefore, that it was sufficiently impressive that she managed to say, “Good to see you again, My Lord.”

And she felt, moreover, that it was lucky that she spoke before she looked beyond Lord Oackley, for her throat closed and her mouth grew dry in the next instance when

she caught her parents looking at her with a mad, avaricious gleam in their eyes.

Well, well, well. Little Frances Miller had grown up.

Evan knew he should not be thinking this.

For one thing, he was sitting at a dinner table, and there was something particularly uncouth about thinking salacious thoughts when at the dinner table surrounded by other members of the ton .

For another, Frances— Lady Frances, he reminded himself for the umpteenth time that afternoon—had been Grace's friend. And looking at her, no longer a carrot-headed schoolgirl but a young woman who had grown into the pleasing rosy blush of her hair, reminded him that while Frances had gotten older, Grace never would.

And that knife wound never healed and likely never would, not when he couldn't seem to stop himself from prodding at it every bloody day of his life.

And third, he should not be thinking such thoughts about Lady Frances Miller because, for all that she had gotten older and considerably more beautiful (he hated himself for noticing), she had not gotten less...

Well, reticent was perhaps a polite term for it.

The more accurate description, as George, Viscount Hounton, chatted amiably at her, was that she looked like she wanted to cast up her accounts, faint, or vanish into the floor.

Perhaps some combination of the three.

And if Lady Frances was alarmed by Hounton, who was possibly the most easygoing

fellow Evan had ever met...

Well. She'd not be able to withstand Evan's particular tastes.

Still, it all reinforced one immutable truth: he should not be looking at her.

The problem was, if he didn't look at Lady Frances, his other option was to look at Lady Reed.

And Lady Reed looked back at him in a way he recognized all too well.

"My goodness," she said, her words clearly intending to draw his attention, even as she pretended to be merely observing for her own sake.

With an inward sigh, Evan glanced in the older woman's direction.

"It feels so strange to be dining at such an early hour, but that's country hours for you. Tell me, My Lord—" She gave Evan what he assumed was meant to be a guileless smile. "—do you spend more time in the country or in Town?"

"In Town," he confirmed. And then, to save her the indignity of prying it out of him, he added, "My family's country seat is my father's; my marquisate is a courtesy title. I have a small house in Hertfordshire, but it is not the primary property, so I remain in London most of the year."

Lady Reed let her eyes grow wide as if she was only just now remembering that Evan was heir to a dukedom.

"Oh, yes, that is right, isn't it? Well." She flapped a hand. "I'm certain a young gentleman like yourself has no need for a grand house of his own, not yet. Though I'm certain that a bride would make your country home seem ever so much more

appealing. These things do so need a woman's touch, don't you agree?"

Lord deliver him from matchmaking mamas, he thought with something akin to desperation. Evan knew, truly, that he had been born with an enormous amount of privilege by the mere circumstances of his birth, and he strove not to let such a gift be taken for granted.

But sometimes, he really felt he'd give it all back if only it could guarantee that he never had to keep a straight face while a middle-aged matron tried to sell him on her daughter's potential "womanly touches."

He gave Lady Reed a noncommittal smile. "So, it is said," he offered mildly. He didn't want to make a scene, not at Winchester's table of all places. His friend did so enjoy entertaining and got rather tetchy when parties went awry. It was only the first dinner. Evan needed to keep his cool.

For all that he'd been schooled from birth in the art of courtly politeness, however, Evan had never quite mastered the art of keeping his irritation from his expression. He turned away before Lady Reed could see the grimace that threatened the corners of his mouth.

Except that was no better because turning from Lady Reed meant that he was facing her daughter. Hounton was evidently on the end of asking her some kind of question—no doubt kindly meant, knowing the man—that had caused Lady Frances' face to blush scarlet.

The words were out of Evan's mouth before he could think better of them.

"Houton, man, you're monopolizing the lady's time." Bollocks. He could practically feel Lady Reed vibrating with excitement over the possibility that Evan was jealous of Frances' attention on the other man. He hastily added, "And she yours, if you'll

forgive me saying it, Lady Frances.” He gave her a practiced, charming grin. “I’ve not seen you in an age, Hounton. Tell me, how are your stables looking? You had two new foals last year, didn’t you?”

Hounton, who was enamored with his horses just to the limit of it being endearing rather than odious, beamed.

“I did, indeed, Oackley, thank you for remembering! And they’re coming along marvelously, if I do say so myself. Not yet ready for racing, of course, but I’m hopeful for next year...”

Evan let the chatter fade into the background as he glanced back at Lady Frances, who was looking down at her lap, an unmistakable expression of relief on her face. He’d saved her. Evan felt a surge of pride...and clung to that feeling with both hands.

Protectiveness. That was fine. He could work with protectiveness. After all, he’d helped Emily Rutley—now the Countess of Moore—when tongues were wagging about her engagement to Benedict, now her husband. He’d not thought twice about that. He’d done it because Emily had been Grace’s friend, and he would have protected his sister from wayward gossip, given the chance...

So, yes, he was well within his rights to look out for Lady Frances. Grace would have wanted as much, no doubt.

Evan thus felt very pleased with himself for precisely sixteen seconds which was how long it took before Lady Reed spoke again.

“Are you a fan of riding, then, My Lord?” Evan gritted his teeth against the obvious way that Lady Reed directed this question only at him, ignoring Hounton entirely. “Frances, you must go out riding with His Lordship.”

Lady Frances mumbled something in the direction of her lap.

Evan decided this was a good moment to willfully misunderstand.

“Yes, Hounton, I’m sure plenty of the ladies here would enjoy your talents as a guide,” he said merrily. Hounton, for all that he was easygoing, was not an idiot; a glint of humor flashed in his eye as he caught on to what Evan was about.

“I should be delighted, Oackley. How good of you to think of me.”

This also got a flickering glance from Lady Frances. Evan could not tell if her eyes were blue or green then chastised himself for wondering.

“Oh, well,” Lady Reed fumbled then she squared her shoulders and soldiered on, “Would you not also be delighted, Lord Oackley? Certainly, a man like yourself would enjoy a turnabout in the fresh air. And you could not protest the company, could you?”

Evan wanted to gnash his teeth. She was trying to trap him, corner him until he had no choice but to agree but to spend time with her daughter.

His temper, alas, got a bit the better of him.

“I am capable of a great many things, My Lady,” he said, tone dripping sarcasm. “I’m sure I could protest if I put my mind to it.”

There. It was a censure, and a clear one, but one that was sufficiently shrouded in wit as to be not entirely rude.

When he risked a glance at Lady Frances, he was pleased to see that she looked as irritated as he did. Good for her. She could no doubt do to stand up to her mother a bit

more. He wouldn't always be around to protect her.

Except...

As their eyes held, he realized that her irritation was not due to Lady Reed's transparent matchmaking attempts.

No, Lady Frances was annoyed with him .

"I rather think," she said, her voice icy even though it was nervous, "that with such a capacity, you could put your mind to finding a more polite answer, too."

Her cheeks burned bright, but this time, blessedly, Evan didn't notice.

Because he was coming to a terrible, gutting realization.

Lady Frances didn't need his protection—not from Hounton and not from her mother. No, this whole coy, shy act of hers was clearly just that—an act.

He felt a sneer crossing his lips as he processed all this.

She was just like the rest of them. Just like all the other simpering flowers of the ton , pretending to get what they wanted.

God, how Grace would have hated that.

And that was the worst part—that this woman, whom his sister had counted amongst her dearest friends, had become someone that Grace would disdain. It was like the stab of a knife, or the cleaving of an axe, that feeling of losing one more connection he had to his beloved sister.

Because if Lady Frances could be someone who lied and schemed to get what she wanted, then Grace couldn't have known the true Frances.

And that left him with one less thread to hold on to.

"I do beg your pardon, Lady Frances," he said, not bothering to hide the scorn in his voice. "I had assumed you competent enough to hunt for suitors on your own. I consider myself corrected; thank you for the information."

Her cheeks burned brighter. Hounton, who had clearly overheard, looked embarrassed.

"It seems we both held mistaken assumptions," she said lowly. "For I had thought you worthy of your family name. I see now that I, too, was wrong."

Rage roared in his ears. Lady Frances wasn't talking about his lineage or the ducal name behind him.

She meant Grace. She dared to throw his sister's memory back in his face?

He was temporarily lost for words. And by the time he could even consider gathering a retort, a rebuttal, anything ? —

Lady Frances had already turned away from him. And she resolutely refused to look at him for the rest of the evening.

CHAPTER 2

As dinner ended, Frances felt nauseated.

This was a pity, truly, as the fare had been top-notch. Lord Hounton, the only person she'd spoken with for the latter part of the meal, had confided that there had been something of a to-do when Lord Winchester had poached his cook from one of the royal dukes on the promise that the French chef could single handedly choose the menu for every party the Earl hosted in perpetuity.

Frances had granted, in an absentminded way, that this trade was well worth it. The food was perfection.

Sadly, however, she was too furious to enjoy it.

The nerve of the Marquess of Oackley!

Frances had never had much to do with Evan when Grace was alive though she'd known that Diana and Emily had known him passably well. No matter how kindly her three friends had spoken of him, Frances had always been too shy, too anxious to associate with a young gentleman—and a future duke at that!

She regretted that a bit now as it left her wondering if all three of her friends had somehow been wrong in their estimation of the Marquess' character or if the man had just changed that much since his sister's passing.

After all, it was quite one thing to feel exasperated with one's own parents—Lord

only knew that Frances could sympathize with that particular emotion. But insulting someone else's? In public?

Unsupportable. Clearly a sign of the most benighted character.

If Frances was feeling charitable, she might have allowed that grief could do strange things to a man's mind.

She was not feeling charitable.

She was, however, feeling distracted which meant that when her mother snagged her by the arm as the guests made their way to the drawing room for after dinner drinks and conversation, she squeaked quite loudly in alarm.

"Oh, don't be dramatic, Frances," her mother scolded as she dragged Frances into a small side room, her iron grip frankly impressive.

Frances didn't protest. She had used up all her bravery speaking back so sharply to the Marquess—who had undoubtedly deserved such a response.

So, she merely took a deep breath to calm her racing heart and looked at her mother patiently. "Yes, Mother?"

Somehow, her mother already looked impatient. "You're needed upstairs," Lady Reed said shortly. "Lady Mary is asking for you."

Oh. That was...

Well, it was a little strange, but in a flattering sort of way.

"Do you know what she needs?" Frances asked.

Her mother rolled her eyes, something she'd never have done if there had been anyone else to witness the uncouth gesture.

“Yes, Frances,” her mother said sardonically. Frances had really had more than enough sarcasm this evening. “When our host’s sister asked for you to meet her in the upstairs parlor, I interrogated her about why, when, and for how long. Then I asked about her favorite dessert, what she likes to do in her spare time, and what she dreams of at night.”

This was, Frances felt, a bit much.

“I didn’t mean—” she began.

Her mother spoke over her.

“For goodness’ sake, Frances!” she snapped. “Can you not do this one thing? You’ve already proven yourself insufficient to attract a marquess—not that I’m surprised. Can you not manage even simple obedience?”

That was more than a bit much, but Frances wasn’t going to repeat her previous mistake and say so. Instead, she indulged in a small frown.

Her mother seemed to consider this an adequate show of daughterly submission as she continued speaking, tone only mildly irritated instead of openly hostile.

“As I was saying, Frances, Lady Mary has requested your presence in the upstairs parlor.” When Frances didn’t immediately react, her mother made a shooining gesture. “That means now, Frances!”

Frances went, biting her tongue against a retort. It was frankly a miracle that she still had a tongue to speak of, given how frequently she had to do such a thing where her

parents were concerned.

Even though the guests were nearly all downstairs, the upstairs hallway of Winchester Manor was well-lit and cheery. Frances asked a bustling maid for directions to the parlor, and though the servant gave her a slightly quizzical look, she pointed Frances to the appropriate door without comment.

Frances thought nothing of this response...

Right up until the moment she entered the parlor and found not Lady Mary but Lord Hounton.

“Drat,” she muttered.

The Viscount looked at her in surprise. “I’m sorry?”

Frances shook her head, pasting on a slight smile. She couldn’t say what had overtaken her this evening to make her so free with her words around strange gentlemen, but she wished it would release her from its grasp.

“Nothing,” she said. And then, on the very small chance that she was wrong in her assumption about what was happening here, she asked, “Is Lady Mary here?”

Lord Hounton looked mildly scandalized. “Here? No, of course not, that would be dreadfully improper...” He trailed off, seeming to realize that this tete-a-tete with Frances was, likewise, dreadfully improper.

“I was told the Earl wished to meet me here?” he added, his uncertainty turning the statement into a question.

“Of course,” she agreed. “Do you mind me asking—who told you that?”

The Viscount blinked. He evidently was not nearly so suspicious of mind as was Frances. That must be nice, she thought. Perhaps it meant that his parents weren't raving lunatics.

"Oh, no, of course not. Well, it was your father, as it happened..."

Frances was going to murder her mother. Then, she was going to also murder her father. She would be henceforth known as "poor Lady Frances, that batty spinster who killed her parents which we can only assume they deserved."

Because they did deserve it, if they were so far gone in their matchmaking madness that they had attempted to trap her—and Lord Hounton, the poor fellow—into marriage via a scandal.

Not that the man was unsuitable. He seemed rather pleasant, actually. But Frances preferred to have greater knowledge of a man's pleasantness than a single dinner before shackling herself to him for life. She was peculiar that way.

Frances had also evidently inherited some of her parents' madness as part of her mind coolly noted that it was very unsporting of them to do so on the first night of the party. Her father had done all that bloviating about her finding a match, but they hadn't even given her a chance to try to obey. Not that she had intended to do as much, of course, but her parents had no way of knowing that...

But that was not the matter that needed her immediate attention. No, her first priority had to be to extricate herself from this snare.

"Right," she said, clasping her hands together. "Well...goodbye."

An elegant departure it was not, but Frances didn't care. She turned back to the open door she'd just entered through then froze as she heard voices coming up the stairs.

Ha, of course. It wasn't a trap unless someone caught her in it.

With a decisive nod, she closed the door. Lord Hounton looked alarmed at this.

"What are you—?" he asked.

But Frances' frantic scan of the room had already revealed another avenue for escape: a door that, from its positioning, could not lead back into the hallway.

"Still leaving," she confirmed, crossing quickly to the door. "Goodbye again." She paused with her hand on the doorknob. "Maybe don't tell them you saw me," she suggested.

"Tell who?—?"

But she'd opened the door and slipped through before she could hear the rest of his question. He'd figure it out, the poor man.

The room she'd crossed into was nearly pitch dark after the brightness of the parlor, the only illumination coming from the faintest glimmer of moonlight peeking through closed curtains. Frances took several hasty steps away from the door, trying to move as quietly as she could?—

She slammed into something, barely holding back her gasp of surprise.

No, not some thing, she realized in horror as the surface beneath her hands moved. Some one.

She froze.

This was...very bad.

It wasn't just that she was ensconced in a dark room with persons unknown while the rest of the party—spearheaded by her parents, who were determined to catch her out—bumbled around next door.

No, it was worse because the person—a man; it had to be a man from his height—was half dressed . She'd not yet put her gloves back on after dinner when her mother had sent her on this false errand, so she could feel the warmth of his skin—his bare skin —against her fingertips. The feel of it was at once satiny and hard in a way that immediately put Frances in mind of ancient statues, the kind that young ladies weren't supposed to look at too closely.

The only small mercy, she allowed, was that she could also feel the rasp of fabric against her forearms which meant he wasn't entirely unclothed.

She hadn't the foggiest idea what she'd have done if that had been the case.

Except this mercy felt very distant indeed in the next moment as the man's arms moved to encircle her, coming to touch her with unerring accuracy.

One hand touched her hair.

The other—she could scarcely think it even in her own mind—touched her derriere .

And then he squeezed it .

Frances gasped, which was truly troubling because the heat of that broad, strong hand against her had arrested her lungs, had made it so that she could not seem to breathe. She struggled to make her body work again, just as she struggled to feel the offense that she should be feeling.

She was, after all, being accosted. She should be horrified. She should certainly not

be hoping that he would squeeze her again, that she would feel another rush of heat through her. She should not feel an instinctive desire for more .

Trapped between these warring impulses, she remained frozen.

A heartbeat passed. Then another.

The man froze, too. And then?—

“You’re not Beatrice.”

It was mad, truly mad, but Frances almost laughed at that. The whole thing was just so ridiculous. Her parents had tried to manufacture a compromising position with one man only for her to put herself into an entirely real compromising position with another man entirely.

A man whose identity she didn’t know.

A man who had assumed her to be someone else.

It was just too absurd.

Frances didn’t know what she might have done then if the opportunity for escape hadn’t presented itself. She heard the noise in the adjoining parlor shift in such a way that it was clear that the crowd her parents had assembled to see her supposed downfall was retreating.

Which meant that Frances had one opportunity to escape with them.

She shoved away from the man, his grip on her breaking easily, and stumbled back to the door she’d entered through only moments before. Reeling with everything that

had just occurred and blinking against the brightness in the parlor, she hurried to join the group that was headed back for the drawing room, parlor games and conversation back on the schedule.

Her entrance was so sufficiently seamless that the only person who noticed anything was Lord Hounston, who blinked at her as if to say, “Where on earth did you come from?”

Again, Frances almost laughed.

She hardly knew herself.

CHAPTER 3

E van looked out over the breakfast table where the partygoers were gathered. They drifted in and out of the room in pairs and clusters, some bright eyed, others blinking sleep from their eyes.

He carefully observed the women while trying very hard not to make it seem as though he was carefully observing the women. That was the kind of thing that could get a man in trouble.

Not as much trouble as being caught, half undressed, in a side room with a woman who was not his mistress...

But still. Trouble.

He had, he reckoned, three things he needed to do.

First, he needed to identify the woman he'd found himself caressing the night prior. This was, alas, no easy task as all he had to go on was the shape of her—pleasingly round and plump—arse.

And, he supposed, the sound of her gasp. But he frankly suspected he'd have more luck with the bit about her shape. He was, after all, a man, and he'd gotten a very appealing feel of her the night prior.

Second, he needed to confirm that she could not identify him. He was at a disadvantage in this, too; he'd spoken while she'd remained silent.

Third, he needed to do all this without Beatrice finding out anything about it as she was, to put it mildly, prone to unflattering jealousy.

“Morning, Oackley.”

Curse his bloody luck.

Evan struggled to keep his face neutral as Victor, the Earl of Southgate—and Beatrice’s husband—lowered himself into the chair beside Evan.

It was, Evan knew, very poor form to dally with a married lady. But it was an open secret among the ton that Southgate’s predilections did not lead him to his wife’s bed and that Beatrice had tacit permission to find companionship elsewhere.

Still, Evan knew Southgate didn’t know the identity of his wife’s lover just as he knew Beatrice preferred it that way—as did he, frankly.

The only thing more uncomfortable than conversing with a man whose wife you were bedding was conversing with that man while he knew you were bedding his wife.

“Morning,” Evan returned shortly. He turned his gaze to his kippers with more studiousness than the little fish warranted.

Southgate, alas, had no reason to suspect Evan might wish to avoid conversation with him and thus continued blithely on.

“Mayhap it’s a bit strange of me, but I do enjoy a house party breakfast. It is such a boring meal when one is at home, don’t you think? No society to think of, just solitude.”

This was, Evan felt, perhaps a bit more revealing about the state of Southgate’s marriage than the Earl had intended.

He gave a noncommittal hmph of a reply.

“Ho, ho!” Southgate chortled, undeterred. “Perhaps you are the sort to prefer that kind of solitude, eh? And here you have me, nattering on.”

This observation did not prevent Southgate from continuing to natter on, alas. Evan might have wondered what he’d done to deserve such punishment if accosting anonymous women in the dark wasn’t such a ready answer to that question.

Across the room, Beatrice was eyeing the exchange between Evan and her husband, a keen glint in her gaze. Evan didn’t return her look; he was not responsible for managing Beatrice’s strange jealousy. If she wanted to know what he’d discussed with Southgate, she could ask.

His eyes slid along the table until they landed on Lady Frances, who had slipped into the room without his noticing. A flash of annoyance shot through him. She was forever slinking about with that mousy little act of hers, wasn’t she? He found her pretending to be appalling, but he had greater concerns?—

He stumbled over his own thoughts. Could it have been Lady Frances who had slipped into his arms the night before?

His imagination took off before he could stop it. It was atrociously easy to imagine embracing her, to picture his fingers sliding into her hair as he clutched her against him. She was so slight that it would be easy to lift her, his hand under her arse, until she could wrap her legs around his waist, skirts be damned, until he could nestle close to the heat of her?—

He forced himself to stop thinking that way. Immediately .

Especially since Lady Frances was glancing up, and if she met his eyes, he feared—irrational though it was—that she’d be able to divine the direction of this

thoughts...

“Frances!”

Lady Frances’ head snapped around at her mother’s piercing call, and Evan felt certain he would never again feel such gratitude for Lady Reed.

That gratitude instantly soured when he saw the nervous way Lady Frances scrambled to her feet which, no—he didn’t like her, and so he didn’t care if she had an overbearing mother. He had his own problems. Why could he not seem to remember that?

Except, as it turned out, Lady Frances and his problems were one and the same because as she hurried to follow her mother, she fumbled the gloves she’d had in her lap, dropping them to the floor.

And then she bent to pick them up.

Giving Evan an unmistakable glimpse of the way her arse curved, delicious and soft and perfect, through the thin material of her morning gown.

He tried to remind himself that his thoughts were absurd. There was no comparing a woman’s rear as squeezed in the dark and as glimpsed across a room. He couldn’t know anything and should likely give up trying to know anything.

But... but a larger part of him knew.

“For goodness’ sake, Frances, must you be so clumsy?” Lady Reed complained as she stalked out of the room, her daughter hurrying on her heels.

The rosy glimmer of Lady Frances’ hair disappeared out of sight.

And before he knew it, Evan was on his feet, too, following her.

Frances was being punished.

This was highly unfair as she'd not done anything wrong except fail to be caught in a scandalous position. But her mother's attitude was clearly stemming from animosity over her foiled plot.

As Frances knew from experience, all she could do was wait it out.

Some days, she truly missed her siblings. She'd never known that being ignored was such a blessing. She possibly owed Cordelia an apology—the elder Johnson sister has been subject to their mother's attention for decades .

Fortunately, Lady Reed's brand of punishment was relatively uninspired. She would snipe at Frances for a day or so before returning to her customary level of mild disdain for her youngest child.

Indeed, the Countess shot a withering glance over her shoulder.

“Goodness, Frances, don't hover . You aren't a puppy nor a nursemaid. Can you not find your own diversions?”

Frances had been happily diverted eating her breakfast, now that her mother mentioned it. Too bad someone had summoned her from the table before she'd finished eating. Whoever could have done such a ridiculous thing...?

“Of course, Mother,” she said, forcing a polite smile to her face. “Perhaps I shall seek Lady Mary and see if she would like to take a walk.”

Lady Reed sighed as if Frances was being obstinate. “If you must spend time with aging spinsters, Frances, do trouble yourself at least to ask about her brother. Though

I dare say an earl is likely a better match than you'll ever make."

"I will try my very best," Frances said, unable to keep an acerbic note from the words.

Lady Reed narrowed her eyes, but she'd evidently grown bored with pestering Frances. "See that you do."

And then she swept away, off to do whatever occupied the remainder of her days. Frightening children, perhaps? Throwing rocks at innocent ducks?

Frances heaved a deep breath, ignoring the rare breath of solitude. House parties were, by her estimation, a bit like a very elegant prison. There was fine food and beautiful surroundings, but the freedom was naught but an illusion. She was, alas, trapped here with her parents for another week yet.

She meandered along, idly admiring the art on the walls. Winchester was not known as a great collector, so these were mainly family portraits going back over generations, but Frances enjoyed them just the same. She smiled at an ancestress who resembled Lady Mary a great deal but who, by her garb, had lived at least a century prior. She was having a fine time, until?—

"Lady Frances."

Frances was not necessarily proud of her reaction when she heard the Marquess of Oackley's voice call her name. She did not freeze, nor did she turn to face him.

Instead, she fled.

Well, a bit. She more...pretended she hadn't heard him which was, in some ways, even more embarrassing than if she'd fled outright. It was childish. But she was quite full up on her rudeness for the morning, and she didn't need whatever he was set to

offer.

So, she feigned a bit of deafness and stepped neatly into a hallway that turned out, happily, to be a portrait gallery.

She was hoping the man could take a hint—or had an intense dislike for portraiture—as she scurried a bit deeper into the narrow gallery. The room was dimly lit, so as to protect the paintings from the vagaries of time, but Frances enjoyed the shadowy effect created by oil paints and filtered morning sunshine.

She'd have enjoyed it more, however, if the dratted Marquess hadn't followed her.

“Lady Frances!”

He called her name again, this time more insistently.

And Frances more insistently ignored him.

This was childish—and foolish, as it turned out, because the Marquess of Oackley was the kind of awful, awful man who couldn't leave well enough alone. He was, instead, the kind of man who would reach out and grasp her by her waist .

He was the kind of man who would tug her tight against him.

As she'd done the night before. Frances froze. And in that moment, she realized she was doing so with the same man as the night before.

“You,” she breathed. “It was you.”

“Fuck,” he said.

She gasped at the profanity, and he pulled her closer, as if he were not the source of

this gasp, as if he had to protect her from something or someone else?—

Or perhaps, she realized as he bent to whisper in her ear, as if he meant to say something.

“You weren’t supposed to realize, but now that you have, Lady Frances, let me make you a promise.” His arm was like iron across her middle, pressing her back against his front. His breath ghosted over her cheek, the sensation not at all unpleasant.

This was a compromising situation. This was a threatening situation, for all that the Marquess had spoken of a promise .

Yet she wasn’t afraid.

Strange, that.

When she didn’t move or speak, he continued.

“If you tell anyone about what you saw last night, I will ruin you once and for all.”