



# Tantalizing the Duke

## (Wayward Dukes Alliance #22)

**Author:** *Ari Thatcher*

**Category:** Historical

**Description:** Milly Nichols has landed herself in the midst of a scandal after being seen in an amorous clinch with a baron, who then absconded to Gretna Green with someone else. Now her father has arranged for her to marry a lecherous old man, which she absolutely refuses to do. She reaches out to her lifelong friend Lester, Duke of Dainsfield, a scandal in his own right as part owner of a gaming hell better known for its cyprian parties, and asks for help finding a man to marry.

Dainsfield is more than willing to help, but given Milly's illegitimate birth, he knows the task will be difficult. What he doesn't expect is the jealousy that erupts when he sees Milly with other men. Can he keep his feelings under control long enough to marry her off, or will he throw more shame on the dukedom and marry her himself?

**Total Pages (Source):** 16

## CHAPTER ONE

Milly Nichols sat in the study of her father's London town house, wondering what had stirred his ire this time. A full month had passed since her indiscretion with Baron Wasing had made the scandal sheets, so surely her stepmother had recovered from her fits of vapors over that. Admittedly, having one's gown dip low enough to reveal one's... endowments while enjoying the operetta was a bit incautious. They were in a private box, however, not in the general seating area where everyone could see what they were up to. Wasing's hands and mouth should have kept anyone from seeing anything indecorous, unless the viewer was determined to see flesh and continued to gawk until he did.

Of course, many of the haute ton thrived on seeing things they shouldn't, so Milly's bosom received more praise than the soprano's solo the following day.

Glancing down, Milly adjusted her décolletage, then lifted her breasts just a bit. There was little sense in attempting to hide something she was proud of, no matter how her stepmother felt about Milly's figure. The woman was jealous, she was certain, over the beauty Milly had inherited from her mother, who happened to be Lady Kingsland's maid at the time of Milly's conception.

Lady Kingsland would have preferred Milly stay in the house Kingsland had proved her mother twenty-three years ago in a village as far from London as one could get without crossing a border or a channel. But Milly loved London and all the men it offered.

"She's a whore, just like her mother," came Lady Kingsland's shrill voice from the

hallway. “You must do something!”

“I have the matter well in hand,” Milly’s father, Lord Kingsland, said evenly, just before the door opened. He smiled when his gaze met Milly’s, and he warmly kissed her cheek. “Thank you for coming, darling girl.”

Lady Kingsland snorted before taking a seat in the chair to one side of the desk, but said nothing. She rarely spoke directly to Milly, as if to do so she might lower her standing in Polite Society.

The earl sat behind his desk and smiled again at Milly. “I have news. Indeed, a splendid match has been made. One that shall see you comfortable and well situated.”

Milly refrained from groaning. They’d had this discussion before. “Father, I’ve told you, I have no wish to marry.”

Her father glanced at his wife, his face showing his frustration. “You must understand, my dear. There are certain expectations?—”

“There are no expectations for an illegitimate daughter,” Milly interrupted. “A wedding, no matter how proper, will not make the ladies of Polite Society accept me. I won’t suddenly receive invitations to tea or Venetian breakfasts. They won’t acknowledge me when they see me at the modiste’s. Or rather, they won’t change modiste when they realize I employ the same one who made their innocent daughters’ wardrobe.”

“You spend too much on her gowns,” Lady Kingsland said, still not looking at Milly.

Milly glanced skyward. If the woman had any idea how much money the earl paid for the rooms Milly shared with her friend, Rose, not to mention her allowance, the countess would have had her kidnapped and sent to live in a brothel on the Continent.

“No doubt the poor man is just as old and doddering as the last one you suggested. No one wants to marry an earl’s bastard.”

“Millicent!” shrieked Lady Kingsland. She waved a hand before her face as if she would faint at any moment.

Kingsland cleared his throat but didn’t reprimand her. “This one is neither ancient nor feeble. He is a gentleman of some reputation. The Lord Crampmoore.”

The name landed like a blow, but Milly refused to flinch. She turned her gaze to her father, hoping for some reprieve. “Surely not the baron? He’s lost more wives than you have shoes.”

Kingsland sighed. “No other man would look past the latest scandal.”

“No other man would dare marry her,” Lady Kingsland said. Her triumph was undeniable. “We must take what we can get. Though a baron with estates and prospects is much more than she deserves.”

Milly sank back in her chair, her heart racing. It was worse than she had imagined. Crampmoore’s third wife recently died under mysterious circumstances. Her sudden ailment was oddly similar to his first two wives, both of whom died within six months of marrying him. “Father, you cannot expect me to marry him. You cannot hate me that much.”

“We only wish to see you well settled,” Kingsland assured her, though his voice lacked conviction. He sighed, again stealing a glance at his wife. “Crampmoore’s eager for an heir.”

“His child would be marked by scandal, with me as his mother.” The baron’s children would have the ghosts of the three dead wives hovering over their acceptance into

society, as it was. A mother with a scandalous conception of her own wouldn't help ease them into the ton .

As much as she loved children, Milly planned to remain childless. Even if she allowed her father to find her a kind man who lived a quiet country life, where no one knew who she was, there would always be the threat of someone finding out about her past. Or rather, her father's past. All the silly scandals Milly had been a part of were minor enough to be overlooked outside the ton .

"Perhaps," Lady Kingsland added, "you ought to consider how this will reflect upon us. We have borne your escapades long enough. There is some peace to be had when you are Crampmoore's wife."

"Milly, you must see that this will save us all a great deal of distress." Father seemed to think she could be convinced to agree to the marriage. Either that, or his decision was final and he didn't want Milly angry with him.

"And when he buries me, will you feel relief at my being gone?" Milly asked.

"I've every confidence that you will manage. The man is no ogre, for heaven's sake," Father said.

"He simply marries his wives to death, is that it?" Milly rose and paced the room, fire and despair mingling within her. "And what if I have no desire for the match?"

Kingsland hesitated, knowing too well the storm that could follow. "Do not be dramatic, my dear."

Lady Kingsland's voice cut like a knife. "You had better make yourself willing. Crampmoore plans to have the banns read in the church near his country home this Sunday, and I've written the vicarage in Kingsland. You'll be married in

Crampmoore's church in a month."

Ice filled Milly's veins. Twice before, her father had decreed his plans for her to marry, but she'd been able to talk him out of moving forward. Today's decision was a fait accompli. How would she escape?

"I've also written to Susan—" Father began.

"What?" Lady Kingsland screeched.

Father went on. "While there isn't time for her to come to Town and help you shop for your trousseau, she can prepare to accompany you to your wedding."

Milly suddenly understood what men meant when they mention the parson's noose, and she felt it tighten around her neck.

"I would recommend you stay here with us," Father paused when his wife gasped, then continued, "but I'm sure that's unnecessary. I trust you to behave until it's time for us to travel. You'll avoid going to Sutcliffe's, of course. In fact, it's best if you remain home in the evening for the next few weeks."

Her father knew of her membership to Sutcliffe's club? She supposed she shouldn't be surprised. He probably had a membership for himself. He didn't seem the gambling type, but her very existence proved he was the sort of man who would take advantage of the private rooms available at the club. In those rooms, one could have a discrete meeting with one or more person of one's choosing, or choose the more elaborate rooms outfitted with scandalous toys and accessories.

Milly hid her smile. Sutcliffe's was exactly the sort of place she needed to go, and the sooner, the better. Watching others through the peepholes, seducing a young buck with fucking on his mind... either of those would calm her nerves and allow her to

think more clearly. She must make a scheme, quickly, to avoid marrying Crampmoore.

The meeting ended when her father left the room, his wife following like a shadow. Milly found the butler waiting in the hallway to escort her to the door. "I've sent for a hackney cab for you, Miss Nichols," he said when Kingsland was out of earshot.

"Thank you, Addams. You always take care of me."

The familiar trappings of wealth surrounded Milly as she walked to the entry, but they always seemed gaudy to her, a blatant display of what she'd been denied growing up. She'd been born on the wrong side of the blanket, a natural child. Baseborn. She'd heard it all over the years. Eventually her skin thickened enough for it not to bother her, but she felt sad for her poor mother, Susan. She was such a kind woman. Milly couldn't imagine her mother seducing anyone, and she put all the blame for the affair with Kingsland on his hands. While Mama had a comfortable life, thanks to Kingsland, she should have had more.

She should have had a loving husband.

Milly would never know a life like that, either, but she no longer cared. She enjoyed having a man's hands on her and his turgid member in her. A variety of men was preferable, so her heart didn't grow too fond. She rarely returned home unsatisfied at the end of an evening. But it appeared her visits to Sutcliffe's would end soon. In the meantime, she planned to spend as much time there as possible.

\* \* \*

For a woman born ruined beyond redemption, there was no better refuge than Sutcliffe's Gentleman's Club, and Milly felt strangely at peace among the roguish horde. Anyone who gambled there might raise an eyebrow or two if Polite Society

knew. Those who entertained themselves in other areas were scandals waiting to be exposed. She passed the gaming tables, where the ever-amorous bachelors leered, intent on winning her eye, and perhaps a moment with her body. Her thoughts were only of her father's threat to see her wed to Crampmoore, a man both despicable and dull. She needed a scheme, a savior, and she needed it quickly. A conversation with her dear friends, Lady St. Ervan or Lady Longford, might guide her, though she imagined their advice would do little to calm her mind's urgent cry.

She scanned the large, main gaming room, hoping to find one of her friends at a table or nestled on the divan. Amongst the gamblers, she noticed a few sharp eyes tracking her every step, and she wondered if anyone knew of her impending marriage. The crowd's murmur continued with no one calling attention to her, and she spied a familiar plume of feathers bobbing among the tables in the distance.

"There she is, our dearest scandal!" called a sprightly voice as Milly approached. Verity, Lady St. Ervan, waved her over with enthusiasm. "We were certain you'd make an appearance tonight."

"Verity and I had a wager," added Betty, the vivacious Lady Longford. "I do believe I've won. Here you are before teatime."

Milly settled into a chair at the card table between her two friends, her spirits buoyed by their easy warmth. "Was it such a difficult bet?" she asked with mock offense.

"We feared you might mourn the loss of Lord Wasing," Betty said with a giggle. "Have you heard? He and some poor girl escaped to Gretna Green."

"Never mention that odious creature to me again." Milly said with a groan. "I've worse news, however. My father has arranged for me to wed Lord Crampmoore. They read the banns next week! What am I to do? I came here hoping for a handsome scoundrel to divert me. Surely one must lurk within these walls, even at this early



hour.”

“Several, I should think,” Verity observed, eyeing the room with interest.

“You don’t plan to marry the baron, do you?” Betty asked.

“I can’t. He’ll have me dead in six months, like the others.” Milly could hear the desperation in her own voice. “But what can I do? My father plans to take me to the church himself.”

Her friends exchanged knowing glances, leaning in conspiratorially. Betty tapped her fan against Milly’s arm, her expression both amused and sympathetic. “Might I suggest an excellent scheme? Marry someone else.”

“Betty’s right,” Verity chimed in. “There’s no better way to guarantee you can’t marry Crampmoore.”

Betty added, “Don’t waste your time and arrange a faux betrothal. It’s a waste of time. You’ll end up married in the end, like Longford and I did.”

The three women laughed. Milly recalled when Betty and Lord Longford found themselves in a scandal of their own, right here in the private rooms of Sutcliffe’s. Now they were among the happiest couples Milly knew.

She sighed, allowing her posture to sag only for a moment. “I had hoped there was a better solution. Why can’t I just become some man’s courtesan? I’d enjoy entertaining him when he wished, while spending the rest of my time how I pleased.”

Verity shook her head. “The only way to keep your father from forcing you to marry is to marry someone else.”

“It’s not an entirely miserable state, you know, marriage. We’ve both enjoyed it twice,” Betty said. She and Verity had been widows with no plans to marry again when they met their current husbands.

“It’s different for me. I’ll have to move to a village where no one has heard of my father, or my own mishaps, or my husband will be a laughingstock.” Milly’s lips pinched into a thin line. “I must marry a man who doesn’t desire children, so they aren’t tainted with my illegitimacy.”

Glancing about, Milly made sure no one was listening before adding, “And I’m uncertain I could be satisfied with one man for the rest of my life.”

The other two women laughed loudly enough to draw attention. “You haven’t experienced the right man, dear girl,” Verity said.

“I’ve sampled so many, I can’t believe there’s one who would tempt me above all others,” Milly rejoined, biting her lip. “Perhaps I should offer my hand to the highest bidder. The winner at one of those tables, perhaps?”

The suggestion hung in the air, met with incredulous delight. Verity gasped, eyes wide with a mixture of horror and amusement. “Oh, Milly, do you really wish to end up with another Crampmoore?”

“It’s tempting fate, isn’t it?” Milly admitted, her bravado fading.

“You might marry a gambler with more debts than titles,” Betty warned, still smiling. “I thought you’d sworn off both.”

Milly conceded with a rueful chuckle. Her friends’ laughter mingled with the racket of the room, but even the clamor couldn’t drown out her silent resolve. She knew the peril of an impulsive choice, yet the prospect thrilled her more than it should.

“Be patient,” Verity counseled. “Betty and I will see that you find the perfect match. Someone generous, with fewer former wives than Crampmoore, and possibly with children.”

Betty sighed. “Poor things. Imagine having a mother who runs off to Sutcliffe’s every week!”

“And quite enjoys herself, at that,” added Verity. Her eyes gleamed with mischief. “A dreadful woman. Where will they ever find such a scandalous bride?”

Milly smiled coyly. “But what if I can’t wait for you to rustle up this magnificent man?”

“Then take one for the night and leave the rest to us,” Betty said with a playful wink.

“We’ll speak to our own friends, of course,” Verity assured her. “There’s bound to be a willing widower or two. And you know some men adore a wife who craves pleasure.”

“Just so long as that wife isn’t seen as damaged goods,” Milly said, unable to mask the flicker of doubt.

Betty shook her head. “Perhaps you need to be reminded of how appealing you really are. Which of these cads shall we trust for the task?”

Milly surveyed the room, contemplating her many options. “The most handsome, naturally. Or at least the least insipid.” She feigned consideration, then added with girlish defiance, “The lot of them, if I had my way.”

Her friends laughed. Milly rose from her seat, the weight of her predicament replaced by the lightness of renewed hope. Even in jest, her scandalous vow to win freedom

kindled her spirit, a blazing revolt against the drear future her father had planned. She resolved not to act rashly, as she had promised, but let herself be swept up by desire in the very first rogue's embrace.

With a teasing glance over her shoulder, she blew a kiss to her companions, then made her way toward the stairway to the private rooms.

### CHAPTER TWO

The light was soft on the carpets in the hallway leading to the owners' offices, lending Sutcliffe's a quiet dignity that belied the true nature of the place. A bustling hive of secret longings and unchecked passions, the club hummed with conversations he had heard too many times before. None interested Lester Burgess, the Duke of Dainsfield. Only in his office could he count on the privacy he craved.

Yet periodically throughout the day or evening, he or one of the other two owners needed to make an appearance on the gaming floor. When he ran out of valid excuses to remain behind his desk, he left the office to find an expected surprise in the hallway. She smelled of orange blossoms and audacity, and when she threw herself into his arms, he found himself, as always, at a loss for what to do with her.

"You are just the man I sought," Milly announced, her voice playful and flirtatious in his ear.

"Are there not enough to choose from upstairs?"

Her laughter was a sweet, reckless thing. She pulled back, her eyes bright with something daring. "No one else could get away with asking me that."

Dainsfield allowed himself a rare smile. "No one else would dare be as rude as I."

The scent of her lingered as he set her from him. She seemed never to change, a perpetually youthful creature despite the years they'd known each other. Five, to be precise, though it seemed like forever. How he had survived those years without

making her his own remained a mystery. They first met at a cyprian party so outrageously attended that he still marveled at her audacity for appearing. She was all of eighteen years, an enticing, scandalous delight to the mature rogues there. He had been a young duke of twenty-seven, jaded enough to assume he had seen all of society's debauchery. Then there was Milly.

He turned back toward his office, shaking his head with fond disbelief. "I suppose you'll insist on a drink, since you've already ambushed me."

"How generous of you, Dainsfield," she said, flouncing in after him. She settled into a chair with feline ease, her bodice resting scandalously low on her breasts in an abandon typical of her.

"And what new intrigues have you brought with you this evening?" he inquired, sinking into a seat across from her, observing her with both wariness and affection. "Will I have to rescue you from anything?"

She pouted. "Not in a way that you imagine. But there is something you could do for me."

It was an open invitation for more questions, but he remembered those early parties instead. How carefree and in love with scandal she had seemed, and how serious he had taken his duty to protect her. There was the one occasion that had ended with her at his town house, draped in one of his robes, clothes mislaid and champagne-fogged memories of a truly wicked night leading to fits of her laughter at his expense. She never apologized for things that would bring others shame, instead she had teased him for being so fraternal.

He never learned if he'd experienced those carnal delights with her that night, or someone else. He only knew he longed to sample her wares, but scolded himself each time he considered acting on those imaginings.

Perhaps that was the problem, that he'd felt more like an older brother, at first. It wasn't the case any longer, but it had been once. Not that it ever stopped her from treating him in the reckless manner she always had.

"Not going to ask me what I want?" Milly feigned exasperation, rising to claim the drink he'd promised with the kind of fluid elegance that was both her charm and his curse. "I'm afraid you'll be a bit put out this time."

He remained silent, watching as she poured two glasses of port. One for her, the other presumably for him, but she drank it too, while he relived the cyprian parties they'd both attended over the years.

He recalled the most brazen event—her standing atop a billiard table, hair loose and nothing but a sheer bit of muslin adorning her, offering champagne from her shoe. No one else would have dared such a thing, but there she was, a delightful goddess presiding over a room of her admirers, until he put an abrupt end to the spectacle by sweeping her away like the most severe of guardians. And yes, there was a kind of protectiveness, perhaps more than a kind. Even then, he could not bear the thought of others feasting on her unrepentant beauty.

"Stop brooding, Dainsfield," she commanded. "This should cheer you. You see, I've decided I must marry."

Dainsfield met her declaration with skepticism, though a bolt of interest found its way to a less cautious part of him. "How delightfully unlike you."

"I knew you would be pleased," she teased, another bubble of laughter escaping. "You always wanted me to be under some man's rule, didn't you? Never your own, though. This isn't my choice, though. My father has signed a contract."

She explained the situation. Dainsfield grimaced. He didn't know Crampmoore well,

but he knew enough to understand Milly would never be happy married to the man.

“Are you going to offer to find me a husband again?” she asked.

Once, when she was twenty, he’d made the mistake of such an offer, at a particularly lascivious event, when she’d barely been wearing a thread. At least a dozen suitors—if such rogues could be called that—were clamoring for her attention that evening. He meant to protect her from herself and said as much.

She’d refused him in her typical irreverent manner. “What if I don’t want to be limited to sleeping with only one man? Or worse, what if I could never again sleep with two or three at once?” she’d asked, coquettish and full of mirth.

It was the first time she’d ever rendered him utterly speechless, a skill she honed with precision. Remembering it now, with her before him in a simple gown, the mounds of her bosom rising and falling with each breath, made him rather speechless again, though differently. Her marriage could indeed limit her to just one man, unless it was arranged with more generous terms. She likely required an entire tome full of generous terms. His cock stirred in appreciation of the possibilities.

“What are you thinking, Your Grace?” she pried, eyes keen, though not as keen as his awareness of her. “Shall I guess? You are having second thoughts.”

“If that is truly what you want,” he said, as he had the last time, though without the conviction. He had a feeling she’d escape her wedding no matter who waited at the altar.

She was on her feet before he knew it, trapping him against his own desk. “Remember, you already offered,” she implored, pressing herself close and capturing his gaze with a look of both daring and entreaty.



And yes, there was her cleavage, something any other woman would use to entice him, but that wasn't Milly. It wasn't even necessary with him, and with her slender waist and hips, the enticement was inevitable. A gunnysack couldn't hide the beauty of her form.

"Why are you resorting to tactics?" he challenged, breath uneven.

"Because I am determined, dear Dainsfield," she said with a certainty that only an intelligent woman could wield, straightening to regard him seriously. She sighed. "I am desperate."

He took a moment to collect himself, touching a finger to her nose with practiced indifference. "You needn't resort to tactics."

She blinked, drawing back, surprise and delight dancing upon her features. "Then you will help?"

He laughed softly. "You hardly left me a choice. If I can survive the scandal you will create, it may even be diverting."

"Wonderful!" she declared, executing an impromptu pirouette. She kissed him on the cheek, a fleeting heat that seared the line of propriety with careless grace. She scurried toward the door. "You are simply wonderful."

"Milly."

She paused at the door, eyes bright with mischief. He knew better than to let it affect him, but it did.

"Call on me tomorrow morning," he instructed. "We will talk, and you can tell me what has truly made you want such a drastic change."

“I shall be there bright and early,” she promised, and in a flurry of silk and impudence, she was gone.

Dainsfield found himself alone, Milly’s perfume lingering like the end of an evening with his mistress. Only his cock was nowhere near content.

The temptation of fucking her before she married hit him like a hammer on an anvil. He’d had affairs or liaisons with married women, of course, but he’d never do that to Milly. The challenge of being faithful would be difficult for her, he was certain, and he refused to be a part of her downfall.

In the past, he’d avoided her at the sex-filled romps they both enjoyed, unwilling to be just another shaft in her silken passage, along with that niggling feeling she deserved better than that sort of treatment. Was he wrong to feel that way about her, when she clearly enjoyed being used thus? And why did he feel guilty now, for considering doing what he’d refrained from for the past five years?

There might not be time enough to spend an evening with her before she married, according to what she said about banns being read already. He needed to concentrate on finding her a husband, not fucking her enormous breasts. Heaven help him, though, if he had the chance to fondle them somewhere other than the club. All bets were off, in that case.

\* \* \*

By the time Dainsfield reached the gaming floor, the early gamblers were at their usual tables, enriching the club’s coffers more likely than not, and seeming unconcerned about their potential losses. They came here to escape something, at this hour of the day, not to get rich. To win big at the card tables, one needed a wealthy opponent. Those men didn’t arrive until evening.

“What’s it like out there?” The Duke of Nomansland, one of Dainsfield’s co-owners, grinned, his broad smile showing how very pleased he was with the current turnout. He must have just arrived for the day.

“Mr. Talbot informed me one fellow is deep into his family’s fortune and hasn’t much left to show for it,” Dainsfield replied, nodding towards a corner table where a portly gentleman frowned as if having just swallowed a bitter dose of medicine.

“He’ll pay his dues. He always does,” Nomansland said.

Dainsfield considered the way the viscount in question sat rigid in his chair, lips a tight line, and reminded himself that appearances were often deceiving. He let out a short breath. “Make sure the dealer knows we won’t accept his IOU, just in case.” Sutcliffe’s rarely accepted the vowels of their noble clientele, and never from the gentry. Those pieces of paper didn’t earn interest when piled in a safe.

Nomansland nodded, then gave him a pointed look. “There was a time you enjoyed watching our patrons hemorrhage money. What’s troubling you?”

Dainsfield didn’t reply at once. He continued to gaze around the room as if something there interested him. The fact his emotions were plainly read by his friend displeased him. He’d been a gambler long enough that hiding his thoughts should be second nature. “Miss Nichols.”

His partner’s brows lifted with an amused incredulity. “Kingsland’s daughter? Surely you haven’t tupp’d her at last.”

“Of course not,” Dainsfield barked with more vehemence than intended. “She’s in need of a husband. She wants me to find one for her.”

“I am to assume, then, that you have not volunteered your own services?”

Nomansland's laughter rang out.

"You assume correctly," Dainsfield said. "I'm not ready to wed."

"Neither was Abingdon," Nomansland countered, leaning against the wall beside him, his posture easy and unconcerned. "And look at him now. Blissfully shackled."

"I like my life as it is," Dainsfield said. "Between the club and my ducal duties, I don't need to add more obligations to my plate."

Nomansland chuckled, eyes shining with mischief. "Obligations? You make it sound as if it's an act of martyrdom to marry. Taking young brides on holidays, dancing with them at balls. It's a hard, lonely life you've chosen, Dainsfield."

"I don't see you rushing to the altar," Dainsfield said with irritation. "As for Miss Nichols, the matter is not so simple."

Nomansland adopted an expression of exaggerated sympathy. "Oh? Her preference in husbands unwilling to forgive her recent performance at the operetta? Or her heavy use of her membership here? You know we have very few unmarried young ladies among our members."

"I can only think of one or two men who might consider her, unless I discretely offer a boon in lieu of a dowry. Her father already has a wedding agreement signed, from what Miss Nichols told me."

"Then why is she involving you?" Nomansland asked.

"Her father pawned her off on Crampmoore."

"Oh. I see."

“Yes. The only way she can escape him is to marry someone else before the ceremony planned next month. Someone who is in a position to ignore all the complications a woman like Miss Nichols brings to the marriage.”

Nomansland mused, “Did I mention that you already are a duke? You have no father making threats about your choice of bride or lack thereof. No need to worry about these... minor details.”

“I will grant you they are insignificant to me. My heir, assuming I have a son with her, might feel differently.”

“Your selflessness is inspiring,” Nomansland said. “However, I should warn you. The lady’s reputation has traveled far beyond London. Your pool of names is likely to be quite small. A puddle.”

Dainsfield nodded. He wasn’t surprised the gossip had spread widely. He could still picture Milly in the theatre box, dress around her waist, Baron Wasing’s eager hands all over her, and he hadn’t been in attendance. The chance to imagine those pale globes of hers would appeal to most men, so the tale gave them permission to dwell on the vision.

“It seems you’re quite concerned.”

Dainsfield pursed his lips. “I’ll find her someone. Perhaps an old man whose fondest memories are too distant to compete with her youthful dalliances.”

“There is always someone who will marry even the most notorious ladies. Some of our patrons spring to mind.” Nomansland spoke lightly, but his eyes were keenly on Dainsfield, watching his response.

“I suppose a woman of Miss Nichols’s social caliber makes a perfect bride, if one’s

objective is to court scandal.”

Nomansland gave a short laugh.

The silence hung between them for a beat too long before Dainsfield broke it. “There are a few who come to mind.”

If he was honest with himself, he’d admit that none of the members of Sutcliffe’s was the ideal husband for the life Milly deserved. If these men valued family, they wouldn’t be sitting in a gentleman’s club gambling night after night. He wasn’t even considering the ones who preferred the upper floor activities.

Perhaps that was the problem. Milly herself said she wanted to continue her wanton ways after she married. Perhaps she needed a husband who enjoyed ordering his wife to perform for him in lascivious ways. If that was the case, he had just the man in mind.

### CHAPTER THREE

Later that evening, Dainsfield examined the schedule for the private chambers. Among the names was the Earl of Parham. Parham was the ideal prospect for Milly. He was more handsome than half of the young bucks parading about Rotton Row during the fashionable hour. His income was said to be good, and he rarely gambled at Sutcliffe's. Instead, he made frequent use of one of the rooms outfitted with floggers, blindfolds, and silken ropes.

While Dainsfield had never known Milly to take part in that type of play, he thought she would enjoy it even more than the fondling and pawing most men offered. They wouldn't need to attend the club to do so, and Milly might find herself more easily sated.

His cock stirred at the image of a sated Milly sprawled on his bed, her breasts pink from mild abuse, her bottom lined with the tracks from a flogger. Too bad there wasn't time to introduce her to a bit of rough play before she married.

He looked at his watch. Parham should be upstairs now. He should tell a footman to send the man to his office before he left for the night.

The upper floor of Sutcliffe's functioned as a kind of bawdy sanctuary, a place where the whispered judgments of the ton fell silent beneath the seductive groans of lust and power. The room Parham was using was outfitted well by Sutcliffe's standards, meant for more than one taste. Iron hooks on the wall and ceiling waited to be tied to. Sturdy leather straps hinted at all the mischief expected within. It also had a spying window, as did many of the rooms, where patrons could watch what went on in the

room. Dainsfield paused in front of it.

Parham had a naked woman bent over the arm of a settee, her backside striped red from the strap he held. Dainsfield let out a slow breath. The scene wasn't unfamiliar—he had watched other women in this position more than once—but this time it was impossible not to see Milly's face, framed with shock or disgust, if she watched. Perhaps she wouldn't even care. Perhaps, if anything, she'd be relieved to have a husband who didn't expect her fidelity. Dainsfield felt something prick inside him at that thought. But what right did he have to be jealous? She had made it very clear the other night—any man would do.

“Might you be inclined to move over, Your Grace?” came a voice as light as birdsong. Before he could even respond, she squeezed in between him and the window.

He could scarcely believe it. “Milly,” he said, his words as incredulous as the look he gave her.

She offered him a grin that mingled impishness and pure delight. “I only have a few weeks left to play. I had to come.”

Eyes glittering, she turned back to the window. Inside, Parham pulled the woman upright by her hair, making her arch her back as he twisted the fingers of his other hand into her pussy, which faced them. Milly let out a sharp breath and Dainsfield caught himself staring. At her, not the couple inside.

Dainsfield parted his lips to suggest they leave if the scene was too disturbing for her, but then he saw she was toying with one of her nipples. She licked her lips, and he had to look away before he kissed her.

“Might you enjoy such treatment from a husband?” he asked.



She didn't even glance his way. "I would have to trust him immensely."

"What about Parham? I haven't?—"

Her soft moan cut him off, and she leaned back, her body pressed against the length of him.

He shifted his weight so she wouldn't feel his growing cock. Inside the room, Parham's fingers were busy as it looked like he was spreading her dampness over her bottom. She rocked into his hand, her private areas damp and fully exposed to anyone who might look through the window. And Milly and Dainsfield continued to look.

"Milly, I had no idea," he said, caught between amusement and astonishment.

She didn't answer, but began to rub her breast again. Dainsfield watched, helpless, as she moved in rhythm with the woman in the room.

Parham's praises reached them in indistinct murmurs. "Good girl. That's it. Almost there."

Dainsfield felt a throb that seemed to start in his chest and settle lower. Inside, the woman shuddered in climax. She hadn't even finished panting when Parham unfastened his trousers.

"Suck me," he commanded, pushing her to her knees. She took his cock in her mouth, and he held her head, urging her to move faster.

There in the hallway, Milly's moans were as urgent as the woman's. Her eyes were half closed, her body so loose and shamelessly pressed against Dainsfield that it was all he could do to keep from groaning.

How was this affecting him so? At Sutcliffe's, he was always immune, his role as owner a kind of armor against the pleasures that ensnared lesser men. Yet his cock was a solid, aching presence against Milly's back, his arousal making him almost angry in its suddenness. Her touch only magnified it. When she moved, grinding her bottom over him, he couldn't hold back the deep, guttural noise that escaped his throat.

And Milly wasn't finished.

He felt her hand guiding his to her breast. She looked up, her expression open, her desire real and unrelenting.

"I can't do that here," he said, his voice strained with wanting her to do exactly that.

She continued to grind into him as she turned to face him. "Then, where?"

Her words sliced through the sexual fog like a sword through butter. Her sincerity stunned him, her tenacity awed him, her utter lack of decorum thrilled him beyond reason. Yet somehow he regained just enough composure to tease her. "I'm flattered you want my company. But as you know, I don't take part in what goes on in these rooms. I could find you someone. A young man, waiting for a woman who?"

"No."

The refusal was simple and immediate. She left no room for misunderstanding.

"Milly," he tried again, ignoring the slow burn of pleasure and embarrassment spreading through him as she slipped two fingers between the buttons of his waistcoat and ran them over his chest, "you only want me because I'm the man standing in front of you."

She gave him a smile that made him want to throw every careful word to the wind. “I want you. I’ve wanted you since I knew what wanting was. Women talk, and I’ve heard more than you think. I’ve heard what a lover you are. Soon I’ll have to obey my husband’s wishes, and I suspect that will mean I’ll have to limit my activities to include only him.”

He could hardly think, her confession tangled him so thoroughly.

She pulled him closer. “I don’t want to miss out on the chance to feel what your fingers can do inside me. Or the way your cock will feel inside me. Inside any of my openings.”

She fully intended to tease him to death, he was sure of it.

And then he realized, she wasn’t teasing.

“Three nights,” he said, the words almost a gasp, “three nights from now.”

The joy on her face left him astounded. “I intend to explore all the ways you can satisfy me, Dainsfield.” Her tone was so fiercely sincere it made him dizzy.

He had never wanted anything so much as to leave Sutcliffe’s with her.

When he laughed, it came out like a mixture of amazement and surrender. “I’m usually the one saying that. Wednesday evening, I’ll send my carriage for you.”

Milly smiled coquettishly, as if he’d offered her the world.

He suddenly felt the need to test her, to see how true was her proclamation that only he would satisfy her. “May I have a hack take you home?”

She nodded, utterly content with the scheme. “That would be lovely.”

He escorted her downstairs to the entrance, every step a slow-motion struggle against his impulse to drag her into the nearest room. With a practiced composure, he called for a footman and had the hackney summoned. As he watched it pull away, a smile like he hadn’t worn in years settled onto his face.

He turned back to Sutcliffe’s and wondered if any man had ever been happier to say the word “Wednesday.”

### CHAPTER FOUR

The moonlight spilled through the gap in her curtains, painting Milly's bedchamber in shades of pearl and black. Her body burned beneath her sheets, a restless heat that refused to be relieved by the cool night air. Sleep abandoned her hours ago, leaving her alone with thoughts of him—of Dainsfield—and the polite, devastating rejection he had delivered at Sutcliffe's earlier that evening.

Milly groaned softly, turning onto her side. The sheets twisted around her legs like gentle bindings, a cruel reminder of desires unfulfilled. Her fingers clutched at the fine fabric, bunching it between white-knuckled fists before releasing it with a huff of frustration. She rolled again, this time onto her back, staring up at the canopy of her modest bed as if it might offer some distraction from the insistent thrum of need pulsing through her body.

"Insufferable man," she whispered to the darkness, though there was no real venom in the words—only a breathless longing that embarrassed her, even in solitude.

She could still see Dainsfield's face, the rigid control of his expression as she had leaned close in the hallway at Sutcliffe's, her invitation clear when she brought his hand to her breast. His dark eyes had widened momentarily—a flash of something raw and hungry that had made her heart leap—before the mask of business proprietor had slammed back into place.

"I can't do that here," he'd said, his voice so low it barely disturbed the air between them,

Milly sighed, the sound dissolving into a soft moan as her body shifted against the mattress.

Her mind, traitorous thing that it was, drifted to memories of men who hadn't been so concerned with propriety. A certain viscount, for instance, whose library had offered sanctuary from prying eyes during a house party three years ago. She closed her eyes, and suddenly she was there again, bent over his knee, her skirts rucked up around her waist, the cool air a shock against her bared skin.

"Such a willful girl," the viscount had murmured, his palm resting warm against the curve of her bottom. "What shall we do about that, hmm?"

The first spank had startled her, a sharp sting that had melted almost immediately into a spreading warmth. The second had drawn a gasp from her lips, and by the third, she had been pushing back against his hand, seeking more.

Milly's breath quickened at the memory, her hips shifting restlessly against the bed. That had been her introduction to the pleasures that could be found in carefully administered pain, but it had not been her last encounter with such delights.

There had been the gentleman from Vienna—she had never learned his true name, only that he traveled with diplomatic papers and had eyes that promised exquisite wickedness. He had introduced her to the leather flogger, a beautiful tool with multiple tails that kissed her skin like a dozen tiny mouths.

She remembered standing before him, naked but for her stockings, her hands braced against the wall of his rented room. The first kiss of the leather had been a whisper across her shoulder blades, a tease that had made her tremble with anticipation. Then the strokes had grown firmer, more insistent, until her skin sang with heat and her body trembled on the edge of some great precipice.

“Please,” she had begged, though for what, she hadn’t been entirely certain.

He had known, though. His hands had replaced the flogger then, soothing the sensitized skin of her back, her bottom, her thighs, before dipping between her legs to find her slick and ready. Two fingers had slipped inside her, curling forward to stroke that secret place that made stars burst behind her eyelids. His thumb had circled the sensitive bud at her center, and she had shattered, her cries muffled against her own arm as pleasure had crashed through her in waves.

Milly’s body jerked at the memory, a soft whimper escaping her lips. Her skin felt too tight, too hot, as if it might burst into flame at any moment. She kicked the sheets away, the cool air against her overheated skin doing nothing to quench the deeper fire.

There had been others, of course. The widow who had taught her the pleasure of a soft rope against skin. The baronet with clever fingers and an even more clever tongue. Men and women who had introduced her to the varied landscape of desire, who had helped her map the territories of her own body with expert guidance.

And yet...

And yet, none of those memories satisfied the particular craving that gnawed at her tonight. None of those hands, those lips, those bodies, belonged to the man who had occupied far too many of her thoughts of late.

Milly pressed her thighs together, seeking pressure, seeking relief, but finding neither. Dainsfield, with his severe expressions and controlled demeanor. Dainsfield, who had never touched her with anything but proper courtesy. Dainsfield, who looked at her sometimes with a heat that made her wonder what passions lay beneath that carefully maintained facade.

“Damn you,” she whispered into the moonlit room, not knowing if she cursed him or herself for wanting what she should not have.

Eventually, Milly surrendered to the inevitable. She pushed herself up against the headboard, her nightgown bunching around her thighs as she settled back against the pillows. If sleep would not come, perhaps release would. Her hand hesitated at the hem of her nightgown, fingers toying with the delicate lace as she closed her eyes. Tonight, she would not summon memories of former lovers. Tonight, she would give in to the fantasy that had been building for months—perhaps years. Tonight, she would imagine Dainsfield.

Her hand drifted beneath the thin fabric, fingertips skimming over the soft skin of her stomach. The touch sent a shiver coursing through her body, a ripple of anticipation that settled low in her belly. She allowed her knees to part, her nightgown rising higher as her fingers traced lazy circles downward. In her mind, it was not her hand but his—larger, stronger.

“Dainsfield,” she whispered, the name falling from her lips like a forbidden prayer.

In her fantasy, they were no longer at Sutcliffe’s ballroom with its watchful eyes and gossiping tongues. Instead, they stood in a darkened corridor of some grand house, alone save for the distant strains of a waltz. Dainsfield loomed before her, his usually stern expression transformed by a hunger that matched her own. His hand shot out suddenly, capturing her wrist in a grip that was firm but not painful.

“You’ve been avoiding me,” he accused, his voice a low rumble that she felt rather than heard.

Milly’s breath quickened as she imagined his touch. Her own fingers dipped lower, finding the sensitive flesh between her thighs already slick with her desire. She circled the bundle of nerves there, gasping softly as pleasure spiraled outward from



her core.

In her mind, Dainsfield's grip tightened on her wrist as he backed her against the corridor wall. She imagined the cool plaster pressed against her back through the thin material of her ball gown, a sharp contrast to the heat emanating from the duke's body as he stepped closer. So close that she could feel the solid wall of his chest against her bosom, the powerful muscles of his thighs pressing against her skirts.

"Tell me you don't want this," he challenged, his dark eyes boring into hers. "Tell me, and I'll release you."

But in the fantasy, as in reality, Milly wanted nothing less than to be released. She imagined herself tilting her chin up, defiant even in submission. "I have no intention of saying any such thing, Your Grace."

Her fingers moved more purposefully now, stroking and circling as her hips rose to meet her own touch. The duke in her mind growled—a sound more animal than human—before capturing both her wrists in one large hand and pinning them above her head.

"Do you know how long I've watched you?" he demanded, his free hand tangling in her hair to tilt her face up to his. "How long I've wanted you? How many nights I've lain awake thinking of all the ways I would have you, if only you would let me?"

Milly's back arched off the bed as her fantasy took a more urgent turn. She imagined Dainsfield's body pressing her fully against the wall, his arousal evident against her belly even through the layers of their clothing. No longer the distant, proper duke, but a man consumed by the same fire that burned in her.

"Yes," she gasped to her empty bedchamber. "Yes, I've wanted you too. Only you."

The admission, even spoken to no one, sent a rush of heat through her body. She slipped two fingers inside herself, her thumb continuing its relentless circling as she imagined Dainsfield claiming her mouth with his. Not a gentle kiss, but a possessive taking—his lips firm, demanding, his tongue sweeping into her mouth to taste her completely.

In her fantasy, he tasted of brandy and something darker, something essentially male that made her whimper with need. His hand moved from her hair to her throat, not squeezing but simply resting there, a reminder of his strength and her willing surrender. Then it drifted lower, cupping her breast through her bodice, his thumb brushing roughly over the peak.

“I’ve seen the way other men look at you,” he murmured against her lips. “The way they speak to you, as if they have the right. They don’t. None of them do.”

Milly moaned, both in fantasy and reality, her fingers moving faster, deeper, as the tension within her built toward something inevitable. “They don’t.”

She imagined his hand bunching in her skirts, dragging them upward until the cool air kissed her thighs, higher still. In her fantasy, his fingers replaced hers, skilled and knowing. He touched her exactly as she needed to be touched, as if he had mapped her body in his dreams just as she had mapped his.

She spoke to the moonlit room, her voice broken by soft gasps as she neared her peak. “I’ve always wanted you. From the first moment I saw you. So stern, so proper. I wanted to be the one to make you lose control. To make you forget yourself. To make you mine.”

The fantasy Dainsfield seemed to hear her, his movements growing more urgent, less controlled. His fingers worked magic between her thighs while his lips claimed her neck, her collarbone, the sensitive spot just below her ear that made her knees weak.

“You are mine,” he growled against her skin. “Say it.”

Milly gasped, her body tensing as the pleasure built to an almost unbearable crescendo. “I’m yours, Dainsfield. Only yours.”

Her release crashed through her like a wave breaking against rocks, powerful and inevitable. Her back arched sharply off the bed, her free hand clapping over her mouth to stifle the cry that threatened to escape. Still, his name slipped through her fingers, a desperate, breathless sound in the quiet room. “Dainsfield!”

For long moments afterward, she lay trembling, her body pulsing with aftershocks, her breath coming in ragged gasps. Slowly, the fantasy receded, leaving her alone in her modest bedchamber, the moonlight her only witness.

As her breathing steadied and her heartbeat slowed, Milly drew her hand from beneath her nightgown and stared up at the canopy above her. A curious emptiness settled in her chest, a hollow ache that pleasure had temporarily filled but could not ultimately satisfy.

The truth she had been avoiding for so long lay bare before her now, impossible to deny: when Dainsfield was present, no other man could compare. Not the skilled lovers of her past, not the eager bucks of her present. None of them made her heart race with a single glance. None of them occupied her thoughts from waking until sleep claimed her.

And worse, she must marry one of them.

She turned onto her side, drawing her knees up toward her chest. The realization was both terrifying and exhilarating. Terrifying, because Dainsfield had only ever treated her with the distant courtesy one might offer a friend’s sister. Exhilarating, because sometimes—just sometimes—she glimpsed something else in his eyes, something

that made her wonder if proper, controlled Dainsfield harbored improper, uncontrolled thoughts of his own.

“Fool,” she whispered to herself, but there was no heat in the admonishment. Only a weary acceptance as sleep finally began to claim her. Tomorrow would bring a new day, and bring her one day closer to Wednesday, when perhaps, just perhaps, she’d discover if the fire she had imagined in him truly existed.

### CHAPTER FIVE

Dainsfield paced the length of the study in his town house like a caged animal, his heels pressing into the thick carpet with each measured step. The ledgers from a potential future speculation lay open on his desk, columns of numbers awaiting his attention, while a stack of correspondence sat nearby, demanding responses he had neither the time nor inclination to provide. His mind, usually as ordered as the books Abingdon's wife, Dinah, still administered at the club, refused to focus on business matters tonight. Instead, it circled endlessly around a woman with sparkling eyes and a laugh that haunted his dreams.

A fire crackled in the hearth, casting elongated shadows across the book-lined walls. Crystal decanters gleamed on the sideboard, the amber liquid within catching the firelight. It was a room built for contemplation and business, not for the turmoil currently twisting through his gut.

"This is foolishness," he muttered to the empty room, his deep voice swallowed by the high ceiling. "Absolute madness."

How had this happened? He'd yet to tuck Milly and all he could think about was her upcoming marriage... both of them. The one she feared and the one he hoped to arrange. And somehow his own name kept creeping into the list of suitable husbands.

He wasn't a suitable husband. For any woman. He wasn't charming and personable, and was perfectly happy going to bed alone at night. Of course, with a woman like Milly awaiting him, he'd likely be even happier in bed each night.

But there were no women like Milly. One might find equally beautiful brown hair, and similarly bright eyes, and all women had the requisite breasts and cunny to satisfy a man, but no one had her spark for life. The way she enjoyed every moment was a pleasure to behold. Whenever he noticed her at a cyprian party, he couldn't stop watching her. Often one saw a woman pretending to enjoy the attentions of a man, but there was no pretense in Milly. She loved life, and loved sharing her body.

If she were his woman, they'd never leave the bed.

That was his biggest objection to marriage at the moment. He had no time for a wife. Which translated to him not desiring a wife enough to make the time. He was getting better about not adding to his duties. The speculations he agreed to were ones that required his money, not his time. And he entrusted more work to his secretary and the stewards who ran his properties. Also, he was learning to trust more that the work would be done to his standard.

The clock on the mantel chimed the hour, each resonant toll a reminder that Miss Nichols would arrive at any moment. Dainsfield moved to the mirror above the fireplace, straightening his already impeccable cravat. His reflection showed a man in his prime—tall, broad-shouldered, with features that many called handsome, though rarely to his face. Few dared such familiar observations of the man known throughout London for his reserved demeanor and fierce scowl.

One night with Milly. He'd longed for this often in the past five years. One night to get her out of his system, then he could focus on finding her a husband.

Even as he made this vow, a knock at the door announced her arrival, and Dainsfield felt his resolve waver like a candle flame in a draft.

\* \* \*

Milly's entire body heated and her heart fluttered when she saw Dainsfield standing in his drawing room waiting for her. There was an uncharacteristic energy in the man, a tension that played at being eagerness, as if the final hour of the hunt were upon him and he'd cornered his prey at last. They shared that eagerness, she knew, and the momentary trappings of his status could not have mattered less to her than they did now. So Milly moved with smiling purpose to his side and reached out to run a fingertip along the fine fabric of his coat.

He met her advance with a silence so brooding it almost seemed calculated, but she refused to let his stoicism unnerve her. Instead, she drew a line along his chest with her hand, pressing close enough to catch the faint, enticing scent of him. "Tell me," she asked with a playful pout, "will you kiss me, or is that against the rules?"

A shadow of a smile touched his lips, vanishing before it took full shape. "Rules are for games. I leave them at Sutcliffe's."

"I know of a kissing game..."

His gaze was focused on her lips. "Kissing implies affection."

"Everyone knows the Duke of Dainsfield holds no one in his affections." Milly laughed lightly. She let her lips curve upward, and dragged her tongue across the bottom one. She suddenly needed his kiss. "Affection isn't necessary to enjoy a kiss. Satisfaction is what I prefer."

His muscles tensed beneath her hand. "And so you're satisfied with what this is between us? An exploration of our mutual... interests? You know I have no intention of growing attached."

"How often does a girl have a duke to herself for the night? I'm certain you'll satisfy me." She relished the awkward moment her directness left him, saw how the gears of

his mind ticked behind his calm facade.

His reply was clipped, as if spoken against his better judgment. “One night. Just tonight. The plan hasn’t changed to find a man to marry you.”

“Good,” she replied, triumphant. She had him now, she knew it. She rose on her toes and sealed her mouth to his, a bold promise that she intended to make good on. Her tongue teased against his lips, and when she pressed him with her own intensity, the self-assured man’s walls crumbled and left nothing but fire in their wake.

The kiss was a lovely surprise, feeling how quickly his resistance broke and the passion beneath it flooded to meet hers. In one swift motion, he caught her up and cupped her face, framing her features as if they were too precious to be left to chance. His mouth moved against hers with a hunger that melted the distance he’d been trying to keep. She felt the pull at her hair, deft fingers releasing pins and letting her dark waves spill loose around her shoulders.

“Ah, Milly,” he said, her name low on his breath, more desire than caution. The last of his defenses fell in his urgency to have her.

Her laugh was quiet, triumphant, rich. She wound her arms behind his head and clung to him, aware that he was already losing himself in the exchange. A playful ache of wanting made her press even closer, letting herself revel in the hot press of his mouth, the possessive heat of his hands. His need gave way to her own, and she felt the raw edge of satisfaction in the way he touched her.

He nuzzled her neck, trailing kisses as he went. “Perhaps it’s your spontaneity that overwhelms me.”

Her lips, almost grazing his ear, formed the words she knew would drive him wild. “Then allow me to do the overwhelming.”



He exhaled a short, needy breath that thrilled her. When he swept his hand to the small of her back and crushed her to him, she pushed against him in turn, daring him to keep up with her own barely restrained want. “Dainsfield, you are quite slow for an athlete.”

As he tangled fingers in her hair, his mouth swept across her chest, and the layers that covered her were no match for the urgency of his movements. He pulled her dress low, baring her breasts, as Milly surrendered to the insistent play of his mouth and his touch.

He suddenly straightened. “This won’t do.” He swept her into his arms and strode out of the room toward the stairs. He took the steps as if she weighed nothing, her breasts bouncing freely, and nearly flew down the hallway.

The door to Dainsfield’s bedchamber swung open when he backed into it. Inside, a fire crackled in the hearth, its golden light supplemented by strategically placed candles that cast the room in a warm, flickering glow. The massive bed dominated the space, its dark mahogany posts rising like sentinels, the midnight blue coverings turned down by an efficient servant. He stopped before reaching it.

There was too much distance between them even as he held her, too much clothing, too much that might come between this moment and the next. Her fingers were in his hair, her legs around his hips, her mouth quick and desperate on his neck. He lowered her to stand but didn’t fully let her go, his hands busy with her gown.

She gave a soft cry as he pulled her bodice loose, a ragged whisper of his name when he caught her wrists and held her fast. Her eyes were half-closed with longing. Dainsfield lowered her gown and let it fall. Her chemise slid off her shoulder. He caught it with his teeth, then trailed his mouth lower, tasting her bare skin. She gasped and arched against him, bit her lip, found his mouth.

The sudden heat was almost more than she could take.

He freed her hands. She made quick work of his coat, her fingers eager and hungry. They fumbled, laughed, as they hindered each other more than helped. Then she made a small, triumphant sound. His waistcoat dropped to the floor, and his shirt followed.

“You are magnificent,” she gasped, pulling him closer, her body arching into his.

He wrestled free, kicking off his shoes and dropping his trousers and drawers. She realized she was holding her breath as each inch of his skin was revealed. Had she never seen him naked? She couldn't recall. She'd always been more concerned with who was in front of her at the moment, who was inside her.

His thighs were thick with muscle, his hips narrow, and his erection was everything she could ask for. She reached for it, letting his hiss of pleasure go straight to her core. He was hard, the tip moist already, telling her how badly he wanted her.

And she needed him. All of him. She didn't bother looking for the perfect place to love him. She lowered herself to the floor and opened her legs. “Please, Your Grace. Take me.”

His response was guttural as he stretched beside her. For a moment he only looked at her, every inch of her, from her breasts to her tummy and below where her fingers toyed with the dark curls above her thighs. She felt his gaze and felt beautiful in it.

Dainsfield cupped her nearest breast, squeezing gently, then pinching the nipple with more force. She purred and licked her lips. She'd waited so long for him to know her body, really know it and it was better than she'd dreamed possible.

His lips captured her nipple, and as he worked her breast with his tongue and mouth,

his hand swept lower, finding her damp heat. A gasp escaped her and her legs parted of their own accord. She was ready for him, ready for whatever he wanted to do with her.

It felt like forever passed before his mouth replaced his fingers between her thighs. He shifted to lie between her legs, bending her knees to spread her wider. “Such a pretty cunny,” he uttered, one finger dipping into her moisture. He sucked that finger, then licked her from her arse to her throbbing nub.

“Oh, yes,” she purred at the sensation. Her hips rocked each time his tongue skimmed over her, and when it thrust inside, she cried out. “More!”

His moan was primal, his voice vibrating against her skin, adding to her pleasure. He continued to thrust into her, building a rhythm her hips matched. Her need built, fed by the touches his finger pressed on her nub.

“I need you inside,” she begged.

He took so long to respond, she wondered if he’d heard, but then he rose to his knees. His cock danced in front of him and she reached for it. He watched her stroke him, letting her play, before he bent and pressed himself against her opening.

When he thrust inside, she squealed her delight. “Oh, yes. Oh, God, you’re so big.” Milly bit her lip when she heard herself say that. It sounded like something a courtesan said to build her lover’s ego. She didn’t want this to be about egos and a man’s delicate pride. Dainsfield knew who he was and didn’t need her pretty words to help him finish.

She caught his eye and held it. “Fuck me.”

She felt his cock jump before he increased his stroke. He was touching all the right

places to make her enjoy it more, as if his cock wasn't enough.

When she clutched him tighter, when she moaned and arched and let him know precisely how he filled her, he seemed to lose himself. Their frantic rhythm drew her closer, made a low, urgent promise with each thrust. She sighed, whispered his name, begged. "Please, Dainsfield, now, now."

Suddenly she shattered, barely noticing when he found his own release. She was still breathless when he carried her to the bed, still warm and lovely and wicked. He set her down and lay beside her.

\* \* \*

Lying on his bed, Dainsfield began the next coupling with slowness, with savoring. He worshipped her, brought himself under control, at least until Milly's gentle sighs set him free again.

There was no taming his desire. He tried. A noble effort, ruined by the taste of her mouth, the smell of her perfume, the heat of her skin, and how desperately he needed them all.

She tugged at his hair, his heart. Her soft, perfect laugh was as unguarded as the rest of her.

This woman. How had he stayed away so long?

She stretched beneath him, touched his face, tasted his mouth. Dainsfield had never known anyone so forthright, so sure of herself, so sure of him.

He wanted the night to last forever. And if it couldn't, he meant to take full advantage of every second, every part, every willing inch.

When he pressed against her, long and slow and close, Milly dug her nails into his shoulders and moaned.

His lips traveled her neck, her collarbone, lower. She moved with him, let herself go, and together they became more than he believed possible.

This was madness. He was mad to want her, mad to have her, mad for believing he'd ever stop.

He dipped lower, and the frantic beat of her pulse drove him on. He teased, tasted, gave her everything but mercy.

"Again," she breathed. "Please, please."

They were more languid this time, more lost in themselves and in one another. And when she began to move beneath him, there was no hiding how sweetly he was undone.

In the dying light from the fire, against the bedpost, against all reason, they turned each other's longings into something rich and urgent and fierce.

Even as they gasped, even as they tumbled over the edge together, Dainsfield knew he hadn't enough of her.

Even as Milly cried out, then gave a satisfied, desperate, familiar laugh, she seemed to know as much.

After, in the calm of half-lit candles and a warm, dark fire, she nestled against his chest. His arms around her were so right, so close, so close to dangerous.

"I told you it would be worth it," she said.

“It isn’t over yet,” he replied, then turned and pulled her to lie with her bottom at the edge of the bed, where he could kneel and worship her.

She melted into him, like wine, like fire, like the exquisite end of him.

His mouth roamed, then his hands, until she was wild beneath him. Until her breath came fast and furious. Until she was close, so close.

When her whimpers reached a certain pitch, he lifted her hips, buried his face in her wetness, and made her cry even higher, louder.

When he could breathe again, he lay on his back and pulled her on top. Milly pinned him with a wicked look, wicked legs, and a wicked laugh. She pulled him into a hot, shameless ride.

Her movements quickened, grew uneven, desperate. She lost herself, found herself, made herself right at home.

The pleasure—so new and so immense—left him breathless, open-mouthed, so sweetly satisfied.

And it left him ruined.

They fell together on the sheets, another long, reckless tangle of limbs and delight.

He caught his breath, then caught her mouth, wrapped her in sheets, gave her the full measure of himself. She never knew how thin his resolve was.

She fit him so perfectly. She moved in ways that told him how right, how wicked, how exquisite they were.

Milly rested against his chest, tangled in him. Her hair was long and loose, as far beyond taming as the rest of her.

The sun crept in. Dainsfield wasn't sure if he'd slept, or if Milly had. His mind was so numb he wasn't sure how long had passed since he was last inside her.

She stirred, sighing. "Just once more," she murmured.

He ran a hand down her back, through her hair, held her as long as he dared. He'd insisted they only had one night together. She was still there, so technically the night hadn't ended, had it? His cock felt the now-cool skin of her bottom and it, too, stirred.

Dainsfield sighed. "Just once more."

### CHAPTER SIX

Dainsfield's study was a testament to his unsettled mind, littered with the debris of half-formed intentions and discarded obligations. He prowled the room like a caged beast, his powerful strides echoing off the paneled walls, as if to exorcise the memory of Milly from his body. Yet there she lingered, four days since he'd taken her home, her essence woven into his thoughts with the tenacity of a lover's scent on an abandoned pillow. The passion they'd shared was an unruly guest in his ordered life, and he found himself a stranger to his own desires, desires that had lain dormant until she'd awakened them with her scandalous, irresistible touch.

He could scarcely bring himself to focus on the tenant disputes and crop yields that lay forgotten on his desk. The matters he once commanded with ruthless efficiency now seemed trivial, paper dragons against the fierce blaze of Milly's memory. He ran a hand through his dark hair, his brow furrowed with frustration and something alarmingly like longing. Three days had passed, and still, the taste of her lingered. It haunted him like a fever he could not shake, igniting a heat that coursed through him with merciless persistence.

He sank into the leather chair, a sigh escaping him, heavy with the weight of desire. He thought of Milly's expressive features, the uninhibited passion that had driven him to the edge of madness. How had he allowed himself to become so entangled? It was unlike him, unthinkable. Yet even now, he felt the pull of her—a force that defied reason and propriety. Dainsfield knew the rules of the game he played. He was a man accustomed to control, not this bewildering chaos that Milly seemed to command.



His mind turned reluctantly to Mrs. Summercourt, his mistress whose company had become a comfortable but passionless affair even before he'd sampled Milly. What had once sufficed now seemed pallid and bland, a poor imitation of desire in light of Milly's brilliance. The memory of his most recent evening with Mrs. Summercourt left him cold, her practiced seduction paling against the raw honesty of Milly's abandon. A cruel truth dawned upon him: Milly had rendered him incapable of feigning interest in anyone else.

With a determination that masked his unease, he reached for a fresh sheet of paper and began drafting a letter to Mrs. Summercourt. His quill moved in bold, sweeping strokes, an outward show of confidence that belied his inner turmoil. "Madam," it began, the formal salutation standing as an icy prelude to the passionate reason behind his dismissal. He wrote with the detachment of a man severing a lifeline, offering her a generous settlement as recompense for the abruptness of his congé.

It was done. He stared at the inked words, a sense of liberation clashing with the disquiet of unacknowledged feelings. The idea of life without Mrs. Summercourt should have been daunting, but it left room—alarming, exhilarating room—for thoughts of Milly to flourish unchecked. Dainsfield realized, with a jolt of something akin to panic, that Milly's presence had not merely unsettled him, it had consumed him.

Trying to regain control, he turned to a task he hoped would steady him. He must do the honorable thing, the right thing. He must find Milly a suitable husband, someone who could provide her with the stability his reckless desires threatened to undermine. A dinner party, then, with the guests chosen carefully, strategically.

His quill scratched furiously over the invitations, as if speed might mask his reluctance. Lady Statham, a respectable widow with whom he shared a long-standing acquaintance, would serve as hostess. He needed the distance her presence would afford him, knowing full well he could not face Milly alone.

He worked methodically listing the names of those whose company would lend legitimacy to the evening. Lord and Lady St. Ervan, Lord and Lady Abingdon, every couple selected with precision, each name a reminder of his obligation to act with propriety. His hand stilled when he reached the most important name—Lord Parham.

Dainsfield's resolve faltered, his quill poised over the paper like a man standing at a precipice. Parham was perfect in every way, titled, amiable. Most importantly, when he'd approached the man about an introduction to Milly for obvious intent, he was willing to overlook the scandal of Milly's birth. Dainsfield knew he must include him since the introduction was the sole purpose of the evening, but the very act felt like betrayal. Betrayal of his feelings, his desires, and perhaps most painfully, of the possibility that Milly might share them.

Finally, with a clench of his jaw, he wrote Parham's name. The letters were slightly uneven, a tiny betrayal of the turmoil roiling beneath his composed exterior. He finished the remaining invitations with ruthless efficiency, each one sealing his resolve as it fell upon the pile.

By the time the letters were dispatched, Dainsfield was a man resigned to his own inescapable truth. He could offer Milly nothing but the freedom to choose a life less fraught with the complications he now embodied. Now that he'd taken steps toward helping her as promised, his thoughts were as full of Milly as ever, a torment and a comfort that left him exhausted and resigned to an uneasy wait.

\* \* \*

An impressive crystal chandelier hung over Dainsfield's dining table, casting a warm light that spoke of his handsome income. Below, the table held a dazzling display of delicate china and shining silver. None of that caught Milly's attention, for she was caught in Dainsfield's gaze. It was an invisible thread, pulling her focus relentlessly toward him, despite the polished conversation and laughter that surrounded her. The

low-cut gown of pale blue silk clung to her figure with scandalous confidence, a daring statement that earned her more than one admiring glance, especially from Lord Parham who sat attentively at her side. She met Dainsfield's eyes at the head of the table, the space between them crackling with a tension she both dreaded and desired. It was a challenge and a promise, his stare a lover's vow wrapped in ducal restraint.

Yet she knew she must behave. She was there to impress Parham, to seduce his heart into marriage.

The other guests were absorbed in lively chatter, bantering over the merits of the latest acts of Parliament, or exchanging playful gossip about recent engagements and rumored duels. Milly listened with a practiced ear, contributing a well-timed laugh here, a clever remark there. Yet always she was drawn back to the man at the head of the table, to the inscrutable Dainsfield, who watched her as if she were the most compelling drama of them all.

Her gown was a daring choice, the pale blue silk skimming her figure with audacious allure. She knew the effect it had, and tonight, she reveled in the attention. Lord Parham seemed particularly captivated, his glances lingering with appreciative interest. He sat beside her, engaging her in easy conversation, his gentlemanly charm apparent in every word. Milly warmed to his good humor and handsome features, yet a nagging doubt tempered her pleasure. Parham was all that a husband ought to be—respectable, kind, titled.

She recalled his evening of debauchery at Sutcliffe's, after which she'd pleased herself imagining Dainsfield toying with her that way. That evening should relieve all her worries about whether he'd allow her to remain a member of the club. Yet something was missing. She wasn't foolish enough to expect him to love her, but she wanted something more.

She caught Dainsfield's reaction to Parham's attentions, the whitening of his

knuckles around the stem of his wineglass, the momentary clench of his jaw. It was all Milly needed to confirm her suspicions—Dainsfield was not as indifferent as he wished to appear. A thrill ran through her at the thought, an intoxicating mixture of triumph and trepidation. If he was jealous, he was not yet lost to her.

The sumptuous dinner came to an end, and the guests rose from their seats to move on to their next entertainment. As they adjourned to the drawing room for cards, Betty and Verity pounced on her, their bright eyes alight with intrigue and mirth.

“Did you see how he watched you?” Verity whispered, her voice a delighted bubble. “I declare, he looked ready to come across the table at poor Lord Parham!”

Betty grinned conspiratorially. “Milly, you must tell us—did something happen between you two?”

Milly laughed, feigning innocence but feeling the blush rise to her cheeks. “Nothing at all,” she protested, knowing full well that the pretense was as thin as the lace at her décolletage. “You see for yourselves, Dainsfield is determined to find me a match.”

“Or keep you for himself,” Verity suggested, not missing the telling look that passed between Dainsfield and Milly as he orchestrated her pairing with Parham for the card game.

With Parham as her partner, Milly found herself once again the focus of his growing interest. He was attentive to the point of excess, touching her hand when there was no need, leaning close to whisper a clever observation or well-timed compliment. Milly responded with practiced flirtation, her laughter bright and inviting, though her thoughts betrayed her. She could not shake the awareness of Dainsfield’s presence, the way he watched her with a mixture of longing and frustration, the air around him charged with tension.

The games went on, and Parham's attentiveness became increasingly bold. He played the part of the enamored suitor with admirable conviction, but there was something too artful in his manner, too knowing in his smiles. Milly matched his play, careful not to show her hand, but the knowledge of what Dainsfield wanted—needed—cut through her performance with a keen edge.

Finally, the evening drew to a close, and Milly's bewilderment only grew as Parham took her hand with practiced grace, asking permission to call on her the next day. She heard herself agree, the words a distant echo in her racing thoughts. As Parham spoke, she caught Dainsfield watching, his expression taut with unspoken emotion, a shadow of longing darkening his features.

The guests began to depart. Dainsfield saw them out, the model of reserved courtesy, though Milly saw the way he avoided her gaze, how he seemed a man wrestling with desires at odds with his duty.

Milly left the town house with more questions than answers, uncertain of everything but the undeniable tension between them.

\* \* \*

In the dim stillness of her bedchamber later, Milly's maid helped her out of the pale blue gown that had transformed her into a creature of scandal and allure, leaving her breathless in its absence. She dismissed the maid with a nod and sat at her vanity, the brush gliding through her hair with a rhythm that matched the racing thoughts in her mind. Dainsfield's presence loomed larger than the room she'd just left, eclipsing Parham's attentions with the shadow of unfulfilled promises and an insatiable desire that refused to be ignored. Was it love he lacked, or the courage to admit it?

Milly felt the full weight of the night settle over her like the train of the elegant gown she no longer wore. Her body hummed with the residue of unspent desire, a pulse

beneath her skin that matched the persistent beat of Dainsfield's image in her mind.

Her reflection stared back at her from the mirror, eyes bright with emotion she could scarcely name. How could a man who watched her with such intensity, who followed her every move with the relentless attention of a hunter to its prey, then distance himself with the formality of a stranger? Milly's thoughts were tangled as she drew the brush through her hair, each stroke smoothing the chaos but not the confusion inside her.

Dainsfield's glances across the dinner table had spoken of possession and longing, a simmering desire barely contained beneath the veneer of ducal propriety. Yet he seemed equally intent on presenting her to Lord Parham, as if determined to thrust her into another's arms even while yearning to keep her in his own. The contradiction left her reeling, torn between the thrill of being wanted and the ache of not being enough.

Was it only her body that he craved, as society would cruelly suggest, or was there something deeper that he could not—or would not—admit? She thought of Parham, with his gentle smiles and careful attentions, a man who could offer her stability and acceptance in the eyes of the world. But it was Dainsfield's passion she remembered, Dainsfield's touch that haunted her waking dreams and drove her to the brink of distraction.

She recalled their night together with startling clarity. The way he'd kissed her, his mouth exploring hers with an urgency that left her breathless. His hands had been everywhere, caressing, commanding, awakening sensations she'd never known she was capable of. And the way he'd whispered her name—like a prayer and a promise as he entered her, as if she were the answer to a longing he couldn't articulate.

Even in this private, stolen moment, he possessed her completely. Her heart clenched with the realization, a bittersweet twist of emotion that was both exhilarating and

devastating. Was it love, or was she as deluded as society believed her to be? Could a man of his standing ever offer her more than a passing fancy, or was she a fool to hope for anything beyond desire?

She lay awake long into the night, the darkness a mirror to the uncertainty that enveloped her. Dainsfield may have allowed her to share his bed, but the evening's events left her with the painful certainty that he did not, perhaps could not, share his heart.

### CHAPTER SEVEN

As he did most evenings, Dainsfield scanned the list of members who reserved a private room for the evening. He trusted his staff to ensure the rules were followed in who was allowed a room, but he never wanted to be surprised if a problem arose. Midway down the short list, he saw a name that surprised him. Parham.

There was no reason the man shouldn't be at the club on any given night. Dainsfield hadn't heard of any arrangement being made between Milly and the earl regarding a marriage. Nor had Milly said anything about the couple deciding they didn't suit.

For that matter, Milly might not object to Parham continuing to spend time in these rooms after they married.

Milly might even join him there.

Dainsfield rose with unusual haste, finding his steady hand faltering as he reached for his door latch. This uneasiness followed him through the dimly lit corridors of the servant areas and staircases. As he neared Parham's assigned room, he took a moment to collect himself, then looked through the small spy window, half dreading, half hoping. He observed Parham with a naked woman spread across his lap, her blonde cunny on open display.

Dainsfield's relief was instantaneous, flooding him with an unbidden warmth that dissipated his distress as the woman's nether hair proclaimed her distinctly to not be Milly. His muscles, so taut with anxiety, relaxed with a strange and unfamiliar warmth. The woman in the room, though unabashed in her exposure, was not the one



Dainsfield feared seeing, and this realization left him unsteady.

Parham might be as free with his appetites as Dainsfield suspected, but he had not yet involved Milly in such promiscuity. Dainsfield's relief made him stagger back from the door with the awkwardness of a man unused to feeling it. He gathered himself, resettling the folds of his waistcoat and the perfect alignment of his cravat. He'd been absurd, he decided, to allow this unease to dictate his actions. It would not happen again.

And yet, as he walked away from the room, a small voice within him refused to be silenced. Had he assumed Milly's attendance as an excuse to see her? Was he so weak, so inattentive to his own inclinations, that he could no longer trust himself?

Dainsfield needed to see her. He had no valid reason for doing so, but he could list a dozen or more foolish ones. He didn't care. Her name wasn't on the list like Parham's was, but he didn't think she'd ever reserved a room before. She usually found a willing playmate downstairs and shared his room. Of course, she didn't spend every evening here at Sutcliffe's, so she might not be here tonight.

That logic didn't stop him from going downstairs.

He found her within fifteen minutes of entering the large gaming room. The roulette table seemed less the center of Milly's attention than she was the center of its players'. Dainsfield felt a perverse awe at how effortlessly she gathered the eyes, the affections, the unguarded selves of the men around her. The swell of her breasts and the wayward charm of her laughter proclaimed her refusal to play by rules even more elemental than those of propriety.

Her low-cut gown left Dainsfield in little doubt of the territory she wished to explore. She placed a careless bet and then, rather than watching her number, leaned toward the nearest man as if he were her prize. The duke's chest tightened, exasperation

battling with an unexpected pride at the force of her nature.

Dainsfield watched how Milly let her hand drift toward the arm of another handsome gentleman, her eyes sparkling with mischief. She laughed again, and the gentleman's attention fastened to her with the eagerness of a moth circling a flame. It was a boldness that only she could provoke, and the heat of Dainsfield's frustration burned hotter than any spurned lover's.

He noted how the man leaned toward her, captivated, and felt a perverse compulsion to measure how far she would go in this audacious experiment. That the man was Parham's height, with hair as thick and brown as the earl's own, did nothing to settle the turbulent mixture of emotions surging through Dainsfield. Didn't she know how precarious her situation was? Each sweep of her long lashes seemed a provocation, each brush of her fingers an invitation that could so easily spiral into scandal. How was he to find her a husband when she behaved this way?

He began to make his way toward her, the weight of his determination guiding his steps. Patrons glanced his way, aware of his presence, but he barely registered their acknowledgement.

Dainsfield's attention was so absorbed in the way she toyed with her latest admirer that he barely noticed the rush of sensations battering him. Anger at her lack of restraint, concern for her reputation, and a darker, more possessive need to ensure she was not lost to anyone else's folly, least of all Parham's. They jostled in his mind, each demanding prominence, but none more insistent than the undeniable allure she held even over him. He was closer now, her daring becoming a challenge that pulled him in as surely as it did every other man there.

He didn't understand how he, so controlled in all things, now felt as helpless to resist as the men vying for her smiles. What force propelled him forward? Anger or admiration, resentment or desire? Whatever its name, it drew him in with an urgency

that defied logic, defied dignity, defied everything he thought himself immune to. He pressed on, each step driven by something more elemental than pride, more raw than reason.

He was near enough now to catch her words. “And what do you think, sir? Will my luck hold out?” Her voice, as rich and inviting as the glances she gathered, reached him above the clamor of the room. Before her latest conquest could answer, Dainsfield reached her side. His fingers found her elbow, the contact electrifying.

She looked up, surprise and something like curiosity flashing across her face. “Dainsfield!” she exclaimed, as if it were the last name she expected to hear, the last presence she anticipated. Her expression was that of a child caught misbehaving, yet delighting in the discovery. The other gentlemen, sensing the change in dynamics, began to retreat, leaving the center of attention to its new, unyielding focus.

He was breathing faster than he liked, his control over both his body and his intentions slipping with every heartbeat. “You’re coming with me,” he said, voice edged with the intensity of his restraint. Milly’s eyes sparked in response, a rebellion that threatened to pull her away but a curiosity that held her in place.

She offered a token protest, her voice part teasing, part genuine. “Can’t you see I’m enjoying myself?” Her hand fluttered, indicating the crowded room, the gaming table, the quickly departing admirers. But Dainsfield’s grip, while not harsh, allowed for no argument.

She moved with him, her steps unhurried yet unresisting, as though amused by this unexpected turn in the game she played. Other guests glanced their way, some smirking, some disapproving, all watching with an interest that threatened new rumors by morning. Dainsfield kept his focus ahead, driven by the need to remove her from this display before it was too late for them both.

His grasp firm, his resolve firmer, he led Milly through the throng and toward the more private areas of the club. He might not be sure what she was to him, but he knew with excruciating clarity what she could never be to anyone else. The door to his office closed behind them, marking the boundary between the reckless world outside and the imminent confrontation within.

Milly had the infuriating audacity to look pleased with herself, a look that grated on Dainsfield as surely as the heat of her flesh was beginning to grate on his own composure. “You have no sense of what you’re risking,” he said, not caring to disguise the hoarse edge in his voice.

“Why, Dainsfield,” she said, arms crossed in a gesture that was half defiance, half provocation, “you’re beginning to sound like you care.”

He did not know which broke first—his control over the words that flew from him or the last strand of propriety that had held him in place. “You need to restrain yourself,” he said, taking two steps toward her, knowing they were two steps toward an inevitability that frightened him less than her easy dismissal of it.

“I need to enjoy myself,” she countered.

Dainsfield was so furious, so tempted, so overwhelmed by both that he could scarcely see the line between anger and desire. He paced like a caged animal. “You need to be married. Parham or someone else will come to their senses if you stop these outrageous games. Or is your intention to scare them all away so you must marry Crampmoore, after all?”

Milly’s smile was too smug. “I thought it would please you. Parham may say he wants a wife, but it seems even he likes to sample the goods.”

Her words hit him harder than they should have. Dainsfield, pausing in his furious

circuit, turned to face her. His anger, his ever-mounting awareness of what she was to him, all of it rushed to the surface. “This isn’t a game. Stay at home unless you’re invited somewhere respectable, and definitely do not come to Sutcliffe’s, which is so well known for the promiscuity that goes on here.”

She was more than he could manage, more than he had prepared himself for. Milly moved toward him with an insouciance that belied the seriousness of his concerns. “I’m bored. I need to enjoy myself as much as possible before settling down to one man.” Her voice was both a challenge and a dare, the light in her eyes as reckless as the words that sent Dainsfield past any hope of control.

The distance between them shrank with a frightening speed, the heat of their desires burning propriety to ash. Dainsfield could see nothing, feel nothing, want nothing but her. “You need—” he began, but Milly’s mouth on his finished the sentence with an urgency more honest than anything he might have said. They moved together with a force that surprised them both, as if all their arguments, all their resistance, were so much kindling for the fire that consumed them now.

His hands found her shoulders, pulling her close, feeling her body arch against him with a responsiveness that was neither coy nor ashamed. Her lips met his, fierce and eager, opening to his as the last barriers between them broke. They struggled, passion more real than resistance, more reckless than reason, and the buttons nearly flew from his waistcoat as she pulled it open with abandon.

“Are you going to punish me, Dainsfield?” she asked, a breathless mockery that only inflamed him further. Her hands were in his hair, pulling him down, pulling him in, as desperate to hold him close as she was to taunt him.

“Yes,” he said, because it was the only truth he could speak. “Yes.”

Her dress tore as she shrugged out of it, falling to the floor as Dainsfield laid her back

against the hard surface of his desk.

They moved with an intensity that brooked no hesitation. He shoved her chemise up, baring skin that was as soft as her gasps were sharp. Controlling in a way that only she could drive him to, he caught her wrists in one hand and held them above her head. Her legs, spread wide, invited him to seek satisfaction.

“You need to restrain yourself,” he said again, the words now a claim rather than a warning, a promise rather than a prohibition.

Milly’s eyes, dark with defiance and desire, met his with the wildness of one who refused to be controlled. “Then control me,” she said, and he did. He quickly bared his throbbing erection and entered her in one move. His thrusts were as demanding as her pleas, their rhythm as insistent as the beating of his heart, as the force of their shared rebellion.

Her breath came fast and unguarded, her body arching beneath him as she urged him on. The desk shook with each urgent motion, papers scattering, ink bottles rattling, his orderly life as upended as the woman beneath him. Dainsfield felt her shudder, her voice high and free as the last of her resistance shattered. The sound drove him harder, faster, losing himself in her in a way that left no room for apology, no room for regret.

They climaxed together, her body pulling his over the edge of reason and control, her voice in his ears, her taste on his lips. They came undone in each other’s arms, an unraveling of need that left them panting, astonished at their own recklessness. For a moment, there was nothing but the shared rush of breath and the echo of the desire they seemed powerless against.

The awareness of what he had done hit Dainsfield with more force than even the desperate culmination of their desires. “I apologize,” he said, and it was as much an

apology for his words as for the raw intensity of their shared recklessness. He watched the change in Milly's expression, watched satisfaction melt into something hollow and unsteady, as if he had pulled the earth from beneath her feet.

She reached for her gown, and the confusion of her movements, so different from their prior certainty, was more accusation than her words could ever be. His waistcoat still hung open, his shirt covering the open placket of his trousers, a reminder of how completely she had undone him, of how quickly he had responded.

"Milly," he started, but she had already gathered herself, gathered the tattered remains of their passion, and fled. The empty space where she had been was unbearable, worse even than the fear of finding her at Sutcliffe's with another man. The door was ajar, just as the recklessness of his actions had left him, and he moved to close it with a resignation that weighed heavily on his chest. He rang for a footman before straightening his clothing.

When the servant appeared, Dainsfield's voice was a study in control, even as his mind was not. "Ensure Miss Nichols gets home safely."

The footman nodded, and Dainsfield was glad he did not have to explain more, that he did not have to voice the confusion that ran deeper than even his desire.

He was alone again, the reality of it worse than he could have prepared himself for. Dainsfield sank into his chair, the physical weariness nothing compared to the emptiness he felt at her absence. His head fell into his hands, an uncharacteristic gesture that mirrored the resignation of his heart.

The scent of Milly, like the rest of her, refused to leave him. It lingered in the air, on his clothes, in every breath he took, a reminder of how completely she had consumed him and how completely he had managed to destroy what had always seemed so indestructible.

It was a desperate, cruel twist, that he should have achieved the very thing he never realized he feared—losing her—through the intensity of wanting her. The uncertainty of what would come next gnawed at him, but even worse was the certainty that she might never let him explain. It was an unbearable awareness, and he wondered if the rest of his life would feel as empty as this room.



### CHAPTER EIGHT

M orning filtered softly through the curtains in Milly's bedchamber, where she sat nursing a headache as severe as if she'd drunk too much wine last night, which she had not. Her tears had kept her awake, and the lack of sleep was painful.

"It's hopeless," Rose exclaimed, her pacing quick and urgent, her movements punctuating each word. Her curls quivered with indignation as she swept past Milly. "And all of London knows it." Her voice rose to fill the space, vibrant and unrestrained.

Milly regarded her reflection with an air of detached serenity, but the thin facade wavered under Rose's assault. She sat at her dressing table, pretending a composure she did not feel. "Have they nothing better to talk of? I thought they'd all forgotten about me." Her voice held more than the suggestion of irony.

"They're saying you've trapped the duke in a scandal. They're placing bets on when he'll come to his senses and abandon you to infamy," Rose cried, her arms waving dramatically as she paced. She stopped abruptly and leveled an intent gaze at Milly, the concern in her eyes belying her playful words. "Tell me it's not true. Tell me you're not letting your heart go to that impossible man again."

Milly turned the brush over in her hand, her fingers tracing the contours as if they held some secret wisdom. "Rose, darling, when did you become such an admirer of his?" The teasing note in her voice couldn't quite hide the vulnerability beneath.

"It's not Dainsfield I'm worried for!" Rose replied, her tone lightening even as her

eyes searched Milly's face. "It's you. I hate to see you hurt. I've heard about the way he looks at you, Milly. Betty and Verity talk endlessly of it. But it can't happen. It won't happen. He won't have you."

Milly's smile was fragile. "Perhaps I should pin my heart to my sleeve, as all the poets recommend, and have done with it." She drew a steadying breath, feeling her carefully crafted defenses buckle.

"You think this is a jest?" Rose's disbelief shimmered around her like an aura, filling the room with its persistence. She resumed her pacing, though slower now, her steps matching the cadence of her words. "I wonder if you even listen to me."

"Oh, I do," Milly assured her, "especially when you make such a splendid fuss."

Rose halted and crossed her arms, leaning against the window frame with a sigh. "He's a duke, Milly. He could never marry someone like us."

Milly's laughter was a small, bright thing in the midst of the heavy truth. "And how do you know he hasn't a fancy for bastards and scandalous pasts?"

"I wouldn't joke about it," Rose said, serious now. "Not with how he's been around you."

Milly met Rose's gaze in the glass, the unspoken acknowledgment passing between them like a sigh. "I thought I had hardened my heart. But then..."

"You can't just stop loving him," Rose said softly, sitting back on her heels with a frown. "He was your first—not in your bed, but in your heart."

"I must. Or else break it again," Milly insisted, her voice growing firmer as her resolve hardened. She looked at Rose, her eyes heavy with unshed tears. "And you

know I don't have the strength for that."

They sat in silence, the weight of truth settling over them like dust in the morning light.

\* \* \*

Milly sat in front of her window watching people stroll past, enjoying the afternoon sunshine. Her eyes widened in surprise when Lord Parham's gleaming curricule approached, his figure a handsome silhouette against the town houses across the street. The courage of the man, to drive so openly to her door!

He sat with relaxed elegance, his smile bright. Seeing her in the window, he doffed his hat with a flourish and called, "Miss Nichols, will you make my drive a pleasant one and join me?"

Milly felt a flutter of nerves beneath her calm exterior. She'd never gone riding with a man, never strolled the paths at Hyde Park. If London wished for a spectacle, she thought with wry resolve, it should have a splendid one.

As she came outside, Parham leaped down and assisted her into the curricule with a bow, as if she were some lady of rare and unblemished pedigree. Milly settled beside him, smoothing her skirts with the air of a woman used to such attentions, despite the irregularity of it all.

"Your presence does me a great honor. And, if I may be so bold, all of London as well," Parham said, his eyes twinkling with mischief as he regained his seat and took up the reins.

Milly allowed herself a glance around, observing the curtain-drawn windows and curious passersby. "Are you quite sure you wish to be seen with me?"

“Quite,” he assured her, setting the currie in motion with an expert flick. “Now, do try to look more pleased about it.”

The warm air lifted the tendrils of hair around Milly’s face as they made their way to the park, her apprehension slowly unraveling into a sense of unexpected enjoyment. The very public nature of Parham’s invitation felt like an extravagant act of rebellion, and for the first time in recent memory, Milly felt herself complicit in her own small insurrection.

As they entered Hyde Park, the fashionable set promenaded in all its glory. Ladies twirled parasols in pastel clouds, gentlemen rode tall and proud on their gleaming mounts, and everywhere eyes turned toward the unlikely pair driving with such casual daring. Milly’s appearance at Parham’s side was enough to stop conversation mid-sentence, and whispers trailed behind them like the tails of so many scandalous comets.

“Why, I believe we’ve been noticed,” Parham remarked, his voice dripping with amusement.

“Just as you intended,” Milly countered, the brightness of her eyes revealing her growing enjoyment. It was a curious thing, the way exhilaration crept into her chest, mingling with a nervous flutter she could not quite place. “I feel like a circus act.”

“Better a performer than a spectator,” Parham replied, casting a quick, knowing look her way. “Are you not having fun, Miss Nichols?”

“To my surprise, I am.” Her voice softened, touched with a vulnerability she hadn’t expected to reveal. “I never realized how enjoyable it could be, simply to be seen.”

They moved through the park, the sunshine warming their faces and loosening the brittle edges of Milly’s carefully maintained defenses. Parham guided the currie

with practiced ease, his attention seemingly split between the horses and his lively conversation.

“There are advantages to infamy,” he mused, keeping the pace steady. “Why, just look at me—riding about with the most notorious beauty in town, and no one to tell me I cannot.”

“Is it so easy for you? Surely you don’t require infamy to enjoy yourself.”

“You might be surprised,” Parham said, his eyes glinting with a shared understanding. “I am not quite the eligible catch marriage-minded mamas seek for their precious daughters. I rather fancy I’m considered something of an odd fish.”

Milly laughed at the imagery, feeling the warmth of camaraderie blooming where she had least expected it. “I suppose we swim in the same pond, then.”

“Very much so,” Parham replied, smiling in that disarming way that made his words feel like confidences.

Milly leaned back, letting herself relax into the moment, the intoxicating sensation of being part of something other than whispered gossip. She wondered at Parham’s motives, at the seemingly uncalculated charm with which he conducted himself. For a man of his position, he was almost too good to be true. “I would have thought a man like you would be quite the catch.”

“Appearances can be deceiving,” he said with a mysterious shrug, the only sign of any deeper meaning hidden behind a rakish grin.

Their laughter mingled with the calls of birds and the rhythmic thrum of hooves, an elegant symphony that carried them across the park and back to the streets of Milly’s neighborhood. Her heart soared in time with the curricule’s speed, exhilarated by the

combination of daring and dignity she hadn't realized she craved.

When they arrived at her building, Milly felt the thrill ebb into a pleasant, if unsettling, awareness of just how much she had enjoyed their outing. Parham pulled the curricule to a stop, handing her down with all the courtesy of an ardent suitor.

"Thank you," she said, feeling the inadequacy of those two words as she spoke them. "For everything."

"The pleasure was entirely mine," he assured her, the weight of his gaze leaving her with more questions than answers.

As Parham tipped his hat and drove away, Milly remained on the step, watching his elegant departure and pondering the turn in the day's events. He hadn't hinted at a proposal, but he had given her something else entirely—a glimpse into a world where she might belong. And yet, the ambiguity of his intentions left her suspended between hope and uncertainty, a state she both feared and found strangely exhilarating.

The thrill of the day faded into a tangled mess of unanswered questions as Milly closed the door behind her. Parham's visit had left her reeling, exhilarated by the spectacle of their outing yet caught in the grip of uncertainty. She moved through the sitting room like a restless spirit, her thoughts circling the same unsatisfying truths. He had driven with her so openly, so defiantly. What, then, was his intention?

Surely Dainsfield had told the earl of her need to marry posthaste. There was no need for courtship on her end. She was a guaranteed "yes."

She longed to speak to Dainsfield for some reassurance. Time was passing so quickly. Her father hadn't made an effort yet to drag her to a modiste or any of the preparations needed before her wedding, but the agreement with Crampmoore was signed, from what he'd said. Parham, or whoever Dainsfield found to rescue her,

needed to do so quickly.

Was Dainsfield truly the best one to advise her? To guide her toward a suitable match, now that she feared she no longer wanted it? She should call on Betty or Verity. They'd also offered to help.

She recalled the way Dainsfield had spoken of Parham. An eligible catch, yes, but a catch for someone with the right expectations. Parham's hints about his outsider status seemed to suggest something she wouldn't guess by looking at him—that he needed a wife in name only, someone to give him an heir while he loved another. There were very few “others” who would be a less acceptable match than she was.

Could his love be another man? Yet she'd seen Parham with a woman at Sutcliffe's. Or was that a ruse, as marriage to Milly would be?

She thought once more of Dainsfield. Had he known? Was this his plan for her all along? Perhaps it was better not to know, she decided. At least not while her memory of Dainsfield's office and their passionate encounter still burned so vividly, so painfully.

The office had been cold, she remembered. Cold until he pulled her to him, kissed her as if he might devour the distance he had kept between them. He'd taken her so quickly her gown had needed repair. And then his breathless words of regret. His apology. The audacity of the man! To claim her body so hungrily, then pretend he hadn't meant to.

But hadn't she done the same? Wasn't she pretending even now, trying to make herself believe she could put him from her heart?

She moved to the window. Outside, a hackney rolled along the cobblestones, staid and unhurried. She watched it disappear down the street, feeling the slow unraveling

of her resolve. Perhaps she could find Dainsfield at the club one evening. She could confront him, demand answers, insist on knowing what he thought of her.

She needed a plan. A way forward that didn't rely on the whims and wishes of men who might never propose. A way to face Dainsfield that would keep her dignity intact, her composure unruffled.

She would find him at Sutcliffe's.

And she would be prepared this time. She would be the woman he thought he had known, the woman who would let him go and do it with grace.



### CHAPTER NINE

Milly was reading a favorite novel when her maid announced the arrival of a visitor one morning a few days later. Lord Parham entered the sitting room, dressed in a striking blue coat that perfectly highlighted his handsome features. She motioned him toward the worn velvet chair across from her own, studying his expression as he took a seat.

“May I offer you some tea, Lord Parham?” She gave the maid instructions for tea without waiting for his response, more than a little intrigued about what could bring a nobleman to her apartment so early in the day.

The earl sat with a natural ease, his thick brown hair falling boyishly across his brow. “I must beg your pardon, Miss Nichols. I hope my unannounced visit is not entirely inconvenient,” he said, a warm smile spreading across lips that Milly could not help but notice were remarkably full.

“Not at all.” She shifted in her seat, smoothing her skirt with careful fingers.

“Consider it a token of my enthusiasm,” he added, his eyes twinkling. “It seems I’m rather eager to speak with you.”

She raised an eyebrow, intrigued by his admission. “And what urgent matter could possibly bring a gentleman here?” Her question was laced with playful innocence, a delicate probe into the nature of his visit.

“I’d be lying if I said it was merely a passing fancy,” Parham replied, glancing

around the room with keen interest. “What a charming apartment you have. Cozy, with such exquisite taste.”

Milly followed his gaze, noting the simple elegance of her surroundings—the slightly worn furnishings, the carefully chosen decor that she hoped lent an air of refinement even here on the edges of society. “Thank you, my lord. It is not the grandeur you’re accustomed to, I’m sure.”

“Ah, but that’s precisely what I like about it. Not everything in my life must be gilded to be pleasing. Sometimes, a bit of character and comfort is far more appealing.”

“You mean the endless balls and dinners aren’t always diverting?” she asked with a smile, amused by the ease with which he dismissed the trappings of the ton.

Her maid entered with a tray, and Milly poured the tea herself, savoring the simple act of hospitality. “How do you take it? Sugar, milk?”

Parham leaned forward, accepting the cup with a gallant nod. “Neither, thank you. I prefer things unfussy. A gentleman’s pleasures are often simpler than society would assume.”

She paused, her interest piqued by his words. “Pleasures, you say? I imagine you’re not speaking of card games or port.”

He regarded her carefully, as if weighing how far to extend the conversation. “You know of Sutcliffe’s, then?”

“I may have heard whispers. Rumors about the... activities gentlemen engage in there.” Apparently, he wasn’t aware she’d seen him there.

Parham chuckled, visibly relaxing as if a weight had been lifted. “Then you will

understand why it is a rare delight to find someone in my circles who doesn't take offense to such proclivities. Which brings me to the true purpose of my visit."

Milly's heart quickened at the shift in his tone, and she set down her own teacup with careful deliberation. "You've sparked my curiosity, Lord Parham."

His expression grew earnest, and he leaned forward with an intent that was almost startling in its sincerity. "Miss Nichols, I come to offer you a proposal."

The room seemed to still as his words hung between them. Milly blinked, certain she must have misheard. "A proposal?"

"Of marriage," Parham added quickly, clearly perceiving her astonishment. He adjusted his coat, a faint hint of nerves apparent. "I hope the bluntness of my offer doesn't shock you. I'm not a poet or artist who can paint a pretty proposal with my words."

Her laughter was genuine, though laced with disbelief.

He shifted in his seat as though it was uncomfortable. "I'm not as I seem, you see. And as you can imagine, my situation requires a particular sort of arrangement."

Milly leaned back, the surprise of the proposal shifting into something else as she listened. "I confess I am intrigued. Please, go on."

"Quite simply, I am... fond of a man called Peter. We live together at the country estate and separately in London. It's a perfectly respectable facade," Parham explained, his earnestness unwavering. "The one thing we cannot manage is an heir."

His candor was disarming, and Milly found herself searching his face for signs of jest. She found none. "You are nothing if not honest. I confess... I saw you with a

woman on the upper floor at Sutcliffe's."

"And now you see me proposing to one." He met her eyes with a forthright gaze. "A conventional marriage would be impossible. But you, Miss Nichols, you would understand the delicate balance required."

"And why would you choose me for such a delicate balance?" Her question was genuine, an inquiry into his reasoning.

Parham reached across the small table, taking her hand in his. His touch was gentle, almost pleading. "Your situation. You stand apart from the ton in the same way I do. I'm told you enjoy gatherings some might call risqué. I'm open minded to allowing you to continue, with some discretion, of course."

She considered his words, the implications slowly unfolding in her mind. He released her hand, watching her with an expression that was almost hopeful.

"You'd be allowed to have a lover, of course," Parham added, his tone nearly casual. "Though again, discretion would be essential."

Milly laughed, a bright sound in the somber implications of the proposal. Her thoughts whirled, her heart thudding with the wildness of the notion. Yet, beneath the shock, she found herself surprisingly thoughtful. "I must confess, you've given me much to consider."

Parham's eyes lit with renewed hope, and he smiled with the charm of a man unburdened by deception. "I dared to think it might appeal to you."

She regarded him, still processing the enormity and peculiarity of his offer. It was outrageous, scandalous, and yet... perhaps perfect.

“And what if,” she asked, her voice tinged with the thrill of contemplating the impossible, “I said yes?”

“Then I would count myself the luckiest man alive. Even if I must share you with another,” Parham replied, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

Her laughter mingled with his, and for the first time, the proposal seemed not only possible but oddly fitting. As their mirth subsided, the room settled into a contemplative quiet, both of them lost in thoughts of an unconventional future.

Milly picked up her teacup, watching Lord Parham as if he were a puzzle she might yet solve.

He returned her gaze with an amused patience. “You’re everything I hoped you would be. I wish I could promise to love you as a husband should, but I can at least promise I’ll never set you aside for another woman.”

Milly laughed. Their eyes met in a shared moment of understanding, rich with the irony of his truthfulness.

“I can scarcely believe it. It’s all so... astonishing.” What appeared to be the perfect answer to her problem was something she’d never imagined as a possibility.

Parham leaned back, observing her with an expression she couldn’t decipher. “May I elaborate on a few more of the practical aspects, then? If I’ve managed not to scare you off entirely?”

She nodded, curiosity battling with caution. The prospect of an entirely unconventional life had seemed distant mere moments ago, yet now hovered within reach.

“You’ll be required to take part in marital relations with me as needed to produce an heir. You’ll be concerned about our children’s position in society, I expect. Your birth, as well as the rather scandalous notion of their parents’ living arrangements, might lead to some gossip.”

Milly arched an eyebrow, her skepticism well-masked by an expression of polite interest. “I consider that as guaranteed.”

“It wouldn’t be the ton if they didn’t talk,” Parham admitted, running a hand through his hair in a gesture that revealed both confidence and vulnerability. “But with time, if we present the right appearance, the talk will fade long before our children reach marriageable age.”

She studied him closely, weighing the conviction in his words against the risks she knew all too well. “You sound so certain.”

“Unusual, I know. I’ve had time to think it through. As you might have gathered, I’ve considered my situation for some time.”

The revelation caught her off guard, and she couldn’t quite hide the pleased surprise that flitted across her features. “I’m a bit surprised you trusted me with your scheme.”

Parham’s expression softened, his sincerity evident. “I see a strength in you, in the way you live your life, despite how society treats you. Most ladies would faint at the mere suggestion of marrying a man such as myself.”

“Most ladies haven’t survived the kind of talk I’ve had to endure,” Milly replied, her tone light but edged with the strength of truth.

He nodded. “Precisely. Your fortitude is as essential as your discretion.”

She took a moment to absorb this, considering the unorthodox life he was offering and the particular freedoms it might grant her. It was a gamble, certainly, but one that promised a rare sort of independence. “Your candor is something of a marvel.”

“I had a sense it would appeal,” Parham replied, joining in her laughter with a sound as genuine as it was rare. The levity of the moment broke over them, smoothing the complexities of their conversation into something simple and almost joyful.

Her gaze turned suddenly keen, and she leaned forward, her eyes glinting with mischief and resolve. “And would dear Peter be understanding of a swift marriage?”

Parham nearly spilled his tea, surprised by the sudden shift. “I did not expect that you would consider it so soon.”

“It seems to me, Lord Parham, that we both have reasons for wanting it settled quickly.”

“You are remarkable,” he said, an admiring gleam in his eye. “I hoped, of course, that you would accept, but I thought you might take longer to consider.”

“My situation requires some alacrity. And I have already given the matter quite a lot of thought, my lord.”

Parham shook his head in wonder, charmed by her unexpected enthusiasm. “And here I believed you would need more persuading.”

“I’m a more practical woman than most,” she replied with a playful shrug. “And if we are to proceed, why not do so without delay?”

She hesitated, then let her excitement shine through, her expression both resolved and radiant. “We must elope, you know. The sooner, the better.”

“Elope?” Parham echoed, as if the suggestion was both delightful and shocking. “I certainly didn’t dare hope you’d be in such haste.”

“We are in agreement, then? Would next week be too soon?” Her smile was a mixture of hope and certainty.

“Next week,” he repeated, the words filled with a newfound excitement. “You never fail to surprise me, Miss Nichols.”

She leaned back, a playful gleam in her eyes. “Good. I hope to keep it that way.”

“Then it’s settled,” he said, shaking his head again with a grin that betrayed his utter delight. “Though I must confess, you’ve quite outpaced me in planning.”

“You shall learn, my lord, that I often get what I want.”

They sat in the small room, the sounds from outside increasing as the world began its day. Their plans unfolded with a wildness that suited them both, leaving the future full of promise and uncertainty—a daring venture into a shared life that, for all its scandal, felt perfectly and deliciously right.



### CHAPTER TEN

A pounding on her door seemed to rattle even the windowpanes as it invaded Milly's sleep and sent the tail end of an unremembered dream flying like startled pigeons. She blinked, momentarily puzzled by the tendrils of hair that clung to her cheek, until another rapid thudding called her from beneath the bedclothes.

"Milly!" her father roared from outside, with all the grace of a bull battering a gate. "Open this door!"

She stumbled toward the sound as she tightened her wrapper around her, a sliver of unease threading through her drowsiness. Opening the door, she found the Earl of Kingsland standing there, red-faced and breathing hard, the morning paper clenched like a weapon in one hand.

The words "Parham and Miss M. N." loomed in scandalous boldness above the fold, the letters nearly vibrating with the old man's ire. He barged past her into the room, the scent of expensive wool mixing with his perspiration. "What is this nonsense? You are engaged to Crampmoore! I told you to stay home and keep your scandals to a minimum."

She clutched her dressing gown closed, taking stock of his fury. Though the words were meant to alarm, it was the crumpled state of his usually immaculate coat that convinced her of his true distress. She closed the door with a quiet click and turned to face the whirlwind that was her father.

"There will be legal repercussions, Milly!" The earl's voice pitched high, almost

comical against the gravity of his claim. “Crampmoore could sue us for breach of promise.”

“You mustn’t fret so,” she said gently, though her heart wasn’t entirely settled. “It is only an announcement. Besides, marrying Parham is the perfect solution. I’ll be a countess rather than a baroness, and your grandson will be an earl someday.”

She hadn’t realized Parham would announce the wedding before the fact. She should have discussed their scheme more fully.

The earl waved her reasoning aside with a dramatic flourish, as if her words were no more substantial than a morning mist. “That is not the point, girl! You are still promised to Crampmoore.”

His vehemence stunned her, though she knew it shouldn’t have. Even in his disheveled state, the earl was the picture of insistence, pacing her sitting room like a general plotting war.

“Perhaps the baron will feel relieved at his narrow escape,” she countered, keeping her voice steady.

Kingsland’s expression darkened as he stalked to the window. The morning light caught the silver threads in his hair, making him appear almost regal in his exasperation. “And have you forgotten the scandal you created? All of London remembers it.”

“You arranged for me to marry a murderer. It seems only fair that I take matters into my own hands.” She kept her voice calm, but laced with defiance.

Her father took a deep breath, his face flushed with anger. For a moment, she thought he might relent, might see the reason in her decision. Instead, he turned sharply on his

heel, marching to the door with a sense of purpose. "I will call on Crampmoore in person," he declared, the paper crackling in his fist. "I must make amends before he decides to act."

The door slammed shut behind him, leaving Milly in a state of disheveled calm. Her hair spilled over her shoulders, a wild contrast to the refined order of her thoughts. She sighed, allowing herself a moment of indulgent relief before summoning the resolve that had carried her through countless storms.

In an odd way, her father's reaction had emboldened her. Going to her bedchamber, she slipped out of her nightclothes, the fabric whispering across her skin as she dressed for the day. The earl's last words still echoed, but their power diminished as she tied a ribbon about her waist.

By the time she smoothed the folds of her skirt and regarded her reflection in the looking glass, the confidence had returned to her eyes. She would marry Parham, on her own terms, and find a happiness that neither scandal nor stubborn fathers could diminish. Milly raised her chin, a subtle yet unmistakable declaration, and moved to the dressing table to fix her hair.

Her hair had taken on a will of its own while she slept, flying this way and that beneath her impatient fingers. She wrestled it into submission, weaving pins through curls with all the tenacity of a warrior rearming after battle. The earl's morning intrusion had left her shaken, though she would have died before admitting it. To her surprise, she found the very admission brought an unlooked-for sense of relief, a lightening of the spirit. She'd just fixed the last pin in place when a soft knock and the maid's hesitant voice startled her anew. "A visitor, miss. The Duke of Dainsfield."

Milly's hands stilled, her heart racing anew with the unexpected news. She caught her reflection in the small looking glass, watching the emotions chase themselves across

her features: surprise, anxiety, then a determined calm. Dainsfield, of all people. What could he possibly want? “Very well. Please tell the duke I shall be with him shortly.”

She moved to the sitting room as if in a dream, each step weighed by anticipation. She took a breath, her hands clasping together in a bid to quell their trembling.

Dainsfield stood with the rigid grace of a soldier called to unwelcome duty. His athletic frame seemed out of place among the fragile chairs and embroidered cushions, and the air around him felt charged, as if the very atmosphere were attuned to his presence.

She inclined her head, her voice sweet and sincere. “Thank you for calling, Dainsfield. I owe much to your assistance in arranging the match with Parham. You were more help than you know.”

His expression remained as unyielding as the rest of him, though a flicker of something indefinable—was it remorse?—passed over his features. “I am pleased you think so.”

“Will you sit?” She gestured toward a chair. “Some tea, perhaps?”

“No, thank you.” His refusal was polite but final, as if refreshments and comfortable seating were at odds with his intentions. He did not move, and she was reminded of a statue, handsome and imposing but strangely devoid of warmth.

“Then how may I help you?” She met his gaze, striving to keep her curiosity from turning into a demand.

His posture remained rigid, yet there was an underlying tension, a crack in the marble. “I’ve heard something about Parham,” he said, the words landing heavily

between them. “Something... concerning.”

Milly’s eyes widened, but she resisted the urge to react with more than polite interest. “And what is it you’ve heard?”

Dainsfield hesitated, a sure sign of the weight he placed on his information. She could see the struggle within him, a clash between loyalty and truth. “That he already has... an attachment. His secretary.”

The silence that followed was palpable, a living thing that pressed in on all sides. “I know about Peter,” she said at last, her tone light and unaffected.

His reaction was almost comical, the shift from self-assured savior to flustered confusion. “You... know?”

She nodded, a soft smile playing at her lips. “I do. And I’m quite pleased with the arrangement.”

“But how?” The question was not just of how she knew, but how she could possibly find satisfaction in such a marriage.

“It’s an old attachment,” she explained, the conviction in her voice a testament to her resolution. “And one that requires a wife in name only. We understand each other, Parham and I.”

Dainsfield’s composure wavered, the mask slipping as surprise gave way to something closer to desperation. He paced the room, his agitation clear. “This is madness, Milly. A woman as passionate and sensual as you deserves a husband who will embrace that part of you, nurture it, and treat you as the treasure you are.”

She took a breath, the words resonating within her in ways she both longed for and

feared. “Dainsfield?—”

“You must see reason,” he interrupted, the controlled demeanor all but gone. He stepped toward her, closing the distance with a suddenness that stole the air from the room. “I can see it in your eyes, Milly. You don’t want this. Not truly.”

His nearness made her heart race, yet it was more than physical closeness that affected her. She felt the depth of his longing, the heat of his sincerity, and it was nearly her undoing. But she would not let it be. Not this time.

“You had the chance to treasure me,” she said, her voice steady though her heart trembled, “but you didn’t want it.”

The finality of her words was a wall, one she raised with painful precision. She stepped back, creating a distance both physical and emotional, and looked at him with a mixture of sorrow and resolve. “Please leave, Dainsfield. I’ve said all there is to say.”

He stood, momentarily frozen, the full impact of her refusal sinking into him. His jaw set, the only betrayal of his inner tumult, and then he turned. The door closed with a heavy click behind him, the sound echoing through her.

Milly’s composure held only a moment longer, crumbling like sand in the wake of a tide. She collapsed onto the nearest chair, the tears falling hot and unchecked. Her shoulders shook with the sobs she had withheld, her defenses gone as she admitted the truth that lay buried in her heart.

“I wish you could love me,” she whispered to the empty room, her words a plea and a lament all at once.

The storm of emotions subsided slowly, the tears drying against her skin as she

breathed in the air of her new resolve. She straightened her posture, the remnants of the past shaken loose as she looked toward a future she would make her own. She would find happiness with Parham. She had to.

### CHAPTER ELEVEN

The door to Dainsfield's office in Sutcliffe's crashed open with such force that the candles in the wall sconces flickered in protest. Somehow, the act of kicking open the door didn't have the satisfaction Dainsfield needed to purge his anger.

The Duke of Abingdon's head appeared in the doorway of the neighboring office, his eyebrows climbing toward his hairline at the sight before him. "Good Lord, man. You look as though you've been dragged backward through a hedgerow. Did you sleep at all, or have you come straight from some debauchery I wasn't invited to?"

Dainsfield attempted to straighten his disheveled appearance, tugging ineffectually at his cravat and smoothing his wild hair with a trembling hand. "It's nothing. Just some business that required early attention."

Abingdon crossed his arms, leaning against the doorframe with the casual grace of a man who knew when his friend was hiding something. "At eight in the morning? In yesterday's clothes?"

Dainsfield stepped into his office, avoiding his friend's perceptive gaze. The room was immaculate—leather-bound ledgers arranged by size on polished shelves, a sterling silver inkwell gleaming in the morning light, crystal decanters of amber liquid standing in orderly formation on a sideboard. Everything in precise order, unlike the man who owned it.

"It's of no consequence," he insisted, moving toward the decanters despite the early hour. His hands shook as he poured himself a generous measure of brandy, and he



downed half of it in one swallow, feeling the burn spread through his chest to compete with the heat of his frustration.

Abingdon appeared in the doorway. “You’re a terrible liar. Always have been.”

Something in Dainsfield snapped then—a tether he hadn’t realized was holding him together until it broke. The mask of aristocratic indifference he wore as naturally as his skin cracked and fell away. “Milly is a fool if she thinks she can be happy married to a molly!” The words exploded from him, too loud for the quiet morning, echoing off the wooden panels of his office and spilling into the hallway beyond.

A passing servant gasped, nearly dropping the tray of empty glasses he carried. Dainsfield’s face burned with embarrassment atop his anger, the uncomfortable heat rising from his neck to his cheeks.

Abingdon stepped quickly into the office, closing the door firmly behind him. His face registered surprise, but not shock—the measured reaction of a man who had suspected something was amiss but hadn’t guessed the particular nature of the problem. “I think you’d better sit down before you fall down. And then perhaps you should start from the beginning and explain what’s happening.”

Dainsfield stared at his friend, his breath coming in short, uneven bursts. The glass in his hand was empty, though he had no memory of finishing it. He placed it on his desk with a heavy thunk and sank into his chair, the polished leather creaking beneath his weight. His shoulders slumped as though the strings holding him upright had been abruptly cut.

“It’s all gone wrong,” he said, his voice barely above a whisper. The fire of his anger guttered, leaving behind a cold, hollow feeling in the pit of his stomach. His hands were numb, but he felt a warmth in his chest, an uncomfortable heat that he recognized not as guilt, but as jealousy—raw and unfamiliar. “It’s all gone terribly

wrong.”

Abingdon poured two fresh brandies and placed one before his friend. He settled into the chair across from Dainsfield, his expression open and patient. “Start at the beginning. What’s this about Milly and marriage?”

“Milly is a fool if she thinks she can be happy married to a molly!”

The declaration echoed in the cavernous room, bouncing from the ceiling’s ornate plasterwork to the polished mahogany wainscoting.

Abingdon didn’t flinch at the outburst, but his eyebrows rose toward his hairline. “I see,” he said, though his tone suggested he didn’t see at all. “Perhaps you’d care to elaborate further... at a slightly reduced volume?”

Dainsfield’s cheeks, already flushed from agitation, darkened further. He leaned forward, elbows on the table, and lowered his voice to a ragged whisper.

“She’s going to marry Parham. It was in the papers this morning.”

“Lord Parham?” Abingdon clarified, his expression thoughtful. “Tall fellow, excellent horseman, collects Greek antiquities?”

“The very same,” Dainsfield confirmed bitterly. “And who has never kept company with a woman for longer than it takes to dance a quadrille, despite being of an age where most men have already produced half a dozen heirs.”

The implication hung in the air between them, as delicate and volatile as gunpowder. Parham preferred men.

“Ah,” Abingdon said simply. Then, after a moment’s consideration, he asked, “And

you know this how?”

“Everyone knows. Everyone who pays attention.”

“Gossip,” Abingdon pointed out mildly. “I’ve seen him upstairs here with various women.”

“Fact,” Dainsfield countered. “I’ve had him investigated.”

“You’ve had him... investigated,” Abingdon repeated slowly. “Hold on a moment. Didn’t I just attend a party at your home with the sole purpose of introducing Parham to Milly?”

Dainsfield’s expression suggested he’d bitten into something unexpectedly sour. He stared at his empty glass as though it might contain an acceptable answer. “It’s complicated,” he finally muttered.

“I imagine it must be,” Abingdon agreed, closing his ledger with a definitive thump. He leaned back in his chair, fingers forming a steeple beneath his chin as he regarded his friend with the patient expression of a man accustomed to waiting out silences. “Perhaps you should start from the beginning and explain what’s happening.”

The suggestion hung between them, an invitation and a challenge combined. Outside, the sounds of London awakening filtered through the windows—the rattle of delivery carts, the calls of vendors, the steady clop of hooves on cobblestones. Inside, the suspended moment stretched, taut as a violin string.

“I’ve made a terrible mistake,” he began, his voice rasping like silk dragged across rough stone. “But I made it with the best of intentions, which I’m discovering is the most dangerous sort of mistake to make.”

Abingdon nodded, his expression carefully neutral. “These things often begin that way. As it appears to me, you introduced Milly and Parham with the hopes of their marrying, and now they’ve set the date to do so. I don’t understand the problem.”

“Parham is a molly. He prefers men.”

Abingdon sat back in his chair, his expression thoughtful. “There have been whispers about Parham for years, though nothing definitive. He’s always been very careful.”

Dainsfield’s head snapped up, eyes narrowing. “You knew?”

“I suspected,” Abingdon corrected. “Which is not the same thing as knowing. And in any case, it wasn’t my place to spread such rumors.”

“It might have been your place to mention it when I told you I was arranging a match between him and Milly,” Dainsfield growled.

“And now that the situation has progressed to the desirable outcome, you’re concerned?”

“Now I don’t know what to do,” Dainsfield admitted, slumping back in his chair. “If the rumors are true, Milly will be entering a marriage with a man who can never desire her. She’ll be a wife in name only, possibly expected to tolerate her husband’s... proclivities... in exchange for protection and position.”

“Many women would consider that a fair bargain,” Abingdon observed neutrally.

“Not Milly. She’s not like other women. She’s warm, passionate. She deserves someone who will appreciate those qualities, not merely tolerate her presence.”

As he spoke, his fingers tightened around his brandy glass until his knuckles shone

bone-white in the morning light. The liquid inside trembled with the force of his grip, small waves lapping against the crystal like a miniature tempest. A muscle in his jaw twitched, betraying the control he was exerting to maintain his composure.

“I don’t see the problem if Milly is happy with the arrangement,” Abingdon said carefully, his tone measured as though testing the temperature of dangerously hot water. “Many couples survive marriages like that, and at least she’s going into it with her eyes open.”

The crystal glass in Dainsfield’s hand met the polished mahogany with a sharp crack. Amber liquid sloshed over the rim.

“Survive?” Dainsfield’s voice rose dangerously. “Is that what marriage should be—something to be survived? A polite arrangement where passion is an inconvenience to be tolerated or ignored?” He was grateful he’d avoided the trap, himself.

“For many in our circle, yes. Marriage is primarily a business transaction, with considerations of bloodlines, property, and social position outweighing sentiment. You know this as well as I do.”

“Damn what I know,” Dainsfield growled, pushing himself to his feet and resuming his pacing. “Milly deserves better. She deserves a husband who truly desires her, who appreciates her passionate nature and her kind heart.”

After a moment, Dainsfield continued, his voice dropping to a lower register that somehow conveyed more emotion than his previous outburst. “You haven’t seen her when she’s truly herself—when she’s not constrained by the rules and expectations of polite society. When she laughs, it’s not the practiced titter you hear in drawing rooms. It’s rich and full-throated, completely unconcerned with how she might appear to others.”

“There’s a quality to her that’s hard to define—a genuine warmth that has somehow survived despite everything. She notices people that others overlook.” Dainsfield returned to the table but remained standing, his hands gripping the back of his chair as though it might prevent him from floating away on the tide of his own emotions.

“She’s kind, Abingdon. Truly kind, not in the calculating way of society ladies who perform charitable acts to enhance their reputations. And despite that kindness, society has treated her abominably because of circumstances entirely beyond her control.”

His knuckles whitened against the dark wood of the chair. “Do you know what they call her? Behind her back, in whispers just loud enough for her to hear? ‘The Duke’s By-blow.’ ‘Kingsland’s Mistake.’ As though her illegitimacy is the sum total of her character.”

Abingdon winced slightly at the crude epithets. “People can be cruel.”

“Cruel doesn’t begin to describe it,” Dainsfield countered.

“Which brings us back to Parham,” Abingdon said.

“Yes, Parham,” Dainsfield spat the name as though it tasted foul. “Who will give her a respectable name and a comfortable home, but nothing of the joy or passion she deserves. Who will expect her to bear his heir and then turn a blind eye to his dalliances with men. Who might even—” he broke off, seemingly unable to continue the thought.

“Who might even what?” Abingdon prompted gently.

Dainsfield sank back into his chair, the anger suddenly draining from him, leaving something rawer and more vulnerable in its place. “Who might even permit her to

seek discreet companionship of her own, once an heir is secured. That's not uncommon in such marriages."

"And the thought of Milly seeking 'discreet companionship' disturbs you," Abingdon stated rather than asked.

"It enrages me," Dainsfield admitted, his voice barely above a whisper. "The very idea of her in another man's arms, giving herself to someone who could never truly appreciate the gift of her passion..."

He trailed off, staring at his hands as though they belonged to someone else. Silence filled the small space.

From the street below came the distant calls of vendors and the rhythmic clop of horses' hooves, reminders of a world continuing its ordinary business, oblivious to the drama unfolding in the quiet club room.

When Abingdon finally broke the silence, his voice was gentle but firm, like a physician who knows the diagnosis will cause pain but must be delivered, nonetheless. "How long have you loved Milly? And what do you intend to do about it?"

### CHAPTER TWELVE

Dainsfield left Sutcliffe's with the doggedness of a man being chased. Through the murky streets, where rain left the cobblestones slick and promises washed away as quickly, he marched. He had too much energy coursing through him to ride to his destination, if he even had one. His mind swirled with Abingdon's pointed question, every step serving to illuminate an answer that no longer left room for denial. Could Milly ever want him after how he'd been treating her? That, he knew, mattered more than business, more than any damn club. It mattered more than he'd even realized until this moment.

He pressed forward, his thoughts teetering between logic and emotion. The investment at Sutcliffe's had never been his priority; it was a diversion, a place to funnel both energy and frustrations away from more personal pursuits. But now the distraction seemed to loom like a barrier between him and Milly. Could he really step aside, allow his partners to take control? Was it conceivable to abandon such an endeavor for the sake of the woman who occupied his every waking thought?

With Abingdon's words echoing like an insistent drumbeat, he acknowledged a simple truth: Milly's happiness was more important than any ledger or gaming table. She was about to marry Parham, a match he himself had suggested, foolishly thinking it would protect her from scandal. But now, the very thought of her becoming another man's wife tore at him in ways he hadn't foreseen. His breath came quicker, fogging the cool afternoon air. If selling his share of Sutcliffe's would win her, he realized with startling clarity, he would do it without a moment's regret.

But perhaps such drastic measures were unnecessary. The thought of making changes



at the club flitted through his mind. Perhaps a more amiable figure could be the public face of the establishment, leaving Dainsfield to focus his attentions elsewhere.

Yet as the practical solution took shape, his urgency centered back on Milly, on the imminent proposal that seemed to swell like a tide within him. He couldn't afford the luxury of careful planning or drawn-out courtship. The urgency was palpable. Every tick of the clock carried her closer to Parham. There would be no time for elaborate elopements, nor would conventional announcements serve his needs. A special license—that would suffice, so long as he had her consent.

The need to act quickly drove him, narrowing his focus, sharpening his resolve. A proposal—a genuine declaration, devoid of society's constraining formalities—must come first. Without it, everything else was meaningless. His footsteps quickened as his plan solidified, leaving the shadowy concerns of business and partnerships behind.

Milly's apartment was clear in his mind, a beacon in the grey expanse of London's streets. His thoughts of her were an intoxicating blend of fear and hope. Could he convince her to choose him over a more socially acceptable match? Did she feel even a fraction of what he did? His heart leaped at the thought, urging his feet faster, until his breath became a cadence with the rhythm of his racing mind.

The doubt and hesitation that once filled him gave way to a fiercer determination. With his mind set, he could picture her so clearly. Her sparkling eyes, the warmth of her smile, the way she had looked at him with an openness he had never encountered in any other. The mere memory spurred him onward, driving him with an intensity that outpaced any earlier ambition.

This was not the time for a duke's careful planning. It was a suitor's impassioned pursuit. She had to know how he felt, even if it meant risking everything else. The streets blurred past him, a chaos of clattering hooves and shouted vendors. He moved

through it all with singular purpose, knowing only that he must reach her, that his next breath might hinge on hearing her answer.

His strides lengthened, direction changing, each movement imbued with a resolve that lit his eyes and transformed his expression from brooding uncertainty to something resolute, something almost hopeful. The decision filled him with an energy he hadn't expected. The words formed in his mind. He had to ask her, had to know. Could she ever want him? He didn't know, but he did know he couldn't face another day without finding out.

By the time Dainsfield reached Milly's residence, he was disheveled and breathless, his normally impeccable appearance ravaged by a determined pace and London's grime. The maid blinked at him, clearly uncertain whether such an imposing figure belonged in the hallway.

Milly's entrance was as sudden as his arrival, her presence filling the room with a warmth that startled him. The loose pinning of her hair suggested an unexpected intimacy, as if she hadn't thought to receive visitors.

"Milly," he began, the word a breathless exclamation, barely waiting for her to reach the drawing room.

Her wide-eyed look took in his disarray, her lips parting in a question that never fully formed. "Dainsfield, what?—"

"I had to see you." His words cut through the air with an urgency that matched his untidy appearance.

The maid hovered awkwardly at the door, and Milly gave a nod, dismissing her with an unspoken command that left them alone. "I wasn't expecting you," she said, smoothing her simple day dress with a gesture that only enhanced her charm. Even so

casually attired, she seemed more alluring than he could bear.

She seemed about to continue when he interrupted, his pacing halting, only to resume again.

And again, he stopped, facing her directly. His composure crumbled under the weight of emotions too long restrained. “I don’t want you to marry Parham. I don’t want you to marry anyone. Except me.”

Her shock was palpable, her sparkling eyes searching his face for some sign of jest. Finding none, they grew wide with the hope she scarcely dared to acknowledge. “Do you mean it?” she breathed, each word a fragile question.

His chest rose and fell, not from exertion, but from the raw feeling that swelled within him. “Milly, I cannot think, I cannot breathe, I cannot do anything but wish to be near you. If I don’t have you as my wife, I will...” He hesitated, uncharacteristically struggling for words.

The room felt poised on a precipice, his declaration lingering like the sweet ache of music not quite finished. “I would ruin your name,” she whispered, the doubt finally spilling from her in a tumble of fear and insecurity.

“You cannot ruin what has already been trampled by my own hand. I’m a duke who owns a scandalous gaming hell known for lascivious activities in its private rooms. There is nothing about you that would worsen my reputation.”

Her cheeks flushed a lovely hue, a blend of embarrassment and tentative relief. “I thought—I thought you wanted?—”

“I want you,” he interjected, each word fervent and insistent. “Milly, will you be my duchess?”

For a heartbeat, the room was as silent as the moment before a storm breaks. Her face was a portrait of warring emotions, disbelief slowly melting into unrestrained joy. “Oh, Dainsfield!” she exclaimed, his name escaping her lips as she rushed toward him.

He pulled her into an embrace that banished any lingering doubts, the two of them wrapped in a tenderness that seemed to defy the world outside.

“Yes,” she murmured, the word as soft as the tears that glistened in her eyes. “Yes, I will marry you.”

His hands cupped her face, his thumb brushing a tear that dared escape. “You love me, then?” he asked, still astonished at his own audacity, and more so at her reply.

“I always have,” she admitted.

The moments that followed were a symphony of shared laughter and whispered promises. Her disbelief faded entirely, replaced by a newfound confidence that their love would endure. Dainsfield’s hand lingered in her hair, savoring the intimacy of the loose strands. He marveled at how their friendship had transformed into something so much deeper and more profound.

As they drew apart, just enough to meet each other’s eyes, there was no doubt left between them. The proposal was a mere formality now, the special license just a piece of paper. What mattered was the truth they’d found in one another, the promise of a future neither had dared to dream of.

His heart felt as if it might soar from his chest, filled with an elation he’d never thought possible.

Milly looked at him, her own happiness mirrored in his gaze. “You can’t change your

mind now.”

“And miss the chance to marry the most extraordinary woman in London?” he returned, his lips claiming hers in a kiss that sealed their fate and left them breathless for the future to come.

She took his hand, leading him to her bedchamber with an eagerness that matched the reckless pounding of their hearts. By the time they reached the bedroom, desire was no longer a polite murmur but a symphony that filled the air, urgent and wild.

He pulled her into an embrace that banished all distance, his lips meeting hers with a fervor that had been years in the making. They barely paused to breathe as they stripped away every barrier between them, clothes falling like whispered promises until skin met skin, burning and alive.

Her day dress slipped from her shoulders, the fabric tumbling in soft whispers to the floor. Dainsfield’s breath caught as he drank in the sight of her, and his own garments joined hers in a tangle of haste and hunger. There was an almost desperate urgency in the way he held her, lifting her effortlessly to the bed and cradling her as though she might vanish with the next heartbeat.

The first touch of her skin against his was electric, a release that shattered the careful restraint he’d worn for so long. He pressed her into the softness beneath them, fingers trailing over her with a reverence that made her gasp and cling to him. Where once he had been the picture of self-control, now he worshipped her with an abandon that defied years of practiced decorum. His lips followed the path of his hands, marking every inch of her with a heat that threatened to consume them both.

Milly’s fingers tangled in his dark hair, pulling him closer as if to assure herself that this was real, that the years of waiting and wanting had finally brought them here. Her voice was breathless and trembling, half-laughter, half-moan, urging him on. She

responded with a fervor that matched his own, exploring the contours of his body, marveling at the strength and power that seemed to pulse beneath her touch.

His kisses moved lower, across the delicate curve of her collarbone, the hollow of her throat. Her reactions spurred him further, the way she arched against him, the soft cries that punctuated the air. Every gasp was a testament to their desire, every sigh a declaration of the love that had grown between them, unfettered by the shackles of doubt or propriety.

The joining of their bodies was both tender and fierce, a symphony of movements that ranged from languid and sensual to almost frenzied in their intensity. They whispered endearments, words long kept silent, as they rode the crest of their passion, giving voice to the yearning that had been too long denied.

He paused only to gaze at her, the look in his eyes one of pure adoration. His large hands moved with both urgency and tenderness, finding the places that made her shiver, focusing intently on the sensitive spots until she was trembling beneath him. Her own touch grew bolder, more assured, drawing from him the groans and gasps that betrayed how deeply he was affected.

They lost themselves in each other, surrendering entirely to the moment, to the shared connection that bound them as surely as the promises they'd made downstairs. The crescendo built inexorably, leaving them both breathless as they finally tumbled into a release that left them clinging to each other, limbs entwined, pulses slowly calming from a wild symphony to a shared, contented rhythm.

In the quiet aftermath, the world beyond the bedroom felt like a distant memory. His hand lay possessively across her bare stomach, a silent promise of more to come, while her head rested against his chest, the warmth of their shared skin sealing the bond they had created.

Dainsfield marveled at how their friendship had transformed, how years of restraint and longing had culminated in this perfect moment. Milly's breath was a soft lullaby against his skin, her contentment as palpable as his own. He had never imagined that love could feel so complete, so freeing, as if every other part of his life had merely been a prelude to this.

Her fingers traced idle patterns across his chest, and he tightened his hold on her, unwilling to let even an inch of distance grow between them. "Are you certain you want this?" he asked, though the question was filled more with wonder than doubt.

"More certain than I've ever been of anything," she replied, her voice a sweet echo of their shared fulfillment.

They lay in silence, each lost in the enormity of what they'd discovered in one another. It was a silence filled not with hesitation, but with a deep, unspoken certainty that the future was theirs, that the past had led them exactly where they were meant to be.

The enormity of it left them both breathless, clinging together as if they might otherwise drift apart. They spent the entire day together, never fully dressing, finding what they could to eat enough to fuel their lovemaking.

As they drifted toward sleep, still wrapped in each other's arms, they knew that this was only the beginning, that the promises they'd whispered in passion would carry them into a lifetime of shared joys and laughter, and the reckless, boundless love that had finally set them free.

### CHAPTER THIRTEEN

M orning found them tangled in rumpled sheets, bodies like marble sculptures softened by the glow that seeped through the curtains. Milly's cheek pressed against his chest, savoring the strong, steady rhythm beneath. Her own heart skipped when he touched her, tracing her nakedness with a languid possession. Desire sparked in the contact. She shifted, straddling him, the unbound grace of her figure as provocative as the promise of her nearness. Her mouth met his, fierce with the familiar, insatiable demand for more. Heat flared between them. His fingers found their way along her thighs, teasing at her clitoris with wicked precision. She gasped, wrapping her hand around his thickening cock, feeling it pulse and grow hard. The world around them melted, leaving only the rushing of blood, the mingling of breath, the way her hand moved on him and his on her, until urgency bloomed into need.

A languorous sigh escaped her as she nestled closer, the muscled expanse of his chest a satisfying counterpoint to her softness. His hands moved idly at first, exploring the curves he had mapped the night before with hunger. "And good morning to you, sir," she murmured, smiling against his skin.

"Is it?" His voice, deep and resonant, held the gravel of early hours. He lifted a brow as his fingers continued their leisurely investigation. "It seems morning has come, and we are still here."

"It is quite scandalous," she said, feigning propriety, though the laughter in her eyes betrayed her. She stretched, the movement languid and feline, arching into his touch.

"Would you like me to leave?" His hand trailed over her back with a proprietary ease,



unwilling to release her.

Milly caught his gaze, her expression both bold and tender. “I might allow you to stay,” she said, a sweet warmth coloring her words. “If you promise not to behave.”

His smile was slow, deliberate. “That is one promise I can make.”

Her laughter dissolved into a breathy moan as he rolled her beneath him, a cascade of hair spreading around her like a dark halo. He took a moment to savor the view—the graceful line of her neck, the elegant curve of her shoulder—before his mouth met hers in a kiss that smoldered with intention.

She met his gaze, unabashed and full of longing, her skin alive with the promise of his touch. She pulled him down, letting the delicious weight of him settle against her, the contact reigniting a spark that had merely slumbered. His hands, once idle, grew more intent, claiming every inch of her as if to commit her again to memory.

His mouth brushed against the shell of her ear. “You do not appear scandalized, Miss Nichols.”

Milly grinned, her eyes dark with mischief and desire. “Perhaps you are not trying hard enough.”

The challenge danced between them, and with a fluid motion, she pushed him back and straddled him. He marveled at her, at the way her skin seemed to glow with an inner light, her breasts swaying tantalizingly as she leaned to capture his mouth. His hands moved to her hips, gripping her firmly, her flesh yielding beneath his fingers. Her kiss was searing, her lips possessing his with a fervor that matched the restless energy coiling in his gut.

A low sound rumbled from his chest as her mouth left his and blazed a path along his

jaw, his throat. Her boldness thrilled him, setting every nerve alight. His hands continued their exploration, skimming over her ribs, tracing the gentle slope of her waist, before seeking the heat pooling between her thighs.

She shivered as his fingers teased her, the motion both knowing and deliberate. “You—ah—you do try,” she breathed, her voice catching.

“Am I succeeding?” he asked, though he knew the answer.

She couldn’t form words, not when he touched her like that. She closed her eyes, losing herself to the sensation, to the artful, wicked circles he drew at her center. Her body moved of its own volition, a slow undulation that begged for more.

His own desire surged, a potent and urgent force that demanded release. He watched her face, the way her lips parted with each gasp, each sigh. Her pleasure was as intoxicating to him as any touch she could offer.

Her hand found him, hard and pulsing with need, and her boldness returned tenfold. She stroked him, slow at first, delighting in the way he grew impossibly harder under her palm.

Their breathing mingled, ragged and raw, echoing in the small space between their bodies. Her strokes quickened, matching the insistent rhythm of his fingers. The world outside their cocoon faded to nothing, leaving only the sensation, the heat, the exquisite tension that wrapped around them, pulling them inexorably toward bliss.

She rose above him, both luminous and wild, and all he could do was watch her. Milly hovered with exquisite patience, prolonging the ache of desire, until the weight of her longing overtook her and she sank down onto him. They groaned in unison, a perfect harmony of need fulfilled. Her breasts swung with each motion, her face a portrait of bliss that transfixed and maddened him in equal measure. She moved

deliberately, slowly, and he tightened his grip on her hips to anchor himself against the storm of sensation. He filled his hands with her breasts, kneading and teasing until her head fell back, and her pace became frantic. When her movements faltered, he flipped her onto the bed, her gasp of surprise mingling with a deep moan as he drove into her. Their mouths crashed together, a collision of desire and impatience, and the room filled with the sounds of skin meeting skin, their breaths wild and frenzied.

She balanced on her knees, hovering over him, her body a tantalizing promise poised on the edge of fulfillment. The intimacy of the moment, the nearness of him, drove her mad with want. Her fingers brushed the sweat-damp hair from her face, the wild curls as untamed as her longing. "I thought perhaps I should continue misbehaving," she said, her voice rich with mirth and need.

"Have mercy," Dainsfield groaned, desire and desperation threading his words as he looked up at her with unabashed yearning.

Her laughter was sultry, her eyes dark with intent as she began to lower herself. She took her time, delighting in the exquisite torture she inflicted on them both, until she could stand it no longer. A gasp escaped her lips as he filled her, stretching her, the joining an electric, consuming thing.

He watched her, enraptured by the sway of her breasts, the flush of her skin, the sheer beauty of her taking her pleasure from him. His hands moved to her hips, anchoring her, claiming her, but it was she who claimed him with each downward thrust.

The sensation was dizzying, and he held on to her as if she might float away. "Look at you," he marveled, a low, reverent murmur. "You are..."

The words escaped him, and she didn't need them. She saw everything in his eyes.

She moved with a purpose that left him breathless, slow and deliberate, savoring each

moment, each friction of skin against skin. His groans mingled with her own, a primal music that filled the room, until he couldn't bear the sweet torment of her pace. He gripped her hips tighter, urging her to more, a lover's impatience that set fire to them both.

She obliged, her movements becoming erratic, frenzied, driven by the urgent need coiling within her. Her hair fell in a wild, silken veil, obscuring her face until he reached up to smooth it away, revealing the full, unabashed ecstasy that he had put there.

"God, Milly," he said, his voice raw and strained as he fought for control, every muscle tense and quivering. His hands traveled to her breasts, molding them, teasing them, his thumbs rolling over her nipples in a way that made her gasp and lose her rhythm.

He could feel the shudders beginning in her, the subtle tightening that promised her release was near. Her inner walls clamped around him, a delicious pressure that pulled him toward the brink of madness. He reveled in the knowledge, in the sensation, of her pleasure building to an impossible peak.

She threw her head back, a cry catching in her throat, and he held on, driving into her with upward thrusts that matched the frenzy of her movements.

The intensity grew almost unbearable. Her rhythm faltered, her body too consumed with impending climax, and he took the moment to act.

In one swift motion, he flipped them over, her surprised gasp transforming into a low, drawn-out moan as he pinned her to the bed. The sheets tangled around them like a lover's knot, but they noticed nothing but the urgent, relentless connection of their bodies.

His mouth claimed hers in a fierce, possessive kiss that swallowed her cries, their breaths mingling in hot, desperate gasps. Her legs wrapped around him, holding him close, and her nails scored his shoulders, urging him on.

The control she had wielded so expertly now belonged to him, and he took it with a passion and tenderness that only made her want more. Each thrust was deep and sure, a testament to how much he adored her, how much he needed her.

Milly broke the kiss, her eyes locked with his, and the world narrowed to just this—the exquisite joining of two souls who were as greedy for each other as they were willing to give all they had.

“Don’t stop,” she pleaded, a whisper that fanned the flames of his desire, and Dainsfield was more than happy to obey.

The world vanished in the frenzy of their union, nothing existing but the punishing rhythm of their bodies, the guttural sounds of their pleasure, and the violent crescendo of their need. He filled her, every stroke deliberate and demanding, and she urged him on with a desperate abandon. The bed rattled beneath them, echoing the wild and primal tempo they set. Her cries grew sharper, her nails branding him as they raked over skin. Dainsfield was past caring about anything but the sweet and tightening pull of her around him. He bent to her ear, his voice low and raw, each word a push toward the edge. Milly’s release shattered her, and he followed, the shock of it so complete that the world came back in fragments: her breathless whimpers, his name on her lips, the sheets clinging to their damp bodies. They collapsed in a heap, a slow return from the frenzy, finding each other in languid kisses and whispered confessions.

Milly’s nails bit into his back as she drew him closer, needing every inch of him, every part of him, until nothing else mattered. “Yes—like that,” she gasped, her words a breathless plea and a satisfied moan.

He complied, his body surging into hers with a power and urgency that left him breathless. The headboard banged a steady percussion against the wall, but neither noticed, wrapped as they were in a cocoon of heat and sweat and the raw, consuming need for each other.

“Milly,” he groaned, her name a mantra, a prayer, as he felt her inner walls begin to quiver around him.

She cried out, her pleasure building into something huge and unstoppable. Her nails scored down his back, a wicked, glorious pain that only drove him harder.

The noise, the madness, the relentless rhythm—it filled the world until nothing else could enter. And he didn’t care. All that mattered was her, the tight and welcoming heat of her, the wild way she matched his pace with complete abandon.

He felt her trembling beneath him, every thrust met with the rising tide of her nearing climax. His mouth found her ear, each word a hot and desperate promise as he whispered how perfect she felt, how beautiful she was.

His encouragement spurred her on, and she moved with him in a perfect, frantic union. Her moans came faster, and he felt the surge of her release coming, building like a storm. He held on, giving her everything, waiting for the moment she’d take him over the edge with her.

It came like an explosion. She arched off the bed, her body bowstring taut as her orgasm shattered through her. She cried his name, loud and uninhibited, and he was lost.

The intensity of her release pulled him under, dragging him into a place where nothing existed but Milly. He spilled into her with a deep, guttural groan, the force of his own climax matching hers. They were unmade, undone, a perfect destruction that

left them shaking and breathless and wonderfully alive.

He collapsed against her, spent and sated, and she wrapped her arms around him, holding him close as if afraid he might vanish. Their breaths mingled in the warm space between them, each ragged exhale a shared confession.

“Milly,” he whispered again, his voice now soft and tender, the earlier frenzy melting into something sweet and unguarded.

She shifted beneath him, her skin slick with the sweat of their passion, but she made no move to pull away. Instead, she found his lips with her own, a gentle, lingering kiss that spoke of all the things they never said aloud.

“Don’t move,” she murmured when the kiss finally broke, the words half a command, half a plea.

He didn’t, savoring the delicious weight of her as they lay tangled together. It was a peace he had never known, a completeness he hadn’t dared hope for, and he had no desire to let it go.

He lifted his head to look at her, marveling at the flushed cheeks, the lips swollen from their ardor, the way her eyes glowed with a light that seemed to come from within. “You are too beautiful,” he said, a low and reverent admission.

Her laugh was a soft, contented sound. “And you are not as grumpy as you pretend,” she countered, a teasing lilt to her words.

“Mmm.” He nuzzled her neck, a lazy affection in the gesture as he shifted them onto their sides. The sheets clung to their bodies, a damp testament to their passion, but they barely noticed. “I am quite serious.”

“So am I.” She smiled, the expression so open and unguarded it made his chest ache. Her fingers brushed his cheek, an intimate caress that made him want to capture the moment and hold it forever.

They lay in silence, the only sound their breathing, slowing now to a tranquil, satisfied rhythm. He could feel the steady beat of her heart beneath his hand, and it felt like coming home.

“I love you,” she said finally, the words quiet but unwavering.

He kissed her again, tender and full of promise, a vow he intended to keep. “And I, you.”

They drifted in and out of a pleasant, dreamlike haze, finding each other in languid touches and shared warmth. Nothing could touch them, nothing could intrude on this perfect, stolen time, and for now, that was enough.



### CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The great oak doors loomed before them like sentinels guarding the entrance to a battlefield rather than a ballroom. Milly's fingers, encased in pristine white gloves, trembled slightly against Dainsfield's arm. One week a duchess, and tonight she would face the very society that had spent years whispering behind fans about her parentage. Dainsfield covered her hand with his, the pressure firm, reassuring. His face remained impassive, but the muscle working in his jaw betrayed his tension.

"Ready, Your Grace?" he murmured, the formality of her new title softened by the unexpected gentleness in his voice.

Milly drew a steadying breath, her shoulders straightening beneath the shimmering ivory silk of her gown. "Yes, Your Grace," she replied, a hint of mischief brightening her eyes despite her nerves.

The doors swung open, and the butler's voice rang out with practiced precision: "His Grace, the Duke of Dainsfield, and Her Grace, the Duchess of Dainsfield."

The makeshift ballroom before them—three rooms connected by hastily removed partitions—glittered with candles. Garlands of spring flowers draped across mantels and doorways, their perfume mingling with the more potent scent of curiosity.

The modiste had performed nothing short of sorcery to create Milly's gown in time for the celebration—yards of ivory silk embroidered with silver thread that caught the light with every movement, transforming her into a creature of moonlight and grace.

Dainsfield stood beside her, tall and imposing in midnight blue, his black hair gleaming almost blue-black in the candlelight. His hand at the small of her back guided her forward, his touch a shield against the hundred pairs of eyes that followed their progress.

Conversation dimmed momentarily before surging again like a wave against rocks, but now fractured into poorly concealed observations. Milly caught fragments as they moved through the crowd, each one sharp enough to draw blood.

“—illegitimate, of course?—”

“—special license, if you can imagine?—”

“—scandal with Lord?—”

“—Dainsfield has clearly lost his?—”

Dainsfield’s fingers pressed more firmly against her back, his arm a band of steel beneath her hand. Though his face maintained its aristocratic composure, Milly felt the tension radiating from him like heat from banked coals. His jaw had hardened to granite, his eyes scanning the crowd with cold precision, noting each whisper, each smirk, each assessing glance.

“Smile,” he whispered, his lips barely moving. “They’re waiting for you to crumble.”

Milly’s lips curved upward, the expression genuine despite everything. Something about his protective ferocity warmed her from within, dissolving the knot of anxiety in her chest. She was Milly Nichols no longer—she was the Duchess of Dainsfield, and this man of ice and iron had chosen her above all others.

They had almost completed their circuit of the room when Lady Summercourt’s voice

cut through the general murmur, pitched to carry just far enough to ensure maximum damage.

“Some women will do anything to secure a title, I suppose,” she drawled, her eyes fixed pointedly on Milly while addressing the circle of tittering ladies around her. “Even if it means?—”

The sudden cessation of Dainsfield’s movement cut her off mid-sentence. The duke turned with deliberate slowness, his expression controlled but somehow more dangerous for its restraint. “I couldn’t help but overhear your observation, Lady Summercourt. And I feel compelled to correct your misapprehension.”

Lady Summercourt’s smile froze, a faint flush beginning to creep up her neck. “Your Grace, I merely?—”

“My wife secured nothing but my heart, Lady Summercourt.” His words fell like perfectly aimed daggers, soft but lethal. “A feat I suspect few would manage with yours.”

The silence that followed was absolute. Lady Summercourt’s face bloomed crimson, her fan snapping open with such force it nearly disintegrated in her trembling fingers. Around them, several onlookers hastily raised glasses or fans to hide their expressions—some embarrassed, others clearly struggling to contain their delight at the public humbling of one of society’s most notorious gossips.

Lady Summercourt retreated with as much dignity as she could muster, which amounted to very little. Her circle of admirers dispersed like smoke in wind, leaving her to make her way alone to a distant corner of the room.

Milly glanced up at Dainsfield, whose expression had not changed except for a faint gleam of satisfaction in his dark eyes. “That was rather forceful, Your Grace.”

“I’ve found that some lessons require clarity to be effective,” he replied, guiding her forward once more. Against her hand, she felt the tension in his arm ease slightly. “Besides, she impugned your honor.”

“I’ve survived worse,” Milly said, though warmth bloomed in her chest at his defense.

“You shouldn’t have to.” His voice was low, almost tender—a tone she’d heard rarely from him, even in private. “Not anymore.”

As they continued their progress through the room, Milly noticed a subtle shift in the atmosphere. Glances still followed them, but some held curiosity rather than contempt. A few heads nodded respectfully as Dainsfield’s gaze met theirs. Lady Summercourt’s humiliation had demonstrated something vital—the Duke of Dainsfield had not been tricked or seduced into this marriage. He had chosen his bride, and he would protect her with all the considerable power at his disposal.

For the first time since entering the ballroom, Milly felt her shoulders relax. The night was young, the battle newly joined—but they had drawn first blood.

The tension in Dainsfield’s shoulders had barely begun to ease when the Duke and Duchess of Abingdon cut through the crowd toward them, moving with the purposeful grace of those accustomed to parting seas of society. The Duchess wore a gown of sapphire silk that complemented her fair coloring, her smile warm and genuine as she extended both hands toward Milly. Behind them, like reinforcements arriving at a besieged castle, came Lord and Lady St. Ervan and Lord and Lady Longford, their determined expressions suggesting they had witnessed Lady Summercourt’s retreat and drawn their own conclusions about the evening’s battle lines.

“Dainsfield,” Abingdon said, clapping his friend on the shoulder with an easy

familiarity that belied the duke's forbidding countenance. "Congratulations on your marriage. Though I must say, the speed of it deprived us all of the pleasure of watching you squirm through a proper engagement."

His wife swatted his arm lightly. "What my husband means to say," she said, taking Milly's hands in hers, "is that we are delighted for you both. Welcome to our little circle, Your Grace."

"Call me Milly, please," Milly replied, the genuine warmth in her voice revealing how rarely she had encountered such sincerity in society's drawing rooms. "And thank you."

"Milly it shall be," the duchess agreed, "though I shall enjoy watching the faces of those who've never dared address me so informally when they hear it."

Before Milly could respond, Betty breached protocol entirely by embracing her in a cloud of rosewater and enthusiastic affection. "How absolutely beautiful you look as a bride! Dainsfield, you are the envy of every man here tonight—though most haven't the good sense to recognize it yet."

Her husband, Viscount Longford, rolled his eyes fondly. "My wife believes volume correlates with persuasiveness," he explained to Milly with a conspiratorial smile.

"And she's not wrong," chimed in Verity as she joined their circle. Her dark eyes sparkled with mischief in a face designed for breaking hearts, her gown of deep crimson making her look like a particularly fetching devil come to wreak havoc on the unsuspecting. "Men are generally quite stupid about these things and require firm guidance."

She turned to Dainsfield, her smile widening. "Speaking of which, I must compliment you on your excellent taste in wives, Your Grace. Quite the improvement on your

usual companions.”

Milly watched in fascination as Dainsfield’s stern countenance softened into what could only be described as a smile—a transformation so unexpected that several nearby guests actually paused mid-conversation to stare.

“Lady St. Ervan,” he replied, inclining his head. “Still tormenting that husband of yours, I see.”

Verity laughed, a bright sound that drew attention from across the room. “He’d be terribly bored otherwise.”

The Earl of St. Ervan, a handsome man with an air of amused tolerance, shook his head. “She’s not wrong,” he said, echoing Longford’s earlier sentiment, earning chuckles from their circle.

The laughter had barely subsided when another figure approached, tall and imposing but moving with the easy confidence of a man who has never questioned his welcome anywhere. The Duke of Nomansland clapped Dainsfield on the shoulder with enough force to make a lesser man stagger.

“Never thought I’d see the day. Our grumpy duke, married at last. And to such a lovely duchess.” He bowed over Milly’s hand with exaggerated gallantry. “Your Grace, I commend your bravery in taking on this particular matrimonial challenge.”

Dainsfield’s eyebrow arched. “Nomansland. I’m surprised you managed to extract yourself from Lady Winterton’s clutches to attend.”

“Lady Winterton is here with her husband,” Nomansland replied with a perfectly straight face. “I merely escorted her daughter in from the carriage.”

“Of course you did,” Abingdon snorted, before turning his attention back to the topic at hand. “So, Nomansland, when will you join our ranks? You’re the last holdout among our illustrious group of reformed libertines.”

The others turned to Nomansland with expressions of exaggerated interest, clearly revisiting a long-standing topic of friendly debate. The unmarried duke shook his head firmly, his smile never wavering.

“Some of us prefer freedom to matrimony,” he replied, though Milly noticed his eyes lingering on her and Dainsfield’s clasped hands with something that might have been curiosity rather than the dismissal his words implied. “Not all men are designed for domestic bliss.”

“Neither was Dainsfield,” Verity pointed out, her smile turning sly. “Yet here he stands, looking almost human. Miracles do happen.”

Nomansland laughed, but his gaze returned briefly to the couple’s intertwined fingers before he raised his eyes to study Dainsfield’s face. “Indeed they do,” he murmured, something unreadable flickering across his features before his usual carefree expression reasserted itself. “Though perhaps we should preserve one or two bachelors for the sake of variety.”

As their circle of friends continued their good-natured banter, Milly became aware of subtle shifts in the ballroom’s dynamics. Their laughter—genuine and warm rather than the practiced tittering of society amusement—drew attention. Several of the ton’s more influential members were watching their friendly group with undisguised interest, some even nodding in acknowledgment when Dainsfield’s gaze met theirs.

Dainsfield’s hand tightened almost imperceptibly around hers, and Milly realized he had noticed the shift as well. The tide had not turned completely—that would take more than a single evening—but the waves of opinion had begun to ripple outward

from their circle of acceptance.

“I believe,” he murmured, his lips close to her ear, “that the evening may be progressing better than anticipated.”

Milly smiled up at him, warmed by the protection of true friends and the steady presence of the man who had gambled his reputation on her worth. “It appears we make a rather compelling case together, Your Grace.”

His dark eyes met hers, and for a moment the ballroom around them faded into insignificance. “Indeed we do, Your Grace. Indeed we do.”

The orchestra in the corner drew their bows across strings in the opening notes of a waltz. Conversations paused as the music rose, filling the joined rooms with expectation.

A ripple of movement spread through the crowd as guests withdrew from the center of the room, creating a perfect circle of empty floor bordered by curious faces. Some expressions held disdain, others speculation, but all held interest—no one would miss this performance, this test of the controversial new duchess.

Dainsfield led Milly to the center of the floor with measured steps. In the sudden quiet, the whisper of her silk gown against the polished wood seemed thunderous. She felt the weight of every gaze like physical pressure on her skin, but kept her chin lifted, her eyes on her husband’s face.

“Remember,” he murmured, just loudly enough for her alone to hear, “you’ve already won the only prize that matters tonight.”

A smile bloomed across her face, genuine and radiant. “Have I, Your Grace?”



His hand settled at her waist as they took their positions, five points of heat through the silk of her gown. “You secured my heart, did you not?” he replied, the corner of his mouth lifting in a rare, unguarded smile that transformed his severe features into something that made several ladies in the audience draw sharp breaths.

The music swelled, and Dainsfield led her into the first steps of the waltz with fluid grace that belied his imposing frame. Milly matched him perfectly, her years of dancing lessons finally serving their intended purpose. They moved together as though they had danced a thousand waltzes, her gown swirling around their legs, his steady hand guiding her through each turn with confidence that required no words.

The rhythm became a heartbeat, the music a current they rode together. The ballroom blurred around them, faces smearing into a wash of color and light. For Milly, the world contracted to the space between them—his hand at her waist, her palm against the fine wool of his coat, their eyes locked in silent communion.

The perpetual furrow between Dainsfield’s brows had smoothed away, and something in his gaze made Milly’s heart flutter against her ribs like a captive bird. She had seen him angry, seen him determined, seen him coolly dismissive—but this unguarded tenderness was new, a gift given to her alone in a room full of witnesses who could see but never truly understand.

Their fingers brushed as he turned her, and the contact sent a shiver across her skin that had nothing to do with the temperature of the room. His eyes darkened slightly, telling her he’d felt it too—this invisible cord of awareness that had first drawn them together despite all sense and society’s disapproval.

As the final notes of the waltz faded, Dainsfield brought them to a perfect stop, his bow matching her curtsy with synchronized precision. The silence that followed lasted only a heartbeat before applause scattered through the crowd—tentative at first, then growing in confidence. Several ladies along the edge of the floor were openly

dabbing at their eyes, their earlier disdain forgotten in the romance of the moment.

The orchestra began another dance, and other couples moved onto the floor. Milly noticed with surprised pleasure that some of the very people who had been most vocal in their disapproval earlier now took to the floor, as though dancing in the same space as the new duchess might not be so objectionable after all.

As the evening drew to a close, Milly realized with quiet amazement that while not everyone had been won over, the atmosphere had undeniably shifted. Several influential members of society had given their tacit approval through their attentions. Even those who maintained their distance seemed less certain in their disdain, as though reconsidering positions taken in haste.

The last guests departed with final congratulations and promises of future visits. As the door closed behind them, Dainsfield turned to Milly in the suddenly quiet entrance hall, his hands coming to rest on her shoulders.

“You were magnificent tonight,” he murmured, his voice low and intimate in the space between them. “They’ll all adore you soon enough.”

Milly smiled up at him, reaching to smooth an imaginary wrinkle from his lapel simply for the pleasure of touching him. “I find I’m no longer terribly concerned with their opinion, now that I have what I truly wanted all along.”

His eyebrow arched in question. “And what was that?”

She rose on tiptoe, her lips a breath away from his. “You, Your Grace. Simply you.”

His arms wrapped around her waist, drawing her against him as his mouth claimed hers with a hunger that had nothing to do with society’s approval and everything to do with the woman in his arms. In that moment, with the echo of the evening’s music

still hanging in the air, Milly knew they had won something far more valuable than the ton's acceptance—they had found in each other a home that no whisper or scandal could ever breach.

### CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The fire flickered in the drawing room, sending errant shadows dancing over the walls. Milly nestled beside Dainsfield on the settee, her gown hugging the curves of her body in a way that surely pleased the man who was now her husband. “We’ve known each other forever,” she said, breaking the silence with a hint of mischief in her voice.

He made a noise that might have been a chuckle as he brought an arm around her shoulder. Milly tucked herself closer, reveling in the warmth of both the room and his touch.

“Since you were eighteen, at least,” Dainsfield replied, his expression softened by memories.

She lifted her head, her sparkling eyes meeting his. “The party. That awful, wonderful cyprian party.”

Dainsfield’s reserved expression melted into a smile as he drew her onto his lap. “You looked too young to be at such a party,” he said, allowing the smile to linger.

“And yet there I was,” Milly retorted, with a playfully defiant lift of her chin. “And you! How old were you? Three-and-twenty, perhaps? Quite ancient to my tender eighteen.”

Dainsfield’s eyes warmed, dark and inviting in the firelight. “Old enough to know you shouldn’t have been there.”

Milly wriggled to make herself more comfortable, her laughter filling the room. “Yet I survived, as you can see.” Her gown shifted as she moved, showing just enough skin to make his gaze follow. “Did you really think I couldn’t manage it?”

“You managed all too well,” Dainsfield replied, drawing her even closer. “That’s what concerned me.”

Milly leaned back, studying him with teasing appraisal. “I seem to remember you were the only man at that party I didn’t make love to.”

Dainsfield’s brows lifted in mock affront, and his hand settled possessively on her hip. “A failing I’m more than capable of correcting.”

Her laughter was as bright as the fire, and she traced a finger along his jaw. “You were very solemn then, too. I wasn’t sure whether you pitied me or disapproved.”

He made a thoughtful sound, his fingers toying with the edge of her gown. “Neither, as it happens. I was mostly struck by how beautiful you were. The other men seemed equally struck.”

Her eyes danced with mischief. “I seem to remember some were quite overwhelmed. I took great satisfaction in that.”

“As I recall, you took satisfaction in quite a few things that evening.” He watched her intently, a familiar heat kindling between them.

Milly tilted her head, considering him with amusement. “And there you were, like a statue in the corner, brooding as always.”

“I wasn’t brooding,” Dainsfield objected, a flash of rare playfulness in his voice. “I was contemplating the foolishness of any man who didn’t fall hopelessly in love with

you that night.”

Her breath caught, and she leaned into his embrace. “You didn’t.”

“I most certainly did,” he corrected, lifting a hand to trace her cheek. “I just kept it a secret from both of us.”

Milly’s gaze softened, a tender light in her eyes. “Five years is a very long time to keep a secret.”

“Not so long,” he murmured, his hand trailing down her neck with unerring purpose. “Though some things have changed in those years. You’ve grown.”

Her laughter returned, low and inviting. “You mean I’ve aged. Like cheese. Or wine.”

“I mean your body, my scandalous wife,” Dainsfield replied, his large hands moving to cup her breasts through the gown. “Particularly these.”

She arched into his touch, a breathy sigh escaping her lips. “Was that why you married me? In case they got away?”

“I couldn’t risk it,” he said, circling her nipples with his thumbs, feeling them respond beneath the fabric.

Milly trembled against him, a delightful shiver that he felt in his own core. “Even as a newlywed, you’re as reserved as ever.”

His fingers teased with knowing intent, each motion claiming her as his own. “I might be reserved, but I assure you I’m thorough.”

“Yes, you do like things done properly,” she breathed, her eyes fluttering as pleasure

stole through her.

“Particularly when it comes to you,” Dainsfield said, watching the way her lips parted at his touch.

Her head fell back, and her laughter had a new edge of longing. “You’ve always been too proper for your own good.”

Dainsfield pulled her closer, claiming her mouth with a kiss that spoke of years of restrained desire, the taste of her more intoxicating than any cyprian party could ever have been.

\* \* \*

Milly’s breath came in little gasps, each one a melody to Dainsfield’s ears. He lowered his head, his lips grazing her neck as he murmured, “I thought of myself as your big brother at that party.” Milly’s body stilled beneath his touch, and she lifted her head to meet his gaze, a slow smile spreading across her face.

“A big brother?” she teased, her voice a mix of amusement and disbelief. “You certainly didn’t behave like one.”

His hand paused, savoring the feel of her through the thin fabric. “I didn’t want them taking advantage of you,” he admitted, feeling the weight of years-old emotions finding their way to the surface.

She laughed, a bright, reckless sound. “I loved how each man was different. I didn’t want to give that up.”

He pulled back slightly, searching her face. “Has that changed? Now that you’re married to me?”

Milly caught her breath, her eyes searching his, measuring his intent. The moment stretched between them, full of expectation. She tilted her head, her lips curving into a smile as bold as the declaration that followed. “No man has satisfied me the way you have,” she said, a hint of wonder in her voice. “I suspect love has more to do with orgasms than my cunny.”

Dainsfield absorbed her words, a slow grin lighting up his usually somber features. “You surprise me at every turn, Milly.”

Her smile turned wicked. “I may miss having more than one man at the same time.”

He met her gaze steadily, the playful tension crackling between them like the fire in the hearth. “And if I say that’s not going to happen?”

Milly studied him, delighting in his thoughtful pause, the way his mind worked beneath the handsome facade. She saw the exact moment his expression hardened into determination.

“No,” Dainsfield said, his tone leaving no room for argument. “I’m a very jealous, very possessive man. I could never allow another to enjoy your body. Not even someone you’ve had before or a friend.”

His words were firm, but they carried an edge of apology. Milly pretended to sigh, a sound of exaggerated woe, as her fingers began to stroke his thigh with calculated intent.

“One man? Oh, the imposition,” she said, her voice layered with humor and desire.

“You seem amused by your fate,” he observed, watching her fingers with rapt attention as they brushed closer to his growing need.



Her hand paused just long enough to make him want more. “Only if that one man is up to the task.” She let her fingers drift over the hardening length of him, her own breath catching as she felt his reaction.

Dainsfield’s eyes darkened with the same possessiveness that colored his words. He lifted one of her breasts from her gown, exposing her to the warmth of the room and his gaze. “I don’t intend to disappoint,” he said, the intensity of his stare matched only by the deftness of his fingers as they teased her nipple to a taut peak.

Milly’s laughter was a joyous sound, full of anticipation and the thrill of his determination. “You’ve much to live up to, husband.”

“I accept the challenge,” Dainsfield replied, sealing his promise with a kiss that claimed her as thoroughly as his hands and his heart. The drawing room and all its elegant trappings seemed to melt away, leaving only the two of them, their passion, and the untold possibilities of forever.

Her fingers moved with skillful intent, and he could almost believe she’d forgotten about all those other men. “I don’t like to disappoint you,” Dainsfield said, lifting one of her breasts from her gown, exposing her to the room’s warmth.

Her laughter turned to a soft moan as his fingers found her nipple, teasing it to an aching hardness. “You have so far to go,” she murmured, leaning into his touch.

He smiled at her boldness, a heated promise in his eyes. “I won’t give you reason to regret it, Milly.”

She shivered with pleasure, every touch making her want him more. “You’re very sure of yourself,” she said, though her voice lacked any real challenge.

“Very,” Dainsfield replied, the words a pledge and a provocation. He caught her

hand, stilling its progress just long enough to remind her who held the true power. Then he released it, a deliberate invitation that spoke of trust as well as desire.

Milly's fingers continued their exploration, sparking an urgency in him that was mirrored in her own heightened breaths. "Show me," she taunted, delight and anticipation mingling in every syllable.

He pulled her closer, kissing her with a passion that had been building from the moment she'd mentioned more than one man. His lips on hers were both a challenge and a surrender, a claiming of her heart and body in a way no words could convey.

Milly wrapped her arms around him, losing herself in the promise of his embrace. They shifted on the settee, all thought of other lovers, past or future, vanishing in the heat of the present moment. Her hands slipped beneath his shirt, finding the warmth of his skin and the rapid beat of his heart.

"Milly," Dainsfield whispered, her name a benediction and a plea. His hands moved with purpose, his urgency a match for hers. He lowered her to the floor, where the world narrowed to the two of them, the fire, and the untamed, glorious hunger that neither could deny.

Her gown slid from her body, an elegant tumble of fabric and desire. Dainsfield took his time, savoring the act of undressing her as he would a rare delicacy. Milly lay on the floor, the firelight painting her skin in tones of bronze and warmth. She watched him with eager eyes, the intimacy of his gaze nearly as erotic as his touch. He worshiped her with his hands and his mouth, each kiss a declaration more profound than words. Milly arched against him, her body a symphony of longing and love, her voice a soft and urgent chorus. He smiled against her skin, feeling the rush of satisfaction that came with knowing he had driven all other thoughts, all other lovers, from her mind.

He traced his lips along the swell of her breasts, savoring the softness, the taste, the way her breath caught in her throat. Her nipples were already taut, eager for his attention, and he obliged them with tender, possessive flicks of his tongue. Milly's fingers curled into his hair, a wordless plea for more, for everything. He obliged again, moving slowly down her body, worshiping each inch as if it were sacred and his alone.

Her stomach, her hips, the sensitive skin along the line of her thigh—he kissed and licked and sucked, delighting in the shivers that followed the trail of his mouth. Milly's voice rose in sweet, breathless notes, her body moving beneath him with a grace and abandon that made him dizzy with desire. He paused, meeting her gaze with a smoldering intensity that made her shudder before he touched her again. She arched toward him, each motion an expression of the longing that only he could satisfy.

Dainsfield took her wrists, pinning them gently above her head as he moved between her legs. She gasped his name, and it was more intoxicating than the finest wine, more compelling than any desire he'd ever known. Her cry became a wordless plea, and then it was nothing but the rhythm of her quickening breaths, the wild, untamed song of her pleasure.

He worshiped her with his tongue, his mouth, the relentless devotion of his touch. Milly writhed beneath him, her fingers tangling in his dark hair, her body yielding and taut in the same urgent, perfect moment. He felt the first trembling waves as they coursed through her, then the great, full flood that followed. Her cry filled the room, raw and exquisite, and he held her to him, drinking in the essence of her climax and the sheer, wild beauty of her release.

Milly lay in a delicious sprawl, her skin flushed and her heart still racing as he rose above her. Dainsfield made quick work of his clothing, a man in the thrall of an urgency that could no longer be contained. His shirt fell to the floor, revealing the

hard, muscular planes of his chest, the powerful lines of a body that seemed sculpted by some passionate and generous hand.

She watched, her eyes dark with anticipation, as he removed his trousers. His erection was bold and fierce, a testament to his desire and the promise he'd made her. "You're beautiful," Milly breathed, each word colored with awe and yearning.

Dainsfield smiled, a rakish twist of his lips as he moved over her. "Not quite as beautiful as you," he said, claiming her mouth with a kiss that was both tender and possessive, a declaration that was both challenge and surrender.

She wrapped her legs around him, pulling him to her with a need that was nearly desperate. He thrust into her, and the world seemed to splinter and reform, leaving nothing but the exquisite joining of their bodies. Milly gasped, each sensation heightened by the love she saw reflected in his eyes, by the passion she felt in every powerful stroke.

Her fingers dug into his back, urging him on as he drove into her with an intensity that matched her own. She moved beneath him, her hips rising to meet his, the wet, hot slide of their bodies setting the rhythm of their hearts. Dainsfield's breath came in rough, fervent pants, and he knew he would never want another the way he wanted her.

Their climax built between them, an unstoppable force that drew them together with ever-increasing urgency. Milly's cries grew louder, uninhibited and wild, and he reveled in the sound of them, in the knowledge that he alone could provoke such joy. He thrust harder, faster, feeling the tension coil and explode as they reached the peak together.

It was everything he had hoped and everything she had longed for. They remained entwined, their limbs a glorious tangle, the rug a haphazard testament to their love.

The fire burned low, a warm and gentle glow, but neither of them noticed as they held each other close.

“You’re the only man I could ever love,” Milly whispered, her breath a soft caress against his cheek.

Dainsfield smiled, a happiness so profound it almost frightened him. “And you’re the only woman I’ll ever want,” he replied, sealing the promise with a kiss as deep and tender as the bond that would unite them forever.

\*\*\*\*I hope you’ve enjoyed Dainsfield and Milly’s story. Would you like to meet Betty and Longford as they first discovered each other at Sutcliffe’s? Read on for a sample of Bedeviling the Duke.\*\*\*\*

### EXCERPT: BEDEVILING THE DUKE

#### Chapter One

May 1, 1821, London

The grandeur of Sutcliffe's gaming hell was unparalleled, a testament to the opulent dreams of the original owner, who sadly went to his grave three months after opening his restaurant and exclusive men's club. The lavish ballroom, with its high gilded ceilings and intricate chandeliers casting a warm glow upon the guests, exuded an atmosphere of festivity and indulgence. Spring blossoms adorned the tables that dotted one wall, bearing punch bowls and glasses, filling the air with a heady fragrance that mingled with the soft strains of a string quartet playing in the corner.

Amidst the sea of elegantly dressed ladies and gentlemen, Betty, Lady Frimley, moved through the crowd with the grace of a seasoned socialite, her laughter ringing melodiously as she exchanged pleasantries with acquaintances, old and new. Betty's keen gaze scanned the elegantly dressed May Day revelers in search of a partner. She had already dismissed half a dozen prospective partners. They were either too young, too old, too portly—or already claimed by another woman.

Although she was at the May Day Ball, it wasn't a dance partner she sought. She needed a lover, one who was generous with his passion and stingy with his heart. Just the way she was. Her last paramour was recently forced to marry by his father, so she found herself alone once again. This type of parting didn't upset her much, especially when compared to the loss of her husband three years ago. It was simply a nuisance finding another lover who could satisfy her and not get designs on marrying her for

her inheritance.

Added to the challenge was the fact they all were masked. Would she be able to identify anyone she wished to avoid approaching? She decided not to worry overmuch on that matter. She could easily talk her way out of an unpleasant situation if she tried to seduce the wrong man.

Betty sighed when she caught a glimpse of her reflection in one of the tall mirrors lining the walls. The scarlet silk gown she had chosen so carefully now seemed glaringly conspicuous, as if she were a poppy in a field of daisies. The dancers here were much more colorful than somewhere such as Almack's, and older than the debutantes one expected to see at a ball. No young women who wished to avoid sullyng their reputations ever entered the halls of Sutcliffe's. Every young man with a pocketful of his allowance rushed there to drink, gamble, and if he was lucky, bed a wench.

Betty continued her leisurely stroll around the edges of the ballroom, her gaze flitting from one elegantly dressed gentleman to another. Each man seemed more handsome than the last—a veritable parade of well-tailored coats and finely chiseled features that beckoned her forward. She knew she should be content with the simple pleasure of dancing and engaging in polite conversation, but tonight, Betty yearned for something more. A tantalizing liaison that would leave her breathless and sated, if only for a moment.

“Good evening, Mr. Worthington,” she greeted a familiar face with a warm smile as they crossed paths. His tall stature and broad shoulders had always intrigued her, yet she knew his affections lay elsewhere. Their brief exchange was cordial, and as he moved away, Betty sighed softly, her eyes seeking another potential suitor.

Perhaps I am being too particular, she mused internally, scanning the room once more. All she desired was a thrilling encounter, a passionate dalliance that would allow her to forget, if only briefly, that she was alone by choice.

Eventually, a figure near the door to the balcony caught her eye. He was tall and broad-shouldered, with tousled dark hair and a brooding expression. Betty's heart quickened. Here was a man who didn't seem inclined to frivolous chatter or vain preening. He looked as if he had stumbled into the ball by accident, drawn against his will from the cozy solitude of his library, or perhaps he'd wandered upstairs from the gaming rooms.

As she drew closer, she saw he was younger than she had first assumed, likely not yet thirty. But there was something very sure and self-possessed in his stance, a kind of quiet gravity that she found compelling. Something familiar in his air. He didn't seem to require the admiration of others to sustain his consequence.

Before she reached him, a familiar feminine voice rang through the chattering women around her. "Betty! You look delightful."

Betty opened her arms to embrace her dear friend Verity, the Countess of St. Ervan. "As do you. Your apricot gown is perfect with your red hair. Where is your charming husband?"

"I left him at the Macau table with Nomansland and a few other men."

Surprised to hear the duke's name, Betty asked, "He's playing with Nomansland? I never see Sutcliffe's owners at the tables. I thought the three dukes avoid gambling here." It made sense that Nomansland, Abingdon, and Dainsfield abstained from adding their own coin to the coffers of their club. She often saw them milling around the rooms, chatting with patrons, but never joining in a game of chance.

"My husband has an ongoing game with the dukes, but they only play in the private room. I'm not sure why Nomansland is playing in the main card room tonight. St. Ervan has been friends with them for many years. The dukes were at the party the week when St. Ervan and I... well, the week everything changed between us."



Betty sighed. “Ah yes, the week he turned the tables on you and tricked you into a courtship. I am still in awe of how he swept you off your feet. Even my late husband wasn’t that romantic. It’s no wonder you fell for him.”

“My first husband wasn’t either,” Verity said, “and I loved him so deeply I didn’t think I could let another man into my heart. Yet here we are...”

After noticing the gentleman she’d been watching had disappeared, Betty took Verity’s arm and began to take a turn about the room. She understood completely the type of love that left one unable to love again. Her marriage to Frimley was a once-in-a-lifetime love. She couldn’t imagine doing what Verity had done—remarrying. Between her dowry and the money Frimley left her when he died, she was lucky. She didn’t need a husband to support her.

And thanks to Sutcliffe’s, she didn’t lack for male companionship. Here, she had control over who she spent time with, and how much time. If a man’s company grew dull, she moved to a different table. Or politely turned down his offer of other entertainment.

If a man was a poor practitioner of bed sport, she didn’t sleep with him again. Honestly, once was enough for too many of these young bucks. She hadn’t the patience to teach them how to please a woman. She would rather enjoy the skills of certain other gentlemen more than once.

Then there were those few men who remained on her list of as-yet unattainable prizes. She didn’t understand why they politely changed the subject when she’d hinted at an assignation. None were married—she’d never trespass on another woman’s territory. None had rumors flitting about that suggested an interest in certain proclivities that would prevent them from desiring her.

Betty knew she wasn’t the prettiest woman in any room, yet she was far from plain. She hadn’t been a Diamond in her Seasons, but she’d had more than one suitor. She

continued to keep her figure trim, which at twenty-eight years old wasn't difficult, despite her penchant for sweets. There was no reason she could imagine for a man not to say yes, should she offer herself to him.

This perplexity always centered on the one name on the top of her list—the Duke of Mayweather. He seemed to enjoy her company at the card tables. He often joined a game she played, often striking up a conversation with her. That wasn't to say he sought her company in particular, as she never saw him at assemblies or parties.

Now that she knew he wasn't in the ballroom, there was no need for her to remain there. As they neared the staircase, she said, "I confess I don't see anyone I wish to partner with on the dance floor."

"Or anywhere else, I presume," Verity said with a laugh. "If you were hoping to find the man I think you were, I'm surprised you even came in here. Come. I feel the need to speak to my husband. Let's see who he's playing with."

Smiling, Betty picked up her step. "That sounds delightful. Perhaps I'll find something in the cards that will revive my spirit."