



The Beast's Unwanted Duchess (Icy Dukes #1)

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Category: Historical

Description: "You left two years ago..." "And yet I am still your husband, Duchess."

The Duke of Ravenmoor has killed his wife... or at least that's what the rumors say. And even though Victor couldn't care less about the ton's gossip, this particular one needs to be stopped immediately!

Abandoned by her beastly husband on their wedding night, Alice thought her life couldn't get worse. Until the vexing Duke returns...

And this time he is planning to stay, until his reputation is restored. Yet Alice cannot wait until then. Not when she starts yearning for the man she can never have: her husband...

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CHAPTER ONE

"He eloped? Are you sure the Earl eloped?"

The news was all over the scandal sheets in all of London, spreading like wildfire among the ton.

Whispers of the Earl of Pembroke's sudden departure with his lover was all everyone was talking about.

Rumor had it that he was in Gretna Green with Florence, the modiste, after they had secretly tied the knot.

"That wretched boy! After everything his mother promised us," Timothy ranted, pacing. "We were counting on this match, we have talked about it at every opportunity, and now he's gone and thrown it all away for some fleeting romance. It's utterly disgraceful! What was he thinking?"

"Let's calm down, my lord," Patience, Alice's mother, tried to assuage him. "I know we had high hopes for this match, but perhaps it is not the end of the world. There are still other eligible gentlemen that I am certain will—"

"Other eligible gentlemen? Did you read what was written in the scandal sheet this morning?"

"Timothy interrupted her and stopped pacing, his brow furrowed.

He snatched a paper from his desk and unfolded it with a sharp flick.

"Here... 'The once-promising match between Miss Alice Robins and the Earl of Pembroke crumbles, as the Earl elopes with another, leaving Miss Alice – once again without a suitor.' My goodness. .."

Timothy flung the sheet aside and let out a loud sigh. "Do you think I want to start again, Patience? To sift through the same crop of young men who have neither ambition nor the title to match? No. This was our opportunity, and now it has slipped through our fingers like sand."

"Papa, please..." Catherine, Alice's sister, interjected.

She had visited two days ago to spend time with the family, given the season and Alice's potential match.

The air in the house always seemed to change when Catherine was around.

A kind of tension filled the space, as if Alice were a shadow in the light of her sister.

On most days, Alice didn't mind. Her parents always seemed to be in a better mood whenever Catherine was in the estate.

But there were days when the reality that she was seen as less stung.

Growing up, people couldn't tell them apart.

They had the same physique, the same long, honey-brown hair and blue eyes.

However, as they matured, their differences became more pronounced.

Catherine's graceful elegance and poised demeanor seemed to overshadow Alice's more spirited nature.

Alice had developed a dust of freckles across her nose, while Catherine didn't.

The older they got, the more different they became.

Catherine grew in the image that her father cherished, while Alice strayed further and further from his expectations.

"...Becoming agitated won't change what has happened," Catherine continued. "We must remain composed and consider our options moving forward."

"There are no other viable options, my dear," Timothy said and sat down. "Perhaps, it would be a different case if we had better material to work with. But you know your sister. You know how she is. We were lucky that Pembroke thought her a good match in the first place."

Alice played with her fingers, staring down at her lap as they discussed her as if she were not even present.

She wanted to say something...to explain that she tried to warn them, but no one listened.

She wanted to say that Edward looked uninterested in the match from the start, and she tried as much as she could to make the match work for Timothy's sake.

She wanted to defend herself, but the words caught in her throat, leaving her feeling more like a child than the young lady she was meant to be.

"You did something, didn't you?" Timothy asked Alice. "You must have done

something to chase him away."

"I didn't do anything, Papa," she managed to say, her frustration melting the lump that had previously choked her ability to speak.

"I did every single thing you told me to do.

I talked to him, I smiled, I was courteous, I danced with him.

..what more could I have possibly done? I did nothing wrong. "

"Of course, you didn't," Timothy scoffed, throwing his hands up in frustration. He rose to his feet and began pacing, his agitation clear. "You never do, do you? It's always someone else's fault.

We never had this issue with Catherine. When I chose Lord Davis for your sister, it was a seamless match.

No problems, no delays. He asked for her hand in marriage after just a month of courting. "

He stopped pacing and turned toward Alice, his eyes narrowed.

"But with you, it's always a struggle. Every time we find a decent man willing to give you a chance, something goes wrong.

You either say the wrong thing, laugh too loudly, or behave in a way that drives them off.

Why is it so difficult for you to be like your sister? "

Alice rose to her feet, clutching a fist full of her dress. "I am not my sister."

"Clearly!" Timothy retorted, his voice rising.

"You are not. Catherine would never have caused such a scene.

Did you see her at the Huntington Ball, Darling?

" he asked, turning to Patience. "I told you what happened. She tripped over nothing but thin air, babbled on about her love of food, and asked the most absurd, childish questions. I lost count of how many times she stepped on the Earl's toes while dancing with him. "

He shook his head in exasperation, pacing again.

"I was mortified. How is anyone supposed to take you seriously when you keep behaving so unladylike, Alice. Do you have any idea how hard it is to find a respectable man willing to court you? You're practically shunned by society, people gossip about you, laugh at your expense, and I don't blame them!

You make it so easy with the circle of friends that you frolic with! "

"My lord!" Patience said, rising to her feet. "That's enough. I'm sure Alice did her best under the circumstances."

"Yes, Papa," Catherine added. "The rumor is that the Earl and the modiste have been seeing each other for a long time now. If it's really true, then there's really nothing Alice could have done to prevent this from happening."

Timothy paused mid-pace, turning to face them.

"If this was the first time, I would understand. You might be fooled into thinking she's trying her best, but I am not.

Her best isn't enough. It is not even close.

Do you even realize what's at stake here?

The season is drawing to an end, and if Alice doesn't secure a match soon, she'll be left behind.

Unmatched. Again. Another year wasted. What respectable gentleman will consider her then?

We don't have the luxury of time or second chances. "

"This is just her second season, my lord," Patience tried to explain. "She's only nineteen."

"Only?" Timothy asked with raised eyebrows. "Catherine was married in her debut year. She was a bride by eighteen and a mother within the year. We never had these issues with her. Yet here we are, two seasons wasted, and Alice is no closer to securing a match."

"What would you have me do then?" Alice questioned, her voice trembling with frustration. She looked between her parents, her gaze flickering with a mixture of anger and sadness. "Tell me. What do you want me to do? I am sorry that I am not like Catherine. It must be a shame. I mean, we are so physically alike, even down to the color of our eyes, and yet I can never be her, can I? I don't walk like her, I don't talk like her, I don't. .."

Alice swallowed, realizing how unfair it was to put Catherine in such a position, as if

her sister had done something wrong by simply existing. It wasn't Catherine's fault.

"We cannot live the same lives, Papa," she continued. "I don't have to get married this season, but I will?—"

"Oh, you will marry this season, Alice," Timothy interrupted sharply. "I am not asking you to live the same life your sister lives. I am asking that you emulate her. You will marry, and you will do it soon."

Alice took a deep breath, trying to steady herself. "But forcing me into a marriage I don't want won't solve anything! I need to find someone who appreciates me for who I am, not for the image you want me to project. I cannot be someone else for the rest of my life."

Timothy's face flushed with anger. "You think you know what's best?

You are a young lady of society. Your happiness should come from making a perfect match, not pursuing whims. Not from reading books and filling your head with nonsense ideologies about love and marriage.

You are running out of time, Alice. I will not have my reputation tarnished because you choose to rebel against your responsibilities. "

"I'm not rebelling," Alice countered, her voice steadying with determination. "I refuse to live my life in the shadow of someone else's expectations. I will find my match, but have you considered, Papa, that your relentless interference are a hindrance to my path?"

"How dare you?" Timothy gasped.

Alice lowered her head as the familiar feeling of fear washed over her on hearing the

anger in Timothy's voice.

"I am not rebelling," she repeated. "I just...I don't know."

The room fell silent for a few seconds, giving Alice a moment to gather her thoughts.

She slowly sat back down and crossed her arms. Even though Edward had embarrassed her family by eloping after promising Timothy he would marry Alice, her father still found a way to place all the blame squarely on her shoulders.

She had gone out of her way. She had done things she laughed at other people about, just so Timothy would be pleased, yet still...still, he could only blame her for his plan falling through.

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"Papa, there are still ways we can salvage this," Catherine said, breaking the silence. "Edward might have been a good match that slipped through our fingers, but I am certain there are other gentlemen we can find."

"Not titled ones," Timothy said. "I'm afraid we are down to our last resort. There is still a gentleman left who is suitable. He wouldn't mind taking Alice as his bride."

Alice felt a chill at her father's words as her heart sank to the bottom of her stomach. She had thought that the Earl was last on her father's list of possible suitors. "Who is he?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

"The Duke of Ravenmoor," he announced. "If we intend to make a match this season, then he is our last option."

"The Duke of Ravenmoor?" Patience asked.

"The Duke of Ravenmoor?" Alice asked even louder, springing to her feet. "Papa, you cannot be serious right now. Are you serious? No...You are not. You're not, right?"

"He is a man of considerable wealth and influence, Alice. He is a Duke," Timothy said. "Your future will be secure and well taken care of."

"That's not the issue," Alice said, placing both hands on her hips. She turned to Patience with pleading eyes. "Mama, are you listening to this?"

Patience let out a soft sigh. "Alice, he is a Duke. A match with him will secure not

only your future but also elevate our family's status. This is a rare opportunity, one that doesn't come around often. You must at least consider it."

"Consider it?" Alice asked, her voice rising in disbelief. "Papa, I have taken all that you have thrown at me. I have done what you asked, smiled and entertained the gentlemen you deemed suitable. But this is a new level entirely. You know the rumors that circulate about this man."

"You have rumors of your own too, Alice so you have no grounds to be judgmental," Timothy said.

"The worst the ton can call me is arrogant and a wallflower," she said. "But the Duke of Ravenmoor has rumors for days! He has no friends, he rarely attends social gatherings-

"Enough," Timothy said. "Rumors are just that. Rumors. People love to talk, especially about those with power. You cannot let idle gossip dictate your future. I know a way to secure this match, so I will do it."

"He was your last resort for a reason, Papa," Alice continued to argue. "Do you know how beastly someone has to be, to be rejected by even the desperate Mamas of the ton?"

"I said enough," Timothy reiterated. "I am exhausted, Alice. You will not question my judgment on this matter. If the Duke will have you, then you will marry him. End of discussion."

With that, Timothy walked out of the drawing-room, leaving Alice standing in the middle of the room with confusion etched all over her face.

Of all the people Timothy could have possibly chosen, the Duke of Ravenmoor was

the last man she would have imagined.

She could see her dreams of a love match, of marrying someone who truly knew her, crumbling like delicate glass.

"The Duke of Ravenmoor? You jest?" Emma questioned.

"I wish," Alice said.

Alice threw a stone into the pond, watching the water ripple and shimmer in the sunlight.

She had left home that morning to promenade around the park with Lavinia and Emma, hoping the fresh air would ease her troubled thoughts.

Yet, despite how much she loved the park or fancied a nice stroll, she couldn't assuage her troubled heart.

Alice had barely slept a wink the night before.

She had never been so troubled by her father's antics. This was different.

"I fear my papa is moving too fast. I would much rather hug the wall for the rest of the season than marry the duke," Alice said.

Although Alice hated the stigma that came with being called a wallflower, she could admit to herself that it did grant her a certain amount of solace.

It wasn't just an attempt to avoid interacting with the gentlemen of the ton; Alice truly loved the time spent with her only friends, Lavinia and Emma.

Lavinia was shy and introverted, often overshadowed by society's standards of beauty.

With her curvy figure, she didn't fit the mold of the most fashionable young lady, and as such, she preferred the company of her beloved books to the noisy gatherings of the season, even though she was dragged to every single one by her mama.

Emma, on the other hand, was all about responsibility.

Being the eldest daughter meant she felt it was her duty to look after her two younger sisters, Cecilia and Dorothy, as well as her ten-year-old brother.

Though she often appeared serious, Emma had a sharp sense of humor that always lifted Alice's mood.

On most days, spending time with them distracted Alice from the fact that she was still unmarried. Being a wallflower had its advantages. It offered a sanctuary from the looming shadow of her father's expectations.

"Who even is the Duke of Ravenmoor?" Lavinia asked, her brow furrowing in confusion. The three of them were squatted by the pond's edge, watching the water.

"The Duke of Ravenmoor," Emma answered. "He's quite a known figure in society, but his reputation precedes him, I'm afraid."

"What reputation?" Lavinia asked again.

"You see, if you didn't have your head buried in books all day, you would know," Emma said.

"The Duke is more beast than man, according to the rumors. No one dares speak well

of him. They say he is not just rude but brutal, with a temper that borders on madness. He avoids society not out of preference, but because people fear him. His tongue is as sharp as a blade, cutting down anyone who dares cross him, and there are whispers... whispers that he's even taken a life in a fit of rage. "

Lavinia shuddered. "Surely, that can't be true."

"I wouldn't be so sure," Emma replied grimly. "These rumors cannot emerge from thin air."

Lavinia shivered slightly at Emma's words. "I cannot imagine being married to someone like that. It sounds utterly dreadful."

Alice gave Lavinia a quizzical look. "You do realize that I might end up marrying someone exactly like that, and it's for this reason, I am currently losing my grip on my mind?"

Lavinia stifled a laugh. "Sorry," she whispered. "But look on the bright side. He is a duke. He has the title and the wealth. Your papa always compares you to Catherine, and she is married to an Earl. If you marry the Duke, you'll finally silence him once and for all."

"That's not exactly the kind of motivation I need, Lavinia," Alice said.

"Titles and wealth do not guarantee a happy life," Emma explained. "You deserve someone who treats you with kindness and respect, not someone who will make you feel small."

"I don't know why this feels so different," Alice said lowly.

"In a way, it scares me. For instance, the other suitors Papa had presented to me were

respectable gentlemen.

People knew them, they were part of society, well-connected and reliable.

But the Duke seems... like a dark alley. He has no relatives here in London, no one can vouch for his character, and the rumors that swirl around him have never been debunked.

If I end up marrying him, I would be stepping into the unknown.

I am beyond terrified. What if he attempts to kill me in a fit of rage? "

Emma patted Alice on the back. "I understand your frustration, my friend," she said. "I would be worried too if I were in your shoes."

"I don't think she should be worried," Lavinia said.

"Why not?" Emma and Alice chorused.

"Because she is not marrying the Duke," Lavinia said. "Your papa is bluffing."

Alice scoffed. "My papa is not one to bluff. He is a strict man who cares more about climbing the social ladder than about the happiness of his daughters. His ambition blinds him to what truly matters, and I fear I am simply a pawn in his quest for status."

"Hear me out," Lavinia asked. "What does your papa care about the most?"

Alice arched her eyebrows. "Status?"

"What else?"

Alice shrugged her shoulders. "Our family's reputation?"

"Exactly!" Lavinia said with widened eyes. "He cares deeply about your family's reputation. He won't do anything to tarnish it. This rush to marry you off stems from the Earl's actions.

He's trying to repair the damage his elopement caused, and he believes pairing you quickly will cause the backlash to die down. "

Alice slowly shook her head. "I don't think I understand?—"

"Marrying the Duke will tarnish your family's reputation," Lavinia said. "Especially if the rumors about him are true."

Emma gasped. "Lavinia makes a valid point. Alice, you must convince your papa that a match with the Duke could be disastrous. If you get him to see things from that perspective, he will rethink his decision and arrange for other engagements."

Alice nodded slowly, feeling a flicker of hope ease her worry. "You are right. I could do that."

"Can your mama help?" Emma asked.

Alice dropped her shoulders before shaking her head.

"My mama is only concerned about the Duke's status.

She will only choose to see the good that comes with marrying a man of such rank.

In her eyes, it's all about securing our place in society, not the potential disaster that might come with marrying a man surrounded by such rumors. "

"What about your sister?" Lavinia asked. "You can always get her to take your side. She might be the pedestal your father places you against, but she is still your sister. If she sees how serious this situation is, she might be able to convince him to reconsider."

"Catherine leaves tomorrow," Alice said. "The Earl misses her already."

"So, it's up to you," Lavinia replied. "But you have to be clever about it. Don't let him know what you're trying to achieve. You need to drop subtle hints, guide him to see the flaws in this match without outrightly defying him."

"I know just how to do it," Alice said with a smile.

A plan was already coming together in her head, and she was starting to feel her confidence build back up. This was her opportunity to regain control over her future and steer her father's decisions in her favor.

Alice hurried home from the park, eager to set her plan in motion. It was simple. She wasn't going to argue. All she had to do was drop hints and she knew just how to do it.

Upon arriving at her family's modest estate, she made her way straight for Timothy's study, where she knew he would be reviewing the estate's finances and correspondence.

"Papa, you will not believe that I heard today," she said and slumped on the chair in front of him. "It is just preposterous."

Timothy only spared her a glance. "What did you hear today, Alice?"

Alice leaned in. "Apparently, there are rumors that the Duke of Ravenmoor killed

someone. It is what everyone is talking about. My goodness. I feel so bad for him. All these rumors about him are so damaging. I mean, no wonder he has no friends!"

Timothy closed the ledger in front of him. "It doesn't matter if he has friends or not. A wife is a far more valuable companion, wouldn't you agree? Since you're so concerned for him, it's perfect! You marry the Duke by the end of the week, Alice. Begin preparations."

With that, he turned on his heel and walked out of the room, leaving Alice in stunned silence. She stared at the door, puzzled.

"Surely he's bluffing," she thought to herself and sat back, trying to come up with a refined plan.

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CHAPTER TWO

Timothy was, in fact, not bluffing.

It was her wedding day, and Alice stood at the entrance of the grand chapel, her heart hammering in her chest. The very plan she had painstakingly crafted — dropping subtle hints, planting doubts in Timothy's mind — had never even gotten off the ground.

In fact, she hadn't had the chance to utter a single word of protest. Timothy, as always, had moved swiftly, and now, here she was.

Getting married to a beast.

Her plan? Completely irrelevant now.

"Papa, are we in financial distress?" Alice asked, turning to Timothy standing by her side, ready to walk her down the aisle.

Timothy raised an eyebrow, glancing at her with a mix of confusion and impatience. "What? No! Whatever gave you that idea?"

"There has to be a reason for this madness," Alice whispered fiercely. "Why else would you sell me off to a man who's practically a myth? For all I know, the Duke is a figment of the gossip columnist's imagination! A beast conjured from nightmares. A...A?—"

"Watch yourself, young lady," Timothy cautioned. "Do not speak ill of your fiancé. You're being married into an influential family. A great match. You should be thankful."

"Thankful?" she asked. "Papa, there are rumors that this man has killed people. Do you not worry about my safety? I could die in his hands!"

Timothy raised an eyebrow, clearly irritated. "Alice, such tales are mere trifles. Idle gossip spread by those with nothing better to do."

"But what if they are not mere tales?" she asked. "Am I to be a lamb led to slaughter? What if he truly is as dangerous as they say? There is no smoke without fire, Papa."

Timothy sighed heavily. "Alice, you indulge too much in farfetched notions. The Duke is a man of standing, well respected despite whatever whispers surround him."

"He was the last option on your list. Surely, you must have had your doubts about the man," Alice said, her gaze darting nervously toward the grand chapel doors ahead of them.

"I have never met this man, Papa. There was no formal introduction, or courtship.

If we are not struggling to make ends meet, I see no reason why you are so eager to marry me off to the Duke of Ravenmoor despite his awful reputation. "

Timothy sighed. "It's about opportunity. You're marrying into one of the most powerful families in the land."

"I am marrying a ghost," she whispered. "A murderous ghost."

"Well, as you will soon come to realize, he is flesh and blood, and today, he'll be

your husband," Timothy said. "With you married to the Duke, our family's standing will be greatly enhanced. You are to think of the benefits, Alice. The position, the wealth, the influence."

Alice swallowed hard and shook her head. "Position, wealth, influence," she echoed. "Just know, that if anything happens to me, you will have yourself to blame, Papa."

"You will be all right," he answered, pulling her gently forward as the music began to swell inside the chapel.

Alice drew a nervous breath, fighting back the tears threatening to fall.

She had accepted her fate, as heartbreaking as it was.

She feared she had no fight left in her.

No reason to resist what was to come. What did it matter anymore?

The wedding was set, the guests had gathered, and she was standing at the threshold of a life she hadn't chosen.

A life that scared her more than anything.

If there was any consolation in the moment, it was the exquisite beauty of her wedding dress.

It was exactly how she had imagined it would look if she ever got married.

It was made from the finest ivory silk, flowing smoothly down to the floor.

The bodice was decorated with intricate lace that highlighted her figure, while soft,

tulle sleeves draped gently over her arms. A modest train trailed behind her, embroidered with delicate flowers with a simple lace veil resting on her head.

Alice sighed, feeling a weight on her heart. If only the man waiting for her at the end of the aisle matched the beauty of her gown.

Alice kept her gaze forward with her eyes fixed on the altar, although her mind seemed to drift somewhere far away.

She pulled back instinctively as the gap between her and the altar began to close.

She could feel Timothy's grip tighten slightly, as if urging her to remain composed.

But Alice felt anything but composed. Deep down, she wanted to turn on her heels and flee, but it was already too late.

Finally—after what felt like an eternity walking down the aisle—Alice stood at the altar.

She couldn't lift her gaze. The man she was bound to spend the rest of her life with loomed before her, an imposing figure radiating power and dominance, but she couldn't lift her gaze.

His tall, muscular frame seemed to command the very air around him.

She couldn't discern whether it was confidence or something more unsettling, but an undeniable sense of intimidation washed over her.

"Dearly beloved," the priest began. "We are gathered here today in the sight of God and this company to join together..."

He is just a person, Alice! Do not show fear!

Reluctantly, she lifted her head as the priest began the ceremony, feeling her throat dry up in the process.

Her breath caught when her gaze locked onto his.

His dark green eyes, deep and unwavering, bore into her, rendering her momentarily speechless.

It took Alice a few seconds to remember how to breathe again.

Though every instinct urged her to flee, she found herself frozen in place, trapped by his piercing gaze, as if his very presence held her captive.

A chilly wave of apprehension washed over her, and she wondered how she could possibly go through with the wedding when all she wanted was to escape. To run for her life.

As her heart raced, she couldn't help but take in the rest of him.

The Duke stood tall – her neck was starting to hurt from looking up at him.

His broad shoulders filled out the tailored lines of his coat, and she could only imagine what powerful physique lay beneath.

His slicked-back black hair, polished to perfection, framed a chiseled face that was both striking and intimidating.

He didn't strike her as one who smiled often and looked quite mean. Like the rumors had foretold.

But the moment she was about to breathe a sigh of relief, reckoning that he didn't look quite as fearsome as the rumors exaggerated, her gaze dropped to his neck, and her eyes widened at the sight.

Jagged scars, like angry whispers of battles, crisscrossed over his skin.

Her heart quickened, and she felt a chill run down her spine as she considered the stories those scars could tell.

What had this man endured to wear such horrid marks?

As her eyes drifted downward, she noticed the scars continued on his forearms, barely visible beneath his crisp white shirt. Instinctively, Alice took a step back, breathing heavily. The rumors were now starting to make sense. His temper, his rumored cruelty...

Who is this...beast?

As Alice's gaze traveled back up, she found his eyes still locked on hers, a smirk playing on his lips that sent a wave of unease coursing through her. It was a look that suggested he was fully aware of the power he wielded – the fear he invoked. It made her skin prickle with discomfort.

Desperation clawed at her throat as she turned her head slightly, scanning the crowd for Patience.

Her heart raced, and she silently pleaded for help with her eyes, hoping for a miracle that could save her from the impending doom that was going to be her marriage.

But all she saw was Patience's composed face.

In fact, everyone was so composed, she looked out of place at her own wedding.

As the last words of the ceremony echoed in her mind, Alice felt as if she were floating through a dream, disconnected from the reality unfolding around her.

The priest's voice had become a distant hum.

She remained in her head, completely lost in a whirlwind of emotions.

Even when her hands trembled as she penned her name beside Victor's, the significance of the act seemed to elude her. She had utterly thrown in the towel.

Once the ceremony concluded, Alice snapped back to reality, almost as if she had just woken up from a vivid dream.

She walked past a line of well-wishers on her way to the reception.

She caught sight of the smiles on their faces, but their insincerity was painfully evident.

Today, they put on masks of feigned joy, but she knew that beneath their hollow congratulations, many would not wish her fate on their worst enemies.

While they always had something to say about her, today, they could only pretend to celebrate her and wish her marital bliss.

Bliss? More like a nightmare.

"My dear, it's time for the first dance," she said, beaming. "You mustn't keep him waiting." Alice snapped out of her thoughts, startled by Patience's sudden voice. She scanned the ballroom, noting that the reception had already started in full swing.

"Mama, have you seen the scars on him?" Alice questioned. "Did he fight in a war?"

"Not that we know of, no, my dear," she answered, pulling Alice by the arm.

"Then how did he get all those scars, Mama?" she questioned. "Aren't you worried? What if he is a murderer? Or a sick man?"

"No one has been able to prove the rumors, Alice. Stop whining. Put on a smile for your husband and dance. Everyone is watching," Patience said. "Careful not to step on his toes."

"Mama-"

"Stop protesting. It's done," Patience said. "You look beautiful, my darling. Like a true duchess."

A figure approached them, and Alice didn't have to turn around to see who was towering over her. When she saw him, Patience curtsied, gave Alice a knowing look, and hurried off, leaving them alone.

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"Let's get this over with, shall we?" she heard Victor say huskily.

Victor's husky voice rumbled beside her, sending an unexpected warmth down Alice's spine.

She stiffened, her breath catching in her throat as she turned to glance at his outstretched hand.

His voice was deeper than she'd imagined.

It seemed to hold a certain power, and it stirred something unsettling inside her.

She couldn't quite figure out what it was.

Her gaze flickered to his outstretched hand, and she grimaced at the sight of his scars.

Were they marks from battles fought in dark alleyways or worse?

The thought chilled her, making her stomach twist. For a brief moment, she wished she could disappear into the crowd to avoid the intimidating figure towering over her.

Impatiently, he took her hand into his rough grasp, his fingers enveloping hers with firmness that sent a jolt of unease through her.

He led her toward the center of the ballroom, and as the music began to play, he drew her close as she fought against the instinct to pull away.

Victor pulled her into the dance, his grip firm yet gentle.

She fought the urge to look up at him, afraid of what she might find in his eyes or, worse. ..what she might feel.

But as they began to move, something changed. His hold, though firm, didn't hurt her. In fact, it made her feel...safe. She figured it was his build. How tall he was, and how broad his shoulders were.

Her cheeks flushed, the heat rising to her face as she struggled to understand how a man who seemed so dangerous, so beastly in nature, could make her feel so secure. It was unsettling and confusing.

Alice couldn't count the number of times she had stepped on his foot, but Victor gave no outward sign of irritation, though she felt the tension in his grip tighten just slightly. She had to constantly remind herself to breathe so she didn't pass out on the dance floor.

As soon as the dance ended, Alice curtsied stiffly and hurried away from Victor's presence with her heart in her mouth.

She barely waited for the final note of the waltz before escaping to the edge of the ballroom, desperate for a moment to breathe.

Her body had betrayed her. She had leaned in, engulfed in the safety of his embrace and temporarily forgetting the man she married.

Her hands trembled as she made her way to the far wall before and pressed herself against it, her chest rising and falling with shallow breaths.

"Alice," Emma whispered.

Alice opened her eyes to find Emma and Lavinia by her side. She let out a sigh of relief.

"My goodness," Emma continued, grasping her arm gently. "Are you all right?"

"You look so pale," Lavinia added. "Do you want a drink of water?"

"No." Alice shook her head. "I'm afraid I cannot hold anything down. I'm all right."

"Did you see the scars on the man?" Emma said. "He is outright terrifying. He doesn't even look real."

"I am scared to death," Alice said, swallowing hard. "He terrifies me, and I'm not just talking about the scars. His presence... his height, the way he looks at me. It's as if he sees right through me. I don't know how I'm going to live like this."

"I would be scared too," Lavinia said. "I've been watching him since the ceremony. He has not broken a smile once. Not once has his demeanor shifted. He has the same terrifying look on his face every single time."

"Why did he even choose to marry you?" Emma asked, still stroking Alice's arm. "Did you ask your papa?"

"I don't know. But I think my papa's desperation might have something to do with it," Alice said quietly, her eyes darting across the room, looking anywhere but at the Duke. "He was so eager to make the match."

"People have been talking," Emma said. "Some are saying that you're only getting married because your reputation is completely ruined after the Earl's stunt."

"I don't want to think about what the ton is saying Emma," Alice said and sighed. "I

hate that he scares me so much. Where did he get those scars? Did you hear anything about how he got them?"

Lavinia exhaled loudly. "I mean, given his reputation, we can imagine the worst and it might not nearly be as terrifying as the truth."

"Don't think about that," Emma added. "Just...concentrate on other things. He might be scary looking but he is rather handsome if you give him a close look."

"Do you think I am capable of focusing on his looks right now?"

"Alice snapped, her voice barely a whisper but laced with frustration.

"Do you really think it's easy to look past the fact that his neck and arms are covered in scars?"

What if I am set to leave a similar mark on him when he tries to strangle me to death in a fit of rage?"

"All right, calm down," Lavinia said to her. "He couldn't possibly try to hurt you, Alice. I mean, you're his wife. He has a duty to protect you."

"Lavinia, I know you're trying to make me feel better but it's really not helping. Let's just talk about something else," Alice said.

"Sorry," Lavinia whispered. "I cannot even imagine how your wedding night is going to unfold."

"Unfold?" Alice asked.

Lavinia turned to her. "I mean, you know...the wedding night activities?"

Alice arched her eyebrows, confused.

"Didn't your mama have the talk with you?" Lavinia asked.

"What talk?"

Lavinia and Emma exchanged wide-eyed glances, both at a loss for words. Alice watched them, beyond confused. It seemed as though she had missed something.

Something extremely important.

CHAPTER THREE

"Would you say something?" Alice asked.

"I don't know what to say," Lavinia answered. "There's supposed to be a talk. My sister had it with my mama. I've heard about it plenty of times. It's the talk about the wedding night."

"Well, what is the talk about?" Alice asked.

"I don't know," Lavinia said in hushed tones. "It's just a talk to prepare you for what happens on your wedding night."

"What happens on my wedding night?" Alice asked, tilting her head to the side.

"I don't know!" Lavinia responded and glanced at Emma.

"You're to consummate the marriage," Emma chimed in.

"Consummate?" Alice asked with widened eyes. "Well, how am I supposed to do that?"

"Don't look at me. I have no clue. I only know that's how babies are made," Emma said.

"Babies? What babies?" Alice asked.

"Well, what do you think happens in marriages, Alice? Obviously, you are going to have to give the Duke an heir. How do you think that's going to happen? It happens on the wedding night."

"I am not having babies with that beast," Alice rasped.

"Do you think you have a choice?" Emma asked. "That's the essence of marriage. To produce heirs. From what I know, you share a bed together."

"Oh, I am not sleeping in the same bed as that man," Alice said, shaking her head. "I can't even look him in the eye without feeling like my heart is about to explode."

"You're speaking like you have a say in this matter," Lavinia said. "Look, you still have time to ask your Mama what it means to consummate. After the ceremony, make sure to demand for the talk. I reckon it's important. You need to be prepared."

Alice felt a knot of unease tighten in her stomach. She had not thought that far ahead. She had no idea what was expected of her, and she couldn't shake the feeling that she was utterly unprepared for what lay ahead.

"The man has barely said a word to me," Alice complained.

"I cannot even guess what he is thinking. He has the same expression on his face every single time. Except for when he smirked at me in the church when I saw his scars. It's like he could tell they terrified me and he was happy that they did. "

"He feeds off terror, I can just tell," Emma said. "You have to be careful, Alice. Take care of yourself and do what he says."

"That might be tasking because you're a pretty stubborn lady," Lavinia said. "You hate to do as you're told, and more importantly, you hate feeling scared."

Alice crossed her arms. "Why does he scare me so much? No one should have that kind of power over anyone."

Emma sighed. "You can't control what you feel. Just stay in line. Treat him like your Papa, respect him, fear him, and don't cross him."

Lavinia shook her head. "He's her husband, not her father."

Emma rolled her eyes. "We can't ignore his scars, Lavinia. Alice, you need to concentrate on your duties and stay out of his way. Don't talk back. I know you, once you get nervous, you snap. That's the last thing you need."

"She can't live in fear, Emma," Lavinia argued. "This is her life."

Alice sighed. "Stop arguing. I appreciate both of you, but I can't be romantically attracted to someone who makes my skin crawl. And Emma, could you live in fear, always afraid to speak?"

Emma hesitated. "Then what will you do?"

"I don't know," Alice admitted. "But I refuse to live in fear. I will fulfill my duties as Duchess, but I won't cower before him."

Lavinia shook her head. "You say that now, but wait until you're alone with him."

Alice winced. "Don't remind me. I need this courage to get through tonight."

Lavinia giggled. "Sorry."

Alice looked down. "I'm a duchess now," she said, the realization starting to settle in.

"The Duchess of Ravenmoor." Emma nodded. "You'll have a lot of responsibilities. Managing the estate, hosting events, and eventually, producing an heir."

Alice flinched. "Maybe that's why he married me...for an heir?"

"Maybe," Lavinia replied. "But there has to be more to it than that."

Emma nodded. "He doesn't seem like a man who'd marry out of desperation."

Alice had considered that there might be a deeper motive behind Victor's choice. It was certainly not love and certainly not some grand desire to redeem either of their reputations. Victor had not cared about his reputation for years.

As the reception came to a close, the ballroom filled with members of the ton began to thin out, their voices fading into the background.

Alice stood by the grand entrance, her heart heavy as she watched everyone offer final farewells.

Lavinia and Emma clung to her, their expressions a mix of concern and sorrow, as if she were embarking on a journey to a distant land rather than merely a few hours' carriage ride away.

When the moment came for Alice to step into the carriage, she took a deep breath, forcing herself to remain composed. Timothy helped her into the carriage, and for a brief moment, she saw a flicker of concern in his eyes.

"You will do well, Alice," he said to her. "You're smart and you can take care of yourself. That's why I am confident."

Alice only responded with a smile. She scanned the crowd, looking for Patience.

There were still questions she wanted to ask, and she feared that her window to discuss them was closing.

Victor followed her inside, the door closing with a soft thud.

Alice didn't look up to acknowledge him.

She just sat still as the carriage began to move.

She stared out the window one last time, annoyed that Patience had been too occupied to see her off.

Disappointed, she sat back and watched the familiar sights of the place she called home all her life blur into the background.

Victor sat silently. Even though she couldn't look directly at him, she could tell he was watching her.

She avoided his gaze, trying to keep her eyes on the road, but slowly, she drifted off to sleep, her exhaustion overtaking her as the carriage rolled on.

It wasn't until the carriage began to slow down that Alice stirred, blinking awake just as they reached the grand entrance of Ravenmoor.

The sight of the magnificent house first took her breath away.

She stared out the window with widened eyes, dazed by the towering spires reaching toward the night sky.

Alice instinctively reached for the door, eager to alight and get a proper look at the Dukedom, but her hand collided with Victor's at the same time he reached for the

same thing, their fingers brushing against each other.

A spark of warmth shot through her at the contact, and she felt the familiar tenseness that defined Victor's presence.

For a fleeting moment, time seemed to still as they locked eyes. Alice quickly pulled her hand back as swiftly as she could. Clasp her hands together.

"What do you reckon will happen if you touch me?" His voice was deep and raspy, sending an involuntary shiver down Alice's spine. "Are you scared you'd turn to stone?"

Alice's heart skipped a beat as she locked eyes with him. At that moment, he didn't seem as intimidating as before. His eyes, usually piercing, seemed softer as he spoke. It was a side of him she did not expect to see, a glimpse of a vulnerability hidden beneath the layers of his rough exterior.

It was the first time she had seen just how pretty his eyes were. She liked the shade of green. It was rare.

"My apologies...Your Grace," she said and cleared her throat. "I should have waited. It's just...we've been on the road for quite some time and I was in a haste to stretch my legs."

"You were asleep for the entire journey," he mumbled and stepped out of the carriage.

Alice took a moment before alighting after him.

She stood beside the carriage, taking in the view before her.

She noticed that he didn't extend his hand to help her down, a subtle shift that didn't really surprise her.

Despite the distance he maintained, she couldn't stop thinking about the softness she had just seen in his eyes and wondered where that person had gone.

Although it was dark, she could still see the beauty of the estate.

The sprawling grounds before her, illuminated by the faint glow of the moon.

The grand stone building towering majestically, its windows gleaming like eyes watching her arrival.

The crisp air was refreshing, carrying the earthy scent of damp soil and distant flowers. It was different here.

The kind that she liked.

Now that she felt the fresh air on her face, Alice was fully awake.

She kept her eyes on Victor, who was still standing in front of her, talking to the staff.

Alice thought about their brief conversation in the carriage.

..how she had pulled away when her hand accidentally brushed against his as he reached for the carriage door.

The sharpness of her reaction had been instinctive, but now it bothered her after seeing his reaction to it.

She had recoiled as if his touch had burned her, and his question haunted her

thoughts.

Alice stepped forward and stood in front of him. "Your Grace..." she began to say softly, hoping to break the silence and apologize. "...about earlier... when I?—"

He turned to her in a heartbeat but cut her off before she could finish. "We'll talk later," he said, his tone curt. "You should go to your room for now."

For a brief moment, she wondered if she should be relieved, after all, he didn't seem angry at her for pulling back.

Merely...disappointed. But the way he brushed her off so quickly stung.

If any other man had suggested she get some rest, she might have considered his gesture thoughtful, seeing that she had fallen asleep in the carriage.

Yet, the grumpiness in his voice made her second-guess it all.

Was he truly offended that she had recoiled from his touch, or was she imagining things?

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As she turned around to absorb the scene, a figure emerged from the shadows, walking with a graceful, measured stride. He was impeccably dressed in a tailored black suit and approached her with a polite bow, his demeanor calm and composed.

"Welcome to Ravenmoor, Your Grace," he said, his voice smooth and respectful. "I am Roberts, the butler. It is my pleasure to serve you."

Alice offered a small smile. "Thank you, Roberts."

"You will be introduced to the rest of the staff in the morning. For tonight, the maids will assist you in preparing for the night. If you would please follow me, I'll show you to your chambers."

He gestured toward the entrance of the estate, leading her inside. As she walked through the grand foyer and down the polished marble floors, Alice reminded herself not to get carried away by the lavish surroundings.

About two hours after she arrived at the estate, Alice found herself dressed for bed in her chambers.

She had changed into a soft, modest nightgown that merely brushed against her skin, a comforting relief from the spine-crushing dress she had worn for the reception.

She sat extremely close to the window, her legs tucked beneath her as she leaned against the sill.

The cool night air was not only refreshing but also relaxing.

The tall trees swayed gently, their leaves rustling softly, calming her restless thoughts. The size of the estate made her feel both small and amazed, and for a moment, she let herself imagine what life could be like here, away from the worries.

Alice shut her eyes, temporarily forgetting her troubles. She smiled and leaned even further out the window, allowing the wind to tousle her hair and brush against her skin.

"Alice!"

No one had ever called her so fiercely. Startled, she staggered slightly, almost tipping out of the window.

Just then, she felt a strong hand grasp her waist, pulling her back to safety.

He practically swooped her from the window with one arm and threw her on the bed.

Alice struggled to regain her composure, panting.

That could have gone very wrong.

"Have you gone mad?"

It took a moment to gather herself, but she finally pushed herself off the bed and stood in front of him, still panting.

His chest rose and fell rapidly, and he glared at her.

Alice noticed his hands were shaking and his entire body practically vibrating as he watched her, waiting for a response.

A flicker of worry coursed through her, but she quickly shoved it aside.

"Excuse me?"

"There are better ways to end your life than jumping off a window," he said breathlessly. "What were you thinking? Surely, your fate cannot be that awful."

Alice's eyebrows furrowed. "First, you barge in here without giving me any notice, then you practically scare the life out of me before proceeding to swoop me off the window and throw me to the bed? And you're asking if I am the one that's gone mad, Your Grace?"

Victor stepped closer, his eyes wild with something Alice couldn't quite decipher. "Do you think this is some sort of joke? I don't know what you were thinking but it will not happen under my roof."

"What are you talking about?" she asked, her frustration boiling over. "I was just sitting. You were the one that scared me."

"Why would any sane person sit on a window?" He ran a trembling hand through his hair as if trying to dispel the panic clawing at him. Alice could see that he was tense, but she couldn't understand why he was so upset when he was the one who caused the ruckus in the first place.

"Do not do that again," he said.

"You don't even know me! You have no right to barge in here and dictate how I should feel or what I should do," Alice said and crossed her arms defiantly.

Victor drew in a sharp breath and straightened his back. "Just... go to bed."

"I don't feel like sleeping yet," she answered.

"Go to bed, Alice," he repeated and turned to walk out of the room.

"Why did you marry me?" Alice asked, staring at his back turned to her. "I mean, you cannot possibly be in any rush to get an heir. But there has to be some reason. So why? Were you doing my papa a favor?"

Victor didn't respond. He continued walking out of the room and slammed the door behind him.

Alice sank onto the bed, feeling tears sting her eyes. She lay there, staring at the intricately painted ceiling, trying to process everything that had just happened. It had made no sense. There was no head or tail to the argument.

Alice let out a shaky breath, and turned onto her side curling into a ball, seeking comfort in the softness of the bedding. Despite her best efforts to stay awake, exhaustion soon took over. Her eyelids grew heavy, and she slipped into a deep sleep, silently hoping to wake up from the nightmare.

But the moment her eyes opened again, she caught sight of the same familiar ceiling, and a sigh slipped from her lips. The nightmare was indeed a reality, and she had to live with it.

The pale light of morning filtered through the curtains. Alice rubbed her eyes and stretched, feeling slightly better than she had slept. She sat up and was surprised to find an older lady standing at the foot of her bed. Alice frowned, confused.

"Good morning, Your Grace," the woman said. "My name is Agatha. I am the housekeeper here at the Ravenmoor estate. I hope you rested well."

"Good morning, Agatha," Alice said. "I had a good night. Thank you."

"Wonderful," Agatha beamed, a warm smile lighting her face. "With me are the maids who will assist in preparing you for the day. I need to bring you up to speed with the morning routine and the duties that await you as Duchess of Ravenmoor."

Alice nodded, a mixture of anticipation and trepidation swirling within her. "I would be most grateful for your guidance. But first, I am rather famished. I had nothing to eat all day yesterday."

"Of course, Your Grace. Allow me to arrange for some breakfast to be brought up at once," Agatha said.

"Wait, I can have my breakfast alone...right?" Alice questioned, recalling that she was a married woman now. "I mean, it wouldn't be rude of me not to sit with His Grace?"

"Well, His Grace left for Bath in the early hours of this morning, Your Grace," Agatha said.

Alice tilted her head sideways. "Left for London? Whatever do you mean? Shouldn't the married couple stay together for the honeymoon and... Consummate?"

Agatha lowered her head. "His Grace arranged for his bags to be packed as he will be living in a different estate henceforth."

Alice sat upright. "Henceforth?"

A silence ensued, and all Alice could do was stare on, confused, to say the least. She thought back to the night before and wondered if that little argument had sent Victor packing.

She had no idea what to make of it or if she was supposed to be relieved that she was free of Victor's intense presence for a short period of time.

"Well, I am sure he won't be gone for long," Alice said, climbing off the bed. "Now, how about that breakfast, Agatha?"

CHAPTER FOUR

Two Years later...

"What did the stonemasons say about the foundation, Roberts?" Alice asked, standing just outside the hedge maze, her eyes scanning the half-built structure of the orangery.

Alice winced, startled by the sounds of hammers striking stone and the scraping of shovels against the earth. The construction of the orangery was in full swing, and the crew for the project was double the size of the ones that constructed her new bathroom.

Roberts – standing behind her – glanced at his notes. "They believe it will hold, Your Grace, though they suggested reinforcing the north side due to the slope of the land. It's nothing too concerning but it may take a little longer."

"Well, time is all I have, so they might as well do it right," Alice said. "Have them proceed with the reinforcement. And ensure the glass shipment arrives on time."

"Of course, Your Grace," Roberts answered. "As for the other matters, the gardener has made adjustments to the rose beds near the entrance, as you requested."

"Did he damage the lavender hedges in the process?" Alice asked, turning to Roberts with a sharp look. "I asked him to be extra careful with them."

Roberts shook his head. "No, Your Grace. The gardener took great care. The hedges

remain intact and as fragrant as ever. I oversaw the adjustments myself."

Alice nodded, satisfied. "Good, thank you, Roberts. I would hate to lose those. And the additional flower beds along the east wing, are they being prepared?"

"They are, Your Grace. The soil is being tilled as we speak by another crew, and the new bulbs you ordered should be planted by week's end. Do you want to check on the progress?"

"No, it's all right. As long as you're on top of everything, I have nothing to worry about," Alice replied, her voice softening slightly. "Once the orangery is finished, it should tie everything together beautifully."

Roberts gave a firm nod. "Also, the new stone pathways through the gardens are nearing completion. The workers should be done by nightfall."

Alice responded with a nod. She watched the workers for a moment, and a smile formed on her face.

It was just like she had envisioned nearly two years ago when she first arrived on her wedding night.

Time had slipped away so quickly. She had filled her days with renovations, tending to the gardens, and carrying out some of the duties that came with being the Duchess.

The renovations had been no small feat. Alice had figured it would be a great way to make the estate feel more like home, so she invested time in it.

She had restored the once-crumbling west wing, opened the library to bring in more light, and revitalized the long-neglected grounds.

The orangery, now nearing completion, was one of the final touches on her long list of improvements: a place where she could grow citrus trees and exotic plants.

She had a plan, and she could wait for everything to come together.

"Lady Lavinia and Lady Emma will be arriving soon," Alice said to Roberts and turned to leave the orangery. "Do well to ensure their chambers are prepared to the finest detail. They are not to want for anything during their stay."

Roberts bowed slightly, following closely behind her. "Of course, Your Grace. Everything will be seen to."

As Alice made her way to the dressing room, her smile faded.

Deep down, she knew that all the estate improvements, the renovations, and the endless tasks were only a means to distract herself from the emptiness that had defined her life.

It had been two years since she had married Victor.

.. two long years since she had last set eyes on him.

Their final encounter replayed in her mind almost daily. She could still see the fury in his eyes and the tremble in his hands as he pulled her away from the window. He had been so angry, almost frantic, and yet she still could not, for the life of her, understand why he had reacted so violently.

One moment, she had only been sitting by the window, taking in the air. And the next, he was gone, leaving her alone in the grand estate, burdened with responsibilities that had slowly become her only solace.

No amount of restored gardens or freshly built orangeries could fill the hollow space left by his absence, and the realization gnawed at Alice, driving her nearly mad.

She couldn't understand it. This was a man whose presence she had once loathed, whose gaze had unnerved her, and whose scars had left her petrified.

Yet, despite all that, she felt his absence. ..missed it, even.

It made no sense to her. How could she long for someone who had terrified and confused her so deeply? Was she that lonely? Was her life so miserable that she was willing to accept even the bare minimum?

"Are you all right, Your Grace?" Roberts asked. "You seem rather flushed."

Alice forced a smile. "I'm fine," she answered. "Let Agatha know that I'll be having dinner in the garden tonight."

But it wasn't just loneliness that plagued her.

There was also anger simmering beneath the surface.

Alice had been left in a marriage of convenience, bound to a man who had barely spoken to her before disappearing from her life altogether.

She had spent the last two years waiting, wondering why he had even bothered to marry her if he intended to vanish without a word.

The bitterness grew with each passing day. How dare he take her hand in marriage only to abandon her, leaving her to play the role of duchess without ever being a wife in truth?

How dare he?

Alice had long convinced herself that his absence was a form of punishment.

Some twisted mental torture only a man like Victor, with his beastly reputation, could conceive.

What better way to assert his dominance than to leave her alone in the estate, forcing her to bear the weight of their empty marriage in silence?

He was cruel, just as the rumors had painted him. A scarred monster who took pleasure in mentally torturing her. Perhaps this was what he intended all along, to make her feel abandoned, unworthy, and forgotten.

What she couldn't understand was why.

Why her, of all people?

"You have to do something about this, Alice. It cannot go on."

Alice sat in the drawing room, staring out the window at the thick clouds gathering in the sky.

The edges were darkening, steadily creeping toward the center, a sure sign the downpour would begin soon.

She loved the rain. It washed everything clean, brought the refreshing scent of damp earth, and for a brief moment, it allowed her to forget.

The world always seemed quieter in the rain, offering her a temporary escape from the burden of her thoughts.

But with the orangery still under construction, she worried the downpour might delay its progress. The last thing she wanted was a setback after months of planning.

"Are you listening to us, Alice?" Emma asked.

"I am," Alice answered without thinking, turning to them.

In front of her, Lavinia and Emma sat across from one another, their expressions mirroring the concern Alice tried so hard to ignore.

Their presence, though comforting in its own way, was a reminder that they were here for more than just a casual visit.

They had visited very often in the past two years, and with each visit, Alice knew their concern had grown.

The rumors about Alice and Victor had only grown more vicious with time.

It began with whispers about Victor's motives for marrying her.

They had said Alice was ruined long before her marriage, that she had been desperate enough to take a man like Victor.

Some even cruelly suggested that she had hidden away at Ravenmoor to bear an illegitimate child, feeding on the idea that her isolation concealed a scandal.

Lavinia shifted uncomfortably. "You know what they're saying now, don't you, Alice?"

"No." She shook her head. "What is the latest scandal that has my name at the center?"

"They've gone from whispers to outright accusations," Emma said. "It doesn't help that you have not been out in society for over a year, Alice. People are thinking the worst."

"Do they still think I'm pregnant?" Alice asked with squinted eyes. "Do they think it's legitimate this time? As if that would even be possible. I've not seen my husband in two years. How could I possibly be carrying his child?"

The more time passed, the more the rumors surrounding Alice began to shift, fueled by the many changes at Ravenmoor.

After the gossip that she was with child subsided, fresh whispers surfaced, alleging that Alice was recklessly squandering her husband's fortune.

Society branded her as extravagant and careless.

Then, less than a year ago, the speculation intensified, with people noting the steady stream of men arriving and departing from the estate.

Although these visitors were merely workers assisting with the renovations, the gossipmongers thrived on exaggeration.

They spun different stories of secret rendezvous and scandalous affairs.

Strangely, the rumors didn't faze Alice.

She had never been one to concern herself with the gossip of the ton .

If there was anyone to blame, it was Victor.

He was the one with a scandalous reputation, notorious for the whispers that trailed

him like a shadow.

Now, by virtue of her marriage to him, Alice found herself trapped in the web of speculation, bearing the weight of his past sins.

"Alice, don't joke about this," Lavinia said.

"All right." Alice sat up. "What are they saying now?"

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"People are saying you've been murdered, Alice," Lavinia answered. "Now, for two years you have refused to debunk any of the rumors that have started. But now I'm afraid that it's become too much.

You haven't appeared at any events of the Season for a whole year, and the ton is saying that your husband must have murdered you!

" Lavinia exclaimed, worry etched across her face.

"It's just rumors, Lavinia," Alice said.

"It has always been just that, I know," Lavinia said. "But the fact that no one else has seen you out in society is driving the rumors."

Emma nodded in agreement. "You have to make an appearance, Alice. Just to prove them wrong. So they know that you are alive and well. That you're not having affairs behind your husband's back, and that you are not nurturing an illegitimate child."

Alice shrugged, unfazed. "I've never liked the ton , and their rumors don't bother me. Besides, Victor doesn't seem to care either. They can talk. They are allowed to talk."

Lavinia leaned closer, her voice lowering. "Alice, are you trying to provoke the Duke by not denying the rumors? Because you remaining quiet only puts him in a bad light."

"Even the rumors that he tortures you every day to keep you in line still persist, and you have done nothing to dispel them," Emma added, her tone laced with concern.

"People are beginning to wonder if you're truly safe in this marriage, and it makes the Duke look even worse given that he already has a terrible reputation. "

While Alice wasn't actively trying to provoke the Duke, the situation felt like a subtle form of revenge for his abandonment.

Each day she remained hidden away at Ravenmoor, she found a strange sense of satisfaction in knowing that her absence stirred the pot of gossip and speculation among the ton .

It was as if she were reclaiming a piece of her independence, a small victory against the man who had married her and then disappeared from her life.

"I thought you were glad that the Duke left?" Emma asked. "You used to say that you appreciated the freedom and the peace of mind it afforded you."

Alice paused, her gaze drifting back to the darkening clouds outside. "I am glad, Emma," she answered, doubting her own words. "His mere presence scared me. At least with him gone, I don't have to worry so much about my safety."

"However, two years is quite some time," Lavinia noted. "What has he been doing all this while?"

Alice shrugged her shoulders. "Tending to his duties as the Duke, from what I hear.

Managing his estates and occupying himself with books.

Not that I care much. I suppose I should be thankful that he pays no mind to me.

Given his temper, who knows what might have happened had he stayed in Ravenmoor? "

Lavinia inched forward. "But Alice?—"

"Enough about me," Alice said in an attempt to change the subject. "We have been talking about me and all these rumors since you both arrived. Tell me about you, Lavinia. Are you enjoying the Season?"

Lavinia looked very reluctant to change the subject, but she sat back and mellowed. "I attended the Patterson ball last week, but it was so crowded that I felt as if I might suffocate. Even the walls were crowded. This season is something else."

Alice leaned in with a smile on her face. "But have you danced at all? Surely there must be one or two gentlemen eager to have your hand."

Lavinia's cheeks flushed as she shook her head. "I... I managed a dance or two, but it was hardly enjoyable."

"Are we truly talking about the season when the ton thinks that Alice is dead?" Emma interjected.

Alice threw her head back and groaned. "Just leave it be, Emma. We hardly ever see each other and I don't want to spend the rest of this time talking about what other people are saying. I would much rather talk about you and Lavinia."

"I understand why talking about it might be uncomfortable for you, Alice, but I insist that you dispel these rumors before they completely ruin you," Emma said. "The Crowell Ball is coming up. Have you considered attending?"

Alice never liked social gatherings, so in a way, she was comfortable in her isolation at Ravenmoor.

There were no judgmental stares, no whispered gossip, and she didn't have to meet

any stifling expectations.

Those days were behind her. It was liberating, even if it came at the cost of loneliness.

At least here, in her sanctuary, she could focus on her own affairs, uninterrupted by the world that once held her captive.

"It is almost as if you like living in this gigantic estate alone," Lavinia said. "People go mad when left in solitude for too long."

"Technically, I'm not alone," Alice replied with a faint smile. "I have Roberts, the butler, Agatha... my maids. It's truly not that terrible."

"You're building an orangery, Alice," Emma pointed out. "You have sufficient time on your hands to build an orangery from scratch. If you were planning balls, or even attending some, perhaps you wouldn't feel the need to pour your energy into these endless projects."

Alice looked away, her fingers tracing the armrest of her chair. "Balls and those gatherings were never my style, Emma. You both know that."

"But these things are expected of you. You are the Duchess of Ravenmoor and you have never hosted any social event in two years. You have been quiet. If Lavinia and I didn't come all the way down here to visit, we would have believed the rumors that you were dead," Emma noted.

Alice rose to her feet and strolled over to the window, her fingers lightly brushing the drapes as she looked out at the gathering storm clouds. She was about to say something when Roberts entered the drawing room, diverting her attention to him.

"My apologies, Your Grace," Roberts said with a slight bow. "His Grace has returned. His carriage has just arrived at the estate."

"What?" was all she managed to say.

She glanced at Emma and Lavinia, panic rising in her chest. "I need to go," she said quickly. "I'll speak to you both later."

Her friends exchanged worried looks and rose to their feet but said nothing as she hurried out of the room. Alice rushed down the staircase, her heart pounding louder with each step.

She reached the bottom of the staircase and paused, nerves fluttering wildly in her stomach. The door to the drawing room was slightly ajar. Taking a deep breath, she pushed it open and stepped inside.

Victor stood near the window, his back to her.

"How do you do, wife," he said, his voice low and menacing. A twisted grin curled on his lips that instantly sent chills down Alice's spine.

The last time she had seen that look on his face was on their wedding day when he realized she feared him. He looked like a man on a mission, and Alice froze in fear, wondering what he was doing here after two whole years.

CHAPTER FIVE

" I see you're alive and well," Victor said, crossing his arms as his gaze settled on her.

They were alone in the drawing room. Alice stood by the door, her fingers gripping the curtains as though they were the only thing keeping her steady.

Victor cherished his solitude above all else.

The rumors and whispers that followed him like a shadow were a small price to pay for the peace he found in his own company.

He had long accepted his reputation as a beast, feared by society, and cared little for what others thought of him.

His darkened reputation, fueled by rumors of cruelty and coldness, never bothered him.

They were baseless gossip, though he knew he had a cruel streak and a quick temper.

Keeping his distance from the ton was a deliberate choice, far from their empty pleasantries and judgmental eyes.

But when it came to Alice, things were different.

Her silence, her refusal to show herself in society, had only fueled the fire of the

rumors.

It didn't matter that the gossip wasn't true.

By saying nothing, Alice made it seem real.

At first, Victor had dismissed it all, relying on updates from Roberts to know Alice was managing fine.

But recently, the shift was undeniable. People who once feared him were now approaching him with letters and visits, encouraged by the scandal surrounding his wife.

Victor's gaze lingered on Alice for a moment, taking her in.

She looked well but seemed to have lost some weight, yet not as bad as the rumors were saying.

Her honey-brown hair was neatly tied back, leaving her face fully exposed.

Her pale skin, smooth and unblemished, contrasted sharply with the intensity in her blue eyes.

..eyes that were still filled with defiance.

Like she was ready to take whatever he could possibly throw.

She looked well. Oddly, Victor was relieved by that. He wasn't one to care about anyone else.

"I could say the same of you," she replied. "To what do we owe the pleasure of your

sudden appearance, Your Grace?"

Victor's eyes narrowed slightly, his posture rigid. "Don't play coy with me, Alice. You know exactly why I'm here."

He had expected this. The confrontation had been brewing for some time, and frankly, he didn't care for the theatrics.

Still, he couldn't ignore the biting irony of the situation.

He had two years of peace, of solitude—something he valued deeply—and now he was dragged back into this mess. And for what? More rumors?

He crossed the room with slow, deliberate steps, watching her grip the curtains tightly as if she could hold herself together by sheer force.

"I decided to just check to see if my wife is still alive, despite what the rumors say," he continued, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "Imagine my surprise seeing that you're breathing after all! Did it not cross your mind to inform people, your family for instance that you are alive and well?"

Alice scoffed, and Victor watched as the flicker of fear in her eyes slowly dissipated, replaced by a defiant glare.

She crossed her arms, her posture shifting.

"Did it not cross your mind to give me an explanation for two years of silence?"

What kind of person simply vanishes without a word and expects everything to be as he deems fit? "

Victor scoffed, too. Her words hit him like a slap, but his expression remained blank, with a smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth.

She rendered him speechless for a few seconds.

What else could she say? That he'd been cruel to leave her here alone?

That he was even crueler to not contact her for two years?

It had been a calculated plan, one that spared them both unnecessary misery.

It was all right that Alice never understood, and he couldn't blame her.

Only he knew what he was running from.

Victor's jaw tightened and his gaze hardened.

"I thought you would be pleased that I wasn't here breathing over you?

I figured everything would run smoothly.

You stay on your own, performing the duties required of you, and I do whatever it is I want.

But it seems I was wrong, because you've been doing an excellent job of ruining things yourself. "

"Your reputation was already in tatters before I arrived. Don't blame me for what you've done to yourself," she retorted.

"I have never been accused of murdering a wife," he said. "That's a first, and forgive

me for being unenthusiastic about having an additional rumor added to the pile. Why are you not attending any social gatherings?"

"It's my choice. I don't feel like it," she answered.

Victor raised his eyebrows. "You don't feel like it? Are you forgetting that you are Duchess of Ravenmoor?"

"Oh, I know who I am. You are the one that seems to have forgotten that you are the Duke and that you, too, have responsibilities," she shot back, her glare unwavering. "...And that you owe me answers for two years of silence."

Victor was taken aback by her boldness, and he struggled to mask his surprise at the sudden change in her demeanor.

It was pretty obvious that she was annoyed.

But he couldn't understand why she was so angry.

Judging from how terrified she had been of him, he reckoned that giving her freedom would make her more comfortable.

"I never treated you like a prisoner," he said. "You can do whatever you want for all I care. But you chose to remain hidden away in this estate, relishing your solitude while letting the rumors fester like an open wound."

"I relish my solitude?" Alice scoffed, her eyes narrowing. "Is that what you tell yourself to justify your abandonment? You made a choice, Your Grace. A choice that affected us both."

"Mind your words, woman," he said to her sternly.

Alice looked away. "I don't think this conversation is going to lead us anywhere productive. If you're only here to fulfill your curiosity about the rumors, then perhaps you should just do what you came for and leave."

"Who said anything about leaving?" he asked and sat back down. "I'm here to stay, Alice. I will remain until the end of the Season, and I intend to clean up the mess you've made of our reputation."

"You're staying?" she asked with widened eyes. "Till the end of the season?"

"We will be attending functions together as a married couple. Prepare yourself for it," he added.

Victor loathed the idea of stepping into the suffocating world of society, but now, with the specter of Alice's growing reputation hanging over him, he had no choice but to re-enter the fray as the Duke, a role he had never embraced.

But, if attending the Season was what it took to salvage their names—and perhaps even his own peace of mind—then he would endure it.

"And you expect me to simply follow your orders because you've decided it?

" she asked. "I understand that we need to fix our reputation, but I'm not preparing myself to play a part just to satisfy your whims or the ton's expectations.

You can't just return and dictate how everything will be from now on. "

"I think I can. Seeing as it's my home and I am the head of it," he said.

Alice muttered under her breath before storming out of the room, leaving Victor alone in the silence. This was the longest conversation he had ever had with her, and

he wasn't quite sure how to process it. Conversations had never been his strong suit, so he had anticipated a clash of views.

Still, he was taken aback by her demeanor. He hadn't expected her to be so furious.

Victor stood in the center of what used to be his chambers.

His room – as he recalled it – had been a strong and traditional space, filled with rich mahogany furniture and deep burgundy fabrics.

His father had designed the chambers himself, and while Victor did not care for the late Duke's taste, he had grown accustomed to it.

There used to be a large four-poster bed, draped in heavy velvet curtains.

It had been the focal point of the room.

The walls had displayed portraits of his ancestors, telling stories of his family's legacy.

There had also been a thick, plush carpet in the center of the room that he had picked out himself.

The room felt foreign to Victor now. Alice had transformed it into a lighter, brighter space. The heavy drapes were replaced with sheer panels that let in sunlight, and the deep green walls were now a soft blue, softening the once-serious atmosphere.

The bed remained, but it was now covered in floral linens, and his hunting trophies had been swapped for peaceful countryside prints. It wasn't his style, and the changes unsettled him more than he cared to admit.

"Roberts..." Victor said to the butler behind him with his eyes shut. "Can you explain to me, what in heaven's name happened to my chambers?"

Roberts cleared his throat. "You were gone, Your Grace," he answered. "Her Grace passed her time making renovations to the estate. According to her, it didn't feel like a home and she wanted to change that."

"This room feels like a stranger's haven.

" Victor's gaze hardened as he turned to Roberts, his brows furrowed.

"It was my sanctuary. You let her redo my room, Roberts? And you didn't think to mention it?

I left you here to keep an eye on her. To make sure that she was in line.

You should have been by my side as you always were, but I trusted that you would take care of this home in my absence. "

Roberts flinched slightly and cleared his throat. "And I did, Your Grace," he answered.

Victor turned to him with furrowed eyebrows. "So, you agree with the changes that Alice has made to the estate?"

"Not entirely, Your Grace," he stuttered.

"Not entirely?" Victor asked in disbelief, expecting an outright no. "Explain yourself."

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Roberts straightened his back and nervously clasped his hands together.

"The Duchess has restored the tapestries on the walls throughout the estate, enhancing the grandeur of the hallways. She has also purchased new furniture for the rooms, replacing the older pieces that were, I must admit, in need of replacement. They were from the time before the late Duke's. "

Victor could hardly believe his ears as he processed Roberts's unexpected praise for Alice.

His butler, known for his unwavering demeanor and sharp tongue, rarely offered compliments, especially not for someone outside their family.

Roberts...who had been by his side since childhood, seldom expressed admiration for anyone or anything.

"You actually think she's making a difference by changing the tapestries?" Victor questioned.

"It's not merely the tapestries themselves, Your Grace.

It's about the intention behind them. I must say that the estate feels more like a home now," he explained.

"Her Grace has also hired new staff, which was necessary as we were quite short-staffed.

The gardens have been restored to their original glory, bringing back the beauty that had faded over the years.

I have not seen it look that beautiful in over twenty years.

She is currently building an orangery close to the hedge maze, which I think will be a splendid addition. "

Victor shook his head. "You cannot be serious."

"Also, she did something to one of the old rooms..." he continued. "She turned it into a bathroom. But it's not like a normal bathroom. It's...different. It is both practical and elegant, a space designed for relaxation. I was quite impressed when I saw how it turned out."

"Enough," Victor rasped. "I want my old room restored. I may not have the time or patience to reverse every change, but I expect the old portraits, the heavy drapes, and the carpet back. Make my chambers as they once were. Understood?"

"Yes, Your Grace," Roberts said. "Are you back for good now, if I may ask?"

"Why are you asking?" Victor questioned as he began to undress. "Let me guess, you are not enthusiastic about undoing the amazing job your new duchess has done?"

"Well...it would be a shame to tear it all done only to have to redo it when you leave," Roberts said.

"You do realize that I am your employer?" Victor asked him. "Not the Duchess. Me. Do as I say."

Roberts responded with a slight bow. "I take it you would also want to undo what she

has done to the study?"

Victor paused and slowly turned around. "She touched my study?"

"Yes, Your Grace," Roberts said. "The Duchess has taken the liberty of redecorating the study to match the overall aesthetic she has established throughout the estate."

Victor threw his hands in the air. "You know what, I'm disappointed in you, Roberts. I walk into the estate and I cannot even recognize the place for the life of me. It's my home."

"I deeply apologize, Your Grace. But she is Duchess of Ravenmoor, Your Grace."

"Is she?" Victor responded with a hint of sarcasm in his voice. "I don't care that she is building an orangery. She could turn this estate into a circus if she wanted to. But my room and my study are off limits. I prefer my belongings to remain undisturbed."

"I apologize, Your Grace," Roberts said. "Although, you are a married man now, and with that comes certain...compromises."

"Compromises?" he asked. "If I was eager to compromise, I would have married for love. This was supposed to be convenient. She is taking the convenience out of the marriage arrangement."

"Well, do you want Her Grace to halt all renovations?" Roberts asked. "I could communicate this?—"

"No," Victor answered swiftly, cutting him off.

"She seems to have a... grudge against me. It's best to let her continue, even if I disagree with her choices."

Let her do what she wants. Just make sure my chambers and my study are out of limits.

I came here to work, and I need to be comfortable to be able to do so. "

"Very well, Your Grace," Roberts said. "I will see to it right away."

"Good. You may leave," he said.

Victor ran a hand through his hair and crashed on the bed.

He had arrived at the estate with so much energy, but all of that was drained now.

Alice seemed to have gotten over her fear of him, and it made him uneasy .

He had banked on that fear to keep the distance between them.

Knowing the reason he married her in the first place, her mere existence was all he needed to achieve his goal.

But she was doing more than just living and breathing. She was complicating things. Drawing him out of his comfortable bubble.

A rush of frustration flared within him, and he could feel the tension coiling tighter in his chest. He needed to clear his head, to regain a sense of control over the overwhelming changes that had made their way into his life.

So, he made a mental note to visit Andrew, his only friend, at the training yard later that afternoon. He figured that the familiar routine of sparring would help him regain some of his focus and distance himself from the emotions Alice had so effortlessly unearthed.

CHAPTER SIX

"What do you mean you're leaving?" Alice asked Emma. "You were supposed to stay the entire weekend."

"Well, your husband scares the living daylights out of us, so we are going home, my dear Alice," Emma said. "We'll write letters."

Alice's heart sank a little at the news.

"So soon?" she asked, trying to keep the disappointment from her voice. "We didn't really get to talk as much as I wanted. I didn't get to show you my new bathroom as well. You'd love it, Emma.

Truly. Lavinia, you could read books in there while taking a bath. "

It still felt so surreal. Alice couldn't bring herself to believe that Victor was present and now under the same roof.

She had not even realized that they had unresolved tension until their conversation the afternoon before.

Alice wasn't sure where the anger came from, but she was glad it came when it did.

She had every right to be angry. She had built a life of relative peace at Ravenmoor, a sanctuary away from the prying eyes of the ton, and now it felt as if he had stormed in to dismantle everything she had carefully constructed.

Even the project she had been so excited to do felt insurmountable.

It was almost as if Victor's presence had changed the rhythm of the estate.

With him back, everything felt different, tainted by his arrival.

Alice found herself constantly looking over her shoulders throughout the day, wondering if he would appear and demand that they go out or be seen together in public.

Being seen with him was the last thing she wanted, as ridiculous as it sounded. Although she was the Duchess of Ravenmoor, she wanted nothing to do with the Duke of Ravenmoor. But he was right about one thing.

They needed to fix their reputation.

Just as they spoke, Agatha joined them, standing only a few feet away. "Your Grace," she said, dipping into a quick curtsy. "The carriage is ready for Lady Lavinia and Lady Emma."

Emma took Alice's hand. "You'll be all right, Alice. We'll write, and it won't be long before we visit again."

Lavinia nodded. "And remember, it's your estate too. Don't let anyone make you feel otherwise. Even the owner of the estate."

Alice forced a smile, though the knot in her stomach remained.

She walked with her friends to the front, watching as Agatha helped them gather their things with some of the other maids.

Alice waved them goodbye as the carriage rolled away.

She wasn't all too sad. If Victor went forward with his plan, then she'd be seeing them for the rest of the season.

"Where is Roberts?" Alice asked Agatha as she turned to enter the foyer. "He wasn't at the orangery overseeing the workers. That was his responsibility. Now, he isn't here as well, helping with the bags."

"He is with the Duke, Your Grace," Agatha answered. "He will be assisting His Grace henceforth. They are rearranging the study and he is helping."

"Assisting?" Alice asked and paused. "That's not right. He is supposed to oversee the construction of the orangery. Roberts and I planned it together. I cannot be overseeing the workers myself, can I?"

"No, Your Grace," Agatha answered. "Perhaps, we could assign someone else to oversee it?"

"No. It has to be Roberts. He knows more than anyone else," she argued.

With that, Alice turned on her heel and marched down the corridor. The orangery was an important project, and it was already in motion before Victor arrived. She couldn't let him disrupt the flow of things.

As she approached the study, the door was slightly ajar. She could hear the soft murmur of voices inside. Pushing the door open, she found Victor standing by his desk, with Roberts by his side, sorting through large books.

"Good afternoon, Your Grace," she said and curtsied. "I trust you slept well?"

"Do you actually care?" he asked without sparing her a glance.

Alice inhaled sharply, reminding herself that even though she could not stand the man, she still needed to show respect so there was peace.

"I need Roberts at the orangery. He was supposed to be overseeing the workers, ensuring that everything is done to my specifications. He knows my specifications, some of which I have forgotten. He needs to be downstairs."

Victor glanced up from the desk, his expression calm but, as usual, cold. "Roberts is helping me," he replied, gesturing toward Roberts. "I need my study back to how it was since you took it upon yourself to change everything."

"You said I had the freedom to do whatever I wanted," she answered. "The study looked horrible. I fixed it."

"I think you need to revisit your definition of fixed," Victor said. "Anyway, Roberts is busy. Assign someone else."

"I cannot do that, Your Grace," she said. "Like I said, Roberts knows the task better than anyone else. Better than me, even."

"This is my estate, Alice," Victor said to her. "Roberts is my butler. He has worked with me for years. Before you ever set foot in the estate. If I say I need him for a task, he is to do what I say. You don't give him orders. I do."

Alice's eyes narrowed. "And what of the renovations? The workers need supervision. This orangery is an important project."

"That's your doing," he said. "It is important to you, not to the estate. Now, find someone else because Roberts will be busy by my side for the rest of the season. Like

I said, you will not be giving orders to him while I have need of him."

Alice stiffened, her hands clenching at her sides. "I am not trying to interfere, but you cannot ignore the fact that the orangery needs attention?—"

"I need Roberts here, and that's final," he said, lowering his head.

Alice stood there, her breath quickening with anger. She wanted to argue, but she could see that Victor wasn't going to budge. So, without another word, she turned on her heel and left the room, hoping that some fresh air would assuage the burning sensation in her head.

"Agatha... where is Alice?" Victor asked as he circled his fork on the plate in front of him, the untouched meal growing cold. His patience was wearing thin.

Agatha, standing a few feet away, shifted slightly, her hands clasped in front of her. "The...the Duchess is in the garden, Your Grace," Agatha stuttered. "She's overseeing the workers herself."

Victor's grip on the fork tightened, and he set it down with a sharp clatter.

"Overseeing the workers herself?" he whispered. "Did you not inform her that we were to sit for lunch together?"

"I did, Your Grace," she answered.

"And what did she say in response?"

"She said she'd rather not, Your Grace," Agatha answered, staring at the ground.

"Just how important is that orangery she's building?"

" he asked. "Is it that much of a distraction? Because I could halt the construction if it'll help her concentrate on our tainted reputation in society. How hard is it for her to sit for a meal? She did not have breakfast this morning, and now she's skipping lunch? "

"Your Grace—" Roberts tried to chime in.

"Who does she usually eat with?" Victor asked Roberts, interrupting him. "For the past two years. I know I heard rumors that she entertained some....guests while I was gone. Is there any truth to it?"

"Not at all, Your Grace," Roberts answered. "She ate alone. Sometimes, once a day. Sometimes, not at all."

Victor turned to him in disbelief, his eyes narrowing. "What?"

Roberts gave a calm nod. "The Duchess has taken to keeping to herself, Your Grace. At times, she would forgo meals entirely."

Victor slammed his fist on the table, making the silverware – and the staff – clatter. "And you let this happen? You never thought to inform me?" His voice rose with each word, sharp with anger. "No wonder these rumors are flying around. She's starving herself, and you kept that from me?"

"My apologies, Your Grace," Roberts responded, bowing his head. "I didn't wish to overstep."

"Overstep?" Victor shot back. "I put you in charge of the household for a reason. Because more than anyone else in this room, I have some trust in you. This is the first time in my entire life that I have been bothered this much about what those jobless lots have to say about my household. It's concerning to me that I'm only now

learning about this. "

Victor turned to Agatha, his frustration now directed at her. "And you, what do you do in this household as the housekeeper if the Duchess is the one changing the tapestries, overseeing the staff, and handling everything else?"

Agatha swallowed, clasping her hands in front of her. "Your Grace, the Duchess insists on managing many of the household matters herself. I assist where I can, but?—"

"Enough." Victor interrupted, his tone sharp.

"Things will change from now on," he stated firmly, locking eyes with each of them in turn.

"Agatha, you will assist the Duchess in every way possible. I want you by her side, guiding her through her responsibilities. If it comes to it, I expect you to feed her yourself if that's what it takes. "

Agatha blinked in surprise but nodded. "Of course, Your Grace. I will do as you say."

"And you, Roberts," Victor continued, turning his attention to him. "You are responsible for ensuring that no more scandalous behavior occurs under this roof. The whispers and rumors must stop. I will not have our reputation tarnished any longer."

Roberts stiffened. "Yes, Your Grace. I will keep a closer watch."

Victor's expression softened slightly. "Alice may have the freedom to make her own choices as the duchess, but she is still my wife."

"My deepest apologies, Your Grace," Agatha added.

Pushing back his chair with a scrape, Victor stood abruptly and made his way out of the dining room.

When he finally reached the garden, he spotted Alice at a distance, standing near the hedge maze with her back to him.

She was speaking to the workers in a loud voice with the hem of her gown all muddied.

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Victor's jaw clenched as he approached. "Alice!" he called out, his voice cutting through the air.

Alice jerked at the sound of her name and turned around, matching his frown with an even more exasperated one. "Your Grace," she said and curtsied. "I must ask you not to call my name in such a manner. It's the same reason I nearly fell from that window two years ago. It's quite frightening."

Victor's gaze instantly softened, reminded of that awful night two years ago. He could feel his hands starting to shake, but he clenched tightly, trying not to think about it so he could regain his composure.

"You were asking to come for lunch, were you, or were you not?" he asked, changing the subject.

"I was," she answered. "But I have been quite busy, Your Grace. I will have dinner later."

"The point here is that I asked you to come for lunch," he said. "We were supposed to have lunch together. I believe it's only courteous to honor that invitation, especially as your husband and the head of this house."

Alice crossed her arms. "You know very well that I have many matters to attend to, Your Grace. The construction is not going to oversee itself, and I cannot simply ignore the workers or their needs. Besides, I asked for Roberts to help oversee the workers, but he's with you, rearranging your study instead. So, I have to do it myself."

"What was the instruction I gave you?" he asked, crossing his arms too.

"I'm afraid I don't understand, Your Grace," she answered.

"When you came to me, asking for Roberts, I gave you an instruction. What was it?"

Alice paused to think. "To find someone else. But I also explained to you that there was no one else to do it."

"So, you are telling me that you are not capable of managing without Roberts for a short time?" he asked.

"I'm telling you, that someone has to do it, and it's either me or Roberts," she answered. "You said that it was my problem, my orangery. So, I figured you wanted me to oversee it by myself."

"Roberts," Victor called out to the butler.

"Yes, Your Grace?" he answered, standing behind him.

"I need you to assign someone to oversee this construction," he said. "Since Alice would not take it upon herself to do so, brief someone else and have them report back to her directly."

"I can manage my own affairs, Your Grace," she answered. "Just because you've returned does not mean I'm suddenly incapable of doing what I have been doing excellently well for the last two years."

Victor briefly shut his eyes, trying to calm himself. "Go upstairs, change, and come to the dining room for lunch. We will have lunch together, and dinner together for as long as I am here."

"I don't think that's necessary," she said.

"Alice, if we are going to be seen together throughout the season, we have to be able to tolerate each other," he explained. "I don't want this, but it is the only way I can get my peace back."

"I honestly have no interest in tolerating you, Your Grace," she said.

"Are you trying to get on my nerves?" he asked. "Is that it? Are you trying to annoy me?"

"I was doing just fine before you came back," she continued. "I'm not a decorative piece in this house. I'm not sitting and waiting for you to come and play with me. This orangery is important to me, and I am going to oversee it. I've been prim and proper for two years in your absence but that has changed since you returned. "

"So, what? You want me to leave?" he questioned.

"I did not say that, Your Grace," she answered.

"Well, that is not happening," he said, taking two steps forward in her direction.

He watched as Alice gasped, her eyes widening in surprise as he came close, and staggered back.

A surge of concern jolted through him as he instinctively reached out, catching her by the waist to prevent her from falling over.

With his arm wrapped around her waist, he pulled her towards him, steadying her on the ground.

He saw the fear flicker in her eyes as she locked onto his, and he instinctively smiled, recognizing her vulnerability.

"There it is," he whispered.

"You think I'm afraid of you, Your Grace?" she asked.

"Aren't you?" he asked quietly. "Everyone is afraid of me."

They stood close, their faces mere inches apart.

He searched her eyes, expecting to find the fear he was accustomed to instilling in others.

But as he studied her, a strange tingling sensation crept up his spine.

Alice didn't flinch or look away. Instead, she held his gaze, her expression steady and unyielding.

She wasn't afraid.

"Is that how you keep control? To get everyone to bend to your will?" she questioned. "What could you possibly do to me? Torture me like you have done in the last two years?"

Victor arched his eyebrows, confused. "You think I've been torturing you?"

Alice stepped back, prying herself away from his grasp. "We don't have to eat together. We don't have to pretend indoors. I'm not hungry. I will eat when I am."

Victor made to step forward again, to say something.

..but he restrained himself. He didn't understand what she meant by him torturing her, but because he could even ask, she walked away.

She didn't look back, her pace quickened as if to escape the moment, leaving him standing there, struggling with his thoughts.

He ran a hand through his hair in frustration, strangely bothered by what she said.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Her waist had not remained the same since the afternoon before.

Alice caressed her back for the umpteenth time that morning, feeling the same lingering warmth where Victor had touched her that had stolen her sleep.

She strolled through the garden that led to the orangery, thinking about her encounter with him the previous day.

His hand on her waist that caught her from falling over, the intensity of his gaze, and the way her heart raced in response to his breath on her skin.

She shook her head, trying to focus on the present, but her mind kept wandering back to that very moment.

It's nothing, Alice. Forget all about it.

Caressing her waist one more time, Alice stepped out of the garden and stood in front of the orangery, happy to see the workers already busy with their tasks. She took a deep breath, preparing herself to supervise, when she noticed Roberts approaching.

"Good morning, Your Grace," he greeted her with a respectful nod. "I trust your night was restful?"

"It was, Roberts," she lied. "What are you doing here if I may ask? We don't want His Grace to get upset now. He requested that you stay by his side while he fixes his

study."

"The duke sent me down here, Your Grace," he answered, gesturing toward the workers. "I am to oversee the construction of the orangery today."

Alice tilted her head to the side. "Why is that? Why did he change his mind?"

"I can't say, Your Grace," he answered. "But he requests your presence in the dining room immediately. He knew you would come down here and he asked that I deliver the message when you do."

"So, he sent you down here, so that I go up to join him for breakfast?"

"Yes, Your Grace."

"Basically, he is taking away my excuse?" she mumbled.

"Very well," she said. "Let me know if anything arises."

With that, she turned around and made her way to the dining room.

She had no intention of giving in to Victor's every demand, yet she recognized that with Roberts back, she might have some control over the situation.

Better still, it showed that he was somewhat reasonable.

It caused a smile to instinctively form on her face, but Alice quickly dismissed it.

There was nothing to be impressed by.

Alice entered the dining room and paused at the door.

Her eyes met Victor's in an instant, and she inhaled sharply, strangely taken aback by his appearance.

The sight of him was strikingly different from what she had expected.

His sleeves were rolled up, exposing his forearms, where the scars crisscrossed the skin.

But instead of the familiar feeling of fear, an unexpected thrill coursed through her.

It was those very hands that had wrapped around her waist and prevented her from falling flat on the ground.

She noticed the way the sunlight caught the angles of his jaw and the shadows that danced across his features.

It was strange, but she no longer felt frightened.

Instead, a mix of curiosity and intrigue ignited within her.

There was something about his personality that he was hiding, and Alice was desperate to solve the mystery.

"Good morning, Your Grace," she greeted and curtsied. "You sent for me?"

"Sit," he said, holding her gaze.

Alice wanted to oblige instantly, but she stopped herself. "I typically don't eat breakfast."

"Not anymore," he answered. "You do now. So, sit."

The air between them crackled with unspoken tension as Alice reluctantly settled into her chair, her heart starting to race.

Victor continued to eat, and she stole glances at him.

He seemed calm as he ate with the same cold demeanor he was known for.

Alice stared at him, hoping to see a flicker of the Victor who had accidentally touched her hand in the carriage two years ago or the Victor who had held her by the waist the day before.

"Are you going to stare at me all morning, or will you eat?" he asked, lifting his eyes. "Is there something on my face?"

Alice's cheeks flushed. "No," she answered and lowered her head.

Victor set his fork down and leaned back slightly in his chair. His eyes locked onto hers with an intensity that made her heart race.

"We will be attending the upcoming Arlington ball in a few days," he announced casually. "We received an invite. Do you have a suitable dress or would you require a visit to the modiste to get one?"

Alice set her fork down, too. "I have two years' worth of dress. I suppose they will do."

Victor simply nodded and returned to his meal, obviously choosing to ignore the sarcasm in her voice. After a moment, he added, "Roberts will be overseeing the construction of the orangery from now on. He will report to you directly. You shouldn't have to concern yourself with the details."

Alice blinked, caught off guard by the unexpected announcement. "What?" she said, her mind racing. "I thought you needed him by your side?"

"Priorities," he answered simply. "I can get someone else. Plus, Roberts knows how to manage the staff effectively. It is what he does."

A wave of relief washed over Alice, and warmth spread in her chest. The thoughtfulness of his decision struck her.

Roberts had been with Victor for years, and deep down, she understood why he preferred to have Roberts by his side while he worked.

It was a matter of trust and effectiveness.

She had not expected him to give that up...

For her...

"Thank you," she said, the words slipping out before she could reconsider. "I appreciate that."

Victor looked up at her then, his gaze so intense that her pulse quickened in an unexpected rush. There it was again...the softness in his eyes.

"You don't have to thank me," he answered.

"I do." She nodded. "You just did a nice thing for me."

Victor made to respond, but he swallowed and blinked repeatedly. Before Alice could say anything else, he stood up and strode toward the door, leaving her alone at the table.

Alice smiled to herself, sensing a shift in the air between them.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"So, Emma might be getting married this season?"

Alice twirled before the mirror, feeling the blue gown constrict a bit too tightly around her waist and shoulders, digging into her skin in a way that only grew more irritating with each adjustment.

She pulled at the fabric, trying to loosen it, but the stubborn dress refused to give.

It was an exquisite gown; she couldn't deny that.

The embroidery was delicate, and the color flattered her complexion.

Yet, as she moved, she could hardly ignore how it limited her breathing.

"I am not getting married this season. It was one dance," Emma argued, sitting on the bed. "Plus, I reckon he only danced with me out of pity."

"Don't say that, Emma," Lavinia argued. "He probably feels just as awkward as we do. You're worth more than just one dance, Emma. You've such wit, and if you simply... put yourself out there more, the gentlemen would see that too."

Emma scoffed. "Please. This isn't our first season, Lavinia."

"Well, don't you want it to be your last?" she questioned. "Are you not tired of your mama always scheming at every tea party? Because I am exhausted."

Emma leaned in. "Well, that's why we keep coming here to Alice's home to escape those awful tea parties."

"Well, we obviously can't keep coming here to hide forever," Lavinia said. "Your mama had finally taken matters into her own hands."

"He's older than my papa, Lavinia," Emma said. "I am not marrying out of convenience. No offense, Alice."

"None taken," Alice chuckled and turned back to the mirror.

"It can't be that bad," Lavinia said, strolling to the window. "I mean, look at Alice, she's still...alive."

Emma tilted her head, squinting at Alice with an amused gleam. "That is true. The Duke has been back in the estate for over a week now. Given his reputation, and your temper, we half-expected you to be...well, in hot waters."

Alice rolled her eyes at their attempt to tease her, though a faint smile tugged at the corner of her lips. "Hardly. He keeps to himself. Ravenmoor is large enough to avoid each other, after all. We cross paths only when we have breakfast together, sometimes lunch."

Lavinia and Emma exchanged glances and rose from their seats. "You eat with him?" Lavinia asked, eyes widened. "Together?"

Alice shrugged her shoulders. "Yes, as much as I would rather not. He insists on it. He says if we are to put up a good front in society, we need to start tolerating each other or we would be unable to fool anyone."

Lavinia slowly nodded. "So, what do you talk about when you eat together?"

Alice emitted a soft sigh, pausing to gather her thoughts.

To say that she was confused was an understatement.

Since their conversation about reassigning Roberts to the orangery, her mornings with Victor had been filled with silence and lingering tension.

They barely spoke at breakfast. He would occasionally ask about the progress of her project, but his responses to her questions were always brief.

More often than not, he excused himself from the table before she could even hope for a real conversation.

It was as if he'd erected a wall between them, one she hadn't yet figured out how to breach.

Not only did she find herself constantly wondering what he was thinking, she was now curious about his every move.

What was he doing? Why was he in his study for so long?

Where does he go when he disappears for hours?

"Alice? Where did you go there?" Emma asked. "Answer the question. What do you talk about?"

"Nothing," she answered and shrugged her shoulders. "He barely talks to me."

"That's good then," Lavinia said. "Right? That way you're at peace. It's good to know that some of the rumors about him might be false."

Alice sighed again. Two years ago, she would have been over the moon with happiness, knowing that Victor had a wall around him that he hated for people to intrude. It would have been the perfect excuse to stay away from him, knowing his reputation.

But her perception of him had changed a lot since he came back.

After she had decided to stop being afraid of him, she had gotten strangely attracted to the way he stared at her.

Then, there was that incident at the orangery when he'd caught her mid-fall, his arm firm around her waist. The warmth of his hand lingered long after he'd let go.

For days even. And when he conceded to let Roberts help with the orangery, an unexpected kindness from him.

...she couldn't ignore the softening in her heart toward him.

"Don't say that, Lavinia," Emma said. "Don't allow Alice to lower her guard around him. He is still a man with terrible reputation. It's best she still keeps some distance. Who knows? One day, he might just decide to prove to her why he is as terrible as they say."

"Well, we don't know if the rumors are true," Alice heard herself say. "I mean, it's been a while, and I haven't heard any stories of him killing anyone. Who knows where that silly rumor came from?"

Lavinia's jaw dropped, and Emma's eyes widened in shock as they stared at Alice. It seemed as though there was an eerie abomination on Alice's face, and they dreaded the sight. Alice arched her eyebrows, puzzled.

"What? What is it?" she questioned.

"Alice, are you actually defending him?" Lavinia asked, stunned.

"Great heavens, I never thought I'd see the day," Emma added and gasped.

Alice felt her cheeks warm. "I'm not defending him," she said quickly, shifting uncomfortably under their scrutinizing gaze. "I'm only saying that we don't know him, truly know him. How can we judge someone that barely speaks to us?"

"You were doing that just fine for two years!" Emma said and scoffed. "Remember how we used to call him evil and vile for abandoning you here for years without even a single letter or message?"

"How we would update you on the latest rumors about him, and you would even agree that he must have done something evil to start these rumors?" Lavinia added.

"What changed?"

"Nothing!" Alice said a bit too quickly, her cheeks flushing as she smoothed her hands over the dress. "Nothing, all right? Now, what do you think of this dress for the ball?" She turned toward the mirror, avoiding their questioning stares. "I quite like the color, but it's rather tight."

"What an obvious way to change the subject," Lavinia said and strolled to stand in front of her. "Answer our questions, Alice. What changed?"

Alice gave her a knowing look. "Don't ask me questions I cannot answer, Lavinia. I don't know why I said that."

Lavinia and Emma both exchanged looks before Lavinia backed away and stood far

enough so she could properly assess Alice's dress.

"I love the color too," Lavinia said. "It's beautiful and it suits you. It is the perfect dress for your reentry into society after two years of absence."

Alice turned back to the mirror. "I had the modiste take it in to fit better since I seem to have lost a bit of weight, but I am afraid she tightened it a little too much.

" She tugged at the bodice, feeling the constricting fabric dig into her skin.

"I can barely breathe, and it's making me question if I should wear something else. "

"It looks stunning Alice," Emma said. "Fitted, I'd say, not tight."

"You know Alice has always hated ball gowns," Lavinia said. "You always complain that they are too tight, that they are digging into your skin."

"Well, must they be too tight?" she asked. "I'd like to breathe a bit."

"Do you have others you would like to try on?" Emma asked. "Or do you want to visit the modiste and have this one mended?"

"I just...I need some air," Alice said. "Let's go and sit by the lake and read a book or something. I have tried on three dresses now. The ball isn't for another week. We have time."

Emma nodded enthusiastically. "That sounds perfect! A little escape by the lake is just what you need. Go change, and I ask the maids to prepare blankets and some snacks."

"I will fetch the books from the library downstairs," Lavinia said, scurrying out of the

room.

As Emma made to leave, Alice stopped her. "Emma? Is what Lavinia says true? You might be getting married this season? To a Baron?"

Emma shook her head. "It was one dance, Alice. Besides, I have no time to socialize or frolic with siblings that depend on me for almost everything."

"But if you had to choose," Alice said. "If you could get married to this Baron, to escape your father and your ever nagging siblings, would you marry him?"

Emma smiled faintly. "Are you asking if you made the right choice, Alice? If marrying the Duke to fulfil your papa's wishes and escape your mama's constant nagging was the right choice?"

Alice feigned a smile. "I should change," she said in a low whisper. "Please send Maureen up on your way down."

"All right," Emma said and made to walk away, but she stopped and turned back around. "You have been doing just fine, Alice. You might not be the happiest, but life isn't as horrible as you thought it would be as Duchess of Ravenmoor, right?"

"I'm lonely, Emma," Alice said to her, tears stinging her eyes. "I hate to admit this to anyone, but I am. It's not horrible, but I would like for it to be better, you know? Of course, I don't have my hopes set high."

"Even if I had the chance, I wouldn't marry the Baron," Emma said. "Perhaps, the books I have read have filled my head with fantasies, but I would like to imagine a different route for me. Alice, he is older than my papa. No, thank you."

Alice giggled.

"On the bright side, the Duke might be a scary man with a dark past, but he is quite handsome," Emma said. "And young."

"And full of secrets," Alice whispered to herself as Emma made her way out of the room.

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After a quick change into a simple linen dress, Alice joined Emma and Lavinia outside to sit by the lake. There were particular places in the estate that Alice loved. Places where she always spent most of her time. The library, her bathroom – soon the Orangery – and the lake.

Perhaps it was how green it was or how still the water looked—so still that she could see her own reflection in it. This place was also a refuge for her. It made time stand still. The air was fresher, and here, she could breathe, sit with her thoughts, and sometimes fall asleep for hours.

On the hottest days, Alice would wade into the lake, letting the cool water refresh her as she swam quietly along its surface.

She'd spend time moving at a measured pace, gliding from one end to the other, finding relief from the warmth of the sun.

She would float, pause to take in the tranquil surroundings, the soft rustling of leaves, and the coolness of the water around her.

The constructions had taken up so much of her time that Alice had barely had the opportunity to enjoy the peaceful moments by the lake that she cherished. She shut the book in her hand and sat up.

"Should we take a swim?" Alice asked Lavinia and Emma.

They turned from their books and stared at her, puzzled.

"A swim?" Lavinia echoed, raising an eyebrow.

"In the lake?" Emma added. "Here? Now?"

"Why not?" Alice grinned, her excitement evident. "The sun is shining, and the water looks inviting. It'll be fun. I do it all the time."

Emma exchanged a hesitant glance with Lavinia, clearly weighing the idea. "But what about our clothes?" she asked, glancing down at her dress. "We aren't dressed for it."

Alice rose to her feet. "We can always dry off afterward. It's just a bit of fun, and besides, who will see us here? We can swim, and then run up to the dressing room to change."

Lavinia shook her head with a chuckle. "Alice, I would prefer our quiet time by the lake, thank you very much. But you should definitely go have fun."

"Yes, really," Emma added. "Have fun, but just know that we will eat all the pastries before you return."

"Eat them," Alice said and kicked off her shoes, feeling the soft grass beneath her feet.

Without hesitation, she dashed into the water, fully clothed, splashing as she went. The coolness enveloped her, and a smile instinctively formed on her face. She squeaked loudly, making her way to the middle of the lake.

Alice let herself float in the water, her body supported by the gentle waves.

She gazed up at the sky, letting the sunlight dance across her face.

In that moment, watching the blue sky, she missed her family.

It was odd, and she found it absurd, seeing as she had been relieved to leave home two years ago, but now she missed her old room.

The garden she always spent time reading, the drawing room. ..

"Are you having fun, Alice?" Emma yelled.

"Yes!" she yelled back and giggled. "Are you sure you don't want to come in?"

"We're all right!" Lavinia answered.

Alice shut her eyes as she continued to float through the water. But then, a sudden shout pierced the serene atmosphere.

"Alice!"

Victor's voice echoed across the lake. It was so sharp and urgent that Alice gasped audibly.

The sound startled her, causing her to lose her balance momentarily as she struggled to steady herself in the water.

She kicked her legs, attempting to regain her position, but the shock of his arrival threw her off.

"Are you mad?" Victor called out, his brows furrowing in disbelief as he rushed closer. "Get out of there! Right now!"

Victor stood at a good distance from the lake, angry. Alice's heart raced, not just

from the surprise of his presence but also from the effect his tone had on her. She wanted to protest, but instead, she quietly swam to shore, exiting from the water.

"May I ask why, Your Grace?" she questioned, approaching him in drenched clothes. "I was just having a swim."

There it was again. The anger in his eyes that looked a lot like fear, the trembling of his hands, as if he were trying to contain a storm within himself. It was a juxtaposition that confused her; the fierce exterior he presented clashed with the vulnerability that flickered behind his gaze.

But then, the anger in his eyes was unmistakable, burning with an intensity that made her stomach twist. He stood rigid, his jaw clenched tight, and the muscle in his cheek twitched slightly, that Alice figured she was probably just imagining the vulnerability she had seen.

Victor's eyes narrowed as he stepped forward. "You are never to step foot in this lake again," he said firmly.

Alice blinked repeatedly in surprise. "And why not?" she asked. "I like swimming in the lake."

"You are not to step foot in that lake ever again," he repeated, louder this time. "I do not know what you were thinking, but I will not have this madness in my home. Occupy yourself with other things, but never do that again. Am I understood?"

Victor didn't wait for her to respond before storming off with Roberts following behind him.

"Madness?" she muttered, her arms crossed tightly against her chest as she watched him walk away.

As he disappeared from view, she felt the rush that had enveloped her before fading, replaced by a simmering frustration. This was the second time Victor had reacted to her like this...acting without any reasonable justification.

It upset and confused Alice, and she had no idea what to make of it.

The atmosphere in the dining room was tense.

Alice sat at the long, elegantly set table, her gaze fixed on the beautiful patterns on the China.

She absentmindedly traced the rim of her cup with her fingers.

The silence in the room felt heavy, interrupted only by the occasional clink of silverware and the distant chirping of birds outside the window.

Victor's expression remained unreadable.

It was like he was wearing a mask of detachment, but it barely concealed the simmering anger that had built up since the incident at the lake.

Beneath his composed facade, it was clear that he was frustrated and still angry.

His jaw was clenched slightly as he ate, downing huge portions of food at a time.

As much as Alice just wanted to live in peace, she had stayed up all night thinking about Victor's anger and the way he had reacted at the lake.

She needed answers to the questions that swirled in her mind, questions that clung to her like a moth to a flame.

It left her feeling restless, and she couldn't take it anymore.

"I would like to know why I am not allowed to swim in the lake, Your Grace," she questioned and put down her fork. "I believe I should be able to swim if I want to."

"Eat, Alice," Victor said sharply, his gaze fixed firmly on his plate as if avoiding her question entirely.

"Why can't I swim in the lake?" she pressed. "I should be able to swim if I want to swim. I do not appreciate you yelling at me for doing something that I like. You tend to do that, and I don't like it. I have expressed this before and I would appreciate some understanding."

"You are not a child, Alice," he said sternly. "The lake is not a playground. You are a duchess, with responsibilities. Surely, you have better things to do."

"What does swimming in the lake have to do with my responsibilities as duchess?" she questioned.

"Just eat your breakfast, Alice," he said. "I don't want to discuss this further."

"Well, I want to discuss it," she insisted. "I want to know why you got so angry that I went into the lake, why you got so angry that I sat by a window, and why you married me in the first place. Surely, it's not because you need an heir, because it's been two years, so you don't seem like you are in a rush."

Did you just marry me so I can idle around doing nothing, collecting dust like some porcelain on a shelf? "

"Why is that so bad?" he shot back. "Why can't you sit still and do nothing? Everything you need is provided for you. What more could you possibly want?"

"A human being!" she blurted and rose to her feet.

"I want to talk to someone. Why do you think Lavinia and Emma come here all the time? We sit and we have breakfast and lunch together in silence. You question everything I do, and you make demands. I talk to myself more than I talk to anyone else and that is not normal. Would it kill you to ask questions about me if you're going to force me to sit here and eat with you every single day? "

Victor sat back and stared at her, exasperated. He lowered his head and swallowed, sitting silent for a moment before lifting his head.

"Sit down, Alice," he said quietly.

"I don't want to," she responded. "I want to go upstairs and rest."

"You haven't touched your food," he pointed out.

"Why should I listen to you, when you won't answer any of my questions?" she asked.

"Because I'd rather not talk about myself," he answered. "But this is important. Trying to get along is important so we look cordial when we step out together. Deep down, you know how important it is to stop these rumors from spreading."

"I am not disputing that," she said. "But you're not answering any of?—"

"I'm sorry I raised my voice at you," he said, cutting her off. "I shouldn't have done that. I was... upset. It won't happen again."

Alice took a deep breath as the tension in the air settled slightly.

She lowered herself back into her seat, her gaze flickering to the untouched breakfast in front of her.

Now that he had apologized – something she had never in a million years expected him to do – she didn't know what to say anymore.

"Well, I am sorry for my reaction," she said.

"You don't have to apologize," he said to her. "But I appreciate it. I still, however, insist that you don't swim in the lake anymore. There are other things to occupy yourself with, I'm sure."

Alice still wanted to protest, but she was tired of arguing.

So she just ate, feeling hungry all of a sudden.

She figured that for peace to reign, she would oblige Victor's request when he was around and swim whenever he wasn't at the estate.

That way, he didn't get upset, and she still got to do the hobby she liked.

"So, tell me about the orangery," Victor said. "How's it coming along?"

Alice expected the question. It was the only one he ever asked during breakfast. "Well..."

"Better yet, tell me why you want an orangery," he said and met her eyes.

A smile crept up on her lips, but she quickly forced it down, unwilling to acknowledge the warmth that simmered within her. She hated how easily impressed she was by Victor's smallest gestures.

Yet, as she spoke with newfound enthusiasm about her plans for the orangery, it felt different this time. She felt his gaze on her, unwavering and intense. He was actually listening.

At that moment, she was torn between her resolve to keep her emotions in check and the undeniable pull Victor was starting to have over her.

CHAPTER NINE

"Maureen, would you prepare my bath in the new bathroom? And a glass of wine, please. It's the perfect day to just relax and watch the sun set."

"Yes, Your Grace, right away," Maureen answered.

"Don't forget to add the lavender and rosemary oils," Alice reminded, her voice tingling with anticipation.

"Yes, Your Grace." Maureen curtsied and turned around.

There was a skip in Alice's steps as she made her way to her room.

The orangery was near completion, and the thought of it filled her with a sense of accomplishment.

It was days like this that she relished the chance to escape into her newly renovated bathroom.

Alice had put a lot of thought into planning the room.

She had even drawn a picture six months before construction began.

For one, the bathroom was on the second floor.

The window was positioned perfectly to offer her a breathtaking view of the

sprawling land beyond, where the sky stretched endlessly above, and the scenery unfolded like a picturesque painting.

She had adorned the space with delicate touches that helped her relax.

She had made the space a sanctuary where she could escape from the world.

Where she could spend hours alone, enjoying her own company.

Often, she would sink into the warm embrace of the bathtub with a glass of wine in her hand, allowing the soothing ambiance to wash over her as she savored the tranquility and beauty outside her window. That particular bathroom was her favorite place in the estate.

On getting to her room, Alice slipped into something more comfortable, a soft, flowing gown that hugged her figure just right.

She made her way to the window, settling into the cozy nook, before picking up a well-worn book, its pages worn from countless readings.

Alice ran her fingers through the spine.

There were many books like that in the room.

Books she had read over and over again in the last two years.

She had been nestled into the seat for about half an hour when Maureen gently knocked on the door. "Your bath is ready, Your Grace," she announced.

Alice looked up, momentarily pulled from her book, and nodded at Maureen in response. Setting the book aside, she stood, smoothed down her gown, and went to

the bathroom.

But the moment Alice entered the room, her breath caught in her throat, and she paused at the door.

Standing there by her tub was Victor, slipping out of a bathrobe that hung loosely on his frame.

She had made a sound when she walked in, garnering his attention.

He stopped, his robe midway down his shoulders, and turned to her with his head tilted to the side, an eyebrow raised.

Alice let her eyes widen and linger on his chest, and her eyes continued to scan him until they fell on his torso.

She squinted, noting that the scars on his arm and neck traveled down there, too.

For a moment, staring at the scars and his bare chest left her breathless, and a wave of warmth flooded her cheeks as she felt an unexpected pull toward him.

She couldn't stop staring as her mind tried to grasp what could have caused Victor's many scars.

"Do you like what you see, Alice?"

Victor's voice was firm, a hint of reprimand lacing his tone, and it sent a jolt of heat through her. She dared not look back at him. Instead, she turned around quickly, her eyes on the doorframe as if it could provide an escape from the unexpected flutter in her stomach.

"What are you doing here, Your Grace?" she asked, instinctively glancing at him as if to get one more look before he tied his robe.

"It's my estate. I can be wherever I want to be, Alice," he answered and faced her.

"That might be true, but this is my bathroom," she managed to say, still battling the heat that had settled on her cheeks. She could only imagine how red her face looked, so she tried not to look up at Victor so he didn't see it, too.

"It's a bathroom," he answered, approaching her. "And like I said, it's my estate. If I want to bathe here, I believe I can."

"You have your own bathroom," she countered, her heart racing as he closed the distance between them. "There are multiple others in this big building. This particular one is my creation. I even had my maid prepare that bath you were trying to enjoy before I arrived."

"I smelled the lavender two corridors away," Victor said, his tone shifting. "I heard you had done something to one of the rooms in this wing, so I was curious. I can see why you'd want to keep it to yourself."

Alice lifted her head slightly. "What do you mean?"

Victor leaned against the doorframe and crossed his arms. "You created a sanctuary here. I can imagine myself here for hours, staring out that big window and losing myself in the view. Plus, with a drink in hand, and a book in the other, I might forget the rest of the world exists."

Alice felt her cheeks flush at the thought, caught off guard by the way he painted the idea in her head so vividly. "A book?" she asked, taking a step back, slightly intimidated by their closeness.

"Why do you sound shocked?" he replied, arching an eyebrow. "Do you really think I'm incapable of appreciating something this beautiful?"

Alice felt her cheeks burn. It was like a furious blush rising to her face.

She shifted, looking everywhere else but at Victor's eyes.

She was reminded of the time when she used to fear him so much that his mere presence made her uncomfortable.

A lot had changed since then. The fear had become something more intense.

Something that burned when it crossed her cheeks and her stomach.

"No, it's just..." Alice hesitated, her words tangled in her throat. "I didn't think you'd see it that way. I mean, I never imagined you as someone who reads for leisure."

Victor tilted his head, squinting slightly as he lowered himself to meet her gaze. Their eyes locked at an intimate level. "What are you still doing here, Alice?" he asked quietly.

Alice blinked, her breath catching as his eyes held hers. Feeling the flush deepen, she barely managed to stammer, "What?" Her voice came out softer than she intended.

"We cannot both bathe together now, can we?" he asked, his gaze unyielding.

It was difficult, but Alice managed to snap out of it and clear her throat. "That bath was prepared for me. It's mine. The wine, the warm tub, the scent...the book. Everything was prepared according to my instructions."

"And oddly, just how I like it," he said and straightened his back. "Plus, I got here

first."

"You got here first?" she stuttered, unable to believe her ears. "It's not meant for you. My goodness, this entire bathroom isn't meant for you; it is mine. I thought you hated the changes I was making to the estate?"

"This particular one I like," he said. "This particular one...we'll share."

"Share? I'm not sharing," she argued. "At least not right now. I came here for a bath, and I will have my bath. If anyone should leave, it should be you, Your Grace."

"Think of it as a favor to me, Alice," he said, his tone softer but no less insistent. "You've done an exceptional job with this space and it would be nice to enjoy it."

The compliment caught her off guard. Alice looked down, feeling a flush creeping up her neck as she eased her shoulders. She had poured so much into making the room perfect. It felt good to hear him actually notice and praise it, making it seem harder to refuse.

Victor crossed his arms. "And miss the view from here?" he replied, with a nod to the window. "No, I'd like to appreciate the work you've done while I relax."

Alice felt her frustration and fluster collide. She wanted to argue, but a small part of her couldn't deny a sense of satisfaction from his persistence and the unexpected praise.

"You could wait until tomorrow," she replied, trying to keep her voice steady. "Or perhaps I could ask Roberts to create the same setup somewhere else."

"What about the view?" he questioned. "The view is key."

"You are utterly impossible," she said, throwing her hands up.

Deep down, though, she'd already decided to give in the moment he'd complimented her work. But she didn't want him to know how much his words had affected her. That his simple approval had, in some small way, managed to override her frustration.

"The water's getting cold, Alice," he said, crossing his arms.

Alice could swear she saw a smile gently tugged at his lips, but it disappeared before she could register it.

Her pulse quickened as he continued to look at her, his calm, self-assured stance making her feel unsteady.

Her cheeks burned, and she could feel the warmth rising, creeping from her neck to her face, betraying the calm she was struggling to project.

She tried to steady herself, tried to seem unbothered, but her heart raced.

Inhaling deeply, she forced herself to calm down, to not let him see that his words had gotten to her.

Straightening her shoulders, she managed a steady voice. "Fine, Your Grace," she said, surprising herself with her response. "You can have it... just this once. I will let it go because of your kindness to me, letting Roberts oversee the staff at the orangery."

"You are so kind, Alice," he said. "Now, if you will excuse me..."

Her lips parted in a bid to retort, but she caught herself.

With a reluctant sigh and a flash of narrowed eyes, Alice turned around sharply, refusing to let him get to her.

She gathered her gown and strode out of the bathroom, her footsteps brisk down the hall.

She needed air, distance, anything to shake the flustered energy lingering from his presence.

As she reached the end of the corridor, she paused, steadying herself with a hand against the wall. Her pulse thrummed in her ears, and she took a deep breath, willing the heat in her cheeks to subside so she could at least think straight.

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"The nerve of him," she whispered to herself.

But as much as she hated to admit it, Victor was beginning to have an effect on her—a troubling one she couldn't shake off. Every time she talked to him, something changed. He left her off-balance every time, and thoughts of him seemed to linger just a bit longer.

She had no idea what to make of it.

"So, you read?"

Alice shifted in her chair and tilted her head sideways, looking at Victor as if reassessing him.

After their charged encounter in her bathroom the previous day, she was unsure if he was genuinely interested in her answer or merely attempting to tease her.

His question was simple, casual even, but something in his tone hinted at candid curiosity.

She hadn't expected him to inquire, much less about her reading habits.

"Do you really want to know?" she questioned. They were seated in the dining room for breakfast that morning. Alice wasn't really hungry, but she wasn't ready to deal with Victor's frustration if she declined.

"I asked, did I not?" he retorted, keeping his eyes on his plate. "In the bathroom

yesterday...your maid left a book with the glass of wine."

"Oh," she said, playing with her food. "Did you enjoy reading the book, and sipping my wine, Your Grace?"

"Yes," he answered plainly.

Alice lifted her head in surprise as her fork hovered over her plate.

She hadn't expected such an unapologetic response, and his calm confidence threw her off guard.

She looked down, carefully poking at her food, unsure how to respond.

It seemed as though Victor was immune to her teasing, whereas the opposite was the case with her.

"Was that your favorite book to read?" he asked. "It was my first time reading it, and I don't think I liked it very much. I think I prefer books that engage the mind. Thought provoking reads."

Alice crossed her arms, fixing him with a challenging gaze. "And what about the book did you not enjoy, Your Grace? Mary Wollstonecraft's book could not have possibly failed to engage your mind."

Victor took a measured sip of wine, his gaze steady on hers. "I don't know what it was...but I couldn't seem to connect with the challenge she posed, Alice," he replied. "I simply prefer ideas that...well, rather than overturning societal norms, examine them."

"Overturning?" she asked.

"I don't entirely disagree with Wollstonecraft, Alice," he continued. "There's a lot of truth in what she writes, but people...traditions... they don't shift so quickly, especially when you are demanding for too much too soon."

Alice's brows lifted, her fingers lightly tapping against her glass. "Wollstonecraft argues for the kind of education that would make women self-reliant, capable of reason. Isn't that worth overturning things? To accommodate a new era where women's lives aren't dependent on societal views?"

"It's easy to demand change, it's harder to guide it," he explained. "Where is the plan? If we overturn things, what is the plan to fix it back together? I'm not saying her ideas aren't valuable, Alice."

I agree that women deserve every right to learn.

It's paramount. But to suggest society should instantly set aside generations of tradition without a clear plan, just simply because it reads good on paper sounds a bit absurd. "

"Or maybe it's that society's too comfortable, and her message makes people uncomfortable. That's why she's so essential. They tried to downplay her words by poking into her personal life but Wollstonecraft was a stubborn woman, and for good reason," Alice said.

Victor set his glass down on the table. "All right, take Rousseau's book, *Emile*, for instance.

He details, step by step, how a boy should be educated to become a virtuous man.

The method is practical and acknowledges the importance of nature and experience in a person's development.

But his approach is inherently traditional. "

"It doesn't always have to be traditional, Your Grace," she continued to argue. "If something is to be effective, it needs to challenge laid down rules."

"That's what I disagree with. It does not need to challenge everything to be considered impactful," he shot back. "Rosseau's book encourages understanding, rather than confrontation, which, in the long run, could lead to a more stable transformation."

"But stability at what cost?" Alice countered, adjusting in her seat. "I think you only relate to Rousseau's book because it is told from a man's perspective."

"Alice, Rousseau encourages both men and women to develop virtues, but he insists each should play complementary roles, each in service to the other. Did you read the book?"

"I've heard about it," she answered. "Is that your favorite book?"

"It is not," he answered. "In fact, I don't care much for the book, but I was trying to give you an example of the different approaches to change, and transformation. Now, given that Wollstonecraft's book is your favorite, I'm not sure you'll find Emile a good read."

"It's one of my favorites, but not my favorite," she said. "I don't think I have a particular book that I place above all else. I read a lot of books."

"So, what kind of books do you read more of?" he asked, returning to his food.

Alice pondered his question, her fingers absently tracing the rim of her glass.

"I find solace in fiction. It's like an escape.

I could read a book for hours and forget to do anything else.

But I also have a soft spot for poetry. Sometimes, I wish I could write poetry the way John Keats does.

His ability to capture emotions and the beauty of nature is simply enchanting. "

"I could have guessed that," Victor said and sat back. "John Keats is a fine choice."

"I don't know how I feel about his Ode to Nightingale.

Lavinia loves it but somehow it puzzles me.

Always leaves me thinking. Every time I read it, it makes everything seem so.

..fleeting. Like it doesn't matter. Like.

..death is just waiting. Whenever it feels like it, it'll come and make its choice.

Time isn't your friend, and happiness might not last as long as you want it to. "

The room fell silent all of a sudden. It took Alice a moment to realize that she wasn't talking to herself and had said those words out loud.

She looked up at Victor, who seemed to have a solemn expression on his face now.

He stared at her so intensely that she held her breath, scared at that moment.

She wanted to believe that he was probably lost in thought, staring at her blankly, but

when she moved a bit, his eyes followed her.

The mood in the room had shifted and it was quite obvious. But Alice had no idea why. Had it been what she said? Her talk of death? Or had she talked too much? Her father always said she talked a lot, and it frustrated him sometimes.

"Your...Grace," she stammered, unsure of how to break the silence.

"Do excuse me," he said and rose to his feet in an attempt to leave the room.

Alice dropped her shoulders as a wave of defeat washed over her.

Each time they seemed to make progress, it felt like they took multiple steps back.

It was the first time she had ever enjoyed a conversation with him, and he, on the other hand, was ready to retreat, leaving her to grapple with the unspoken tension that he always seemed to leave behind.

"You're just going to leave, Your Grace?" she asked, staring at the table.

Victor paused. "What?"

"There is a wall, Your Grace," she said, turning to him as she rose to her feet.

"A wall you seem to put up, and bring down whenever you please.

I am not asking you to open up to me, or talk about whatever it is that you seem to be guarding.

But it can get frustrating when you do things that I cannot understand and you fail to explain. Like the other day at the lake."

"Alice—"

"You offered a glimpse into your mind, but every time I reach out in return, it's as if you retreat further into shadows. It is utterly confusing."

Without waiting for a response, Alice turned sharply on her heels and stormed out of the dining room, her heart racing. She had not expected to get so upset, but she couldn't help it.

Victor wasn't the only one confusing her with his actions. Her emotions were all over the place. There was a newfound stir in her heart that came and went as it pleased, and Alice knew she needed to deal with it as soon as possible.

CHAPTER TEN

Victor paced at the foot of the grand staircase, his patience wearing thin.

They were running late for the ball, and Alice wasn't ready yet.

He glanced at the ornate clock on the wall, the ticking seconds amplifying his anxiety.

They needed to be on time. The earlier they arrived, the fewer people they would have to greet.

"What's taking so long, Roberts? The ball is about to start," he asked Roberts, standing by his side. "She has been getting ready for so long."

"Do you want me to get a message to her, Your Grace?" Roberts asked.

Victor ran his fingers through his hair. "No," he said quietly. "I wouldn't want to rush her."

He had been dressed and ready to go for over thirty minutes. His outfit had been meticulously chosen for the occasion. It was the Crowell Ball, one of the most anticipated balls of the season. Everyone was going to be there.

Victor had on a tailored black tailcoat, its fine fabric hugging his broad shoulders while tapering elegantly at the waist. It was paired with a white waistcoat featuring subtle silver embroidery.

His trousers matched the coat and fell neatly over polished black boots.

It was tailored to fit. He had made sure of it.

Appearance was everything to society, after all.

Just as Victor turned his gaze to the stairs, Alice emerged, standing at the top.

Perhaps it was the flickering candlelight or the deep emerald gown that seemed to flow with every step she took—or perhaps a fusion of both—but the moment he set eyes on her, something about her seemed almost otherworldly.

She wore a gown of deep emerald green, the fabric flowing like liquid around her form, highlighting her curves with an effortless elegance that took his breath away.

Victor was not one to stare for long, but he could not take his eyes away.

His heart raced as he watched her descend the stairs.

A mix of awe and something deeper stirred within him.

Her hair flowed in soft waves, with a few tendrils framing her face, and pearls scattered around it like stars against a midnight sky.

At that moment, he wasn't in a rush anymore.

He felt as if he were witnessing the unveiling of a masterpiece, one that had been hidden away and was now emerging into the light.

Alice was beautiful, no doubt about that, but there was something different tonight.

Something more captivating.

Victor's heart quickened and, no matter what he did, he couldn't calm himself down. It was a reaction he hadn't expected, and he had to force himself to maintain his composure, even though his gaze remained fixed on her, unwilling to let a moment pass.

"Apologies for my tardiness, Your Grace," she said, reaching the foot of the stairs. "Seeing as we need to keep up appearances, I figured I would try to look my best."

"Your efforts show," he said to her and cleared his throat, not wanting her to dwell on the moment or his compliment. "We must go or we'll be late. I'd hate to arrive when the ballroom is flooded with people. That is more eyes on me at once than I am prepared to handle."

"I'm all set," Alice said to him. "Let's get this over with."

Victor recalled saying those words to her the day they'd first met, on their wedding day.

He'd been weary then, surrounded by curious, expectant eyes that scrutinized his every movement, every glance.

All he had wanted, after enduring that endless ceremony, was to retreat to the estate, to shut the world out and disappear into the solitude of his own company.

Now that he thought about it, he realized that it was a cruel thing to say to Alice. Judging from how terrified she looked that day, he figured he could have done a better job to assuage her.

When Victor reached the carriage out front, he opened the door himself and extended

his hand to help her step into the vehicle. Instead of accepting, Alice stared at him, confused.

"This is what people do, is it not?" he asked.

"Most people...yes," she answered. "But...you don't have to. We're not in public yet."

"We can start now," he said, stretching his hand further.

Alice looked reluctant, but then she sighed. "Well, since it's the polite thing to do."

She placed her hand lightly in his, her fingers brushing against his palm in a way that sent an unexpected warmth through him.

For a brief moment, their eyes met, and Victor became acutely aware of everything.

Her soft hand against his coarser one, her lean fingers warm yet delicate in his grasp, and her scent, faint but undeniably present.

If he had to guess, he'd say it was a blend of lavender and something subtler.

He blinked, forcing himself to pull back as soon as she was seated.

After taking a second to breathe, he got into the seat across from her and kept his gaze out the window as they began the journey.

It was safe to say that he was flustered. Victor had not been aware of the feeling until he met Alice. Everything she did unnerved him more than he cared to admit.

"Alice, we need to present ourselves as a loving couple tonight," Victor said to her.

"The rumors surrounding our marriage will only dissipate if we give people

something to believe in. The sooner we do that, the better."

"Yes, Your Grace," she answered unenthusiastically. "Whatever you say."

Victor turned to her, sensing the attitude in her tone. "Are you still upset about our last conversation over breakfast yesterday?"

Alice only glanced at him. "There's nothing to be upset about."

Victor stared at her. She had talked about death, and he had reacted strongly to it. His reaction had been instinctual, a sudden response that surprised even him. He hated the talk of death or dying. It twisted something in him...memories he fought so hard to bury.

"There's a wall, Alice," he said to her, causing her to shift her attention to him. "You're right."

Alice only nodded in response and lowered her head to stare at her fingers.

"I'm sorry if it's lonely," he added. "But you knew what you were signing up for when you married a man like me."

"Who is that man?" she asked, throwing both hands in the air. "I have no idea what I signed up for. When we got married, I had no idea what I was getting into. All I had to go by were rumors. But even now, after two whole years, I still don't know who I married."

Victor didn't know how to communicate it.

How to tell her that he was just trying to protect her.

To make sure that she never experienced the darkness that was – most of the time – the order of the day for him.

He carried a burden alone, one he didn't want to pass onto her.

No one deserved to live in the darkness that he did.

It wasn't fair to her.

"You just have to live your life, Alice," he told her. "As freely as you want."

"Your Grace, the only reason you have a wall is because you are hiding too much," she said. "You know almost everything about me and my family and I know nothing about yours. I don't think that's normal, no matter the circumstance surrounding this marriage. What was your papa like? Did you get along with your mama? Is there a reason you don't have any siblings or close relatives?"

I have questions about you too, Your Grace. "

Victor inhaled deeply. "You should call me Victor," he said. "For our plan to work, you need to call me Victor so we seem close enough."

"You're changing the subject, Your Grace," she argued.

"Let me think about it, Alice," he said. "For now, let's concentrate on the Crowell Ball, shall we? Please?"

Alice sighed and faintly smiled. "If you say so...Victor."

A smile formed on his lips on hearing her call his name. He turned back to stare out the window, allowing silence to settle in. Victor found himself stealing glances at

Alice throughout the journey.

Alice was unable to take deep breaths. She'd thought that after two years away from society, she would be at ease with attending a ball, but as she took Victor's hand and stepped out of the carriage, her dress suddenly felt tighter, constricting her chest. She held his hand a little more firmly than intended as if his presence might steady her at the moment.

And it did. Alice was aware of his presence, and strangely, she felt assured by it.

Perhaps it was because society feared him, so she knew others would think twice before crossing her.

Or maybe she had grown to rely on him in ways she hadn't fully acknowledged.

Whatever the reason, it was working. She looked up at him, catching the slightest flicker of reassurance in his gaze, and found herself more composed than she could have imagined.

"There is nothing to be scared of, Alice," Victor said as they walked side by side. "It's just a ball."

"I'm not scared," she answered and swallowed. "I have no reason to be scared."

"Then what is it? You don't like being seen with me?" he asked, looking at her. "Shouldn't you have prepared yourself for this? It's been two years."

Alice held his stare but didn't respond.

He had every reason to believe she was ashamed to be seen with him, and the thought only made her chest tighten.

She had given him little to disprove it.

After all, she recalled how nauseated she had been on their wedding day.

It was so obvious that there were rumors he was holding her hostage.

"That's also not it," she whispered, but not loud enough for him to hear. She clenched tightly to his arm, hoping her nerves would ease soon. No matter how many times she tried to convince herself that there was nothing to be nervous about, she couldn't help it.

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As they entered the ballroom, Alice felt every eye turn toward them.

The entire room seemed to go still, conversations halting mid-sentence as people took in the sight of Victor and her.

She could see the look of disbelief on many faces; some even looked as though they were staring at a ghost. Alice knew her marriage to the Duke had thrust her into the center of society's attention, but she hadn't imagined it would be this intense.

She felt the weight of every gaze and the hush that followed them like a lingering shadow.

Victor's expression, on the other hand, remained stoic, his gaze fixed ahead. He seemed unfazed, like he could take everyone on in a fight all at once. People were looking at him, but their gaze dared not linger for long. His presence alone demanded respect, even awe, of those around him.

Alice hadn't considered it before, but now she wondered if Victor might be the shield she needed in her life.

His sternness and the aura of distance he kept around himself gave him a certain power in society that few dared to challenge.

She had feared coming back into society because she lacked the strength to tackle or debunk rumors of her death, but scanning the crowd, she noticed that everyone looked scared rather than curious.

"Your Grace."

A gentleman approached, and Alice instinctively released Victor's arm, her hand dropping to her side as she took a small step back.

The man offered a respectful bow, his wife mirroring his gesture with a polite nod.

Alongside them were two younger girls, likely making their societal debut, who giggled softly behind their parents.

Their gazes flickered to Alice, eyes wide with curiosity, before they curtsied, each of them casting quick, shy glances in her direction.

Alice greeted them back, surprised by their demeanor. Everyone else looked weary, whereas they, on the other hand, seemed....excited to see her.

Victor turned to the gentleman, engaging in conversation about business matters. Alice, now somewhat separated from his side, watched as the two young daughters of the man slowly made their way to her side. She stared at them with a questioning look, wondering what they were up to.

"Your Grace," they greeted and curtsied again.

Alice acknowledged them but remained silent.

"You look rather beautiful tonight, Your Grace," one of them – the taller one – said.
"Simply ravishing."

"Thank you," Alice answered. "You both look very beautiful as well. You're...sisters?"

"Yes," the taller one answered. "Only a year apart. We decided to make our debut into society together. So we have each other. She is Edwina, and I am Viola."

"How wonderful," Alice said and beamed. "It's nice to meet you. I hope you're enjoying the ball?"

"I never believed the rumors," the shorter one – Edwina – blurted.

Alice's eyebrows furrowed, caught off-guard by her statement. "I'm sorry?" was all she managed to say.

Victor – only a few steps away – glanced at her but said nothing as he continued his conversation.

"The rumors..." she repeated softly, a slight blush coloring her cheeks. "...that you had died. I never believed them."

Alice tilted her head to the side, curious. "Why not, if I may ask? Everyone seemed to."

"Well, there has to be a love story," Viola chimed in. "You and the Duke look so perfect together, it's admirable."

"Like opposites attract," Edwina explained. "I've read books about it."

Again, Victor turned to them only briefly with a puzzled look. Alice caught it, and she tried her best not to laugh.

Alice stifled a laugh, but the incredulity must have shown on her face. "You think Victor and I have a love story?" she echoed, raising a brow.

The young ladies blinked, almost in unison, as though the question was confusing. "Doesn't everyone?" Edwina asked. "Surely the Duke fell in love with you, and you with him...that's why he proposed, right? Can you tell us, please? We would like to hear all about it."

Alice couldn't help but give them an amused smile, her expression a mixture of disbelief and bemusement.

It seemed unfathomable that anyone would believe she and Victor shared some fabled romance.

The very idea of a love story seemed ludicrous when held up against the reality of their relationship, if it could even be called that.

She glanced at Edwina and Viola, each leaning forward with wide, expectant eyes, as if she were about to teach them life lessons.

"My goodness," Alice said to herself.

It was as though she had stumbled upon a pair of rare birds who still believed in innocent dreams of romance, blissfully ignorant of the complexities of life. For a fleeting moment, Alice envied their naiveté.

"Well, if you must know," she began to say, hastily formulating a story that she hoped sounded believable. "The Duke proposed not long after hearing of my broken engagement with Lord Pembroke. He told me later that he'd noticed me before, though we hadn't officially met."

Alice glanced at Victor. She knew he was listening, and a spark of mischief flickered within her.

She wondered how far she could stretch the truth about their marriage before he reacted.

After all, he was the one who was adamant about remediating their reputation.

What better way to do it than to rewrite the story of their marriage?

"You see, the Duke claimed that he had been severely heartbroken when he heard that I got engaged,' Alice continued with a soft smile on her face that she hoped was convincing enough.

She clasped her hands together and brought them to her chest. "You've heard of the man.

He is quiet, reserved...keeps to himself all the time. "

Victor glanced again, but his gaze did not linger.

"People like that find it difficult to express their feelings," Edwina said.

"Exactly," Alice said. "He was heartbroken and had no idea what to do. For days, he berated himself for not making the first move. But then, as fate would have it, Lord Pembroke found love in someone else, and Victor saw his chance. He wasted no time, seizing the moment to propose to me."

Edwina and Viola both squeaked, hanging on her every word. "And what about you? When did you realize that you were head over heels in love with him?"

Alice opened her mouth to speak but couldn't find the words. She was all for teasing Victor, but she didn't want to get trapped in the web of lies she had started to weave.

"Well, I didn't know what to think at first," Alice said. "I mean, I was flustered by his determination to wed me, and in a way, it impressed me. He was so impatient, he couldn't wait to make me his wife."

Alice smirked and attempted to check Victor's reaction, but she jumped when she noticed he was now fully facing her, listening intently. Before she could react, he walked up to her and stretched out his hand.

"Would you like to dance?" he asked, his voice low but steady.

Alice blinked, taken aback by the sudden shift in his demeanor. She half-expected him to scold her for the fabrications she'd spun for the girls, yet here he was, inviting her to dance as if nothing were amiss. But she was determined to see his reaction to the lies she had spun.

"I would be honored, my love," she teased, taking his hand.

Victor's initial response was a soft chuckle that caught Alice off guard, surprising even him. But as quickly as it came, he suppressed it, clearing his throat and adopting a more serious expression. Alice stared at him in shock as he led her to the dance floor.

"You laughed," she pointed out, still surprised. "That's the third time you've ever laughed in front of me. Well, the other times weren't as loud as this one, but you actually laughed in public."

"My love?" he asked, stopping in the middle of the floor. "And what was that ridiculous story you were telling those girls? I told you to pretend that we are cordial, not paint the ultimate love story."

Alice couldn't pay attention to anything other than that she had made him laugh. She

couldn't take her eyes off of him. He didn't look as frightening as usual when his face lit up with a smile. In fact, she dared say that, for a moment, he looked almost... charming.

As the music began, Victor gently drew her closer, his hand resting lightly on her waist. For a moment, Alice could only focus on his hand, how carefully placed it was, as if he were cautious.

..almost hesitant, about the contact. She took a steadying breath, trying to still the erratic beat of her heart.

The closeness was unfamiliar, unsettling.

"You're tense," he leaned in to whisper. "It's obvious. People will see. We should probably have practiced dancing."

Victor held her gaze, his expression unreadable. His hand tightened slightly on her waist as the dance began, guiding her with an unexpected tenderness that made her pulse quicken.

"I apologize in advance if I step on your feet again," she said to him and averted her eyes. "I haven't done this in a while."

Victor smiled. "That's all right."

As the dancing continued, Alice began to relax in Victor's arms. Everything else seemed to blur as she found rhythm in their movement.

She could tell Victor was guiding her, making it easy for her to follow his movements.

It was hard not to get flustered by it. How considerate he was starting to be. Almost as if he was lowering his walls.

"Do you truly think that I am ashamed to be seen with you?" Alice asked him, lifting her head.

Victor lowered his head, his face only inches away from hers. "Would that be entirely unfounded? I know the circumstances of our marriage, Alice, and I am also well aware of my reputation in society. It would be...typical."

Alice felt a pang of guilt. "We have only been out like this once. On our wedding day. I'll admit?—"

"Alice, you don't have to explain it to me," he said to her. "I understand."

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"I think I still need to," she insisted. "I was...frightened by you at first, and confused. Before our wedding day, I had never met you, and all I'd heard were rumors—stories of the terrible things you'd done to those who crossed you. I didn't know what my future would hold, marrying a man who seemed to have no need or desire for a wife.

So, yes, I was afraid. And honestly, there are times when I still am. "

"Is it the rumors that scare you, or me?" he asked, his face barely inches away from hers.

Alice swallowed. "Both?" she answered.

"Both?" he repeated and squinted his eyes.

"I still don't know if the rumors are true or false," she explained, then let her eyes drift to his arm, recalling the scars that always intrigued yet troubled her just imagining where he'd gotten them.

"Also, Victor, you have all these scars and they are quite frightening.

I have tried to imagine what could have possibly caused them, and the curiosity is killing me. "

"Did you ask me about the scars?" he said gently.

"Well..." she stammered. "I couldn't ask before. But I'm asking now, because... you seem to be in a better mood today. How did you get your scars? Did you fight? Did

you hurt yourself on purpose? Or did... someone hurt you?"

As the words left her lips, Alice felt her whole body tense.

It was a question she'd never thought she'd voice, but the curiosity kept battling against the nervous energy running through her.

She had to know. She had to understand something about Victor that would give her a better perception of him.

But yet, as she looked at him, she could already feel the answer slipping through her fingers.

Victor wasn't smiling anymore. He had that same look as he did at breakfast when he didn't want to talk about something anymore.

She sensed he wouldn't answer. He never spoke of his past, much less of something as private as the scars.

"I got them from the late Duke," she heard him say. "From my father."

Alice could swear that they paused in the middle of the dance floor, and the music began to fade, but that wasn't the case. Nothing paused, but she froze inside, completely startled by his response.

"Your father?" she repeated, unable to believe her ears. She searched his expression, hoping to find some sign that he was joking or that she didn't hear him properly. But Victor's eyes were somber, reflecting a pain that seemed to reach far beyond the surface.

It was the first time she was seeing the look in his eyes, and in a way, she quite

understood why he chose not to speak of it.

Slowly, she could see the wall around him breaking. He didn't look as confident anymore, and he avoided her gaze.

"To attain perfection, one must endure pain. That's why steel has to go through fire," he continued.

"My father probably said that to me over a hundred times.

It was his justification for the punishments he believed were necessary to mold me into a perfect Duke.

So, every time I made a mistake growing up, I got a few scars. "

"Every time?" she asked with widened eyes.

"He believed every weakness can be beating out of a man," he explained. "So, that's what he did. When he wasn't around, he would assign someone to punish me. I think back then, I got punished more for the things I didn't do than for the things I did."

"Do you believe that?" she asked softly, her heart aching for him. "That pain is necessary for perfection?"

"I do believe it was his twisted justification," he replied. "But I've come to realize that pain can forge strength and resilience, things that can be mistaken for perfection. It can teach you what truly matters. I've learned to appreciate the good that has come from my suffering."

"That doesn't mean it was right," Alice argued, feeling a sudden surge of anger at the injustice of it all. The thought of a child being subjected to such cruelty ignited a fury

within her. "You shouldn't have had to endure that, Victor. No one deserves to be treated that way, no matter the lessons they learn afterward. What good are the lessons when it hampers on your happiness? Isn't that what matters at the end? "

Victor smiled faintly. "What? Happiness?"

"Yes," she answered. "I believe happiness is really all that matters. It makes life worth living. Everything we do as human beings should lead us toward that feeling, whether it's through our relationships, our passions, or simply finding joy in the little things. Life would be empty without happiness."

"I understand that, but?—"

"Pain isn't something noble," she continued. "It shouldn't be. I think it was more of a curse than it was beneficial. You shouldn't see the good in it.

In fact, I think the reason you keep yourself so guarded is because of it.

You could have learned to be the perfect duke without pain being the teacher.

Pain shouldn't be worn like a badge of honor, and I am sorry to say but your papa was a terrible man for doing that to you. "

Alice's words hung in the air, a confession she hadn't planned but couldn't suppress. She braced herself, expecting the storm—anger, dismissal, perhaps even an icy silence. Surely, she had overstepped, piercing the wall he so carefully maintained around his family and his past.

But as the seconds passed, she dared to glance up at him. And there, instead of anger or reproach, was the faintest smile softening his face.

The dance came to an end, and Victor stepped away from her to take a bow. When he lifted his head, he was smiling again. Alice's eyebrows furrowed.

"What is it?" she asked as he led her towards the edge of the dance floor. "Why are you smiling all of a sudden?"

Victor's smile widened. "I find your sudden anger amusing," he replied, his voice light. "One would think that you were at the receiving end of the punishments I endured."

Alice exhaled. "Well, what is wrong is wrong," she said. "And I'm sorry you had to experience that and that you have the scars as a constant reminder of it."

Victor stood by her side. "Thank you," he said.

Alice locked eyes with him, and neither of them looked away.

Time seemed to stop, and she found herself completely at ease in his gaze.

Everything in the background was now reduced to a muffled hum.

Alice wanted to ask him why he never did anything to curb the rumors.

..why he let people believe that he was a terrible person when, in reality, he was only a victim.

But deep down, she understood his silence.

She knew how important power was in society.

It was often better to be seen as a monster than to show vulnerability.

It was better to be feared than pitied. Pity watered down power.

It affected status. Victor was the man he was because people feared him, and in a way, she benefited from that fear.

They had been at the ball for a while now, and no one had dared to throw a snide remark her way.

It dawned on her, in that moment, that this man was actually her husband. The man she was going to spend the rest of her life with.

Strangely enough, she was beginning to feel comfortable with that idea.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Alice lay in her bed, staring at the ceiling.

She couldn't stop thinking about the ball.

Everything felt so surreal, and if she had not experienced it herself, she wouldn't have believed it had happened.

She had spent the entire evening by Victor's side, completely forgetting to look out for Lavinia and Emma.

They had danced three times, and it was only now, as she lay tucked into bed, that she started to feel the effects of it. For one, there didn't seem to be a wall anymore. Victor seemed approachable now as if the distance between them had melted away in that ballroom.

It still gagged her that he had laughed in public.

This was a man known for always being serious; his reputation built on an unyielding demeanor.

Yet, he had shared a laugh with her. It was as if he had allowed her a small glimpse into his heart, and that realization both thrilled and terrified her.

Alice sat up from the bed. It wasn't enough. For some reason, she wasn't satisfied with the conversations they had that evening. She wanted more. She wanted to know

more about him. Why he didn't like it when she swam or sat by a window...why he wasn't so open to change.

What kind of books did he enjoy reading? What else did he do during his spare time?

"What does a quiet man do to have some fun?" she wondered.

Determined not to let the fire die, she rose from the bed, threw on her robe, and made her way out of the room.

She feared Victor would rethink his decision to open up to her and mount that ridiculous wall again.

She couldn't let that happen. They had started something nice, and she wanted to sustain it.

It was late, and he was probably asleep, but the impulse to seek him out was too strong to resist. She could already imagine them chatting by the fireside, sipping warm milk while the flames crackled softly in the background.

Alice had always envisioned moments like this after getting married, and the thought that her dream was coming to life filled her with excitement.

Alice approached Victor's door, her heart pounding with a mix of anticipation and nervousness. She knocked twice, her knuckles tapping lightly against the wood. "Victor?" she called softly, unsure if he would even be awake.

Alice gently opened the door and peeked inside, her heart racing. Reluctant to intrude, she tiptoed in. The room was dimly lit, and there, in the middle of the bed, was Victor. He seemed to be asleep, but as she watched, she noticed his lips moving, forming words that were barely audible.

"Victor?" she called out to him softly, noticing that he was shifting uncomfortably in his sleep.

"Your fault....it's your fault," she heard him mutter as he shivered.

Victor's brows furrowed deeper, and he shifted restlessly, as if trying to escape whatever shadow haunted him in his dreams. Alice panicked and she assessed him, trying to figure out what to do. She squeezed his shoulder gently, hoping that it would rouse him.

Alice panicked, her heart racing as she assessed the situation.

Victor's distress was palpable, and her initial attempts to rouse him weren't working.

He remained lost in his nightmare, and she could feel a surge of urgency rising within her.

Without thinking twice, she slipped into the bed beside him, instinctively curling herself around him in a protective embrace.

"It's all right," she whispered, patting his head on her shoulder. "It's only a dream."

She pressed her face into his hair, hoping her presence would anchor him back to reality. Slowly, she felt him relax beneath her as he subconsciously leaned into her.

Alice continued to caress him, suddenly feeling guilty.

She wondered if their conversation at the ball had unintentionally opened a door to the pain he kept locked away.

It had been a delicate moment, and now she wondered if it had stirred something deep

within him, something that had long remained dormant.

The thought that she might have triggered these nightmares filled her with concern, and she wished she could take away the shadows haunting him.

As his breathing started to even out, Alice felt the warmth of each breath against her neck, his steady exhalations gently brushing her skin.

Her heart raced as she realized he had relaxed enough to reach for her, his fingers curling instinctively around a handful of her dress as though grounding himself in her presence.

She held her breath, startled by the unexpected intimacy.

She could feel his weight shift against her as he got comfortable.

He stopped muttering, and his shoulders eased.

Alice shut her eyes, allowing herself to settle into the moment. Perhaps it was best not to push any further. She could wait until he was ready to talk again. The last thing she wanted was to cause him any more pain by forcing him to talk about his past.

She could at least try to be a source of strength for him, not another weakness.

"Mother..." she heard him whisper before he completely eased into her embrace and went back to sleep.

Victor hugged the pillow tighter as he roused from his slumber.

His brows relaxed, and the faintest of frowns softened on his face.

He didn't want to get up. He felt entirely too comfortable, an unfamiliar sensation, given that he usually couldn't wait to escape the morning stillness.

He wondered if perhaps it was because of the pillow.

It felt different...weird. It was warmer, unsteady, and soothingly alive, and it seemed to be holding him down, urging him to stay in the embrace of sleep.

The pillow was moving.

He froze. The pillow was breathing.

His senses finally stirred fully awake, and his eyes flew open before he jolted from the bed, staring at the figure curled beside him.

"Alice?" he mumbled, recognizing her instantly.

Alice stirred and turned over, slipping deeper into sleep. She was there, nestled against him, her presence familiar and disarming. The first thing he did was pause to confirm if he was still dreaming or if Alice was truly in bed with him.

Victor's brow furrowed in confusion, his mind piecing together the night before. The last thing he recalled was slipping into bed, exhausted after the ball and a quiet bath in Alice's bathroom. She had come to him in the middle of the night.

But why?

Alice stirred again, turning to face him.

Victor took a steadying breath, watching her peaceful expression for a moment.

His gaze lingered on her as she lay beside him, her features softened in sleep.

She didn't look feisty in her slumber. In fact, she appeared rather innocent, far removed from the fiery woman who liked arguing with him.

The sunlight seeped into the room, shining almost directly on Alice's face.

Victor noticed this and instinctively raised his arm, shielding her face from the harsh light.

The soft tendrils of morning light played across her features, and he couldn't help but admire how serene she looked in that moment, completely unaware of his presence.

Somehow, he found himself wanting to cherish that moment. Part of him wanted to reach out, to brush the stray strands of her hair that tickled her face, but he held himself back, knowing he couldn't let his guard down so easily.

After a moment, he reluctantly turned away, slipping silently out of bed to clear his thoughts.

He needed to start his day, but he also needed some sort of distraction to loosen up.

As he prepared for the day, putting on a fitted shirt and black trousers, he decided to visit the training yard where he could meet Andrew for a boxing match.

It had been far too long since he'd last seen his friend, and he knew he owed him an outing since he was back at the estate.

Once prepared for the day, Victor made his way out of the estate. As he reached the grand staircase, he paused under the ornate archway, spotting Roberts standing nearby, carrying a stack of documents.

"Roberts," Victor called out to him.

"Your Grace?" he answered, stepping forward.

"I'll be at the training yard for the rest of the morning," he said to him, adjusting his collar. "Do me a favor, encourage Alice to have breakfast. Just because I'm not here does not mean she should skip it."

"I will let her know, Your Grace," he said. "Is there anything else you require?"

"I need my horse," he said. "Inform the stable hands to prepare him for a ride."

"Of course, Your Grace," Roberts replied, nodding before making his way to the stables.

Victor stepped out into the crisp morning air, the scent of dew and fresh grass awakening his senses.

Once the horse was ready, he made his way towards the training yard.

The boxing arena was by the side of the field.

Andrew owned it and was there almost all the time, training people, boxing to blow off steam, or conducting business.

Victor was greeted by the familiar sounds of fists striking leather echoing in the open space when he walked in. He found Andrew already in the ring, his shirt clinging to him as he sparred with another fighter. On seeing him, Andrew paused and smiled brightly.

"Well, look who it is," he said and shook his head, bringing his hands to his hips.

"Come to join the fray, or are you just here to spectate?"

Victor smirked. "I've come to remind you who the better boxer is."

Andrew gestured for his boxing partner to leave the ring, and the man obliged, greeting Victor with a nod as he stepped out. Once they were alone, Andrew turned back to Victor. "Where do you get your confidence from? You have not boxed in months, and you think you can take me on?"

Victor chuckled, rolling his shoulders as he loosened up. "Confidence? It's called knowing you're due for a good thrashing."

Andrew chuckled. "If you say so. Just don't get bitter when you lose."

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Victor stepped into the ring, feeling the familiar adrenaline surge through him. He squared his shoulders, settling into a fighting stance. Andrew mirrored him, and they began to walk in a circle in the ring.

"So, I heard you're back into society," Andrew asked, throwing the first jab.

Victor easily dodged it. "You could say that."

"Do the rumors really bother you that much?" Andrew asked. "You have never paid any mind to them no matter how many times I ask you to address them. There have been rumors about you for years now. This is the first time you are actively working to curb them."

Victor had known Andrew for years. They had attended the same university together, where a shared friendship formed between them.

Over time, Andrew became the only person who truly understood Victor, knowing every detail about his troubled past. To the outside world, Andrew was a charming gentleman, effortlessly captivating the attention of ladies with his wit and charm.

Yet Victor was aware of the deeper scars that lay beneath the surface.

It was probably the reason their friendship thrived; they both had difficult stories to tell.

"They said I killed my wife," Victor said. "That I let her die a slow, painful death. Do you know how many people confronted me about it? It was frustrating. I figured the

sooner I fixed it, the better."

"You even danced with her at the ball," Andrew said. "Three times! The rumor spreading now is that you both probably had a secret affair. That's why you got married so quickly."

Victor shrugged his shoulders. "That is much better. I can live with that."

"I must say, Her Grace was rather stunning last night," Andrew remarked, a teasing glint in his eye. "Quite beautiful, I must say."

"Don't talk about my wife," Victor replied, throwing a punch that landed squarely on Andrew's jaw. Andrew staggered back and winced.

"All right, now I know something is bothering you," Andrew said. "That punch was weak, even for rusty old you. Why did you decide to come here today?"

Victor reluctantly dropped his hands and let out a loud sigh. "I told Alice about my father."

Andrew's eyes widened. "You told her everything?"

"Not everything, but enough," he said. "More than enough actually. I probably said too much and now I don't know how I am supposed to feel about it."

"You care about her," Andrew said, almost as if he didn't believe the words he spoke. "You actually have feelings for her now."

Victor wanted to respond – to deny it – but deep down, he knew there was truth in Andrew's statement. It was hard not to develop feelings for some who saw beyond his carefully crafted facade. Someone who wasn't afraid to look at him or speak her

mind.

Someone so beautiful.

"You realize you have never told anyone else about your father," Andrew pointed out.

"There's a reason you're the only person that knows," Victor said. "Why would I willingly burden anyone with that kind of information? I don't want pity. But again, I don't know why I told her. It just...she asked, and I answered. I wanted to answer."

"That's a good thing, Victor," Andrew said. "She's your wife. She of all people should know everything about you."

"Come on, Andrew, what are you saying?" Victor asked and threw both hands into the air. "You know I cannot give her a happy life. I am not built for love, or that kind of affection. I cannot give what I did not get."

"Who says?" Andrew questioned. "Life doesn't always have to be black and white, Victor."

You are letting the past, which you claim to have let go of, define your present.

Right now, in your home, you have someone that could offer you the love and support that you very desperately need. Open up to her."

"I cannot do that," Victor retorted, bringing both hands to his hips. "She came into my bed last night. I woke up to find her sleeping next to me."

"What!" Andrew asked and chuckled. "Oh, she is bold."

"It's not like that," Victor said. "I don't know why she did it, and frankly, I don't think I want to ask."

Andrew took a step forward. "Did it ever occur to you that perhaps, she might be lonely? She lived as a married woman for two years, without seeing her husband. You live in a big estate. It can get boring if she does not have company. You have also refused to give her children, so don't be surprised when she hovers around you, seeking conversation.

You of all people should understand what it is like to be all alone. "

Victor began to pace. "It is for her own good. She was better off when I wasn't there. She never dared attempt to—" he paused. "She is better off without me."

"I don't think she was trying to jump," Andrew said in a low tone. "I think you misunderstood that. She was probably just sitting."

"You weren't there," Victor said and shook his head. "You didn't see her by the window. You didn't see her face when she stood next to me at the altar either. I saved her life by leaving. She had space, and she will continue to have that space. I will not be the cause of her death. Not her too."

"Victor, your mother?—"

"Andrew!" Victor said sternly, feeling the heat in his stomach rise to his throat. "Don't."

Andrew mellowed and nodded, understanding that Victor did not want him to go there. He paused, letting the silence stretch between them, before finally lifting his hands with a slight grin.

"Come on," he said. "Arms up. You came here to lose to me, did you not? Let's get it over with."

Victor feigned a smile and raised his fists, resuming his stance. He felt a heavy weight settle on his chest as he continued to spar with Andrew. He realized that while Alice's warmth had begun to penetrate the walls he had built around himself, it would be best to give her some distance.

He didn't want her to become too attached...to inadvertently become entwined in the shadows that haunted him. The darkness of his past was a burden he had learned to carry alone, and he was determined that it wouldn't define her future.

It was the most merciful choice for both of them.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

A week later...

"Maureen...what are the rumors saying now?"

Alice leaned against the stone wall of the newly constructed orangery, taking in the sight of her finished masterpiece.

The structure gleamed under the fading light, its glass panes reflecting the colors of the setting sun.

The pots and containers, neatly arranged inside, stood bare with seeds that Alice couldn't wait to see blossom.

After months of planning and construction, she could finally claim she had an orangery. There was so much she could do with the space, and she looked forward to it. The garden was fully restored, and now the orangery was done. She was officially finished with the renovations.

"The negative rumors are starting to fade, Your Grace," Maureen answered. "People are beginning to believe you and the Duke are truly in love after the ball. It seems your dance together caught the attention of many, and now they're starting to think that perhaps, the honeymoon phase went on for far too long, that's the reason you didn't attend any social gatherings last season. "

Alice scoffed. "That's what they're saying? That I have been having too much fun?"

"Yes, Your Grace," she answered.

"I suppose that's good," she said quietly. "I didn't expect one ball to completely change the notion of our reputation, but I'm glad it did."

"Are you attending the tea party Lady Crowell invited you to, Your Grace?" Maureen asked. "It will help strengthen your efforts."

"I must," she answered. "If I want this new and improved reputation to stick, I'd have to keep up appearances."

It had been a week since the Crowell Ball. A week since she and Victor danced, and also a week since they last had a proper conversation. The wall was back, and Alice would be lying to herself if she claimed that she didn't see it coming.

This time, the wall was higher than it had ever been.

They didn't eat together anymore. Victor was never around for them to have breakfast, lunch, or dinner together.

On the days when he was around, he would be too busy in his study, not wanting to be disturbed.

Alice had tried to talk to him, but she could see he was avoiding her.

This time around, Alice tried not to let it faze her.

She had expected more. She had expected that after their conversation at the ball, Victor would be more cordial, but instead, he had shut her out completely.

In a way, she blamed herself for it. She blamed her actions.

If only she stayed in her room that night.

If only she hadn't invaded his privacy and fallen asleep on his bed, things might have been different.

Even though she had been wanting to talk to Victor, perhaps to apologize for going into his room, she had not found the right time to do it.

Until now. The orangery was done, and all the construction was finally over.

It was the perfect time to ask Victor to come and see her work, to share, even briefly, a moment of pride and accomplishment with him.

He was the owner of the estate, after all.

The decision to keep the renovations as they were or make any changes was up to him.

"Is the Duke still in the study?" Alice asked Maureen.

"Yes, Your Grace," she answered.

"Prepare a bath for him in the bathroom," Alice said to Maureen. "The new bathroom. Prepare it like you would do for me."

"Yes, Your Grace," she answered and walked away. Alice silently rehearsed her words as she made her way toward his study, her heart pounding at the thought of facing him for the first time since that night. She wasn't entirely sure if she wanted to apologize or if, deep down, she simply needed to clear the air between them—to find some sense of understanding.

She had already resolved not to push him any further, to avoid stirring up memories that might haunt him.

It was one of the reasons she had kept her distance and quietly accepted his silence.

She hated seeing him so troubled. It was a side of him that lingered in her mind ever since that night. And the last thing she wanted was to be the cause of any more pain.

As she reached the door, she took a steadying breath and knocked. A brief silence hung in the air before his voice answered from within, low and restrained.

"Enter," he said.

Alice stepped inside, her hands clasped in front of her to keep them from trembling. She saw Victor's eyes instantly widen when he saw her as he rose to his feet. He stared at her, silent, waiting for her to say something.

"The construction is done," she started by saying. "The orangery is ready."

Victor lowered his head and placed the document in his hand down. "I heard. Roberts informed me this morning."

"I wanted to show it to you," she continued. "Perhaps, also show you other places in the house that I renovated. It's your home after all. You should see it. I made a lot of changes."

"That's all right. It's your home too," he said, avoiding her gaze. "You can do whatever you want. Change whatever needs to be changed."

"I still want you to see it," she insisted, stepping forward with her fingers on the desk. "I'll take you on a tour and show you. Maybe afterwards you can take a bath. You've

been working for so long, it'll help you relax."

"I'm all right, Alice, thank you," he said.

It wasn't working. Her heart sank, but she refused to let the frustration show. It had taken a lot of courage to approach him. To do it, she had to push aside her jumbled-up feelings that she had failed to sort out. But he didn't budge.

"Are you like this because I climbed into your bed without your permission?" she asked with a quivering voice. "Because I held you?"

Victor lifted his head. "What?"

"You've not spoken to me in days," she explained. "I know what I did was wrong, but it couldn't have been so unforgivable, I am your wife after all. I didn't mean to cause you to have nightmares, but I was trying to help and I did."

"Alice, how could you have possibly caused my nightmares?" he questioned.

"I made you talk about your past at the ball," she said to him, fighting to keep the tears at bay but failing. "That's why you had a terrible dream."

"I have terrible dreams every other day. It's the reason I hate sleeping, that has nothing to do with you, and this has nothing to do with that night," he revealed.

"Then what is it?" she questioned, letting her frustration show.

"I am not like you, Victor. You can easily mount your wall whenever you please but I cannot do that.

My walls are already down and I cannot put them back up, and that frustrates me

because I should be angry with you for playing with me like this. I am no good at it."

"Alice, let's not do this," Victor said quietly.

"Do what?" she asked as the tears began to fall. "You're confusing me, Victor and I don't like to be confused. I am trying to understand you, but you keep slamming the door to your mind in my face. Why?"

Alice's chest tightened as she watched Victor struggle to find the words.

She had known him long enough to recognize the look in his eyes.

That vulnerability that seldom made an appearance.

She had spent so much time trying to break through, to understand the shadows that seemed to haunt him.

But here they were again, facing the same closed doors, and it was tearing her apart.

Victor took a step toward her, his hand outstretched, but she instinctively stepped back.

"I am not crying because I'm hurt," she lied. "I am crying because I am angry. There's a difference."

Victor took another step toward her, undeterred by her attempt to maintain a distance between them.

His hand reached for her cheek, and he cupped her face, his fingers warm and gentle as they brushed away a tear.

Alice stiffened, caught off guard, but he didn't let go, his gaze softening as he held her face.

"I don't like that you cry when you're angry," he murmured, his thumb tracing along her cheekbone with a tenderness that sent a shiver down her spine.

Alice swallowed, her breath hitching as she felt herself melt into his touch despite every instinct telling her to keep her distance. He was only going to act nice to her and disappear behind his wall again.

A silence settled between them. Slowly, Victor pulled her closer, wrapping his arms around her and pressing her to his chest. She sank into his embrace, her own arms winding around him as she let herself relax in his warmth.

His hand stroked her hair gently, and he exhaled so deeply that she felt his body relax.

They stood there, wrapped in each other's arms, the tension between them softening into something warm and unspoken.

Deep down, though, Alice couldn't shake a small, nagging fear—that this was merely a reprieve, a momentary gesture to soothe her frustration before he withdrew again.

But right now, with his arms around her and his heart beating close to hers, she didn't want to think about it.

She wanted to stay in this moment, to feel his touch without questioning it, to hold onto the rare vulnerability he was offering her. So she let herself relax into his embrace, closing her eyes and letting go, if only for now.

"If it's not to your satisfaction, we can have the workers do it again," Victor said.

It didn't take a lot of effort after bursting into tears for Victor to agree to the tour. If Alice had known how persuasive her tears would be, she wouldn't have waited so long to make up with him.

Now, standing in the orangery, she felt a sense of exhilaration that washed away her earlier frustrations. A part of her was ashamed that she had been unable to control her tears, but the other part was glad she let her emotions show.

"No, it's perfect this way," she explained. "It's just how I imagined it."

Victor raised his eyebrows. "Are you sure?"

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"I am," she beamed. "So, what do you think of all the renovations? Is there anything you want changed?"

They had spent about an hour on the tour, Alice leading Victor through the house with a mix of excitement and nervousness.

After two years of living there, each room now held a piece of her heart, a reflection of her visions.

She pointed out the details, the new curtains in the drawing room, the polished wood floors, the vibrant colors she had chosen for certain spaces, and why she had chosen them...

Victor had listened to her intently. At some points, she had seen approval in his eyes but never disapproval. He seemed pleased, and the thought sent butterflies dancing in her stomach.

She had saved the orangery for last because it meant the most to her. Victor was pleased with how it turned out. He had said so, and she could see it. He asked a lot of questions, all to make sure that she was satisfied with the outlook.

They were seated inside, tucked beneath a trellis adorned with climbing vines that reached toward the glass roof.

Two comfortable chairs faced each other around a small table draped with a soft, embroidered cloth, a detail Alice had added for warmth and charm.

The spot was designed for quiet moments, a sanctuary where she could sit and enjoy the scenery.

"I'm asking because I saw that you changed the renovations done in your room and in the study. If there is any part of the estate that you want to?—"

"I don't want anything else changed," he said with a smile. "I'm proud of what you've done here. I'm proud of you, Alice."

Alice felt her heart swell at his words, a rush of warmth flooding her. His pride was a balm to her earlier insecurities, the pat on the back that she needed.

"Thank you," she said, fiddling with her fingers.

Alice took a deep breath, gathering her thoughts as she sat by Victor's side.

The silence that had settled between them wasn't uncomfortable, so she let it linger, enjoying the momentary peace.

But it didn't take long before a thought occurred to her.

She had received a letter from her parents days ago, tucked away in her desk.

"I got a letter from my parents a few days ago," she began, breaking the silence between them. "They want to come for a visit soon since they have never been here."

"That sounds like a good idea," he answered, nodding. "When are they arriving?"

"I haven't...written back to them," she answered, hesitating. "I was hoping to speak to you about it first."

Victor's eyebrows furrowed, his expression shifting to one of mild concern. "Alice, you don't need my permission to invite your parents over."

"I wanted to make sure you were all right with it," she said to him. "I was hoping that when they arrive, we can all have dinner...together."

"That's fine," he said. "Just tell me when."

"Thank you," she said, then turned to face. "Right, I've always been meaning to ask you this. Since we are discussing my parents, perhaps I can ask now."

Victor sat up and interlocked his fingers on the table. "Ask away."

"When the rumors began," she started by saying as she leaned forward. "The rumors that I was dead. Did my papa visit you to ask about me?"

Victor paused to think. "He wrote me a letter to ask about your wellbeing and I wrote back telling them that you were alive and well."

"A letter?" she questioned with widened eyes. "He sent one letter? He didn't confront you?"

Victor shook his head. "Did they not write to you?"

Alice sighed. "No," she answered. "My sister wrote to me, and I wrote back, but she is married and lives in Northern England, so she had no idea there were rumors. I'm guessing once my papa confirmed from you that I was alive, and he heard from Lavinia and Emma, he didn't bother to check in on me directly. "

"You're not close to your father, I presume?" Victor asked.

Alice feigned a smile and rose to her feet. "I'm not sure," she answered.

"Not sure?" Victor echoed and rose to his feet, too. "That sounds complicated."

"It is," she admitted, folding her arms as if to shield herself. "You see, my sister married first. Before that, she had always been the favorite child. She was...perfect, if I dare say. Brilliant, polite, very modest. It wasn't a surprise when she got married to the Earl."

Alice sighed, unable to hold her smile. "I was always...awkward. It wasn't on purpose, I promise. No matter how much I tried, I just couldn't be her. I'm guessing that was my mistake from the start. I tried so hard to be someone else, and I realized who I was later in my life."

Victor sat on the edge of the table and crossed his arms. "How were you so different?"

"Oh, in many ways," she said. "Catherine has always been prettier. She also cared a lot about balls, and dancing. I didn't. I tried, but I really hate balls. I was always so clumsy and whenever I got nervous, I would step on people's toes. It wasn't a good look for me, so then I started hiding.

I hid so much that I became a wallflower. "

"My papa was livid when that rumor started," she continued. "That no one was asking for my hand because I was clumsy and unladylike. I didn't mind at first. At least I wasn't forced to dance with anyone after that. But then my papa started getting agitated. He couldn't understand how he gave birth to polar opposites. "

Victor was quiet, still. The subject of her family—more importantly, her father's love—was sensitive for her, so she couldn't bring herself to look him in the eye.

Instead, she stared at her hands, twisting her fingers nervously.

"I think... I think my papa expected me to follow my sisters' path, and when I didn't, he was disappointed in me," she continued, her voice trembling slightly.

"When he finally found me a match, he started smiling at me again. At the time, I didn't want to marry the Earl, but I was willing to do anything to please him.

Then the Earl broke off the engagement, and suddenly I became your responsibility.

It felt like I was being handed off, like I was no longer his concern but yours to manage. "

Alice took a deep breath, summoning the courage to meet his gaze. But when their eyes locked, she was met with an unreadable expression on his face. She couldn't gauge what he was thinking.

"I'm sorry, I said too much," she said and laughed awkwardly. "I don't even know why I started talking about my family."

Victor shook his head. "You're not something to manage, Alice," he finally said. "Your father had no right to compare you to your sister. You are your own person, and you are brilliant."

Alice looked away briefly, flustered. "You don't have to say that, but thank you."

His gaze drifted to her lips, a subtle shift that sent a flutter of awareness racing through her. He remained silent for a moment, his expression still difficult to decipher. Alice stood in front of him, caught between the urge to close the distance and the fear of what might happen if she did.

As if he read her thoughts, he reached for her hand, his fingers intertwining with hers as he gently pulled her closer. She found herself standing between his legs, the space between them shrinking as she looked down, her heart racing.

"Alice, look at me," he whispered, his hand finding the small of her waist, pulling her closer.

The warmth of his touch sent a rush of emotions coursing through her, and she met his gaze, her heart pounding.

His eyes were intense, filled with a mixture of longing and sincerity that made her breath catch.

Alice felt her heart race as Victor cupped her cheek with his other hand, sending a jolt of lightning through her.

His thumb brushed against her skin in a tender gesture.

When he leaned in, capturing her lips with his in a soft kiss, it felt like the world around them had stopped.

Everything stopped. Even her breathing stopped.

His kiss was tentative at first, sweet and gentle, awakening something deep inside her. She found herself leaning into him, basking in the warmth of the moment. But just as she began to lose herself in the moment, he pulled back slightly, searching her eyes as if gauging her reaction.

His gaze made her heart flutter, and before she could think, he was kissing her again, this time with an urgency that took her breath away.

Alice tried to keep up the pace, but in actuality, she was only relying on her emotions.

She wasn't entirely sure what to do. Her hands found their way to his hair, pulling him closer.

But suddenly, he broke the kiss again, standing up and creating a momentary distance between them. Alice felt a pang of loss, sad that it had ended so soon, but then he reached for her again, drawing her in closer. When their lips met once more, she didn't hold back.

She melted against him, lost in the sensations that overwhelmed her senses.

The kiss deepened, fierce and passionate...

stirring emotions she didn't know she had deep inside her.

Alice felt as if she were floating; she couldn't think.

Everything that plagued her thoughts was swept away in the heat of the moment.

Finally, he broke away again, both of them panting, their foreheads resting together as they caught their breath. Alice's mind raced, overwhelmed by the intimacy of what had just happened. He cupped her face with both hands, caressing her cheeks.

They stood there, both panting, their hearts racing, and at that moment, she knew that her feelings for him had crossed a line she couldn't uncross.

"Victor..." she whispered, clutching onto his shirt.

"Yes, Alice?" he answered breathlessly.

"Can I ask you a question?"

"You can."

"Why did you decide to marry me?"

The question hung in the air, heavy and palpable. Victor pulled back slightly, the tenderness of their intimacy giving way to a tension that made Alice's heart race for an entirely different reason. She worried, wondering why her question had caused such a change in the moment.

"Why did you decide to marry me?" she repeated, her voice even softer now. It felt vulnerable to ask, yet the question burned within her, demanding to be voiced. She needed to understand the choice that had bound them together, especially now, in the wake of their kiss.

"My father... he added a clause to his will. I must marry before I can access the rest of my fortune."

The words hit Alice like a cold gust of wind, stealing the breath from her lungs. She blinked at him, searching for a hint of a joke, a sign that this was all just some cruel misunderstanding. But Victor's gaze remained resolute, devoid of the warmth that had just ignited between them.

"That was the only reason you got married?" she asked, taking a step back. "For...money?"

Victor made to take a step forward but stopped, his expression caught between frustration and vulnerability. "Yes," he said, his voice strained. "That was the reason. I'm not looking for love, Alice. I can't?—"

"You're not looking for love?" she interrupted, the words slipping out, half incredulous, half wounded.

Alice felt her anger rising, unexpected and unsettling, tightening her chest and sending a flush to her cheeks.

She knew, logically, that this had always been a marriage of convenience, an arrangement crafted for necessity rather than desire.

She'd accepted that even though she always wanted to know the true reason...

or so she thought. But after their kiss, after the moment they just shared, his confession felt like a betrayal, piercing and raw.

He exhaled, eyes searching hers, as though he, too, was struggling to find the right words. "I don't think I'm capable of it," he admitted softly. "I can't give that to you."

"You can't or you won't?" she questioned angrily. "Do you know how utterly ridiculous you sound right now, Victor?"

"Alice—"

"Why did you just kiss me then?" she stammered. "What was that? You must have felt something."

Victor's gaze softened, almost pleading, yet distant, as if he was already slipping away. "I'm sorry," he murmured, his voice barely above a whisper.

With a sharp breath, Alice turned on her heel, unwilling to let him see the pain flickering in her eyes.

She could barely see the path in front of her with the tears in her eyes, but she kept walking.

The heat of his words washed over her, and the sting of his excuse cut deeper than she expected.

How could he reduce the intimacy of their kiss to that?

The hope she'd clung to for him, for them, crumbled, taking with it all her strength.

Once she got to her room, her legs gave way, and she sank to the floor, her hands resting limply in her lap. A single tear traced down her cheek, then another, until she could no longer hold back the flood of emotions she'd tried so hard to contain.

"That cursed wall," she sobbed.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"Y ou kissed her and then you did what?"

The faint rustle of leaves and the distant chirping of birds filled the air as Victor and Andrew walked through the estate gardens.

He'd fallen asleep to the memory of the kiss.

..Alice's lips on his, woken up with the thought of it, and even now, he could feel the lingering tingle as if the kiss had left a permanent mark.

"It's for the best," Victor muttered, more to himself than to Andrew.

Andrew paused and turned to face him. "Why did you kiss her in the first place, Victor?"

Victor's jaw tightened, and his gaze drifted off to the stretch of trees in the distance.

The question lingered, unsettling in its simplicity, yet he had no clear answer for Andrew.

It had felt right in the moment, natural—inevitable, even.

But saying that aloud felt like admitting to something deeper, something he'd been avoiding.

After a long pause, he finally said, "It was a mistake. A... lapse in judgment."

"Please tell me you did not say that to her," Andrew asked, his eyes pleading. "That you did not call – what was probably her first kiss – a mistake."

"I didn't say it to her," he answered.

Andrew sighed, relief evident in his shoulders as he muttered, "Thank heavens for small mercies." But his look of disbelief quickly returned. "So, what exactly happened? You both shared a kiss, and you told her you only married her for the fortune. What happened next?"

"I told her that love wasn't something I could give her," he admitted, the words heavy in his mouth. "I had no choice."

"Lord have mercy," Andrew said. "You did that?"

"It's the truth," he protested. "I don't want to lie to her anymore, Andrew. It's not my fault that I constantly want to tell her everything. She asked, and I couldn't lie."

"But she's angry with you?" Andrew asked. "How did she react when you said that to her? Did she hit you across the face?"

"No," Victor answered.

"Did she yell at you?"

"No," he answered again, feeling frustration creep into his chest. "She walked away. She just walked away."

Victor ran a hand through his hair, his heart racing with frustration.

He had let himself get too close, allowed a moment of weakness to cloud his judgment, and now he was grappling with the consequences.

The memory of Alice's hurt gaze haunted him, a reminder of the line he had crossed.

He couldn't shake the feeling that he had not only hurt her but also trapped himself in a web of his own making.

The very thing he had been trying to avoid had happened in an instant.

He felt cornered and afraid, yet he wasn't sure what he was afraid of.

"I can't change what I did, Andrew. I just—" He stopped and sighed. "I didn't think ahead. I've never felt this way before so I am quite confused. I mean, I admit that perhaps, I shouldn't have kissed her in that moment."

"Then why did you do it?"

"I just told you, I don't know."

"For you to have kissed her, it means you felt something, right?" Andrew explained, his tone shifting to one of understanding. "Or rather, you feel something for her. Shouldn't you pay attention to the feeling?"

"Why should I? It's merely a feeling," Victor answered.

"I don't know," Andrew said and massaged his nape.

"Look, I cannot explain why it happened.

The kiss...the confession...the feeling. It just did.

" Victor explained, shaking his head in frustration.

"I know myself better than anyone else. I've never been the kind of man who lets emotions dictate my choices.

What is right, is right, and what is wrong is just that. "

Andrew dug his hands into his hair. "You have always been stubborn."

"You should understand me better than anyone."

"I do, Victor. In some ways, we are alike," Andrew said, his gaze steady. "So, you should understand my confusion as well. I was hoping since you got married first, you could explain things to me from your elevated point of view. I don't know what to tell you. I've never been in your shoes. You have the opportunity to start a family. I never...in a million years thought you would ever find someone who could break through the walls you've built around yourself. But someone did. That is progress."

"No one is breaking through my walls," Victor insisted. "It was one kiss. She isn't angry with me, is she? I mean, I told her the truth. She asked, and I was honest."

"But she walked away," Andrew said. "That isn't a good sign. Perhaps, you might need to talk about it with her? Over dinner maybe. From what you explained, it seems as though there's...tension."

Victor sighed and shook his head. "I respect Alice," he said. "But I think the more we talk about this, the more...entwined our paths become. It feels too precarious."

"It sounds like you are scared of your emotions," Andrew replied.

"It is not fear," Victor snapped at him. "You're wrong."

Andrew sighed. "I am your friend, Victor. I have known you for years. I know that if I were in your shoes, you wouldn't let me make stupid decisions.

I am sorry that I cannot give you the answers that you need, but I still think you need to talk to Alice about it.

About everything. It might help, who knows? "

Victor shut his eyes and clenched his jaw, lowering his shoulders slowly. "Would an apology help? She was upset, and I saw that. Perhaps, I can apologize for upsetting her."

"That might help," Andrew said. "Plus, it might be quite flattering. The Duke of Ravenmoor never apologizes to anyone. He is quite pompous."

Victor playfully rolled his eyes. "I will apologize to her tonight. Her parents are arriving soon, so she is occupied right now, preparing to receive them."

"But what will you be apologizing for?" Andrew pressed, his expression serious now.

"Well, the kiss for one," he replied.

"The kiss...do you regret it?" Andrew asked. "Is that why you are apologizing for it?"

Victor opened his mouth to speak but couldn't find the right words.

The truth was tangled within him. Did he regret the kiss?

Part of him wanted to say yes—to distance himself from the vulnerability it had exposed him to.

But another part of him, the part that had been charged by the touch of her lips, screamed the opposite.

Finally, he exhaled slowly and cleared his throat to speak. "I don't know, Andrew. I don't think I can regret it..."

Andrew massaged the space between his eyebrows. "You are a complicated man, Victor."

"Exactly," he mumbled. "But thank you, Andrew. For listening."

Andrew placed a hand on Victor's shoulders. "I wish I had a clear answer for you. But relationships can be chaotic, Victor. They don't come with a manual."

The conversation was abruptly halted by the appearance of Roberts, who approached them with a respectful bow. "Your Grace, the Viscount and Viscountess Westridge have arrived."

"Thank you, Roberts," Victor replied. "Let Her Grace know that I will be with her shortly."

As Roberts stepped away, Victor turned back to Andrew, the tension in his shoulders easing slightly. He hoped their presence would bring Alice comfort, perhaps even a sense of normalcy.

"You don't seem tense," Andrew pointed out. "Usually, you don't like having people over."

Ever since his conversation with Alice in the orangery, Victor found that he now held a grudge against Alice's father. It angered him to think that Alice had spent so long trying to gain her father's approval when she could have been living her life. It didn't

sit right with him.

"I'll come by the training yard soon," Victor said, walking away. "And thank you again, Andrew, for coming."

Andrew responded with a wave goodbye, and Victor turned around and made his way into the house. He made a mental note to forget about the kiss. To at least try so he could concentrate on what was important.

Protecting Alice.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Alice's parents arrived, and she was entirely nervous as she waited at the door to receive them. She worried her lip between her teeth, her hands twining and untwining as she hoped she could impress them with how she handled her husband's home.

When she finally spotted them, her heart beat an unsteady rhythm as she watched her father take in the lavender gardens lining the path to the foyer leading into the house.

"Father. Mother." She curtsied.

"I must say, Alice, the Duke's home is quite a sight," Timothy noted.

She already knew he would show no regard for her, but his nonchalance still stung.

"You look well, my dear." Her mother smiled. "Marriage becomes you."

She smiled politely and nodded.

"You look well too," she praised. "I hope the journey wasn't eventful."

"Not at all," her mother answered. "The roads are so much better this way. Don't you think so Timothy?"

He grunted his reply.

"Where is your husband?" he asked pointedly. "I should think he would have been

here to greet us or have you done something to anger him?"

"No, Father. He was attending to a guest but I am sure he has been informed of your arrival and would no doubt be joining us soon."

He sniffed, and she withered, knowing he saw the duke's absence as a slight to him. He was easily offended, her father, and now she would bear the brunt.

"Did you fail to inform him we would be arriving today? If you had, he surely would have..."

"I did inform him, Father," she replied quickly. "The guest had been unexpected but a dear friend of his."

"I see you haven't outgrown the habit of interrupting me."

Her eyes moved downward as anger simmered in her blood.

She was beginning to regret allowing him to visit, especially since this had become her abode.

If he was never going to be happy with anything she did and nitpick about everything she did, he didn't need to come.

She had been perfectly content not seeing them for the past two years, and she would have continued to do so if he hadn't written, nearly demanding it.

"Let's not start the day on a sour note, darling," Patience said, trying to calm the tension. "We haven't seen our daughter in two years."

"I was only..." He withered under her glare and cleared his throat. "All right."

Her mother turned to her with a bright smile.

"Why don't you tell us what you have planned for today, dear?"

Alice nodded, hiding her now shaking hands behind her back. If her father saw it now, he wouldn't hesitate to harp on it, as was his custom, and she didn't know if her temper would survive the assault.

"I have already told the staff to take your things up to your chambers and had a tea service set up in the orangery. It is such a beautiful day and it would be a shame to waste it inside."

"We shan't stay long as we are both weary from our journey and we will need time to change out of our travelling clothes," her mother said with a tone that was almost condescending.

She nodded and led them along to the orangery, secretly hoping Victor would join them soon, if only to spare her parents' attention.

As much as she dreaded seeing him after their last encounter, she couldn't help but admit that he had a calming effect on her when her anxieties sought to overwhelm her.

Oh, Victor. Where are you?

"I will show you to the new baths we had constructed." Victor heard Alice's voice say from outside.

She was leading her parents to the orangery from the direction they were taking, and from the sound of her voice, things must have been proceeding quite nicely.

"The Finch homestead has mentioned that there will be a need to expand the barn as the pigs have..."

The words trailed off as he stopped listening to the report Roberts was regaling him with and tried to listen for Alice and her parents. He wondered if perhaps now her parents would treat her better than how she had fulfilled their wishes by marrying.

"Your Grace?" he heard Roberts call.

"Yes?" he asked.

"You do not seem satisfied with my reports," the man commented.

"Why do you presume so, Roberts?" he asked.

"Because you have barely listened in the past hour."

Victor raised a brow at the man's boldness and knew he could only be speaking so simply to show his disapproval.

"I have been listening," he answered.

"Very well," the man answered. "May I continue?"

He nodded and picked up his quill, noting things when he needed to and crossing off numbers he had already written until they finally reached the end of the report.

"In the absence of any activities relating to the running of the duchy, Your Grace, might I suggest you join the duchess?"

Victor could barely hide his surprise that it had taken Roberts longer than usual to

voice his thoughts in the snide manner he usually did.

"Do you presume to tell me what to do, Roberts?" he asked, frowning at him.

"I would never, Your Grace," the man answered, his voice dripping with sarcasm despite his annoyingly placid expression.

He sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"I barely know them, yet I cannot stomach the thought of being around them," he admitted finally.

"Think of Her Grace who you've left alone with them," Roberts replied.

Shite. He hadn't thought of that.

Alice had told him the kind of man her father was, and considering how many letters he had received from members of the ton inquiring as to her well-being, he hadn't even received one from either of her parents in the two years she had shunned society.

The look in her eye as she regaled him with her childhood haunted him now as he knew deep down that she would still be a little girl vying for the affections of people hell-bent on misunderstanding her.

He could relate strongly to her situation as he had been in a similar state, and now, not just the physical but mental scars haunted him.

"I had better make myself presentable," he remarked, casting a glance at the creased shirt and breeches he donned.

Unable to contain his satisfaction, Roberts smiled and all but skipped behind him as he went to change into more appropriate attire. He hoped they hadn't already berated Alice for his lateness, or it would doubtless be added to his already long list of offenses.

He had still yet to come up with a way to broach the topic of the kiss between them, and it worried him endlessly how her disappointment in him had bothered him so.

"When do you think the duke will be joining us?" he heard the viscountess ask as he drew near to the drawing room where they had adjourned their discourse.

"He should be here..." Alice started to answer, but on seeing him, her eyes went wide, gratitude shining in their depths before she buried it under a mask of indifference.

The viscount and viscountess rose when they noticed him, grinning so brightly he was all at once uncomfortable.

"Your Grace," they greeted. "Thank you for having us in your home."

"I can assure you the pleasure is all mine," he said smoothly. "It has been long overdue. I must ask that you forgive my absence in welcoming you earlier. I was caught up in matters of utmost importance. I trust your daughter has been an excellent host?"

"She has done her best," her father answered. "Perhaps later we can discuss some of your challenges. Sometimes you might need the perspective of an older gentleman to give insight."

Victor chuckled politely and held out his arm to Alice.

"Shall we adjourn to the dining room?" he asked.

She took his arm but didn't look at him even though he could feel the tension in her body as it traversed through her arm. The lavender scent she favored wafted up to him, and he couldn't resist the urge to breathe in deeply.

The Viscount and Viscountess rose from their seats, and he preceded their entrance into the dining room, seating himself at the head of the table with Alice by his right.

They usually never sat this close, and from the way she stared away from him, he knew she would have much rather preferred their usual seating arrangements.

He nodded, signaling the meal could begin, leaning back as the plates were brought in.

"You have a beautiful home, Your Grace," the viscountess commented, breaking the silence that had settled over them as they ate. "I must commend how you've managed to keep your home despite it being one of the oldest castles. That is an impressive feat."

"I cannot take all the credit," he answered, not looking at her as he did. "Alice spent the better part of the last two years restoring the castle."

"That must be why she isn't yet with child," the viscount quipped, causing Alice to choke on her wine.

His eyes shot to her, his hand momentarily reaching out, but he pulled back before his hands could make contact. She stopped coughing, her cheeks red with embarrassment.

"You should consider relieving her of such stressful tasks if you intend to get an heir,

Your Grace," her father continued, briefly eyeing her with disgust. "My daughter is incapable of handling several tasks simultaneously."

Victor said nothing still, truly at a loss for decent words to reply to the man. He couldn't help but notice that Alice had reddened deeply. Her mortification was almost palpable, and he wondered then how her parents could be too dense not to see it or too hurtful to ignore it.

"I must thank you, Your Grace," the Viscount added after a sip of his wine. "I have never seen my daughter move as gracefully as she does now. She was such a clumsy thing growing up, I feared she would displease you. I'm glad to see that all she needed was a husband to refine her."

Victor said nothing, but anger filled him at her father's lack of decorum in speaking about his daughter. His irritation had grown with each word that came out of the man's mouth, and if it hadn't been his concern for Alice, he would have given into his desire to ask the man to leave his estate.

Apparently taking his silence as a reason to continue, her father continued.

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"Did you tell the Duke how many etiquette tutors you had, Alice?

" he asked bitterly. "She had gone through four at thirteen and by her debut, none wanted to teach her as she was hopeless.

She failed to grasp the simplest things which her sister had perfected at her age.

It was honestly a marvel how they could look alike yet be so different. "

"Father, please," Alice begged softly, her eyes darting to him and back to them. "There is no need to bring up the past. I am married now, aren't I? Have I still yet to meet your impossible standards?"

She was clearly hurt by his disparaging words but, worse still, embarrassed that he was there to witness the entire incident. Victor wondered at the satisfaction parents derived from ruining their children's happiness.

"There is no need to use that tone with your father, Alice. I thought we raised you better than that," the Viscountess scolded. "It is indeed in the past, and your father is only trying to make conversation."

"I see there's still some things she has yet to learn," her father sniffed in disapproval. "I am sorry to see this, Your Grace."

Victor was incensed to see Alice wither under the barrage of her parents' words. He wondered if there would be no more attempts to refute her parents' words and was sorely disappointed when her eyes remained downcast.

"If she weren't my daughter, she would have never secured any matches but even then, she always found some way to ruin it. Her sister had no fewer than ten suitors all vying for her attention by the end of her first season. If you hadn't married her after she ruined that match with Pembroke, then... well I guess I can't complain as she secured a match to you, a duke no less.

That at least salvaged our family's reputation. "

"I am perfectly happy to have your daughter as my wife, Lord Westridge, and if Lord Pembroke didn't see her worth, then it was his fault and not hers," he said, having had enough of the man's words.

"Alice is an interesting woman who has proven herself an embodiment of grace and intelligence.

My home has wanted for nothing since we married and if you or the rest of the ton cannot see this in her, you must indeed question your sense. "

Three mouths hung open at his declaration, but Alice collected herself once his eyes landed on her. He could see the gratitude in her eyes, but mistrust still shone in their depths.

He rose from his seat, needing to be away from her and her parents, who had regained themselves and were visibly thinking of how to reclaim the situation. But he had had enough. He couldn't trust them to be around Alice without upsetting her, and by extension, him.

"It is probably best we retire as the day is far gone," he announced. "I hope, come morning, that the weather would be favorable for a safe travel."

"Your Grace, we were to stay..." the viscount started but stopped once Victor's eyes

landed on him.

Her mother looked away, too, red in her face and neck. It was a welcome sight to see that they at least had the decency to feel embarrassed. He wondered why they had failed to see just how deeply their words had distressed their daughter, and in that moment, he sympathized deeply with Alice.

Even if they hadn't physically hurt her for her shortcomings, as his father had, they had left deep scars on her mentally, which could have been the reason for the clumsiness they had referred to. It was almost pitiful that neither of them had had the blessing of loving parents.

"If you will excuse me," Alice said, rising from her seat and scurrying away, not before bumping into the edge of her seat.

He frowned as he watched her leave and knew if he left things the way they were, they would no doubt take out their anger on Alice, and he would be damned if he let that happen to her.

"I would like to make this one thing clear," he started, staring down at the Viscount and Viscountess. "If I hear any unnecessary comments from either of you directed at my wife in the future, I can assure you, I won't hesitate to make sure you regret it."

He walked quickly to his chambers, not able to bear being a minute longer in their presence. He never knew why parents tended to force their failed dreams onto their children.

Once in his chambers, he poured himself a glass of whiskey, needing to rid himself of the tension simmering in his blood. He had meant every word he had spoken about Alice, and it had shocked him how easy it had been to admit it.

She had shocked him with her silent way of taking her parents' barrage of words and was nothing like the woman who didn't hesitate to voice her feelings to him.

He sighed and took another sip of his drink, placing the cup down briefly to rid himself of his too-tight cravat and the jacket he had worn. A few buttons of his shirt went with them as he needed to breathe if he were to truly be free of the anger that still lingered.

It annoyed him that he still had to discover how to broach the subject of apologizing for the kiss with her even though she looked hell-bent on ignoring him.

His lips stung as though reliving the sparks that had simmered between them.

It had startled him that he had lost control enough to do so, and the worst thing was that he hadn't hated it.

On the contrary, if the voice of wisdom hadn't screamed at him, he would have consummated their marriage right there in the orangery.

A knock on the door pulled him out of his thoughts. He gave admittance without asking who it was, expecting Roberts. His eyes popped open in surprise to see Alice. Her surprise was equally evident, her eyes trailing from his face to his chest and back up.

Her face was bright red, even in the orange glow of candlelight. He had to fight the urge to button up his shirt, but that would give her away, and he didn't want to embarrass her further.

"Alice. Why are you here?" he asked. "Is something wrong?"

"No... No," she stuttered. "I came to... apologize. I didn't know my parents would

Speak as they did. I am sorry they made you uncomfortable."

"You do not have to apologize to me, Alice," he told her. "If anyone should, it should be them and they should be apologizing to you."

She scoffed, wrapping her arms around her body. He noticed then she was in a nightdress and robe and was all at once uncomfortable.

"I should also thank you for defending me as you did," she added with a small smile. "No one has ever done so in the past. It felt good not being alone this time."

"You do not have to thank me, but you are very welcome."

He permitted himself to return her smile. He was unprepared for her eyes to go as wide as they did or for the bright smile that would come with it.

He didn't know where to look or put his hands as she stood awkwardly in his chambers once she realized she had been staring.

He recalled the last time she had been in his chambers; even if it had been without his knowledge, it had ended with his arms wrapped warmly around her and the memory of her soft warmth pressed against him.

Worse still, her eyes were fixated on his chest, exposed by his partially unbuttoned shirt.

The innocence of her obvious curiosity drew him in, but he knew if he were to act on it, she might regret it once the warring emotions wrought by her parents in her faded. He cleared his throat, which broke her focus. She reddened, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

"I had better return to my chambers," she announced.

He nodded and watched her head to the door, but she paused, turning to him.

"When is our next event?" she asked.

"There is a garden party at the Bellworth estate next week," he told her.

She nodded and made to leave but stopped visibly battling mentally.

"Is something wrong, Alice?" he asked.

She took a deep breath and turned to him before answering.

"Why did you leave on our wedding night?"

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 7:56 am

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

" If I hear any unnecessary comments from either of you directed at my wife in the future, I can assure you I won't hesitate to make sure you regret it."

Alice screamed into her pillow as she recalled Victor's parting words to her parents.

She had been on her way to apologize for leaving as she had when she overheard him, and her heart had warmed when she heard his attempt to protect her from suffering the sure backlash from the disastrous dinner.

Her parents would have no doubt found a way to blame her for being dramatic.

She had hidden in a corridor when she heard him approach and only emerged after her parents had gone up to their chambers before returning to hers.

She had spent a better part of the night avoiding him, as she had yet to forgive him for saying their kiss was nothing more than a mistake.

But there was no way she could continue being angry at him, not when he had defended her as he had.

He had no reason to, yet he had done what no one else had done for her.

She had changed into a nightgown and was brushing her hair, but she knew sleep wouldn't come if she didn't thank him. But how could she go to his chambers so late?

"No," she said out loud to herself, willing her body to behave.

A knock on her door pulled her out of her thoughts.

"Enter," she called out.

"Your Grace." Roberts bowed.

"Is anything the matter?" she asked, surprised to see him so late in her chambers.

"Your parents have asked me to inform you that they will be departing, come morning, to their estate."

Oh.

"Very well. I shall try to see them before they do. Is there anything else I should know?"

"Not at the moment, Your Grace," he answered. "Have a good night."

She giggled as soon as the door was closed, flinging herself onto her bed rather undignifiedly. It wasn't filial of her to find delight in her parents' discomfort, but she couldn't deny the pleasure of seeing them on the receiving end of their own medicine.

Turning to her side, she was haunted by the memory of him warning her parents and had lain there, unable to sleep. The scream of frustration into her pillow was the motivation she needed to get out of bed, don a robe, and look for his chamber.

Ignoring a look from the maid she had asked to lead her there, she mentally prepared her speech, but all that was in vain the second she stepped into the room. The sight of him in a less-than-societally presentable state had her wishing she had waited until

breakfast to speak to him.

Victor clearing his throat was the thing she needed to remember what she had come for.

"Why did you leave on our wedding night?"

Alice watched emotions flitter quickly across Victor's face, and she couldn't help but wonder if perhaps she should have buried the question deep in her thoughts.

She had come only to thank him for defending her against her parents but had only been met with surprises at every turn.

The first being his exposed chest through his partially unbuttoned shirt.

Even as she looked him over now, she couldn't help but swallow deeply at the sight of the light brown hair dusting his chest.

He was so visibly male that she felt small standing before him. She had realized, too late, her mistake of being dressed in only her nightgown and robe. Thankfully, it was of a thick material and cut in such a manner as to cover rather than seduce.

Then, she had been surprised by the scars still visible on his chest and wondered about their extent.

He had told her how he had gotten them, and she pitied the boy he had been.

They shared similar mental scars of not being good enough in their fathers' eyes, and while she had resented hers, she resented the late duke who had wrought so much pain in Victor.

"Why do you ask now?" he asked once he overcame his surprise.

She shrugged, stepping away from the door.

"It seems the perfect time to ask," she answered him. "I have spent many nights wondering."

"We do not have to discuss it," he tried to dismiss her. "It has been two years."

"That is precisely why we must," she answered stubbornly. "We have been married for two years, yet we haven't consummated our marriage. I used to blame myself but considering you're not one to lie, I believed you when you told my parents that you were satisfied with me."

"I am satisfied with you."

"Yet the topic of consummating our marriage burdens you."

"It has nothing to do with you. I can assure you of that."

"Then what is it, Victor?" she asked irritably.

"You cannot just leave things at that. If you are not put off by my inadequacies, then why would you just leave? I am not asking just because we didn't consummate the marriage.

I am asking for every other reason. Companionship. Friendship. I have a right to know."

He sighed and began to pace, running a hand through his hair.

"Can we not discuss this when I am better prepared for the conversation?"

"There is no better time than the present."

"You are a very stubborn woman," he muttered.

She shrugged, not minding the characterization.

He had confused her by saying what he had to her parents even after telling her he had only married her for his inheritance and calling their kiss a mistake so she couldn't leave things peacefully.

Her conscience would never permit her a moment's rest if she didn't seize the opportunity to get answers.

"I thought it was what was best for both of us." He answered.

She hadn't truly expected him to answer, so when he started, it was almost too hard to hide her surprise. It took everything in her to school her expression so he wouldn't stop.

"I thought you were trying to throw yourself out of the window when I walked into your chambers and I panicked. I couldn't have your death on my hands."

"That is why you left?" she asked incredulously. "I would never... I'm sorry you felt that way."

"It was a match you obviously didn't want, and I could understand that considering the rumors around me," he answered.

"You were too scared to look me in the eye on our wedding day and you had been so

startled when our hands touched in the carriage.

Anyone would have thought the same thing.

I mean no one I know sits on the windowsill. "

"You do not know that many people," she teased, smiling.

"It matters not," he returned her attempt at playful conversation. "It is a rather odd habit. I find you have a number of dangerous hobbies."

"Just because you're afraid doesn't mean they are dangerous hobbies."

"I assure you I am not alone in my thoughts on the subject, Alice."

She couldn't deny that hearing her name on his lips in such a playful tone set weird butterflies fluttering about in her belly. She had once thought her name too feminine for her and not at all fitting, but each time he pronounced it, she found herself liking it a little bit more.

"Oh?" she asked playfully. "Do you discuss my habits with others?"

He looked like she had exposed a secret of his, and she laughed softly at his expression. He almost looked boyish, unlike the serious duke everyone saw him as.

"Not particularly," he answered when he had recovered.

"I only hope you say good things." She smiled.

"I cannot promise that."

"Well." She pouted. "I will just have to correct the narrative when I meet them."

"If you meet them."

"If you say so, Your Grace." She nodded. "I do hope you do not still perceive that I would hurt myself to escape marriage to you?"

She needed to ask the question before the vulnerable air that had settled over them dissipated.

"I do not," he answered. "I now know you will not hurt yourself to escape marriage to me."

She smiled and nodded triumphantly.

"I am glad you have come to know that," she told him.

They settled into a companionable silence, and she found she was in no hurry to leave. However, she didn't want to overstay her welcome and push him too quickly behind his walls. If he wanted her to stay, all he would have to do was ask.

"I had best be returning to my chambers," she smiled at him. "I will see you at breakfast tomorrow?"

She had said it as a question, not wanting to scare him off. She knew he was quick to erect walls between them each time they took a step closer to each other. Her heart beat in anticipation of his reply, her breath hitching in her chest.

"I am glad to see I have influenced such a positive change in you." He nodded.

"Do not take all the credit. Roberts had already advised me on the matter."

"Yet it took me threatening you for you to make the change," he said smugly.

"And I am thankful for it." She smiled. "I have more energy for my day-to-day tasks."

He smiled then, startling her and apparently himself as he struggled to hide it.

"Thank you, Victor," she added, turning to the door.

"Alice..." he called.

"Yes?"

She turned and was surprised to see how close he had come to her.

His sandalwood and male scent filled her senses, and she couldn't help but breathe deeply.

Her body went through a change that startled her.

Her heart beat rapidly in her chest, and her lips grew dry, so she had to swipe her tongue over them.

His eyes followed the movement, and she noticed his Adam's apple bob as he swallowed. She briefly wondered if he was going to kiss her.

"Did you want to ask me something?" she asked.

She saw his eyes return to the present, and a mask quickly fall into place. She was almost sorry to have broken whatever mood had fallen over them.

"I wanted to wish you a good night's rest," he told her, meeting her eyes.

"Thank you," she answered. "Do sleep well."

He nodded, and she left the room quickly, stopping after turning into the next hallway to catch her breath. She placed a hand on her chest and was surprised she hadn't fainted from how fast her heart beat in her chest.

She hadn't imagined that look on his face. He had looked at her like that in the orangery just before he kissed her. And even though he had rejected her then after the kiss, she realized she had wanted him to kiss her.

Her lips tingled, reminding her of the last time they had kissed and the sparks that burned between them with each movement of his lips. His arms had held her so tightly, yet she had trusted him not to hurt her.

She had always trusted him, she realized. Even on their wedding day, she had known deep down he was nothing like the rumors said and even though she had a general distrust of people, she wouldn't have dreamed of doing what he had feared.

Lying in bed later that night, she couldn't help but smile as she replayed their interactions in her head. No one would believe her if they didn't see it for themselves.

He had looked handsome as they had teased one another, and not as severe as he usually did. She imagined how differently they could both live if only he would completely tear down the walls he had erected between them.

The aching loneliness she usually felt had disappeared, and she barely felt the melancholy that haunted her after her parents berated her.

She couldn't deny it any longer. Not to herself. She had somehow fallen for her husband without knowing it, and she worried her lip, knowing that come morning, he could be an entirely different man than the one she had conversed with that night.

She could only pray he would finally stop fearing the hurt that would come with leaving his heart open.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"I can't believe you got the duke to fetch us punch," Lavinia said with eyes wide, shaking her head.

"He seems like a different person," Emma added. "Is this real? What happened?"

"We had a long overdue conversation and it looks like things might be better between us." Alice was unable to hide the hopefulness in her voice.

The week leading up to the garden party had seen a change in their relationship that had surprised her and had the feelings she had come to realize she had for her husband growing deeper.

They hadn't had much time for conversation as they had the night of her parents' visit, but she had seen him more often than usual.

He had often opted to respond to correspondence in the orangery with her working on embroidery or having tea with her rather than in his study.

She had noticed his eyes on her more often than usual. Perhaps because he noticed she had put a little more effort into her appearance, but he had said nothing even if he had.

"Oh thank you, Your Grace," Lavinia thanked him once he returned to their party.

She was thankful he hadn't berated her for choosing to sit with her friends rather than

mingle, and even though she could feel the curious eyes on them, she paid them no mind.

Her usual anxiety at parties had dissipated with Victor by her side. His arms had received the brunt of her anxiety when they had stepped into the Bellworth gardens, but he had said nothing, squeezing her hand and sending her a reassuring nod.

"I need to speak with some of my friends," he whispered in her ear. "Will you be alright on your own?"

She nodded as her friends smiled brightly at the intimate gesture, her cheeks flaming with bashfulness. He smiled and squeezed her hand, walking off.

"You love him, don't you?" Emma accused.

"I do not," she defended, still red.

"It is all over you, Alice." She laughed. "You are literally glowing with it."

"I like him. That I can admit but love? I do not think so," she admitted finally.

"I cannot tell you the truth of your heart, but I can tell he has feelings for you."

Her eyes roamed over to him where she found him talking with a man she didn't know. Even if he had feelings for her, it would not be easy for him to admit. He wasn't one to trust so easily.

"I should warn you, Alice," Lavinia said with a frown. "Lord Pembroke is here."

"He has returned? When?" she asked.

"I do not know exactly but..."

Her words trailed off as Alice's eyes landed on him.

He was looking right at her and seemed to be approaching them.

Her friends notice and scamper off, leaving her alone with the man she would rather not be seen with.

A few eyes were already turning to them, and she knew if she didn't shorten their conversation, it would turn into a scandal she could not afford.

"Miss Robins," he greeted with an embarrassed smile.

"It is the Duchess of Ravenmoor now," she corrected him.

"Oh you have married," he smiled. "Congratulations."

"Why are you here, Lord Pembroke?" she asked. "Surely it is not to offer overdue felicitations."

He winced at the abrasiveness of her tone, but she didn't care how she sounded. He needed to leave before too many people saw them conversing and rumors started.

"I came to apologize," he answered. "I should not have embarrassed you as I did but I was in love, and I didn't want to be trapped in an unhappy marriage. Surely you can understand that."

She said nothing, and he took her silence as an avenue to continue.

"I know an apology is not enough to make up for the embarrassment, but you are

happily wed now so something good came out of it."

"I really do not want to discuss the past, Lord Pembroke. We should..."

"Alice," she heard Victor call.

Her eyes went wide as she noticed him. How long had he been standing there?

"Yes?"

"We had best take our leave."

She noticed he had blatantly ignored Edward, who was now looking between them in shock. He ended up walking away once he saw his presence wasn't going to be acknowledged.

"Why? It's still early," she protested. "It would be too improper if we were to leave now."

He ignored her protest and turned, leaving her to decide if she wanted to follow him or walk home. Anger burned inside her at his rudeness, as he didn't even give her room to say her goodbyes, and she intended to let him know he had annoyed her by ignoring him.

She stepped into the carriage herself, ignoring the hand he held out to support her and turning away from him when the carriage began to move. She could feel his eyes on her, but she didn't turn to him. It wasn't until they entered their home that she finally voiced her thoughts.

"Why would you do something so rude?" she queried. "The party was still in full swing. Do you want new rumors to start up again?"

"I am not the one giving fodder to rumor mongers," he retorted.

"Excuse me?"

"You and Lord Pembroke seem to be on good terms considering he jilted you."

"Is that what this is about?" she asked incredulously. "You have nothing to worry about."

"I am not worried, " he replied. "I do have concerns that your continued friendship with your former betrothed would breed talk we do not need."

"There is no friendship between me and Lord Pembroke," she argued. "He came to apologize and I warned him never to speak to me again."

"It didn't look like it," he murmured.

She scoffed, disbelieving that he would think she would intentionally jeopardize their good standing. She was not one to hold grudges, but that didn't mean she lacked common sense.

"It has been two years and there were no feelings between him and I," she protested. "It is not fair that you would accuse me of something as foolish as intentionally ruining our reputation, but I do not fault your thinking."

She turned to return to her chambers in anger, but his hands on hers stopped her.

"Please don't leave," he begged. "I apologize."

Her eyes went wide at his vulnerable expression, and she stopped wondering what he could possibly say.

"When are you going to introduce me to your wife?" Andrew asked with a wolfish smile.

"Never," he answered, sipping at his punch. "I do not trust you around her."

Andrew wagged his brows suggestively.

"I would never put my hands on my friend's woman. You know that."

"It is not your hands I fear, my friend," he quipped. "It is your mouth. You do not know how to keep secrets."

"And you think I would spill secrets of your escapades to your loving wife? Never. You wound me with your distrust."

"My apologies then."

"I spied a pretty red head with your wife before. Who might she be?"

"Please keep your eyes off my wife's friends," he warned. "They are lovely girls and do not need your terrible influence on them."

"I am appalled you would think that I have nothing other than good intentions for the beautiful maiden."

They chuckled, and he basked in the warmth of their friendship when his eyes finally roamed back to Alice to check on her. A frown crossed his face when he spied a man talking to her. He couldn't identify who he was, and it angered him how close they stood together.

"Who is that discussing with Alice?" he asked Andrew, who knew every member of

the ton .

He squinted and smiled a devilish smile.

"Why he's your wife's former betrothed. The runaway Lord Pembroke."

He frowned as he watched them converse.

Why was the bloody man standing so close to her?

"Why is he talking to her now?" he grunted despite himself.

"Perhaps he is trying to rekindle old flames." Andrew laughed.

"He had better not."

He stormed over to them, ignoring the man looking at him in surprise.

He knew she would have been angered by the abrupt way he had ordered them to leave, but he couldn't see past the looks he had been getting as the two of them had spoken. Did she not know what talk would come of her speaking with the man who had jilted her?

"Please don't leave," he begged. "I apologize."

Victor was shocked to see himself reaching out to touch Alice on his own accord, worse still, hearing the words come out of his mouth.

In truth, he was apologetic for accusing her as he had and rudely forcing her home.

He had seen nothing in his blind rage, and now that he had considerably calmed, he

saw the truth of things even though he was content to deny it.

He had been jealous when he had seen how close they had stood, and it annoyed him when Andrew teased him about it. He wondered if perhaps that was what the other members of the ton could see.

"I just... I do not know if perhaps my marriage to you is keeping you from being with who you love."

"There is no such thing."

"You and your parents seemed heartbroken over the ended engagement to Lord Pembroke. It almost seems as though I was nothing more than an inconvenience."

"I never cared for the match between Lord Pembroke and me. I am truly glad it ended although I would have preferred if it had been a little less embarrassing." She laughed humorlessly.

"You seemed so offended by the fact that I all but dragged you away from him."

She laughed, shaking her head at him.

"I was upset you had us leave the party early without even saying goodbye to my friends or our host."

Oh.

"So you never loved Lord Pembroke?" he asked.

He tried to ignore how his breath hitched, anticipating her response, and if she noticed, she did nothing to show it. It annoyed him that her answer meant a lot more

than it should have to him.

"I have never loved, nor will I ever love Lord Pembroke," she answered, shaking her head. "It was a match my father arranged, and I knew it was doomed to fail from the start. I was trying to tell him that before you came and pulled me away."

"I should have trusted you to handle things."

"You should have," she affirmed. "You will have to beg my forgiveness now."

"How?"

"Perhaps you could have dinner with me and afterwards you'll let me beat you at cards."

He nodded and watched her skip off, hating the relief he felt knowing she had no feelings for her former betrothed.

He had begun a dangerous game by opening up too much to her, and if he were to continue down this path, he would no doubt find himself in deeper trouble than he was now.

He couldn't deny now that he had fallen for his wife even though he had been trying to put her away from him.

He had known from the moment he had seen her walk down the aisle, radiant albeit scared, that she would be dangerous to him, but he hadn't known just how much till he had returned to his family's estate and he had seen just how capable she truly was.

Her stubborn way of voicing her feelings, even when he attempted to intimidate her into silence, had him thinking about her much more than he should have until she had

imprinted herself firmly in his mind.

He couldn't continue down this path if he wanted to protect her from the monster he truly was.

He couldn't keep pretending he could be the man she wanted him to be, a man with whom she could live a normal life.

It would hurt both of them, but with time, she would come to see that this was the best path he could take.

For that night, he would enjoy the fantasy he had spun for both of them.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"H is Grace has gone down for breakfast, Your Grace."

Alice smiled brightly as she looked over her image in the mirror. She had taken extra care with her morning ablutions and hoped Victor would appreciate her efforts.

She smiled when she recalled how he had looked the night before as he tried to cover up his jealousy. Her husband was not a man who would admit his feelings so easily, and she knew all she needed was to be patient with him. With time, perhaps they could have more than a cordial relationship.

She walked quickly to the dining room to join him, even though she was yet to be accustomed to eating breakfast. She stopped shy of the door to tamp down her excitement.

"Good morning," she greeted as she entered and allowed herself to be helped into a chair.

She tried not to let her disappointment show when he barely looked at her.

Now that she had arrived, he seemed to almost rush his meal, and she wondered if perhaps he had erected the wall between them again.

Her ire was kindled, but she didn't want to give up so easily, so she pressed the feeling down.

"I was thinking we could-"

"I'm leaving this morning," he announced, interrupting her.

She set down the piece of bread she'd been buttering as well as her cutlery before looking up at him.

"I beg your pardon?" she asked, unsure if she'd truly heard him.

He rose from his seat, setting his napkin down.

"I am leaving this morning," he repeated, meeting her eyes with expressionless ones.

"Why?" she asked incredulously, rising from her seat. "I thought... did I do something to offend you last night? I already told you I have no feelings for Edward."

"It's nothing you did, Alice," he explained. "I see no need to stay as we've sufficiently put an end to the rumors circulating about us."

She scoffed, disbelieving that that was his excuse.

"Was that really your only reason for staying as long as you have? For defending me to my parents? For... everything?"

He winced and turned away from her.

"Please don't make this harder than it has to be, Alice," he begged. "You are a practical woman, and you already know there wasn't much to be expected from our match."

"I thought you had come to change your mind. If not concerning our relationship,

then at least towards leaving."

"I truly am sorry to be leaving so suddenly, but it's for the best."

"For whom?"

"Alice," he said, exasperated.

"You said you would at least stay till the end of the season," she bargained, refusing to believe he was really going to leave her alone again. "That's not for weeks."

Tears were already pooling in her eyes, and it took everything in her to blink them back. He noticed her discomfort and looked stricken but was in no hurry to end his current plan of action. In fact, he looked even more resolved to leave.

"There's no need to attend any more events. At least not for me. They already think we're a couple madly in love."

She scoffed and wiped at her eyes.

How could she have been so stupid to think he would have torn down the walls he hid behind so easily for her when he was perfectly content?

"I don't know why I find that so hard to believe," she stated. "You're only running away because you've shown me a side of yourself you hadn't planned to, aren't you?"

"There's no such reason," he stated tonelessly, and she could tell by the stubborn set of his shoulders that their conversation was now over. "I have asked Roberts to write to me if you need anything. Goodbye, Alice."

"You're a coward, Victor," she spat at his retreating back. He halted temporarily but resumed as though she'd said nothing.

She found herself falling into her seat just as the tears began to fall. Once again, she had trusted Victor only to have that trust shattered.

She would show him that she could live without him just as easily as he did without her.

"Alice!" Her friends' voices pulled her out of the dreamless sleep she hadn't realized she had fallen into.

"Are you well?" Lavinia said in a panic. "You look so pale."

"Why aren't you in your bed?" Emma asked.

"I am well. There's no need to worry," she answered, waving aside their concerns. "I didn't know you two were coming."

"We decided to surprise you and the Duke," Emma smiled.

"And London's boring now."

At the mention of her husband, the sour mood that has freed her at seeing her friends returned in full force.

"What's wrong, Alice?" Lavinia asked with a frown.

A tear escaped her, and before she could think to hide it, she was sobbing into her friends' shoulders, telling them about her latest encounter with her husband.

Knowing their tempers, she could feel the tension in their bodies, but they said nothing and let her empty her tear glands, not minding that she stained their dresses.

"I am sorry. I don't mean to..."

"Speak nothing of it, dear girl." Lavinia smiled.

"Do you know how many of your kerchiefs I've ruined with my tears?" Emma asked.

Alice smiled as the warmth of her friends' love for her seeped into her quicker than her favorite jasmine tea. She sniffed and wiped at her eyes.

"We are hardly girls anymore," she commented, which caused her friends to laugh.

"At least you're married," Lavinia teased.

"Do not remind me," she pouted. "Would it be wrong of me to ask that we put him out of our minds for today? I just want to spend the day with you two without thinking of my husband. "

Her tone caused her friends to laugh, and they nodded, asking her what she had in mind.

She asked for a parlor maid and had her relay her instructions to the necessary household staff to set up a picnic for them by the lake. When she was done giving orders, she found her friends smiling oddly at her and inquired about the reason behind it.

"You've just matured, that is all," Emma smiled.

She shook her head and pulled them towards the lake at a run. They laughed in

surprise and joined her nonetheless. It had been too long since she'd laughed freely or been away from prying and judgmental eyes.

They collapsed on the blankets set up, heaving deep breaths as they tried to recover from their run. Her body felt tired but awake for the first time in an age, and her heart was pounding with exertion.

"I hate these damned corsets," she complained, picking at the bones restricting her chest.

"Don't remind me," Lavinia groaned, sitting up. "Whoever invented this must have hated women."

"Indeed," they agreed.

They soon helped themselves to the feast laid out for them, and when they were full, they lay down to enjoy the coolness of the day.

"I still cannot believe the Duke left you again," Lavinia said in a rage, sitting up. "After he played such a charming role last night. I was starting to like him."

"Lavinia..." she sighed. "I really do not want to talk about him."

"I would have given him a good piece of my mind if I had been in your place."

"I did and now I'm ready to move past it," she told her friends. "If he doesn't want to be in my life then so be it."

"Alice..."

"Lavinia, please leave her be," Emma interjected. "Let's not open up old wounds."

The stubborn girl sighed and lay back on their blanket, muttering under her breath. She shared a look with Emma before they launched themselves at her, tickling her till she laughed.

"All right. I surrender." She laughed, pushing at their hands.

"You're much too stubborn," Alice laughed. "I really hope you marry a man much nicer than my husband."

"Please not you too," she groaned. "I am already weary of all this talk of marriage. My parents have talked my ears to near deafness at this point as if I were actively trying not to be married. It's a wonder how I haven't run away to come live with you yet. Even Jeremy has started asking questions. Isn't that marvelous? "

"Jeremy asked about marriage?" she asked incredulously. "My! That is indeed marvelous."

Jeremy was Lavinia's elder brother and a renowned rake who often expressed his opposition to the institution whenever he had the chance.

For him to inquire...

"I am sorry, Lavinia," she sighed. "It will come in time."

"That's what I keep telling them." She frowned. "It's not like there's even a good batch to pick from. All that's left are rakes and widowers old enough to be my father. I am truly not that desperate."

They laughed at that and soon settled back on their blanket.

"Emma, you're oddly quiet," Lavinia noted.

The girl sighed and patted her cheeks.

"I cannot help but worry about my sisters."

"Cecilia and Dorothy? Has there been any trouble?"

"Hasn't there always been?" she complained. "I ignored their willfulness as perhaps the rebellion that came with age but now they're old enough to know better and they're out right refusing instruction."

They're only three years away from their debut and still have so much to learn.

Father cannot afford them both education at finishing school and has tasked me with it.

When would I have the time then to find a spouse? "

Her eyes widened in surprise at her complaint, and she found her expression mirrored in Lavinia's face.

"Why have you never said anything?"

"I didn't want to bother you two considering we were in almost the exact same situations."

They lay back, the silence heavy between them as they pondered on their lives and the way forward for all of them until Roberts arrived to inform them that their carriage was set to return them.

"I will miss you both dearly," Alice hugged them.

"We will miss you too." They hugged her back just as fiercely.

"We will try to visit as often as we can but with the season still in full swing..."

"I understand." She smiled, trying not to feel downtrodden. "Perhaps I will attend a few events myself."

They brightened and hugged her again.

"That will be marvelous."

"You truly must leave now or you will be late."

"Write to us."

She nodded and watched them be led away, opting to walk by the lake. She shivered slightly as a cold draft blew her and miscalculated her next step, trying to hop over a slippery spot. She found that she had sprained her ankle in her bid to catch herself.

Trying to balance her weight, she slipped again and found herself flying headfirst into the lake.

The feeling was all at once disorienting as the water made her dress heavier, pulling her deeper.

She thrashed around, unable to stay calm as she found herself in the deeper side of the lake but each time she was able to push her head above water, the weight of her dress pulled her down.

"Help me!" she cried once her head broke forth, slapping around again, a move she was quick to regret as once again she was pulled under and she hadn't taken in a deep

breath in time.

The pressure of the water around her and the water she had swallowed had her struggling again, and just as she began to lose hope, she felt hands around her.

Once they reached the surface, she heard the voices of frantic maids and footmen, but she could barely see as she coughed up water and tried to regain her breathing.

She let herself be wrapped in a towel and helped to her feet, remembering too late that she had sprained her ankle. Her cry of pain had her being scooped into someone's arms, and she vaguely recalled Roberts asking someone to fetch a physician.

Once she was safely behind her chamber doors, she let herself be undressed, towel-dried, and tucked underneath her covers. It would take only a few minutes for sleep to claim her, but not before wishing Victor had been around to save her.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

" You look terrible." Andrew commented as Victor stepped into their makeshift boxing ring. "And you smell like a cellar. Have you been drinking?"

When hadn't he?

He had found it hard to sleep since he'd left Alice two days prior and had hoped the drink would rid him of the memories of the hurt look he'd put on her face, but he was only left feeling worse with each glass he took.

You're a coward, Victor.

Her words had stung, but he couldn't deny the truth of them.

He was afraid of the feelings for his wife that had rapidly taken root in his heart, which had previously housed the darkness of his past. Knowing she was quick to trust, he didn't want to give any more fuel to the flame that had begun to spark between them.

He wasn't selfish to resign her to that fate. Placing his things down at the edge, he turned to his friend.

"I still look better than you." He tried for humor to mask his pain, but his friend, damn him, saw right through it.

"You look like you haven't slept for days." Andrew scoffed. "What happened?"

"I didn't come here to talk," he answered, rolling his neck and shoulders.

His friend scoffed, shaking his head and taking on a stubborn stance.

"As much as I enjoy senseless violence and beating you to a pulp, it wouldn't be fair to do so now," he retorted. "Talk."

"Andrew."

"Victor."

"Don't be a cad. I need this."

Why, of all times, the man would decide he would rather talk than fight, would the man choose now?

They had decided many years prior that boxing would be the outlet by which they communicated when they had issues they would rather not discuss.

It was a much better outlet and more respectable than starting brawls in inns of low repute and had worked just as well for years.

He could barely understand the man's insistence on talking now.

"You're drunk and you have a crazed look in your eye," Andrew explained, stepping closer with cautious steps the way one would when approaching a frantic horse. "You need a warm bed and some sleep from where I'm standing."

"I can get some sleep after I beat you," he bragged, but seeing the stubborn look in his friend's eye, he sighed. "Please, Andrew."

He sighed and shook his head, muttering under his breath.

"I'll humor you, but I warn you, I won't be merciful."

"I have never needed you to be."

The words were barely out of his mouth when a blow struck him square across the jaw. His head whipped to the side from the force. If he had used a little more force, Victor was sure his neck would have snapped.

"Damn you," he cursed, spitting out the blood that had pooled in his mouth.

He was lucky the blow had taken none of his teeth.

"You didn't come here to talk, did you?" the bastard quipped, looking smug.

He returned the favor with a blow his friend dodged easily. He grinned broadly, a wolf excited by the prospect of the kill, and squared up. Now, they were both ready for an actual fight.

Andrew struck out again, and perhaps it was due to the whiskey in his blood, he was too slow to dodge, and this one met him in his abdomen, winding him.

"Shite," he spat.

He tried, blow after blow, to land one on his friend, but the man moved fast, not wasting a single movement and returning blows with rapid succession.

Victor would have given in and called the match off, but pride held him in the ring.

The pain was excruciating but at least distracted him from the memory of Alice's hurt

eyes.

This was exactly what he had needed and what he had deserved. Perhaps his father had been right all along. He was always going to be lacking. He was never going to be able to do anything right. No matter how hard he tried.

He had done the right thing, leaving Alice to live her life free of his influence. She deserved better than a man who failed at everything he set out to do.

"God. Victor," Andrew groaned. "You are ruining this match for me."

He returned to the present, still feeling the clouds of the darkness he had begun to sink into hovering strongly over him.

He hadn't even realized just how much damage his body had taken until now.

His face and body ached in several places, and he knew there would be a new collection of bruises to deal with.

"I didn't say we could stop," he complained, noticing Andrew had removed his shirt and was wiping at his face.

"You didn't need to," Andrew replied with a frown. "If I didn't, I could have killed you and I have a sinking feeling you were hoping I would."

He accepted the water pitcher and drank greedily, not realizing how thirsty he was.

"I would have stopped you before you could."

"I highly doubt you would have," Andrew spat. His chest still heaved with the exertion of the exercise. "I know you are burdened by whatever foolish thing you've

done now but this isn't the way to handle things. I don't like you using me as punishment."

"I'm not..."

"You forget I know you, Victor," he spat.

His forest green eyes were alight with rage, showing that Victor had hurt him deeply.

"You are not much different from Benedict, and I would rather see you here in pain than have you chase physical punishment to some other continent."

"Is there still no word from him?" he inquired.

Benedict was Andrew's cousin who enlisted in the army after his betrothed had jumped into the Thames when she discovered his affair.

He had started by drinking himself into a guilty stupor and, unable to bear the guilt of her death, decided that he deserved punishment.

The three of them had been close since their school days, but as Andrew's cousin, his disappearance weighed heavier on him.

"No, but we are not discussing him now. What has you in such a state? Why aren't you at your estate?"

Victor sighed in preparation for the scolding that would come with his revelation of the truth of what he had done, and he was not mistaken. As soon as the words were out of his mouth, his friend nearly punched him again.

"Why would you do that?" he asked, near yelling.

"I can't be with her like a regular man," he answered.

"I do not understand. Are you impotent?"

"That is not what I mean," he sighed, rising from the floor to pace. "I cannot feign happiness when deep down I am not. I cannot live as though I have no cares."

"I still do not understand what you mean," Andrew insisted, rising also. "Why would you have to feign happiness or live without a care? You like her, do you not?"

If he were honest, he liked her more than he could accurately describe, and that was what scared him.

If he were to voice it out, it would be as though asserting it, and there would be no forgetting her, as he intended to, with time.

He had never felt the way he did for Alice for any other woman, and the magnitude of it scared him to no end.

"I cannot say that, but I do care for her happiness."

"That is utter rubbish, and you know it." Andrew scoffed. "You like her, otherwise you would never have kissed her or set yourself on this supposed righteous path."

"I care for her and that's the truth of it," he answered stubbornly.

"There is nothing more than concern for her. She was basically gifted to me by her father who didn't want an unmarried daughter and had made her life miserable.

Now that she has my name and lives in my estate, she has nothing to worry about. I have played my role."

"You are unbelievable." Andrew laughed. "I didn't think you had it in you to say ridiculous things."

You have never let yourself converse with a woman, even your household staff, but you not only kissed this one, you let her take you on a tour of your own home and discuss literature. You are smitten by all standards."

"Do not..."

"What's worse? The girl is equally smitten and now will be forced to live her days lonely because you choose to hang yourself on a cross for naught."

"I am trying not to hurt her."

"By hurting her?" he asked. "She will live her days in misery and will come to resent you. Doesn't that story sound familiar? The only difference is that you haven't put a child in her that she would hate."

"Don't liken me to my father, Andrew. I will not stand for it," he warned. "I am nothing like him. He was a monster."

"Why not?" Andrew mocked. "You're doing the exact same thing to Alice that he did with your mother."

"You have no right!" Victor glared. "No right! You weren't there. You didn't see what happened."

"No I wasn't, but I can tell from how you act that you have stepped into the shoes of the man you claim to hate."

Victor lunged at him but missed and was shoved into the corner.

"You push away any and everyone who shows even the slightest hint of concern for you. Hell, the only reason we're still friends is because I'm the only one who gives you the pain you continue to feel you deserve," Andrew continued.

"I will no longer serve as your purveyor.

You have grown past letting his sick words keep you in this prison. You are not what he said you are."

"I am worse, Andrew. I ruin everything I touch, and I do not want to harm her. She doesn't have to suffer being bound to me," he argued. "I am trying to save her from my family's curse. From me. I have no love to give her."

"You keep saying that, yet she loves you anyway."

"She doesn't love me."

"Why else do you think she has stayed despite your conflicting attitude?" Andrew questioned. "I saw how you looked at her at the garden party. You are taken with her also. I watched you nearly lose your head over her speaking to another man. It is more than possession you feel."

"You're being ridiculous."

"And you're being a coward."

"For someone who doesn't believe in love, you're a staunch advocate of it."

"I am tired of seeing you this way," Andrew sighed, chest deflating with the act. "You deserve happiness, Victor. For once in your life I need you to see that."

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They fell into a silence that was pregnant with unspoken words, but neither was willing to break it.

"She deserves a better life than anything I could give her."

"You do not know that."

"I do and that's why I stay away to protect her. I cannot divorce her so she isn't shamed by society, but I can at least give her room to live her life free of my influence."

"You might think your actions are noble, but they achieve the opposite.

You only hurt her by your constant denial of what exists between you two," Andrew said, looking unlike the nonchalant friend he had grown up with.

"Plus, you told her you only married her to get your inheritance.

Have you asked her what she hoped to gain from this marriage apart from escaping her parents? "

He frowned, knowing he hadn't even thought to, but buried the emotion that came with it. He had already made his bed; unfortunately, they would both have to lie in it.

"I..."

A knock on the door saved him from another round of scolding from his friend, and

he was grateful for that.

"Enter."

The door opened to reveal Higgins, Andrew's butler.

"Yes?"

"Pardon my intrusion, Your Grace, but there's someone here to see you."

"I'm not expecting anyone," Andrew said, confused. "Who is it?"

"He says his name is Roberts, the Duke of Ravenmoor's butler."

Both their eyes went wide with surprise.

Why would Roberts have come all the way to Andrew's estate?

"Let him in."

He shared a look with Andrew but shook his head, refusing to harbor any negative thoughts. Perhaps he had misunderstood when he had been asked to keep an eye on Alice.

"Your Graces," he greeted, bowing to them.

He looked outwardly normal, as though coming for his routine visits and not bearing bad news, so he saw no reason to panic.

"Is anything the matter?" Victor asked. "I wasn't expecting you for weeks."

"There was an incident at the estate," Roberts stated. "Her Grace was involved."

The familiar signs of dread began working their way up his body, and for an instant, he felt akin to the little boy he had been all those years ago.

No. He told himself. It will be different this time.

"What happened?" Andrew asked because he had apparently been lost in his thoughts.

"She slipped and fell into the lake," he reported. "She sprained her ankle but otherwise she is fine. Mr. Martin attended to her."

"I told her never to go there. Why was she unattended?"

"I escorted her friends to their carriage. It was only for a brief moment."

Victor paced, feeling anger not just at the man but also at himself. If he hadn't left her, she wouldn't have had reason to return to the lake.

"Why are you here now? Why aren't you with her?" he asked. "What if she needed you?"

"She is out of acute danger so I had to report to you as soon as I could."

"When?"

"Your Grace?"

"When did this incident happen?"

"Two days ago," the man answered tonelessly.

"And you didn't think to inform me sooner?!" His voice was louder than he intended, but his frustration didn't let him acknowledge it.

"I couldn't leave until I was sure she was well enough to be without my assistance," Roberts answered, tone depicting his annoyance.

"That isn't your job," he growled. "It is not your place to help my wife recover. It is mine."

"You're not keen on fulfilling it."

He stepped back as if he had been slapped, as the truth washed over him as if he had been doused. If Roberts hadn't been like a father to him, he was sure he would have sacked the man for the slight. At least he looked apologetic once the words were out of his mouth.

"Victor," Andrew called out, trying to hold on to him, but he could barely hear him over the roaring of blood in his ears.

"I must go to her."

"And you will, but you must calm yourself. You're in no position to ride."

"She is injured, Andrew," he said desperately. "And I left her alone."

His friend sighed, placing a hand on his shoulder.

"At least take the carriage. I do not want you getting hurt. Not while I can stop it."

"Too slow."

He made his way quickly to the stables before any more words could be said, saddling his horse and riding to his estate, praying all the while that there was still time to seek Alice's forgiveness and hoping to God she hadn't been hurt worse than Roberts had reported.

"Where is the duchess?" Victor asked the second he stepped into the castle.

"She is in her chambers, Your Grace," a footman answered.

He ignored the chill in his veins and rushed to her chambers, hoping she didn't hate him.

He didn't care that he was soaking wet and mud-stained for riding in the storm as he had, but he needed to see she was well.

He could care for himself after she was well and truly taken care of.

He would apologize to her and confess his feelings, and if she still wouldn't have him, then so be it.

He knocked on her door but, hearing nothing, stepped into her chambers. Seeing her so pale and asleep brought back memories of his mother, whom he had hoped to forget.

He didn't know when he rushed to her, grabbing her hand.

"Victor?" she asked, opening her eyes.

She thought she had been dreaming when she heard his voice, but now she was sure it

was him.

Shocked, he held onto her hand and murmured, but she could not hear him.

He appeared to be lost in another time, and he was shaking.

He looked rough, as though he had ridden hard through the storm that was still raging outside, and she worried what memories he could possibly be reliving.

"Victor, talk to me. I'm right here," she cried, hugging him fiercely.

He was soaked to the bone, and she knew he could catch his death, but she couldn't let go of him. He held tightly to her, and she knew whatever trauma held him was stronger than she knew, so she held him even tighter, whispering into his ear.

"I am here. I am not going anywhere. I promise you."

She wasn't going to leave him. Not after she had seen him like this. He appeared to be holding onto so much pain she worried for him.

"I am sorry I wasn't here," he apologized. "I should never have left. You were right I was a coward. I am sorry. I don't want to lose you. Please don't leave."

"I am not going anywhere," she reassured him, whispering into his hair. "I promise. Talk to me, Victor. I can only understand you when you do."

"I have such a dark past, Alice," he murmured against her. "It is an old wound I would rather leave covered."

"If it doesn't come to the light then it will never heal," she told him, pulling away to look in his eye. "Let me help you."

He looked so broken she ached inside her heart for him. There was so much pain in his eyes and the way he held his body that she knew whatever he was about to tell her was him trusting her with his entire world.

"My mother... I found my mother dead in the lake when I was ten," he said suddenly.

Her gasp rent the air, and she slapped a hand over her mouth to hide her shock.

"What... what happened?"

"She had been given over in marriage to my father after he had forced her parents' hands, and he had found quickly she didn't take kindly to people threatening her family.

" He laughed humorlessly as he squeezed her hand for support.

"She hated my father for forcing her into the match to him and had plans to run away, which she put aside when she discovered she was pregnant with me. "

She nodded and tried not to ask any questions that could push him back behind the walls, which he appeared to have completely torn down.

"He knew she loved me and used me to punish her for her hatred of him but she tried. When I got older, I started to look more like him, and it made her start to resent me. She tried to help me so many times but ended up getting hurt herself so she chose to shield herself by acting like I did not exist so he couldn't use me to punish her.

" He laughed darkly. "It was her own way of protecting me and it worked for a time, but she ended up throwing herself in the lake to escape the pain she tried so hard to bury.

That was why I hated seeing you at the lake. "

"I am so sorry, Victor," she told him, squeezing his hand.

"I hated him so much from that night," he said with so much venom in his voice. "And I swore that I would kill him. It was a shame he died before I was strong enough to do so."

"You wouldn't have been able to live with that on your conscience."

"He knew that and he knew very well that I would never want to marry and bring a child into this family so he put the clause that I would never get full access to all of the estates unless I did," he told her, nuzzling her hair. "That is why I had to marry. I couldn't let the farmers suffer."

She realized that her husband loved physical touch. His hands had roamed over her face, her hair, and her hands, and it excited her how comfortable he had become with her.

"I promise you, Victor," Alice said, holding his face in hers.

"You are nothing like your father. I do not stay with you just because we are married. I have come to love you. The beautiful, scarred, and broken man you are. You are perfect, and I wish you hadn't gone through all you did, but I am selfishly glad because it brought us together. I... I love you, Victor. All of you."

"You cannot mean that," he said, trying to move away from her.

"Oh but I do." She smiled, taking the initiative and kissing him to silence him when he looked like he wanted to interrupt. "There is no other man I would want to spend the rest of my life with."

When her confession was made, she took her hands off his face and was all at once uncomfortable as she awaited his reaction. She was prepared for him to perhaps confess his feelings also, but not for him to claim her lips in a slow, deep, passionate kiss that stole the very air in her lungs.

When he finally pulled away from her, it took her a while to regain her ability to breathe at a sedate pace, but even then, the bright smile on his face stunned her.

"What is it?" she asked, almost uncomfortable.

"I just never realized how much I loved you before now," he said, almost amused.

"Was everything you said to me a lie then?" she asked, faking a pout.

"Of course not." He looked so appalled she couldn't help but laugh. "I just realized that I fall deeper in love with you with every part of you I come to know."

She gasped at the beautiful words, placing a hand on her chest.

"Do not say such things if you do not mean them," she warned him.

"Have you ever known me to jest?" he asked with a smile. "I love you, Alice."

"And I, you," she replied.

They kissed again this time, and there was no rush to their pace. It reminded her of the blueberry pies she loved when the fruits were in season—sweet and tart, and she couldn't stop at one slice.

When they pulled away for air this time, he pulled her to lay across his chest.

"Does this mean when I wake up in the morning, you wouldn't push me away? You won't hold back with me anymore?"

His answer involved him rolling atop her, nuzzling her cheek with his nose.

"I don't intend to hold back with you ever again."

And hold back, he didn't, for as the night neared its end, she knew then what it meant to be the wife of a powerful man.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

"We can always return home. I believe I could elevate the evening's enjoyment beyond your wildest imagination, even surpassing the allure of the finest musicians," Victor whispered mischievously to his wife as they stood in a queue, awaiting the butler's introduction at the prestigious Parkington ball.

To other guests, they were the picture of shining nobility, but appearances were deceiving since a certain duke was whispering filthy innuendos in his wife's ears.

"Do behave yourself, Your Grace. Let us remember we are at a public ball," she said, fighting to keep up her gracious smile and pretending that her charming husband was not trying to seduce her with his words at the entrance of a bustling ballroom.

"At this rate, we might dispel one rumor for another one of the salacious kind," she warned.

"What will they say?" Victor said, lifting his head away from her ear.

"That the Duke of Ravenmoor looked fit to devour his wife in the middle of a ball, but that would be the truth, wouldn't it?"

I am not averse to returning to our carriage to bring what we had commenced there to its natural conclusion. "

Alice could feel her cheeks warming with a blush as she remembered just what they had been doing in the carriage before they halted in front of the Parkington castle.

In the last three months since her near-death experience, which had forced her husband to profess the full weight of his feelings for her, It was like the wall that surrounded his heart not only collapsed but its pieces were ground to dust and scattered in the wind.

He showed every day how much he adored and loved her both emotionally.

"The Duke and Duchess of Ravenmoor," the butler finally announced them, his voice booming across the room. Victor took her arm leading her into the ballroom.

Walking into society on the arm of the handsome duke that was her husband, she lifted her chin, confident that while they might have coveted her title, they had never stood a chance of acquiring it. The man beside her was devoted to her in a way that silenced even her deepest insecurities.

As they walked, the guests moved away, clearing a path. A single male emerged from the crowd.

"Your Grace," he greeted with a deep bow, raising one of her hands to his lips to press a kiss to it.

"Victor did not do your beauty justice the times we spoke," he added, an easy smile gracing his lips.

By the way, he addressed Victor, she could only guess that he was a close acquaintance of his, and the only one she could think of was Andrew Haskett, the Duke of Hargrave. She was proven right when Victor made the introductions.

"Andrew as you may have assumed, this is my wife the Duchess of Ravenmoor and please do let go of her hand," he said, pulling Alice's hand out of his friend's grasp, eliciting a chuckle from the other man.

"My love," Victor continued, turning to face Alice. "This scoundrel here happens to be my friend Andrew, the Duke of Hargrave."

"Good evening, Your Grace," Alice greeted, lowering herself into a curtesy.

"No need to stand on ceremony on my account, Your Grace. I must commend your courage. Any woman who braved the den of the gloomy Duke of Ravenmoor and emerged unscathed should be celebrated.

"You are doing a great service to humanity keeping him agreeable.

My poor ribs have gotten some time to heal since your beloved duke has not come to pummel me in the guise of sparing.

He is a barbarian, I tell you. Feel free to come complain to me when he becomes a bear again, I promise to curse his guts with you," he said, a charming grin on his face.

Victor released a low growl of disapproval that ought to scare lesser men away, but it spoke of their relationship that he showed no outward reaction to the subtle warning.

"It was my honor to make your acquaintance, Your Grace," he said, pressing a kiss to her gloved hands. He winked at her, eliciting a surprised laugh from her.

Victor growled even louder, and this time, Andrew bowed to her and left. That one was a charmer. A total opposite to the brooding personality of his friend.

"Your friend is interesting," she said to Victor, looking at Andrew's retreating back.

"Pay him no mind. He is a considerable rake, stay away from him."

"Afraid that he would charm me away from you?" she said with a teasing smile.

"Of course not. You belong to me, Alice, and no man living can take you away from me," he said with a quiet confidence filled with solid conviction.

His faith in her loyalty brought tears to her eyes, and if they hadn't been standing in the middle of a crowded ballroom, she would have kissed him.

"Alice," a feminine voice called behind her, drawing her out of her emotional moment. She hurriedly cleaned her eyes with a handkerchief. She pasted on a wide smile and turned to greet the newcomer. Her fake smile transformed into a wide, genuine one when she saw who it was.

"Cathy," she said, excitedly drawing her into a hug. When she broke the hug, she turned to Cathy's husband, who was smiling indulgently at them.

"Pardon my manners my lord. How do you do?"

"I am very well, Your Grace," he answered with an easy smile.

Just then, Victor stepped up behind her and exchanged greetings with the Earl and Cathy. Soon, the Earl drew him into conversation about a bill that was about to be passed in the House of Lords.

Alice took that opportunity to draw Catherine away to catch up on her life and all she had missed in the last two years.

"You look well dear Cathy. You have an incandescent glow around you. It seems your husband is taking very good care of you."

"Yes, he is," she said with a wide smile. "Since he got the news that I was with child, he has insisted that I do nothing. He drives me to distraction sometimes, but I do realize he is doing this to protect me," she said with a sigh.

"Congratulations, Cathy," Alice said in an excited whisper.

"I didn't know about it. Father and Mother had decided to keep me in the dark about everything and everyone.

I would have been ecstatic to hear such great news.

I will be an aunt soon." she squealed, rocking lightly on her heels in a small celebratory dance.

"I think I now understand the source of your other worldly beauty this evening. You have always been beautiful, perfect in a way that I could never hope to attain."

"Perfect?" Cathy said in surprise. "I am anything but perfect. I am riddled with flaws. In fact, I envied you and wished I could be like you."

"Envy me? Why? What quality could I possibly possess that you think is so attractive?"

"Your ability to retain the authenticity of your person.

To stand for what you want and believe in.

Growing up, I felt I needed to dress, eat, and talk a certain way.

I practiced everything down to the way I smiled in order to attract their validation.

They chose my hobbies, friends, and, ultimately, my husband.

I felt like a doll with no thought of my own, forever controlled by the strings in their hands.

Until last year, I did not know who I was or what I liked or did not like.

What I was passionate about and what irritated me.

I was lucky enough to be married to the most considerate man in the universe, who was willing to take my hand and be patient with me throughout this journey of self-discovery.

While I will never be happy about how they trained us, I would not change a thing that happened.

It happened so that I could meet my wonderful husband.

He is the best thing that ever happened to me," she said, looking over to her husband with Victor, a look of adoration in her eyes.

"You might not be Mama and Papa's favorite," she said, turning back to lock eyes with Alice, "but you were always aware of who you are and your place in the universe, and that is so rare it is beautiful.

You are bold and beautiful, and I am sure that was the woman the Duke fell in love with," she added with a knowing smile.

"How are you so sure that he is in love with me?" Alice asked, feeling her cheeks heat up in a blush. "My marriage was not a love match, you know that."

"It might not have started as one, but it had developed into a beautiful love affair.

How could no one guess it, when the man looks at you like the sun rises and sets in your face?

He looked fit to devour you right there in the middle of the ballroom.

He might have even gone ahead had I not interrupted when I did. "

"Surely he would not do that," Alice said, chuckling.

"What do you think?" Catherine asked with a raised eyebrow.

Alice couldn't answer because her husband, while he was conservative in a way, was unpredictable at times. She could never know what he might do next, and that quality—she must confess—kept things interesting.

"That was what I thought," Catherine said with satisfaction, following Alice's continuous silence.

"My husband and I were planning to relocate to one of his smaller estates in Scotland.

I am to take my confinement there. We would have been on our way there now were it not because of your husband's letter. "

"What letter?" Alice interrupted, her curiosity getting the better part of her.

"Your husband wrote a letter to my husband explaining that you were lonely and wanted to see me. He even sent a ducal carriage along to carry us to ensure that we did not use a lack of good transportation as an excuse."

"I mentioned it to him in passing one time, just one time. I never knew that he would go through all this trouble." Alice felt tears gathering in her eyes.

Her gruff and grumbling husband was very tender-hearted, and she felt humbled that she belonged to such a man.

"You are lucky to have him. I would advise you to hold on tightly to him. I intend to hold on to mine," she said, accepting a hug from her husband when he returned to where they stood at the fringes of the ballroom.

"Might I interest you in a dance, my love?" the Earl asked, his dark head bent over his wife's face.

"I believe a certain person had prohibited me from engaging in activities that he deemed as stressful. Am I to infer that you do not think a dance fits into the category of stressful activities?" Cathy asked, sarcasm coloring her tone.

"I hear it is a waltz, Cathy. I will be holding you and guiding the dance, you do not have to do much," he said in a cajoling tone, drawing her up to stand. He bowed to Alice before whisking her away towards the dance floor.

Alice stared at their retreating backs, a permanent smile on her face. Cathy turned at the last minute to wink at her and she couldn't control the laughter that escaped her at the gesture.

The Cathy she knew growing up was guarded. She always seemed to be on edge, with perfectionism ingrained in her at an early age. But the Cathy who walked into the ballroom today seemed happier, more carefree, and more optimistic, and because of that, she held a deep respect for her brother-in-law.

"Dare I ask what is so funny?" Victor's voice came behind her, causing her to look up at his face. He bent at the waist to press a kiss on her forehead.

"It's Cathy, she has the Earl wrapped around her little finger and he does not seem to care."

"Just so you know, I would be happy if I get to wrap my body around yours in any

way," he said in that infernal whisper that did terrible things to her equilibrium.

She swallowed thickly, blinking rapidly to bring her mind back into focus.

"I want to hold you in my arms," he continued in that seductive whisper. With each syllable that fell from his lips, she felt herself shiver.

"We are in public, Victor," she warned weakly.

"Well if we cannot, I know of another way to get what I want," he said, stretching to his full height while she watched him with a question in her eyes.

"Can I interest you in a dance, Your Grace?" Victor requested, a naughty smirk on his face.

"Yes, I would love to," she replied, taking his outstretched arm and watching as a smile of victory claimed his lips as he led her to the dance floor.

As the musicians struck up the strings to a waltz, she understood why he thought this dance could substitute for a hug.

The waltz was the most intimate of all English dances, and that was one reason it was shunned by the matrons when it first appeared in English high society. Her husband aimed to take advantage of its scandalous nature.

Sure enough, when they faced each other for the dance, he pulled her into his body more than was considered proper.

"Victor, everyone is watching," she hissed in warning.

"What did I do wrong this time? I am just dancing with my beautiful wife. If they are

offended, they should dance with their own spouses," he said with a wolfish smile.

"I never knew you had it in you to be so... naughty."

"I am many things, wife," he said, his grin widening. "You will find out with time."

"Thank you." she blurted out, locking eyes with him to convey her gratitude.

"For what, pet?" he asked, genuine confusion on his face.

"For everything, for bringing my sister here and for loving me despite my flaws."

"You are welcome, my darling, but on the last count, I disagree. You saved me with your love and determination. I should be the one thanking you," he said, his voice hoarse with emotion.

"I love you Alice, my duchess."

"I love you too," she replied, her eyes shining with unshed tears.

He took her arm and led her away from the dance floor, bringing to her notice that the dance had ended.

"While I am all for having you to myself, I think you might want to rescue your friend from the big bad wolf." Victor said beside her, restrained laughter bleeding into his voice.

Alice looked up to see Lavinia in what appeared to be a heated conversation with Andrew.

It definitely looked odd because Lavinia had always favored the seats close to the

wall.

She had, too, two years ago before she had married the duke.

This was the first time she was seeing her with a titled young man, especially one that was clearly a rake.

Lavinia might be a wallflower and a bluestocking, but her mild appearance and friendly nature hid a spine of steel. She was sure she could hold her ground even in an argument with the prince regent himself.

"I do not think she needs my help. I think your friend might be the one who needs to be rescued," she replied, smiling up at her husband.

"I don't even know why I was bothered. She is, after all, your friend. Every bit as bold and fearless as you are," he said, looking at her in adoration.

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"It's a pleasant day, wouldn't you say, husband?" Alice asked, looking up into her husband's face from her position with her head on his lap.

"It's a pleasant day, wouldn't you say, husband?" Alice asked, looking up into her husband's face from her position with her head on his lap.

"Indeed, it is perfect," he answered absentmindedly, still reading from his newspaper while he stroked her hair absently with his free hand.

"We have been blessed with great weather for the last couple of days. I must confess, I am thoroughly enjoying it."

"Given your recent inclination towards outdoor picnics, it is no surprise you find the weather agreeable," he said, glancing away from his newspaper to peer at her playfully.

Over the last week, she had resorted to dragging her typically serious husband from the dusty ledgers in his study into the sunlight. Since he had a strong aversion to water, she had yet to convince him to join her for a swim.

Instead, they had picnics at the riverbank while she settled for watching the sunlight play on the water, transforming it into a golden hue at sunset.

Sometimes, she skipped stones in the river for fun, making it a game to outdo her husband in throwing distance.

While she enjoyed their picnics, she enjoyed swimming more.

She enjoyed the feel of the water on her body and how it loosened the tension underneath her skin after a stressful day. It brought her joy. A joy she wanted him to experience alongside her husband.

She could not fathom the idea of spending her life hating one of life's best pleasures simply because of a parent's unfortunate choices in the past. Her goal was to dispel his aversion to water. Now that she understood the reason for it, she was more sympathetic.

"Are you complaining, my love?" she inquired.

"Of course not pet, while I would grumble whenever you drag me to one of these...interludes, I must confess it has done wonders for mood. The confines of my study can be gloomy sometimes," he confessed.

"See? I am always right. Admit it, you cannot function without me."

"I sense I would be stepping into a trap if I agree to that," he said, laughing.

"I love spending time with you, husband," Alice said with a sigh, nestling deeper in his embrace and rubbing his forearm.

"The day is always brighter and lovely whenever I am with you. It is safe to say you are the sun in my universe, Your Grace."

"While I can never lay claim to such glory as the sun, I understand the sentiment, and I feel the same about you," he said, looking down at her with an affectionate look.

His left hand caressing her face slowly roused fires of intimacy that seemed to reside so close to the surface of the skin. A little longer and she would forget her mission for bringing him here in the first place.

"Do you know what would make this day even better?" she asked sitting up and turning to face him.

He promptly folded his newspaper with a flick of the wrist. Fixing her with his undivided attention.

"Dare I ask?" he asked warily.

"Swimming," she said, looking directly into his eyes. So she saw when his initial excitement faded into indifference.

"Dearest Alice, you know my stance on this matter. I do not like swimming, and you know why."

"You are right. I do know why, husband, but for how long will you keep denying yourself the simple pleasure of swimming in the cool waters of a river that runs through the grounds of your own estate? Just think of it as you being in our bath."

Victor had enjoyed taking his bath since she had the bathtub installed. The time he spent lounging in the water told her what she needed to know about his affinity for water.

"Except this river differs greatly from a bath, wife," he said in an exasperated tone.

"Well, they are not so different in the sense that they involve immersing oneself in a body of water. I, for one, enjoy the feeling of water on my skin. I do not have any reason to refuse its remarkable benefits," she said, standing up and proceeding to shed her clothing.

"Alice..." he began.

"Yes, husband?"

"I thought we were having a good time here on dry land. Is there any reason why we must enter the water? Here, come back," he said, patting the space beside him on the blanket.

"Besides we have barely had much of the meal that cook prepared for us. I wager she would not be happy if we leave the food to waste."

"I never knew my husband was given to gambling," she smiled mischievously, enjoying Victor's discomfited mood.

It was funny to see him working so hard to convince her to abandon her swimming plans.

"Besides what she doesn't know would not bother her," she said, giggling and walking backward, turning at the last moment to dive in.

She was temporarily disoriented while her body adjusted to the cool temperature of the water. She held herself still under the water, testing out her long-forgotten skill of holding her breath underwater.

While growing up, she and Catherine often went swimming. They usually dived in and settled at the bottom of the river, competing to see who could hold their breath for longer before their need for oxygen outweighed their competitiveness.

Every single time, she won, and nothing felt better than the sound of her sister swimming upwards and gasping for air as she cleared the surface of the water in search of much-needed air.

It was one of the few skills in which she could claim superiority over her seemingly

perfect sister, and while she knew it was not necessarily a practical skill needed in her daily life as an aristocrat.

The knowledge of how well she could trump her sister when it came to the water helped soothe the part of her heart that was battered from the continuous verbal injury her father seemed to enjoy meting out on her.

It felt good to know that even though she could never master the art of etiquette and ballroom charm, she was, in fact, good at something, proving to herself that she was, in fact, not useless at all.

"Alice!" She was jolted from her reverie by the sound of her husband calling her, his voice frantic with worry.

She must have spent too long enjoying the water and testing her peculiar skill, unfortunately forgetting that she had a husband with a severe phobia for water waiting for her at the riverbank.

She hurriedly stretched her arms out, diving upwards until she cleared the water, dragging in air and moving her wet hair out of her face enough to spy her husband watching her.

His whole frame vibrated with a strong emotion that seemed like a cross between anger and fear. He had shed his clothes at some point and stood at the riverbank in his smalls. It seemed he had been getting ready to dive into the water in search of her when she stayed below the surface for too long.

"Do you value yourself so little that you would try to kill yourself?" he asked in a dangerous low rasp. She knew that tone. It was the proverbial calm before the storm.

Her husband was very angry. The teasing reply on her lips died, and she decided to

try to calm him down.

"Victor, it is not what it looks like -"

"It definitely looked like you were trying to drown yourself. Am I such poor company that you would wish to kill yourself just to be free of me? If so I can..."

"I was doing nothing of that sort. I would never..."

"You do not have to placate me. I am not a child."

"Then do not behave like one. You stubborn man!" she screamed at the top of her voice, stunning him into silence.

He was silent for so long that she began to fear that she might have pushed him too far.

Suddenly, he stepped into the water, swimming strongly towards her, his eyes blazing with rage.

She instinctively moved backward away from him.

She kept stepping backward but had to stop when she noticed she was venturing towards the deeper part of the river.

While she did not worry about herself, the same could not be said for her husband, an amateur swimmer, even though you would not guess that by the strength of his stroke as he advanced toward her.

When he stopped in front of her, he caught her against his chest, his body trembling with barely leashed emotion.

While Alice knew she should be afraid, instead, she could not deny the pleasure of the opportunity to be so close to the glorious skin of his chest. Her husband looked like one of those Roman sculptures, and his anger, instead of making him scary, made him even more attractive.

While she was aware that line of thinking made absolutely no sense, she had long accepted that her feelings and thoughts about this man made absolutely no sense.

It seemed that she was not the only one who felt the tension building between them because, the next moment, he bent his head and caught her lips in a fierce kiss that took her breath and weakened her knees.

She had to hold on to his strong frame to maintain her balance.

"Mischievous woman," he said, breaking the kiss, his eyes slightly dazed. "I should punish you for what you just did," he said softly, cradling her face and placing a kiss on her nose.

"But you are enjoying the water aren't you?" she asked softly.

He looked away from her face, turning round the water. He seemed to realize then that he was, in fact, standing in the middle of the forbidden river of his childhood voluntarily.

"See? I told you it was harmless," she said with a sunny smile.

"Yes, you did say so, darling," he said, hugging her to his body and settling his nose into her shoulder, inhaling her unique scent.

She was indeed an angel sent to him by God to deliver him from the demons of the past that haunted him. Since the day he saw his mother's lifeless body floating in this

river, he always thought of the body of water as evil.

It was funny how the clear, pure water of this particular river suddenly became evil simply because his mother had decided to take it as her final resting place.

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Today, standing here with his wife, those dark memories were slowly being overpowered by new ones. Memories of sharing a passionate moment with his wife.

After this day, whenever he saw the river, he would remember the feel of his delectable wife's wet body in his arms, her beautiful smile, and the sound of her musical laugh.

"Thank you," he whispered into her ear.

"While I am not aware of the reason why you are thanking me, I am never one to pass on a chance to have you in my debt. So, you are welcome Your Grace."

He chuckled quietly at her response. He was so in love with this feisty woman he had married. So in love that it was ridiculous.

"I do have a question though," she said. Reluctantly, he released her so he could look into her face.

"Yes, my love," he answered, smiling down at her.

"Well, for someone who claims to hate water, you definitely seem to be at home in the water."

"I used to practically live in the water once, when I was very young. Before my mother died and everything changed. Sometimes I think she knew how much I loved the water and in her resentment, even in her death, she sought to destroy everything I hold dear. She is quite capable of that."

"I do not believe that a mother would go out of her way to scar her child so deeply with her death.

I think she was ill for a very long time and the times she treated you badly, I think she was just grasping for a reason at all to survive, even if she had to blame an innocent person.

It was quite unfortunate and cruel of her to transfer her hatred and dissatisfaction with your father to you, but at the core she was just a young woman in pain who had nobody to rely on.

If you think of it that way, you might be able to forgive her one day. "

Instead of responding to her, he gathered her into his arms, the feel of her body in his arms calming the storm that raged in his heart—a storm that she seemed determined to quench. But his demons had haunted him for too long, and they were never going to be vanquished easily.

With her beside him, he had hope that one day, he just might be free of them.

"What would I do without you, my duchess?"

"Frankly, nothing. Of course I am well aware of my value, and I am never shy to declare it."

"You are definitely not shy."

"I never pretended to be."

"I do not think you have a single pretentious bone in your sweet body. Your temper will not allow it."

"I do not have a temper!"

"Says the lady who never hesitated to tell me off, even though she was quite aware of the stories circulating the ton about me."

"If I have a temper, you have an even more volatile one."

"How so?" he asked with mock outrage.

"Well , your temper was the reason you had a black reputation to start with -"

"Those are just exaggerated rumors."

"Says the man who stormed away and stayed away from the manor for several years simply because he saw me standing in front of an open window, convinced that I wanted to kill myself. As if I would kill myself because of a man."

"You were virtually hanging out of the window."

"I was admiring the flowers."

"You could have done so standing upright. You could have fallen over."

"I was in no danger of falling until you screamed at me."

"I did not-"

"You did-"

Alice was gearing up to continue the argument when he kissed her, promptly emptying her mind of her next line of defense.

She was quite aware that their argument was childish at best, but something about teasing Victor was quite enjoyable, and she could not control it.

When he finally broke the kiss, he looked down at her with a rueful smile.

"That was the only way I could think of to shut you up."

If that was his mission, he had been immensely successful. She was surprised she had not melted into the river surrounding them.

"We both have a temper. Let's agree to disagree," he said, drawing her close till she was hugging his body.

"Well I do hope our child does not inherit that particular trait. If that happens, we will have our hands full in the coming months," she said, a smile in her voice.

She knew when the implications of her words hit him because he stiffened and gently pulled away to peer into her face.

"Are you saying what I think you are saying?"

"And what do you think I am saying, Your Grace?"

"That you are...with child," he said, his voice filled with fragile hope.

Nodding vigorously, she giggled with joy. The giggles turned into loud laughter when he lifted her and proceeded to whirl her around.

"Sto... Stop, we will fall," she sputtered between bouts of laughter.

He carried her out of the water, dropped her to stand on dry ground, and then pulled

her into a fierce hug.

"Thank you so much. Thank you. I love you," he said, placing a kiss on her shoulder.

"I think we should return to the manor. I do not fancy standing in wet clothes," she said after some time.

Victor immediately withdrew, then proceeded to sweep her off her feet and carry her bridal style. He ignored her when she insisted she could walk and wanted to walk into the house with her own feet.

"It is my responsibility to take care of you and my unborn daughter," he said as he made his way to the staircase, ignoring the small crowd of servants assembled in the foyer to watch the rare sight of the duke carrying his wife.

"Why do you think the child is a girl? I would have thought you would prefer an heir to solidify your title," she teased.

"No, in case you have not noticed, I am a selfish man. I want a daughter with your eyes who will greet me with sweet smiles."

"A son can do that also."

"No, boys are trouble, little terrors if you will. They are more mischievous than sweet. I would prefer to have a sweet daughter before I have to deal with the trouble of male children."

"With your luck, you just might end up with a daughter who is a hellion."

"Well I will just have to tame her like I tamed her beautiful mother," he said, watching her face closely to see her reaction.

"You think I am tame now?" she replied, a baffled expression on her face.

"Well what do you think?" he said with a mischievous smile.

Instead of answering, she flashed him a wicked smile that promised retribution. A punishment that the Duke was sure to enjoy very much.

The End?

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

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

Everyone, Isolde included, had been thrilled when the announcement had come that the debut ball of the Season, where she would make her entrance into society with the rest of the debutantes, was to be held in such an illustrious environment.

Society had spoken of nothing else for weeks.

Isolde had spoken of nothing else for weeks, eager for the day to come at last.

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

Isolde smiled politely at Lord Pomfrey, lowering her own gaze behind a mask of ornate silver and bronze vines and leaves, coiling over the bridge of her nose, the apples of her cheeks, and around her eyes as if they were part of her.

Vincent had had it imported from Venice, and it was already drawing a great deal of attention.

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

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

She chuckled just enough to be considered demure, rather than obnoxious or discourteous, remembering the lessons she had received over the past few years.

After a somewhat memorable—for all the wrong reasons—house party at her family’s residence, Grayling House, she had been thrown into elocution and deportment and comportment lessons at once by her mother.

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

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

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

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

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

“For what?” Vincent replied, grinning. He wore an unusual golden mask that was apparently meant to be a fox but looked more like a ferret to Isolde’s amused eyes. She had neglected to tell him as much, for politeness’ sake.

“I know I should not be terribly particular on my debut evening, but I am glad to not have to dance with such a gentleman,” Isolde replied.

“At best, my toes would be broken by the end. At the worst, he would forget what he was doing halfway through the dance and wander off, leaving me mortified. And one should never be mortified in the midst of a country dance. A quadrille—now, that is mortifying for everyone.”

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

“Whatever do you mean?”

Vincent paused, staring down at her for a moment with solemnity in his blue eyes.

“It is no secret that I had my concerns over the years,” he explained haltingly.

“There was a time when I worried you were as half-wild as Prudie, but... you have surprised me, Isolde. Which, in and of itself, should not be so surprising.”

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

Gentlemen had been staring ever since she made her entrance in her splendid gown of cream silk, the skirt and bodice painstakingly adorned with pearlescent beads that caught the light in the most remarkable way.

She preferred to think that they were merely admiring the craftsmanship of the gown,

rather than looking at her; it seemed less intimidating that way.

Vincent gave her hand a reassuring squeeze.

“Nor do I know what it is I am trying to say.” He paused.

“I know I have been stricter with you since that unfortunate business with Edmund at our residence, but I am not sorry for it. I am proud of you, Isolde. Proud of the charming, elegant, demure young lady you have become. Prouder still that you have not entirely given up your sharp sense of humor, though you are better at hiding it now—it bewilders and adds to your charm where it once outright offended.”

“I took pains to study the world’s greatest humorists, and though I am not nearly as entertaining as they are or were, I do well enough.

As long as I amuse those who are dearest to me instead of embarrassing them, I am quite content with my wit,” Isolde teased, feeling a little sorry that she had forced her brother to be stricter with her.

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

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

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

Vincent grinned from ear to ear, making his mask look more like a wolf than a fox or a ferret for a moment.

“I have no notion of where our mother has wandered off to, but if there is one thing that is guaranteed to deter a gentleman from pursuing a lady, it is mentioning one’s mother.

Then again, I think you probably could have dispensed with subterfuge and distracted Lord Pomfrey just by pointing to something shiny. ”

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

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

And when I am married, he will not have to worry about me at all anymore.

It saddened and gladdened Isolde in equal measure as she cast her brother a sideways glance.

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

Isolde knew she had not always made it easy for him to do his duty well.

She had been half-wild after their father passed and might have walked a more gossip-worthy path if she had been left alone, but she had realized that it would only cause her brother and mother more heartache.

That had been the true catalyst to her changing her behavior.

Deep down, there was still a sliver of rebellion in her, but now it was dressed up in a

pretty gown and would never show its face around her family again.

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

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

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

Even the likes of Lord Pomfrey were preferable to Edmund Connolly, the Duke of Davenport.

Isolde prided herself on being amenable to most people, but she could not stand Edmund.

She could not stand the way he behaved as if he were the most honorable, respectable, congenial gentleman to ever walk the earth, when it could not have been further from the truth.

Since the age of twelve, Isolde had decided to loathe him, for the crime of not being there for her brother when he needed a friend the most. Yet, he had expected Vincent’s loyalty and generosity and comfort when he had suffered the same grief and had never once thanked Vincent for it.

Edmund had acted as if it were a reasonable expectation instead—something required, rather than something graciously offered by Vincent, who was the best of men.

As such, he would not ask for an apology or a gesture of thanks himself; it had been up to Isolde.

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

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

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

"Edmund is back? When? Were you planning to inform me, or were you waiting for me to bump into him?" Her eyes flared with irritation.

Of all the people she hoped would attend her debut ball, Edmund Connolly, the Duke of Davenport, had his name firmly in the bottom spot.

If she never saw the man again, it would be too soon.

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Vincent sighed, leading her to the side of the main ballroom, where they might have more privacy from gossipmongers.

“He is my oldest and dearest friend, Isolde. I know the two of you have not always been friendly, but I had hoped that three years of distance might be enough for you to be civil in one another’s company.

” His grimace became more pronounced. “Besides, dear sister, it is mostly your fault that there is enmity between you.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Isolde brightened, shuffling off her irritation like a heavy cloak after a walk in the rain.

“Now is perfectly convenient,” she said softly.

“My brother and I were just having a lighthearted quarrel about nothing much at all. It is assuredly a family’s prerogative to squabble now and then, for I believe it shows you care. ”

Colin chuckled, gazing at her as if she were the most precious thing he had ever seen.

She would have been lying if she said it did not feel good to be so admired, after all of the effort and determination she had put into being a refined lady of the Ton .

Anyone would have been pleased by the reward after such hard work.

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

Isolde laughed daintily. “Quite so!”

“I shall restore Lady Isolde to you after the dance, my lord.” Colin bowed his head to Vincent.

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

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

Colin stifled a snort, turning his warm brown eyes on Isolde once more.

“Meanwhile, I should hate to be in the smoking room—at least while you are still in the vicinity. Who would choose the company of gentlemen over the prospect of catching a glimpse—perhaps, even dancing—with the most beautiful lady in all of England?”

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

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

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

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

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

Her stomach dropped as she caught sight of a towering figure leaning against the entryway to the ballroom.

Dark brown curls, with an undertone of auburn, framed a smirking, annoyingly handsome face, while eyes the color of sapphires twinkled smugly, unfettered by any mask despite the fact it was supposed to be a masquerade ball.

A few ladies were making eyes at him, no doubt 'charmed' by his rebellion against the nature of the ball.

Isolde could imagine them whispering of how daring he was, to show up without a mask, nudging each other to walk past him or drop something in front of him—anything to capture his attention in return, though his attention was firmly fixed on Isolde.

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

Why come back tonight of all nights?

Of course, she already knew the answer: he wanted to ruin her debut. Revenge was a

dish best served cold, after all, and it appeared he had waited six long years to exact it.

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

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

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

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

Unlike Edmund, the Marquess of Fenton seemed to be a true gentleman: shy, polite, intelligent, and bursting with compliments for her.

Why should she waste another moment thinking about Edmund and how much she loathed him, when she was supposed to be having the night of her life?

A society lady never had the chance to debut twice, so she needed to make the most of it, regardless of what unsavory characters might have been invited.

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

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

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

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

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

Isolde’s stomach fluttered with excitement; she was never one to refuse a wander in fine gardens, and she had been longing to explore those at the palace.

Every time she wandered by the gates when she was in London, she thought the same thing, how nice it would be to stroll in such exquisite gardens.

Having a handsome gentleman beside her would only make it more delightful.

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

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

The extraordinary sprawl of manicured gardens was precisely as Isolde had imagined, transformed into a fairy realm by the flicker of torchlight and the silvery moon that shone above, as full and round and perfect as a freshly minted coin.

Crushed-shell pathways gleamed white, guiding any guests who might find themselves wandering in the night air.

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

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

Isolde nodded eagerly, caught up in the mystery and romance of promenading with a gentleman in such a dreamy place.

It did not matter too much that Colin had yet to make her heart pound or her mind race with visions of a potential future, nor that he had barely made her stomach flutter.

She was content to enjoy amenable company in a beautiful setting, and to take her time to see if there was any delayed spark between them.

Perhaps, it would ignite later on. Perhaps, it would not.

There was no rush to make any decisions; it was only her first outing into society, after all.

“That would be marvelous,” she told him, relishing the sound of her shoes crunching

against the crushed shells, the sleepy coo of doves coming from a nearby apple tree, and the absolute serenity that enveloped her.

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

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

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

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

Frowning, but knowing that Colin was right, Isolde allowed herself to relax again.

Soon enough, she settled back into the peace of the gardens, following Colin's lead as if they were back on the dance floor.

Although, she did listen out more intently for the telltale crunch of her mother's shoes on the pathways, but as the time wore on, that comforting sound never materialized.

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

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

mother.”

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

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

Isolde released the rebellious girl who, for the most part, remained hidden inside her, buried deep.

She glowered at Colin and slammed her palms into his chest, noting his wince with some satisfaction.

He still wore his bird mask, but the mask beneath had slipped; he was not as nice nor as gentlemanly as he would have had her believe.

She told him as much. “I do not appreciate tricks and deceits, Lord Fenton,” she hissed.

“Invite me into beautiful gardens under false pretenses at your peril. You do not know my true nature, and I doubt you would find her as gracious as I am being right now. So, with the greatest disrespect, please unhand me.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

A shadow emerged from a gap in the torchlit hedge, a short distance away.

A tall figure in a greatcoat, apparently oblivious to the balmy warmth of the evening, the tails of the garment flapping in the light breeze.

He wore a top hat and in a flare of amber light from the flickering flame, she caught the glint of an elegant mask beneath the rim: bronze roses and thorns coiling and weaving across the upper part of his face, his eyes dark and menacing through the almond-shaped holes.

A rough hand seized Colin’s arm and flung it away with considerable strength, while another rough hand grabbed Isolde by the wrist and pulled her from danger’s grip, hauling her toward the mysterious figure instead.

He tugged her so fiercely that she hit his chest with a thump, but she made no attempt to run from him or to free herself from his grip.

His powerful arm snaked around her waist, strong and secure, and though he did not squeeze her or constrict her or hold her there with any distinct force, she felt quite breathless in his unexpected embrace.

Her cheeks, too, were flushed with such heat, as though she had sprinted through the gardens back to the palace already.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The man released her slowly, and she had to resist the urge to cling on a while longer, embarrassed that she would even have such a notion.

But he did not respond to her thanks, simply bowing his head.

Perhaps, he might have said something eventually, if the sound of ladies’ voices had not drifted on the breeze to their ears at that moment.

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

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

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

"And you never heard his name?" Prudence hugged the pillow she had snatched out from under Isolde's head to wake her up, desperate to hear all of the events of the night before.

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

Isolde shook her head, glancing at Teresa, who perched daintily on the end of the bed, pretending to read a book.

But she had not turned the page in at least twenty minutes, not while Isolde had told the thrilling tale of a mysterious stranger who had emerged from the shadows to save her from the clutches of the dastardly Marquess of Fenton.

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

"Was he really so handsome?" Prudence urged.

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

Of course, she could have spoken at great length about the strength of his arms and the hard muscle of his chest and the broadness of his shoulders, but she did not think

that was appropriate for such young ears.

She was not even certain it was appropriate for her mind, though it had not stopped her from dreaming of the stranger ever since her hurried return to Mayfair the previous evening.

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

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

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

Isolde shrugged. “Very well.”

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

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

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

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

“How could you be so careless?” Vincent snapped as he stalked further into the room,

arms crossed.

“Do you realize what could have happened if you had been seen? I should have known better than to think you were entirely reformed. You will always cause trouble, Isolde. Always. I do not know why I thought any differently.”

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

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

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

“Do not test me, Isolde.” Vincent grimaced, sweeping a stressed hand through his hair. “As you have proven that you cannot be left to your own devices without risking our entire family’s reputation, more supervision will be required. Yes, a lot more supervision.”

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

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

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

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

"But it has been fair all week."

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

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

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

"Three-and-ten. Teresa is six-and-ten and will likely be as difficult to find a husband for as Prudence when she is of age." Vincent groaned.

“How is it possible that all three could be so completely opposite to one another? Prudence is wild and untamable. Teresa is mute half the time. And Isolde is...”

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

Vincent nodded slowly, sitting back in his chair as the babble of other men’s chatter rose and fell in waves around them.

“I thought she was improving, I thought she had become a proper lady at last, but I was mistaken.” He sat up straight once more.

“Now, I must go to Bath, and I have not the faintest notion of what I am going to do with them—my sisters and my mother.”

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

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

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

Vincent hesitated, swirling his glass, transfixed by the movement of the amber liquid.

“I could, but I fear it would jeopardize Isolde’s prospects.

She has only just debuted, and though there is society aplenty in Bath, the true elite are here.

I need her to be well-stationed in marriage, and she will insist on being wherever her sisters are, so I cannot take them and leave her behind.

Moreover, I cannot trust her to stay behind, not even with our mother present. ”

“There was no one of interest for her last night?” Edmund asked, his brow creasing as he heard a somewhat familiar voice weaving through the smoke. A reedy, pathetic voice that reminded him of a certain wretch he had encountered the previous evening.

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

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

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

Edmund glanced at his friend as the waiter came by to replenish their drinks.

He had encountered someone last night; a rather fierce lady who had needed his help before an opportunistic coward could force a kiss upon her.

A lady he had not ceased thinking about since, wondering if she was well after her unpleasant experience.

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

If Vincent knew the woman, Edmund might very well ruin her by accident, by speaking of the events in the gardens of Kensington Palace.

And as much as he wanted to talk about it, he realized that only silence would keep her truly safe—indeed, what was the point in rescuing her last night, if a scandal destroyed her tomorrow?

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

Vincent nodded, tugging at his collar. “Then, you will not have any other prior engagements to attend to this coming week?”

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

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

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

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

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

And I owe him. I owe him a great deal. My life, probably.

Perhaps, that was why he could not find a worthy excuse.

In his younger years, cast adrift in a lonely world with no family and no idea what he was supposed to do in his new position as Duke, Vincent had been his anchor, holding him steady through every storm, guiding him safely back to calmer waters.

The least Edmund could do in return was keep an eye on the Wilds girls for a short while.

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

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

Raising his hand, Edmund summoned the waiter and asked him to bring over what was left of the bottle of port.

He would need more than a meager measure of the stuff if he was to share a residence, and the lion’s share of his time, with Isolde Wilds—otherwise known as the bane of his existence.

Even after three years of absence, she had not lost that title, and he doubted she ever would.

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

As it was still rather early in the morning, the sun barely high enough to cast a glow through the townhouse windows, she had not bothered to dress for the day yet.

Instead, she wore her nightgown and housecoat, determined to irritate Vincent if they happened to cross paths.

If he truly believed that she had not changed in six years, then she figured she ought to remind him of who she used to be— then , he would take back his unkind words.

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

Turning right and heading for the kitchens, resuming her jaunty tune, she did not hear the study door open nor see the lumbering figure lurch out until it was too late.

A hefty weight knocked into her, and she stumbled backward, saved from a fall by bouncing off the opposite wall.

Her shoulder collided with mahogany, a sharp pain shooting down her left arm.

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

Indeed, considering where the figure had emerged from, she suspected it was her brother...

until the morning glow illuminated the man’s face.

A horrified gasp slipped from Isolde’s throat as she looked upon one of the most handsome, infuriating men in all of England, her irritation liquefying into molten anger.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She squared her shoulders and straightened her posture, but she still barely came up to his neck, which rather made trying to look intimidating an impossibility. “What were you doing in my brother’s study? Not plundering his generosity as always, I hope?”

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

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

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

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

“It is bewildering to me that, at eight-and-ten, you are still behaving like a child,” he said coolly.

“Always resorting to such juvenile remarks. If you ever hope to find your fairytale prince and live your happily ever after, I would suggest remedying that first. No man wants to deal with such pettiness.”

She glared at him, cheeks flushing with furious heat.

In all the years they had known one another, he had taken every opportunity to mock her for her belief in romance.

And while that belief had set her on a dangerous path at her debut, she would not let him continue to tease her for it.

If anything, her unpleasant encounter with Colin, and her rather marvelous encounter with the masked stranger, had made her all the more determined to find an exceptional love.

The kind that made other ladies swoon, and made life feel like the most exquisite dream.

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

“I might make remarks that you do not favor, but at least I am not utterly unlovable,” she muttered.

“Indeed, it rather smarts of envy. Duke or not, you will never find a wife. If any lady had the choice between spending ten minutes in your company or listening to the most tedious sermon in a feverishly warm church on the hottest day of the year, they would, without fail, choose the latter every time.”

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

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

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

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

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

something to ease the ache.”

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

Isolde cast her brother a withering look.

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

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

“Ah, speaking of which,” Vincent hesitated, turning his gaze everywhere but at Isolde, “Edmund will be escorting you to the week’s events and gatherings, along with Mother, of course.

I must leave for Bath by noon, and considering...

um... recent troubles, I must have a replacement here.

A replacement that I trust to watch over you until I return, so no harm can befall you.
”

Isolde stared at her brother, mouth hanging open, as shocked as if he had struck her with his hand.

“You cannot be serious! I refuse! If you mean to... to... inflict this beast upon this household, then I shall also be departing at noon. I shall go to Charlotte’s or Louisa’s—goodness, I would rather spend the Season at our country seat, in complete

isolation, if him being my wretched shadow is the alternative. ”

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

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

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

Certain that Edmund was going to jump in with a scathing rejoinder, Isolde took off before he could, marching away from that awful man as fast as she could.

As she did, her brain raced, already conjuring up schemes for the days to come, for if Vincent would not change his mind—which she sensed he would not—then she would make him wish he had never left her in the ‘trustworthy’ hands of Edmund Connolly.

And maybe, just maybe, her masked stranger might come to her rescue once again, saving her from an interminable week in Edmund’s company.

She sighed at the thought, but the thrill of it passed quickly.

After all, getting her unknown champion to emerge from the shadows again might well be easier said than done; she had no name, she had no information, she did not even know what he looked like.

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